

# Written Evidence Submitted by the Drugs & (dis)order Research Project (AFG0008)

## 1. Introduction

- 1.1 'Drugs & (dis)order: building peacetime economies in the aftermath of war' (<https://drugs-and-disorder.org/>) is a four-year Global Challenges Research Fund project generating new evidence on how to transform illicit drug economies into peace economies. Afghanistan is one of three countries where the project works, and the Afghanistan team includes SOAS University of London, the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, the Organization for Sustainable Development and Research, and ALCIS.
- 1.2 For this submission, we draw on the insights generated by our research in Afghanistan and the collective expertise of our researchers. We thank the Committee for the opportunity to provide written evidence. Should you have any questions, please contact Prof. Jonathan Goodhand ([jg27@soas.ac.uk](mailto:jg27@soas.ac.uk)) or Dr. Orzala Nemat ([orzala@areu.org.af](mailto:orzala@areu.org.af)).
- 1.3 This written evidence is concerned with the following questions in the call for evidence:
  - a. *What should the UK's objectives be in its relationship with Afghanistan? How should these be prioritised, and what trade-offs should be made to achieve them?*
  - b. *What are the humanitarian and human rights implications of the Taliban takeover? How can the UK support those at risk – particularly women and girls – both in the immediate and longer term? What steps is the government taking to do this?*
  - c. *How does the Taliban takeover affect the role of Russia, China, and other powers in the region, and does this affect UK interests? Where do the regional powers' interest overlap with those of the UK – including security, migration, and economic ties – and how can the UK work effectively with these states to pursue them?*

## 2. What should the UK's objectives be in its relationship with Afghanistan? How should these be prioritised, and what trade-offs should be made to achieve them?

- 2.1 The UK's and Afghanistan's security are interdependent. Instability and insecurity in Afghanistan will lead to blow back effects on the UK in terms of refugee flows, terrorism, drugs and criminality. An indefinite wait-and-see approach on the part of the UK and other western governments is likely to exacerbate a growing humanitarian, financial and security crisis that will have regional and global ramifications. The central UK objectives in its relationship with Afghanistan should be: (a) addressing potential terrorist threats; (b) protecting the development gains and investments of the last 20 years; (c) providing humanitarian aid; and (d) stabilising the economy and easing the liquidity crisis.

- 2.2 Our project is best positioned to comment on objectives (b), (c) and (d). These objectives can only be addressed through engagement with the Taliban so as to avoid creating a political vacuum, further fragmenting the state apparatus, and intensifying the development and humanitarian crisis. In our view, the key question should be, not *whether* to engage, but *how* to engage? Engagement is *not* the same as recognition or endorsement. Policies of confrontation or isolation will have the effect of strengthening the hardliners within the Taliban, whilst increasing their dependence on neighbouring states. While it is true that engagement risks legitimising the Taliban, it cannot be denied that the Taliban were granted a measure of international legitimacy as a result of the 2020 Doha ‘peace process’ in which the US, without consulting its allies, effectively recognised the Taliban as the real power in the country. At the same time the Doha Peace Agreement circumvented and undermined the Afghan state, playing a role in demoralising the national government and the Afghan National Army.
- 2.3 There are inevitable trade-offs that need to be honestly engaged with, requiring courageous, as well as pragmatic leadership when making difficult choices. Should stabilisation be prioritised over human rights and political freedoms? Will a focus on short-term needs lock in repressive conditions in the long-term? Should aid be delivered unconditionally, or used too as a leverage for reforms, such as education for women? Should assistance for the stabilisation of essential public services such as health, water, or electricity be channelled through civil society organisations instead of state institutions that are vital for the delivery of welfare in the long run? How should westernised urban centres and conservative rural peripheries be weighted in the prioritisation and distribution of aid? How should short term humanitarian aid be balanced with the need for longer term support for the agrarian economy that continues to be the main source of livelihood for the majority of Afghans?
- 2.4 These decisions need to be made with a clear-sighted understanding of the contemporary Taliban – which recognises both the historical continuities within the movement as well as how they have changed in recent years. Since coming back to power, they have in their official pronouncements used language about inclusion, ruling for the whole of Afghanistan, reconciliation, education, the role of women, and dealing with terrorism. These pronouncements should not be taken as firm political commitments, but rather as a form of signalling which show that the Taliban are aware of international sensibilities and have some capacity and willingness to engage in diplomacy. Yet the current cabinet’s composition is anything but inclusive. A new generation of cadres, some not yet alive or too young to remember 9/11, are more radical and militant than the old guard. Although some parts of the Taliban government seem to understand that they need significant foreign support to provide essential services beyond security and the ad hoc implementation of Sharia law, there are strong internal pressures not to compromise and to adopt hardline and socially conservative positions.
- 2.5 At the same time, the Taliban have taken over a very different Afghanistan today from when they first came to power in the 1990s. Then, they took over a fragmented society and a broken state and brought a civil war to an end. Now, demographically, Afghanistan is more urbanised and younger, and there are higher expectations of the state and of political participation than twenty years ago. The Taliban inherits a state machinery which employs

thousands of people, has delivered services, raised revenue, and equipped various public offices. The Taliban have demonstrated a capacity for imposing a brutal form of order and justice. But they have no track record of delivering services and welfare. They are unlikely to be responsive to bottom-up political pressure and demands, particularly from urban centres. The Taliban's domestic political base is relatively narrow, and they will face ongoing challenges of coalition management. They cannot depend solely and indefinitely on brutal coercion and repression.

- 2.6 Given these conditions, the Taliban should be convinced and enabled to take over rather than replace and destroy the administrative apparatus of the former state, and retain its specialists, trained bureaucrats, or engineers. The Taliban had initially announced this was their intention. In some cases like the Ministry of Finance, they retained key bureaucrats, given the need to administer revenue flows, taxes, and budgets. But there is emerging that not only political positions are being filled with Taliban fighters or mullahs but also more technical positions. In Nimroz, for example, the Taliban-run Ministry of Economy initially kept in position the former head of the Department of Economy. But then the new Taliban Governor replaced him with a Taliban appointee from a military background. This reflects the aforementioned challenge facing the Taliban of coalition management; growing pressure is building up from Taliban fighters demanding positions, which come at the expense of trained professionals, which further plays into the financial, humanitarian and development crises.
  - 2.7 Compared to the urban centres, the current transition in the rural borderlands looks quite different, particularly in areas of the south that experienced some of the heaviest fighting. For example, for women and men in Pashtun heartlands like Sangin who have experienced almost constant violence and predation in the last 20 years, the new Taliban regime has brought a level of order and predictability that was lacking in the previous regime, which revived militias and warlords responsible for some of the worst human rights abuses. Traders, farmers, and businessmen in the borderlands of Nangarhar and Nimroz interviewed by the Drugs and (dis)order project argued that in contrast to the arbitrary and predatory state, the Taliban was clear on where they stood and were consistent in their policies and practices related to law and order, justice, and taxation.
  - 2.8 Various international responses to the Taliban have been discussed – from sanctions, to wait and see, to programmatic engagement, through to recognition. It is clear that there are no win-win solutions – instead there are messy compromises and difficult trade-offs – and the impacts of these trade-offs will differ for the rural and the urban, for men and for women, young and old, Pashtuns and minority populations. But it is clear the biggest danger to Afghanistan and its people right is a political vacuum and fragmentation – so that it becomes again a key exporter of ‘public bads’ – terrorism, drugs, refugees, and regional instability.
- 3. What are the humanitarian and human rights implications of the Taliban takeover? How can the UK support those at risk – particularly women and girls – both in the immediate and longer term? What steps is the UK Government taking to do this?**

- 3.1 The contours of the current transition are unclear and still being played out. Fragmentation, collapse, and a return to civil war are a definite possibility – particularly if western governments adopt an isolationist position. The social infrastructure built up over the last 20 years is collapsing. Two-thirds of the population are food insecure. More than 18 million people are in need of humanitarian aid. Two million children under 5 suffer from malnutrition. The health care system is imploding. Only 5% of the population are fully vaccinated. Over 2.1 million vaccines are at risk of expiring. A fifth wave of the pandemic is raging in Iran. Over two-thirds of the country's territory were affected by drought, which is now recurring. There are some 3.5 million internally-displaced people.
- 3.2 Already before the Taliban took power, levels of poverty and food insecurity in rural Afghanistan were rising due to the combined effects of drought, Covid-19, conflict, and a failing agriculture sector. One source<sup>1</sup> reports that between 2012 and 2017 the number of Afghans living in poverty increased from 38 to 55 percent of the population. The recent suspension of international support has further undermined a largely informal, failing economy leading to price inflation and trade disruptions. This has further worsened levels of food insecurity and poverty.
- 3.3 The exclusion of women in the new government, despite previous announcements of commitment to protect and respect the rights of Afghanistan's women and girls, is deeply disappointing. This may well extend to the exclusion of women from participation in all walks of life – from being educators, humanitarian workers, medical professionals, or entrepreneurs particularly in the rural areas where their inclusion is essential for the reconstruction and stability of livelihoods.
- 3.4 The Taliban government is going to struggle to support any public sector activity including support for the basic services of health and education. For many in the agrarian sector, given declining farm sizes and the high levels of landlessness, the possibilities of survival in rural Afghanistan will be severely limited.
- 3.5 There will be two possible responses. First, outmigration to the cities and beyond Afghanistan's borders. This will reduce household consumption demand, might provide work for survival at best, and possibly allow some form of remittance to support those at home. Second, a return to opium poppy cultivation which not only provides access to land for the landless through sharecropping arrangements but also provides a return to labour that cannot be secured by any other crops. A humanitarian response to the threats to household survival will need to be based on food provision and through employment provision at scale.
- 3.6 There is a need for a massive humanitarian uplift – and this can only happen through engagement with Afghanistan's new regime to enable the state to perform at least some of its core functions, for example ensuring that teachers and health workers get paid. Aid organisations have important relationships with mid-level people within the Taliban that may be drawn upon to build a conversation about meeting humanitarian and development needs.

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<sup>1</sup> [15 Facts About Poverty in Afghanistan - The Borgen Project](#)

- 3.7 Under pressure and under conditions of economic decline and an escalating crisis, the Taliban will not move against the drug economy, except for forceful and mostly symbolic action against domestic drug consumption and mostly in the big cities, where oppressive enforcement has been seen with no provision of harm-reduction measures. There is no indication that other parts of the drug business (cultivation, refining, trade, and cross-border trafficking) are being targeted. However, they may change their approach should their rule consolidate and the economic situation stabilises. Unlike the Daesh/Islamic State Khorasan, moving against drug cultivation and trade is not an ideological matter for the Taliban but rather a bargaining chip for improving foreign relations.
- 3.8 When the Taliban took over, drug prices increased significantly. In Nangarhar, dry opium increased from PKR 20,000 (Pakistani Rupee, approx. GBP 86) to PKR 33,000 (GBP 141) per Afghan seer (approx. 1.25 kgs). In Nimroz, opium increased from PKR 10,000 (GBP 43) to PKR 28,000 (GBP 120) per kilo. In Badakhshan, opium prices went from PKR 1500 to 2000 (GBP 6.40 to 8.50) per pow (450 grams) to PKR 5000 (GBP 21). But prices have dropped again since then, showing that the spike was demand-driven. Prices rose because traders were buying when they were unsure about what would happen following the Taliban takeover. But prices settled down again when it became clear that the Taliban would consolidate their power swiftly, and traders expected the drug trade would not be hindered under Taliban rule. True enough, the drug trade is back, with many opium bazars closed in government-controlled areas now operating openly again. For example, in Sherzad district, three temporary and one permanent drug bazar are open.
- 3.9 Taxes on the drug trade are now monopolised by the Taliban. In one-stop-shops in districts like Durbaba in Nangarhar – there is a tax of PKR 1,000 (GBP 4.28) per seer of opium; PKR 500 (GBP 2.14) per kilo of hashish; and PKR 2,000 (GBP 8.56) per kilo of heroin.
- 3.10 Enabling cross-border trade to function as freely as possible should remain as a priority. This involves ensuring that key crossing points remain open, which will require maintaining good relations with Iran and Pakistan. For the moment, the cross-border trade on the Iranian border is ongoing. Smuggling into Iran appears to have intensified with little interference from the Iranian border authorities, whose focus is to prevent refugees and migrants crossing, not drugs and other goods.
- 4. How does the Taliban takeover affect the role of Russia, China, and other powers in the region, and does this affect UK interests? Where do regional powers' interest overlap with those of the UK – including on security, migration, and economic ties – and how can the UK work effectively with these states to pursue them?**
- 4.1 It will be in the UK's interest to broker a multilateral agreement that may prove critical in achieving the objectives of protecting the development gains and investments of the last 20 years; providing humanitarian aid; and stabilising the economy and easing the liquidity crisis. This should involve China, Russia, the rest of the G20, and regional powers Pakistan and Iran – who all have a common interest of avoiding a return to civil war in Afghanistan and in supporting the stabilisation and the prevention of terrorism, drugs, or refugee outflows.

- 4.2 Western powers have some influence and leverage because China and other non-western donors are unlikely to fund in any substantive way the welfare and development functions of the Afghan state. The application of sanctions and pariah regime status on Afghanistan will be counter-productive. If the country is treated like a pariah, it will act like a pariah – for example, the effects of US sanctions on both the Iranian regime and its people failed to achieve stated objectives, whilst causing immense humanitarian distress. The prior decision by the IMF to cut Afghanistan out of the global financial system should be reconsidered.
- 4.3 Though very difficult, coordination between G20 countries could be built around how to provide unhindered aid delivery and support for peacebuilding efforts that aim to build a more inclusive political settlement over time. Informal financial systems such as the hawalas, which are licensed in Afghanistan and which have become a lifeline for millions of Afghans, should be allowed to continue their money transfer transactions. Some agreement on priorities and red lines, or where to compete or not among the various powers would be helpful.
- 4.4 There is a need for pragmatic, realistic but coordinated engagement which focuses on common interests and seeks to find practical solutions to the security and financial crisis.

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