

The Outlook for International Aid Agencies in Afghanistan

The outlook for international aid agencies in Afghanistan is very uncertain. The uncertainty is not confined solely to Afghanistan itself but is also regional and global.

The Principal Uncertainties

Within Afghanistan:

- How will the Taliban govern and what sort of Afghanistan will the Taliban preside over? Will the Taliban reach out to other constituencies? Will they attempt to learn from their mistakes in power pre-2001 or will they make the same errors but this time with a high proportion of young Afghans who have lived the majority of their lives in a country not ruled by the Taliban? To what extent will the rights of women, and other fundamental human rights, be respected?
- How much coherence will there be within the Taliban movement? How capable and how quick will they be to pivot from insurgent movement to a national government? Can the leadership reconcile the (generally) rural conservatives with the urban progressives inside and outside the movement? Can the leadership control what its cadres do on the ground?
- Will the Taliban be able to secure the whole country? What does the future hold for parts of the country that are not ethnically Pashtun or are not politically, religiously or socially aligned with the Taliban? The open question of whether the Taliban are a national Islamist movement or an ethnic Pashtun party will be exposed to the light more fully than at any time since the Taliban were last in power.
- Will the country become more secure and less corrupt? The Taliban have tended to bring some security with them and a justice system that was perceived as relatively efficient and relatively fair, at least in comparison with the widely-perceived predation and corruption of other recent Afghan governments.
- To what extent will the Taliban government allow extreme radical Islamist groups (e.g., Al Qa'ida, the Pakistan Taliban and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)) to shelter and use Afghanistan as a resting, training and planning area or as a base for operations? How successful will the Taliban be in meeting the political and security challenge from the local branch of the Islamic State, the IS Khorasan (ISK)?



Regionally:

- What will be the relationship between regional powers (China, Russia and Iran) and the new Taliban government? Will the Taliban be able to maintain cordial relationships with neighbouring countries Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan?
- To what extent will India and Pakistan continue to actively pursue their own interests in Afghanistan? Will India provide support to the Taliban's enemies and purposefully undermine Taliban rule? Will Pakistan be able to control the Afghan Taliban's radical Islamist allies (such as the Pakistan Taliban and Lashkar-e-Taiba) on the border and within Pakistan?

Globally:

- Will the Taliban and the US and its allies be able to build a stable modus vivendi?
- International aid to Afghanistan comprises about 40% of GDP and three-quarters of the government budget. To what extent will Western governments, Russia and China, and the relevant multilateral institutions such as the World Bank and IMF, consider it possible to support financially a Taliban government in Afghanistan and allow access to funds? Western governments appear currently unwilling to do so without the Taliban meeting (in practice as well as word) stringent conditions that may prove unacceptable to the Taliban.
- Will the US and Western governments be able to reach an agreement with Russia and China on international relations with Afghanistan?

Aid and development:

- Will implementing agencies, the Taliban and donors be able to build and sustain a relationship and framework whereby safe and effective aid and development can be implemented in Afghanistan? Work is underway to navigate the contours of such a relationship, with the UN's Humanitarian Country Team urgently seeking to agree Joint Operating Principles with the new Taliban leadership.
- Will the Taliban favour Russian, Chinese or other non-Western aid to that provided by Western countries? Will they find it less conditional and will they view it as less likely to be infiltrated by, or complicit with, intelligence agencies?



There is clearly enormous uncertainty set against a background of a dire humanitarian situation. There are, however, some potential positives:

- Some effective aid and development took place in Afghanistan under a Taliban government in the late 1990s and until 2001 – it was possible then and it may be possible now. A number of aid agencies are currently working in countries, or parts of countries, e.g., northern Syria, that are dominated by movements considered to be hostile by donor governments, with similar challenges over sanctions and counter-terrorism legislation.
- Security will, under almost any scenario, remain a concern. The Taliban is likely to want to provide a secure environment for international aid agencies, as long as a joint working relationship can be forged, but both organised crime gangs and the Taliban's political enemies will likely target international aid for kidnap and extortion and, in the latter's case, in order to disrupt the Taliban government strategically. But there are reasons for assessing that the Taliban may be capable of meeting the challenge from ISK. This would appear to be in the interests of the NATO countries, Russia, China, Iran, Pakistan and India. It seems that the Taliban and Western intelligence agencies cooperated to some degree in the hunt for ISK cells that were known to be threatening the international troops and the crowds around Kabul airport. Tragically they were not able to defeat all the attacks but this was probably, given the particular circumstances, an impossible challenge. It's too early to draw conclusions, but security reporting shows a significant decrease overall in incidents since the Taliban walked into power. This is unsurprising, given that it was the Taliban, and the fight with the Ghani government's forces, that was the main driver of conflict, insecurity and violence in the country. In summary, while the accession to power of the Taliban may bring new threats, security and humanitarian access – a major constraint in recent years - may actually improve overall.

The principal threat to foreign aid and development in Afghanistan could prove to be the Taliban's will and capacity to show that it will not allow violent radical Islamism to shelter in Afghanistan and plan or launch attacks beyond Afghanistan's borders. However, as ever with Afghanistan, the solutions lie not only within Afghanistan's borders, but regionally and globally.

The challenge for the international community is immense. The international community needs to be practical and innovative in establishing a framework that allows humanitarian aid to flow where it's needed and that is independently monitored and evaluated. Donor governments and implementing agencies will need to improve their ability to assess objectively whether their impact is beneficial or whether their operations are ultimately driving perverse outcomes such as more conflict, criminality and corruption. International sanctions and counter-terrorist legislation regarding humanitarian aid will need to be re-designed so that aid agencies are able to work effectively and are given the incentive to be more candid, open and objective in their assessments of ground reality.



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