

# AFGHANISTAN

## Key risk areas to watch: January – June 2024 and beyond



Thematic report  
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### INTRODUCTION

In 2024, people living in Afghanistan are facing numerous challenges. While physical security for many citizens is better than it has been for decades, household income is lower, debt levels higher, and individual freedom more restricted. 2023 has been another difficult year, with a third consecutive year of drought, the devastation of the major city of Herat by a series of earthquakes, and the forced return of large numbers of people from Pakistan. Compounding these challenges is the strengthening of the Afghani, which has reduced the value of foreign income and, by extension, government spending while the cost of living remains high. Women and girls also face severe restrictions on their rights and freedoms. They continue to fight for basic human rights amid an environment that often subjects them to discrimination, violence, and marginalisation. Most Afghans are expected to continue struggling to meet their basic needs in 2024, becoming increasingly vulnerable to shocks as humanitarian assistance fails to meet the scale of need.

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#### About this report

**Aim:** this report considers seven issues expected to affect the living conditions in Afghanistan from January–June 2024. While they may not all be immediate risks likely to materialise within the year and while not all will have the same scale or type of impact, they are all issues of which humanitarian decision makers should be aware to anticipate needs and ensure context-sensitive programming.

**Methodology:** the seven factors presented in this report and their associated risks were identified during a workshop with experts from 16 humanitarian and research organisations in November 2023 and supplemented by information from individual interviews. This report considers these issues, which could drive negative change in Afghanistan, and analyses their probability, potential impact, and associated risks. While the time frame considered for this report is January–June 2024, some issues, such as coercive control and water scarcity, pose much longer-term risks. Nevertheless, mitigation strategies need to be implemented soon.

**Limitations:** assessing risks in Afghanistan is fraught with significant challenges and limitations given the complex and dynamic nature of its socio-political landscape. This report presents an understanding of the risks based on expert opinion and available information as at December 2023. From the range of risks identified, ACAPS selected the seven most likely to affect the lives of Afghan households from January–June 2024. That said, the future is inherently complex and uncertain, and in volatile contexts such as Afghanistan, risks can change rapidly. At the same time, this report does not delve into the complexities of each issue but seeks to highlight the essential elements and indicate the level of impact each may have on Afghan society.

## KEY FINDINGS

- **Opium poppy (and other narcotics):** continuing or strengthening the ban on narcotics production without profitable and sustainable alternatives will reduce income for many rural households, harm much of the rural economy, and potentially lead to local insecurity and even political tensions within the Interim Taliban Authority (ITA).
- **Economic pressures** are probably the most concerning issue facing Afghans at the start of 2024. While reduced employment, overtaxation, and the inability to pay salaries – especially in the security sector – all risk destabilising parts of the country and increasing poverty, a continued ban on opium production and a decline in humanitarian aid present the most serious risks to the economy.
- **Population movements**, the most pressing of which is the forced return of Afghans from Pakistan since 15 September 2023, are not risks in themselves. They can, however, result in increased economic vulnerability, as those who move often do so with no safety net and end up living in poor conditions, especially when livelihood opportunities are scarce. Specific attention should be given to the pressures facing cities with the increased forced return of Afghans from neighbouring countries (especially Iran and Pakistan), especially in large numbers over a short period.
- **Climate hazards:** climate change has been intensifying drought and extreme weather events, which have long been drivers of need and conflict in Afghanistan, over the past decades. Competition for scarce water is a source of increasing tension both internally and with Iran, Pakistan, and other neighbouring countries. Heavy winter snowfall and flash flooding in the summer pose immediate risks, being more likely in 2024 given the influence of El Niño.
- **Tensions and armed conflict** can be expected in 2024 as armed groups continue to try and destabilise the country. Tensions arising from land disputes and reclamation may also lead to small-scale, localised armed conflict, especially as people are forced to return from Pakistan. The overall conflict level is unlikely to significantly change.
- **Coercive control:** since 2021, the ITA has been increasingly restricting the daily lives of Afghans. Women and girls have borne the brunt and seen access to education, employment, and freedom of movement dramatically reduce. At the same time, the ITA has curtailed freedom of expression and to protest. Further restrictions would worsen this already dire situation, aggravating poverty and suffering and driving emigration while normalising oppression.
- **Humanitarian response capacity**, both international and national, is decreasing given an increasingly strict regulatory environment and competing priorities for international funding. The response capacity to sudden-onset crises requires strengthening but is likely to decline unless intentional efforts focus on the capacity to build appropriate national structures and international partnerships.

All seven issues/factors, individually and combined, are expected to continue exerting negative pressure on most Afghan households, driving poverty and fuelling irregular and dangerous migration out of the country. Almost all these factors amplify the vulnerabilities of women and girls by restricting their access to healthcare, education, and economic opportunities and increasing their susceptibility to exploitation and gender-based violence. Of immediate concern for 2024 is the risk of further ITA restrictions on the population and aid responders. The specific nature of new restrictions is difficult to foresee, but they would likely affect individual freedoms, income generation, and humanitarian service delivery.

## THE OPIUM POPPY AND OTHER NARCOTICS INDUSTRY

Afghanistan has long been the main opium-producing country, but production has drastically reduced since its national ban in 2022. According to UNODC, the estimated total value of opiates (opium, heroin, morphine) in 2021 was 9–14% of the national GDP (UNODC 01/03/2022). Following the ITA ban on the cultivation, trade, and use of narcotics in April 2022, cultivation is estimated to have declined by up to 95% in 2023 (UNODC 05/11/2023; Al Emarah 03/04/2022). The ban appears to have been inconsistently enforced across the different growing regions. While it has reached the remote areas of Baghlan, Kandahar, southern Nangarhar, and Uruzgan, there are a few areas where cultivation has grown more widespread (e.g. Badakhshan, where cultivated land grew from 13,803–15,391 hectares between 2022–2023) (Alcis 29/09/2023). By January 2024 the Taliban had reportedly increased their focus on poppy eradication in Badakhshan (Azadi Radio 22/01/2024).

The economic effects of the ban are felt at different levels and in different ways. The reduced supply has resulted in increased prices, benefiting those with stocks of opium paste, such as richer farmers and traders (Alcis 29/09/2023; AAN 15/11/2023). By contrast, poorer farmers, who count only on upcoming harvests of poppy fields are severely suffering. Income is expected to decrease even for the farmers who had switched to alternative productions such as wheat, earnings from which are less than 10% of that from poppy. In addition, landless labourers that rely on the labour demand for weeding and harvesting have also lost a primary source of income. The poppy cultivation ban is estimated to have already resulted in a USD 1 billion loss of income per year for rural Afghan households (USIP 10/08/2023).

The ban has also affected people making a living from the business chain of the poppy industry in Afghanistan. In 2023, the total income of farmers from selling opium to traders decreased by 92% to USD 110 million compared to the previous year (UNODC 05/11/2023). This means that the ban also concerns opium traders in terms of goods acquisition and circulation. Afghan media reported that in 2023, exceptions were granted to traders to export opium and liquidate remaining stocks (Hasht-e Subh 23/03/2023).

The macro effects, specifically of the reduction in opium poppy and heroin production, on the Afghan GDP and the ITA's tax revenues remain largely unknown. Some estimate tax revenues to be at USD 100–500 million, although a more conservative estimate is around USD 40 million (Reuters 16/08/2021).

### Is it of concern?

While a sustained reduction in drug production in Afghanistan presents a significant opportunity to reduce the damage of the illicit drug trade both locally and globally, there are some immediate risks for Afghans. A primary concern is the effect on the rural economy. 15 years of alternative livelihood programmes have failed to stem poppy cultivation because of insufficient income (Aicis 29/09/2023; FH 05/02/2023). A continued ban – without a sustained increase in the local economy and, specifically, concerted efforts to promote successful rural developments – would see rural poverty grow rapidly. There would also likely be a negative impact on the national economy, reducing ITA revenue.

The inconsistent implementation and enforcement of the poppy cultivation ban and its impact on political stability and economic development and recovery are also concerning. Not enforcing the cultivation ban in some areas, such as Badakhshan, while enforcing it elsewhere risks fuelling resentment against the ITA and fracturing the country as people perceive the losses and benefits of the enforcement policy to be unevenly distributed and have a geographic, tribal, and potentially ethnic dimension. While the selective enforcement of the ban is primarily a risk to political stability at a local level, it could also have significant repercussions for the central government once the more influential middle and larger landowners have sold their remaining stocks and are prevented from planting again in 2024. Enforcing the trade ban could alienate large traders who bankrolled the Taliban in difficult times, are currently running the trade, and have access to foreign currencies (KabulNow 14/06/2023). These dynamics could result in strong political instability.

While a reduced heroin supply may lead to reduced trafficking, it may spur the production and supply of harmful alternatives, such as fentanyl. As at November 2023, methamphetamine trafficking had already surged in the region (UNODC 05/11/2023).

## ECONOMIC PRESSURES

Despite significant progress in reducing corruption and increasing domestic revenue collection since 2021, stabilising the Afghani, and concerted efforts to move away from aid dependency, the ITA, like the previous Government, has been unable to generate the jobs and livelihoods required to strengthen the economy, which is forecast to decline in 2024 (USIP 17/11/2023). The fragility of the economy makes it vulnerable to shocks. At the household level, income is falling faster than prices as employment opportunities and profit margins decrease.

Economic activity in the service, agricultural, and industrial sectors (which together contribute more than 80% of GDP) all declined in 2022, while the trade deficit increased in 2022 and 2023. The significant export of coal, food, and textiles in 2022 declined in 2023 – largely as coal and food exports to Pakistan reduced – although all remained higher than before the Taliban takeover. While the strong Afghani has slightly reduced prices, it also contributes to the shrinking of the economy. Despite increasing the domestic tax burden, revenue from in-country sources remains low, with the ITA generating more than 50% of its revenue from taxation on cross-border trade. At the same time, security sector funding currently accounts for a greater proportion of government expenditure than in 2019, leaving less for services (WB 10/2023).

During 2023, many Afghans saw income fall for a number of reasons.

- The ban on the opium poppy and other narcotics industry affected whole business chains, including people involved in cultivation, production, and trade. Farmers with smaller holdings were particularly affected, with their income falling by 90% even after switching to wheat production. The poppy cultivation ban is estimated to have already resulted in a USD 1 billion loss of income per year for rural Afghan households (USIP 10/08/2023).
- Employment restrictions, especially for women, became more severe in 2023. After the prohibition of women from working for humanitarian organisations, a ban on women from working in beauty salons was imposed in the summer of 2023. This resulted in a possible 60,000 female beauticians losing their jobs (Khaama Press 03/01/2024; OHCHR 14/08/2023).
- Unemployment doubled between 2020–2023, with unemployment in the 14–24 age group being the highest (31% for men and 57% for women). Women were more than twice as likely to be unemployed as men (WB 10/2023).
- In late 2023, following a surge in the Afghan Transit Trade (ATT) and accusations of Taliban support to the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Pakistan announced a crackdown, removing 212 goods from the ATT agreement and imposing a 10% processing fee on ATT items destined for Afghanistan. Afghan traders faced immediate losses (estimated in millions of dollars) on goods uncleared at Pakistani ports (BS 06/10/2023). Those relying on the re-export of ATT items also saw their businesses decline.

- Shocks such as the flash floods of July–August and the Herat earthquakes also contributed to interrupted or lost livelihoods.
- The reduction in humanitarian aid has reduced income for some, as programming has become more targeted.

Household purchasing power has also been decreasing. At the same time, strong deflation has characterised the Afghan economy since April 2023 (EIU accessed 06/12/2023). Since August, the Afghani has risen in value against the US dollar by about 25%. While this has contributed to reducing the cost of imported goods, Afghans continue to report high prices of many staple items (WB 10/2023; KIIs 10/2023). Afghans receiving salaries pegged to the US dollar are also receiving 25% less in Afghani. Lastly, the value of remittances, a vital lifeline for many Afghans, is suffering from a stronger Afghani.

### Is it of concern?

Building a healthy economy is essential for the ITA to maintain revenues. Back taxes have largely been collected, and a declining economy would reduce in-country revenue and that from cross-border trade. Such lost revenue could result in increased domestic tax rates or reduced expenditure. Any reduction in salary payments to Taliban fighters risks local security should disaffected fighters turn to crime or extortion. Increased taxation would reduce business profits and likely be passed on to the consumer, hitting household income and reducing economic activity across the country. Irrespective of the ITA's ability to raise income and pay salaries is the strength of the Afghani. As long as traders maintain high prices for goods, household purchasing power will decline, driving poverty.

Overall, the fragility of the economy is a major concern. Overreliance on export trade, humanitarian aid (including cash shipments), and remittances makes the economy vulnerable to external factors, such as a drop in the prices of export goods or reduced humanitarian aid. An increasingly unstable and weakening economy would drive poverty, in turn driving unrest and emigration.

## POPULATION MOVEMENTS

Afghans have a long history of displacement, with life strongly shaped by a culture of mobility (BPB 23/01/2019). While a need or desire for better economic opportunities drives much displacement, conflict and enforced returns are also major reasons (MMC 29/03/2023). In the last decade, there have been three periods of accelerated internal and cross-border movement: international troop drawdowns in 2015–2016, the Taliban takeover in 2021, and the movement that followed the 3 October 2023 order of the Pakistani Government for all undocumented foreigners to leave Pakistan by 1 November 2023 or face deportation in a measure called the Illegal Foreigners Repatriation from Pakistan (ACAPS 07/12/2023).

Natural hazards, such as earthquakes and flooding, regularly cause localised displacement and can, along with the longer-term effects of drought, lead to more permanent economic displacement to cities or neighbouring countries. As at December 2022, the number of IDPs in Afghanistan had reached 6.6 million, making it the country with the second-largest IDP population globally (IDMC accessed 24/01/2024). Many IDP households have been displaced for years and often live in informal settlements – urban displacement sites with no written legal agreement for land usage – where they blend in with other rural-urban migrants (OCHA 23/12/2023).

Of the three to four million Afghans living in Pakistan, an estimated 1.7 million do so without any official status and, as at 1 November 2023, had begun to be forcibly returned. As at 19 January 2024, UNHCR reported over 500,000 Afghans had returned from Pakistan since 15 September 2023, mostly in fear and haste (UNHCR 19/01/2024). Those returning to Afghanistan are prevented from bringing significant sums of money, livestock, or other possessions. Although the number of those returning across the border daily appears to have drastically fallen, more than 375,000 Afghans have been forced out of Pakistan since September, 20,000 of whom were deported (HRW 28/11/2023). A plea filed by human rights groups before the Pakistani Supreme Court to halt deportations is thought unlikely to have a significant impact on the number of Afghans being returned (Al Jazeera 01/12/2023).

The Pakistan Government has indicated that future phases of its repatriation plan could target those with documentation, such as Afghan Citizen Card holders. Some of those facing deportation fear reprisals from the Taliban after having worked closely with the previous authorities or international military forces. The ITA is scaling up efforts to facilitate the arrival of returnees by establishing temporary camps at the border and providing SIM cards and identity cards, but its capacity to process such an influx is already stretched (ICG 13/11/2023).

It is crucial to note that such displacement particularly affects women in Afghanistan, as they are more likely to remain displaced for a longer period and face more barriers to living in and gaining sufficient support during displacement. At the same time, women may face

challenges related to movement restrictions and a lack of documentation, particularly at official border points. The conditions at unofficial border points, which are often remote and lack basic facilities, may also necessitate the use of smugglers, posing further risks of violence for women and girls (UN Women/UNHCR 01/03/2022).

### Is it of concern?

While Afghanistan has witnessed significant population movement for decades, the continued forced return of Afghans presents a number of challenges.

- Those returning would face challenges in finding employment as they enter an already difficult labour market, increasing competition for limited jobs.
- Increased competition for jobs would increase unemployment and could even encourage recruitment into armed groups, especially the TTP, as those returning with knowledge of Pakistan could aid in TTP operations.
- The already high demand for services would rise without a significant increase in government revenue to provide them.
- Housing, land, and property issues would increase, as those returning need places to live and may try to claim property that they had left before leaving Afghanistan.
- Added pressure on the local economy in areas of high return would drive inflation.
- Internal displacement would further increase with the secondary displacement of those returning from Pakistan who are unable to return to their areas of origin.
- Some of those returning will likely add to the growing number of people in need. This comes at a time when an estimated 28.3 million Afghans – two-thirds of the population, including women and girls – require humanitarian and protection assistance, and aid is declining (IOM 21/11/2023; UNHCR 18/07/2023).

Other internal displacement drivers, such as drought, earthquakes, flooding, and decreased economic opportunities, would likely continue to drive internal and international displacement in 2024. With decreasing employment opportunities for women, increased competition for jobs for men, and reduced humanitarian funding, many of those forced to move would struggle to meet their basic needs.

Urban overcrowding and conflict over land and water access in rural areas are also likely to increase, heightening women's and girls' exposure to different forms of gender-based violence. As both issues are expected to occur gradually, neither is likely to be addressed until it becomes a major problem.

## CLIMATE CHANGE, EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS, AND WATER SCARCITY

Climate change and environmental degradation are drivers of multiple hazards in Afghanistan. The country ranks among the 10 most climate change-vulnerable countries in the world and scores 5/5 (high risk) on the Ecological Threat Register, a composite index measuring the impact of ecological threats to countries (ND-GAIN accessed 11/01/2024; Vision of Humanity accessed 12/01/2024).

Since 1900, average temperatures in Afghanistan have increased by more than 1.7 degrees (above the global average of 1.5 degrees). While average precipitation has changed little since 1900, rainfall and snowfall have become more erratic and unpredictable, triggering frequent dry spells and flooding (WB accessed 19/11/2023; Climate Centre 28/03/2019). Since the 1960s, desertification has affected over 75% of the land in the country's northern, western, and southern regions. As a result, vegetation cover for pastures has shrunk, land degradation has accelerated, and crop farming has been adversely affected (OCHA 01/08/2023).

The 2023 Water Stress Index (which measures the ratio of water demand to renewable supply) indicates that Afghanistan faces 'high' water stress, meaning that the demand is using between 40–80% of renewable water supply, placing the country at risk of water scarcity (WRI 16/08/2023). According to OCHA, Afghanistan witnessed worsened drought conditions in 2023 following a sharp increase in drought rates in the previous years (39% in 2021 and 64% in 2022), affecting more than half of the population (OCHA 01/08/2023).

In recent decades, water has become an increasingly contested resource. The issue has both local and international dimensions. In southern and western Afghanistan, water for drinking and irrigation is in increasingly short supply. Efforts by the Afghan authorities to manage the water flow in the main rivers have angered Iran, as supplies in the main rivers feeding Sistan and Balochistan provinces have decreased (AAN 20/11/2023). In the north, the ITA's rapid progress in constructing the Qush-Teppe Canal is likely to concern Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, as it is expected to markedly reduce the available water in the middle and lower reaches of the Amu Darya River within six years of the dam's completion (CABAR 22/07/2023). At the same time, tensions with Pakistan are increasing over the ITA's plans to build a new hydroelectric dam on the Kunar River (RFE/RL 22/12/2023).

Despite the forecast of above-average precipitation from December as El Niño persists until April 2024, potentially a welcome relief after three years of drought, the 2023–2024 winter wet season has started lower than normal reducing the area planted under rainfed winter wheat (OCHA 11/12/2023, FEWSNet 12/2023). Theoretically, the increase in both rainfall and snowfall should contribute to relieving the drought situation in Afghanistan, although too heavy rainfall or too fast a snow melt could reduce the ground's ability to absorb water and, without appropriate storage, the availability of water for irrigation at the right time.



## Is it of concern?

In the **short term**, higher precipitation and increased snow cover will likely lead to reduced access across the Hindu Kush during the later winter months as snow blocks key trade routes. This, in turn, may lead to local goods shortages. The expected above-average levels of mountain snowpack in the winter months also increase the risk of local flooding. As in 2023, flash floods in the summer are likely following three years of drought since the soil is too hard and dry to absorb rainfall in any quantity. With only 28 meteorological stations (which are insufficient for such a geographically complex country), the abolition of the National Water Affairs Regulation Authority, and little coordinated efforts to disseminate flood warnings to the population, the loss of lives, livestock, crops, and homes can be expected in 2024 (PreventionWeb 02/10/2023).

In the **medium term**, increased precipitation, whether snow or rain, will help replenish the reservoirs, not only increasing the water available for distribution but also improving the reliability of electricity generation at the main dams. Internationally, tensions between Afghanistan and Iran or Uzbekistan over water are not considered likely to affect Afghans in the immediate future. Diplomatic tensions with Iran may rise if the ITA makes no efforts to increase water flow across the border, but the probability of direct conflict is deemed low, as any destabilisation of the border areas would facilitate migration into Iran. To the north, Uzbekistan is also unlikely to take issue with Qush-Teppe Canal, as the ITA has been paying for electricity imports.

In the **long term**, water scarcity remains a serious problem. Water is a priority need for livelihoods, and should the ban on narcotics cultivation be maintained, the increase in alternative crops that require more water to grow would further increase demand. Climate-induced displacement will likely increase, exposing those forced to move to all the risks associated with displacement.

## TENSIONS AND ARMED CONFLICTS

The ITA has been successful in improving security conditions across the country, but some internal and regional security concerns remain. Tensions and latent or open conflicts exist at different levels:

- between the ITA and neighbouring countries
- between the ITA and armed groups (e.g. the National Resistance Front, Islamic State – Khorasan Province or IS-KP)
- within the ITA itself
- between communities over land claims and disputes.

The ITA has no interest in direct conflict with its neighbours, but there are many areas of tension, especially with Pakistan. With Iran and Uzbekistan, disagreements over water flows persist but are unlikely to escalate into armed conflict. Diplomatic relations with Pakistan have soured with the Taliban's support of and perceived inactions vis-à-vis the TTP. This has led to trade disruptions and likely played a role in the forced return of Afghans from Pakistan. While the Taliban does not appear to be directly involved in TTP activities in Pakistan, it is allowing them to operate freely from Afghanistan (Workshop with experts 14/11/2023).

Armed groups within Afghanistan fall into two categories: those actively fighting the Taliban and those who are not, although it is complicated to assess which groups specifically oppose the Taliban at any time, some having formed since the movement came to power after August 2021. Among those seen as not actively against the Taliban, although the exact relationship is less clear, are al-Qaeda, the TTP, and a number of Central Asian Islamist armed groups. Although numerous smaller groups have formed since the Taliban came to power, the strongest among those opposing the Taliban are IS-KP and the National Resistance Front. While there is some critique of the ITA for failing to deliver on the counterterrorism provisions of the Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the US and the Taliban, it is acknowledged that the ITA has made efforts to constrain IS-KP and that al-Qaeda has been relatively subdued since a US drone strike killed its then-leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, in 2022 (USIP 15/08/2023). The ITA also appears to continue enabling many foreign Islamist armed groups and giving them refuge in Afghanistan while imposing strict limitations on their activities, apparently to avoid jeopardising their efforts for international recognition (USIP 15/08/2023). This means that these groups are unlikely to be the cause of any increase in conflict in the near future. The main source of internal conflict is IS-KP, which is the primary threat to the ITA despite a stall in its growth, leading the Taliban to focus significant effort on the group's containment (CT 11/09/2023). Again, significant conflict escalation is not considered probable in the immediate future, although IS-KP attacks and Taliban operations against its leadership can be expected.

The Taliban are far from united in their vision for Afghanistan, with those more internationally oriented in favour of a more moderate form of government and opposed to many of the more restrictive decrees emanating from Kandahar (Brookings 03/02/2023). Open division, however, would pose risks to the ITA's survival, and intra-Taliban conflict is thought unlikely in the immediate future (Workshop with experts 14/11/2023).

The fourth potential conflict driver is land disputes, which can quickly escalate and become violent (EASO 22/07/2020). While Land disputes are not new – the taking of land dates back at least to the post-Soviet period – the ITA seems more in tune with public opinion than the Republic was and, as it did in its areas of control before 2021, the ITA is prioritising the resolution of land disputes (EASO 07/2020; Workshop with experts 14/11/2023). Since regaining power, the Taliban have established a Land Grabbing Prevention and Restitution Commission, which announced in June that it had reclaimed over 600,000 acres of 'usurped' state-owned land. Although many welcome the move to reclaim state land, those who had bought or had property built on land previously belonging to the state stand to lose their investment – unless they are permitted to purchase new legal ownership documents, which is possible in some cases (Ariana News 27/07/2023; AAN 15/12/2023).

### Is it of concern?

While there are multiple drivers of tensions and conflicts within Afghanistan and with its neighbours – and with current conflict levels expected to continue – a significant increase in armed conflict is not foreseen in the near future. IS-KP will continue to undertake terror attacks, often targeting Hazara and Shi'a communities and may again target diplomatic or even humanitarian responders, but the ITA security forces are equally committed to preventing such attacks. As a result, the humanitarian operating environment will remain unpredictable but is not expected to deteriorate.

Land ownership has long driven local conflict in Afghanistan. Should the ITA manage to recover state land, or payments, in a manner that is largely deemed fair, it will likely strengthen its reputation for standing against corruption. That said, if senior ITA members are permitted to remain in villas on 'usurped land', or reclaimed state land is redistributed to ITA officials, it will provoke widespread discontent, especially among those less supportive of the ITA. At present, however, the ITA seems to be handling the issue better than the previous Government (Workshop with experts 14/11/2023). Continued forced evictions, which often affect the poorest, are expected to drive poverty.

## INCREASING COERCIVE CONTROL

Since the ITA consolidated its control over the country and strengthened its military and political position, it has decreed and enforced rules and regulations governing all aspects of life in Afghanistan (ACAPS 01/12/2023). Some regulations, such as the regulation clarifying taxation requirements and substantially reducing bribery, have been broadly welcomed. Other regulations have imposed limits or restrictions on freedom of religion, entertainment, and men's appearance, but the most severely restrictive have been on women and girls (RFE/RL 14/08/2023). Afghans have been adept at exploiting grey areas to continue living and working as best they can, but the ITA can be expected to continue reducing this grey space. While local arrangements are likely to continue to be negotiated, the trend is for increasing control by the state both at the national and regional levels. One example is the recent tightening of the dress code for women (RFE/RL 04/01/2024).

Women are still permitted to work within state administration (but not at senior levels), especially in the healthcare and education sectors, but other ministries also have female employees (e.g. the Ministry of Interior Affairs). However, in some cases women employees are being paid while being told to remain at home. In its response to the UN Special Coordinator's Assessment on Afghanistan, the ITA claimed that approximately 23.4% of civil servants were women, although they did not provide further details (Reuters 21/11/2023). The ITA has also allowed – and claims to support – women to work in the private sector, although some women's businesses, such as beauty salons, have been banned for being 'un-Islamic' (Al Jazeera 19/07/2023). That said, the ban on girls' education will increasingly limit the ability of future generations of women to be able to work in the health or education sectors; without secondary and tertiary education, future generations will also be severely disadvantaged in the private sector and remain in less influential positions within the public sector. A lack of female medical and educational professionals entering the workplace will further reduce women's and girls' healthcare and education access in years to come.

Negative gender norms foster negative attitudes toward girls' education in many parts of the country, which, when combined with transportation costs, distance, and safety concerns when going to and from school, further interfere with girls' education access.

### Is it of concern?

In the short and medium term, the ITA will continue to introduce new restrictions or tighten existing ones. While further curtailing personal freedom for all, these restrictions will most likely continue affecting urban women, especially those who are the primary income generators of their families.

In the longer term, the normalisation of such restrictive practices and the lack of young women able to qualify as professionals, especially within the health service, will have a severe impact on the wellbeing of future generations of women and girls.

The increasing absence of women from the public space would normalise women being effectively imprisoned in their homes and increased social tensions.

Increased restrictions would drive those with the ability and opportunity to leave the country to live where they can reach the full extent of their potential, depriving Afghanistan of the people best able to contribute to its socioeconomic wellbeing.

## HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE CAPACITY

The ability of the ITA, Afghan civil society, national NGOs, and the international humanitarian community to respond adequately to the frequent crises besetting the country depends on a number of factors.

First, the ITA has limited capacity both in terms of funding and emergency response structures (RFE/RL 14/08/2023). The October earthquakes in Herat province demonstrated a lack of administrative preparation and capacity. According to data provided by numerous working groups during these earthquakes, the lack of coordination, monitoring, and reporting, as well as the number of affected villages, led to humanitarian organisations taking a very long time to discover some of those in need. This indicates a lack of an efficient emergency response strategy.

Second, the amount of humanitarian funding is a key factor and will depend on both internal and external constraints. Internally, any increase in restrictions on the delivery of humanitarian assistance by international organisations – directly or in partnership with national organisations – or a growing perception of interference in the delivery of assistance will reduce donor appetite to fund. Externally, issues such as the global decline in humanitarian aid and the situations in Gaza and Ukraine that will draw the attention of major donor countries would also reduce humanitarian funding for Afghanistan.

In 2023, total humanitarian aid exceeded USD 1.7 billion, which included USD 850 million carried over from 2022 (OCHA 26/04/2023). This was approximately half the USD 3.7 billion funding that Afghanistan received in 2022, resulting in fewer rounds of assistance and reduced rations (OCHA 26/04/2023 and 10/09/2023). The 2024 Humanitarian Response Plan aims to assist 17.4 million people (down from 21.3 million in 2023) with a budget of USD 3.04 billion (OCHA accessed 18/12/2023). The reduction in aid targets likely reflects the anticipated reduction in funding rather than reduced need, as OCHA assessed that 23.3 million people remained in need at the end of 2023. Funding for food assistance and for Afghan children was also significantly cut in 2023 (WFP 05/09/2023; STC 27/03/2023).

Third, even if funds do continue, Afghanistan's operating conditions are complicated, and its inefficient banking system is a major barrier to receiving aid when compared to other countries. The level of humanitarian assistance is highly dependent on and hence vulnerable to a cessation of UN cash shipments. Humanitarian workers also face bureaucratic hindrances to their operations (USIP 19/09/2023). Humanitarian organisations need to dedicate significant time and resources to liaise with ITA authorities at the national, provincial, and local levels to facilitate operations, reducing efficiency (KII 10/11/2023).

Finally, the ITA continues to be frustrated by its lack of control over humanitarian activities, specifically the concern that humanitarian responders are trying to undermine the values espoused by the Taliban (KII 12/01/2024). The ban on female aid workers has already reduced the humanitarian response for women and girls, resulting in their increased exposure to food insecurity, gender-based violence, and inadequate access to healthcare and essential services.

### Is it of concern?

Given the fragile nature of the economy and the expectation that it will further decline in 2024, the need for humanitarian assistance is only expected to grow in 2024. Humanitarian responders face four main risks.

- Funding available to Afghanistan will likely continue to decrease, while programming costs will rise driven by the strength of the Afghani, reducing the scope and scale of humanitarian programming.
- The bureaucratic requirements of the ITA and new restrictions will continue to require humanitarian organisations to remain flexible and dedicate significant energy to liaise with the authorities in Kabul and the provinces.
- A scandal or security incident around UN cash shipments (such as diversion or interception) will likely result in their suspension. Even a temporary interruption in cash flow would affect humanitarian operations and, to some extent, the wider economy.
- The risk of inefficient emergency response persists. The occurrence of localised hazards, such as flooding from snowmelt run-off, could increase from March–May 2024, and heavy summer rains or earthquakes may also drive needs (FEWS NET 26/10/2023). The local administration's capacity is not expected to improve, and, with the state of the economy, the ITA may not be able to provide effective emergency response to sudden-onset calamities and may request humanitarian assistance from foreign countries. As a result, the burden of emergency response would fall on communities themselves and local and international organisations, who would struggle to meet (the growing) existing needs.