

Human trafficking in the Afghan context: Caught between a rock and a hard place?¹

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Summary

This briefing note discusses the potential implications and impact of various actors' policies, intentions, and perspectives on both the continuing humanitarian crises in Afghanistan, and specifically on Afghan human trafficking. It argues that humanitarian assistance should be prioritised and recommends that stakeholders pursue a pragmatic approach that places human lives at its centre in their responses and negotiations in order to prevent exacerbating the humanitarian crises, vulnerability to human trafficking, and further loss of life.

- 1 The research paper of which this briefing note is a summary, is Hoang, T (2022). *Human trafficking in the Afghan context: Caught between a rock and a hard place?* SOC ACE Research Paper No. 10. Birmingham, UK: University of Birmingham.
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- 3 The author would like to thank Nicole Kalczynski for her great support in conducting desk research and literature review for the research.

Background

Decades of wars and internal conflicts have driven generations and millions of Afghan families into impoverishment, illiteracy, unemployment, and displacement, rendering them unable to provide for themselves and their children. Political instability and conflicts have inevitably increased human suffering and vulnerabilities, eroded community resilience, deprived people of legitimate and viable economic options, opportunities, and livelihoods, as well as having amplified (in several cases also created new forms of) human trafficking in local communities.

Human trafficking in Afghanistan over the past decades shared similar characteristics with those in other situations affected by humanitarian crisis and conflict, especially concerning undermined state-level responses (or lack thereof), the use of child soldiers, women and girls as weapons of war, heightened vulnerabilities of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), and exacerbation of pre-existing practices of human trafficking, such as forced and child marriage, forced labour, organ trafficking, and forced criminality, as well as those specific to the Afghan context, including the practice of *bacha bazi*.⁴

Drawing on existing academic and grey literatures, expert interviews and media reports, as well as

on the human trafficking situations, forms, their widespread reach and practices in the Afghan context before the Taliban's takeover in August 2021, this briefing note discusses the potential implications and impact of various actors' policies, intentions and perspectives on both the on-going humanitarian crises in Afghanistan, as well as the situations of human trafficking in particular. It argues that humanitarian assistance should be prioritised, and recommends that stakeholders pursue a pragmatic approach that places human lives at its centre in responses and negotiations to prevent exacerbating the humanitarian crises, vulnerability to human trafficking, and further loss of life.

Key findings

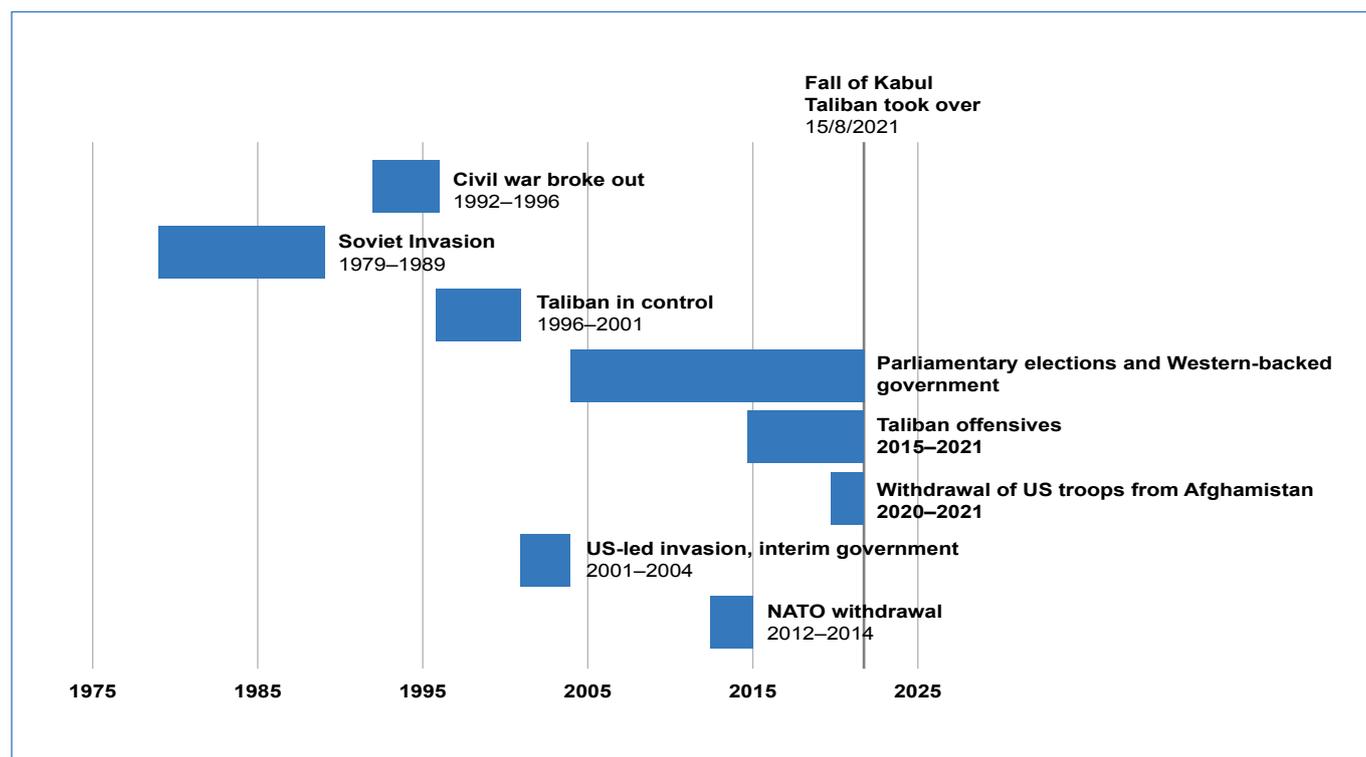
Human trafficking thrives in decades of conflict

Afghanistan has a history of being in constant conflicts and power struggles. As shown in Figure 1, this dates in modern history from 1838, when the British forces invaded the country.⁵ Millions of Afghans have been internally displaced or forced to flee the country for over 40 years since 1979, when the Soviet Union invaded and occupied Afghanistan.

4 '*Bacha bazi*', literally translated 'boy play', also as known as 'dancing boy', describes an Afghan custom or common practice by wealthy and powerful warlords and businessmen who exploit underage boys (as young as 11 or 12 years of age) as 'tea boys', entertainers, dancers and sexual partners. (See Somade, J E (2017, August 18). *Bacha bazi: Afghanistan's darkest secret. Human Rights and Discrimination.* <https://humanrights.brightblue.org/blog-1/2017/8/18/bacha-bazi-afghanistans-darkest-secret/>).

5 BBC. (2019, September 9). Afghanistan profile—timeline. *BBC News.* <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-12024253>

Figure 1: Afghanistan – Timeline of Events



Source: The author, based on BBC. (2019, September 9). Afghanistan profile—timeline. *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-12024253>

Uneducated, unemployed, impoverished, constantly on the move and fearful of persecution, millions of Afghan families have for generations been left fending for themselves and unable to provide for their children. Coupled with the lack of resources, infrastructure, institutional protection, support and legal mechanisms and frameworks, as well as weak, fragile and transitional governments due to years of instability, Afghan women and children have been forced and sold into forced marriage, forced labour, and other human trafficking practices including *bacha bazi*, child soldiers, organ removal, forced criminality, as well as forced child / female suicide bombers. Foreign nationals have also been reported to be trapped in human trafficking situations amidst the conflicts, invasions, and changes of government.⁶

One of the largest humanitarian crises worldwide

Leading up to the events of August 15, 2021, Afghanistan grappled with increasingly severe climate conditions, as well as escalating levels of violence that led to civilian casualties and large-scale displacement. The years before the takeover, a series of droughts—one of which was the worst the country experienced in the last 30 years—and escalating violence led to the destruction of critical water and agriculture infrastructure, which worsened existing levels of food insecurity and widespread water shortages. All of these conditions took place while the COVID-19 pandemic continued to spread throughout the country.

⁶ Black, S (2014, March 7). After 12 years of war, labor abuses rampant on US bases in Afghanistan. *Aljazeera America*. <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/3/7/after-12-years-ofwarlaborabusesrampantonusbasesinafghanistan.html>

After the events of August 2021, Afghanistan's economy faced instability and ruptures across several dimensions. Essentially cut off from international markets, the government accounts were frozen. Foreign investments, aid, and external trade—a substantial source of Afghanistan's public expenditures—came to a standstill.⁷ US sanctions blocked Afghanistan's central bank from approximately \$9.5 billion in assets frozen in US accounts.⁸ Teachers were left unpaid, markets were increasingly burdened, businesses began to shut down, and unemployment spiked. The availability of work became scarce while the price of food and fuel continued to rise. Afghans were increasingly unable to feed themselves and their families, leading to rising rates of malnutrition, particularly among children. Access to food, water, healthcare, and education, among other services, has deteriorated throughout the country.

In brief, Afghanistan is facing what has been deemed the world's largest humanitarian crisis. Estimates indicate that about 24 million Afghans—nearly half of the population—are in desperate need of humanitarian assistance. Nearly 14 million Afghans are struggling to put food on the table, while 8 million are experiencing levels of hunger that may soon amount to famine-like conditions in which having even a single daily meal is unlikely.⁹ The prospects of economic stability are clouded by political uncertainty, and some estimates indicate that a 13% increase in economic losses could plunge the country into universal poverty by mid-2022.¹⁰ As poverty, unemployment, lack of access to resources, protection schemes, and education,

are well-known risk factors to both falling victim to human trafficking and becoming traffickers or engaging in trafficking practices,¹¹ Afghanistan's social, economic, political, and humanitarian crises have significantly exacerbated pre-existing human trafficking situations and conditions in the country.

Increased trafficking vulnerabilities and restricted capacity to respond

The fall of Kabul in August 2021 also led to a mass exodus of Afghans and foreigners from the country, putting thousands at risk not only of the Taliban's persecution, but also of aggravated smuggling and trafficking risks since many cannot afford the thousands of dollars to pay transport or smuggling fees,¹² thus turning to the 'pay-as-you-go' model. The 'pay-as-you-go' form of smuggling exposes migrants to significant aggravating factors, which could lead to them falling victim to human trafficking.¹³

Adding to the dire situation is the increasingly limited capacity of civil society organisations (CSOs) and international organisations to respond. The west's sanctions not only blocked the Taliban from access to the national bank's assets, but also prevented humanitarian responders, especially local and national non-government organisations (NGOs), from accessing cash, banking, and financial services, thus threatening a tremendous disruption to the provision of basic services against the backdrop of one of the world's largest humanitarian crises. Furthermore, the

7 UNDP Afghanistan. (2021). *Economic instability and uncertainty in Afghanistan after August 15 a rapid appraisal*. https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2021-09/Economic%20Instability%20and%20Uncertainty%20in%20Afghanistan%209%20September%202021_0.pdf

8 The Editorial Board. (2022, January 15). Opinion | Let innocent Afghans have their money. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/14/opinion/afghanistan-bank-money.html>

9 UNAMA. (2021, September 10). *Millions of Afghans need urgent humanitarian assistance, UN humanitarian chief says*. UN Video. <https://videos.un.org/en/2021/09/10/millions-of-afghans-need-urgent-humanitarian-assistance-un-humanitarian-chief-says/>

10 UNDP Afghanistan (2021).

11 Institute of Medicine (U.S.), Clayton, E W, Krugman, R D, Simon, P, Institute of Medicine (U.S.), & National Research Council (U.S.) (Eds.). (2013). *Confronting commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking of minors in the United States*. National Academies Press; LeBaron, G., Kyritsis, P., Thibos, C. and Howard, N. (2019, 19 March) *Confronting root causes: Forced labour in global supply chains*. OpenDemocracy. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/beyond-trafficking-and-slavery/confronting-root-causes/>

12 Goldbaum, C & Faizi, F (2021, 31 July). As fears grip Afghanistan, hundreds of thousands flee. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/31/world/asia/afghanistan-migration-taliban.html>

13 Reitano, T & Bird, L R-B de L (2018). Understanding contemporary human smuggling as a vector in migration: A field guide for migration management and humanitarian practitioners (p. 38). Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime. <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/TGIATOC-Understanding-Contemporary-Human-Smuggling-1936-hi-res.pdf>

Taliban was also reported to have carried out attacks on civil society groups and international communities, raiding their offices and compounds, which increased the risks to their operations and further disrupted humanitarian support.¹⁴

The Taliban's new (or old) dynamics?

Concerning the human trafficking trends and dynamics under the Taliban's rule, it is worth noting that the Taliban-led government is not a new one.¹⁵ Shortly after gaining power and control of the country, the Taliban has started to implement or bring back many of the former Taliban government's ideologies, cultural, and governing practices, such as prohibiting Afghan women and girls from higher education and access to criminal justice systems.

Given the various reports of the Taliban's human trafficking practices over the past two decades, such as the use of *bacha bazi*, the abduction (and selling) of women and girls and children for (i) domestic and sexual servitude and forced marriage to boost Taliban fighters' morale and/or to attract new followers; (ii) funding operations and paying military-related costs; and (iii) child soldiers, it can therefore be expected that, under the Taliban's rule, current human rights violations and human trafficking practices will continue and often be amplified in the name of preserving traditional values and cultural norms. Some practices that had been, to some extent, prohibited during the previous western-backed government, such as using the forced marriage of women and girls as a means of debt relief and dispute settlement, are likely to return under Taliban's rule. Furthermore, the Taliban ideologies centre around patriarchal beliefs and practices could reintroduce the

normalisation of female exploitation committed by a family member (in most cases, the victim's father, brother, husband, and other male relatives¹⁶). Under the Taliban's rule, the institution of marriage will most likely be stricter, putting female victims of trafficking, rape, kidnapping and abduction at higher risk of both state criminalisation, cultural punishment, and family 'honour killings'.

There have also been reports of new dynamics and exploitation under Taliban rule. Opium poppy production and mineral deposits, well-known sources of revenue for the Taliban, significantly depend on the forced and/or exploitative labour of unskilled and semi-skilled workers in harsh and hazardous conditions.¹⁷ Mohammad Yaqoob (the eldest son of Mohammed Omar, the founder of the Taliban, and current member of the 12-person council set up to steer Afghanistan) was reported to regard the strategic use of the mining operations and drug production as a means to secure financial independence for the Taliban. While native Afghans will potentially return and be attracted to the employment opportunities arising from increased poppy production (for which demand is expected to rise given the fewer restrictions under the Taliban's governance), it is reported that ethnic minority groups in China, especially Uyghurs, will be forced to cross the Wakhan Corridor to work in Afghan-Chinese-owned mines, to meet the region's mining operation and production goals.¹⁸

Policy and diplomatic challenges

Over six months since the fall of Kabul, Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022, which has arguably pushed Afghanistan's humanitarian crises and challenging situations further into the background. The stark contrast of how the west

14 Vishak, S (2021, September 14). Taliban backtracking on civil and women's rights pledges, says Bachelet. *The Morning - Sri Lanka News*. <https://www.themorning.lk/taliban-backtracking-on-civil-and-womens-rights-pledges-says-bachelet/>

15 Select Committee on International Relations and Defence. (2021). *The UK and Afghanistan, HL Paper 208, 2nd Report of Session 2019–21*. <https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/360/international-relations-and-defence-committee/publications/>

16 United States Department of State. (2021). *2021 trafficking in persons report*. Office of the Under Secretary for Global Affairs. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-trafficking-in-persons-report/afghanistan/>

17 Launder, A (2021, October 6). The future of human trafficking in Afghanistan [Substack newsletter]. *The Fintel Brief*. <https://fintelbrief.substack.com/p/the-future-of-human-trafficking-in>

18 Launder, A (2021). the future of human trafficking in Afghanistan [Substack newsletter]. *The Fintel Brief*. <https://fintelbrief.substack.com/p/the-future-of-human-trafficking-in>

urgently responded to the needs of the Ukrainian refugees fleeing the war, compared to their Afghan counterparts, painted a painful picture of *selective compassion*, which reflects the way societies, including the west, prioritise and differentiate the suffering of different peoples.¹⁹ This also shows that, the main challenges arguably do not lie in the lack of infrastructure or logistical obstacles, but rather in the relevant actors' lack of political will.

Western actors, especially the US, and international organisations such as the United Nations (UN) and European Union (EU) reportedly continued to condemn and criticise Taliban rule on grounds of their use of unconstitutional means to take over the government, as well as their lack of inclusivity and respect for the rights of women and girls. It is, however, ironic that the 2021 Taliban's ousting of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan was relatively peaceful compared to the US-led invasion of the country in 2001. It has been argued that the country's current political instability and life-threatening humanitarian crises could be seen as the direct outcome of two decades of missteps by the US-led western 'intervention' in Afghanistan.

The collapse of Afghanistan is not the result of things that happened just in the last year or a couple of years. They're the result of 20 years of missteps in how the west has run its war in Afghanistan. (Emma Graham-Harrison, senior international affairs correspondent, *The Guardian*)²⁰

The Taliban's priorities are gaining international and diplomatic recognition of their regime's legitimacy, achieving economic and financial independence, and reinstating the Taliban's rules, ideologies, and cultural practices in all aspects of governance and life in the country. The Taliban has reportedly been guarding most of the western countries' embassies which were closed down after the fall of Kabul on August 15, in hope of achieving their diplomatic recognition.²¹ Other

issues, such as upholding the rights of women and girls, current and ongoing humanitarian crises, widespread human trafficking and human smuggling practices, are arguably not at the top of their agenda. On the contrary, there is a possibility that the Taliban would resort to tactically capitalising on these issues as a shield and/or leverage to put pressure on the west and international organisations in order to gain legitimacy and recognition for their regime, especially when they are up against the wall.

Meanwhile, millions of Afghans are now in limbo, facing extreme poverty and hunger, acute financial hardships and limited means of survival and outlook, as various actors and interest groups are tactically planning regardless of the Afghan people's opinions and life-threatening conditions. It is therefore imperative that the US and its staunch allies recognise their past missteps and adopt a more pragmatic approach, especially prioritising recovery plans and actions, and directing resources to help relieve the ongoing humanitarian crises in the country.

The current hesitation and political tensions between the de facto Taliban-led government and the west (US, EU) reportedly only delay and deter the urgent and much-needed humanitarian aid and support for the Afghan people. International agencies and actors should also be mindful that, if it is strongly isolated and against the wall, the Taliban might resort to more extreme measures such as leveraging human trafficking and humanitarian crises, further engaging with international, regional organised criminal networks and extremist groups. This might well result in not only the west losing its influence and leverage in the country and region, but more importantly, the heightened suffering of the Afghan people, increased vulnerability to trafficking, and exacerbated humanitarian crises in the country.

19 Dixon, R & Hussein, A (2022, March 13). 'Selective compassion shown to those fleeing Taliban and Ukraine'. *The Sydney Morning Herald*. <https://www.smh.com.au/world/europe/selective-compassion-shown-to-those-fleeing-taliban-and-ukraine-20220313-p5a46q.html>

20 Burke, J (2021, August 18). Taliban in power may find themselves fighting Islamist insurgents. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/aug/18/bidens-over-the-horizon-counter-terrorism-strategy-comes-with-new-risks>

21 Trofimov, Y (2021, September 13). As Taliban seek international acceptance, countries seek to engage—but stop short of recognition. *Wall Street Journal*. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/as-taliban-seek-international-acceptance-countries-seek-to-engage-but-stop-short-of-recognition-11631548841> BEHIND PAYWALL SO UNABLE TO DOUBLE CHECK THIS

Finally, by deprioritising the current dire economic and humanitarian crises in Afghanistan, western argument for upholding the rights of women and girls including to higher education, as well as its position on persistently pressuring the Taliban to become an inclusive governing authority, might be in vain if millions of women

and girls are currently dying of starvation. Navigating this is by no means an easy task. However, if the west is to uphold its human rights principles, placing human lives at their centre, then prioritising humanitarian support and aid for nearly half of Afghanistan's population should be the path to follow.

Key points

- Afghan women and children, particularly young boys and girls, account for the majority of human trafficking victims within and outside Afghanistan. The continuing humanitarian crises, coupled with widespread unemployment, intensified poverty, and limited economic opportunities to secure viable livelihoods or receive financial assistance have significantly heightened the susceptibility of Afghan women and children to trafficking. Proposed interventions should aim to provide women with accessible forms of (multipurpose) cash and in-kind assistance that can be used to meet urgent needs.
- Political instability, deteriorating economic conditions, catastrophic natural events, a global pandemic and the Taliban's recapture of Afghanistan have changed the dynamics of child protection in Afghanistan: in many areas girls can no longer go to school, and at the same time families encourage girls and boys to earn money by working in carpet making, domestic service, truck driving, and often to engage in illicit activities and the worst forms of child labour such as begging, poppy cultivation and harvesting, transnational drug smuggling, brick kilns, salt mining, etc.
- As the Taliban re-establishes its rule and control over the country, many basic government services, including legal and medical, have collapsed during the transition and remain underfunded.
- Humanitarian assistance is urgently needed to minimise food insecurity, improve access to clean water, and provide other forms of emergency aid. Principled humanitarian action should be the highest and most urgent priority.
- The west, when considering imposing sanctions on the Taliban regime, should exempt those which could potentially delay or limit humanitarian assistance to the most vulnerable populations.
- Engaged stakeholders, especially the west and international organisations (US, UN, EU), should pursue a pragmatic approach, which is centred on human rights and human lives, in their responses and negotiations order to prevent worsening the humanitarian crises, exacerbating vulnerability to human trafficking and further loss of life.
- Addressing the humanitarian crises in the country and supporting the Afghan people needs to include the situation of millions of Afghan migrants and refugees in the two largest host countries: Pakistan and Iran.
- Forced return and deportation of Afghan migrants and refugees should be strongly resisted, especially regarding the generation born outside Afghanistan.
- Civil society actors and humanitarian responders in the country need to remain alert to the risk of potential hostility and retaliation by the Taliban.

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