

AFGHANISTAN: SCENARIOS

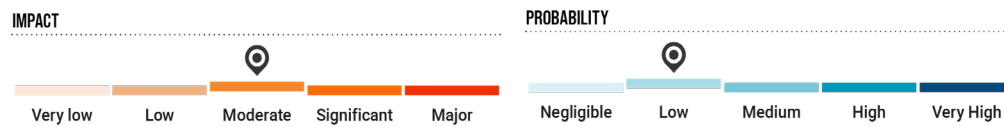


Possible developments in household livelihoods and purchasing power over the next 20 months

| APRIL 2023

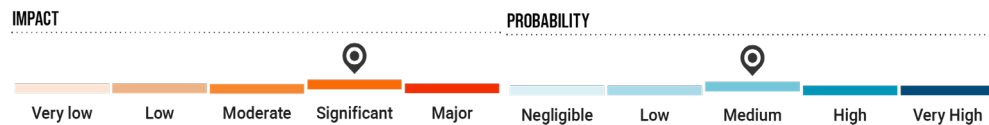


SCENARIO 1: ENABLING



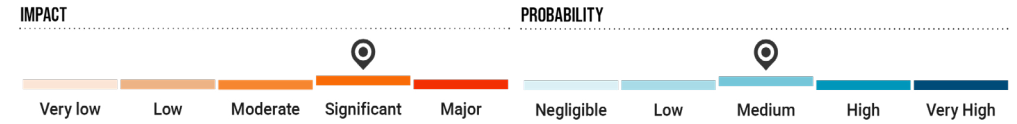
Relations between the international community and the Taliban become more productive, enabling longer-term assistance that improves livelihoods and the overall economy. Although no country formally recognises the Taliban's legitimacy to govern, payments from the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF) and access to the international banking system improve the economic outlook for many Afghans, although not all see tangible benefits. Some concessions to women's and girls' rights are made, but many underlying social, economic, and political issues remain unaddressed, perpetuating inequality and exclusion. Few have a say in policymaking, and dissent continues to be stifled. Humanitarian access improves, although programming focused on empowering women remains difficult. Household income and purchasing power increase slightly for many, while some become increasingly dependent on aid.

SCENARIO 2: ANTAGONISTIC



The Taliban and the international community continue to negotiate but with no substantive long-term agreements, and the economy further weakens. Internal tensions within the Taliban persist, while governance becomes increasingly restrictive. International trade continues at present levels, but humanitarian funding decreases, and no ARTF payments are made, reducing overall income and support to essential services. The influence of non-Muslim foreigners diminishes and humanitarian space steadily contracts, as programming is constantly interrupted, while responders adapt and negotiate. Household income continues to decrease for many Afghans, especially those without access to land, and while threats to physical security remain low, human rights abuses and Taliban interference in the daily lives of Afghans make life increasingly difficult, prompting an increase in outward migration.

SCENARIO 3: REORIENTED



Western engagement decreases to a minimum, while the Taliban remain strong, generating sufficient revenue and foreign currency to maintain slow economic growth. The increased exploitation of natural resources and some new international investment by countries less concerned with the Taliban's governance enable the regime to remain strong, prioritising security and morality without delivering basic services. This compensates for reduced humanitarian funding while enabling the Taliban to govern according to their values. The Taliban increasingly restrict the lives of the population, especially women, and non-Muslim humanitarian organisations.

Urban livelihoods remain scarce, and inflation increases slightly. Good harvests mitigate the loss of humanitarian assistance in rural areas, but a lack of income prompts many to migrate from urban areas to rural or abroad. Human rights abuses increase, and humanitarian aid diversion is widespread. Household purchasing power diminishes, and remittances become an increasingly important income source.

SCENARIO 4: INSECURE



Increasing insecurity and public discontent result in the fracturing of the Taliban and the increased influence of other armed groups. Commercial exports are disrupted, and the few remaining foreign companies pause investment activities. The economy deteriorates, and humanitarian access and funding decrease, driving increased displacement and needs. Ethnic tensions surface and drive local conflict.

Conflict disrupts harvests in some areas, but those with land fare better than those without as unemployment rises. Household purchasing power diminishes, driving poverty, while crime and human rights abuses increase. Increased conflict, uneven access to aid, and limited prospects increase refugee migration. Access to education decreases for both boys and girls.



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What scenarios are and aren't

The four scenarios consider four different yet plausible futures for Afghanistan over the coming 20 months. These scenarios do not describe the imagined futures in detail but consider key differences in the governance, economic, and security environments and the extent to which and how people's personal safety, livelihoods, and purchasing power might change. They are not forecasts; they describe situations that *could occur and are designed to highlight the possible impacts and humanitarian consequences associated with each scenario*.

Scenarios are possible evolutions of the current situation a summary of which is given on page 2.

Intended purpose and audience of the report

The primary purpose of the report is to support strategic planning, create awareness, and promote discussion among humanitarian policymakers, practitioners, and donors through an understanding of the possible ways in which humanitarian needs may end up being met or not – whether intentionally or unintentionally. See the [Methodology](#) section for more information on how these scenarios were developed.

It is suggested that users consider how each of the scenarios might influence their engagement in Afghanistan to identify preparatory actions that could reduce any disruptions to the delivery of humanitarian services resulting from each scenario.

INTRODUCTION

Problem statement

From 2002 until mid-2021, conflict and corruption beset Afghanistan as it tried to establish itself as a stable democratic republic. The country was highly dependent on international support for security, infrastructure and public service delivery, and financial stability. Regardless, it was able to make significant developmental steps: government institutions were strengthened, a competent civil service was established, schooling was available to most boys and girls, the rights of women improved, infant mortality decreased, and the economy grew.

Following the collapse of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in 2021, life in the country has changed dramatically. The vastly improved security has been widely welcomed, but the cessation of international bilateral assistance, suspension from the international banking system, and severe restrictions of individual freedoms – especially on women and girls – has pushed many households further into poverty. Household income has fallen, and public services, notably education and healthcare, became largely unavailable, inaccessible, or unaffordable. With most coping mechanisms exhausted, hunger became widespread, and those that can have left the country.

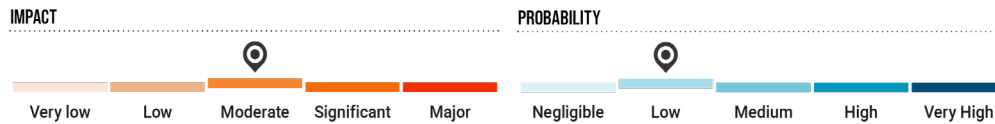
Despite widespread condemnation from the rest of the world, the Taliban remain defiant and continue to work towards their ideal of a pure Islamic state. To this end, they have largely maintained security, collected domestic revenue, and secured some international investment and trade deals. On the other hand, the resilience capacity of the population has been stretched to the limit, making them vulnerable to negative shocks, and their rights have been few.

The four scenarios presented suggest how the different ways in which the Taliban engage with the international community (and vice versa) and are able to manage the economy will affect the country, particularly Afghan citizens, over the coming 20 months.

SCENARIOS

1. Enabling

Relations between the international community and the Taliban become more productive, enabling longer-term assistance that improves the overall economy.



With security generally good throughout the country and widespread compliance with Taliban regulations, pressure from (predominantly urban) communities and traditional local leadership to provide better services, pay salaries, and restart girls' education increases. As the ban on cultivating drugs is widely enforced and 2023–2024 harvests fall below average, growing poverty in rural areas fuels discontent and adds to the pressure on authorities to improve the economy and increase livelihood opportunities.

While no country recognises the Taliban's legitimacy, engagement between the Taliban and international donors becomes more productive, and international institutions increase their engagement with the ITA. The Taliban make some concessions to women's and girls' rights, including the resumption of post-primary education for girls and the return of women to some workplaces, resulting in gradually improving international relations.

Payments from the ARTF boost the economy and contribute to increased financial income and stability. Mechanisms for facilitating private sector confidence gradually lead to the resumption of more business activity and consumer spending. An improving environment also encourages Afghan diaspora capital to return to the country, complementing aid and development assistance in further stimulating the economy. Increased government revenues and infrastructure investment provide new employment opportunities. That said, while the improvement of the economy and job creation is a positive development, it does not translate into tangible benefits for all citizens, particularly those who are vulnerable and marginalised given a lack of capacity, mismanagement, and rising levels of corruption.

The overall level of humanitarian assistance declines in 2023–2024, but talks on 'humanitarian plus' programming and development assistance resume. There is a slight improvement in governance, with people's welfare being prioritised alongside security and activities of the

Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice. Inflation remains stable, and the economy slowly strengthens, although it remains heavily dependent on aid.

Triggers/assumptions

- The resumption of education for girls' post-primary education, albeit with restrictions (e.g. strict segregation, possible subject restrictions), is announced.
- Domestic demands for the Taliban to provide education for boys and girls increase.
- Domestic demands for the Taliban to address economic, livelihood, and employment issues increase.
- The ITA leadership remains united, successfully managing internal disagreements.
- Isolated attacks by the IS-KP continue to have only localised impact.
- Lobbying for donors to increase engagement with the ITA increases.
- International engagement with the ITA becomes less confrontational based on mutual respect (possibly as a result of confidence-building measures).
- Humanitarian responders recalibrate some of the conditions they insist for the Taliban to meet.
- International correspondent banking is re-established.
- The ARTF makes its targeted disbursement of USD 3.5 billion in assets.
- Cross-border trade continues at similar or increased levels.
- The ITA continue to enforce the drug cultivation ban.
- Below-average harvests in 2023 and 2024.
- New workplace guidelines allow women to return to work for NGOs, with the international humanitarian community agreeing to their strict adherence.

Impact and humanitarian consequences

The impact of economic progress on poverty reduction and job creation is limited, and many underlying social, economic, and political issues that contribute to inequality and exclusion remain unaddressed. While the Taliban's tight control over the daily lives of the population remains, some opportunities for women in the private sector increase the level of female economic activity, leading to greater stability at the household and community levels. The adoption of a longer-term approach to addressing human and women's rights means that violations continue. As a result, the Taliban's strict interpretation of Islamic laws continues



to restrict freedom, especially for women and girls, who continue to be denied access to public spaces, face movement restrictions, and deal with obstructed access to justice, with many avoiding Taliban courts for fear of not being granted justice or being wrongfully and harshly punished. Incidents of domestic violence continue to go unreported and remain unaddressed.

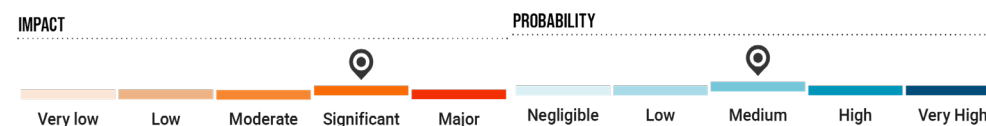
While there is talk of an intra-Afghan dialogue, no significant progress is made, as it is unclear who the parties would be. Discrimination against many groups remains, with government and public services restricted for many Afghans, especially women and minorities. The government remains non-inclusive, with minorities and urban dwellers having limited say in policymaking.

Public services remain underdelivered and underinvested in minority areas, and minorities have no say in policymaking. Dissent and freedom of speech continue to be stifled.

Humanitarian access improves, with less interferences by the Taliban authorities, although programming for women, especially those empowerment-focused, remains difficult. The provision of basic services improves across the country, and household food security begins to recover for many, while access to healthcare and education expands. That said, vulnerable groups, such as marginalised households, women-headed households, IDP households, and deportees, continue to face discrimination and social exclusion, remain in severe need, and struggle to access basic services. Continued hardship in rural areas following three years of drought and improving opportunities in urban areas result in continued but slow rural-to-urban migration. Despite the slight increase in employment opportunities, unemployment levels remain high. As the situation continues to slowly improve, the prospect of a peaceful future increases optimism among many, reducing the number of people seeking to leave the country and encouraging more returns. Regardless, economic and security challenges continue to fuel emigration.

2. Antagonistic

The Taliban and the international community continue to negotiate, but with no substantive, long-term agreements, the economy further weakens.



As the Taliban continue to prioritise security and the establishment of their interpretation of an Islamic state based on Afghan and Islamic values, relations with other states remain strained. Tensions within Taliban leadership continue to grow throughout 2023–2024, with the Kandahari leadership continuing to dominate governance while sidelining Kabul-based ministries. Governance also becomes increasingly restrictive, with the Kandahar-based leadership reducing local autonomy. Restrictions on the population increase, and the influence of non-Muslim foreigners, including the humanitarian community, further decreases.

Pressure from the Afghan population, especially local leaders, concerning rights to education and employment grows, as does dissatisfaction within the general population concerning the lack of employment and livelihood opportunities, underpayment of state salaries, poor or non-provision of public services, and insufficient humanitarian assistance.

Small-scale opportunistic trade and investment initiatives by regional entities continue but do not provide the boost that the economy needs. Frequent regulatory changes cause humanitarian responders to continually adapt and negotiate, resulting in constantly interrupted humanitarian access. The current confrontational rhetoric between the Taliban, Western international governments, and humanitarians continues to prevent a resolution to Afghanistan's isolation from the international banking system and access to financial engagement by international entities. Talks on providing development assistance do not resume.

While some humanitarian organisations cease operating, most food assistance programming continues, which, together with above-average harvests in 2023–2024, improves food security in much of the country. Increased agricultural exports provide increased income for the Taliban, compensating for income reductions from 'back taxes' – although disruptions at the border continue to interrupt trade. UN cash shipments continue at current levels but



are insufficient to prevent steady inflation resulting from external or global factors, such as disruptions to imports and continued conflict in Ukraine, reducing the purchasing power of Afghan households. While still officially banned, the cultivation and export of opium poppy and other drugs slightly increase. The overall level of conflict remains manageable. Despite this, increased social restrictions, inflation, the gradual reduction in humanitarian investment, and a lack of new international investment leave most households – especially those in urban areas – worse off. Urban-to-rural migration increases.

Triggers/assumptions

- The Taliban leadership continues to project a united front, successfully managing internal tensions.
- Isolated attacks by the IS-KP continue to have only localised impact.
- Lobbying for international organisations to boycott the Taliban increases.
- International diplomacy, while fraught, continues to be pragmatic.
- Additional sanctions are imposed on Taliban officials.
- The ARTF does not release assets.
- Cross-border trade continues at similar or increased levels.
- The ITA continue to enforce the drug cultivation ban, albeit less rigidly in some parts of the country.
- Average harvests in 2023 and 2024 vary geographically (good in parts, poor elsewhere).
- Guidelines enable women to work for the UN and NGOs in specific sectors and areas, albeit with great scrutiny and continued disagreements over compliance.
- The ITA increasingly allege that international organisations fail to adhere to their decrees and start to declare staff persona non grata (PNG).
- The ITA continue to announce restrictions on humanitarian activities and agree to case-by-case exemptions.
- The ITA bans some humanitarian organisations.
- Humanitarian responders remain vocal in championing human rights.

Impact and humanitarian consequences

Feeding the family continues to be the priority for most Afghans – especially in urban areas, where there are high levels of un/underemployment. Although those employed in import/export businesses continue to receive salaries, local business and trade decrease. Day-labouring opportunities decrease because of a lack of infrastructure investment, affecting households' expenditure. Job opportunities and salaries in the public sector further decrease. Payments to legacy Taliban fighters (those not on the official payroll of the Ministry of Interior (MoI)) decrease income for some families, driving some to join up with other non-state armed actors (e.g. IS-KP). Other local Taliban authorities try to divert aid towards their patronage networks and extended families. The extortion of humanitarian responders rises. While low-level corruption is more common, organised corruption is also on the rise. The humanitarian space is increasingly constrained as authorities, who become more exploitative, increasingly control humanitarian programming and try to divert aid or demand bribes.

Household income in rural areas improves slightly following good harvests, but most Afghans remain food-insecure, depending on remittances, humanitarian assistance, and borrowing during the lean season. The number of households adopting extreme coping mechanisms increases, especially in urban areas. Urban-to-rural economic migration increases as unemployment in the cities rises, increasing pressure on land and leading to more land conflicts.

No progress is made towards an intra-Afghan dialogue. Discrimination against minority groups continues, and they grapple with limited access to public sector employment. Public service provision and investment in minority areas remain poor, and minorities have no say in policymaking. Dissent and freedom of speech continue to be stifled, with increasing arrests of critics of the Taliban. This, combined with the lack of funding, further shrinks civil society space in urban areas, reducing the voice of Afghans within Afghanistan and their ability to effect change within the country.

Reduced funding combined with an increased interference in and diversion of aid significantly reduce humanitarian organisations' access to some of the most vulnerable groups, including women, people with disabilities, and people without any direct or indirect connection with the Taliban. Aid delivery becomes increasingly interrupted. Many people cooperate with local Taliban authorities to be able to access aid.

The government's preference for NGOs more aligned with Taliban values prevents holistic access to essential services, as it excludes services that local authorities consider unimportant, such as girls' education, protection, support services for gender-based violence, legal aid, and sexual and reproductive health services. NGOs still largely provide healthcare, but various restrictions, including on mobile health teams and transport costs,

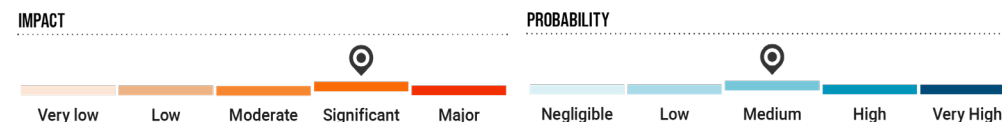
reduce people's access to healthcare and disproportionately affect those living in rural and remote areas, women, women-headed households, and people with disabilities. Difficult access to certain parts of the country leads to reduced access to vulnerable people in some locations, resulting in an inaccurate measure of humanitarian needs. Strained international relations further reduce access to decision makers in the Taliban government, making it challenging to engage in dialogue with the Taliban and find long-term solutions, leading to a deteriorating humanitarian crisis.

Although the Taliban continue to provide physical security, and conflict remains low, human rights abuses and Taliban interference in the daily lives of Afghans and humanitarian operations make life increasingly difficult in Afghanistan. Violence against Afghans employed at humanitarian organisations increases, especially in Helmand, Kandahar, and Uruzgan provinces. People find it difficult to keep up with arbitrary changes in policies regarding movement, education, the working environment, etc. This is compounded by local variations in the implementation of policies, causing uncertainty around which activities are considered violations. The Taliban impose increasingly harsh punishments, which, together with a weak economy and lack of livelihoods, affect the mental health of Afghan citizens, especially women, and lead to increased incidents of suicide and domestic violence. This prompts an increase in regular and irregular migration out of the country. People who had previously returned to Afghanistan in the past two years seek to migrate again.

The growing influence of *madrassas* on young Afghan men further restricts freedoms and threatens the physical and mental safety of women and men. The lack of freedom of speech becomes normalised, as the arrest of dissidents and physical and psychological violence deter people from speaking against the regime. Afghan society becomes increasingly conservative.

3. Reoriented

Western engagement decreases to a minimum, while the Taliban remain strong, generating sufficient revenue and foreign currency to maintain slow economic growth.



Throughout 2023–2024, the Taliban continue to resist what they perceive as immoral Western influence, further restricting the ability of international organisations to work effectively and efficiently. Although the UN continues to advocate human rights, the Taliban continue to violate international human rights norms and refuse to allow women to play an active role in society. Women are further confined to their homes, increasing their seclusion. The population grows more accustomed to Taliban edicts restricting their daily lives, which, combined with selective harsh public punishments, lead Afghans to increasingly comply with rules and/or become more adept at working around them. This reduces confrontations between the Ministry of the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice and the Afghan population. Western international engagement and humanitarian funding decrease, as Ukraine and other crises take priority. Afghan banks remain isolated from international financial institutions, and the ARTF ceases. UN cash transfers decrease slightly but continue, which, combined with investment in infrastructure projects by governments less supportive of international sanctions, result in a gradual devaluation of the local currency.

To maintain income, the Taliban prioritise the exploitation of natural resources. They also permit – despite publicly claiming to continue to prohibit – the resumption of the opium poppy and ephedrine cultivation, which, combined with good agricultural harvests in 2023–2024, mitigates the impact of reduced food assistance in rural areas and facilitates the export of agricultural products, including opium poppy.

As the Taliban prioritise security and morality, the provision of basic services continues to be poor and depends heavily on local administrative capacity and funding from national NGOs.

The Taliban prioritise Muslim NGOs (including local Afghan organisations) and private sector entities over Western INGOs and ensure their compliance to their strict regulations. This reduces the number of confrontations between humanitarian responders and the Taliban, although local authorities continue to interfere with aid delivery, and occasional breaches



are met with further restrictions. The decrease in humanitarian aid and international trade increases poverty levels across Afghanistan, mitigated slightly by good harvests and increased employment opportunities in new infrastructure projects. Significant urban-to-rural migration (as well as cross-border migration) occurs, as people seek to cope with the high cost of living and reduced employment opportunities in cities.

Conflict increases slightly, driven both by the IS-KP and internal tensions within the Taliban, with some local Taliban commanders switching loyalty to other non-state armed groups and/or start to act more autonomous from the centre (in Kandahar/Kabul). The IS-KP gains some territory in the north and east, but overall, the country remains stable.

Triggers/assumptions

- Girls' post-primary education does not resume.
- The Taliban maintains power despite internal disagreements, although some local commanders begin to act more autonomously.
- Isolated attacks by the IS-KP continue to have only localised impact.
- Lobbying for international organisations to boycott the Taliban increases.
- Additional sanctions are imposed on Taliban officials.
- International diplomacy becomes increasingly principled and less pragmatic.
- International entities adopt increasingly confrontational stances towards the Taliban government and vice versa.
- The ARTF does not release assets.
- Cross-border trade increases.
- Above average harvests in 2023 and 2024.
- The ITA increasingly allege that international organisations fail to adhere to their decrees and start to declare staff persona non grata (PNG).
- The ITA bans some humanitarian organisations.
- Humanitarian responders remain vocal in championing human rights.
- Women are further restricted in working for humanitarian organisations.
- The ITA imposes further restrictions on the UN and non-Muslim NGOs.
- Muslim NGOs step up operations across the country.
- Interference in aid delivery increases.

Impact and humanitarian consequences

As the Taliban become more self-sufficient and humanitarian aid declines, significant fractures emerge. Those loyal to the Taliban and living in Taliban heartlands continue to receive some aid, while others lose access, especially urban dwellers and those living in minority areas. This makes the Afghan population largely dependent on remittances and their own earning capacity. Household incomes in many rural areas improve thanks to good harvests, prompting some to migrate from urban areas for survival. Remittances become increasingly important for many families, fuelling out-migration of young men. Urban and some rural households adopt increasingly negative coping mechanisms. Although inflation remains reasonable, continuing economic hardship combined with a lack of prospects for the urban and educated, as well as a future in which individual freedoms remain severely restricted, lead to an increasing number of Afghans seeking to leave the country.

As the Taliban continue to resist international calls for greater respect for human rights, restrictions on the ability of international and national organisations to work increase. While there are few direct restrictions on women's businesses, an increasingly conservative culture decreases women's ability to actively participate in society, reducing employment opportunities and access to education. Access to primary education decreases for girls, happening only where communities demand it and local Taliban authorities permit it. Employment opportunities for women remain severely limited. Civil society organisations largely cease to operate, with the exception of those aligned with Taliban ideology. Domestic abuse increases, and women, the poor, and the marginalised lose access to justice. People find it difficult to keep up with arbitrary changes in policies regarding movement, education, the working environment, etc. This is compounded by local variations in the implementation of policies, causing uncertainty around which activities are considered violations.

As the Taliban rule is consolidated, challenges by non-state armed groups continue, especially by the IS-KP. Revenue from new bilateral investment and internal taxation is largely spent on providing security and continuing to pay legacy Taliban fighters. While some teachers continue to receive salaries at a reduced level, little investment is made in the provision of public services, and the Taliban rely on a diminished humanitarian community for health service provision. The Taliban directs significantly reduced humanitarian aid towards areas that support their rule and where the families of key authorities live. As a result, minorities and marginalised groups lose access to aid.

4. Insecure

Increasing insecurity and public discontent results in the fracturing of the Taliban and the increased influence of other armed groups. The economy deteriorates, and humanitarian access and funding decrease, while displacement and needs increase.



As the Taliban leadership continues to restrict freedoms and activities deemed un-Islamic or counter to their vision of Afghan culture, international engagement decreases further. IS-KP presence in the east and northeast strengthens, increasing the frequency and intensity of attacks on the Taliban government and soft religious minority targets. The TTP also increasingly uses Afghan soil to plan and execute attacks against the Pakistani establishment, who launches military operations within eastern Afghanistan.

Sporadic civil protests and unrest occur as a result of poverty and a lack of livelihoods and future prospects but are quickly quashed. Internal Taliban tensions grow and are not managed well. Increasing civil dissatisfaction with Taliban rule provides an opportunity for various provincial commanders to become increasingly autonomous.

While most observable conflict is limited to the east, parts of the north and major urban centres, such as Kabul and other major provincial capitals, see a rise in high-profile attacks, crime, and violence. Security levels vary significantly by province. Attacks on international targets and civilians increase, leading to an exodus of remaining foreign missions and international humanitarian staff. Some INGOs cease operations altogether. International flights stop. UN cash shipments stop for an extended period. Humanitarian access becomes more difficult, and instances of aid diversion increase, resulting in the reduced provision of aid focusing on food, health, and WASH services. Commercial exports are disrupted, and the few remaining foreign companies pause investment activities.

While there is an average agricultural output in 2023–2024, conflict reduces the harvest and associated income in some areas, while inflation reduces purchasing power for all. Opium poppy cultivation continues in some areas despite the ban, with both production and trade being controlled at the regional level. This, combined with a downturn in international trade (outside opium poppy), reduces Taliban state revenue and fuels inflation, although individual commanders benefit from the opium poppy trade. These issues are compounded by a

reduction in humanitarian activities and budget, which falls by at least 25% in 2023 and a further 10% in 2024. A decline in government revenue reduces the Taliban's ability to pay public sector salaries, and public service provision ceases nearly entirely. Dissatisfaction with the lack of service provision and Taliban governance rises. As the economy weakens, purchasing power declines as the rate of inflation increases. Un/underemployment rises, as does the adoption of negative coping mechanisms. Remittances become an increasingly important source of income for many households. The absence of hard currency to pay for imports leads to Pakistani rupees and Iranian rial replacing the depreciated Afghan afghani as the primary currency for domestic and cross-border transactions, especially in the drug trade.

Triggers/assumptions

- Incidents of harsh Taliban repression of the civilian population increase.
- Internal divisions result in the slow fracturing of the ITA, increasing the independence of regional commanders and fighters and prompting them to join other non-state armed groups.
- Attacks by the IS-KP, al-Qaeda, and other groups increase and spread.
- The Pakistani military initiates operations inside Afghanistan
- Lobbying for international organisations to boycott the Taliban increases.
- International entities adopt increasingly confrontational stances towards the Taliban government and vice versa.
- Cross-border trade decreases and becomes more informal.
- The ITA continue to enforce the drug cultivation ban.
- Average harvests in 2023 and 2024 vary geographically (good in parts, poor elsewhere).
- The rate of inflation increases.
- Humanitarian responders remain vocal in championing human rights.
- Women are further restricted in working for humanitarian organisations.
- The ITA imposes further restrictions on the UN and non-Muslim NGOs.
- Further restrictions are imposed on women from working for NGOs and UN agencies and are extended to include diplomatic missions.



Impact and humanitarian consequences

Rising insecurity results in a fall in international trade (and, consequently, revenue collection), a reduction in harvest, increased restrictions on people's freedom, and reduced humanitarian assistance. The severe downturn in economic activity fuels unemployment and a cut in public sector salary payments. Income decreases for many households, while purchasing power decreases for all. Food needs rise across the country. Households resort to increasingly severe negative coping mechanisms as they deplete any other means that served as a safety net. Withdrawing cash from banks becomes more difficult. Remittances play an increasingly important role, as other forms of income decline.

Outward migration increases substantially, primarily driven by economic hardship, while conflict also drives increased internal displacement. Those moving are exposed to risks of exploitation, extortion, and trafficking, as many lack sufficient funds to pay for the journey, and most travel via unofficial means. Young men are drawn to join the conflict.

While some households receive some life-saving humanitarian support, insecurity prevents access for many – especially those in remote areas, who become increasingly food-insecure and vulnerable. The Taliban also increasingly interfere with aid delivery, diverting aid to heartland areas and where they are supported. As humanitarian presence and reach decrease, human rights are compromised for many as people prioritise security. Some households lose property and assets from conflict and increased crime. Petty crime and more systematic organised crime increase despite the imposition of increasingly harsh punishments. Ethnic tensions surface and drive local conflict, resulting in minorities within any community area facing increased threats to their security.

The provision of public services, specifically healthcare, solid waste removal, the provision of identity documents, and access to justice, decreases significantly. As insecurity rises and poverty spreads, crime and human rights abuses increase. Minorities within any area need but do not receive protection, as they are targeted in surfacing ethnic tensions, fuelling local conflicts. Access to education for both boys and girls decreases.

COMPOUNDING FACTORS

The above scenarios consider possible operational environments resulting from differing governance – and, consequently, economic and security – approaches. Irrespective of which scenario(s) the actual future resembles, several other factors have the potential to significantly affect household income. These include:

Livestock disease epidemic

Bird flu broke out in Afghanistan in 2018 (*Reuters 23/01/2018*). Poultry farmers in the eastern regions have lost millions as a result of the outbreak. The Afghan authorities, with the assistance of international organisations, have taken measures to contain the outbreak and prevent the spread of the virus, such as culling infected birds and establishing quarantine zones (*TOLO News 01/02/2018*).

Drought

Afghanistan has been facing severe drought in the past two years (*OCHA accessed 11/04/2023*). If this continues, it will lead to reduced crop yields, livestock losses, and water scarcity, resulting in increased food insecurity and malnutrition.

Flash floods

Flash floods are relatively common in Afghanistan during the summer months and has a significant impact on people and infrastructure. Flash floods can lead to the loss of life, damage or destroy homes, and destroy crops, livestock, and other assets, leading to the loss of household income and increased poverty, particularly in rural areas. Flash floods affected around 16,000 Afghans in August 2022 (*UNICEF 17/09/2022*).

European conflict

While the Russian invasion of Ukraine has diverted Western attention and will likely reduce the humanitarian funding available for Afghanistan in 2023–2024, there remains a risk of war between Russian and Europe, which would significantly reduce humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan.



ANNEX A: CURRENT SITUATION

Afghanistan is experiencing a period of security stability, with a significant reduction in violent conflict and concerted effort by the Interim Taliban Authority (ITA) to encourage Afghans to stay or return home and attract foreign investment back to the country. That said, since the imposition of sanctions and withdrawal of international development assistance, human security has decreased, and life for most Afghans has become more difficult. Feeding their family has become the priority for most. Households rely on a variety of means to survive, including a mix of income generation, remittances, debt, and humanitarian assistance. The most common sources of household income in Afghanistan include agriculture and farming, remittances, daily labour, opium poppy cultivation, small businesses, and employment in the government and private and humanitarian sectors. That said, many small businesses have closed or are struggling, and government and NGO employment has declined since the Taliban took power in August 2021, especially for women. In April 2022, just before the annual harvest, the ITA also banned the cultivation of opium poppy and other narcotics. These measures have forced Afghans to look for alternative forms of employment to make a living and/or engage in negative coping mechanisms for survival (e.g. selling assets, taking on loans, child labour, begging). Afghanistan has also been dependent on international aid for the last 20 years; the country is among the top three largest recipients of bilateral and multilateral foreign assistance and received USD 4.46 billion in 2021 (WB accessed 11/04/2023). The ITA takeover has resulted in the suspension of development assistance and the loss of 75% of the budget for public services (OCHA 09/03/2023).

International relations

No country has formally acknowledged the ITA, but while most of the embassies in the country initially closed, several have re-established an official presence. China, Iran, Japan, Pakistan, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkmenistan, the United Arab Emirates, and Uzbekistan all have their diplomatic missions open in Afghanistan. Germany and the EU also have a diplomatic presence. Collaboration, focused almost entirely on business, between the Taliban and neighbouring countries is developing. There have been discussions with Iran about creating a joint free economic zone spanning the border, which would lead to job creation for the populations of both countries and enhance exports and imports (TWI 03/03/2023). On 5 January 2023, China and Afghanistan announced an oil extraction deal that will see an investment of USD 150 million in the first year in Afghanistan and USD 540 million over the next three years (Al Jazeera 27/02/2023). Turkish investment in Afghanistan has also continued since the Taliban took power. For example, the second phase of the Kajaki hydroelectric dam, largely funded by a Turkish company, was completed in 2022. The first half of 2022 also saw a 23% rise in the overall trade volume between Turkey and Afghanistan (VOA 12/08/2022). The former has also continued providing humanitarian aid to the latter (Pajhwok 15/01/2023).

On the other hand, the Taliban's stance on girls' education and women's employment has resulted in Western countries adopting an isolationist policy towards the Taliban government. There are concerns that this isolation will lead to more extreme decrees by the Taliban, leading the UNSC to call on the UNSG to establish an independent panel to assess the situation in Afghanistan and make proposals for a "coherent approach" (UN 20/12/2022; AP 16/03/2023).

Governance

The Taliban is an authoritarian regime with no pretence of democracy. Headed by the Amir in Kandahar and with a sizable (but far from open) group of decision makers, the group has to grapple with different ideologies among its factions and conflicts between the 'older' and 'younger' generations. Despite these challenges, it is widely seen as maintaining a cohesive and united front (Lawfare 24/10/2022; EUSA 24/01/2023). Many decrees, especially those banning girls' higher and university education, have emanated directly from the Amir and contradicted the policies of the Kabul ministries. The ITA's hold on power could be severely challenged if certain factions within the group split, either through a coup or through dissatisfaction with the deteriorating economy and a sharp drop in their incomes (Brookings 03/02/2023). Resisting calls to make the government more inclusive arguably serve to prevent the further aggravation of these tensions (Lawfare 24/10/2022). While decisions are made centrally – either in Kabul or Kandahar – there are differences in interpretation between the Taliban in central leadership positions and officials at the provincial and district levels, resulting in significant differences in governance at the local level.

The Taliban have succeeded in collecting, consolidating, and centralising customs revenue while sharply curbing corruption in customs and getting rid of the bulk of the numerous road checkpoints that had generated hundreds of millions of dollars in bribes under the previous Government (WB 25/07/2022). While Afghanistan's ranking on the Corruption Perception Index has improved, there is a lack of evidence to verify any systemic reduction in corruption (VOA 31/01/2023). The ITA's issuance of a new decree against nepotism, coupled with an order to end the employment of relatives of officials in the administration, suggests an acknowledgement of the existence of nepotism within the administration (RFE/RL 20/03/2023).

Human rights

Respect for human rights in Afghanistan is deteriorating. The Taliban security forces continue to enact arbitrary arrests, torture, and execution against former security officers and alleged members and supporters of the Islamic State – Khorasan Province (IS-KP) (HRW accessed 01/04/2023). The ITA has also been imposing policies that violate a wide range of fundamental human rights, including freedom of movement and access to education. For example, the Taliban have subjected women's rights advocates, scholars, and activists to illegal detention in the past few months (AI 05/03/2023).

The Taliban's rule in Afghanistan restricts women's rights and access to justice. The legal system has been replaced by a fundamentalist interpretation of Shari'a law, excluding women from education, jobs, and public spaces and restricting their rights. The situation has created multiple protection concerns, including those related to redress for domestic violence (UN 08/03/2023).

Security

There is a general sense of security in the country under the ITA, but sporadic IS-KP activities have created some concerns for government workers and foreign citizens, including aid workers and civilians. The recent attacks on the embassies of the Russian Federation and Pakistan, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and a hotel hosting Chinese nationals have resulted in civilian casualties and are believed to have been perpetrated by the IS-KP (UNAMA 20/12/2022).

Tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan persist over the Taliban's continued support of the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and their acquiescence to the TTP using Afghanistan as a safe haven from which to launch attacks inside Pakistan. This has led to an occasional exchange of fire and closures of the Torkham border crossing between Pakistan and Afghanistan, although Pakistan appears to be seeking a diplomatic solution to the issue (USIP 14/02/2023; UNAMA 20/12/2022; REF/RL 20/02/2023).

There have also been several incidents of businessmen being kidnapped in different parts of the country, and petty crime is on the rise but underreported (TOLo News 04/01/2023; Pajhwok 05/02/2023).

Economy and purchasing power

A double-digit economic growth boosted living standards in Afghanistan until the mid-2010s. That said, the economy stagnated years before the Taliban seized power in 2021 as a result of a decline in financial support from the international community, severe drought, the COVID-19 pandemic, and a decreasing international military presence (FT 22/08/2021; USIP 08/08/2022). The amount of aid the country was receiving decreased from approximately 100% of its gross domestic product in 2009 to 42.9% in 2020. As a result, the services sector and employment opportunities became limited (FT 22/08/2021). Immediately after the Taliban took over Kabul, the economy shrunk by an additional 20–30%. It has since stabilised but at a much lower equilibrium (USIP 08/08/2022).

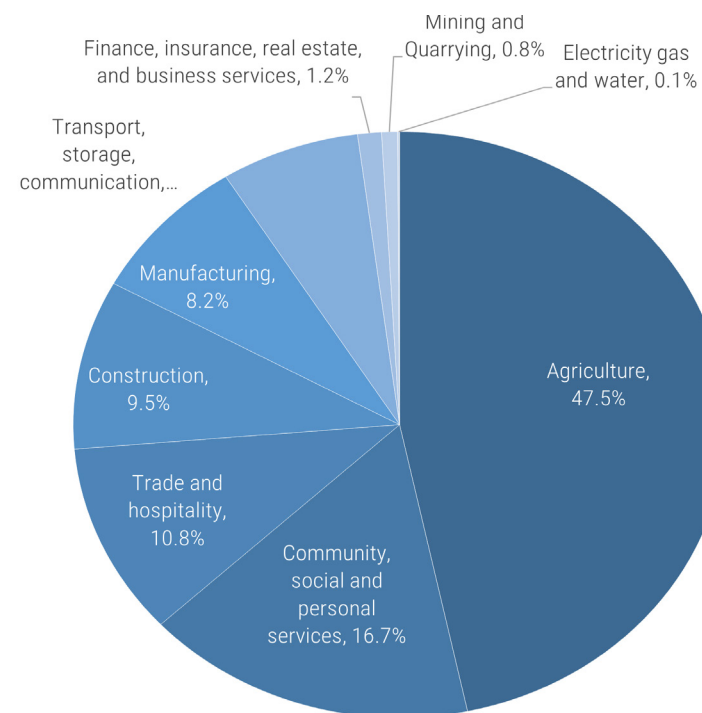
Although the exchange rate has bounced back, the domestic economy is still experiencing high inflation given economic sanctions on Afghanistan and the global rise in food and energy prices resulting from the conflict in Ukraine (ACAPS 05/01/2023). This has reduced the purchasing power of Afghans, making it harder for them to afford necessities, such as food and healthcare (MSF 06/02/2023).

While taxation is generally much cleaner than under the Republic, the Taliban Authorities, in addition to maintaining flat tax rates, have reactivated fines for late tax payments and added or increased new tariffs for small business licences. The ability to avoid or negotiate tax has also reduced. This, combined with rising costs and loss of income, has further reduced the disposable income of citizens, making it even more challenging to make ends meet (AAN 28/09/2022).

Overall, poverty levels have increased and many Afghans are struggling to meet their basic needs.

Income sources

While most people in the rural regions are primarily dependent on agriculture and livestock as an income source, people in urban areas depend on employment (government, private sector, or NGOs), small businesses, or daily labouring. Most households in urban areas reported a decrease in income in 2022 compared to previous years (AERU 15/12/2022). As rural and urban households are often linked, job losses or income reduction in one also affect the other.



Employment by sector 2019-2020

Source: NSIA 16/11/2021



Of the total workforce in 2020, 83% were men, and 27% were women. Men were more likely to be employed in the formal sector, while women tended to work in informal sectors, such as handicrafts, embroidery, and home-based small businesses. Some women in urban areas were involved in government and NGO jobs.

Over the past decade, there has been no significant shift in employment from one sector to another. Despite advancements in other industries, agriculture has remained the dominant employer. The electricity, gas, and water sectors currently employ the least amount of people. On the other hand, although the mining sector currently employs a relatively small percentage of the population, the ITA is actively exploiting it and seeking foreign investment to expand extraction capacity.

Although some households in Afghanistan still have members who work for the government and/or have a small business, income has heavily dwindled from these sources. A majority of women lost their jobs in early 2022 because of restrictions imposed by the ITA (AREU 15/12/2022). Women holding government jobs have not been dismissed from their positions but have been prohibited to enter their workplaces and are receiving a significantly reduced salary (Al Jazeera 11/08/2022). The ITA has also been struggling to pay full salaries to government officials. Most small businesses have closed, as people are limiting their spending to only the necessities (Islamic Relief 12/08/2022).

NGO/UN employment

As at January 2023, around 55,000 Afghans were working in NGOs, out of whom approximately 30% or 16,500 were women (UN News 30/01/2023). As at April 2023, around 3,300 were working with the UN, out of whom 400 were women (Le Monde 05/04/2023). The recent Taliban ban on Afghan women from working in the UN and NGOs will further decrease the number of those working in the sector, although most are still receiving their income while working from home. This will have a disproportionate effect on the income of urban women, many of whom are looking to find alternative employment (e.g. cleaning, sewing).

Daily-wage labour

Households also rely on daily wage labour, including work in factories, construction, and other industries. That said, average labour wage and work opportunities decreased below average in 2022 (EUAA 04/08/2022). This could be a result of the Taliban takeover closing the construction sites where labourers were working. On the other hand, there has been an increase in child labour in coal mines (NPR 31/12/2022).

Agriculture

In 2022, an assessment showed that more than half of the population in Afghanistan depended on agriculture as their primary source of income (STC 19/04/2022). This can involve growing crops, such as wheat, corn, and rice, or raising livestock, such as sheep, goats, and

cattle. That said, the past two years have been difficult in terms of agriculture, mainly because of drought. In 2021, prolonged drought across the country, felt hardest in the southern, northern, and western regions, affected 25 of the 34 provinces in Afghanistan, reducing agricultural yields and affecting the availability of and access to safe drinking water (OCHA accessed 12/04/2023; TOLO News 15/04/2022). The drought continued well into 2022 and was followed by an extremely severe heatwave, which caused multiple wildfires in Afghanistan's eastern regions. Subsequently, there were unexpected heavy summer rains in many parts of the country, leading to flash floods that inundated villages and caused the destruction of homes, roads, and farmland (UNHCR 15/08/2022). This resulted in a significant reduction in crop yields, especially for wheat, which is the country's main staple (CDP accessed 20/03/2023).

Opium poppy cultivation and narcotics trade

In April 2022, the ITA banned the cultivation of opium poppy and other narcotics. This sent the market price soaring, and, although the 2022 harvest was down by 10% (to 6,200 tons) because of drought, income from opium poppy sales tripled, and opium and heroin trafficking continued (UN 01/11/2022). Opium production is concentrated in the southwest of the country, where cultivation seems to continue uninterrupted despite the ban (RFE/RL 18/10/2022). In November 2021, the ITA also banned the harvesting of ephedra, which is used in the production of crystal methamphetamine and is of regional importance (particularly in the central highlands of western Afghanistan); the ban on harvesting ephedra had similar price effects as in the case of opium (ALCIS 13/01/2022).

Remittances

Globally, there are approximately 5.9 million Afghans residing outside Afghanistan, and the money they send back home in the form of remittances is crucial for their families and the country's financial system (Migration Data Portal 15/08/2022). In 2020, Afghanistan received over USD 788 million in remittances. Remittances during 2021 – expected to be around USD 600 million or 1.5% of GDP – are assumed to have fallen to USD 300 million, as the severance of international relations and the exclusion of the Afghan central bank from the international banking system after the Taliban takeover left informal channels the only means for migrants to send financial assistance to their families in the country (WB/KNOMAD 05/2022). Remittances are thought to have increased slightly to USD 350 million in 2022 (Migration Data Portal accessed 20/02/2022).

Movement to and from neighbouring countries

Afghans are trying to migrate to neighbouring countries to escape the worsening economic crisis, unemployment, and increasing poverty (TNH 17/05/2022). This mixed-migration includes both those seeking asylum and irregular migrants in search of work opportunities. The latter in particular created some circular movements. For example, in 2022, around 564,000 Afghans moved to Iran, while about 850,000 returned from Iran to Afghanistan (IOM 15/01/2023), possibly because the country has stepped up its deportation of irregular migrants

from Afghanistan (Salaam Times 12/07/2022). A similar back and forth movement could be observed between Afghanistan and Pakistan, with around 3,478,000 people moving to Pakistan and about 3,200,000 returning home (IOM 15/01/2023). This suggests that migration out of Afghanistan has become increasingly difficult, as people face closed borders and deportations (TNH 10/08/2022). The ITA has also been encouraging Afghan refugees to return home although in 2022, only 6,039 Afghans were recorded returning voluntarily from Pakistan and 379 from Iran (UNHCR 31/12/2022; UNHCR 04/04/2023).

Climate: Afghanistan has suffered two successive years of drought, which may linger into 2023. The effects include a significant reduction of water availability for irrigation, drinking, and domestic use. In 2023, the country also faced one of the coldest winters in decades, with temperatures dropping as low as -34°C (Al Jazeera 26/01/2023). Winter precipitation was mixed: higher regions saw below-average snowfall, while other areas benefited from above-average snowfall. While conditions for spring planting have mostly been good, concerns persist that drought-like conditions will occur later on in the year, compounding the effects of recent years of drought (FEWS NET 24/02/2023; OCHA 12/03/2023). Flash flooding annually affects many provinces between May–August, causing deaths, livestock losses, and crop damage (FloodList accessed 11/04/2023).

Afghanistan is also prone to earthquakes, with three striking respectively striking Badghis, Kunar, and Paktika provinces in 2022 and one occurring in March 2023 in Laghman (WorldData accessed 11/04/2023).

METHODOLOGY

ACAPS uses the chain of plausibility approach to scenario-building, as outlined in our [guidance note](#). While ACAPS staff normally use and advocate face-to-face workshops with context experts to proceed through a structured process of scenario-building, these scenarios were, by necessity, developed through remote working sessions, discussions, and document exchanges. The sessions involved:

- agreeing on the research question and current situation and mapping a wide array of variables that affect displacement and humanitarian access
- creating miniscenarios from different combinations of assumptions on how the main variables might change over 2023–2024
- reviewing and further developing the four most interesting scenarios.

Key terms used throughout the scenario-building process and the report are:

- **Variable:** a development or event likely to cause a change in a situation.

- **Assumption:** the direction that a variable can take (i.e. increase, decrease).
- **Scenario:** a verbal picture of a possible future state based on a number of assumptions (which may be more or less probable) as to how certain key variables will change. Scenarios describe both the future state and the impact and consequences on people and society.
- **Triggers:** events that, should they occur, may contribute to a scenario materialising.
- **Compounding factor:** a development that can occur in parallel with any of the above scenarios and which have the potential to significantly change the nature of humanitarian response.

It should be noted that a combination, but not necessarily all, of the triggers are required to reach any given scenario.

The estimated caseload for each scenario is an estimate of the additional caseload that could result should that scenario unfold. They are designed to give an order of magnitude only and are based on current displacement and refugee return trends.

The estimated probability is subjective and based on the views of individual participants. It is most usefully used as a guide in comparing the relative probabilities of the scenarios.

Limitations

Scenarios can seem to oversimplify an issue, as the analysis balances details against broader assumptions. Scenario-building is not an end in itself; it is a process for generating new ideas that should, in turn, lead to changes in project design or decision-making. These scenarios focus primarily on how changes in governance, international engagement, humanitarian aid, and rainfall will ultimately affect household income and the wellbeing of Afghans.

Thank you

These scenarios were developed in March 2023 with input from 19 other humanitarian or academic organisations/independent experts, who contributed via participation in online workshops, bilateral meetings, and/or reviews. ACAPS would like to thank all the organisations that provided input to these scenarios.



ANNEX B: SCENARIO TRIGGERS

Scenario 1 = enabling

Scenario 2 = antagonistic

Scenario 3 = reoriented

Scenario 4 = insecure

SCENARIOS	1	2	3	4
Governance and security				
The resumption of education for girls' post-primary education, albeit with restrictions (e.g. strict segregation, possible subject restrictions), is announced.	X			
Girls' post-primary education does not resume.			X	
Domestic demands for the Taliban to provide education for boys and girls increase.	X			
Domestic demands for the Taliban to address economic, livelihood, and employment issues increase.	X			
Incidents of harsh Taliban repression of the civilian population increase.				X
The ITA leadership remains united, successfully managing internal disagreements.	X			
The Taliban leadership continues to project a united front, successfully managing internal tensions.		X		
The Taliban maintains power despite internal disagreements, although some local commanders begin to act more autonomously.			X	
Isolated attacks by the IS-KP continue to have only localised impact.	X	X	X	
Internal divisions result in the slow fracturing of the ITA, increasing the independence of regional commanders and fighters and prompting them to join other non-state armed groups.				X
Attacks by the IS-KP, al-Qaeda, and other groups increase and spread.				X
The Pakistani military initiates operations inside Afghanistan				X

SCENARIOS	1	2	3	4
International relations				
Lobbying for donors to increase engagement with the ITA increases.	X			
Lobbying for international organisations to boycott the Taliban increases.		X	X	X
International engagement with the ITA becomes less confrontational based on mutual respect (possibly as a result of confidence-building measures).	X			
Humanitarian responders recalibrate some of the conditions they insist for the Taliban to meet.	X			
International diplomacy, while fraught, continues to be pragmatic.		X		
Additional sanctions are imposed on Taliban officials.		X	X	
International diplomacy becomes increasingly principled and less pragmatic.			X	
International entities adopt increasingly confrontational stances towards the Taliban government and vice versa.			X	X



SCENARIOS	1	2	3	4
Economic				
International correspondent banking is re-established.	X			
The ARTF makes its targeted disbursement of USD 3.5 billion in assets.	X			
The ARTF does not release assets.		X	X	
Cross-border trade continues at similar or increased levels.	X	X		
Cross-border trade increases.			X	
Cross-border trade decreases and becomes more informal.				X
The ITA continue to enforce the drug cultivation ban.	X			X
The ITA continue to enforce the drug cultivation ban, albeit less rigidly in some parts of the country.		X		
Below-average harvests in 2023 and 2024.	X			
Above average harvests in 2023 and 2024.			X	
Average harvests in 2023 and 2024 vary geographically (good in parts, poor elsewhere).		X		X
The rate of inflation increases.				X

SCENARIOS	1	2	3	4
Humanitarian operating environment				
New workplace guidelines allow women to return to work for NGOs, with the international humanitarian community agreeing to their strict adherence.	X			
Guidelines enable women to work for the UN and NGOs in specific sectors and areas, albeit with great scrutiny and continued disagreements over compliance.		X		
The ITA increasingly allege that international organisations fail to adhere to their decrees and start to declare staff persona non grata (PNG).		X	X	
The ITA continue to announce restrictions on humanitarian activities and agree to case-by-case exemptions.		X		
The ITA bans some humanitarian organisations.		X	X	
Humanitarian responders remain vocal in championing human rights.		X	X	X
Women are further restricted in working for humanitarian organisations.			X	X
The ITA imposes further restrictions on the UN and non-Muslim NGOs.			X	X
Muslim NGOs step up operations across the country.			X	
Interference in aid delivery increases.			X	
Further restrictions are imposed on women from working for NGOs and UN agencies and are extended to include diplomatic missions.				X