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TO SAVE AFGHANISTAN, TRY DIFFERENTLY

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As global attention shifts further away from Afghanistan to Ukraine and elsewhere, time is running out to change course before the country's freefall under the Taliban becomes irreversible. There is no silver bullet for the problems facing Afghanistan and some of what is needed and possible could very well require uncomfortable, tough decisions and strategic patience to yield any results. But pivoting away from the counterproductivity of current efforts to appease the Taliban, [as I have argued before](#), is necessary if the country's future is to be saved.

Proponents of ongoing leniency justify it in the name of averting worse outcomes, such as the rise of Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP), a deadly civil war, or a full-scale famine. They fail to acknowledge, however, that the Taliban are not a guard against those worries, but rather an enabler of them. According to the U.N., since the Taliban's takeover, the economic catastrophe is only deepening toward a [point of irreversibility](#) despite more than \$2 billion spent in aid, and ISKP recruitment has increased dramatically. Therefore, if Afghanistan is to avoid any or all of those outcomes, the limits of the Taliban's ability and willingness to change must be put to the test. The international community needs a two-pronged, interlinked approach to normalize the economy and stabilize the political scene. While economic support could incentivize commercial activity, it is the political solutions that will ensure stability.

Supporting People: Minimal but Effective

The first step should be to rethink the current aid architecture, focusing on effectiveness, accountability, and conditionality.

It is critical for aid money to build resilience by supporting economic activity at the local level instead of fueling further dependency through short-term, piecemeal interventions. Efforts should rely on domestic capabilities, especially human capital, to minimize costs, cater to local needs, increase employment, and sustain capacity for the future. Even after the departure of hundreds of thousands of educated Afghans, enough operational and technical expertise remains to execute such programs. Additionally, supporting small businesses and entrepreneurship, especially in the areas of food production, basic commodities, and agriculture, would help to rebuild local supply chains given the complexities that remain around international trade and transactions. The growth of grassroots civil society in recent years as foreign funding dried up shows that such times of crisis also provide opportunities for creativity. One solution is to let an international organization such as the ICRC manage the Afghanistan Red Crescent Society in order to play a more robust role in humanitarian response. The organization suffers from corruption and low capacity, but it also has the widest reach of any indigenous institution. Ensuring its independence by removing it from Taliban control and boosting its efficiency by decentralizing its operations would allow for the incorporation of local perspectives in the implementation of what is now a fully foreign-driven agenda.

The accountability of aid money is just as important as many have already raised concerns about the transparency of these programs. There has been, unsurprisingly, [reluctance on the part of U.N. agencies](#) whose overhead costs are disproportionately high compared to their programmatic spending to be fully open to outside scrutiny, including from the media. There is also a growing trend of NGOs mushrooming

to undertake humanitarian activities similar to the early days of the post-2001 era. It is important not to repeat mistakes of the past. In 2015, I reviewed financial documents from the two largest national NGOs: the Afghanistan Development Association (ADA) affiliated with Jilani Popal, the former head of local governance, and Coordination for Humanitarian Assistance (CHA), then run by Salam Rahimi, who later became President Ashraf Ghani's chief of staff. They both had submitted the same report to the Ministry of Economy for more than five consecutive years — each year executing around \$12 million in development money. Recently, I also came across an organization engaging in humanitarian activity that, in addition to what it officially charges for its services in distributing aid, had a designated line in its fundraising appeal for donations as “tips,” without clarifying where the money would go. Humanitarian response can provide employment, but it must not turn into a lucrative business enterprise.

To that end, three layers of accountability measures are necessary. At the highest, the international organizations should have regular reporting cycles to publicize the financial and programmatic details of their activities. Entities such as Transparency International and Freedom House that track global accountability and access to information can partner with credible platforms such as *Etilaat-e-Roz* newspaper in setting up a designated accountability portal to track the expenditure of international aid in Afghanistan. Parallel to that, local and community-level accountability platforms should be set up to involve beneficiaries. This is important not just in identifying the right priorities, but also in supporting community-engagement practices that would strengthen the foundations for any meaningful democratic experiment in the future. To avoid commercialization and duplication, a uniform structure should be built into the design of aid programs based on past experience and existing institutional foundations. As a third-layer support system, easy-to-use, homegrown technological solutions could allow access to information, crowd-sourced reporting and documentation, and cost-effective feasibility studies and impact evaluations.

While the rapidly deteriorating economic situation and the power vacuum left by the disintegration of the republican state pushed the international community to assume the primary responsibility for mitigating the crisis in Afghanistan, the Taliban must begin to play their role if the outside world is to entertain any further meaningful engagement. It is obvious

that humanitarian aid alone cannot solve all of Afghanistan's problems. A calibrated degree of conditionality, thus, is necessary to prevent increasing aid from empowering the Taliban and to gauge their will to transform. Conditionality of aid and more robust diplomatic engagement with the Taliban, however, must be part of a comprehensive architecture with specific expectations of deliverables rather than vague, immeasurable commitments such as those made by the group in [the Doha Agreement](#). Efforts thus far have failed to account for such delicacies. The U.S. Treasury [comfort letters and general licenses](#) allow transactions on issues related to “rule of law, citizenry participation, government accountability and transparency, human rights, access to information and civil society” without accounting for the shrinking space for such work under a cabinet full of sanctioned terrorists. Blank checks like these could foster aid embezzlement on the one hand and help cement the Taliban's rule on the other.

Demands for gradual sanctions relief, asset freezes, and similar actions should solicit in return clear changes in behavior from the regime. The Taliban must immediately end its campaign of arbitrary retribution and address the problem of legal ambiguity by acknowledging the validity of previous legal frameworks until they are reviewed — a key step to any economic and political normalcy. Moreover, the international community must define a series of fundamental non-negotiables to support and protect the people of Afghanistan against the Taliban. Key among them are the rights and civil liberties of women. It cannot be acceptable in 2022 for a regime, under whatever pretense, to remove half the population from public life. The international interest in paying the salaries of teachers and medical workers must be used as meaningful leverage to not only open schools to girls, but also influence the content of the curriculum and the broader issue of women's employment. Of course, conditionality can only be effective if violations are met with credible consequences.

Additionally, access to the Central Bank's foreign reserves must be conditioned on reforming its Board of Governors to include international representatives such as officials from the International Monetary Fund, allowing [robust independent monitoring mechanisms](#) as many have suggested, and fully implementing the Central Bank Law. The Taliban must allow this board to appoint an independent expert as governor of the bank and monitor recruitment and operational processes at senior levels. The issue of Afghanistan's assets



Photo above: Afghans receive humanitarian aid from the World Food Programme on Dec. 4, 2021 in Kabul, Afghanistan. [Photo by Paula Bronstein /Getty Images](#)

abroad, however, goes beyond the bank's reserves. There are commercial properties abroad that produce revenue, hundreds of military aircraft in neighboring Uzbekistan and Tajikistan the fate of which has not been declared, hundreds of millions of afghanis in an European country that were printed in the last months of the republic, and a growing number of embassies vacated by diplomats as they run out of resources and supplies, including blank passports. A comprehensive but lean arrangement such as an U.N.-mandated taskforce involving other entities like the Asian Development Bank and Organization of Islamic Cooperation, can be established to manage all of Afghanistan's foreign belongings until a truly representative government is in place in Kabul.

Political Roadmap: Decentralized Pluralism

Interventions to address the economic crisis can only be effective if political solutions are also implemented in parallel

to ensure lasting stability. The Taliban have taken their grip on power and their brutality to new heights in an environment of legal ambiguity and political uncertainty. The best solution remains a political process to define a roadmap for the country's future that would include all segments of Afghan society. A decentralized, pluralistic configuration would cater to the country's political and socio-cultural diversity. The Taliban have utilized operational decentralization in their insurgency and know its merits well. They have to give in to political decentralization to ensure a basic level of stability and even their own survival. During the peace talks in Doha, they showed some degree of openness in informal engagements to democratic practices at the local level. Their rejection of national elections stems as much from their ideological rigidity, which considers sovereignty to be divine, as from their insecurity about winning public votes. Thus, pressuring them to allow other ethnic groups and political forces to define preferred forms of government in their regions would be a starting point, especially if they continue to dominate national politics.



Photo above: Da Afghanistan Bank (DAB), Afghanistan's Central Bank, in Kabul on Feb. 9, 2022. [Photo by Saifurahman Safi/Xinhua via Getty Images.](#)

Such a political process should be comprehensive and multilayered. One of the reasons the Doha talks failed was because of the simplicity of their design and the lack of a comprehensive, long-term roadmap. The reliance on a single-track direct negotiation would make the entire process vulnerable to the whims of individual actors, who could sabotage it when their narrowly defined interests are not served maximally. Additionally, it would limit the space for broad representation by enabling a select group of individuals on behalf of wide and diverse constituencies without necessarily speaking for their interests or being accountable to them. It also does not need to begin with the immediate conventional practices of holding grand meetings and conferences. That was what happened in Bonn in 2001 and in the Doha talks in 2020 and it proved disastrous. The last thing the international community should do is to bring back the corrupt old guards or to mobilize a new such class. The focus should be on structural changes rather than tokenistic incorporation of individuals into the Taliban's emirate.

Such a political process should begin with a series of unilateral measures by the Taliban to establish trust and their willingness to work with others. They should realize that despite a near absolute hold on power, they are on the vulnerable end of any potential conflict. The unsuccessful talks in Doha can possibly provide a foundation to build on. For example, the U.N. should demand the Taliban sign the principles document that was developed in preparation for the Istanbul talks that ended up not taking place. This short document asked the Taliban to commit to civil liberties, democratic processes, equality of all citizens, and freedom of expression, among others, as the guiding principles of any meaningful negotiations. More broadly, the world should pressure the Taliban to provide the bare minimum of an environment conducive to political activity. Coherent and credible alternatives will eventually emerge on the ground in organic and indigenous ways. A basic level of protection for political dissent and diversity is required to ensure those alternatives are non-violent. The Taliban's intransigence must be seen not as a constant to accept but an obstacle to overcome.

Precondition: Collective Action

Admittedly, achieving these objectives will not be easy. But any chance of success requires reestablishing the credibility and authority of the international community — which equally suffers from a trust deficit — so it can play a positive and effective role. The first step in doing so is better internal coordination and cohesiveness. Disunity and lack of consensus have been one of the key factors undermining global efforts to end the conflict in Afghanistan. There appears to be a lack of coordination even between the two American envoys: Rina Amiri, who is communicating a more critical approach on human rights, and Thomas West, who often appears more ready to compromise on the political front. It is imperative to mobilize more cohesively in pressuring the regime. Individual bilateral engagements only bolster the Taliban's ability to bargain and play multiple stakeholders against each other. Additionally, working with regional countries remains critical to the effectiveness of external efforts. Using a more robust and coherent strategy of carrots and sticks can still yield some results.

The other component is a holistic, multi-dimensional negotiation strategy. The Taliban use a maximalist approach that starts negotiations from very low bars in order to use every ordinary matter as a point of leverage. For example, contrary to previous promises and assurances, they have taken the entire country and its people hostage, partly to use as bargaining chips against the international community to solidify their rule. The outside world, however, barely knows what it wants from the regime and what it would do if its demands are rejected. The European Union reopened its diplomatic mission in Kabul despite none of [its five-point engagement benchmarks](#) being fully met. Similarly, while almost all of Taliban leadership are on multiple sanction lists, they are roving around the globe, as we recently saw in Turkey, to expand diplomatic alliances; they are also expected in London for an upcoming donor conference. In order to negotiate effectively, the international community needs to have clarity about its interests and priorities. Limiting engagement with the Taliban to the U.N. mission in Kabul and the group's Doha office by penalizing travel against sanctions would be an example of such strategic calibration. Sanctions will not have any consequences for the Taliban if transgressions (by the regime and members of the international community) are not addressed. Unless the

international community uses its leverage effectively, it will soon have to give in even more helplessly than it already has — all to the detriment of Afghanistan's future and undermining its own national security interests.

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