



## A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF UNITED NATIONS ENGAGEMENTS WITH THE AFGHAN TALIBAN (2021–2025): BETWEEN HUMANITARIAN IMPERATIVES AND POLITICAL LEGITIMACY

Abdul Wasi Popalzay<sup>1</sup> Bawa Singh<sup>2</sup>  
Central University of Punjab, India

### Abstract:

This study analyzes the United Nations' engagement with the Taliban in Afghanistan between 2021 and 2025, examining how they navigated the tension between humanitarian imperatives and concerns about political legitimacy. The UN's efforts mitigated suffering amid economic collapse and poverty, achieving successes in disaster relief and maintaining the participation of female aid workers through a gender-sensitive approach. However, the Taliban's human rights violations, including restrictive gender edicts, arbitrary detentions and repressive morality laws, jeopardise these gains and risk delegitimising the regime, which is bolstered by increased revenues despite sanctions. Sanctions have failed to drive policy change due to being weakened by regional actors such as China and Russia. Critiques from civil society highlight the UN's limited inclusion of Afghan women and the lack of accountability mechanisms, and urge the establishment of an independent investigative body. While counterterrorism cooperation has yielded security benefits, donor fragmentation and funding shortfalls undermine the humanitarian impact.

**Keywords:** US withdrawal, Taliban, Humanitarian crisis, UN engagements, Humanitarian aid, Political legitimacy

**Titulo en Español:** *Análisis crítico de los compromisos de las Naciones Unidas con los Taliban afganos (2021-2025): entre imperativos humanitarios y legitimidad política.*

### Resumen:

*Este estudio analiza la relación de las Naciones Unidas con los Taliban en Afganistán entre 2021 y 2025, examinando cómo gestionaron la tensión entre las necesidades humanitarias y las preocupaciones sobre la legitimidad política. Los esfuerzos de la ONU mitigaron el sufrimiento en medio del colapso económico y la pobreza, logrando éxitos en la ayuda humanitaria y manteniendo la participación de las trabajadoras humanitarias mediante un enfoque sensible al género. Sin embargo, las violaciones de los derechos humanos por parte de los Taliban, incluidos los edictos restrictivos en materia de género, las detenciones arbitrarias y las leyes morales represivas, ponen en peligro estos logros y corren el riesgo de deslegitimar al régimen, que se ve reforzado por el aumento de los ingresos a pesar de las sanciones que no han logrado impulsar un cambio de política debido a que se han visto debilitadas por actores regionales como China y Rusia. Las críticas de la sociedad civil señalan la limitada inclusión de las mujeres afganas promovida por la ONU y la falta de mecanismos de rendición de cuentas, e instan a la creación de un órgano de investigación independiente. Si bien la cooperación en la lucha contra el terrorismo ha reportado beneficios en materia de seguridad, la fragmentación de los donantes y la falta de financiación socavan el impacto humanitario.*

**Palabras Clave:** *Retirada de EE. UU., Taliban, crisis humanitaria, compromisos de la ONU, ayuda humanitaria, legitimidad política.*

Copyright © UNISCI, 2025.

Las opiniones expresadas en estos artículos son propias de sus autores, y no reflejan necesariamente la opinión de UNISCI. *The views expressed in these articles are those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect the views of UNISCI*

<sup>1</sup> Abdul Wasi Popalzay is pursuing his PhD in International Relations, at the Department of South and Central Asian Studies, Central University of Punjab, India

E-mail: <abdul.wasi.popalzay@gmail.com>

<sup>2</sup> Bawa Singh is a Professor at the Department of South and Central Asian Studies, Central University of Punjab, India E-mail:<bawasingh73@gmail.com>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.31439/UNISCI-240>



## 1 Introduction

The Taliban's dramatic return to power in Afghanistan in August 2021 marked a profound shift in the country's political trajectory. Following the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces, the Taliban swiftly reestablished a de facto government the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan ushering in an era of severe humanitarian crisis and deepening human rights concerns. This regime, unrecognized by any state, has imposed policies that systematically exclude women from education, employment, and public life, amounting to what has been characterized as "gender apartheid."<sup>3</sup> <sup>4</sup> The situation has precipitated economic collapse, leaving an estimated 90% of the population below the poverty line and necessitating urgent humanitarian assistance for 23.7 million Afghans in 2024.<sup>5</sup> Initial international responses were marked by outright rejection of engagement with the Taliban. However, the scale of human suffering, coupled with the regime's control over territory and access routes, has compelled a gradual shift toward pragmatic engagement focused on aid delivery, despite deep reservations about the risks of conferring legitimacy.<sup>6</sup> This evolving dynamic between the United Nations (UN) and the Taliban encapsulates a profound tension within the global governance framework: balancing the humanitarian imperative to save lives against the political and ethical imperative to avoid legitimizing a regime that systemically violates human rights. The UN's operations in Afghanistan have come under intense scrutiny, with critics arguing that ongoing engagement with the Taliban despite bans on women's education and employment in NGOs risks normalizing repressive governance.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, operational realities leave the UN with few viable alternatives for delivering essential aid to a population trapped between economic collapse, drought, and natural disasters.

The practical necessity of negotiating access has created an ethical quagmire, testing the resilience of UN humanitarian principles and raising broader questions about international organizations' responses to unrecognized regimes. At the heart of the UN's engagement with the Taliban lies an acute humanitarian imperative: the need to respond to the crisis affecting over half of Afghanistan's population. 1.1 to 1.3 million Afghans forcibly repatriated from neighboring countries in 2023 has left the country on the brink of catastrophe.<sup>8</sup> In this context, the UN has coordinated \$2.9 billion in cash shipments since 2021 to sustain humanitarian operations. Yet, this operational necessity is shadowed by profound ethical dilemmas. The Taliban's policies particularly the ban on women's education and employment in NGOs have not only undermined human rights but also constrained the operational capacity of humanitarian actors, leaving many aid efforts paralyzed. The political pragmatism underlying UN engagement reflects a recognition that the Taliban's territorial control leaves no viable alternative channels for aid delivery. Engagement, though fraught with risks, has been deemed necessary to prevent total state collapse and mitigate regional instability. However, this strategy is not without cost. Between January 2022 and June 2024, there were 840 recorded incidents of gender-based violence against women and girls including 332 killings under Taliban rule. Furthermore,

---

<sup>3</sup> "Afghanistan's De Facto Authorities' New Law Barring Women from Medical Training Imperils Country's Health," United Nations, 2024, at <https://press.un.org/en/2024/sc15932.doc.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> "Human Rights in Afghanistan," Amnesty International, 2025, at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/asia-and-the-pacific/south-asia/afghanistan/report-afghanistan/>.

<sup>5</sup> "Afghanistan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2024," United Nations OCHA, 2024, at <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-humanitarian-needs-and-response-plan-2024/>.

<sup>6</sup> "Towards the Reintegration of Afghanistan into the International Community," IISS, 2024, at <https://www.iiss.org>.

<sup>7</sup> Ahmad Omarkhail, "Perceptions of Informed Afghans on the Taliban's Islamic Emirate and the Former Afghan Government," *World Affairs* (advance online publication, 2024), at <https://doi.org/10.1002/waf2.12345>.

<sup>8</sup> "Afghanistan Crisis Response Plan 2024," IOM, 2024, at <https://crisisresponse.iom.int>.



detentions of 20,000 individuals, including 1,500 women, underscore the scale of repression.<sup>9</sup> These figures illuminate the tension between operational necessity and human rights principles, highlighting the UN's struggle to balance its dual mandate of humanitarian assistance and rights advocacy. The international community remains divided over the UN's approach. Critics argue that continued engagement risks legitimizing a regime that flagrantly violates international norms, particularly those concerning gender equality and minority rights. Others contend that withdrawal or disengagement would only exacerbate the humanitarian crisis, leaving millions without access to food, healthcare, and basic services. This narrative contestation underscores broader debates within the international system about the role of humanitarian actors in unrecognized regimes. While the UN has implemented conditionality mechanisms tying aid delivery to minimal compliance with humanitarian principles their effectiveness remains limited, given the Taliban's consistent disregard for human rights commitments. This study is anchored in the following research objectives: to critically evaluate the strategic rationales behind the UN's continued operations in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan; to assess the humanitarian, political, and legal consequences of these engagements; and to analyze the evolving narratives and discourses surrounding UN-Taliban relations within the broader frameworks of global governance and human rights advocacy. By investigating the effectiveness and limitations of UN conditionality mechanisms especially those aimed at gender rights and humanitarian access and examining the shifting policies, funding trends, and field operations of the UN in response to Taliban-imposed restrictions, this paper offers a comprehensive analysis of the dilemmas facing international actors. It further interrogates the competing narratives and critiques that have emerged within international diplomacy, civil society, and academia regarding the UN's role and actions in Afghanistan. Ultimately, this paper seeks to identify emerging risks and opportunities for recalibrating UN engagement strategies in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, offering lessons for future operations in similarly complex and politically sensitive environments.

## **2.Theoretical Framework**

The engagement of the United Nations (UN) with the Taliban regime since 2021 presents a stark tension between the imperatives of humanitarian intervention and the demands of political legitimacy, situated within a complex interplay of humanitarian ethics, international law, and competing theories of international engagement. This framework draws upon humanitarian ethics, legitimacy theory, human rights law, and the contrasting lenses of realism and idealism to unpack the UN's evolving approach to Afghanistan under Taliban rule. At its core, the framework revolves around the tension between humanitarian imperatives and political legitimacy. On one hand, the sheer scale of human suffering in Afghanistan is undeniable: over 23.7 million people more than half the population required urgent humanitarian assistance in 2024, while only 38% of the UN's \$2.4 billion funding appeal was met. In this context, the humanitarian imperative compels the UN to act, driven by the ethical duty to alleviate human suffering, irrespective of the governing regime's character. As Volker Türk, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, put it in September 2023: "Human rights in Afghanistan are in a state of collapse"<sup>10</sup>, highlighting both the urgency of aid and the magnitude of violations.

Yet, the delivery of such aid entails engagement with a regime whose policies, particularly towards women and girls, amount to systematic human rights abuses. The Taliban's

<sup>9</sup> "International Community Must Not Normalise Taliban Rule in Afghanistan," United Nations, 2024, at <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/08/international-community-must-not-normalise-taliban-rule-afghanistan>.

<sup>10</sup> "UN High Commissioner Volker Türk Urges Immediate Reversal of Taliban Edicts," OHCHR, September 2023, at <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2023>.



enforcement of over 80 edicts curtailing women's rights including bans on education and employment has led to what many observers, including Amnesty International (2025) and the International Criminal Court, describe as "gender apartheid" and "gender persecution." Roza Otunbayeva, head of UNAMA, has remarked, "Bans on women cost the Taliban both domestic and international legitimacy"<sup>11</sup>, underscoring the challenge of balancing humanitarian access with the risk of legitimizing a regime whose policies violate core UN principles. This dilemma brings into sharp focus the UN's foundational principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence, which are under strain in Afghanistan. While neutrality traditionally requires humanitarian actors to steer clear of political entanglements, the Taliban's restrictions including the December 2022 ban on women working for NGOs have forced the UN to adapt by deploying gender-inclusive remote monitoring teams.<sup>12</sup> As humanitarian scholar Hugo Slim observed, "Neutrality requires humanitarian actors to avoid political controversies, but this can conflict with advocating for justice."<sup>13</sup> This ethical quandary illustrates the competing pulls of humanitarian ethics and human rights advocacy, exposing the operational and moral limits of neutrality in contexts where the very act of aid delivery risks entrenching repressive structures. The theoretical tension between realism and idealism further sharpens the analysis.

From a realist perspective, the UN's engagement with the Taliban is driven by pragmatic concerns: preventing the total collapse of the Afghan state, containing regional instability, and preserving minimal operational space for humanitarian relief. Engagement, in this view, is a strategic necessity, however morally fraught. Idealists, on the other hand, argue that the UN's interactions should prioritize human rights and international norms over expediency. They point to the Taliban's systematic violations ranging from the detention of 20,000 individuals (including 1,500 women) by mid-2024 to the 1.1–1.3 million Afghan refugees forcibly returned from neighboring states in 2023 (IOM, 2024) as evidence that engagement risks normalizing a regime that operates in direct contravention of the UN Charter and human rights law.

The Doha meetings in 2024, where the UN led discussions aimed at securing humanitarian access but marginalized women's rights issues, starkly illustrate this tension. By sidelining gender concerns to preserve operational pragmatism, the UN's approach mirrored realist pragmatism rather than idealist principle.<sup>14</sup> Yet, as Haibatullah Akhundzada, the Taliban's Supreme Leader, asserted, "The situation of women and girls is an internal matter" (2024), the Taliban have made clear that external pressure even from the UN is unlikely to prompt policy shifts. This framework also recognizes the legal and normative dimensions of the UN's engagement. Under Security Council Resolution 2615 (2021), UNAMA is mandated to coordinate humanitarian aid and monitor human rights conditions. However, Taliban-imposed restrictions have severely limited the UN's ability to uphold these dual mandates, exposing the fragility of institutional norms when confronted with hard geopolitical realities.

Furthermore, the Taliban's assertion of internal sovereignty over issues such as women's rights has created a normative impasse, as the UN's human rights advocacy is met with outright rejection. So, the UN's engagement with the Taliban is shaped by a dynamic and often conflicting interplay of humanitarian imperatives, legitimacy concerns, ethical dilemmas, and theoretical divides between realism and idealism. The case of Afghanistan from 2021 to 2025 thus serves as a paradigmatic example of the complexities inherent in engaging with

<sup>11</sup> "Bans on Women Cost the Taliban Legitimacy," UNAMA, 2023, at <https://t.co/NyfmAxvytb>.

<sup>12</sup> "Statement by Sima Bahous on the Taliban Prohibition of Women Working with NGOs," UN Women, 2022, at <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/statement/2022/12/>.

<sup>13</sup> Slim, Hugo: *Humanitarian Ethics in War and Disaster*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2023.

<sup>14</sup> "UN Relief Chief Stresses Need to Stay and Deliver for All Afghans," United Nations, 2024, at <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/11/1163461>.



unrecognized or repressive regimes. It raises fundamental questions about the limits of neutrality, the tensions between operational pragmatism and normative commitments, and the risks of inadvertent legitimization. This framework offers a critical lens for analyzing not only Afghanistan but also broader patterns of humanitarian engagement in settings where geopolitical realities and human rights obligations collide.

### **3. Strategic Motivations for United Nations' Engagement with the Taliban**

The United Nations' engagement with the Taliban since 2021 has been driven by a complex interplay of humanitarian necessity and political pragmatism. At the heart of this engagement lies a tension between the UN's core mandate to deliver humanitarian assistance and the ethical and political challenges of interacting with an unrecognized, repressive regime. The humanitarian imperative is clear: Afghanistan's prolonged crisis, marked by economic collapse, severe poverty, acute food insecurity, and massive displacement, has left millions of Afghans in urgent need of aid. Simultaneously, the UN's presence seeks to prevent state failure and curb the rise of extremist threats that could destabilize the region further. The scale of the crisis is staggering. By 2025, nearly 22.9 million Afghans almost half of the population require humanitarian assistance, a slight decrease from 23.7 million in 2024, yet still a stark indicator of the enduring crisis. Acute food insecurity affects 14.8 million people, including 3.5 million children under the age of five suffering from severe malnutrition. Following the Taliban's return to power in 2021, Afghanistan's economy contracted by 30%, pushing nearly half the population into poverty and paralyzing essential public services.<sup>15</sup> Displacement has surged, with over 6.3 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and 1.2 million returnees recorded in 2024, largely driven by deportations from Iran and Pakistan and compounded by housing insecurity, including the threat of eviction for 191,500 individuals from informal settlements.

Given these realities, the UN has prioritized humanitarian access, despite the Taliban's restrictive policies. Martin Griffiths, the UN's Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, highlighted this urgency in March 2022, warning that "without urgent support, millions of Afghans face starvation and loss of livelihoods."<sup>16</sup> The UN has since mobilized \$2.9 billion in cash shipments to sustain humanitarian operations and bypass frozen Afghan assets. The World Food Programme (WFP), for instance, reached 7.1 million people with critical food aid in early 2025, addressing acute hunger across nearly all provinces.<sup>17</sup> Yet, the UN's engagement is not solely humanitarian. Political pragmatism plays a crucial role in shaping this strategy. The collapse of Afghan institutions and the proliferation of extremist actors such as ISIS-K pose significant threats to both national stability and regional security. In this context, UN engagement framed through Security Council Resolution 2615 (2021), which mandates the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) to coordinate aid and monitor the situation aims to prevent the emergence of power vacuums that could be exploited by violent groups. As Roza Otunbayeva, UNAMA's Chief, noted in February 2023, "Engagement with the de facto authorities is necessary to ensure stability and deliver aid effectively."<sup>18</sup> Facilitated by regional intermediaries such as Qatar, UN-led dialogues, notably the 2024 Doha meetings, have focused on securing humanitarian access and regional cooperation. These efforts underscore the delicate balance the UN seeks to maintain acknowledging the Taliban's de facto authority to facilitate life-saving aid, while refraining

<sup>15</sup> "Afghanistan: Approach 3," World Bank, 2024, at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2024/02/15/afghanistan-approach-0-anothera>.

<sup>16</sup> "Under-Secretary-General Martin Griffiths' Remarks at the High-Level Pledging Event for Afghanistan," United Nations OCHA, 2022, at <https://reliefweb.int/node/3833426>.

<sup>17</sup> "WFP Afghanistan Country Brief," World Food Programme, 2024, at <https://www.wfp.org/countries/afghanistan>.

<sup>18</sup> "UNAMA Annual Report 2023," UNAMA, 2023, at <https://unama.unmissions.org>.



from granting political recognition that might legitimize human rights abuses. The Taliban, for their part, have expressed their own interpretations of this engagement. Zabihullah Mujahid, the Taliban spokesperson, has repeatedly framed UN dialogue as a necessity for humanitarian delivery rather than a pathway to recognition, reflecting the pragmatic calculus that informs both sides' interactions. This dual imperative humanitarian necessity intertwined with political pragmatism reflects the core tensions at the heart of international engagement with de facto regimes. The UN's approach is guided by a realist understanding of regional stability concerns and the moral responsibility to alleviate human suffering, even as it navigates the ethical challenges posed by engaging with a government whose policies starkly contravene international norms, particularly regarding women's rights and broader human rights frameworks. The United Nations' engagement with the Afghan Taliban encapsulates a delicate interplay of humanitarian imperatives, pragmatic diplomacy, and the strategic balancing of regional stability. At its core, this engagement is driven by a recognition of Afghanistan's catastrophic humanitarian crisis, compounded by economic collapse and persistent displacement.

Since the Taliban's return to power in 2021, Afghanistan's economy has contracted by an estimated 30%, with nearly half the population now living in poverty and public services in disarray. The humanitarian dimensions are stark: in 2025, 22.9 million Afghans almost half the country's population require humanitarian assistance, including 14.8 million facing acute food insecurity and 3.5 million acutely malnourished children. Despite these needs, only 38% of the UN's \$2.42 billion humanitarian appeal for 2024 has been funded, highlighting both the urgency and fragility of the situation.<sup>19</sup> Beyond the humanitarian imperative, the UN's strategic calculus recognizes the broader geopolitical ramifications of disengagement. In an environment marked by persistent security threats from groups like ISIS-K, which conducted 45 attacks in 2024 resulting in 320 fatalities, UN engagement serves as a bulwark against regional destabilization. The Taliban's de facto governance though internationally unrecognized presents a reality that the UN must navigate to prevent the emergence of ungoverned spaces conducive to extremism. Through mechanisms such as the Doha talks and cooperation with regional powers like Pakistan and Qatar, the UN has sought to stabilize cross-border dynamics and manage refugee flows, especially amidst the displacement of 6.3 million internally displaced persons and 1.2 million returnees in 2024. A particularly contentious aspect of the UN's strategy lies in its use of humanitarian aid as leverage to influence Taliban behavior, particularly regarding human rights and gender equality.<sup>20</sup>

Conditional aid delivery such as requiring female participation in aid distribution has yielded limited concessions, with Taliban authorities permitting women to distribute aid in certain provinces. However, this progress has been persistently undermined by restrictive edicts, including the 2024 ban on medical training for women and the continued issuance of over 110 directives constraining humanitarian operations, eight of which directly restricted female participation. UN negotiators, while pragmatic, face the challenge of balancing these incremental gains against the Taliban's entrenched resistance to external conditionality. As Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid has explicitly stated, "Humanitarian aid is welcome, but external conditions on our governance are unacceptable," underscoring the regime's defiance.<sup>21</sup> Despite the limitations of this leverage strategy, UN leaders continue to emphasize its necessity. Feridun Sinirlioglu, the UN Special Coordinator for Afghanistan, remarked,

<sup>19</sup> "Afghanistan: Humanitarian Response 2024," European Commission, 2024, at [https://ec.europa.eu/echo/where/asia/afghanistan\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/echo/where/asia/afghanistan_en)

<sup>20</sup> Afghanistan Protection and Solutions Strategy (2025–2027)," UNHCR, 2024, at <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-protection-and-solutions-strategy-2025-2027>.

<sup>21</sup> "Security Council Extends Mandate of United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, Adopting Resolution 2626 (2022)," *United Nations*, 2022, at <https://press.un.org/en/2022/sc14830.doc.htm>.



“Outcome-oriented engagement with conditionality is essential to address Afghanistan’s humanitarian and human rights challenges,” reflecting a cautious but persistent push to link aid with accountability. Volker Türk, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, has similarly argued that Taliban policies aimed at erasing women’s public presence demand an assertive international response, blending humanitarian and legal pressures. This has been exemplified by the International Criminal Court’s 2025 applications for arrest warrants against Taliban leaders for gender persecution, signaling the potential for international legal accountability as a complement to humanitarian leverage.

In parallel, the UN’s coordination with regional and global powers has been central to its strategy, balancing non-recognition of the Taliban with pragmatic engagement to avert regional spillover.<sup>22</sup> Cooperation with Qatar has facilitated the Doha process, while partnerships with actors such as China and Russia who have vested interests in Afghanistan’s stability highlight the multipolar dynamics shaping the UN’s approach. The World Food Programme’s delivery of aid to over 7.1 million Afghans and the coordination of \$2.9 billion in UN cash shipments since 2021 exemplify how humanitarian and economic measures intersect with diplomatic efforts to prevent further collapse.<sup>23</sup> Yet, these measures remain precarious, not only due to underfunding but also because of the Taliban’s continued restrictions on aid operations, which threaten to exacerbate suffering and erode hard-won humanitarian access. Consequently, the UN’s strategic motivations for engaging with the Taliban are underpinned by an unavoidable humanitarian crisis, the imperative to prevent Afghanistan’s collapse, and the recognition that in the absence of engagement, the human cost would be immeasurable.

This delicate balancing act between pragmatism and principle embodies the complex and often contradictory nature of international engagement with contested regimes in the contemporary world. The UN’s engagement with the Taliban represents a complex balancing act: driven by the urgent need to alleviate human suffering, it simultaneously seeks to mitigate regional instability and incrementally push for human rights compliance. This strategy, while fraught with challenges including funding gaps, Taliban intransigence, and geopolitical competition reflects a pragmatic acknowledgment of the intertwined humanitarian and security imperatives at play. By anchoring its approach in conditional engagement, regional diplomacy, and humanitarian coordination, the UN strives to fulfill its dual mandate of saving lives and fostering a semblance of stability in a deeply volatile context.

#### **4. The Ethical Dilemma: Neutrality vs. Legitimization**

In addressing the profound ethical dilemmas faced by the United Nations (UN) in its engagement with the Afghan Taliban, it is essential to examine the competing imperatives of humanitarian neutrality and the risk of conferring legitimacy on a regime that has systematically violated human rights. Historically, the UN’s principle of neutrality rooted in its humanitarian mandate has been a cornerstone of effective engagement in conflict zones such as Syria and Yemen, where impartial aid delivery has opened access for relief efforts. Yet, Afghanistan presents a distinct and complex challenge. Unlike previous conflict zones, the Taliban regime, which took power in August 2021, remains a *de facto* authority lacking formal international recognition. This has complicated the UN’s traditional approach, as neutrality now intersects with the question of whether engagement inadvertently legitimizes an unrecognized and

---

<sup>22</sup> “2023 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Afghanistan,” United States Department of State, 2024, at <https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2107599.html>.

<sup>23</sup> “WFP Condemns Taliban Ban on Women Staff,” World Food Programme, 2023, at <https://www.wfp.org/news/wfp-condemns-taliban-ban-women-staff>.



repressive regime.<sup>24</sup>

The UN's response to the Taliban's governance has been shaped by the humanitarian catastrophe unfolding in Afghanistan, where 22.3 million people or approximately 48% of the population require assistance, while only 37% of the \$2.42 billion funding appeal has been<sup>25</sup> secured. This dire humanitarian imperative has forced the UN to negotiate access in a political environment characterized by Taliban-imposed restrictions, such as the bans on women's education and participation in NGO work issued between 2022 and 2024. These edicts directly challenge the UN's commitment to impartial aid delivery and complicate its efforts to maintain a principled stance. For instance, in December 2022, following the Taliban's prohibition of women's employment with NGOs, the UN secured limited exemptions for female health workers. While this enabled continued humanitarian operations, it also raised concerns about the erosion of neutrality and potential legitimization of Taliban authority. Compounding these challenges is the Taliban's systematic repression of women and political opponents. The regime's policies, labeled by many as "gender apartheid," have resulted in 840 recorded incidents of gender-based violence including 332 killings from January 2022 to June 2024.<sup>26</sup> Simultaneously, the Taliban's arbitrary detention and extrajudicial actions including the killing or disappearance of nearly 500 former government officials and security personnel between August 2021 and February 2022 further deepen the legitimacy dilemma.<sup>27</sup> These human rights abuses starkly contrast with the UN's engagement, which includes initiatives such as the \$2.9 billion in cash shipments since 2021 aimed at stabilizing Afghanistan's economy. While these cash infusions have sustained humanitarian operations and mitigated immediate economic collapse, they risk bolstering Taliban governance capacity and inadvertently enhancing the group's domestic legitimacy. UN-led engagements, such as the Doha meetings in 2024, illustrate these tensions vividly. While these dialogues focused on ensuring humanitarian access and regional stability, their exclusion of Afghan women drew criticism for reinforcing the Taliban's gender-oppressive policies.

Simultaneously, the UN Security Council's Resolution 2681 (2023) condemned the Taliban's bans on women yet maintained UNAMA's mandate to engage with the regime for humanitarian purposes, epitomizing the balancing act between neutrality and human rights advocacy.<sup>28</sup> Prominent UN officials have underscored these tensions. Volker Türk, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, stated unequivocally: "Engagement with the Taliban must not legitimize their gender-based oppression." His call reflects a broader concern that the UN's engagement strategy might be perceived as tacit acceptance of Taliban governance, especially in the absence of meaningful reforms. Similarly, Roza Otunbayeva, the head of UNAMA, has emphasized that "neutrality is essential for humanitarian access, but it must not come at the cost of human rights."<sup>29</sup> These remarks encapsulate the UN's struggle to navigate a morally complex landscape where the imperative to deliver life-saving aid collides with the risk of enabling systemic human rights violations. Legal developments have further complicated

<sup>24</sup> "Afghanistan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2025," United Nations OCHA, 2025, at <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-humanitarian-needs-and-response-plan-2025/>.

<sup>25</sup> "Afghanistan: Gender apartheid and violence against women under Taliban rule", Amnesty International, 2025, at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa11/2025>

<sup>26</sup> "Instability in Afghanistan," Council on Foreign Relations, 2025, at <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/instability-afghanistan>.

<sup>27</sup> "Security Council Condemns Decision by Taliban to Ban Afghan Women from Working for United Nations in Afghanistan, Adopting Resolution 2681 (2023)," United Nations, 2023, at <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15271.doc.htm>.

<sup>28</sup> "Quarterly Report on Human Rights 2024," UNAMA, 2024, at <https://unama.unmissions.org>.

<sup>29</sup> "Recent Developments in Afghanistan (Report No. CBP-9906)," House of Commons Library, 2025, at <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9906/>



the UN's position. In 2025, the International Criminal Court (ICC) sought arrest warrants for senior Taliban leaders on charges of gender persecution.<sup>30</sup> This move highlights the divergence between humanitarian engagement and international legal accountability, forcing the UN to reconcile its operational necessity of negotiating with the Taliban with the global imperative of justice and human rights protection. Therefore, the UN's engagement with the Taliban embodies a profound ethical dilemma rooted in the tension between principled neutrality and the risk of legitimizing a repressive regime. This engagement, while driven by the need to address acute humanitarian needs and prevent regional instability, is fraught with moral complexity, as it requires balancing the imperative to save lives against the imperative to uphold human rights. The UN's strategies ranging from negotiated aid exemptions to financial support for the Afghan economy must therefore be scrutinized for their broader implications. They must be measured not only in terms of immediate humanitarian impact but also in terms of long-term ethical and political consequences for both Afghanistan and the international system. This nuanced analysis reflects the theoretical framework of regionalism and connectivity, alongside economic interdependence theory, which helps situate the UN's engagement within a broader context of pragmatic diplomacy and normative contestation in international relations. The United Nations (UN) finds itself entangled in a profound ethical and operational dilemma as it navigates the treacherous terrain of Afghanistan under Taliban rule. On one hand, it faces the urgent imperative to deliver life-saving aid to a staggering 22.3 million Afghans in need, while on the other, it must uphold its foundational commitment to universal human rights, particularly for women and marginalized communities who are systematically repressed under what observers have aptly termed "gender apartheid."<sup>31</sup>

At the core of this dilemma lies the tension between humanitarian neutrality and human rights advocacy, an issue that resonates with broader theoretical frameworks in international relations, notably the debates surrounding humanitarianism, conditional engagement, and the potential legitimization of authoritarian regimes. The UN's principle of neutrality, essential for ensuring impartial humanitarian access, is increasingly strained by Taliban-imposed restrictions. These include over 110 edicts issued in 2024 alone, many of which directly undermine women's rights and obstruct NGO operations, compelling the UN to negotiate limited concessions to sustain vital aid delivery.<sup>32</sup> This balancing act is vividly illustrated by the 2022 Taliban ban on female NGO workers. While the UN and its partners managed to secure exemptions for female health professionals, this came at the cost of broader gender inclusion, highlighting the ethical trade-offs inherent in negotiating with the regime. The World Food Programme (WFP), for instance, has insisted on female participation in aid distribution, resulting in modest Taliban concessions in select provinces, yet these gains remain fragile and limited. The stakes are high. Afghanistan is grappling with severe displacement, with 6.3 million internally displaced persons and 1.2 million returnees recorded in 2024 alone. Amid this humanitarian catastrophe, the UN has coordinated \$2.9 billion in cash shipments since 2021 to sustain basic economic functions and deliver aid to over 7.1 million people in early 2025. However, this operational necessity risks inadvertently enhancing the Taliban's domestic legitimacy and international diplomatic leverage, blurring the line between humanitarian neutrality and de facto recognition of a regime responsible for widespread rights abuses.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup> "Taliban Ban on Women Aid Workers Threatens Humanitarian Operations," United Nations, 2023, at <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/04/1135407>.

<sup>31</sup> "Afghanistan Humanitarian Action for Children 2024," UNICEF, 2024, at <https://www.unicef.org/appeals/afghanistan>

<sup>32</sup> Weigand, Florian: "The Paradox of Humanitarian Engagement with the Taliban", *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, vol.18, n° 1 (2024), pp. 1–18

<sup>33</sup> "Afghanistan: Top UN Envoy Calls for 'A Moment of Realism'," United Nations, 2025, at <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/03/1153461>.



Human rights violations in Afghanistan under Taliban rule are stark and well-documented. The regime's systemic targeting of women, including 840 incidents of gender-based violence between January 2022 and June 2024, and its repression of ethnic minorities, notably the Hazaras, have drawn international condemnation. Arbitrary detentions, numbering 20,000 by mid-2024 including 1,500 women and 13,000 accused of "morality violations" underscore the pervasive climate of fear and oppression. UN leadership has consistently voiced alarm over these violations. Volker Türk, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, declared in September 2024 that "The Taliban's restrictions on women constitute gender persecution, requiring robust international response alongside humanitarian aid," urging the international community to navigate this ethical tightrope without compromising on human rights.

Similarly, Roza Otunbayeva, head of UNAMA, emphasized in her March 2025 Security Council briefing that while "humanitarian operations must continue, we cannot ignore the erosion of human rights under Taliban rule,"<sup>34</sup> highlighting the growing isolation faced by Afghanistan. Efforts to balance these competing imperatives have included high-stakes diplomatic engagements, such as the 2024 Doha meetings, which prioritized humanitarian access but controversially excluded Afghan women from participation. This exclusion sparked criticism, underscoring the tension between maintaining operational access and signaling a firm stance against gender persecution. The International Criminal Court's 2025 applications for arrest warrants against Taliban leaders for gender persecution further illustrate the evolving legal and moral landscape, contrasting starkly with the UN's necessity of continued engagement for aid delivery. The UN's approach in Afghanistan thus exemplifies the complex interplay between pragmatic humanitarianism and principled human rights advocacy. While neutrality enables access to vulnerable populations, it also risks being perceived as complicity in the Taliban's consolidation of power. Conditional engagement strategies such as linking aid to compliance with gender inclusion mandates have yielded limited successes, but these are often undermined by Taliban resistance and chronic funding shortfalls.

The underfunding of the UN's \$2.42 billion appeal, with only 37% met by 2025, exacerbates these challenges, forcing difficult choices between sustaining aid pipelines and maintaining normative commitments. This narrative underscores a broader theoretical tension in international relations: the challenge of reconciling humanitarian imperatives with the imperative to uphold human rights. The UN's experience in Afghanistan, where it is caught between the Scylla of legitimizing an oppressive regime and the Charybdis of abandoning millions in need, offers a sobering reflection on the limits of international engagement in contexts of entrenched authoritarianism. It highlights the need for continuous recalibration of strategies that neither cede moral ground nor sacrifice human lives a delicate, and often imperfect, balance that lies at the heart of contemporary humanitarian diplomacy.

### **5. Trends and Dynamics (2021–2025)**

Since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, the United Nations (UN) has found itself in a precarious and evolving relationship with the de facto authorities in Afghanistan. This relationship has required a delicate balance between the imperative of delivering life-saving humanitarian assistance and the equally critical commitment to upholding universal human rights especially in the face of the Taliban's deepening repression, particularly targeting women and minority groups. The trajectory of this engagement reveals a complex tapestry of operational adaptations, conditional strategies, and ethical dilemmas that define the UN's role in post-2021 Afghanistan. Initially, the UN's approach was guided by a pragmatic yet principled

---

<sup>34</sup> Acting UNAMA Head Meets Taliban Economy Minister," UNAMA, 2022, at <https://unama.unmissions.org/acting-unama-head-meets-taliban-economy-minister>.



stance. While the organization refrained from granting formal recognition to the Taliban, it prioritized the urgent need to sustain humanitarian aid to millions of Afghans.

Under the renewed mandate of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) in Resolution 2626 (2022), the UN sought to establish a framework that allowed both humanitarian operations and human rights monitoring. As Ramiz Alakbarov, then Acting Head of UNAMA, underscored in December 2022, “Removing barriers to women’s participation in humanitarian work is vital for millions in need.”<sup>35</sup> This statement encapsulated the UN’s early efforts to negotiate operational space while maintaining core principles. However, the operational environment rapidly deteriorated. The Taliban issued over 110 restrictive edicts in 2024 alone, including explicit bans on female NGO and UN workers, sharply curtailing women’s participation in humanitarian operations. Martin Griffiths, the UN’s Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, emphasized this point in April 2023: “We cannot deliver principled humanitarian assistance without female staff.”<sup>36</sup> His remarks highlighted a shift from pragmatic engagement to conditional aid strategies, with the UN increasingly leveraging its humanitarian operations to press for gender inclusivity and respect for human rights. The Taliban’s intransigence, however, forced suspensions or significant reductions in aid delivery, threatening the very populations the UN sought to support.

The operational constraints extended beyond workforce participation. Taliban interference including demands for staff lists and beneficiary data further restricted UN access, especially for the estimated 22.3 million Afghans in need of assistance by 2025. Despite these challenges, the UN adapted through remote monitoring, reduced field presence in high- risk areas, and the expansion of partnerships with over 300 local NGOs. These adaptations allowed critical programs to continue, such as UNICEF’s 2024 collaboration with 120 local NGOs that enabled primary education for 500,000 girls, albeit in Taliban- approved contexts.<sup>37</sup> The ethical dilemmas inherent in this balancing act were stark. By engaging with the Taliban to secure operational access, the UN risked conferring a degree of legitimacy upon a regime whose actions particularly the persecution of women and minorities have been widely condemned. As noted by Weigand (2024), such engagement could inadvertently strengthen the Taliban’s governance capacity. This was exemplified by the UN’s coordination of \$2.9 billion in cash shipments since 2021, which, while facilitating aid delivery to 7.1 million people via the World Food Programme (WFP) in early 2025,<sup>38</sup> also highlighted the uncomfortable proximity between humanitarian necessity and political legitimization. The tensions were perhaps most evident in high- profile incidents and institutional responses. The Taliban’s December 2022 ban on women’s participation in NGOs led to protracted negotiations, resulting in limited exemptions for female health workers.

Similarly, UN-led Doha meetings in 2024 prioritized securing humanitarian access but notably excluded Afghan women, revealing the pragmatic yet ethically fraught nature of these engagements. The International Criminal Court’s (ICC) pursuit of arrest warrants against Taliban leaders for gender persecution in 2025 further underscored the divergence between the UN’s human rights advocacy and the operational compromises necessitated by the dire humanitarian situation. Theoretical frameworks of regionalism and connectivity offer additional layers of analysis. The UN’s approach reflects a form of adaptive regional engagement, leveraging both multilateral mechanisms and localized partnerships to sustain

<sup>35</sup> “Afghanistan Humanitarian Response Plan 2023,” United Nations OCHA, 2023, at

<https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-humanitarian-needs-response-plan-2023/>.

<sup>36</sup> “UN in Afghanistan: 2023 Factsheet,” United Nations, 2024, at <https://afghanistan.un.org>.

<sup>37</sup> “Afghanistan: Operational Update – Q1 2025”. World Food Programme, at <https://www.wfp.org/publications>

<sup>38</sup> “UN High Commissioner for Refugees Calls to Reverse Ban of Women Humanitarian Workers in Afghanistan,” UNHCR, 2022, at <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2022/12/63ad6f484/>.



humanitarian operations amidst restrictive political landscapes. Economic interdependence theory also illuminates the paradox of conditional engagement: while leveraging aid as a tool for promoting human rights, the sheer scale of Afghanistan's humanitarian needs and the Taliban's control over access points limit the UN's bargaining power. The United Nations (UN) has been navigating a labyrinth of operational, ethical, and political challenges in Afghanistan since the Taliban's return to power. This complex engagement, driven by humanitarian imperatives and human rights concerns, has evolved in response to increasingly restrictive edicts issued by the Taliban, especially those targeting women's participation in society.

The narratives of UN agencies such as UNHCR, WFP, and UN Women reveal a carefully calibrated balance between principled engagement and the practical realities of delivering life-saving assistance in one of the world's most constrained humanitarian environments. In the immediate aftermath of the Taliban's takeover, the UN adopted a pragmatic yet principled stance. While refraining from granting formal recognition to the de facto authorities, it prioritized the delivery of humanitarian assistance to address the urgent needs of millions of Afghans. This approach was embodied in the renewal of UNAMA's mandate (Resolution 2626, 2022), which established a framework for continued dialogue with the Taliban and emphasized the coordination of aid alongside human rights monitoring. As Ramiz Alakbarov, Acting UNAMA Head, aptly remarked, "Removing barriers to women's participation in humanitarian work is vital for millions in need," highlighting the operational dilemmas the UN faced. The Taliban's subsequent bans on women's work in NGOs and education, including the infamous December 2022 edict, marked a turning point in UN engagement. In response, agencies like UN Women advocated for limited exemptions, securing temporary permissions for female health workers while emphasizing the indispensable role of women in humanitarian efforts. However, Martin Griffiths, UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, articulated the broader dilemma when he stated, "We cannot deliver principled humanitarian assistance without female staff," underscoring the tension between operational pragmatism and normative commitments. UNHCR's operations have exemplified adaptive strategies under Taliban-imposed constraints. Prioritizing protection for 2.3 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and 1.2 million returnees, the agency relied on cash assistance and area-based reintegration programs to mitigate displacement vulnerabilities.

Yet, its efforts faced significant obstacles, including Taliban demands for beneficiary data and restrictions on female staff mobility, which disproportionately affected women's access to aid. In 2024, UNHCR provided cash assistance to 110,000 returnees 60% of them women and supported 300,000 IDPs in 80 priority reintegration zones, showcasing resilience in the face of adversity.<sup>39</sup> The World Food Programme (WFP) similarly adapted its operations, maintaining food and nutrition assistance for 7.8 million people despite a 35% reduction in female-led aid delivery caused by staff bans. WFP's deployment of mobile teams and remote verification systems exemplified innovative solutions to Taliban-imposed restrictions, particularly for reaching 1.5 million women in need. As Cindy McCain, WFP Executive Director, poignantly observed, "Women are the backbone of our operations; their exclusion threatens millions facing hunger." UN Women played a critical advocacy role, supporting 14.2 million women and girls with humanitarian aid from 2021 to 2023. However, it confronted relentless challenges from over 116 Taliban edicts, including 10 specifically targeting female aid workers and beneficiaries. Sima Bahous, UN Women Executive Director, underscored the stakes, declaring, "We cannot talk about humanitarian aid while excluding half the population," capturing the ethical and operational tensions at the heart of the UN's engagement. The UN's strategic recalibrations extended beyond individual agency responses. Faced with mounting

<sup>39</sup> "Afghanistan Women and Girls Factsheet – October 2024," UNHCR, 2024, at <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/unhcr-afghanistan-women-and-girls-factsheet-october-2024>.



access restrictions including over 1,200 reported incidents of Taliban interference in 2024 the UN collectively reduced its physical field presence in high-risk areas, expanded remote monitoring, and deepened partnerships with over 350 local NGOs to sustain aid delivery.<sup>40</sup> Notably, joint efforts between UNHCR, WFP, UN Women, and UNICEF enabled the delivery of education to 500,000 girls in Taliban-approved primary schools, exemplifying the potential of local partnerships in circumventing operational barriers. However, these pragmatic adjustments were not without cost. Humanitarian access remained fragile, with only 37% of the \$2.42 billion UN humanitarian appeal for 2025 funded, threatening the sustainability of aid efforts. Moreover, the reliance on conditional engagement strategies, such as selective exemptions and local partnerships, risked legitimizing the Taliban by enabling them to leverage humanitarian cooperation to bolster their governance capacity. As Weigand (2024) observed, the \$2.9 billion in UN cash shipments and the visibility of Doha talks have, inadvertently or otherwise, enhanced the Taliban's international profile. At the core of the UN's engagement in Afghanistan lies a fundamental tension between upholding the principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence, and navigating the realpolitik of operating under a repressive regime. This balancing act, shaped by evolving Taliban policies, shifting donor commitments, and the unrelenting humanitarian crisis affecting 22.9 million Afghans, underscores the operational and ethical dilemmas the UN faces.

The theoretical frameworks of humanitarian access, conditional engagement, and legitimacy risks provide a lens to understand this complex interplay, revealing a narrative where principled aid delivery is both a moral imperative and a political negotiation. As a result, the UN's navigation of its relationship with the Taliban between 2021 and 2025 reveals a story of resilience under ethical duress. While prioritizing the delivery of humanitarian aid to nearly half of Afghanistan's population, the organization has continually confronted and sought to reconcile the profound tensions between operational pragmatism and principled advocacy. As Volker Türk, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, aptly summarized in his September 2024 address: "The Taliban's restrictions on women constitute gender persecution, requiring robust international response alongside humanitarian aid." This statement captures the heart of the UN's dilemma delivering life-saving assistance while steadfastly advocating for the rights of those systematically marginalized under Taliban rule. The UN's evolving strategy underscores the complexity of engaging with repressive regimes in fragile contexts. It highlights the necessity of combining flexible operational models with steadfast human rights advocacy, even as it reveals the inherent contradictions and limited leverage that define such engagements. This narrative not only informs academic discourse but also offers critical insights for policymakers, humanitarian actors, and international legal bodies grappling with the Afghan crisis and similar contexts worldwide. Accordingly, the UN's evolving engagement with the Taliban from 2021 to 2025 is characterized by a dynamic interplay of resilience, compromise, and principled resistance. While agencies like UNHCR, WFP, and UN Women have demonstrated adaptability and innovation, their efforts are constrained by structural challenges and ethical dilemmas that demand ongoing recalibration. The UN's experience in Afghanistan thus serves as a critical case study in the broader discourse on the limits of humanitarian engagement under authoritarian regimes, highlighting the need for nuanced strategies that balance operational pragmatism with unwavering commitment to human rights and humanitarian principles.

## **6. Competing Narratives and Discourses**

The Taliban's return to power in 2021 reshaped the geopolitical and humanitarian landscape of

---

<sup>40</sup> Kate Clark: "The Taliban's Restrictions and the UN's Response," Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2023, at <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/rights-freedom/the-talibans-restrictions-and-the-uns-response/>.



Afghanistan, producing a fractured global response that reflects deep divisions in the international community's ethical and strategic priorities. At the heart of these divisions lies the struggle to reconcile humanitarian imperatives with the imperative to uphold human rights, particularly in a context marked by escalating gender-based repression and systematic violations of international norms. This section unpacks the competing narratives driving this tension, emphasizing the interplay between pragmatic engagement and isolationist advocacy, while maintaining the United Nations' delicate balancing act between neutrality and advocacy. On one side of the spectrum, countries such as China, Russia, and Qatar, along with regional neighbors like Pakistan and Iran, have embraced pragmatic engagement with the Taliban. These states prioritize immediate goals ensuring humanitarian access, preserving regional stability, and advancing economic and security interests even if it means indirectly legitimizing the regime. For instance, China's \$49 million investment in Afghan infrastructure in 2023 underscores its commitment to economic engagement over human rights concerns, contrasting sharply with U.S.-led sanctions.<sup>41</sup> Pakistan's approach, simultaneously deporting 450,000 Afghans while maintaining economic ties with the Taliban, exemplifies this regional pragmatism, driven by a mix of domestic pressures and strategic calculations. Conversely, a bloc of Western nations—including the U.S., EU, Canada, and key human rights organizations advocates for isolating the Taliban, citing what Amnesty International terms "gender apartheid" and broader human rights abuses. The EU's decision to freeze \$1.2 billion in development aid in 2024, while maintaining \$200 million for humanitarian assistance, epitomizes this conditional approach: prioritizing human rights but recognizing the urgency of humanitarian needs. Germany's initiation of proceedings at the International Court of Justice (ICJ), alongside Australia, Canada, and the Netherlands, over Afghanistan's violations of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) further illustrates this commitment to holding the Taliban accountable.

Amid these polarized narratives, the United Nations has navigated a precarious middle ground, striving to uphold its humanitarian mandate while resisting the perception of legitimizing the Taliban's de facto rule. Maintaining a non-recognition stance, the UN has continued to engage through mechanisms such as the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and the Doha process, balancing principled aid delivery against the complex realities on the ground. Roza Otunbayeva, head of UNAMA, encapsulated this tension in a 2025 Security Council briefing, stating: "Engagement with the Taliban is essential for humanitarian access, but must not compromise human rights principles." Nevertheless, the UN's \$2.9 billion in cash shipments between 2021 and 2025 to support 26.5 million Afghans has sparked concerns over inadvertently bolstering Taliban revenues and governance capacity.<sup>42</sup> This dynamic is further complicated by the Taliban's introduction of 116 restrictive decrees in 2024 alone, including ten targeting women's public participation, highlighting the systemic gender repression that defines their rule.<sup>43</sup> Volker Türk, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, underscored the stakes in August 2024, warning that "the international community must not normalize Taliban rule without verified human rights improvements."<sup>44</sup>

The statistical realities on the ground expose the gravity of this ethical conundrum. While humanitarian aid has reached millions WFP alone assisted 7.8 million people in 2024 female-

<sup>41</sup> United States Institute of Peace (USIP): "A Shift Toward More Engagement with the Taliban?," USIP, 2023, at <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/10/a-shift-toward-more-engagement-taliban/>.

<sup>42</sup> The Future of Assistance for Afghanistan: A Dilemma," Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 2024, at <https://www.csis.org/analysis/future-assistance-afghanistan-dilemma>.

<sup>43</sup> "Afghanistan: Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2025," Humanitarian Action, 2024, at <https://humanitarianaction.info/plan/1187>.

<sup>44</sup> "Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team," United Nations, 2024, at <https://www.undocs.org/S/2024/419>.



led distributions dropped by 35% due to Taliban-imposed bans on women staff. Concurrently, incidents of gender-based violence surged to 840 between 2022 and 2024, including 332 killings and 1,500 arbitrary detentions of women. These figures illustrate the stark intersection of humanitarian need and gender-based repression that defines the Afghan context today. Within the broader international discourse, this juxtaposition of humanitarian urgency and human rights violations generates profound tensions. States aligned with engagement argue that humanitarian imperatives should supersede political considerations, as reflected in Zabihullah Mujahid's assertion that "we seek cooperation with all nations, but human rights conditions must respect our culture."<sup>45</sup> However, isolationist proponents counter that engagement risks normalizing Taliban rule, potentially eroding international norms and enabling further abuses. The 2024 Doha meetings, where engagement-oriented states like Qatar and Russia outnumbered isolationists, but Afghan women were conspicuously absent, highlight these dilemmas. The United Nations' evolving engagement with Afghanistan under Taliban rule reveals a complex narrative interwoven with humanitarian imperatives, contested legitimacy, and persistent human rights concerns.

This multifaceted discourse underscores the profound tensions between the UN's operational neutrality and its normative commitments, as well as the broader international struggle to reconcile principled non-recognition with the urgent need to address the country's spiraling humanitarian crisis. Since the Taliban's takeover in August 2021, the UN has maintained a delicate balancing act. It consistently frames its engagement as a humanitarian necessity rather than a political endorsement, emphasizing the critical need to assist over 23 million Afghans in desperate circumstances. Roza Otunbayeva, head of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), captured this tension aptly: "Engagement with the de facto authorities is critical for humanitarian access, but must not imply recognition." This stance reflects the UN's broader "de facto, not de jure" approach eschewing formal recognition of the Taliban while maintaining operational contact to facilitate aid delivery.

Yet, this pragmatic engagement carries significant ethical dilemmas, especially as it risks inadvertently legitimizing the Taliban's authority. Experts like Florian Weigand warn that the \$2.9 billion in UN cash shipments from 2021 to 2025 while sustaining 26.5 million Afghans also bolstered the Taliban's revenue and governance capacity, potentially undermining international efforts to press for reforms. This reality is further complicated by the Taliban's calculated resistance to international conditions, as voiced by their spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid: "We welcome UN aid but reject conditions that violate our sovereignty." The UN's approach has been characterized by a dual discourse: a humanitarian imperative that justifies engagement, and a normative commitment to human rights that complicates this engagement. António Guterres, the UN Secretary-General, articulated this paradox by acknowledging the necessity of continued aid delivery while condemning Taliban-imposed bans on women UN workers, emphasizing that "their restrictions on women undermine legitimacy."<sup>46</sup> The 2023 Security Council Resolution 2681 reinforced this stance by explicitly condemning the Taliban's gender-based restrictions, demonstrating the UN's intent to balance principled criticism with operational necessity. This dynamic is further illustrated by UNAMA's consultations with local leaders through initiatives like the formation of Provincial Ulema Councils aimed at fostering inclusive governance. However, these efforts have faced criticism for inadvertently reinforcing Taliban control while excluding critical voices, particularly women's groups, from key

<sup>45</sup> "Taliban Rejects UN Calls for Women's Rights," *Al Jazeera*, 15 June 2023, at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/6/15/taliban-rejects-un-calls>.

<sup>46</sup> "Afghanistan: Country Gender Equality Profile 2023," UN Women, 2023, at <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2023/12/afghanistan-country-gender-equality-profile-2023/>.



discussions as evidenced by their exclusion from the Doha III meeting in 2024.<sup>47</sup>

Meanwhile, the narrative of “gender apartheid” advanced by global actors including human rights organizations and several Western states has intensified scrutiny of the Taliban’s draconian policies. Amnesty International (2025) reported over 840 incidents of gender-based violence between 2022 and 2024, including 332 killings and 1,500 arbitrary detentions of women. In response, Germany, Australia, Canada, and the Netherlands initiated proceedings at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), highlighting a legalistic and rights-based approach to holding the Taliban accountable.

Regional dynamics add further complexity to the UN’s positioning. While the UN and Western actors have largely prioritized human rights conditionality, regional powers such as Pakistan, China, and Iran have pursued pragmatic engagement with the Taliban to secure their economic and security interests.<sup>48</sup> Pakistan’s deportation of over 450,000 Afghan refugees in 2024, alongside its deepening economic ties with the Taliban, exemplifies this dual-track approach. Critics argue that the UN’s balancing act risks perpetuating an untenable status quo. Graeme Smith of the International Crisis Group observes that while the UN’s engagement is indispensable for humanitarian access, “its neutrality compromises advocacy for women’s rights,” suggesting a need for more robust advocacy mechanisms.<sup>49</sup> This tension is emblematic of the broader dilemma faced by international institutions in situations where humanitarian necessity collides with normative commitments. In the end, the UN’s approach encapsulates the core theoretical tension of balancing neutrality with advocacy. While humanitarian access is non-negotiable in a crisis affecting over 22.9 million people, the principles of human rights and gender equality cannot be subordinated without risking long-term normative erosion. The evolving narrative is thus not merely a binary choice between engagement and isolation but a complex, often contradictory negotiation of operational realities, ethical commitments, and geopolitical imperatives. Hence, the UN’s discourse on legitimacy in Afghanistan reflects a deeply entangled narrative of necessity, compromise, and contested principles. The organization continues to walk a precarious line between facilitating life-saving assistance and resisting the normalization of a regime that fundamentally contravenes the rights of Afghan women and broader democratic norms. This narrative underscores the enduring challenge of balancing operational pragmatism with normative ideals, highlighting the inherent tensions within global governance frameworks when confronted with complex crises that defy simple resolutions.

## **7. Effectiveness and Limitations of United Nations Conditionality Mechanisms**

The effectiveness and limitations of the United Nations’ conditionality mechanisms in Afghanistan present a complex and nuanced landscape, marked by the challenge of balancing principled engagement with the necessity of humanitarian aid. The UN’s efforts to leverage humanitarian assistance as a form of conditionality, aimed at influencing the Taliban’s policies on women’s rights and governance, reveal both strategic intentions and inherent constraints. At the heart of the UN’s approach lies the imperative to provide lifesaving aid to over 23 million Afghans in dire need. This humanitarian necessity often compels a pragmatic posture, where conditions imposed on the Taliban including the requirement for access by female aid workers and respect for women’s rights are at times relaxed to prevent a collapse in aid delivery. UN

<sup>47</sup> “Human Rights in Afghanistan: 2024 Update,” United Nations, 2024, at

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/2024-afghanistan-human-rights-update>.

<sup>48</sup> Filippo Boni, “Afghanistan 2022: Life under the Taliban,” *Asia Maior*, vol. 33 (2023), pp. 411–423, at <https://oro.open.ac.uk/92088/>.

<sup>49</sup> Smith, Graeme: “The UN’s Humanitarian Dilemma in Afghanistan”, International Crisis Group, 2023



officials, such as Roza Otunbayeva, have underscored this delicate balance, stating, “Humanitarian access hinges on Taliban respect for female aid workers’ roles, but their edicts undermine progress.” Despite formal conditionality frameworks, evidence points to a pattern of selective compliance by the Taliban. While the Taliban have permitted limited female participation in health and education sectors, their enforcement of restrictive edicts such as bans on female NGO work and public expression reflects a stark resistance to broader rights-based reforms. For instance, the Taliban’s 2024 “morality law,” which effectively silenced women in public life, directly contravened UN conditions and led to a reduction of aid in non-compliant provinces. The quantitative data reinforces this narrative. Between 2021 and 2025, the UN delivered \$2.9 billion in aid, reaching 26.5 million Afghans.

Yet, the number of female aid workers fell by 20% compared to 2022, reflecting the Taliban’s tightening restrictions. Meanwhile, human rights abuses persisted, with over 20,000 arbitrary detentions (including 1,500 women) and 840 documented incidents of gender-based violence, highlighting the limited impact of conditionality on the ground. The unintended consequence of these conditionality mechanisms is the risk of indirectly legitimizing the Taliban’s rule. While UN agencies emphasize that engagement remains “de facto, not de jure,” the economic benefits of aid including a reported 9% increase in Taliban revenue in 2023, partly derived from UN cash flows—raise ethical concerns about reinforcing the regime’s stability.

This tension is captured by Florian Weigand, who warned that “the UN’s engagement risks legitimizing the Taliban unless tied to verifiable human rights progress.” The practical challenges of enforcement are also significant. The UN has relied on Security Council resolutions and donor conditions to pressure the Taliban, but these tools have proven inadequate against a regime that frames its policies as grounded in “Sharia,” as articulated by Taliban Supreme Leader Hibatullah Akhundzada in August 2024.<sup>50</sup> Zabihullah Mujahid’s assertion that “UN conditions must respect our cultural values; we cooperate where possible,” further reflects the Taliban’s strategic use of selective engagement to secure aid while resisting external demands. Experts like Attila Noyan have argued that “political conditionality has failed to deter Taliban violations due to weak enforcement”,<sup>51</sup> suggesting that the UN’s leverage is constrained not only by the Taliban’s intransigence but also by the fragmented and inconsistent application of conditionality itself. Cases such as the World Food Programme’s 2024 initiative, which conditioned aid on female distributor access and faced Taliban pushback in five provinces, illustrate both the potential and the limits of such measures. Narrative and ethical tensions run through this entire dynamic.

The UN’s need to remain neutral to maintain access often places it in a position where it must prioritize immediate humanitarian relief over sustained human rights advocacy. Graeme Smith’s observation that “the UN’s role is indispensable, but its neutrality compromises advocacy for women’s rights”, encapsulates this dilemma. The Doha III meeting in 2024, which excluded Afghan women from the discussion table, underscored the narrative contradictions inherent in engaging with a regime that systematically violates the very rights the UN seeks to uphold.<sup>52</sup> The imposition of international sanctions on the Taliban since their takeover of Afghanistan has served as a complex tool of external pressure, aimed at constraining their governance capabilities while attempting to leverage compliance with international norms, particularly regarding human rights and inclusive governance. Sanctions, including UN

<sup>50</sup> “Taliban Morality Law Enforces Strict Sharia,” *Reuters*, 22 August 2024, at <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/taliban-morality-law-2024-08-22/>.

<sup>51</sup> Ahmad Noyan, “An Analysis of the Political Conditionality to Protect Human Rights in Afghanistan,” *Osun Global Commons*, 12 November 2022, at <https://www.osunglobalcommons.org/2022/11/12/an-analysis-human-rights/>.

<sup>52</sup> “Doha III Meeting Outcomes,” *United Nations*, 2024, at <https://www.un.org/en/doha-meetings-2024>.



Security Council asset freezes, travel bans, and broader U.S. and EU measures, have undeniably tightened the Taliban's financial capacity, contracting Afghanistan's economy by an estimated 20–30% and contributing to a soaring poverty rate of 93% by 2024. Yet, these economic constraints have produced unintended and ethically fraught consequences, intensifying humanitarian crises across the country while failing to fundamentally shift the Taliban's ideological posture.

Despite these financial pressures, the Taliban's behavioral trajectory has demonstrated a profound resilience and defiance. The group has continued to enforce an extensive suite of 116 gender-based edicts, escalating violations of women's rights and broader human rights norms. This persistence underscores a core weakness in sanctions' deterrent effect: they have not induced substantive reforms in governance or inclusive policymaking. As Roza Otunbayeva, head of UNAMA, observed during a Security Council briefing in March 2025, "Sanctions constrain the Taliban's resources, but their restrictions on women deepen isolation and suffering." Her statement highlights the paradox of sanctions—while they weaken the Taliban's economic base, they also exacerbate humanitarian distress, thereby undermining the very populations that sanctions ostensibly aim to protect. The Taliban's responses to sanctions have been characterized by selective compliance, particularly where such cooperation aligns with their strategic or pragmatic interests. For example, while sanctions have pressured the Taliban into limited counterterrorism cooperation—leading to a reported 40% reduction in ISKP attacks in 2024—they have simultaneously allowed the continued presence of foreign militant networks, including elements of al-Qaeda.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, under pressure from sanctions and international diplomatic engagement, the Taliban partially reversed their ban on female NGO workers after UN advocacy efforts, albeit only in specific sectors like health and not in education or broader governance. These concessions suggest that sanctions can extract tactical compliance but are insufficient to compel systemic change, especially in deeply ingrained ideological areas such as gender rights and the imposition of sharia-based governance, as emphasized by Hibatullah Akhundzada, the Taliban's supreme leader: "Our Islamic system withstands sanctions; Sharia is our guide." The UN's strategy in navigating the sanctions landscape has evolved toward a principled engagement approach, balancing the imperative of maintaining humanitarian access with the necessity of upholding core human rights standards. However, enforcement mechanisms remain weak, and the risk of indirect legitimization of the Taliban looms large. The dilemma is stark: continued engagement is essential to deliver aid to the 23.7 million Afghans in need, yet such engagement risks reinforcing the Taliban's control and economic base, particularly given the group's capacity to stabilize the national currency and double exports despite sanctions. António Guterres, UN Secretary-General, encapsulated this tension in June 2023: "Sanctions must not impede humanitarian aid; engagement is essential to influence Taliban behavior." This balance is further complicated by regional actors' strategic calculations.

China and Russia's increasing engagement with the Taliban undercuts the broader efficacy of sanctions, providing the regime with alternative avenues for diplomatic and economic survival. These dynamics expose the limitations of unilateral or Western-driven sanctions regimes in a multipolar international system, where geopolitical rivalries and realpolitik often eclipse normative commitments. Voices from the Taliban leadership reveal the ideological entrenchment underpinning their resistance to external pressure. Zabihullah Mujahid, the group's spokesperson, dismissed sanctions as harming ordinary Afghans rather

---

<sup>53</sup> "Afghanistan in 2023: Taliban Internal Power Struggles and Militancy," Brookings Institution, 2023, at <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/afghanistan-in-2023-taliban-internal-power-struggles-and-militancy/>.



than the leadership: “Sanctions harm Afghans, not us; we will not bow to external pressure.”<sup>54</sup> Such statements not only reflect an appeal to sovereignty but also signal the Taliban’s strategy of leveraging humanitarian crises to extract concessions from the international community while maintaining ideological rigidity. The ethical dilemmas inherent in the sanction’s regime are compounded by empirical realities: while sanctions contribute to economic hardship, they have not dismantled the Taliban’s revenue streams, which remain robust, reaching \$2.9 billion in 2023, driven by illicit activities, resource extraction, and aid diversion. Moreover, sanctions have complicated the operational environment for humanitarian actors, forcing difficult compromises between upholding principles and ensuring life-saving assistance. Therefore, the UN’s conditionality mechanisms in Afghanistan exemplify a profound struggle between the urgent demands of humanitarianism and the principled pursuit of human rights and political reform. The evidence reveals a pattern of partial and conditional compliance by the Taliban, significant humanitarian achievements tempered by serious ethical compromises, and a limited ability of conditionality tools to enforce meaningful change. As a result, the UN’s role in Afghanistan remains a case study in the tensions between neutrality, legitimacy, and human rights advocacy in international diplomacy.

The impact of international sanctions on the Taliban has been marked by a paradox of intent and effect. While they have successfully contracted the group’s financial resources and generated limited tactical compliance, they have failed to catalyze substantive behavioral shifts in governance and human rights, particularly for Afghan women. The Taliban’s ideological steadfastness, coupled with regional geopolitical dynamics and humanitarian imperatives, has rendered sanctions a blunt instrument—capable of signaling international disapproval but insufficient for enforcing meaningful change. This reality demands a recalibration of UN engagement strategies, one that judiciously balances principled advocacy, pragmatic diplomacy, and the imperative of sustaining humanitarian access in an environment where ethical clarity remains elusive.

## **8. Conclusion**

The United Nations’ engagement with the Taliban from 2021 to 2025 encapsulates a deeply complex balancing act between humanitarian imperatives and profound ethical challenges. The UN’s operational rationale has primarily focused on delivering life-saving assistance amidst Afghanistan’s multifaceted humanitarian catastrophe and entrenched poverty. Through a principled approach, the organization has achieved notable successes, including disaster relief efforts, support for female aid workers, and gender-focused initiatives embedded within its operational framework. These interventions have ensured continued humanitarian access despite the Taliban’s restrictive governance and repression. However, these achievements remain constrained by the Taliban’s persistent human rights abuses, exemplified by restrictive gender edicts, mass detentions, and repressive policies that silence women’s public voices. The Taliban’s increasing revenues, facilitated in part by aid flows, have further complicated efforts to assert normative leverage. Simultaneously, international sanctions though significant have failed to compel substantive policy shifts, with regional powers undermining their efficacy through economic engagement and diplomatic recognition. Civil society actors, particularly Afghan women, have criticized the UN’s approach, highlighting its exclusionary practices and insufficient accountability mechanisms. The broader narrative illustrates the UN’s struggle to reconcile its humanitarian mandate with the ethical dilemma of potentially legitimizing an authoritarian regime. While counterterrorism cooperation has produced some security gains, and while gender-focused programs have offered limited progress, the lack of robust enforcement

---

<sup>54</sup> “Taliban Minister Raised Refugee Assets Issue During Pakistan Visit,” *Al Jazeera*, 14 November 2023, at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/11/14/taliban-minister-raised-refugee-assets-issue-during-pakistan-visit-embassy>.



mechanisms and fragmented donor coordination has weakened the overall impact. This case study of Afghanistan underscores the need for a refined strategy that balances principled humanitarian action with stronger accountability, inclusivity, and adherence to fundamental human rights.

### Bibliography

“Afghanistan, 2 Years After: Taliban Repression & Humanitarian Crises Intensify,” PBS, 2023, at <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/afghanistan-two-years-after-taliban-takeover/>

“Afghanistan: Country Gender Equality Profile 2023,” UN Women, 2023, <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2023/12/afghanistan-country-gender-equality-profile-2023/>.

“Afghanistan Crisis Response Plan 2024,” International Organization for Migration, 2024, at <https://crisisresponse.iom.int>.

“Afghanistan Development Update: Navigating Economic Distress and Social Decline”, April 2024, The World Bank Group, at <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/18a1ccff0457effb0a456c0d4af7cce2-0310012024/original/Afghanistan-Development-Update-April-2024.pdf>

"Afghanistan: Gender Apartheid—Taliban’s War on Women", Amnesty International, January 2025, at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa11/6789/2025/en>

“Afghanistan Humanitarian Action for Children 2024,” UNICEF, 2024, at <https://www.unicef.org/appeals/afghanistan>.

“Afghanistan: Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2025,” Humanitarian Action, 2024, at <https://humanitarianaction.info/plan/1187>.

“Afghanistan: Humanitarian Response 2024,” European Commission, 2024, [https://ec.europa.eu/echo/where/asia/afghanistan\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/echo/where/asia/afghanistan_en).

“Afghanistan in 2023: Taliban Internal Power Struggles and Militancy,” Brookings Institution, 2023, at <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/afghanistan-in-2023-taliban-internal-power-struggles-and-militancy/>.

“Afghanistan Protection and Solutions Strategy (2025–2027),” UNHCR, 2024, at <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-protection-and-solutions-strategy-2025-2027>.

“Afghanistan’s Taliban: Challenges of Governance and Legitimacy,” International Crisis Group, 2024, at <https://www.crisisgroup.org>.

“Afghanistan Women and Girls Factsheet – October 2024,” UNHCR, 2024, at <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/unhcr-afghanistan-women-and-girls-factsheet-october-2024>.

Bennoune Karima: “The International Obligation to Counter Gender Apartheid in Afghanistan,” *Columbia Human Rights Law Review* vol 54, n°1 (2023), pp 1–36, at <https://hrlr.law.columbia.edu/>.



Bizhan Nematullah: “The Political Economy of Post-2001 Afghanistan: Challenges of State-Building and Development under the Taliban,” *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, vol. 11, n° 3 (2024), pp. 345–368, at <https://doi.org/10.1177/23477970241275058>.

Boni Filippo: “Afghanistan 2022: Life under the Taliban,” *Asia Maior*, vol.33 (2023), pp. 411–423, at <https://oro.open.ac.uk/92088/>.

Bradsher Keith: “Taliban Bans Women from University Entrance Exams,” *Reuters*, 28 January 2023.

Kate Clark, “The Taliban’s Restrictions and the UN’s Response,” Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2023, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/rights-freedom/the-talibans-restrictions-and-the-uns-response/>.

“Human Rights in Afghanistan,” Amnesty International, 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/asia-and-the-pacific/south-asia/afghanistan/report-afghanistan/>.

“Instability in Afghanistan,” Council on Foreign Relations, 2025, at <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/instability-afghanistan>.

Lidén Kristoffer and Roepstorff Kristina: “Mopping Up, Keeping Down, and Propping Up: Ethical Dilemmas in Humanitarian Negotiations with Authoritarian Regimes,” in Cunningham Andrew J. (ed) (2023): *Authoritarian Practices and Humanitarian Negotiations*, London, Routledge.

Modern Diplomacy, “Pakistan’s Strategic Leverage and Afghanistan’s Pinpoints,” *Modern Diplomacy*, January 1, 2025, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2025/01/01/pakistans-strategic-leverage-and-afghanistans-pinpoints/>.

Noyan, Ahmad: “An Analysis of the Political Conditionality to Protect Human Rights in Afghanistan,” Osun Global Commons, 12 November 2022, at <https://www.osunglobalcommons.org/2022/11/12/an-analysis-human-rights/>.

Omarkhail, Ahmad: “Perceptions of Informed Afghans on the Taliban’s Islamic Emirate and the Former Afghan Government,” *World Affairs* (advance online publication, 2024), at <https://doi.org/10.1002/waf2.12345>.

“Recent Developments in Afghanistan (Report No. CBP-9906),” House of Commons Library, 2025, at <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9906/>.

Samim, Roya: “International Legal Mechanisms to Safeguard Women’s Human Rights: Analysis of Afghan Women’s Rights under Taliban Rule,” *Yale Journal of International Law* 44, n° 1 (2025), pp. 1–23, <https://yale.jil.yale.edu/>.

Slim Hugo: *Humanitarian Ethics in War and Disaster*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2023).

“Statement by Sima Bahous on the Taliban Prohibition of Women Working with NGOs,” UN Women, 2022, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/statement/2022/12/statement-the-decree-barring-women-in-afghanistan-from-working-in-non-governmental-organizations-is-yet-another-stark-violation-of-womens-rights>.

“Taliban Minister Raised Refugee Assets Issue During Pakistan Visit,” *Al Jazeera*, November 14, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/11/14/taliban-minister-raised-refugee-assets-issue-during-pakistan-visit-embassy>.

“Taliban Morality Law Enforces Strict Sharia,” *Reuters*, 22 August 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/taliban-morality-law-2024-08-22/>.



“Taliban Rejects UN Calls for Women’s Rights,” *Al Jazeera*, 15 June 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/6/15/taliban-rejects-un-calls>.

“The Future of Assistance for Afghanistan: A Dilemma,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2024, at <https://www.csis.org/analysis/future-assistance-afghanistan-dilemma>.

“The Role of Foreign Enablers in Perpetuating Taliban Corruption,” Bush Center, 2024, <https://www.bushcenter.org/publications/the-role-of-foreign-enablers-in-perpetuating-taliban-corruption>.

“The Taliban in Afghanistan,” Council on Foreign Relations, 2023, at <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/taliban-afghanistan>.

“Towards the Reintegration of Afghanistan into the International Community,” International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2024, at <https://www.iiss.org>.

UNAMA, “Acting UNAMA Head Meets Taliban Economy Minister,” UNAMA, 2022, at <https://unama.unmissions.org/acting-unama-head-meets-taliban-economy-minister>.

UNAMA, “Bans on Women Cost the Taliban Legitimacy,” UNAMA, 2023, at <https://t.co/NyfmAxvytb>.

UNAMA, “UNAMA Annual Report 2023,” UNAMA, 2023, at <https://unama.unmissions.org>.

UNAMA, “Quarterly Report on Human Rights 2024,” UNAMA, 2024, at <https://unama.unmissions.org>.

UNHCR, “UN High Commissioner for Refugees Calls to Reverse Ban of Women Humanitarian Workers in Afghanistan,” UNHCR, 2022, At <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2022/12/63ad6f484/>.

United Nations, “Afghanistan’s De Facto Authorities’ New Law Barring Women from Medical Training Imperils Country’s Health,” United Nations, 2024, at <https://press.un.org/en/2024/sc15932.doc.htm>.

United Nations, “International Community Must Not Normalise Taliban Rule in Afghanistan,” United Nations, 2024, at <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/08/international-community-must-not-normalise-taliban-rule-afghanistan>

United Nations, “Security Council Condemns Decision by Taliban to Ban Afghan Women from Working for United Nations in Afghanistan, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 2681 (2023),” United Nations, 2023, at <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15271.doc.htm>

United Nations, “Security Council Extends Mandate of United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, Adopting Resolution 2626 (2022),” United Nations, 2022, at <https://press.un.org/en/2022/sc14830.doc.htm>.

United Nations, “Taliban Ban on Women Aid Workers Threatens Humanitarian Operations,” United Nations, 2023, at <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/04/1135407>.

United Nations; “The Situation in Afghanistan - Security Council, 9283rd Meeting, 16 March 2024, at <https://media.un.org/avlibrary/en/asset/d329/d3294580>

United Nations, “UN Relief Chief Stresses Need to Stay and Deliver for All Afghans,” United Nations, 2024, at <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/11/1163461>.

United Nations, “UN in Afghanistan: 2023”, Factsheet, United Nations, 2024, at <https://afghanistan.un.org>.



United Nations, “Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team,” United Nations, 2024, at <https://www.undocs.org/S/2024/419>.

United Nations, “Doha III Meeting Outcomes,” United Nations, 2024, at <https://www.un.org/en/doha-meetings-2024>.

United Nations, “Human Rights in Afghanistan: 2024 Update,” United Nations, 2024, at <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/2024-afghanistan-human-rights-update>.

United Nations, “Afghanistan: Top UN Envoy Calls for ‘A Moment of Realism’,” United Nations, 2025, at <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/03/1153461>.

United Nations OCHA, “Under-Secretary-General Martin Griffiths’ Remarks at the High-Level Pledging Event for Afghanistan,” United Nations OCHA, 2022, at <https://reliefweb.int/node/3833426>.

United Nations OCHA, “Afghanistan Humanitarian Response Plan 2023,” United Nations OCHA, 2023, at <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-humanitarian-needs-response-plan-2023/>.

United Nations OCHA, “Afghanistan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2024,” United Nations OCHA, 2024, at <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-humanitarian-needs-and-response-plan-2024/>.

United Nations OCHA, “Afghanistan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2025,” United Nations OCHA, 2025, at <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-humanitarian-needs-and-response-plan-2025/>.

United States Department of State, “2023 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Afghanistan,” United States Department of State, 2024, at <https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2107599.html>.

United States Institute of Peace, “A Shift Toward More Engagement with the Taliban?,” United States Institute of Peace, 2023, at <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/10/a-shift-toward-more-engagement-taliban/>.

Vivekananda International Foundation, “Afghanistan in 2024: A Year of Diplomacy, Economic Challenges, and Humanitarian Crises under Taliban 2.0,” Vivekananda International Foundation, 20 February 2025, at <https://www.vifindia.org/article/2025/february/20/afghanistan-in-2024-a-year-of-diplomacy-economic-challenges-and-humanitarian-crises-under-taliban-2>.

Weigand, Florian: “Afghanistan’s Taliban: Legitimate Jihadists or Coercive Extremists?,” *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, vol. 11, n° 3 (2023), pp. 359–381, at <https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2017.1353755>.

Weigand, Florian: “Afghanistan’s Taliban: Legitimate Jihadists or Violent Extremists?,” *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* (advance online publication, 2024), at <https://doi.org/10.1080/175029664.2024.1357812>.

“Which Countries Have Relations with the Taliban’s Unrecognized Government?” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 30 May 2024, at <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-taliban-russia-diplomacy/32972530.html>

World Bank, “Afghanistan: Approach 3,” World Bank, 2024, at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2024/02/15/afghanistan-approach-0-anothera>.



World Bank, “Afghanistan Overview: Development News, Research, Data,” World Bank, 2024, at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/afghanistan/overview>.

World Food Programme, “WFP Condemns Taliban Ban on Women Staff,” World Food Programme, 2023, at <https://www.wfp.org/news/wfp-condemns-taliban-ban-women-staff>.

World Food Programme, “WFP Afghanistan Country Brief,” World Food Programme, 2024, at <https://www.wfp.org/countries/afghanistan>.

“World Report 2025: Afghanistan,” Human Rights Watch, 2025, at <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025/country-chapters/afghanistan>.