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One Year after the Collapse: A Reflection from the Field

(What Are the Options to Engage with Afghanistan under the Taliban Control?)

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One year after the collapse: A reflection from the field
What are the options to engage with Afghanistan under Taliban control?
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Abstract

Following a quick overview of the situation before the collapse of the Afghan republic on August 15, 2021, and an assessment of the past one year under the control of the Taliban, this research explores possible options for the engagement of the international community with Afghanistan under Taliban control. It particularly looks at three main options of full-engagement, condition-based engagement, and disengagement. To provide a realistic picture from the ground for a constructive engagement, the research defines and analyzes the pros and cons of each option, and briefly talks about the consequences of the continuation of the current situation for both Afghanistan and the international community.

The research aims to navigate the major perspectives of various groups in the aftermath of the Taliban's takeover and provide constructive intervening options for the international community, including international organizations to preserve the minimal achievements of the last two decades and transitioning peacefully from this critical juncture.

The paper has been written based on interviews with activists, politicians, researchers, lecturers, and representatives of negotiation teams both inside and outside Afghanistan. Wherever possible, observations and literature review were embodied to consider and analyze all important aspects.

Keywords: *Engagement, humanitarian aid, radicalization, conditional engagement, international community, disengagement, Afghanistan*

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1 Introduction

Afghanistan, during the last 44 years of its turmoil, has endured several rounds of political and regime changes. However, what turned up on August 15, 2021, was unique in the sense that it marked the largest setback, failure, and degradation of what was achieved under 20 years of democratic state-building since 2001. The collapse of Afghanistan's Republic was a collective failure of Afghan citizens, the Afghan state, and the international community. It was a failure of democratization efforts due to several factors including lack of accountability, absence of rule of law, and huge trust deficits between citizens and the state on the one hand and between the Afghan politicians, the government, and the US-led international community on the other hand.

It is worth remembering that 22 years of international engagement before August 15 had provided not only the ground but also the sense of confidence that Afghanistan would sustain its positive path in building a state that is responsive to the needs and demands of its people. In addition, it was expected that, though slowly, the country was taking steps towards self-reliance, rule of law, good governance, and a democratic governance system. Indeed, Afghanistan commenced its rehabilitation journey from zero. The post-9/11 transition politics offered a unique opportunity for the country to restore its lost political stability and to establish a functioning state that is responsive to the needs of citizens in accessing education, health, communication, and nourishment. No one can ignore that around 10 million Afghan boys and girls were able to attend school; around 400,000 went to universities. Many young people received scholarships and went abroad to pursue their education at well-known universities. Along with public schools and universities, thousands of private schools and universities were established and provided educational services to the millions. In a war-torn country like Afghanistan, many teachers and schools were nominated for peace awards (IIHM, 2021) and quality education at the global level (Global Teacher Prize, 2018). Though the unemployment of the majority of young graduates, who constitute more than 65% of the country's population, was a huge concern, they were promising the country a greater chance of development given their education, skills, and expertise.

People were practicing democracy through huge participation, though later less; the presidential, parliamentary, and provincial councils' elections provided an enormous opportunity for people's representation in national institutions. Self-determination rights and the right to political participation were ensured by the 2004 constitution. Although with delays, mismanagements, and huge frauds, the four rounds of parliamentary and presidential elections were conducted, which offered, for the first time in Afghan history, a chance for eligible citizens to exercise their political rights.

On the economic front, despite many challenges, small and medium enterprises such as shops, bakeries, restaurants, cafés, clubs, etc... were running, and by creating job opportunities were contributing to the operation of the country's economic machinery. Furthermore, Economic cooperation with regional countries was expanding; and various multimillion projects were supposed to transform Afghanistan into an important economic and transit hub for the region.

Social life at least in main cities was intensely practiced among various upper- and middle-class, groups, families, and circles. Women, men, and families were able to attend various ceremonies, festivals, concerts, and cultural events without any serious restrictions and desperation. Overall, the citizens were exercising their rights and freedoms. The Media broadcasted their programs 24 hours a day. Although the quality of TV and Radio programs could be criticized, no structural restrictions were imposed on them. Moreover, freedom of expression and association were other important factors that enabled the citizen to work in a variety of fields. Civil society organizations, associations, and networks were established and led by young female and male activists to bring social change and target policy arenas to improve the social, political, and economic conditions of citizens. According to many reports, including the Asia Foundation (2018), particularly around 2010, there was a huge optimism among citizens regarding the overall positive direction of governance, society, and politics. Such optimism seemed to remain unchanged in 2018 despite the drawdown in the 2014 election, and the withdrawal of international troops.

These achievements were gained not easily. Afghanistan is a traditional society, where ethnic politics play a crucial role by being one of the main sources of tension, rivalry, and conflict among various ethnicities. Unfortunately, the division of resources including power takes place

based on ethnicity and identity. Having left no positive legacy behind, warlords and power brokers continue to play a dominant role in Afghan society and politics; claiming that they represent their ethnic groups. Thus, the political and identity culture in the country made activism and change blurred. In addition, there was a huge distance between the political elites and the rural population over the years, which left the ground for the radicalization of young people and—considering that more than 75% of the country’s population lives in rural areas—one could imagine how important the impacts of rural Afghanistan could be. Despite all these, with the momentum that was created over the last two decades, even small positive changes had the chance of being institutionalized and changing the country over time.

On the other hand, Taliban and terrorist groups remained a key (in the negative sense) pillar of Afghan society since the 2001 transition. Taliban, who were excluded from the Bonn conference—where the governance and state structure of the Afghan republic was defined—managed to remobilize shortly. Opposing the presence of foreign troops in Afghanistan, the Taliban remained a constant obstacle to the processes of state-building, democratization, and economic development. The continuance of violent conflict, suicide attacks, insurgency, and counter-insurgency were leading to the brutal death of Afghan citizens and the destruction of public infrastructures including schools, hospitals, and roads. Consequently, a major part of the resources of the international community, and the republic government were spent on the so-called war on terror. The republic government was stuck in a fragile and precarious condition, where it had to fight with not only the Taliban and other insurgent groups but also with the warlords and violent local powerbrokers contesting over key parameters of the Afghan political setup and sociopolitical outlook. Meanwhile, the country was pushed to the edge of collapse standing in the middle of a growing conflict, insurgency, ethnopolitics, brain drain, and a despondent public with an outmigration desire. All these ultimately led to a huge loss of achievements; slowed progress; and prevented the consolidation of state and democratic institutions. Afghanistan before the collapse was a country at war, which particularly since 2015, was among the top five vulnerable societies in the world (Global Peace Index, 2020). It was representing a fragile democracy with a lot of internal and external challenges.

A few Words about the Paper: The work on this paper began a few months after the Taliban takeover when there was absolute uncertainty about the role of the international community. Although the lines are now more or less clear, the situation on the ground got, even more, worsened; people dealt and are still dealing with huge hunger. The de facto authority in Kabul feels no responsibility for most of the current challenges Afghan citizens are facing, and the international community does not recognize them. As the evacuation was taking place, and the Taliban began to strengthen the basis of its regime, we –the authors of this paper— came across the idea of discussing the topic systematically with experts, researchers, activists, journalists, young leaders, and representatives of the republic in peace negotiations with Taliban in Doha.

This paper explores the perspectives of those groups through semi-structured interviews, where the representatives of each category were randomly selected. Following the first interviews, a snowballing methodology was acquired to reach out to wider target groups. At the end of each interview, the participants proposed new interviewees relevant to the topic. The interviews took place online via Zoom, connecting us to various representatives across the globe.

The observation was also an additional means that we considered during developing this paper. From the beginning of Kabul’s takeover, we watched over the political developments and actions of the Taliban in the social, political, and economic spheres in Afghanistan. We looked at demonstrations of girls and women especially and analyzed them in the paper.

Documents review enriched the research. The literature related to the post-Taliban takeover was reviewed, including the website, news, reports, and research related to incidents in Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover. Documents review and observations helped us to develop the interview questions. The questions are developed based on the fact to cover the various narratives that grew up in the post-Taliban takeover among Afghans inside and outside the country.

2 Situation analysis: Afghanistan post-15th August 2021

Normalization of the Taliban's ideology and doctrine is an obstacle. If people get used to this, then it will be very difficult to change. Society will lose self-awareness, demands, and motivation. This is the biggest challenge.

- (Interview, Int04, May 2022)

The August 15th upheaval marks a huge setback for Afghan citizens, particularly in social, political, and economic spheres. Since the takeover of power almost a year ago, the Taliban have tried to project a moderate image of themselves to convince the international community that over the past 30 years, the group has changed. However, the actions of the past one year indicate restoration and imposition of the same or similar repressive rules, regulations, and policies that were executed during their rule between 1996-2001—an era marked by drastic curtailment of civic freedom, girls and women's access to education, work, and public life. Under the subcategories of political, civil society and NGOs, media and freedom of speech, women's rights, education, and extremism, this section of research will briefly enquire about the situation of the country under the de facto Taliban regime during the past one year.

2.1 Political

President Ghani's departure on 15th August 2021 and the consequent takeover of the capital Kabul by the Taliban led to a sudden dramatic –and for many, unexpected– change in all areas, including politics. Within a day, Afghanistan turned from the Islamic Republic into an Islamic Emirate. The Afghan state, including most of its military and security institutions, collapsed. The national assembly and the provincial councils were disjoined—interestingly without any official announcement. Consequently, the provision of services by the country's civil service in most areas including education was interrupted.

The political change and collapse of the twenty years old republic state were so sudden that left no time neither for citizens nor for Afghan politicians, the international community, or even the Taliban to properly plan and react. In fact, on the day of the fall, leaders of major political parties and most of the traditionally influential political figures were outside of the country, in

Pakistan, hoping for a stronger mediation role of the neighbor in ongoing peace negotiations with the Taliban. However, with the march of Taliban fighters into the city and capturing of the ARG, the country's political heart, Taliban leaders felt no need to continue a political process. They had gained more than whatever they were fighting for, and even much sooner than expected.

However, shaping the political and governance structures of Afghanistan has never been an easy task. It took the Taliban almost three weeks to announce their caretaker government; a government that according to almost everyone outside the Taliban, was representative of the Taliban, not that of Afghanistan. Since the first day of the Taliban's takeover of power, the Taliban repeatedly had promised both the nation and the international community that their government would be (1) inclusive, and (2) temporary. Below we will shortly go through these.

Inclusivity was and still is, one of the top demands of all involved actors, and as it will be explained in the rest of this paper, there has been no consensus either about its definition, or the criteria for its measurement. However, when it comes to an inclusive government in the context of Afghanistan, one would expect at least three factors: political, ethnic, and gender inclusivity. A closer look at the announced Taliban cabinet on September 7th, 2021, shows that contrary to the promises and expectations, not a single ministerial position was given to anyone outside the Taliban movement. Moreover, not only the traditionally opponent parties and figures were excluded, but also the politically neutral figures and technocrats, such as Dr. Ramazan Bashedost, and the ideologically closed ones such as the Hizb-e Islami and its alike were sidelined. In addition to a lack of political inclusivity, the announced cabinet was mainly composed of figures from one ethnic group, namely Pashtuns. Considering that Afghanistan is a multi-ethnic country, with no credible statistics suggesting one of them reaching even 50% of the country's population, the lack of ethnic inclusivity rang more alarms. Finally, and as was partly expected, the Taliban announced not only an all-male cabinet but also an all-male government, which excluded half of the society, the women, from all decision-making, political, and executive roles.

Another important political aspect was and still is, the nature of the post-August 15th government. When the Taliban announced their cabinet in early September, it was officially named "*a caretaker government*"—interestingly as time passes, it is being used less and less. However,

since a caretaker or, as it is also called, a transitional government doesn't receive its legitimacy from the people or their representatives, it can be formed only when a due date is set either by the country's constitution or by the political agreement which forms such a government. Even in the case of military Juntas, a framework will be set that defines how and when a shift towards a more permanent government will take place. However, the Taliban's caretaker government was announced without any specification on when and how a transition would take place. At the time that the cabinet was announced, there was no overall political agreement or roadmap agreed upon or announced even unilaterally by the Taliban. Thus, at least officially, the 2004 Constitution was formally in place, and the Taliban had not nullified it yet. According to that constitution, the caretaker government could be in place for a maximum of 3 months. However, in late September, the Justice Ministry of the Taliban announced that the republic constitution was nullified, and the 1964 Monarchy Constitution, except for the articles, which were against Sharia, would be in place. So, even if we take this constitution, the cabinet is supposed to be headed by a Prime Minister, who takes its legitimacy from the National Assembly. However, what the Taliban announced was even against this constitution. For obvious reasons, a National Assembly has no place in their system of governance, so if no national assembly, then you could not justify the position of the prime minister either. That is why, the Taliban came up with the term *Chief Cabinet*, something that has no place in Afghanistan's political history. A Caretaker Chief Cabinet is assigned by the Taliban's supreme leader, where the caretaker ministers are again assigned by the supreme leader; with no indication of either a legal-constitutional reference or anything on timing.

Moreover, as recently as April 4th, 2022, the Taliban disjoined the Directorate of Political Parties within the ministry of Justice. Before the takeover of Power by the Taliban on August 15th, more than 70 political parties were registered with this directorate, which was also responsible for overseeing the activities of the political parties. Though the Taliban, at least at the leadership level, has never officially announced the dissolution of political parties, in January 2022, several political parties went public that they were not allowed by the Taliban to operate. The answer by the Taliban was that they were still working on "a guideline to define activities of the political parties" and thus, the operations and activities of parties would be again permitted once the so-called guideline is ready. However, there is still no indication of even when that would happen. In fact, the recent move to disjoin the Directorate of Political parties in the ministry of justice practically puts an

end to the operation of any official political party and demonstrates, at least in the political area, that the Taliban has no intention to move toward pluralism.

To summarize, one could see that, experiencing a totalitarian regime in power, Afghanistan is far from any political freedom or pluralism. The current government is a single-party government consisting of only Taliban members or individuals close to them. It is composed mostly of a single ethnic group, in a multiethnic country. The regime has no tolerance towards any kind of opposition and silents the appraisals with suppression. Taliban has shown no genuine intention of forming an inclusive government representing the religious and ethnic diversity of the country; and with a so-called caretaker government, which becomes permanent day by day, has clearly no intention of moving towards a democratic political system based on citizens' views. Most importantly, there is a government in place that has excluded, half of the society, the women, from all decision-making and political processes.

2.2 Civil society and NGOs

Civil society organizations suffer, firstly from a lack of resources as the international community left the country and halted their projects and programs. Secondly, they suffer from insecurity, fear, and intimidation by the Taliban. Though NGOs play a crucial role in both distribution of the humanitarian aid and the raising of the voice of the indigenous people, in comparison with the first round of Taliban's power in the 2000s, the Taliban's attitude towards civil society has not improved.

Overall, the atmosphere of fear and intimidation in the country has led to the low motivation of people to participate in social and political activities. The context of political participation and the mechanisms of enabling civil society no longer exists. Consequently, a large proportion of men, women, and the young generation is excluded from its sociopolitical rights. The environment for civic engagement and NGO activities has highly shrunken.

On the one hand, and after almost one year since the collapse of the republic, the international community has failed in finding appropriate ways to sustainably support civil society so that it can criticize and stand moderately, if possible, at all, against the de facto regime's politics. On the other

hand, as the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law suggests (2021), the governing ideology and the policy of the regime do not encourage and enable a neutral civil society. Thus, the civil society that was once aligned with democratic values no longer exists. Unfortunately, desperation, intimidation, and dismay are so extreme that members of civil society could not take a stand on national issues. Furthermore, civil society activists continue to be tracked, followed, interrogated, disappeared, and even killed.

2.3 Media and Freedom of Speech

Afghanistan's media outlets and journalists faced an extreme crisis. Many were already shut down in the immediate aftermath of August 15. The remaining is on the verge of collapse: confronting extreme restrictions. A survey by Reporters without Borders (RSF) and the Afghan Independent Journalists Association (AIJA) indicates that the Afghan media landscape has radically changed since the Taliban takeover. The survey shows that 231 media outlets are closed and 312 were still active by the end of 2021. This means that 43% of the Afghan media outlets disappeared right three months after the Taliban takeover of Kabul and 6,400 journalists, 80% women, have lost their jobs since then (Reporters Without Borders, 2021).

The Taliban gradually imposes its restrictions on media and limits the scope of freedom of speech. In September 2021, they issued the "11 journalism Rules", in which they called journalists to align their broadcasts in coordination with the government's Media Office. Media are told that they must refrain from topics, which are considered "contrary to Islam" and/or "insulting national personalities". The regulations are so broad and vague that prohibit any critical reporting about the Taliban (Human Rights Watch, 2021). In addition, journalists who broadcasted women's protests faced violent reactions from the Taliban militants. In some cases, they were beaten and detained, while covering the protests.

Another mentioning point is that while many female journalists left the country soon after the Taliban seized power, many remained in Afghanistan straggling with enormous difficulties. Women journalists can appear on the TV screens only with covered faces; they cannot work freely and are not able to appear in media as they wish to appear or broadcasts their desire programs. In some cases, the Taliban barred women even from entering their offices at the National Radio and

Television of Afghanistan (Tolonews, 2021). Finally, the Taliban has informed Radio and TV stations to stop airing songs and music. All these have made it impossible for the free media to conduct their main role of informing the citizens without taking sides or censorship.

2.4 Women's Rights

Without any doubt, women and girls have been the main victims of the US-Taliban peace negotiations and the consequent collapse of the republic. Since the Taliban takeover of power, women have encountered serious restrictions. They are among the first category who are deprived of their basic rights and freedom—the right to participation in social events, the right to education, employment, singing, and media presence are only a few examples. Considerably, the Taliban's decision to prevent girls in 7th grade and upper classes from going to school makes Afghanistan the only country in the world to ban a considerable part of its population from education. Today's women and young girls in Afghanistan are despaired, disappointed, and frustrated.

In answer to all these restrictions, the Taliban continues to suggest that their restrictions on women's access to work, and secondary education are '*temporary*' and only in place to provide a '*safe*' workplace and learning environment for women. Let us not forget that these were the same justifications and arguments that the Taliban had during their first round between 1996-2001. Then too, they kept promising to open the girls for years, until their fall. Equally important, the question that all Afghans keep asking is "to protect girls and women from what exactly?" Afghanistan as a society is and will remain Muslim. Even during the republic era, in secondary schools, girls were separated from boys. Afghan girls in the past 20 years before the collapse had their specific uniform, which was already according to Islam and Afghan culture. Except for cases where no female teacher could be found, all teaching and management staff of girls' schools were women. So, one wonders what part of it was non-Islamic that is taking the Taliban one year to make it Islamic. On the other hand, religious scholars continue to emphasize that the Taliban's policy on female education has nothing to do with the principles of Islam. They argue that the first word of Islam to mankind has been about "reading and learning" without any gender segregation; and "pen" has been one of the most sacred objects in the Quran. So, if the Taliban really wants to be—as they claim—more Islamic, then they should do even more than the previous government about

education rather than restricting it further. Whether the underlying reason is political or ideological, the tragic fact is that for almost one-year millions of young girls are deprived of one of their basic rights; and that is not acceptable in any system of beliefs.

In addition to education, civic spaces have highly been restricted under the rule of the de facto regime. Taliban militants held 'door-to-door' searches looking for women activists. The peaceful demonstration of women and men in support of basic rights has faced serious violent reactions from the Taliban's militants and many women activists and journalists disappeared, abducted, misbehaved, and tortured by their militants. Following the demonstrations across the country, particularly in Herat, Mazar-e-Sharif, and Badakhshan, the Taliban issued a new decree that ban unauthorized protests. Thus, any group that intends to hold an assembly or protest must now register with the Taliban in advance and those who have tried have received a big No. As a result, only protests and gatherings which are in support of the authorities' policies receive approval. Anything else is considered against the national interests.

Furthermore, women's access to work is extremely restricted. Soon after the takeover of Kabul, women across the country, particularly those working with public organizations and institutions were advised to stay at home and only a very small fraction of women whose positions could not be filled with male employees were allowed to continue their work. After almost one year, the situation has not changed. Most of the female civil servants are now permanently dismissed from work, while a very small fraction is still waiting and hoping for a change in the Taliban's policy.

Finally, it is highly important to note that while hundreds of female athletes, artists, musicians, and politicians have been evacuated since the Taliban takeover of power, a large majority have been left behind, feeling betrayed and unprotected. In some cases, the complain of Afghan regular women is that those who benefited from the 20 years of the international community's money and influence and had a good life in the name of Afghan women are the same group that was evacuated and are now living in safety and peace in western countries. This is in a situation where the regular Afghan women are again the victim and deprived of everything, including the attention of the international community. Today's Afghan girls and women are

banned from school and employment; so it leaves no question that they would be banned from the sport, music, art, and any other civil rights too.

2.5 Education

“The big difference is their ideological approach to [the higher education] ... The Taliban want to turn the universities into places where Taliban doctrine will be thought.

- (Interview, Int04 & Int05, May 2022)

In the last one year under the Taliban regime, Afghanistan’s education systems have faced extreme regress in various areas. Firstly, from the qualitative perspective, the Taliban have tried to turn the universities into a place where their doctrine is thought. With hardliners in charge of both ministries of Education (MoE) and Higher education (MoHE), they are in the process of reshaping and reorganizing the system according to their ideology. For that purpose, immediately after the takeover, they began changing the management of the ministries and later the universities. With few exceptions, all high and midlevel management staff of the ministries as well as the chancellors of the public universities were replaced with either Taliban members or their supporters. For elementary and secondary education, the priority for the Taliban seems to be to substitute educational facilities with Madrassas, again, to promote their ideology. The effort to turn each mosque into a Madrassa and the specific decree of the Taliban leader on the issue, which defines the staffing structure and Salary scheme of Madrassas indicate the importance of Madrassas in sustaining the rule of the Taliban and their systemic approach to this. The fact is that most of the Taliban members are graduates of religious schools and thus lack formal educational diplomas and university qualifications, which makes it very difficult for them to assume teaching positions in universities and schools, or work in the public sector. Thus, the Taliban, on the one hand, have been very busy paving the way for its members to enter the higher education system, by changing the regulations so that graduation documents of Madrassas are considered equal, if not more privileged, to formal educational certificates and university diplomas. This way, gradually not only managers of public universities but also the teaching staff would be composed of mainly Taliban members. On the other hand, the Taliban have been trying to increase the number of its members with university qualifications. Thus, the issuance of university diplomas mainly from private

higher educational institutes of Pakistan for its members, and the consequent certification of them by the ministry of higher education to make them officially recognized is considered a very important mission for the Taliban's education ministries. Moreover, the Taliban government has recently started signing agreements with some private higher education institutions in Afghanistan through which Taliban members are accepted for bachelor programs without any serious admission examination plus much-relaxed admission requirements. All these show the ideological approach of the Taliban towards education in Afghanistan.

Secondly, the Taliban considers the presence of both males and females in classrooms a western style of education that increases immorality and abuse in society. That is why the introduction and application of gender segregation have been an important element of the Taliban's policy regarding higher education institutions. It took the ministry of higher education and the public universities more than 6 months to separate males and females in academia as much as possible. Introduction of male and female shifts in the universities, as well as assigning separate buildings and classrooms for males and females are examples of their efforts in this regard.

Third, the cleaning of academia from what the Taliban considers as elements of west and anti-Islam is another worrying development. In addition to the high number of academics who voluntarily left the universities and the country, a considerable number of university teachers have been dismissed, degraded, and under strict surveillance. Academic promotions of teachers who are opposing the Taliban's ideology and policies, or are perceived as anti-Taliban, have become extremely difficult while climbing the ladder of hierarchy in the country's public higher education for the Taliban loyalists and extremists is becoming easier day by day.

Furthermore, in the last two decades, private higher education institutions played a great role in delivering education services to Afghan youth. In fact, at the time of the collapse, more than two-third of Afghan university students were hosted by the private sector. Nevertheless, after only one year since the Taliban takeover, most of the private higher education institutions are at the edge of collapse; with a considerable number of them already seized operations partly or in full. There are two reasons; first, most of the capacities of the private universities have either left the country or are in the process of leaving. Secondly, because of the sudden collapse of the republic

as well as the enormous financial difficulties of Afghan families, the young generation has neither the motivation nor the money to go to private universities.

Overall, the Taliban's ideological approach in all parts of the education system will highly affect the current and future generations. Those who have grown up in a relatively democratic environment in the last 20 years will receive the most setback in terms of modern education. Additionally, the girls' secondary schools have remained closed. This means, with each year of the Taliban in power, a generation of Afghan girls will lose the opportunity of finishing high school and entering the universities.

2.6 Extremism and Radicalization

Following the Afghan president's escape and the consequent collapse of the republic, the Taliban became the de facto rulers of the country. It is good to remember that this is the same group, which fought militarily for more than 20 years against the democratic government of Afghanistan. They don't believe in either democracy or the constitution; and they see the current situation as the chance to realize their radical objectives regarding all aspects of Afghan society. With a radical interpretation of Islamic Sharia, the Taliban continue to issue decrees and orders related to public and private lives. Even in urban areas such as Kabul, most of the citizens do not feel safe and secure enough to comfortably wear non-traditional cloths. The same citizens who, before the collapse, were clean-shaved, wearing jeans, t-shirts, suits, and ties are now growing beards, putting traditional Afghan cloths, and wearing traditional hats. Women's presence in the streets and social lives is decreased dramatically, and the number of women with Burqas and face covers is on the raise. Gender segregation is getting more and more visible in all aspects of Afghan life. Women are encouraged, and in some cases are forced to wear and appear in the public as per directions of the Taliban; and based on the official decrees, in case they violate the rules, first their "male guardians"—that is their husbands, fathers, and brothers—will get warning and punishment, which in return has already increased the domestic violence and has pushed the Afghan women further towards isolation and deprivation.

Overall, the Taliban's actions and policies, of which some were explained above, eventually will lead to the emergence of a closed society, which is far beyond the international

norms or even other Islamic societies. Particularly, establishing Madrassas to deliver a radical version of religious studies especially by those who are not competent and under a regime with a radical approach will lead to further extremism.

Finally, the Taliban are traditionally connected with extremist groups in the region. Thus, regardless of how many times they deny it, for them, it is difficult to lose their connection. The fact that Al-Qaida's leader was residing at the heart of Kabul's diplomatic region is a simple yet very clear answer to those who still believe or expect the Taliban to disconnect itself from other extremism groups. Taliban's victory on August 15th and the fact that they remained in power has given a strong motivation for all radical groups in the region and across the globe. On the one hand, many preachers continue to tell again and again the story of their success in Afghanistan to their followers and worshipers particularly on Friday praying. On the other hand, even though one year has passed radical groups in the neighboring countries continue to celebrate as they call it "the victory of Jihad against infidels". Thus, since August 15th, the Taliban and Afghanistan have become sources of pride for other extremist and radical groups of the Islamic world. Taliban's actions not only turned the Afghan society into a closed and radical one, but in case it continues, it will also become the source of exporting terrorism, radicalism, and extremism to the region.

3 What consequences may pose if the current situation continues?

Traditionally governments based only on religious principles intend to keep the citizens uninformed about anything, which may harm the rulers, their policies, or ideologies. Citizens who are kept in darkness will hardly ever raise their voices and are seldom able to protest. Awareness raising and information sharing will be very selective, and their main purpose would be to encourage and persuade the “subjects”—not the citizens—to obey and follow the rules and regulations. Taliban is not an exception, and their policies and actions over the last year have been in line with the imposition of a strict interpretation of Islamic sharia in which the citizens must arrange themselves accordingly, even in their private spheres. For the Taliban, people are subjects rather than citizens, and their main task is obedience. This being said, below we will go through the consequences of the continuation of the Taliban’s rule in Afghanistan for both Afghan citizens and the international community

3.1 For Afghanistan and its citizens

As one of the foremost consequences of the Taliban’s takeover, we are observing that only one year after the collapse, all fundamental rights enshrined in the 2004 Afghan constitution have been abolished. The rights and values such as education, equality, participation, and representation in the last 20 years provided the ground for a diverse, multi-ethnic, and representative government, at least in codification. However, our observations and inquiries demonstrate that the Taliban not only reject elections but also abolished the representative bodies and the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), which was officially in charge of protecting and supporting the rights and freedoms of the citizens. Furthermore, all protests to revive the basic rights of women and girls including education, employment and freedom of movement have been harshly suppressed. Currently, there is zero space for civil and political rights; and the current regime does not believe in the sociopolitical participation of citizens. The strategy of the Taliban after seizing the power was to fight against norms, values, and principles, which were aiming for diversity, participation, and representation in Afghan society. Those who stood for such values and represented them were suppressed, detained, tortured, or killed. Others either kept silence to

survive or aligned with the Taliban's doctrine ensuring their own interests. As a result, society is far from breathing freely. It has turned into a silent, obeying, and closed society.

Normalization of the Taliban's ideology and doctrine is an obstacle. If people get used to this, then it will be very difficult to change. Society will lose self-awareness, demands, and motivation. This is the biggest challenge.

- (Interview, Int04, May 2022)

The second consequence lies in the fact that the Taliban's leadership lacks the capacity and competence for governance and economy growth. They assess various aspects of society and its relationship with the global community from a religious lens. As far as the evidence demonstrates, there is no clear understanding of how to lead society both politically, and economically. For example, internally, the Taliban possess a system of friendship—*Andewali*—which is often based on non-administrative norms and principles. Such an approach may lead to a transparency deficit and make them irresponsible and unaccountable. For instance, people expect employment opportunities, food, water, and economic growth, but in his first speech to the nation, the acting chief of the Taliban's cabinet, Mullah Mohammad Hassan Akhund responded to the citizens that the “*Taliban have not promised to feed the nation and that people must ‘ask the God’ for food*”.¹

Under the de facto regime, a transparent and functioning state that can be responsive to citizens is not imaginable. In a situation where the structure of government, laws, rules, and regulations does worth nothing anything, and the Taliban's strict interpretation of Sharia seems to be above anything and anyone, all the investments over the past 20 years in building institutions and governance structures are multiple to zero.

If the current situation continues, increased upraising, conflict, and a possible civil war sound more likely to become a reality in the longer term. Certain reasons may prove it. First, the Taliban failed to establish an inclusive government, where various factions take a piece of the cake,

¹ Afghanistan dispatches: Taliban PM says ‘God will provide for the people’ in first public TV address(2022), available at: <https://www.jurist.org/news/2021/11/afghanistan-dispatches-in-first-public-tv-address-taliban-pm-says-god-will-provide-food-for-the-people/> (accessed 12 July, 2021).

but the Taliban seem to be not ready to share. A unipolar government may lead to more instability and internal conflict. Because a large part of society does not see itself in the structure of the government. When space for political, civil, and non-violent activities is not possible, people will more likely get arms and join the various armed groups. Currently, for instance, the National Resistance Front, Azadagan Front, Azadi, and Balkhab Resistance are active in different Northern provinces of Afghanistan. Additionally, ISIS-K, which is composed of former Taliban members and foreigners, is a real threat to the current regime. Afghanistan's history has proved that a unipolar government cannot sustain and can never control violence.

Let's not forget that Afghans have tasted freedom in the past 20 years. So, they know what they would fight for. All these will lead to a big rebellion and uprising, which consequently might lead to the collapse of the Taliban regime.

- (Interview, Int01, May 2022)

To conclude this section, the generation that has been engaged with democratization over the last two decades, is in a losing position. All the achievements either have been abolished or are on the edge of collapse. If the current conditions follow, the regime will remain marginalized with a poor economy, extreme poverty, and a high unemployment rate. Ethnic cleaning, exclusion, and fragile state structure may lead to further violence, uprising, and conflict. This will increase and expand to other parts of society. Outmigration would become the top priority for almost all segments of society. Intimidation, frustration, fear, detain, and torture will become routine. The citizens may face an uncertain future in the coming years.

3.2 For the international Community

Growing insurgency and radicalization will be another impact of the continuation of such an uncertain future in Afghanistan. This might provide the grounds for networking and mobilization of terrorist networks² on Afghanistan's soil, which might threaten once again the

² The main Islamist movements and networks in Afghanistan soil are namely, Al Qaeda, which has a tight link with Al Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent represented by Zawahiri; The Haqani Network is the semi-autonomous forces of Afghan Taliban and long time ally of Al Qaeda; Tahrir Taliban Pakistan (TTP), also

regional and international countries. The presence of Al-Qaida's leader at the heart of Kabul's diplomatic area indicates how confident the radical groups feel under the Taliban rule. The victory of the Taliban has largely increased the motivation of the other Islamic political groups and extremist groups in the region. The two most capable groups including Al Qaeda and its network in the regional Indian subcontinent and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, Khorasan province (ISIS-K) are gaining more influence and territory in Afghanistan and will soon become serious challenges for the whole region. On the other hand, the Taliban has started to establish more and more Madrassas and align the educational system with their own ideology, which clearly increases the space for radicalism and extremism to grow rapidly. The threat is so real that even some fractions of the Taliban have started to worry that they would lose control. And even though the Taliban continue to deny any connection with other extremist groups, previous literature including the recent UN report demonstrates a tight partnership between Haqqani Network, currently the main power player in the Taliban's regime with Al-Qaida receiving assistance. (Amiri and Jackson, 2022).

A key point made by all the interviewees was the increased radicalization in Afghanistan, which may turn the country into a safe shelter for terrorism. The primary steps have already been taken including establishing more madrassas, changing college campuses to Madrasas, and or redefining the school and university subjects producing a radicalized generation.

Extremism will grow under the Taliban shelter. That is a threat to regional and international countries... The space and environment are provided for extremists. This is a huge problem.

- (Interview; Int06, May 2022)

It is equally important to note that Afghanistan has since 1946 been a member of the United Nations, and not only endorsed international covenants but also reflected and regarded them in

known as Pakistani Taliban, who fled the country's army's operation FATA region and fight alongside Afghan Taliban against Afghan government. Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) is formed by mainly by Uzbek and allied with Taliban to launch attacks in Central Asia. Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement ETIM aim at establishing an Islamic State for Uyghurs, a Muslim majority group in China's western province. For more detail, refer to Clayton Thomas, Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs, Terrorist Groups in Afghanistan, available at <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/IF10604.pdf>. (Accessed 17 July 22).

practice. A few such conventions have been signed even in the last 20 years which ensured the right of citizens, participation, representation, cultural diversity, women's rights to education, movement, and employment, freedom of speech and media, civil society, etc. it is remarkable to note that Taliban neither recognize such treaties nor regard and reflect them in internal affairs of the country. Therefore, one of the main consequences of such uncertainty is that Afghanistan does not meet any requirements for recognition. However, we believe that such international standards and principles are important factors to ensure the rights of various segments of society.

4 What are the Engagement Options?

Immediately after the collapse of the Afghan republic and the Taliban's takeover of Kabul, the question of what to do and how to engage with the de facto authorities so that the achievements of the past 20 years are preserved, started to be asked and discussed in almost all circles and events of the international community on Afghanistan. Considering the developments since August 2021 and based on the realities on the ground, it seems that the international community has three options: First, resuming a full engagement with the country to the level before the collapse, which would mean official recognition of the existing authority, and cooperating on both development and humanitarian spheres. The second option is to adopt a more conservative approach through a "condition-based engagement", where official recognition and resumption of the development aid and cooperation would be linked to the steps the de facto regime in Kabul takes toward the demands of the Afghan citizens and the international community. And the final option of the international community is to avoid any kind of formal engagement with the Taliban and focus on regime change instead. Below, we will go through each of these options, and using the data collected from interviews with civil society activists, politicians, and academics explain them.

4.1 Full Engagement:

Desired by at least a fraction of the Taliban, their supporters in Afghan society, and countries such as Pakistan and Qatar, entering a full engagement with the country's new rulers is one of the main three options, and probably the most painful one, the international community has to choose. Taliban through almost all podiums they could find, have repeatedly requested to engage, and cooperate with the international community without any restriction. According to a dominant political activist who had to flee Afghanistan the current path taken by the international community is already leading toward the political recognition of the Taliban (Int03, 25 May 2022). On the other hand, he adds, since no strong voice to criticize and oppose the Taliban has remained inside the country, the Taliban believes that the international community will, sooner or later, recognize them ((Int03, 25 May 2022). However, one should ask what does a full engagement with the Taliban mean and what its consequences are?

After following most of the conversations and discussions on Afghanistan since August 2021 and talking to several academics, activists, politicians, and journalists both inside and outside Afghanistan, it seems that full engagement with the Taliban requires the international community to take the following crucial actions:

- Recognizing the Taliban as the formal government of Afghanistan,
- Resumption of development aid and cooperation,
- Continuation of humanitarian aid,
- Unblocking the frozen assets of Afghanistan,
- And removing the names of the Taliban members from the national and international sanctions lists.

Probably the most important element here would be the political recognition of the Taliban. Recognizing the Taliban as the formal authority of Afghanistan would give them international legitimacy, something that their Doha office has worked hard in the past year to achieve. Consequently, it would enable the Taliban to, among other things, assign their people to the embassies and representative offices of Afghanistan in the UN and other international bodies that Afghanistan is part of.

An interesting observation, however, is that even if the international community decides to close its eyes on all actions the Taliban performed during the past year, and show a willingness to turn the page and start a new chapter, will the Taliban be ready to cooperate? A full engagement is for sure, the maximum desire of the so-called moderate Taliban or those of them who have been engaged in discussions with the international communities. However, one should not forget that in absence of a constitution and the relevant laws and regulations to define the terms and conditions of relationships with foreign governments, the Taliban's guiding principle would be the orders of their religious leader. On various occasions when asked about some key issues and policies, the Taliban leaders have indicated that they would follow whatever their Amir- *the supreme leader of the Taliban*- says. Nevertheless, does the Amir really back a full engagement with, as they have repeatedly called, infidels? Subject matter experts remain skeptical.

Regarding the consequences of a full engagement with the Taliban, most Afghans remain skeptical; with some considering it “*not even imaginable*” and others seeing it as a “*continuation of the crisis*” (Int06, May 2022). As stated by a major CSO and youth activist still inside the country, “*This cannot be a solution, because it legitimizes the Taliban and their actions. The international community is already blamed for the collapse of the republic and the current situation. So, if they go on and recognize the Taliban, it will legitimize Talibs; and will be the complement to the previous failure of the international community to leave the Afghan republic alone*” (Int01, 20 May 2022).

Furthermore, a former member of the negotiation team with the Taliban and many others believe that the official recognition of the Taliban would mean abolishing all rights of Afghan citizens by the international community. Furthermore, not only that they do not see it as a solution, but also perceive it as a reaction, which normalizes the actions and human rights violations of the Taliban, which would consequently mean that the international community becomes the partner in all crimes conducted by the Taliban (Int04, 26 May 2022).

Considering it as “*a very dangerous choice*” a former UNAMA staff and observer of peace negotiations with the Taliban before August 2021 suggests that if the world decides to go back to the sort of engagement we had in the past 20 years before the takeover of power by Taliban, there will be no guarantee that Taliban will improve the conditions regarding discrimination, human rights, inclusive government, etc. (Int07, 01 June 2022). Furthermore, the interviewee questions the honesty of the international community, stating that

“The western countries were always telling that they would retain and promote certain values; however, the collapse showed that they were not genuine in their promises. So, we all saw that the west didn’t have an interest in standing behind democratic values (anti-corruption, human rights commission, civil service reform commission, etc.). Many years of investment are now gone. They do not even talk about these. So, a full engagement will not bring anything positive to Afghanistan”.

A former regional manager of a well-known media organization shares a similar view, where she believes that a full engagement will not change the situation, at least for regular Afghan

citizens who are the most affected ones. Therefore, even if international recognition is given domestic recognition will not happen. Citizens have not even seen the faces of leadership. Moreover, the current regime is considered by most of the citizens as a single-ethnic regime in a multi-ethnic country. Because of this and many other reasons, the Afghan people will not accept them as the legitimate government of the country. A youth activist who is still in Afghanistan and is in contact with Afghan citizens in almost all provinces of the country on a daily bases believes that entering a full engagement with the Taliban and recognizing them as the official authority in Afghanistan bring even more problems. If Taliban receives the recognition from the international community, then any hope for change will be lost. The young leader states *“Taliban has the power, but it lacks legitimacy. So, if they get this also given to them, then no one can stop them* (Int10, 08 June 2022).

Finally, most Afghans are blaming the western countries for the collapse of the republic government and request the international community not to recognize the Taliban and certainly not to fully engage with them. As stated by a former minister of the republic government, *“indeed, it was the west who brought us [Afghans] to the current situation. So, recognizing the Taliban would mean escaping from responsibilities”*. The International community, the interviewee adds, *“Cannot and should not work with a group that is still terrorist”* (Int07, 07 June 2022). Political recognition is a very important leverage that can be used by the international community. However, it should be used for the right purpose and in the right manner.

4.2 Conditional Engagement

“The world is facing a very difficult problem in Afghanistan. It cannot close its eyes. It cannot say we completely ignore it and disengage. On the other hand, having a full engagement is not possible either; mainly because the policies of the Taliban are not acceptable even to their traditional supporters in the international community. That is why the best, and probably the only, option left is a condition-based engagement”

- (Interview, Int05, 22 May 2022)

As a second option, the international community can adopt a condition-based approach to engage with the Taliban. One thing is clear, and namely that the international community has important advantages that can use to convince the Taliban to change things. **Development aid, political recognition,** and the **international treaties and conventions** that Afghanistan is a party are among them. This would mean that while political recognition and resumption of development cooperation are tied to **clear, tangible, and realistic conditions**, humanitarian aid continues. However, what these conditions could be? A review of the documents and interviews with several politicians, civil society activists, and academics indicate the following essential factors as conditions that the international community can set in exchange for its engagement and cooperation at both political and development levels;

- Recognition of civic and human rights for all Afghan citizens, both men, and women, including
 - Freedom of speech
 - Girls' education
 - Women's rights, particularly the right to work and employment
- Justice and equality between citizens from all ethnicities in the provision of services and receiving humanitarian and development aids
- Political freedom and civic open space
- Education, particularly girls' education
- Inclusive and representative state and public administration

It is worth mentioning that civic and human rights have to be at the top and foremost of the conditions because it will pave the way for the other conditions. In addition, one should not forget that an inclusive government, similar to what we had during 20 years of republic—where only cabinet ministries were distributed among Jihadi leaders as representatives of ethnic groups based on the perceived percentage of each ethnic's population in the country—would not solve the problem of fair ethnic representation. Governments, and thus the ministers, come and go. By inclusivity, we mean inclusivity in the structure of the state and the country's public administration,

so that all Afghans from all ethnicities feel that are fairly represented. This is, by the way, the only way of solving the problem of ethnical conflict in Afghanistan.

How a Condition-based Engagement can be implemented? The starting point for a condition-based engagement would be to establish a commission composed of important state actors including the neighbors of Afghanistan, main international bodies such as the UN and the EU, as well as representatives of the Afghan diaspora to adopt a unified strategy and approach. Then this body needs to get into meaningful discussions with the Taliban. An Important element is the development of a clear roadmap to clearly define who does what and when. The bases for such a roadmap would be the above-mentioned conditions and the below-listed expectations from both the Taliban and the international community.

Within a condition-based engagement,

Taliban is expected to:

- Recognize the Afghan Constitution, even if it is not as democratic as the one before
- Respect the international treaties Afghanistan has already endorsed and all laws of the past 20 years,
- Agree to a caretaker government with a specific timeline, and facilitate the election,
- Pave the way for an inclusive state which can represent all ethnic groups of the country,
- Ensure sustainable safety and security, particularly for ethnic Hazara and religious minorities,
- Immediately prevent extra judicial killings and detention of previous armies, soldiers, service agencies, journalists, activists, and those who are not aligned with their ideology,

Here, though prevention of the growth of extremism has repeatedly been mentioned as a key condition and is indeed part of the Taliban-US deal, it will not be a realistic expectation. Taliban by nature is a fundamentalist group, which has a radical interpretation of Islamic Sharia. Thus, while protection and expansion of their version of Islam seem to be one of the fundamental missions, it would be very naïve to expect them to restrict the activities of their alike—ISIS is an

exception. Therefore, even if they promise to refrain from the financial or military support of other extremist groups, the Taliban will not be an obstacle to their activities.

The International community is expected to:

- Link their assistance and support to the conditions mentioned above,
- Adopt a step-by-step (political) recognition approach, through which recognition is connected to improvements inside the country,
- Hold the de facto authority accountable for the international treaties and conventions that Afghanistan has signed should still be an active part of them,
- Support, negotiate and enable Afghan civil society, young leaders, women, and political activists inside and outside the country to create an open space and enlarge it. Talking only with de facto authorities and ignoring the rest may not lead to a positive direction,
- Finally start to learn and implement the lessons learned from 20 years of its engagement, between the two periods of Taliban rule. The most important element here would be to reach the regular Afghan citizens and invest in them rather than the islands of power.

Advantages of a condition-based engagement:

Stability: at least some sort of stability is highly important for the prevention of chaos in the country. Therefore, one advantage of condition-based engagement would be that there would be no need for a radical change of regime. Particularly, if one considers the history of Afghanistan and the costs of the regime change, condition-based engagement seems to be the most realistic option. Moreover, if there is one lesson to learn from the past 20 years of conflict in Afghanistan, it is that defeating the Taliban is not easy. Good or bad, the Taliban is a reality of today's Afghanistan, and they have the support of a fraction of Afghan society, particularly in rural areas. Thus, fighting the Taliban is equivalent to yet another civil war, which consequently brings more destruction to the country and more misery to the Afghan citizens, particularly in rural areas.

Another advantage of condition-based engagement is that the international community is already in some sort of engagement with the Taliban. It seems that the world has accepted the reality that the Taliban will remain in power. The humanitarian aid is channeled to the country.

Every week more than 20 million US dollars are injected into the country's economy through Afghanistan's Central Bank. Part of the salaries of the Afghan civil service is paid from outside of the country. Even partial political recognition is there; the governments of Pakistan, Qatar, China, Russia, and Turkmenistan have already admitted some diplomats introduced by the Taliban; and Taliban's ministers are frequently traveling to these countries and having exchanges with representatives of the international communities regarding all matters.

Meanwhile, the Taliban is divided at least into two fractions. Their technocrats, though may share the same beliefs and principles as their radical religious fraction, understand the importance of international legitimacy and engagement with the international community. Thus, they are ready to discuss almost everything and give compromises. This is itself a big opportunity which should be benefited from.

Lastly, a crucial advantage is that the Taliban has only mosques and madrasas. Regardless of the topic, they neither consult nor trust others outside their group. The majority of Afghan society is not supporting the Taliban. Taliban lacks domestic legitimacy. The bulk of their support inside Afghanistan comes from parts of the society mostly in rural areas of Afghanistan, which either were disappointed with the republic government or supported the Taliban due to their religious beliefs of—as they say—fighting with the foreign invaders. Now, both of these justifications are gone. Thus, these people are continuing to support the Taliban mainly because they do not see any alternatives.

However, any sort of engagement with the Taliban, particularly a comprehensive condition-based engagement bares several challenges, that all involved parties should be aware of. Some of these challenges are:

The only leverages that the world has are political recognition and humanitarian aid. Here too, the aid cannot be conditioned, so only the development aid remains. However, the Taliban in the course of 20 years fight has learned very well how to find alternative financial sources, which makes the development aid leverage even less effective.

Taliban, particularly its radical fraction, has proven in the past one year that they have a very specific interpretation of Sharia; and that they are committed to implementing it regardless of the consequences. Therefore, as long as they go in that direction, it would be extremely difficult to deal with them. That is why, the suggested condition-based engagement should have an implementation guarantee and the conditions and rules of engagement should be clear.

Taliban has no interest in conducting free and fair elections for two main reasons. First, they do not believe in elections the way the international norms and standards define them. Second, they are well aware that if Afghans are let to choose freely, their loose is guaranteed. Thus, considering the current realities on the ground, the international community cannot force the Taliban to have an elective government; however, pushing the Taliban towards election should be an integrated part of all efforts. It may take time, but it is possible.

Critiques of a condition-based engagement, however, complain about the minimalistic approach of the international community in their engagement with the Taliban. They criticize that considering the advantages the international community had, particularly in the immediate aftermath of the collapse, they ask for too little. While the main demands of Afghan citizens were paving the way for a national election, and recognition of the Afghan constitution even with some amendments, the international community chose to bargain for much smaller things. That is why, some Afghans, insist that unless the fundamental issues are not discussed and mentioned, as conditions for engagement and recognition, requests to re-open the secondary schools for girls in the whole country will not lead to substantial change. These group of critiques argue that this is indeed a technique of the Taliban; meaning they successfully managed to lower the expectations and demands of the international community by keeping them busy with issues such as the Hijab decree, or girls' education. Therefore, if the Taliban agree to back off, even a little, from only these two policies, the international community will consider it a win and will take another step forward toward further engagement with the Taliban. However, comparing the original demands, while the gain of the international community will remain questionable, the Taliban will certainly have a win.

A very important element for a condition-based engagement is that instead of investing in non-functioning mechanisms such as Loya Jirga, the international community should establish the grounds for an active civil society, which can lead to change. Here too, keeping the lessons learned from more than 20 years of engagement during the Afghan republic is very important. The problem at that time was that the international community got busy with supporting the government, and a fraction of the civil society was mostly disconnected from society, and their works were more symbolic rather than substantial. So, the normal citizens of Afghanistan, which are by the way in rural areas, were not benefiting from the developments. Therefore, it is essential that this time the connection with the people is established through, maybe small but real, civil society initiatives that overtime lead to a change in society.

4.3 Disengagement

For obvious reasons, including the current dire situation of Afghan citizens inside the country and management of issues at Afghanistan's borders, a complete disengagement of the world with the current rulers of Afghanistan is almost impossible. The unprecedented poverty and unemployment require the help of the international community regardless of who is ruling the country. It is clear that Afghan citizens should not be punished for the actions of the Taliban or the consequences of what the previous government did. Similarly, like it or not, Afghanistan's immediate neighbors have to work with the Kabul administration on issues such as migration, water, and transit. Thus, while the disengagement would mean the continuance of non-recognition policy by the international community as well as extending the existing sanctions on Taliban leaders, it also means the continuance of humanitarian assistance as well as focusing and investing more on Afghan diaspora for a post-Taliban, or an era in which power is shared between Taliban and other political groups.

Within the disengagement policy explained above, the world has to choose between two sorts of actions against the Taliban. **The first** would be to fully support—politically, financially, and in material,

- The civil opposition

- The military movements
- The Afghan diaspora

The second option would be based on a non-violent approach, meaning to support

- Civil opposition inside Afghanistan
- And Afghan diaspora

In the case of supporting the military opposition, the important factor is to support movements, even smaller ones, across the country and from all ethnic groups so that in case of a monopoly of power—the same as what happened after the collapse of the leftist government of Dr. Najeeb or the removal of Taliban following the Bonn Conference—is prevented. The other risk of military opposition and its support by the international community is that, one way or another, it paves the way for the return of the traditional ethnic leaders or as the west often calls warlords to the scene. However, most of the educated generation of Afghanistan is disappointed with these leaders, the power and influence of these figures particularly in the rural areas of Afghanistan is a reality all should expect. Moreover, even if regular citizens from all ethnicities do not willingly support these traditional leaders and their decisions, the balance of the system of power in Afghan society and the deep ethnic division and distrust push Afghans to, again and again, gather around these classic figures.

Regarding the support for civic opposition, it is highly important to focus on the young generation and new figures rather than working with those who used the civil society mask to maximize their own profits in the past 20 years and did mostly symbolic and/or superficial actions, which did not lead to substantial changes in the society.

Concerning working with the diaspora, though each country and society has its own characteristics, following a utilized model of work with Tunisia, and Syria is suggested. Focusing on systematic cooperation and linking the diaspora organizations with each other to design and implement joint measures are extremely important. Furthermore, supporting the diaspora to develop a comprehensive charter, based on the realities of Afghanistan, is crucial. Here again, identifying those diaspora organizations, which are genuinely committed to democratic values and

citizenship, and can work together without any ethnic, linguistic, or religious prejudices is highly important.

Supporters of disengagement with the Taliban argue that the Taliban since its foundation in the 1990s has not changed. Given the first round of Taliban's rule as well as their stance and actions during the 20 years of their fight with the Afghan republic and its foreign counterparts, the critiques of any sort of engagement with the Taliban believe it is very naïve to think that Taliban, as a political movement, will change—particularly now that they are in power and have the full country under their control. Looking from such a perspective, attempts to call for a Loya Jirga, or establishing a reconciliation commission to bring some of the high-ranking government officials back to the country are merely aimed at sustaining their own power and gaining some sort of legitimacy. The recent gathering of the selected elders and religious leaders from across Afghanistan is a clear example of such efforts.

Another justification by supporters of disengagement with the Taliban is that any sort of engagement with the Taliban will sustain the Taliban's rule one way or another. Consequently, the continuation of the Taliban's rule means more crises not only for Afghan citizens but also for the region and the world. Taliban, at least a core part of it, cannot and will not give up its demands and policies, which are, by the way, based on a radical interpretation of Islamic Sharia. Thus, any sort of compromise—according to them—would mean giving up on values and the ideology they fought for almost 30 years. This means a much more conservative and probably more radical society in the future. Furthermore, the Taliban by nature cannot cut its ties with other radical groups. If they do this, they would, in a way, deny their own nature. It is due to these, and several other reasons fighting the Taliban on all fronts including more sanctions on their leaders to move towards another regime change is considered by many Afghans as the only solution.

Similar to the other approaches, adapting a disengagement policy will have its own challenges. Below, we will name a few important ones:

Re-establishment of a parallel civil service with poor accountability and transparency mechanisms in place. Channeling billions of euros of humanitarian aid, purely via non-governmental organizations will, once again, create a parallel civil service that would get busy

with the provision of services—a task which under normal circumstances is done by the country’s public administration. Surely, in the short term, it will help many Afghan citizens to survive; but in long term, there will be serious problems of suitability and devaluing the already fragile institutions of the country.

Secondly, working with the Afghan diaspora would be extremely difficult. Compared to the Diasporas of similar conflict-affected countries, the Afghan diaspora has a big problem; and that is that in addition to divisions based on political views (e.g., being leftist, pro-democracy, pro-monarchy, the pro-Islamic system of government) ethnic division has taken roots in Afghan diaspora, unfortunately, among educated ones much deeper. Thus, bringing the Afghan diaspora under one umbrella to work together for a better Afghanistan in the future is extremely difficult.

Another major challenge of the disengagement policy is that it leaves almost no reason for the Taliban to stop their current approach to governance. This consequently leads to more disability, extremism on both sides, migration, and poverty. Similarly, the current administration would get busy suppressing opposition movements and disobedience rather than investing its energy and resources in service provision, employment, and other crucial areas.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that as supporters of disengagement with the Taliban insist, even if the international community decides to recognize the Taliban and work with them, the Afghan citizens are not ready to give local legitimacy to the Taliban and thus will continue fighting and disobeying them.

5 Conclusions and Recommendations

Afghanistan, during the last 44 years of its turmoil, has endured several rounds of political and regime changes. However, what turned up on 15th August 2021 was unique in the sense that it marked the largest setback, failure, and degradation of what was achieved under 20 years of democratic state since 2001. The collapse of the Afghanistan Republic was a collective failure of Afghan citizens, the Afghan state, and the international community. It was a failure of democratization efforts due to several factors including institutionalized corruption, lack of accountability, absence of rule of law, and huge trust deficits between citizens and the state on the one hand and between the Afghan politicians, the government, and the US-led international community on the other hand. Gradually, the country was pushed to the edge of collapse standing in the middle of a growing conflict, insurgency, ethnopolitics, brain drain, and a despondent public with outmigration desire. Afghanistan before the collapse was a country at war, which was among the top five vulnerable societies of the world and represented a fragile democracy with many internal and external challenges.

Since the takeover of power by the Taliban almost a year ago, the Taliban have tried to project a moderate image of themselves to convince the international community that over the past 30 years the group has changed. However, the actions of the past one year indicate restoration and imposition of the same or similar repressive rules, regulations, and policies that were executed during their rule between 1996-2001—an era marked by drastic curtailment of civic freedom, girls and women’s access to education, work, and public life. Politically, the Taliban has introduced a caretaker government—with no indication of if and when it will turn into what sort of government. It has been one year since the country’s constitution has been put on the shelf, and a single ethnic political group is governing over a multi-ethnic society, without any intention of sharing the power with other political groups or seeking the opinion of Afghan citizens in any way. Using and imposing the language of one ethnic group, the new rulers of the country advance toward ethnic and cultural hegemony. The vibrant Afghan civil society is gone long ago. Except for a small group, activists have lost hope and left the country, or are still trying to figure out how to adjust to the new realities. The number of media organizations has already shrunk to less than half of the pre-Taliban era, and freedom of speech cannot be even discussed. Women and girls have been the

real victims, losing almost all their civil rights including the right to education, employment, and freedom of movement. With Madrassas replacing schools, and radical graduates of the religious schools replacing the academics and university teachers, the education system of the country is rapidly re-designed to serve the ideology of the Taliban. Extremism and radicalism are on the rise, and Afghanistan is once again turning into the dreamland of radical Islam.

Whatever the reasons, the era of democracy in Afghanistan has ended, and the Taliban has become the undeniable, and probably unbeatable, the reality of Afghanistan. Like it or not, the Taliban is ruling the country and for obvious reasons, the international community has to take a decision. It is at this critical juncture that the international community has to take a decision. A decision that will affect not only the future of Afghanistan but also its region and the rest of the world. In the course of this paper, we tried to explore the available options of the international community regarding Afghanistan. We explained that the world has three options: full engagement, condition-based engagement, and disengagement. To the possible extent, we explained the meaning and pros and cons of each of these options.

On the one hand, entering into a full engagement with the Taliban by giving them political recognition and international legitimacy would be disastrous. It will complete the failure, destroy any hope of change in Afghanistan, strengthen the Taliban, and sustain their power for many years to come.

On the other hand, for obvious reasons including the current dire situation of Afghan citizens inside the country and management of issues at Afghanistan's borders, a complete disengagement of the world with the current rulers of Afghanistan is also not possible. The unprecedented poverty and unemployment require the help of the international community regardless of who is ruling the country. Afghan citizens should not be punished for the actions of the Taliban or the consequences of what the previous government did. Thus, while the disengagement would mean the continuance of non-recognition policy by the international community as well as extending the existing sanctions on Taliban leaders, it also means the continuance of humanitarian assistance as well as focusing and investing more on Afghan diaspora for a post-Taliban, or an era in which power is shared between Taliban and other political groups.

However, the disengagement option is also not advisable for several reasons. First, it will re-establish a parallel civil service with poor accountability and transparency mechanisms in place, which in long term will not be sustainable and devalue the already fragile institutions of the country. Moreover, disengagement with the Taliban would mean intensive work with the Afghan diaspora to form a government that would eventually replace the Taliban. However, the big challenge here is that in addition to divisions based on political views (e.g. being a leftist, pro-democracy, pro-monarchy, and pro-Islamic system of government) ethnic division has taken roots in the Afghan diaspora, unfortunately, among educated ones much deeper. Thus, bringing the Afghan diaspora under one umbrella to work together for a better Afghanistan in the future is extremely difficult. Another major challenge of the disengagement policy is that it leaves almost no reason for the Taliban to stop their current approach to governance. This consequently leads to more disability, extremism on both sides, migration, and poverty. Similarly, the current administration would get busy suppressing opposition movements and disobedience rather than investing its energy and resources in service provision, employment, and other crucial areas. Thus, for these and many other reasons disengagement is not advisable either.

Third and the advisable path for the international community is the adaptation of a condition-based approach to engaging with the Taliban, using the leverages such as development aid, political recognition, and the international treaties and conventions that Afghanistan is part of them. This would mean that while political recognition and resumption of the development cooperation are tied to clear, tangible, and realistic conditions, the humanitarian aid continues (see Section 4.2 of the paper for more details on the condition-based engagement). As previously mentioned, a very important element for a condition-based engagement is that instead of investing in non-functioning mechanisms such as Loya Jirga, the international community should establish the grounds for an active civil society, which can lead to a change. Here too, keeping the lessons learned from more than 20 years of engagement during the Afghan republic is very important. The problem at that time was that the international community got busy with supporting the government, and a fraction of the civil society was mostly disconnected from society and their works were more symbolic rather than substantial. So, the normal citizens of Afghanistan, which are by the way in rural areas, were not benefiting from the developments. Therefore, it is essential

that this time the connection with the people is established through, maybe small but real, civil society initiatives that over time lead to a change in society.

Finally, below are the recommendations of the paper for the main stakeholders of a condition-based engagement, namely the international community, the Taliban, and the Afghan diaspora.

➤ **For international community**

1. A condition-based engagement is necessary; however, the tools and approaches shall be designed in a way to make the current regime responsible and accountable. Furthermore, the engagement of the international community must also be effective and efficient to prevent escalation of the situation on the ground and improve the economic, political, and social conditions of the people.
2. A conditional-based approach with the current authorities means that both sides take practical steps with specific timelines towards establishing an ‘inclusive, representative, and Islamic-democratic state’ where Afghan culture and international human rights standards function in a way to provide open space for social and political participation of various groups.
3. Humanitarian aid needs to continue, however, UNAMA should set a fair and transparent nationwide mechanism of distribution so that the aid reaches to needed poor people in rural areas. In addition, this should be used as an effective tool to bring changes on the ground, as discussed previously in this paper.
4. The UN representative on Afghanistan and the rest of the envoys and delegations should stay engaged with various groups including civil society, political actors, and Taliban authorities to monitor the situation, prevent a dramatic human rights situation as well as discover open space and enlarge it.
5. To create and enlarge an open space in Afghanistan, the civil society, media, youth, and women organizations should be politically and financially supported.
6. Afghanistan should be held accountable, by any possible means, for the implementation of the international treaties and conventions the country is officially part of them. UN is the best

actor that can do this. Even if part of these promises is delivered, it will improve the conditions for Afghan citizens based on international standards, principles, and values.

➤ **For Taliban**

1. Afghanistan is a multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic, and diverse society where different beliefs, values, and behaviors exist for instance, from generational aspects to different social, political, cultural, economic, and gender clusters. Therefore, the Taliban must understand the reality, acknowledge, and recognize it.
2. To get domestic legitimacy Taliban needs to become responsible and accountable to its citizens. It is simply not acceptable to be representative of God—as the Taliban claim—but not take responsibility to solve some terrestrial mandates such as economic, social, and political dilemmas of its citizens.
3. Afghanistan has been since 1946 a member of the United Nations and has committed to fulfilling, respecting, and meeting international standards of human rights, and civil, political, and child and women rights. It must not lose this credible position on the international stage. Thus, it requires the Taliban to invite scholars, researchers, and clerics to discuss and find a solution and define them based on Afghan culture and Islamic studies.
4. A functional and sustainable state requires periodic elections, and representation in both houses, and the presidential palace. Therefore, refraining from the right to self-determination, participation, and representation would not be acceptable to citizens and the international community.
5. The justice system must function per Afghan laws and international standards to ensure the basic rights of citizens and ensure a fair trial. The extra-judicial tribunal, torture, and killings need to stop soon.
6. The majority of the Afghan population is comprised of young people, and they have different demands, enthusiasm, belief, and activism. Therefore, the Taliban should recognize it and provide the ground for their growth, activism, and participation in various programs and activities.
7. Modern education has played a crucial role in transitioning society and ensuring tolerance, pluralism, and diversity over the last 20 years. So, this needs to be respected, sustained, and

strengthen. Pushing the young generation to learn religious studies or calling the graduates useless will lead to further radicalization.

➤ **For Afghan diaspora**

1. Acknowledging the differences, and challenges as well as the positive and negative roles of Afghan diasporas, they can play a crucial role in this juncture. They need to initiate, negotiate, and find an entry point to enlarge an open space jointly with various groups inside Afghanistan. So, first and foremost all Afghan diaspora in Germany, the EU, and across the globe including researchers, scholars, NGOs, activists, and journalists should come together and work on a ‘Visionary roadmap 2025/2030’ in which portfolios can be defined, ways of cooperation with civil society, women groups and various groups can be inquired, analyzed, and then set practical steps, define tools and resources towards potential changes. Bakhtar Institute will be eager to initiate and lead the process and welcome any ideas and support in this process.
2. A steering committee composed of the Afghan diaspora and domestic elites should be formed to negotiate the findings of this paper with the Taliban, international organizations and stakeholders, and Afghan NGOs, politicians, and policymakers.
3. Re-activation and mobilization of civil society, media, NGOs, youth groups, and women's activities sound important in raising the conflicting points of the de facto authorities, asking for reforms, making them responsible, and transforming society.
4. Afghan diaspora organizations should act, initiate a ‘bridge-building role’ between private universities, civil society organizations, youth networks, groups, and women-led organizations and international aid agencies, and donors to cooperate on small projects to revive and sustain the last 20 years’ achievement, to the extent which is possible.

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Appendices: Interview Guide

Dear (Name of the Interviewee)

The Taliban takeover of power in Afghanistan on August 15th and the developments since then have extremely affected every aspect of Afghan life, from society and economy to politics and culture. Lack of concrete plans and policies, particularly on the side of the international community is evident. Questions such as should and how we engage with the de facto government of Afghanistan or considering the reality on the ground, what are the available options, have been asked again and again. While most of the politicians and decision-makers “continue to observe” the developments, there is little done to help the citizens of Afghanistan. And what is done is not enough, and not sustainable.

Thus, the continuation of the status quo seems to provide no sustainable, and effective solution either for this juncture or for the future. Therefore, there is a huge need to enquire about various aspects of engagement with the Taliban to provide a constructive solution and prevent further worsening of the situation of Afghans and negative consequences for the result of the world.

We, as two independent researchers, allocate our time and resources to analyze the preceding notions of engagements or disengagements as well as their subsequent consequences by talking to various politicians, former parliamentarians, youth groups, civil society activists, journalists, and women's rights defenders. The research paper seeks to develop a framework to dig deep into the available options of engagement with the de facto government in Afghanistan, which will ultimately benefit the Afghan citizens.

Therefore, we would like to request you give us a maximum of 1 hour of valuable time to share your opinion and analysis of the current situation and the way forward. The interview will be conducted totally in an anonymized way, and the data will be quoted completely anonymized.

We are looking forward to your contribution and setting a time.

Warm regards,

Dr. Mustafa Nasry & Abdullah Athayi

Interview Questions

- (1) How do you assess the current situation in Afghanistan, particularly in the following areas?
 - a. Political,
 - b. civil Society and NGOs
 - c. Media and freedom of Speech
 - d. Women's rights
 - e. Education (including higher education)
 - f. extremism

- (2) If the current situation continues, what are the potential risks/ threats facing
 - a. Afghanistan,
 - b. The region,
 - c. and the world?

- (3) How can we prevent, minimize, tackle and/or manage the above threats and risks? Could one of the following options be a comprehensive solution?
 - 3.1 *Full Engagement with the Taliban*
 - *Could you imagine that? Why? why not?*
 - *any conditions?*
 - *How do you define it? Please be as specific as you can.*
 - *How to approach and who shall be involved (stakeholders)?*
 - *How it can be started? What are the practical steps toward its implementation?*
 - 3.1 *A conditional-based recognition/ engagement*
 - *How would you define it?*
 - *According to your area of engagement, what conditions should be set?*
 - *From the Taliban side?*

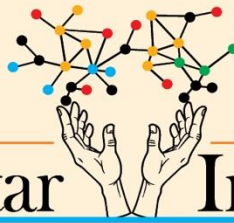
- *From the side of the international community?*
- *How to approach and who shall be involved (stakeholders)?*
- *How it can be started? What are the practical steps toward its implementation?*

3.2 OR disengagement

- *What would it mean? How do you define it?*
- *What would be the consequences?*

(4) For any of the three options,

- a. What would be the expected role of the Afghan diaspora abroad, particularly in the west?
- b. How about the role of the young generation?



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