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Quiet Engagement with the Taliban

Arne Strand and Astri Suhrke

The 20-year United States-led state-building venture in Afghanistan came to an abrupt end on 15 August. Amid the ensuing chaos in Kabul, the Taliban leadership outlined the contours of a very different Afghan state and society, the fourth comprehensive state-building vision in as many decades. How the international community responds could make a critical difference for both the trajectory of the Taliban's efforts and their prospects of success. The choices range along a spectrum from isolation, sanctions and even support for opponents at one end to engagement, dialogue and continued assistance at the other. For understandable reasons, there is international scepticism about the Taliban's intentions. However, experience and the current situation in Afghanistan suggest a strong case for aid engagement and dialogue – that is, quiet engagement.

The setting

The humanitarian situation in the country is now extreme. The World Food Programme (WFP) estimates that 14 million people, including 2m children, are dependent on food aid.¹ This is a consequence not just of the internal conflict, but also of severe drought and crop failures. Moreover, the recent fighting has displaced up to half a million people, increasing the number of internally displaced Afghans to nearly 4m.² The official number of 7,116

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COVID-related deaths as of 31 August undoubtedly understates the actual number, and less than 1% of the population is fully vaccinated.³

UN agencies, including the WFP and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), announced immediately after the Taliban takeover that they would remain in-country and continue to operate, and large medical non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as Médecins Sans Frontières did the same. Initial reactions from Western governments indicated that continued humanitarian aid may find reasonably broad international support. Whether this will be anywhere near enough to meet the demand – already a problem under the previous government – is uncertain. The WFP announced in mid-August that they needed \$200m just to continue operations until the end of the year. Some governments may reallocate development aid already in the pipeline to humanitarian assistance, as Sweden announced, and others may earmark the aid to support expected new outflows of refugees, as the German government initially declared. This approach resonated in other European countries, where the focus rapidly shifted to management of the refugee situation in order to prevent mass, spontaneous arrivals in Europe.

Regular development aid will be a much more difficult issue for the international donor community. Despite two decades of huge outlays of development assistance for Afghanistan, almost half of the population (47.3%) still lives below the national poverty line, according to the Asian Development Bank.⁴ Recognising the scale of human needs in the country, the international donor community had over the years developed elaborate institutional and procedural arrangements for channelling aid to the government. In recent years, that assistance had averaged around \$3.8 billion annually, committed within a four-year framework for pledges.⁵

At the last donor meeting in Geneva in November 2020, most donors made only one-year pledges, and conditioned further support on government efforts to combat corruption, reduce poverty and advance the ongoing peace talks in Doha. The pledges for 2021 totalled \$3.3bn, much of it in on-budget support to the government via trust funds administered by the World Bank and the UNDP on behalf of donors.⁶ The World Bank's Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund has been financing a range of multiyear development programmes in cooperation with the Afghan line ministries.

The UNDP's Law and Order Trust Fund for Afghanistan has for many years financed the justice sector, above all salaries for the police. The change of power in Kabul has now placed the future of these programmes in doubt, in part depending on whether the main donors will make formal recognition of the new government a requirement for disbursement. Aid commitments in the pipeline for the present year stopped in August when the Afghan president, Ashraf Ghani, fled the country and the Taliban assumed power.

The immediate response by the US government and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) was to further tighten the financial screws. Washington froze Afghan reserves held in the US, which came to about \$7bn of the total \$9bn in reserves held by the Afghan government abroad. The IMF suspended the special drawing rights of \$460m that had been available to the previous government.

The impact of these initial actions – which fall near the sanctions part of the spectrum of responses – must be seen in relation to the financial position of the government. The World Bank noted in March this year that 75% of public spending was financed by grants from donors. Without this money, basic services will soon cease, and state structures will rapidly erode. The Taliban does have other sources of income, notably taxes collected at the country's lucrative customs posts at borders with neighbouring countries and the informal economy, especially the opium sector.⁷ But even the introduction of a poppy species that yields three rather than two annual harvests, something the Taliban is reportedly considering, will not make up the shortfall.

*The Taliban
wants to speak
with donors*

The Taliban leadership clearly understands the significance of donor money for financing basic services and paying the salaries of the civil service. One key message from their first post-US-withdrawal press conference, held in Kabul on 17 August, was that they wanted to speak with donors. They also understand the importance of international recognition, as was evident during the past rounds of peace talks and their initially conciliatory public positions after taking Kabul. Major international humanitarian organisations, for their part, announced that they would maintain their activities in the country, and the Civil Society Joint Working Group – the principal

network of Afghan civil-society actors – on 24 August issued an urgent plea on social media for continued international aid. The group also urged the US to restore transfers of funds to the Afghan central bank.

The case for engagement

The principal rationale for past international involvement in Afghanistan led by the United States was tied to counter-terrorism objectives. While morphing into a broader nation-building venture, national security remained foundational. Justifying aid policy in terms of measures to counter terrorism, however, tends to have perverse effects: it distorts sound humanitarian-based programmes and project criteria, and encourages recipient governments to present all unrest as terrorism. It also leads to unpredictability, inconsistency and a lack of sustainability in aid engagement – all of which have arisen in Afghanistan. A more defensible rationale for continued diplomatic and economic engagement in the country would be an international obligation to address both immediate humanitarian needs and longer-term measures to reduce extreme poverty. These objectives are valuable in themselves and sanctioned by widely accepted norms in the UN system, such as the Sustainable Development Goals. Politically, they may also contribute to a more stable, less violent society.

Engagement based on conventional humanitarian and economic-development objectives would be a step towards the normalisation of Afghanistan's relationship with members of the former US-led coalition. It would be grounded in country-specific humanitarian and development objectives, divorced from the remnants of the 'global war on terror'. It would be premised on the recognition that the Taliban originated in distinctly Afghan conditions as a nationalist Islamic movement with ambitions and political horizons confined to Afghanistan. The Taliban itself has no record of international terrorist activity. Its hosting of al-Qaeda in the past was grounded in Islamic solidarity, laced with opportunistic interests that at critical moments in 2001 caused deep internal divisions.⁸

A policy of aid and dialogue as sketched out above recalls the 'constructive engagement' policy adopted by the Reagan administration towards apartheid South Africa. While implementation was controversial and fell

short of expectations, the underlying logic was arguably sound. It assumed that basic change would have to come from within South Africa, but that positive engagement could nudge developments in desired directions because cracks had appeared in the system. Sanctions and harsh rhetoric, by contrast, would only isolate and harden the regime.⁹ The same rationale applies to Afghanistan.

A possible model

Obviously, both the Taliban and the international donor community face serious political challenges in establishing a dialogue. Yet there are plausible models for how the conversation could be structured to instil confidence in donors and be acceptable to the Taliban. The oldest model dates to the first Taliban emirate (1996–2001), which controlled Kabul as well as two-thirds of the country, but that was internationally isolated and sanctioned for supporting transnational terrorism and violating human-rights standards. Some aid arrived, but it was governed by a strict ‘Strategic Framework’ with guidelines for a ‘principled engagement’ that was adopted by the international aid community in 1999. The framework permitted humanitarian assistance, tightly constrained development aid and excluded aid for capacity- and institution-building.

Both the Taliban leadership and important parts of the aid community nevertheless found ways to cooperate based on mutual recognition of the desperate conditions prevailing in a country devastated by continuous war since the aborted revolution in 1978. Some European aid organisations and UN agencies stretched ‘humanitarian’ to include health, education and basic development infrastructure such as local water supplies. UN-Habitat maintained a presence in Kabul and promoted community forums to articulate local needs. The UNDP had started a three-year programme for community-based organisations to promote poverty reduction and community development (called ‘P.E.A.C.E.’). In the education sector, the numbers added up. A German NGO was running schools with a total of around 1,000 pupils in Kabul, half of them female. The Swedish Committee for Afghanistan had an agreement with the Taliban Ministry of Education to support local schools for 200,000 students throughout the country, of whom 37,000 were female.¹⁰

The programmes were authorised at the national level by the relevant Taliban ministries and carried out in cooperation with local Taliban officials and traditional authorities. Continuity in the civil service facilitated cooperation, particularly at the national level. The Taliban's rapid advance to Kabul in 1996 had made it dependent on existing civil servants to staff the administration. The civil service provided skills, an element of continuity and often some flexibility when dealing with international aid actors. Local Taliban officials could also be found to bend the rules in response to community demands (for instance, in permitting home schooling or separate schooling for girls).

Admittedly, the relationship was not easy. For the Taliban, cooperation required balancing the desire for assistance and international recognition with the need to regulate and restrict foreign activities in the newly established Islamic emirate. Close control was especially important in the education sector due to the centrality of schools in the development of social norms. For the donors, the challenge was to navigate between Taliban rules and their own rights-based principles while simultaneously ensuring that the projects fit local contexts. Unpredictability in the government's establishment and enforcement of rules was a major problem, owing partly to the decentralised nature of the Taliban movement. When the Taliban's external relations worsened and tighter international sanctions were imposed, other problems developed. Some foreign NGOs found the working environment marked by new tensions and hostility.

After 2001, similar aid arrangements were adopted, initially on a smaller scale but increasing as the Taliban insurgency steadily gained ground in the countryside. By the 2010s, several internationally financed NGOs and UN agencies were operating in both Taliban- and government-held areas.¹¹ UNICEF's agreement with the Taliban to establish 4,000 community-based education classes in areas under its control is the most recently concluded large-scale programme along these lines. Built on an ongoing project with the Afghan Education Ministry under Ghani, the agreement took two years to negotiate and was signed in late 2020. The operations required delicate aid diplomacy towards both sets of authorities. International NGOs implementing government-funded education, health and infrastructure projects

in Taliban areas cleared their activities with the Taliban commission for international NGOs. The NGOs also had to consider the possible impact of international sanctions that penalised actors supporting movements and organisations designated as ‘terrorist’.

On the ground, the relationship followed familiar patterns. De facto Taliban authorities taxed the local population and the NGOs, and supervised activities – at times down to the details of running a hospital – but could also provide protection, and were somewhat open to negotiations with traditional authorities in matters of local governance.¹² In the education sector, the Taliban generally imposed restrictions on the curriculum and controlled teacher recruitment but ensured a stable work environment: teachers showed up and schools were running.

These recurring elements of a functioning relationship between the Taliban and the international aid community may serve as a model for the present and foreseeable future. Such an arrangement could provide relief assistance and aid in related development areas, including education and health, as well as more direct poverty-reduction measures. Existing programmes in these sectors, developed and refined over many years, could be salvaged and maintained. Taliban leaders appear open to considering the possibilities, even announcing at their first press conference that they would provide security for aid actors. As in 1996, the Taliban’s rapid advance to Kabul forced it to rely on the existing civil service, at least in a transition period. One of the group’s first announcements was that the health minister would continue in his post. In a transition period, aid would probably be delivered off-budget – that is, not channelled via the Afghan government but through the implementing organisation – as was frequently done during the two decades of engagement. While criticised in the past for undermining state-building objectives, off-budget aid seems suitable in a transition period. Disbursement would not have to clear the bar of formal recognition, making it an acceptable option for donors unwilling to take that step.

Possible derailment

A long history of violent conflict and raw memories of recent clashes make an initial dialogue politically difficult for both the Taliban and the

donor community. Both sides, moreover, will frame the relationship in the context of their own principles of rights and justice, and both have vocal constituencies demanding that engagement, if any, be ‘principled’. Disagreement over the nature of rights could easily escalate into more serious confrontation.

The Taliban faces the enormous task of consolidating its newly won power in a climate of considerable fear and mistrust, stemming from memories of its earlier rule, the development of a new Afghan middle class attuned to liberal values and lifestyles, and 20 years of relentless government and international vilification. The wheels of national and local administration must start turning to ensure basic services, especially in newly controlled urban areas where people are used to regular electricity, water supply and waste collection (failures of which have already sparked unrest in the northern city of Kunduz and a positive Taliban response). Relations with the country’s minorities must be managed (early conciliatory gestures were made towards the Hazara), as must relations with members of the previous political class (talks with possible candidates on matters of ‘inclusive government’ were announced). How the Taliban will deal with people who worked for the previous regime was initially unclear. The leadership had declared a general amnesty immediately after taking Kabul, but many feared they would not be spared, just as the Taliban and its supporters were not spared in 2001 and its aftermath. Tens of thousands fled the country immediately, while in the Panjshir Valley a resistance movement was announced. These and similar challenges that the Taliban is facing after the first flush of victory are fraught with potential friction that could generate internal conflict, external criticism and further sanctions that will strain or break an emerging dialogue with the donor community.

Initial signals are uncertain indicators of longer-term trajectories. Recent Afghan history offers mixed messages as to how the transition period may unfold and a second emirate develop. There is substantial evidence that collective political violence follows ethnic lines, fed by deep ethnic distrust. Periods of political uncertainty such as the present one are likely to cement ethnicities as markers of political alignment. Frequent predictions earlier this year that the American withdrawal would be followed by civil

war recalled memories of the disastrous violence based on ethnic identities in the capital in 1992–96. Residential patterns in parts of Kabul still follow ethnic lines, making targeted violence more feasible.

Afghan political history also shows how strong social constructs can reduce the costs of violent conflict by encouraging cooperation and pragmatism, and above all a preference for negotiations or surrender between armed adversaries when the balance of power tilts to one side. This pattern powered the Taliban's rapid advances in the 1990s and the early 2000s, and the blistering pace of its descent on Kabul in summer 2021.¹³ Socio-cultural codes that prescribe reconciliation and compromise are stronger within ethnic groups but can extend to inter-ethnic relations. Even at the height of hostilities, compromises have been forged. In the late 1990s, for instance, the Taliban emirate negotiated an autonomy agreement with the local Hazara leader Ustad Akbari and made similar arrangements elsewhere in the central Hazara-populated region.¹⁴ This shows that local demands for autonomy are not necessarily regarded as a *casus belli* in Kabul even when the parties by tradition are deeply antagonistic and one is the usual victim.

In much of the donor community and in Western states generally, the Taliban has long been viewed simply as a crude, fundamentalist enemy of liberal values and Western aspirational standards for political, social and legal behaviour. This lens is in many ways simplistic, and can easily lead to distorted assessments that fail to comprehend the calculus of the Taliban in dealing with the former US-led coalition, misread the dynamics of the interaction and miss opportunities for constructive dialogue. If Western states revert to a default position of sanctions and isolation, it is easy to envisage conflict escalation and Afghanistan's return to the outcast status of the first Taliban emirate. As one American analyst noted, 'if policymakers treat the Taliban as a pariah, they will almost certainly become a pariah'.¹⁵ Recent history offers a lesson here as well. The Taliban's strictly enforced ban on poppy cultivation in 2000 was part of an initiative to gain broader international recognition; it turned out to be its 'final test of the good-will of the international community'.¹⁶ International failure to respond to such overtures strengthened the movement's hardline factions, cemented its international isolation and hampered aid relations on the ground.

* * *

By late August, the Taliban could claim to control most of Afghanistan, but the country remains dependent on external support to address immediate humanitarian and economic needs. If the outside world wants to stay engaged and assist the Afghan people, it has no choice but to deal with the new government. The Taliban now has considerable experience in operating internationally, gained through years of peace talks in Doha and other capitals. A broadened range of contacts could be springboards for developing relations that could help prevent the country from once again becoming internationally isolated apart from relations with only a very small number of states – although this time that number would probably include Russia and China. The Taliban evidently wishes to avoid this scenario. In this vein, the meeting between Central Intelligence Agency Director William Burns and Taliban leader Abdul Ghani Baradar in late August 2021 was a tentatively hopeful step.¹⁷ So was the reaction by German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who on 24 August called for talks with the Taliban to preserve past progress, and for strategic patience in the international community: ‘Many things in history take a long time. That is why we must not and will not forget Afghanistan.’¹⁸

The Taliban movement has over the years defined its identity partly in dialectical opposition to the situation or the forces opposing it; the group’s representation of order and justice in the anarchic conditions in southern Afghanistan in the early 1990s is an example. Further international sanctions and isolation would likely galvanise hardline Taliban elements to the detriment of the Afghan people and perhaps international security.

Different understandings of human rights will be stumbling blocks in the further development of relations, particularly in the aid sector. That Western governments frequently maintain economic relations with regimes with chequered human-rights records does not in itself justify reprising the practice in Afghanistan, but it is worth remembering that constructive precedents do exist. Cooperation over aid is an opening for a wider dialogue that may be a vehicle for airing other concerns in the relationship. Unless used wisely by the parties, however, dialogue itself could derail even a limited aid

relationship in Afghanistan. What the situation calls for is quiet engagement that could encourage a conversation on rights while allowing for concrete measures to address humanitarian needs and reduce extreme poverty.

Notes

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- ³ Coronavirus Research Center, Johns Hopkins University of Medicine, 'Afghanistan – Overview', data correct as of 31 August 2021, <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/region/afghanistan>.
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