

Three Years of Taliban Rule

CONFERENCE REPORT

AFGHANISTAN WEEK

29 October – 1 November, 2024



The Norwegian Afghanistan Committee

Founded in 1980, the Norwegian Afghanistan Committee (NAC) is a member-based solidarity organization with activities in Norway and Afghanistan and an elected Board and Secretariat based in Norway.

The purpose of the organization is to work together with the Afghan people to: contribute to the development of an independent, peaceful, and democratic Afghanistan; promote knowledge about Afghanistan in Norway; and promote friendship between the Norwegian and Afghan people.

Our Vision

NAC shall contribute to a peaceful Afghanistan, free from poverty, where rural communities are empowered and resilient, valuing equality and diversity.

Our Mission

NAC shall support the Afghan people in the development of a peaceful, just, and egalitarian society where universal human rights are respected. NAC shall be a nexus for knowledge of, interest in, and engagement with Afghanistan in Norway, promoting Afghan voices and perspectives in Norwegian public debate and advocating for informed and responsible policies towards Afghanistan.

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CONFERENCE REPORT

Afghanistan week 2024



Liv Kjølseth Secretary General in the Norwegian Afghanistan Committee

This report is based on a number of panel discussions held as part of Afghanistan Week 2024 in Oslo.

Afghanistan Week was first initiated in 2014, and is a bi-annual event where politicians, journalists, academics, and activists from Afghanistan, Norway, and beyond come together to address key issues facing the country. It aims to provide a safe space to share knowledge, experiences, hopes and concerns. Debate, active listening and asking questions are at the core of the concept. Most importantly, it aims to constitute a platform for voices from inside Afghanistan to be heard.

Afghanistan Week was arranged jointly by the Norwegian Afghanistan Committee (NAC) the Peace Research Institute in Oslo (PRIO), the Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI) and the Nansen Center for Peace and Dialogue. This year the Norwegian PEN and the Norwegian Human Rights Fund have also contributed with two of the sessions. A total of 32 speakers, five coming directly out of Afghanistan, contributed to a variety of panels, roundtables and dialogue circles. This would not have been possible without financial support from Norad and Fritt Ord.

More than three years have passed since the Afghan Taliban seized control over Kabul on 15 August 2021, bringing two decades of internationally supported statebuilding to a definite end. The Taliban have had three years to build their state based on their heavily contested understanding of Afghan and Islamic values – in which popular participation, and individual rights and universal welfare, are given short shrift. Taliban's policies are much disputed among Afghans, in the international domain, as well as within the Taliban itself.

The 2024 Afghanistan Week took stock of the last three years, examining the evolution of Taliban rule, the international engagement with the regime, and the adaptation of Afghans to the new state of affairs: Consolidation or Muddling Through? What is the status of the Taliban's ruling apparatus, what internal divisions exist, and how are those being managed? What are the costs and benefits of the various strategies of engagement or non-engagement? What is driving the variety of positions taken by different actors, and what are the lessons learnt? What do strategies for change and survival look like inside the country?



These are among the questions asked against the backdrop of a dramatic humanitarian situation reinforced by the impact of climate change, grave violations of human rights, incomparable restrictions of women and girl's access to education and work, and continued uncertainty and mounting tensions, but increase in trade between Afghanistan and many of its neighbouring countries. Each of the questions asked raise a multitude of dilemmas, yet with a population of some 40 million people living under Taliban rule, overlooking them is not an option. For the sake of the Afghan people, we must continue to engage and explore every possible avenue for positive change.

The articles in this report have been produced in the following way: Panel discussions were taped with consent and have been transcribed with Turboscribe. The transcripts were anonymized and edited with the help of Claude.ai. The articles are verified against the transcripts and subject to a final quality check by NAC staff, partners and panellists. All references to specific persons and projects have been removed. Direct quotes are anonymized and edited for readability. Facts and figures provided during the various panels have not been fact checked.

As previously noted, Afghanistan Week is a hub for debate and various perspectives. NAC and its collaborating institutions do not necessarily share the views presented in this report. Nevertheless, we are proud to present them and trust that the reader will find food for thought and reflection.

Executive summary

The opening article describes Afghanistan's current state as one of "miserable stability" with 0% economic growth, rising poverty due to population growth, and deep structural problems masked by surface-level stability. The economy particularly struggles in rural areas where household expenses exceed incomes. International reluctance to engage in development discussions has hindered economic recovery frameworks. The country faces multiple interconnected crises: humanitarian, economic, human rights, social, and governance. Recent enforcement of the opium cultivation ban has affected approximately half a million laborers, creating significant ripple effects throughout the rural economy. The absence of a constitution after three years has created a significant governance vacuum, contributing to unpredictable implementation of regulations.

The governance analysis examines how Taliban rule combines previous administrative frameworks with strong centralization in Kandahar, featuring provincial governors reporting directly to the Emir while handling technical matters through Kabul ministries. The Taliban swiftly established control over customs houses and revenue collection. Provincial ulema councils were systematically established across provinces by September 2023, creating an unexpected approach to local governance that incorporates both Taliban supporters and respected community figures. Southern Pashtuns hold approximately 80 percent of governor positions, though some positions are filled by Tajiks and Uzbeks. The dual power structure between Kabul and Kandahar creates a complex administrative system where formal government functions continue in the capital while key decisions flow from the Emir.

Norway's policy outlines an approach of maintaining dialogue with Taliban authorities while upholding human rights principles, emphasizing engagement over isolation based on historical evidence that isolation strengthens hardline positions. The strategy focuses on practical reasoning, particularly economic arguments about the impossibility of achieving growth while excluding half the population. The approach has generated both support and criticism from Afghan civil society representatives and human rights defenders, with ongoing debate about its effectiveness. Critics point to limited concrete results after three and a half years of engagement and express concern about legitimizing the Taliban without securing meaningful changes. However, supporters argue that historical examples demonstrate how isolation can lead to catastrophic outcomes, pointing to Afghanistan's experience after the Soviet withdrawal.

The economic analysis examines Afghanistan's unprecedented transition from being the world's highest per-capita aid recipient to attempting economic self-sufficiency, noting surprisingly effective tax collection despite operating in a weaker economy. The state budget, estimated at approximately \$2.7 billion in 2022, remains largely opaque. The government has implemented aggressive revenue generation strategies, including revising tax laws and introducing new taxes on various sectors. The administration maintains substantial security forces, representing a significant portion of the budget, though exact figures remain unknown. The development of more transparent and predictable institutional frameworks could help build confidence in the economy and attract investment in key sectors. The current administration's economic management faces significant challenges in creating sustainable economic growth without substantial international support.

The trade analysis explores Afghanistan's efforts to leverage its position amid China's expanding Central Asian influence, suggesting practical approaches like domestic production may prove more valuable than grand trade schemes. Iran has emerged as Afghanistan's largest import source, while trade with Pakistan has shifted due to political tensions. The lack of reliable data collection after 2021 poses significant challenges in analyzing economic and trade patterns. China's engagement reflects broader geopolitical objectives rather than immediate economic interests, with involvement manifesting through both state-level projects and private entrepreneurial activities. The Belt and Road Initiative provides a framework for engagement, though actual implementation faces significant challenges. While major projects like the Mes Aynak copper mine have seen limited progress, smaller-scale private Chinese operations in gold mining and gemstone extraction continue.

The media assessment documents the dramatic decline in press freedom, with Afghanistan now ranked 178th out of 180 nations, featuring strict controls on content and severe restrictions on women journalists. Female journalists face particularly harsh constraints, with their numbers in western Afghanistan dropping from 200 to 15. Media outlets must now operate under strict controls, with authorities providing a list of 120 approved speakers and requiring pre-screening of all content. Currently, 500 Afghan journalists are in Pakistan and 250 in Iran, facing significant challenges including limited ability to continue their work. While domestic journalists face severe restrictions, foreign journalists often receive different treatment, creating a dual system of media coverage. Digital platforms remain a critical tool for disseminating information, as the Taliban have yet to fully control internet access.

The education analysis traces the impact of Taliban rule on education, particularly focusing on the estimated 1.4 million girls pushed out of education since 2021, examining both political changes and deeper societal barriers to education access. The international community's approach has often proved counterproductive by mixing political demands with basic educational rights. The path forward requires depoliticizing education and focusing on practical solutions like ensuring both male and female teachers. Parents across the country want their daughters in school, demonstrating that current restrictions conflict with community desires. Despite current restrictions, there remains a strong hunger for education among Afghan youth. The future remains uncertain, but the dedication of educators and community leaders offers hope for finding innovative ways to ensure learning continues.

The human rights examination describes how traditional advocacy has become nearly impossible, with organizations finding new ways to operate through adapted strategies and resilient local networks despite severe restrictions. Key statistics show 51% of women-led organizations have closed since 2021, while 87% received no funding in 2022. The remaining organizations maintain innovative approaches, creating safe workspaces in residential areas and utilizing co-working spaces with private sector partners. Documentation of rights violations continues through adapted means, including digital platforms and informal networks. International engagement remains crucial but requires significant adaptation to current conditions. Mental health support for human rights defenders has emerged as a critical but often overlooked need.

Afghanistan Week 2024
Afghanistan today: A situation analysis

AFGHANISTAN TODAY:

A situation analysis

Three years after the government transition, Afghanistan has reached what can be described as a state of «miserable stability» with frozen assets, limited international trade, and a stagnant economy.

While Afghanistan avoided the catastrophic scenarios initially feared - including state collapse and regional instability - the current situation remains deeply concerning. The economy has stabilized at 0% growth, which, given population growth and approximately 500,000 new job seekers entering the market annually, translates to rising poverty and unemployment. In addition, this relative stability masks deeper structural

How is life for Afghans living inside Afghanistan today? How is the population adapting to the economic constraints and the restrictions from the ruling power? Are there visible protests or signs of resistance?

This seminar provided an overview of the complexity and variety of life in Afghanistan today, including coping mechanisms developed over the last three years, as people respond to the continuous and many new restrictions and regulations. The panel participants shared insights and analytical perspectives we seldom have access to through media, by sharing examples from daily life, work, and in-depth studies. The situation in Afghanistan is complex, and so is the response from its population.

Chair: Norunn Grande **Panellists:** Terje Watterdal, Graeme Smith,
Rayhana Karim

problems, as there is no clear development framework or plan for economic recovery, partly due to international reluctance to engage in development discussions.

Economic challenges

The economic challenges are particularly acute in rural areas, where household expenses significantly exceed incomes. Families are forced to cope by borrowing money or selling assets intended for future sustenance, creating a slow-burning crisis that threatens long-term stability. The banking sector remains constrained by frozen national assets and various restrictions, while the broader business environment struggles with limited import-export capabilities, border operation challenges, and visa restrictions for business travelers.

Multiple crises and their Impact

The country faces five interconnected crises: humanitarian, economic, human rights, social, and governance. The economic crisis is characterized by frozen assets, banking restrictions, a fragile national market, and limited international trade.

Climate change has further impacted the economic situation. The recent enforcement of the ban on opium cultivation has affected approximately half a million laborers and created significant ripple effects throughout the rural economy.

The absence of a constitution after three years has created a significant governance vacuum in Afghanistan. Without a clear legal framework defining governmental

«In discussions with Taliban officials, they are quite open about the fact that they also disagree with a lot of the decisions that are being made. And that they are also concerned about the future.»

«I do think that if most Afghan women, men, youth would know that this is what we now have to live with, then they would somehow cope with that. But it's that nagging question of what comes next.»

powers and responsibilities across legislative, executive, and judicial branches, there is considerable uncertainty about how the country is governed. This lack of clear governance structures contributes to unpredictable implementation of regulations, particularly affecting women's lives.

Impact on women

Recent regulatory changes have created additional limitations on women's movements and activities, particularly in public spaces. Women face increasing practical difficulties in basic activities like renting apartments or moving around without a male guardian.

The impact varies significantly by region - while women in some remote areas have experienced little change in their daily lives, those in urban and more developed areas have faced drastic shifts in their freedoms and opportunities. This regional variation extends to the interpretation and enforcement of restrictions, creating a complex patchwork of experiences for women across the country. Some areas have maintained relative continuity with pre-2021 practices, while others have seen strict implementation of new regulations, making it difficult to speak of a uniform "women's experience" in Afghanistan.

The economic crisis has disproportionately affected women and girls, with mortality rates 90% higher for females at feeding centers due to families prioritizing male children when resources are scarce. Healthcare access for women has been particularly impacted by the economic situation and management changes in medical facilities.

Women in the private sector

The private sector has emerged as one of the few remaining spaces where women can maintain an identity outside the household and exercise agency. However, women's participation in the formal economy remains limited, with most economic opportunities confined to small-scale, home-based businesses. The 90% male-dominated private sector, which generates most of the GDP, represents an untapped opportunity for women's economic participation.

Future outlook and human capital

The situation is marked by ongoing uncertainty about future regulations and restrictions, which affects both economic planning and women's daily lives. While active conflict has ceased in many areas, bringing relative calm to previously unstable regions, the current stability has come with significant restrictions on personal freedoms, particularly for women in urban areas. This has created a collective lack of faith in the future that impacts people's psychological well-being and decision-making.

A continuing brain drain, particularly in medical, academic, and educational fields, further compounds these challenges by depleting the human capital needed for future development. Despite these challenges, there are still spaces where women can gather and participate in community life, including certain private sector venues, community hubs in provinces, and religious spaces, though these opportunities require careful navigation of current restrictions.



«We have been talking about the Afghan people's resilience for over 40 years now. What does that mean, really? I think for some people, it can mean an acceptance of whatever comes your way and the understanding that you have no control over it. For others, it means when one door closes, we will actively seek other doors to open and other pathways to be active and to pursue our goals. Resilience will be different from one perspective to another.»

THREE YEARS OF TALIBAN RULE:

Internal politics and the room for engagement

The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in August 2021 marked the beginning of a new governance structure. Their system combines elements of previous administrative frameworks with strong centralization in Kandahar.

The Taliban's governance structure represents both continuity and change in Afghanistan's administrative system. While maintaining much of the previous government framework, they established a strong centralized authority in Kandahar around the Emir.

The cabinet was swiftly appointed but remains designated as temporary, leaving room for future changes. Provincial governors, who combine religious backgrounds with military capability, report directly to the Emir while

handling technical matters through ministries in Kabul. The Emir maintains control through strategic rotation of positions when performance doesn't meet expectations.

Provincial councils and local governance

A significant development in their administrative structure came in 2022 with the introduction of provincial ulema councils. These bodies were systematically established across provinces, with the final implementations occurring in September 2023, except for Bamiyan.

After their return to Kabul in August 2021, the Taliban leadership have worked hard at consolidating its movement and developing new forms of governance. The structure it inherited from the preceding Republican government is still in place, but not necessarily with the same functions. Power is concentrated around the Emir's office in Kandahar, key positions are filled by those with solid Taliban credentials, the court system is renewed (in compliance with the Taliban's understanding of Sharia), and new institutions are being created across multiple levels.

The Taliban's approaches to governance are evolving and far from all of their initiatives work out. Yet.

working in Afghanistan under Taliban rule presumes a solid understanding of their organization and how they have sought to design governance.

This seminar zoomed in on how the Taliban has evolved over its first three years back in power, and discuss the possible implications of its current state for the engagement strategies pursued by Afghan citizens (in-country or in the diaspora), NGOs, multilateral organization and states both in the neighborhood and further afield.

Chair: Kristian Berg Harpviken

Panellists: Arne Strand, Fatima Gailani, Graeme Smith



The councils demonstrate an unexpected approach to local governance, incorporating not only Taliban supporters but also respected community figures, including tribal leaders and professionals who hold local trust. This structure allows the population to bring their concerns to figures they trust, who can then communicate with provincial governors and the Emir.

Village level administration

At the village level, the Taliban moved away from internationally established systems like community development councils, reverting to traditional governance structures such as the Arbab or Malik roles.

«Is the constitution of the [former] republic valid? This is unclear, and we lack an understanding of how they really think they are going to govern and what will be the bodies in place to decide upon important matters to Afghanistan. Is it the parliament? Is it the Loya Jirga? Or is it something completely different? This is unresolved.»

«I strongly believe that this present government, when they came to power, they didn't expect it to be that soon and that quickly and that overnight. [...] I strongly believe that still they don't know how to place themselves. They are still working it out.»

This shift represents a return to historical Afghan village governance methods, removing structures introduced by international actors.

Constitutional framework

The constitutional framework of Taliban governance remains undefined. Questions persist about the applicability of the 1964 Constitution and the role of traditional decision-making bodies like parliament or the Loya Jirga. This lack of clarity extends to fundamental aspects of governance, including how important matters will be decided and which bodies will hold decision-making authority.

Financial control and resources

Financial control emerged as a key priority in the Taliban's governance strategy. They swiftly established control over customs houses after taking power, a move that reportedly eliminated significant corruption in the revenue collection system. This centralization of financial resources represented a crucial element in establishing comprehensive control over the country.

International relations

The Taliban's international relations, particularly with Muslim-majority nations, have evolved since their takeover. During peace talks, support from Islamic nations was limited, with Indonesia being the primary engaged nation. Subsequently, countries like Qatar and the Emirates have shown interest in humanitarian and livelihood issues. However, engagement from the broader Islamic world in addressing Taliban policies remains constrained.

Ethnic composition in governance

The provincial governance structure reflects both ethnic considerations and control mechanisms. While southern Pashtuns hold approximately 80 percent of governor

positions, some positions are filled by Tajiks and Uzbeks. This composition suggests an effort to maintain strong central control while incorporating some ethnic diversity in the administrative structure. The system emphasizes direct reporting to Kandahar while maintaining technical connections to ministries in Kabul.

Current challenges

Current challenges in Taliban governance center around the implementation of rules and laws. The development process for a constitution remains unclear, with uncertainty about which body holds responsibility for its creation. The lack of codified laws particularly affects women's rights, with decisions often made without formal legal backing. The administration continues to operate without clear long-term governance plans or structures.

Control mechanisms

The Taliban's control mechanisms extend beyond administrative structures. They successfully consolidated control over two critical elements: weapons and money. Their ability to centralize these resources demonstrated unexpected capability in maintaining discipline among their formerly decentralized fighting forces. This centralization may have been driven by concerns about internal fragmentation, given Afghanistan's history of state collapse and factional conflicts.

Kabul-Kandahar dynamics

The relationship between Kabul and Kandahar reflects the dual nature of Taliban governance. While government structures remain in Kabul, real authority resides in Kandahar with the Emir. This dynamic creates a complex administrative system where formal government functions continue in the capital while key decisions and authority flow from Kandahar.



Role and function of the provincial ulema

The provincial ulema councils serve multiple functions in the governance structure. Beyond their role in local administration, they act as a reporting mechanism to the Emir and provide oversight of provincial governors. The councils' composition reflect local ethnic and religious demographics, incorporating respected community members regardless of their Taliban affiliations. This structure provides a channel for local populations to raise concerns through trusted figures who can communicate with both provincial governors and the central authority.

Assessing three years of Taliban rule

The Taliban's governance structure after three years reveals a system of centralized control flowing from Kandahar, while maintaining elements of previous administrative frameworks in Kabul. Through provincial governors and ulema councils, they have established mechanisms for both control and local engagement, though without defining a clear constitutional framework. Their swift control over resources and weapons demonstrated unexpected capabilities, yet fundamental questions about long-term governance remain unresolved.

The system balances centralization with limited local representation through the ulema councils, while international engagement remains constrained. The interaction between religious authority, military power, and traditional governance structures continues to shape Afghanistan's administrative landscape, as the Taliban navigate between maintaining control and establishing sustainable governance mechanisms.

«I don't think that they have a master plan, but they are getting better and better every day to see what would help them to sustain. That is why, when we come back to the sensitive subject of engagement, that we must not leave the arena only for a few countries to get engaged whose interest is only in their own region or their own country. It is extremely important that those countries that [have] the interest of people of Afghanistan, remain part of the engagement.»

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Afghanistan Week 2024 Norway's Afghanistan policy: Options and dilemmas

NORWAY'S AFGHANISTAN POLICY:

Options and dilemmas

Norway's policy of engagement with Afghanistan's de facto authorities reflects a complex balance between maintaining dialogue and upholding human rights principles. While the approach has generated both support and criticism, it represents an attempt to influence developments in Afghanistan through continued presence rather than isolation.

Norway's approach to Afghanistan reflects a complex balance between maintaining engagement with the Taliban regime while upholding fundamental human rights principles. This policy emphasizes engagement over isolation based on historical experience showing that isolation tends to strengthen hardline positions in nonstate armed groups and repressive regimes.

The foundation of Norway's approach

The Norwegian position rests on several key premises. First, the recognition that the Taliban now represents the de facto authority in Afghanistan, with effective control over the territory and few indicators of change in the short to medium term. Second, an understanding that complete isolation has historically proven counterproductive when dealing with such regimes. Third, the practical necessity of maintaining channels for humanitarian aid and development support in a country where approximately 23 million people require humanitarian assistance.

Principles and red lines

Norway's engagement strategy is characterized by clear communication of criticism and human rights concerns, particularly regarding the systematic curtailment of women's and girls' rights. The approach explicitly avoids formal recognition of the Taliban as a legitimate government while emphasizing Afghanistan's international legal obligations. Rather than moral arguments, Norwegian diplomats focus on practical reasoning, particularly economic arguments about the impossibility of achieving growth while excluding half the population from education and work. Norway continuously assesses its engagement approach and is likely to continue as long as engagement is deemed to make a positive difference.

Challenges and criticism

This approach has generated both support and criticism from Afghan civil society representatives and human rights defenders. Supporters argue that historical examples demonstrate how isolation can lead to catastrophic outcomes, pointing to Afghanistan's experience after the Soviet withdrawal. They emphasize how engagement allows for monitoring of ground realities and support to civil society while maintaining crucial connections between the Afghan people and the international community.

Critics, however, point to limited concrete results after three and a half years of engagement with the Taliban regime. They express concern about the risk of legitimizing the Taliban without securing meaningful changes and highlight the lack of clear benchmarks for measuring progress. A particular point of criticism is the insufficient support for accountability mechanisms alongside engagement efforts.

After returning to power in 2021, the Taliban have only very selectively followed up on the promises they made to the world. While security has improved and drugs are eradicated, unparallelled restrictions are imposed on girls and women as well as on public debate and political participation. In turn, different countries have adapted different strategies towards the Taliban administration. Norway has been at the forefront of dialogue with the Taliban, even it has not established diplomatic representation.

Neighbouring countries have prioritised closer contact for trade and security reasons. Some Western countries want to take the Taliban to the International Court of Justice for their restrictions on women and girls, heeding the calls of many Afghan women rights defenders to hold the Taliban accountable. Some argue for a total disengagement from the Taliban altogether.

Many of those who advocate for dialogue, closer collaboration and more long-term aid point to the gravity of the humanitarian and climate crisis in Afghanistan. UN and NGO staff, as well as female activists inside Afghanistan, focus on day-to-day negotiations to carve out the space to make a practical difference to everyday lives under increasingly challenging conditions.

Those advocating for engagement worry that isolating the Taliban will leave Afghans starving and at the mercy of Taliban hardliners and the interests of regional powers. They suggest that public statements and

diplomacy will be counterproductive and only serve to harden the Taliban's position. On the other hand, those favouring a more confrontational approach against the Taliban fear that engagement and support will consolidate totalitarian rule for generations to come.

At the main event of the 2024 Afghanistan Week, the options and dilemmas surrounding Norwegian and international approaches to Afghanistan were discussed. The even was kicked off by an introduction by Andreas Motzfeldt Kravik, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, on how the Norwegian government understands the situation and what is see itself doing in the years ahead. Following his presentation, Kravik meets Afghan experts in a panel debate. Important questions include:

- How can Norway best navigate competing considerations, whether through its direct engagement or through international collaboration?
- How can the Norwegian government balance concerns for an impoverished population and the effects of sanctions, with concerns for gender discrimination and human rights violations?
- How can Norway best continue to make a difference for Afghans?

Chair: Kristian Berg Harpviken Panellists: Andreas Motzfeldt Kravik (Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs), Fatima Gailani, Madina Mahboobi, Fereshta Abbasi, and Liv Kjølseth

«If we are looking at evolution, that's «But we have seen the result of fine, but that's not something that we can orchestrate. So that's for Afghanistan itself to decide. But if we are talking about evolution, we have to try to give oxygen to those within Afghanistan who are trying to help progress the situation.»

isolation. Those people that are old enough to see that after the withdrawal of Soviet troops that Afghanistan was isolated, we saw a catastrophic time of civil war. We saw the region was ruling a group of people left and right.»

The Accountability Question

The debate on accountability reveals a tension between engagement and justice-seeking approaches. While Norwegian officials argue that accountability and engagement can coexist, critics emphasize that the Taliban have effectively received a "free pass" for their human rights violations over the past three and a half years. They point to the lack of accountability mechanisms in Afghanistan compared to other conflict situations like South Sudan, Myanmar, and Iran, which all have established mechanisms for documenting violations.

Advocates for stronger accountability measures argue that documentation itself serves as a form of accountability and provides hope to Afghan women by allowing their stories to be heard. They cite the International Criminal Court's arrest warrant for Vladimir Putin as an example of how international legal mechanisms can have practical impact by restricting movement and sending clear messages to rights violators.

The discussion suggests that while engagement might be necessary for humanitarian reasons, it should not preclude the development of robust accountability mechanisms that could both document violations for future justice processes and serve as a deterrent to ongoing human rights abuses.

Women as Change Agents

A crucial perspective emerged regarding the recognition of Afghan women not just as victims but as active change agents. Despite severe restrictions, women continue to work within available spaces, demonstrating resilience and capability in maintaining organizational structures and delivering services. However, this work is hampered by limited funding and complex administrative requirements from international donors.

The effectiveness of Norway's engagement policy appears to hinge on its ability to maintain a delicate balance: supporting practical solutions to immediate needs while not compromising on fundamental rights principles. The policy acknowledges that change might be incremental and slow but maintains that keeping channels of communication open is essential for any possibility of influence.

Key recommendations moving forward include:

- Strengthen accountability mechanisms to run parallel with engagement efforts
- Increase targeted support to existing spaces where women can work
- Improve funding mechanisms to better support womenled organizations
- Enhance coordination of international engagement efforts
- Maintain development funding while streamlining access mechanisms
- Establish clear objectives and impact measures for international presence
- Focus support on Afghan-led initiatives and organizations
- Develop more effective methods for documenting human rights violations

The debate around Norway's Afghanistan policy reflects broader international dilemmas about engaging with authoritarian regimes. While engagement carries risks of legitimizing problematic authorities, total isolation may leave populations more vulnerable and remove possibilities for positive influence. The challenge lies in maintaining principled engagement that can deliver practical benefits while upholding fundamental human rights values.

«We have been very clear that we are moving forward for one purpose, and one purpose only, namely to better the situation in the country in which we are operating.»



On its own feet: Any chance for economic recovery?

ON ITS OWN FEET

Any chance for economic recovery?

In a bid for economic self-sufficiency, Afghanistan has embarked on an unprecedented experiment, attempting to transition from being the world's highest per-capita aid recipient to managing without international development support.

The Afghan economy experienced a dramatic downturn in 2021 following the sudden halt of approximately \$8 billion in annual international aid, including \$3.5 billion in civilian assistance and \$4.5 billion in security support. Military spending in the country was at least equal to security assistance, meaning another \$5 billion was cut off, with previous years seeing even higher figures.

Stabilization at a low

While the economy stabilized at a lower equilibrium by mid-2022, recovery remains elusive amid tight macroeconomic policies, increased taxation, and complex regulatory pressures on the private sector. The stabilization included controlling inflation and exchange rate fluctuations, though at the cost of maintaining an artificially strong currency.

Afghanistan's relationship with foreign resources has deep historical roots dating back to 1747. During the Cold War era, the country became the world's highest per capita aid recipient, benefiting from competitive funding from both the Soviet Union and the United States, as well as both Germanies. This pattern of external dependency continued through recent decades, with the country receiving approximately \$8 billion in annual aid before 2021, including both civilian and security assistance. The current attempt at economic self-sufficiency represents an unprecedented challenge in modern Afghan history.

State budget and revenue generation

The current administration has demonstrated surprisingly effective tax collection capabilities, matching or exceeding previous government levels despite operating in a significantly weaker economy. The state budget, estimated at approximately \$2.7 billion in 2022, remains largely opaque, with no public access to detailed financial information. The government has implemented aggressive revenue generation strategies, including revising the 2009 tax law, introducing new taxes on solar panels for both domestic and commercial properties, and recategorizing small businesses into higher tax brackets. The administration maintains substantial security forces, representing a significant portion of the budget, though exact figures remain unknown.

Governmental economic policies

Afghanistan's currency has shown remarkable stability and strength despite the economic challenges, emerging as one of the strongest performing currencies globally. This stability came after initial volatility following the events of 2021, when both inflation and exchange rates were temporarily out of control. The current monetary policy maintains a strong currency, though this approach during an economic downturn raises questions about its impact on export competitiveness and economic recovery. Current economic policies reflect a complex and sometimes contradictory approach. While demonstrating

competence in areas like revenue collection and infrastructure development, the administration maintains unusually tight macroeconomic policies during an economic downturn. The central bank's policy of maintaining a strong currency appears counterintuitive given the weak economy, potentially hampering export competitiveness. The government has shown interest in infrastructure development, including water projects and cement plant construction, marking a departure from previous approaches. However, the ban on opium cultivation, while politically significant, has created additional economic pressures, particularly for rural communities.

Climate challenges

Natural disasters pose a significant threat to economic stability, with annual losses estimated at \$500 million - approximately 20% of the national budget. Floods alone cause average annual losses of \$54 million and claim hundreds of lives, while extreme cases can result in damages up to \$500 million. Droughts create even more severe economic impact, with losses averaging \$280 million annually and potentially reaching \$3 billion in extreme cases. Additional climate-related challenges include landslides (\$120 million annual losses) and avalanches (\$80 million annual losses). Cold waves have also taken a significant toll, with recent events causing the loss of 70,000-200,000 livestock, representing economic losses of \$10-15 million.

Transition from aid dependency

The shift away from aid dependency presents both challenges and opportunities. While the immediate impact has been severe, with GDP declining by more than 25%, the situation has forced a reconsideration of economic fundamentals. Humanitarian aid, which peaked at nearly \$4 billion in 2022, has provided crucial support during this transition, including weekly cash shipments of \$40 million for UN humanitarian assistance. However, recent reductions in humanitarian funding create pressure to develop more sustainable economic models.

Alternative Revenue Sources

In response to reduced aid, the administration has focused on developing alternative revenue sources. This includes improved tax collection, investment in infrastructure projects, and efforts to develop the mining sector. The emphasis on domestic revenue generation marks a significant shift from previous aid-dependent models, though the transition remains challenging. The development of sustainable revenue sources requires

«I think the first response is, there should be more advocacy directly from the private sector. Funders, donors, project designers, they should hear directly from the private sector.»

War was the engine of the Afghan economy, and as such the country's economic decline begun already in 2014 when the military withdrawal began. International aid contributed to a significant percentage of the Afghan national budget and following international sanctions and a significant cut in aid – Afghanistan was hit by an economic shock immediately following the Taliban takeover.

An increase in humanitarian aid in the autumn of 2021 and throughout 2022 contributed to stabilizing the economy and prevented a full collapse of the banking system. War and conflict in Ukraine and Gaza, the uncompromising politics of the Taliban when it comes to education for girls and women, as well as the lack of respect for human rights, are now resulting in reduced humanitarian aid as well. With the politics pursued by the Taliban – the Afghan population has been left to fend for themselves.

In this seminar we wanted to explore what opportunities and limitations there are for economic growth in Afghanistan, including the possibilities that lie within minerals and farming, the consequences and limitations following the international sanctions, the opportunities surrounding trade with China, and the room of opportunity for women and entrepreneurship.

Chair: Karim Merchant

Panellists: Assem Mayar, Rayhana Karim, Terje Watterdal, William Byrd



balancing immediate fiscal needs with longer-term economic growth considerations.

Private sector dynamics

The private sector operates in an increasingly complex regulatory environment. The absence of private sector representation on the Economic Council, which previously included two seats for business representatives, has led to a disconnect between policy formation and business needs. The regulatory framework remains challenging, with some businesses preemptively reducing operations due to uncertainty about future restrictions. Despite these challenges, certain sectors have shown resilience, particularly in maintaining basic operations and adapting to new regulatory requirements.

Economic opportunities and development potential

Several potential growth areas exist, though their development faces significant challenges. The extractive

industry, previously valued at between one and three trillion dollars in potential wealth, remains largely untapped. Import substitution presents opportunities, particularly in sectors where raw materials are currently exported without value addition. The development of comprehensive value chains could create new employment opportunities and reduce dependency on imports. The agriculture sector shows potential for development through high-value crops and improved post-harvest infrastructure, though climate change and water management issues pose significant challenges.

International financial flows

Humanitarian aid peaked at nearly \$4 billion in 2022, including approximately \$40 million in weekly cash shipments for UN humanitarian assistance. However, recent reductions in humanitarian funding raise concerns about economic stability, particularly given the role these cash flows play in supporting the banking sector and overall economic activity. Diaspora remittances

continue to provide crucial support to the local economy, though their potential is limited by international financial restrictions and immigration policies in host countries.

Institutional framework and future outlook

The lack of transparent budgetary processes and limited economic data creates significant challenges for economic planning and development. While tax collection has improved, the absence of published budgets and economic plans creates uncertainty for businesses and investors. The development of more transparent and predictable institutional frameworks could help build confidence in the economy and attract investment in key sectors. The current administration's economic management, while more effective than anticipated in some areas, faces significant challenges in creating sustainable economic growth without substantial international support.

«We need to shift from humanitarian to more development. Humanitarian aid is decreasing every year. The needs are increasing. What is the solution to bridge that gap in needs? We need more businesses. We need livelihood. And for that, we need development budgets to create business opportunities.»

Afghanistan Week 2024

Regional trade and the role of China

Regional trade and the role of China

As China expands its influence across Central Asia, Afghanistan seeks to leverage its position for economic gains - yet the results remain mixed.

Regional dynamics complicate Afghanistan's aspirations and suggest that practical approaches like domestic production may prove more valuable than grand trade schemes.

Data challenges and economic assessment

A significant challenge in analyzing Afghanistan's economic situation and regional trade patterns stems from weak or unreliable data collection, particularly after 2021. This limitation affects both policy planning and assessment of economic initiatives. The data weakness extends to crucial areas like water resource management, where Afghanistan lacks basic information about water flows to neighboring countries.

Regional trade shifts

The Taliban government has pursued regional trade connections as an alternative to restricted international economic engagement. While Iran has emerged as Afghanistan's largest import source, Pakistan traditionally served as the primary export destination. However, this trade dynamic has shifted due to political tensions with Pakistan, leading to increased trade with Iran. Central Asian trade, while showing potential, remains limited in comparison.

Import substitution as economic strategy

A notable economic strategy emerging in Afghanistan focuses on import substitution rather than export-oriented growth. The country has moved to develop domestic production in key sectors, particularly hydrocarbons and cement. While Afghanistan currently imports significant petroleum products, it possesses sufficient hydrocarbon resources to potentially meet domestic demand. In the cement sector, the country

has leveraged existing resources and facilities from the 1950s, with the Taliban administration supporting new plant construction. A recent \$100 million investment by an Afghan investor, utilizing Indian technology for cement production, demonstrates the viability of this approach. This strategy appears more practical than export development, requiring less initial infrastructure while creating domestic employment and reducing foreign currency expenditure.

China's strategic engagement

China's engagement with Afghanistan reflects broader geopolitical objectives rather thanimmediate economic interests. The Belt and Road Initiative provides a framework for this engagement, though actual implementation faces significant challenges. Chinese involvement manifests through both state-level projects and private entrepreneurial activities, particularly in mineral extraction. However, major projects like the Mes Aynak copper mine have seen limited progress, while smaller-scale private Chinese operations in gold mining and gemstone extraction continue.

Structural economic barriers

The Afghan economy faces multiple structural challenges. The banking sector, already weakened by the Kabul Bank collapse before 2021, struggles with international restrictions. While sanctions impact is often overstated, with regional banks finding workarounds, the overall financial infrastructure remains weak. Private investment is limited, despite available capital both within Afghanistan and among expatriates, largely due to regulatory uncertainty and security concerns.

International sanctions, freezing of Bank of Afghanistan's reserves and restrictions on bank transfers pose strong limitation on the Afghan economy. Taliban has therefore looked towards regional neighbours for trade and investment, countries less concerned over human rights than regional stability.

The Taliban administration has invited for collaboration and invested in road and rail infrastructure, as a road towards China through the Wakan corridor and railways to Iran and Uzbekistan. This to facilitate regional trade, electricity and gas transfers and potentially link up China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) rail networks in Central Asia and in Pakistan. China and Chinese companies, already active in Afghanistan during the Republic, have increased their presence and investments since USA's departure. This includes the Afghan mining sector, where extractions of copper have started from the Mez Aynak reserves, but also oil and

gas exploration in the Amu Darya basin.
While trade with Iran, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan has increased has tension with Pakistan reduced their cross-border trade. Pakistan accuses the Taliban administration of housing the Pakistani Taliban and the Islamic State Khorasan Group (ISKG) have claimed responsibility for increasing number of attacks on Chinese projects, embassies and nationals in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The seminar discussed whether Afghanistan can provide a safe regional energy and trade corridor, if China is likely to withdraw or rather increase their diplomatic efforts, if China's approach differs from other regions they invest in, and if regional trade can become a major source of income for the Taliban administration?

Chair: Arne Strand

Panellists: William Byrd, Ilaria Carozza

Resource development and Integration prospects

Natural resources, particularly minerals, present potential economic opportunities but face significant development challenges. The estimated value of these resources ranges from \$1-3 trillion, though extraction feasibility varies significantly. Regional integration prospects are constrained by geographical and economic realities. The vision of Afghanistan as a major transit hub faces practical limitations, as sea routes remain more economically viable for long-distance trade. Water resource management emerges as a critical regional issue, affecting both agricultural development and relations with

Regional power dynamics

neighboring countries.

Central Asian states face complex choices in balancing relations between China, Russia, and Western powers, affecting their engagement with Afghanistan. While China's involvement offers some opportunities for Afghanistan's economic development, it does not represent a comprehensive solution to the country's economic challenges. The reality of regional trade integration remains complex, with both political and practical constraints limiting rapid progress.

«Regional trade has a role to play, but looking at Afghanistan's economy and benefits, there needs to be a focus on import substitution, and particularly things like hydrocarbons, where Afghanistan is a big importer.
[...] Taliban are actually building cement plants. This kind of import substitution is a way forward.»

ENGAGEMENT OR ACCOUNTABILITY?

Countering Taliban's oppression of women

International actors and organizations face difficult choices in their approach toward the Taliban regime. Discussions among practitioners and experts highlight the complexities of pursuing engagement while maintaining pressure for human rights.

The concept of engagement remains contested, with varying interpretations among international actors. While some practitioners advocate for proactive engagement aimed at preventing harmful policies, current approaches tend to be reactive – responding to restrictions after they're implemented. At the local level, engagement has enabled humanitarian work to continue, though permissions for women to work remain unstable and can be revoked at any time, often varying between provinces and depending on local authorities.

Proponents suggest that while isolation isn't a solution, engagement should pursue clear strategic goals rather than becoming an end in itself. They emphasize that engagement doesn't equate to endorsement of Taliban policies but rather represents a pragmatic approach to preventing further deterioration of conditions. Some

This seminar explored the positions, focus and strategies of Afghan women's rights activism both inside Afghanistan and in exile. It looked at what unites and differentiates various groups and actors, and how women activists inside Afghanistan relate to their counterparts in exile.

Chair: Torunn Wimpelmann **Panellists:** Fereshta Abbasi, Madina Mahboobi,

Payvand Seyedali

practitioners report success with technical-level engagement in creating space for humanitarian initiatives but argue for a shift toward more strategic political engagement with defined objectives.

The role of accountability

The effectiveness of accountability measures remains debated. While some practitioners note that international legal frameworks haven't been fully utilized, others point out that current pressure hasn't succeeded in reversing restrictions on women's rights. The discussion includes consideration of legal frameworks like "gender persecution" or "gender apartheid," though questions persist about the practical impact of such designations.

Critics note that sanctions and pressure often affect the population more than policy decisions. However, advocates for stronger accountability argue that the international community has yet to exhaust available tools for holding the Taliban responsible for human rights violations. They point to mechanisms like international courts and systematic documentation of rights violations as untapped resources.

The challenge of balancing approaches

Experience shows that local engagement has produced some practical results in maintaining humanitarian access and women's employment in specific sectors. However, international engagement efforts have shown mixed outcomes, with some initiatives leading to further restrictions rather than improvements. This has led to



calls for "principled engagement" – maintaining necessary humanitarian support while avoiding actions that might strengthen Taliban authority.

Practitioners note the difficulty of pursuing both engagement and accountability simultaneously. While engagement might secure immediate humanitarian access, it could potentially undermine longer-term efforts to pressure for systemic changes. Conversely, strong accountability measures might satisfy calls for justice but could jeopardize crucial humanitarian operations.

Suggested ways forward

- 1. Develop a unified strategic approach to engagement among international actors, with clear objectives beyond maintaining humanitarian access. This could involve creating coordinated frameworks for engagement that set clear boundaries and expectations while maintaining flexibility for humanitarian operations.
- 2. Explore combinations of local and international engagement strategies that have shown practical results, while maintaining principled positions on human rights. This might include documenting and replicating successful local negotiation approaches while strengthening international coordination.
- 3. Investigate untested accountability mechanisms that could create pressure for change without causing undue

harm to the population, potentially through targeted measures rather than broad sanctions. This could involve developing new frameworks for addressing systematic discrimination while protecting humanitarian access.

The path forward requires careful consideration of how different approaches might complement rather than contradict each other. The experiences of practitioners suggest that neither pure engagement nor pure accountability approaches alone will suffice. Instead, the international community might need to develop more nuanced strategies that combine elements of both approaches while remaining focused on improving conditions for the Afghan population.

«Should the focus be on whatever support that can be extended to Afghan women within the current parameters set by the Taliban? Is it possible to work with or under the Taliban without further empowering them?»

How are human rights promoted and protected in the current Afghan context?

Despite severe restrictions and the formal shutdown of civic space, human rights work continues in Afghanistan through adapted strategies and resilient local networks.

While traditional human rights advocacy has become nearly impossible, organizations and human rights defenders have found new ways to promote and protect fundamental rights, particularly focusing on women's agency and community-based support systems.

The changed landscape

The context for human rights work in Afghanistan has transformed dramatically, with civic space effectively closed and explicit human rights language becoming taboo. Organizations must navigate an environment where traditional advocacy approaches are no longer viable, and basic freedoms, particularly for women, face severe

This session provided an opportunity to hear firsthand experiences and insights from frontline human rights defenders working both in Afghanistan and internationally. It aimed to provide attendees a deeper understanding of the personal and professional challenges they face, as well as the strategies they use to overcome them.

Chair: Hasina Shirzad
Panellists: Payvand Seyedali, Hazrat Khan
Hoshmand, Signe Gilen, Elisabeth Eide

restrictions. The situation is further complicated by a deepening economic crisis that disproportionately affects vulnerable populations and makes them more susceptible to rights violations.

Freedom of expression and press freedom are integral components of fundamental human rights. It notable that Afghanistan is now number of 178 out of 180 on the list being monitored by the Reporters Without Borders.

Key statistics as of October 2024:

- 51% of women-led organizations closed down since 2021
- 87% of local women-led organizations received no funding in 2022
- 450+ verified women-led organizations remain operational
- These organizations reach 1.5M direct and 12M indirect beneficiaries
- Women's organizations participating in recent consultations reported a combined staff of 12,000 female employees

Adapting strategies

In response to these challenges, organizations have developed innovative approaches to continue their work. Inside Afghanistan, organizations create safe workspaces in residential areas and utilize co-working spaces with private sector partners to maintain women's participation in the workforce.

The concept of human rights work itself has evolved, with a broader understanding that encompasses individual acts of agency and resistance. Every woman taking steps to support her family or continue her education is now considered a defender of human rights, reflecting a more practical approach to rights promotion.

Building sustainable support systems

A critical aspect of current human rights work is the development and maintenance of support networks through e.g. informal community gatherings that provide spaces for solidarity and mutual support. Organizations increasingly focus on creating flexible, adaptable structures that can respond to changing restrictions while maintaining their core mission.

The role of international support

International engagement remains crucial but requires significant adaptation. Development funding, alongside humanitarian aid, is essential for addressing the root causes of rights violations and maintaining the infrastructure necessary for rights promotion. However, current funding mechanisms often create barriers for local organizations, with processes taking up to a year for fund disbursement.

The international community can support rights promotion through:

- Maintaining development funding alongside humanitarian
 assistance
- Simplifying funding mechanisms for local organizations
- Supporting protection networks and referral systems
- Investing in mental health and wellbeing initiatives
- Diversifying funding streams while accepting calculated risks

Mental health and wellbeing

A frequently overlooked but crucial aspect is the mental health crisis among human rights defenders. The constant pressure, trauma exposure, and limited support mechanisms have created significant psychological challenges.

Organizations emphasize the need for dedicated funding for wellbeing initiatives, as programmatic or core funding is rarely used for self-care support.

Documentation and future accountability

While immediate advocacy may be restricted, documentation of rights violations continues through adapted means, including digital platforms and informal networks. This work remains crucial for future accountability and for maintaining international attention on Afghanistan's situation, despite competing global crises.

Looking forward

The promotion of human rights in Afghanistan requires a delicate balance between maintaining space for rights work while protecting those involved. Success depends on supporting local agency and resistance while providing protection mechanisms for those at risk. International actors must maintain their engagement while adapting their approaches to the current context, ensuring that support reaches local organizations effectively and through long-term commitment.

The path forward involves recognizing and supporting the courage of those continuing to work within severe constraints while maintaining the flexibility and creativity necessary to adapt to changing circumstances. Despite the challenges, the resilience of local organizations and defenders demonstrates the continued possibility of promoting human rights, even in the most adverse conditions.

The effectiveness of future human rights work in Afghanistan will largely depend on the international community's ability to provide consistent, flexible support that respects local agency while protecting those at risk. This includes maintaining development funding alongside humanitarian aid to address root causes of rights violations, and ensuring that funding mechanisms are accessible to local organizations.

«The notion of human rights has changed, and human rights work and defense of human rights has changed inside the country. [...] Human rights work takes a lot of different shapes. Every woman who is taking agency of her life and actively trying to find ways to support her family or continue her education is a defender of human rights.»

Silencing Afghan media, banning freedom of expression

Afghanistan's media landscape has transformed dramatically in recent years, with new restrictions fundamentally changing how journalism operates in the country. From pre-censorship requirements to bans on women's voices in broadcasting, the changes have led to an exodus of media professionals and new systems of information control.

Afghanistan's media landscape has transformed dramatically in recent years, with new restrictions fundamentally changing how journalism operates in the country. From pre-screening requirements to bans on women's voices in broadcasting, the changes have led to an exodus of media professionals and new systems of information control.

Since the Taliban's return to power in 2021, Afghanistan has witnessed a dramatic decline in press freedom.

Ranked 178th out of 180 nations by the Press Freedom Index, the country's media landscape is now defined by stringent controls, censorship, and a pervasive climate of fear. Afghan journalists, especially women, face immense challenges as they strive to continue their work under severe restrictions.

Decline in media freedom

Afghanistan has seen one of the steepest drops in press freedom globally, moving from 98th place on the Press Freedom Index to 178th. This shift reflects the collapse of independent journalism, as the Taliban enforce strict controls on media content. Journalists are required to submit all programs for pre-approval, limiting the range of topics that can be covered and ensuring alignment with the authorities' directives.

Challenges for female journalists

The restrictions on women in media are among the most severe. Women are prohibited from appearing on camera, and their voices are barred from being broadcast on the radio. In western Afghanistan, the number of active women journalists has decreased from 200 to 15. Female journalists who continue working must be accompanied by male guardians and cannot directly question sources. Instead, questions must be written down and passed through male intermediaries.

This system, combined with additional costs for media outlets who must pay for both the female journalist and male companion, has led many outlets to stop employing women altogether. For those who remain, professional opportunities are constrained by social and institutional barriers, including requirements to have a male escort when interviewing sources.

Censorship and surveillance

Media outlets now operate under strict controls, with authorities providing a list of 120 approved speakers who can be invited to programs. All content must undergo prescreening before broadcast, and outlets receive approved news through mandatory WhatsApp groups managed



by official representatives. Pre-censorship, whereby Taliban will approve what can and cannot be broadcast leads to pervasive self-censorship. These changes have fundamentally altered how journalism functions in the country, with independent reporting largely replaced by protocol journalism, where outlets primarily report official statements and approved content.

Exile and limitations abroad

Currently, 500 Afghan journalists are in Pakistan and 250 in Iran. These journalists face significant challenges, including limited ability to continue their work and the risk of being returned to Afghanistan by host countries. Some journalists who attempted to continue their work from Pakistan have been forcibly returned following requests from Afghan authorities. Exiled journalists often rely on informal networks and external support to continue their work, with some collaborating with international media organizations under strict anonymity.

Taliban's dual media strategy

While domestic journalists face severe restrictions, foreign journalists often receive different treatment. Panelists discussed how international media representatives are frequently granted access to officials and locations,

Author and Journalist Khalid Qadery was imprisoned for one year by Taliban. Qadery now lives in exile, and spoke about his experiences as a journalist and a prison inmate.

With: Khalid Qadery and Elisabeth Eide

though their movements and coverage are carefully managed and controlled. This creates a dual system where domestic and international coverage operate under different rules and restrictions.

Efforts to continue reporting

Despite the challenges, some Afghan journalists persist. Those still in the country report covertly, often contributing to international media under pseudonyms. Digital platforms remain a critical tool for disseminating information, as the Taliban have yet to fully control internet access. This underground effort helps maintain some level of awareness about the situation inside Afghanistan.

Call for support

International action is needed to support Afghan journalists. Exiled media and reporters require financial and logistical aid to continue their work, while independent Afghan media need platforms to amplify their voices. Ensuring the safety and livelihoods of journalists in exile, particularly those in precarious situations in Pakistan and Iran, needs to be a priority.

Implications for access to Information

The restrictions on Afghan media underscore broader concerns about the right to access information. Limited coverage from within the country reduces global awareness of the situation, leaving significant events nd human rights issues underreported. Continued international engagement is essential to sustain media coverage and protect journalists' ability to report.

EDUCATION IN AFGHANISTAN

Three years after Taliban's return to power

As Afghanistan grapples with radical changes in its education system three years after the Taliban's return to power, experts paint a picture of complex challenges, deep-rooted barriers, and a desire for education among the country's youth.

Imagine a young girl somewhere in a small village in Afghanistan, her name could be Zahar or Shakila or Gulchin. In December 2019, the 11-year-old completed her fifth grade in a small Afghan village, eagerly anticipating her return to school after winter break. However, her educational journey would be disrupted by unprecedented events: first, the COVID-19 pandemic that reached her remote village from Wuhan, China, leading to sporadic school closures throughout 2020 and early 2021.

Then came the fall of the Ghani government and the Taliban's return to power in August 2021. In Shakila's village, nothing much changes as it is far away from the halls of power in Kabul and Kandahar. But Shakila, who is now 13, will never again return to school. Her school never reopened after the change of government, not for her, not for her classmates. Today, Shakila is 16. Like many other Afghan girls her age, she is married and she is pregnant with her first child. Her story represents an estimated 1.4 million Afghan girls who have been pushed out of education since 2021. It is a generation lost.

Beyond political change: Understanding educational barriers

Three years have passed since the collapse of the government of the Republic and the return of power of Taliban in Afghanistan. This transition from the Republic

to the Emirate has profoundly impacted education for students and teachers.

However, educational challenges in Afghanistan extend far beyond political transitions. Research on students' and teachers' lived experiences reveals a complex network of political, social, and cultural barriers. For instance, even before 2021, students had to carry different sets of clothing to accommodate various authorities' requirements.

Key takeaways

- Students and teachers must be directly listened to.
- If you want to understand how education works in Afghanistan, you need to go beyond politics and powerholders and listen directly to students and teachers.
- Students and teachers are the primary recipients of educational change.
- Barriers to education are varied, depending on whether the setting is rural or urban, and where in the country you are.
- Exclusion from education isn't simply tied to political regimes, there are also social and political factors.
- Students in rural areas have always had to navigate between different authorities even before Taliban rule, for instance by carrying different sets of clothing.

Practical realities and the path forward

The international community's approach often proves counterproductive. By mixing political demands with basic educational rights in negotiations, they have inadvertently portrayed education as a Western agenda rather than what it truly is: a fundamental demand of the Afghan people.

There is a need for constant, smart engagement with authorities rather than sporadic interventions. The path forward requires depoliticizing education and focusing on practical solutions: ensuring both male and female teachers, maintaining religious and scientific subjects, and working toward inclusive classrooms. These steps, rather than political negotiations, offer the most promising route to educational progress.

It is also important to distinguish between social norms and political bans. Parents across the country want their daughters in school. Despite current restrictions, there remains a strong hunger for education among Afghan youth, with families and communities seeking creative solutions to continue learning.

The future of Afghanistan's education system remains uncertain, but the dedication of educators and community leaders offers hope for finding innovative ways, such as for instance home libraries, to ensure learning continues, even in the most challenging circumstances.

Key takeaways

- Most external advocacy is based on rumors due to lack of access to local actors. Media often presents an inaccurate or incomplete picture.
- Linking education with political demands, like inclusive government, makes education appear as a «Western agenda»
- Emphasizes this is not a «Western demand» but comes from Afghan people themselves.
- Engagement needs to be «smart, realistic, proactive and constant, not sporadic.
- Political agendas need to be separated from basic rights.
- There is a distinction between pre-existing negative social norms and current bans.
- Warns that even if bans are removed, it will take decades to restore Afghan society.
- Outdated curricula affect quality negatively, and there is a need for updated vocational training materials.

«Negative social norms existed before
August 2021. In some of the areas, we
had a school, but families did not allow
their daughters to go. There was a huge
investment in combating negative social
norms in Afghanistan, but it doesn't mean
that bans and negative social norms are
the same.»

Three years have passed since the collapse of the republican government and the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan. This political transition has profoundly impacted education, with students and teachers, especially girls, bearing the brunt of these changes. Over 1.4 million girls have been prohibited from accessing education; and for those with access to school, the content and quality of education have remained as the major issue.

During this period, significantly disparate narratives and often contradictory views and attitudes have emerged in attempting to make sense of the situation and explain facets of change in education. However, few have focused on the lived experiences and perspectives of students and teachers within their explanation and analysis.

This seminar aimed to bring these overlooked perspectives to the forefront, exploring the lived experiences of Afghan school students and teachers. By examining the situation through the lens of those most directly affected, we hope to contribute to a more holistic understanding of the current state of education in Afghanistan.

Chair: Terje Watterdal

Panellists: Mustafa Himmati and Madina Mahboobi



Rethinking international engagement in Afghan education

The international community's efforts to support girls' education in Afghanistan have had an unintended consequence: the politicization of education itself. What was meant to advocate for basic rights has instead become a flashpoint, with education access now viewed as a symbol of resistance to Western pressure by the current government.

This dynamic calls for a fundamental shift in approach. The experience of Afghan students who previously navigated between different educational authorities offers valuable lessons in pragmatic adaptation. Their ability to maneuver between competing demands demonstrates the kind of smart, flexible engagement needed today.

The current pattern of sporadic international engagement – meeting once or twice a year – fails to address Afghanistan's complex, ongoing challenges. Meaningful progress requires consistent, sustained interaction rather than isolated diplomatic encounters. Each engagement must be purposeful, realistic, and designed to achieve specific outcomes.

Despite these challenges, the last two decades have not been wasted. They have fostered a deep understanding of education's value among Afghans. The focus now must extend beyond simple access to education, emphasizing quality and relevance to local communities.

Key takeaways:

- Educational rights should be separated from broader political demands.
- Engagement must be consistent and results-oriented, not sporadic.
- Local solutions and adaptability offer lessons for international engagement.
- Quality and relevance of education are as important as access
- Previous investments have created lasting appreciation for the value of education.

«Most of the advocacy that we are doing on all matters related to Afghanistan, but particularly on education, most of the advocacy, especially outside, is based on rumor. [...] Afghanistan is like a closed box, only we who are living there, know what's happening, because we cannot put anything on media, we cannot do the publicity of our work, we cannot mention what is happening, and what what's not happening.»

Afghanistan Week 2024 Chairs and panelists

Chairs and panelists in alphabetical order

Fereshta Abbasi is the Afghanistan Researcher in the Asia division at Human Rights Watch, focusing on research and documentation of ongoing abuses in Afghanistan. For the past 10 years she has documented human rights abuses in Afghanistan with different organizations, including Human Rights Watch and the All-Survivors Project.

William Byrd is a development economist who has been working extensively on Afghanistan since 2001. His academic background includes a doctorate in economics from Harvard University and a master's degree in East Asian Regional Studies from the same institution. He had long experience at the World Bank, where most of his work was on China, India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. He has lived in all of these countries and speaks Dari and Chinese. During 2002-2006, he was stationed in Kabul where he served as the World Bank's country manager and then as economic adviser. William Byrd currently is at the U.S. Institute of Peace, where he is a senior expert focusing on Afghanistan. He attends the Afghanistan Week in his personal capacity.

Ilaria Carrozza is a Senior Researcher at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), where she focuses on understanding how China extends its influence abroad and challenges the existing world order. She covers topics such as China's foreign policy; the normative, political and security impact of artificial intelligence; great power competition; geopolitics; and the Digital Silk Road. Her broader interests include China's engagement in Africa and Asia, the Belt and Road Initiative, South-South cooperation, and international order. She has a PhD in International Relations from the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and a MA in Chinese Studies from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). She is a regular commentator in both Norwegian and international media, including the BBC, The Guardian, and the South China Morning Post.

Elisabeth Eide is a journalist, traveller, and Professor Emerita at OsloMet. She has authored or coauthored a large number of books, among them several books and research articles on Afghanistan. She has since 2003 worked with journalists' rights and freedom of Expression in Afghanistan through Norwegian and Afghan PEN.

Fatima Gailani is a women's rights activist and a political leader of Afghanistan. She holds a master's degree from The Muslim College of London and a BA from Iran National University (renamed to Shahid Beheshty University). Early in her career she served as a spokesperson of the Afghan Freedom Fighters during the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union. In the new government, she became a member of the highest political decision-making body called the Loya Jirga according to the country's Constitution, and from there she was appointed as a Commissioner for drafting and getting the New Constitution ratified. Gailani previously served as the president of the Afghan Red Crescent Society, and she was a senior negotiator at the 2020-21 Afghan peace talks held in Qatar.

Signe Gilen is serving as the Norwegian MFA's Special Envoy for Women, Peace and Security. She has covered the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from 1992 to 2010, both as a researcher and as a diplomat. She has been serving at the Norwegian Representative office to the Palestinian Authority, at the Embassy in New Delhi and as Deputy Head of Mission in Juba where she followed the revitalization of the peace agreement, followed by three years as DHOM at the embassy in Riyadh. She wrote her thesis in Anthropology on Gender imagery and nationalism in Palestine, an occupied land. She has worked on women inclusion and gender perspectives in peace and security related matters over the last twenty-four years as a diplomat.

Norunn Grande is a special advisor at Nansen Center for Peace and Dialogue (NCPD), based in Lillehammer, Norway. She develops and provides training courses in conflict transformation and dialogue facilitation, in Norway and internationally, also in Afghanistan, in close cooperation with Norwegian Afghanistan Committee (NAC).

Kristian Berg Harpviken is a Research Professor at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO). He is a long-time student of Afghanistan and the surrounding region, a frequent media commentator, and lectures regularly to both scholarly and popular audiences. He is author of Social Networks and Migration in Wartime Afghanistan (Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), and (with Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh), A Rock Between Hard Places: Afghanistan as an Arena of Regional Insecurity (Hurst, 2016).

Mustafa Himmati is the Head of Knowledge Management at the Norwegian Afghanistan Committee (NAC), based in Oslo, with over a decade of experience in Afghanistan. His work at NAC has focused on project reviews, evaluations, and participatory research across various sectors. Notably, in the education sector, he contributed to key review projects, including the Afghanistan Education Joint-Sector Reviews and the Vulnerability to Corruption Assessment of the Ministry of Education between 2016 and 2019. Mustafa holds dual master's degrees: one in Inclusive Education from the University of Bristol, UK, and another in Inclusion and Diversity in Education from Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia (UPI), Bandung, Indonesia.

Hazrat Khan Hoshmand is a committed human rights defender with extensive experience in grassroots activism and leadership within the Civil Society and Human Rights Network (CSHRN). After the Taliban's takeover in 2021, Hazrat was forced to flee Afghanistan and now resides in Sweden with his family. In exile, he helped rebuild CSHRN and co-founded the Human Rights Defender Plus (HRD+) network in 2022. Additionally, Hazrat serves as a verification officer for the Afghanistan program of the World Organization Against Torture (OMCT), where he supports human rights defenders at risk and advocates for the protection of Afghan citizens' rights and dignity.

Rayhana Karim is an accomplished humanitarian and development expert, with a deep specialization in women's protection, reintegration, and advocacy in Afghanistan. Her career began in London's legal sector before she transitioned to entrepreneurship, successfully founding and managing businesses in the hospitality industry. As the CEO of The Khadijah Project, Ms. Karim leads initiatives that provide critical support to women-led and daughter-majority families, incarcerated women, women human rights defenders, and advocates for private sector integration of women. Ms. Karim serves on the board of the Afghanistan Microfinance Association and is a former strategic advisor to the Afghan Women's Chamber of Commerce and Industry (AWCCI), reflecting her ongoing commitment to women's economic empowerment.

Liv Kjølseth is a Political Scientist, with a postgraduate degree from the University of Oslo, with a specialisation in International Relations. For the last decade she has held the position of Secretary General of the Norwegian Afghanistan Committee (NAC). Prior to joining NAC, she was Information

Afghanistan Week 2024 Chairs and panelists

and Advocacy Adviser for the Norwegian Council for the Rights of the Kurdish People. She has previously worked for the Norwegian Directorate for Immigration (UDI).

Madina Mahboobi is the Founder and Executive Director of Vision Development Organization. A distinguished Afghan humanitarian and development practitioner with a profound commitment to human rights. With a background in entrepreneurship, Ms. Mahboobi brings a unique blend of professional acumen and passionate leadership to VDO. Her dedication to women's empowerment and human rights has earned her recognition on both national and international platforms. As the leader of the Change Drive Network, Ms. Mahboobi oversees a vast coalition of over 17,000 members, 74+ local organizations, and 11 international entities across Afghanistan.

Assem Mayar is a dedicated professional with a focus on climate change and its economic consequences on Afghanistan. With a strong foundation in both technical and policy-level knowledge, Dr. Mayar brings a comprehensive perspective to discussions on environmental and economic challenges. Passionate about sustainability and development, Assem actively engages in sharing insights on the intersection of climate policy and economic resilience, making them a valuable voice in conferences and expert panels.

Karim Merchant is currently a freelance consultant on policy, programme and project development and management in the fields of rural development, humanitarian assistance, conflict-sensitive development and peacebuilding. Over the last 27 years, Karim has worked in Afghanistan with local civil society organisations, INGOS, UN Agencies, donors and the several previous Afghan governments. He lectures on Fragile and Conflict Affected States and Peacebuilding and continues to support policy and programme design initiatives for Afghanistan.

Andreas Motzfeldt Kravik is State Secretary to the Minister for Foreign Affairs Espen Barth Eide. Andreas Motzfeldt Kravik is former department director in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' legal department, ambassador at Norway's UN delegation in New York, lawyer at the UN's International Criminal Court in Cambodia, advisor in the Security Policy Department in the Ministry of Defense and deputy judge in the Drammen District Court.

Payvand Seyedali is the Country Director of Women for Women International, Afghanistan, an international NGO that supports women survivors of war to rebuild their lives. She is the Founder of The Khadijah Project, a grassroots initiative that supports protection, reintegration, and advocacy and coordination efforts of women in Afghanistan. Formerly, Payvand was Senior Advisor to UN Women in Afghanistan, Senior Education Advisor to the Swedish Committee in Afghanistan, and, for the British government, led the largest gender fund in Afghanistan. In 2018, she won the NATO Leaders' Award for Tranformative Leadership. She has lived in Afghanistan for 13 years.

Hasina Shirzad is an Afghan journalist, writer, and human rights activist now based in Norway. She holds a master's degree from Oslo Metropolitan University and is currently engaged in program and human rights defender (HRD) work at the Norwegian Human Rights Fund (NHRF). In this role, Shirzad supports grassroots human rights initiatives, focusing particularly on the protection and empowerment of women and other human rights defenders in vulnerable and marginalized communities. Her activism is deeply rooted in advocating for freedom of speech, women's rights, and the protection of human rights defenders, both in conflict zones and in exile. Through her work, she highlights the unique struggles faced by women and human rights defenders under oppressive regimes, aiming to bring global attention to their resilience and courage.

Graeme Smith is a Senior Analyst for the International Crisis Group. He has been working in Afghanistan since 2005 for organisations such as the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) and the Norwegian Centre for Conflict Resolution (NOREF). From 2015 to 2018, he served as a Political Affairs Officer for the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, with responsibility for domestic politics. He previously worked as the Crisis Group country director in Afghanistan (2012-2015). His career as a journalist included a decade as a staff reporter for The Globe and Mail, which posted him in Moscow (2005), Kandahar (2006-2009), Delhi (2010) and Istanbul (2011).

Arne Strand has a PhD in Post-war Recovery Studies through which he studied coordination of humanitarian assistance in complex emergencies. His research focuses on aid coordination, forced migration and reintegration, peace building and security sector reform and humanitarian and development assistance. Strand has been team leader of several evaluations and research programmes in and on Afghanistan. He has extensive management experience from NGOs and research institutes, and has also been involved in developing management and professional capacities of Afghan NGOs and peacebuilding organisations.

Khalid Qadery is a writer and a journalist who has worked for several media in Afghanistan. He was imprisoned for one year by the Taliban, and is currently writing a book about his experiences. From his exile in France he works for the Ravi Zan news channel.

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Torunn Wimpelmann is a Research Director at Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI). Torunn completed her PhD on gender violence in Afghanistan (SOAS). Her main field of research is gender politics and legal reform in Afghanistan, where she has done several years of fieldwork. She is the author of, The Pitfalls of Protection: Gender, Violence and Power in Afghanistan (University of California Press, 2017).

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