

Introduction: Understanding and Engaging with Afghanistan after August 2021

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Abstract

This article introduces the anthology *Still Here: Understanding and Engaging with Afghanistan After August 2021*. As most public and scholarly debate concerning Afghanistan since August 2021 has been both retrospective and centred on the withdrawal of Western forces, this collection of articles focuses on the current situation as it has unfolded since then. Taliban rule has proved resilient in a manner demanding research and analysis on the new circumstances in Afghanistan and the surrounding region. It has become increasingly difficult to assess and understand the facts on the ground in contemporary Afghanistan. Thus this anthology brings together respected scholars and practitioners in an attempt to do just this. The following articles will approach this topic from different perspectives, providing insights into the most significant themes characterizing the current situation in Afghanistan in a time of limited interaction between it and the international community.

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Afghanistan still matters to the world. This anthology examines the contemporary dilemmas facing Afghanistan, the Afghan people, and the global implications of the country's internal challenges. Focusing on the period after August 2021, we explore Afghanistan's transformation in the wake of a pivotal shift.

August 2021 marks a clear division in Afghanistan's history. Together, the rapid ascent of the Taliban insurgency, the collapse of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and the Afghan Republic's government in Kabul, and the disorderly withdrawal of NATO forces with the evacuation of international personnel, mark a critical juncture in the nation's tumultuous history. Recent events may seem to have confirmed Afghanistan's reputation as the "graveyard of empires".¹ Following the British Empire in the First, Second, and Third Anglo-Afghan War (1839–1842, 1878–1880 and 1919) and the Soviet Union in the Soviet–Afghan War (1979–1989), the United States and its allies are only the latest foreign powers to suffer defeat in what has now come to be known as the War in Afghanistan (2001–2021). As chapters in this anthology reveal, the fate of Afghanistan cannot simply be explained by reductively commenting on its reputation, demoting Afghans to the status of some unconquerable people. Certain important historical developments should be explained through a consideration of the misguided, ill-informed or unwise strategies of foreign policy makers. A more fitting title for Afghanistan is, perhaps, the "graveyard of bad foreign policy".

For the United States and its allies engaged in Afghanistan, the situation following the withdrawal in August 2021 – referred to as the "Fall of Kabul" – calls for strategic introspection. Numerous "War Commissions," "Afghan War Evaluations," and other inquiries intended to glean "lessons learned" are either underway or now concluded across Europe and the United States. In Scandinavia, the Danish Afghanistan War Evaluation concludes in November 2024 (DIIS, 2024); Norway announced in March 2024 that it would reassess its role in Afghanistan from 2015–2021, including the withdrawal and evacuation.² While these lessons are vital for future Western or NATO engagements in fragile states, they treat Afghanistan as

1 The title "graveyard of empires", although hardly recent, gained prominence in Bearden, 2001.

2 A war commission in 2016 evaluated Norway's Afghanistan operation from between 2001 and 2014.

a chapter now completed. In Western capitals, Afghanistan has become a distant and haunting echo of a bygone failed engagement. Despite 20 years of military presence, the loss of countless lives and trillions of U.S. dollars, Afghanistan and the Afghan people been consigned to the past without much consideration for the ongoing challenges. As Barnett R. Rubin writes in the first chapter of this volume, “the U.S. withdrew its troops, ended its aid programs, and simply walked away as the structures established during the twenty-one-year international operation melted away overnight, and the Taliban strolled back into power” (Rubin, 2024).

Afghanistan is still here, however. And the Afghan people continue to face significant challenges. The purpose of this anthology is not to dwell on the past but to explore the contemporary dilemmas confronting the country and the international community’s role post-August 2021. In this anthology, we focus on Afghanistan in the belief that current circumstances have global implications. Challenges such as irregular migration, international terrorism, and transnational drug trafficking continue to persist, posing ongoing or potential threats to European nations. Three years into Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, it is imperative that we continue to engage with and deepen our understanding of the situation rather than leaving it in the rear-view mirror.

The State of Afghanistan

At the time of writing, more than three years have passed since the Taliban declared the establishment of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) on the 15th of August, 2021. The period that followed has defied the expectations of analysts who doubted the Taliban’s longevity post-NATO withdrawal. Since assuming power, the rule and mode of governance of the IEA has been arbitrary, ad hoc and at times erratic – yet it has nonetheless achieved a semblance of stability. After an initial freefall, the Afghan economy, albeit severely shrunken, has steadied itself, with controlled inflation and stable prices (World Bank, 2023). But with limited potential for economic growth and more than two-thirds of the Afghan population needing humanitarian aid (UN OCHA, 2024), Afghanistan has a “persistently weak, below-subsistence economy”, as William Byrd writes in Chapter 8 (Byrd, 2024). As highlighted in several chapters, the humanitarian and economic situation is further strained by the IEA’s drug ban in October 2023, which, as David Mansfield writes in Chapter 9, is

“undermining the livelihoods of the 10 million people directly involved in poppy cultivation” (Mansfield, 2024).

In many ways, the Taliban has proven to be just as draconian as expected, when looking at the treatment of its population in general, and especially in relation to Afghan women and girls. The re-imposition of severe restrictions of the rights of women and girls to education, to walk in public without a male guardian, or to work in NGOs, echoes the Taliban governance of the 1990s. This has, once again, resulted in Afghanistan being described as “the most repressive country in the world regarding women’s rights”, as Roza Otunbayeva, Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General and Head of the UN political mission in Afghanistan, put it in March 2023 (UN, 2023). As Belquis Ahmadi writes in Chapter 6, the Taliban has conducted a “systematic erosion of women’s rights” and once again “relegated women to second-class citizenship” both in terms of education, employment and access to the justice system (Ahmadi, 2024).

While the responsibility for the reprehensible human rights situation in Afghanistan lies entirely with the Taliban, the improvements to the overall security of the Afghan population also needs to be credited to their movement. With the end of the war between NATO forces, the ANSF and the Taliban, the number of conflict-related civilian casualties plunged dramatically. Using statistical data provided by the UN Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA), Kate Clark reports a total number of “3,774 civilian casualties, 1,095 people killed and 2,679 wounded from August 2021 to May 2023. The figures for that 21-month period were substantially lower, in terms of the average monthly civilian casualty toll, than for any single year since 2009 when UNAMA began systematically recording civilian casualties” (Clark, 2023). While such statistical data should be used with caution, the same pattern of significantly decreased violence emerges when looking at the civilian casualties resulting from terrorist attacks conducted inside Afghanistan by the Islamic State of the Khorasan Province (ISKP) and other groups (Clark, 2023; IEP, 2024).

Despite the persistent security threats posed to Afghan Shia or Hazara minorities by ISKP, Afghanistan has enjoyed a rare period of relative stability in the last three years under Taliban rule when looking at incidents and casualties statistically. The current security situation in Afghanistan demonstrates the Taliban’s somewhat unexpected ability to manage internal security and maintain order when compared to the situation prior to August 2021. It is important to stress that this relative order occurs in the context

of economic distress, widespread food insecurity, and human rights abuses by the IEA: the price of this improved security, it appears, is a fragility and volatility making life exceedingly challenging for the Afghan people.

Navigating Murky Waters

Western withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 resulted in the abrupt dissolution of established information sources and communication networks. This has created a critical need for heightened awareness, understanding, and engagement with Afghanistan and its people. However, this task is currently daunting as reliable information on the situation in the country is scarce. Navigating Afghanistan's informational landscape has become increasingly challenging, especially for Western observers who lack the necessary language proficiency and who are now excluded from traditional information channels.

The departure of international forces also led to the dismantling of existing security and military intelligence networks, effectively removing almost all human intelligence (HUMINT) assets (Follorou & Stadius, 2023). Consequently, intelligence collection now heavily depends on satellite imagery and digital data (signals intelligence, SIGINT). As noted by General Frank McKenzie, former commander of U.S. Central Command, by December 2021 the United States had come to retain only “about 1 percent or 2 percent of the capabilities we once had to monitor Afghanistan” (Burns & Baldor, 2021).

To date, most Western nations have adopted a political strategy of non-engagement with Afghanistan and the IEA, resulting in a diminished diplomatic presence in Kabul and complicating both official dialogues with the Taliban and interaction with broader Afghan society. Inside Afghanistan, the few remaining international journalists struggle to give valid reports; the Taliban have cracked-down on all media and free speech (including access to some social media websites), further constraining the flow of reliable information (Human Rights Watch, 2024). One example of this, emphasized by Belquis Ahmadi in Chapter 6, are reports from April 2024 of the Taliban instructing media outlets to refrain from reporting violence against women, and even airing women's voices at all (see Ahmadi, 2024; DW, 2024). Combined with the sudden shift in focus of international media to the Russia-Ukraine War in February 2022, the attention given to Afghanistan by European publics or decision-makers is quite negligible.

Not only is reporting on Afghanistan scarce, there is also significant bias in how this information is presented. Both the IEA and opposition groups like the National Resistance Front (NRF) disseminate skewed narratives about the realities of Afghanistan and life of the Afghan people, further muddying and complicating the overall picture. The topic of Afghanistan remains politicized within both regional and Western discourses, often coloured by the emotions and politics of a 20-year military engagement. The politicization is reductive, leading to binary thinking that serves to hinder balanced analysis; it fuels a one-sided approach to policy discussions, overshadowing the nuanced realities on the ground. Somewhat counter-intuitively, the extreme politicization of Afghanistan actually keeps the issue away from the political agenda, as decision-makers consider the subject controversial. As a report from the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) from May 2024 suggests, “the tragic end of US involvement in Afghanistan has also made it a toxic issue, reinforcing inclinations to keep the region off the policy agenda and the public’s radar”; U.S. decision-makers and security agencies, it even argues, “show signs of something like collective trauma” (USIP, 2024, p. 16).

Writings on Afghanistan after August 2021

When looking at the international anglophone-oriented research, the realm of academic literature (peer-reviewed articles and books) and policy literature (think-tank reports, policy-briefs, etc.) reveal that only few scholars, researchers and practitioners continue to engage with Afghanistan’s evolving situation³ – especially compared to the Western research communities engaged in the years of the War in Afghanistan. Since August 2021, several books on Afghanistan have been published. Most of these are journalistic records of the withdrawal of Western forces or reflections on the process leading to the withdrawal;⁴ very few are written about the current situation post-August 2021. One notable example is the book *The Return*

3 In this regard, the quality work of United States Institute for Peace (USIP), Afghan Analysts Network (AAN), and West Point’s Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) deserves mention and praise.

4 Andrew Quilty’s book *August in Kabul* gives an account of the days of the withdrawal in August 2021. For books on the history of the Afghan Republic and the lead-up to the withdrawal see *The Ledger: Accounting for Failure in Afghanistan* by David Kilcullen and Greg Mills (2021), and *The Decline and Fall of the Republic of Afghanistan* by Ahmad Shuja Jamal & William Maley (2023).

of the Taliban: *Afghanistan After the Americans Left* by Hassan Abbas (2023), which grapples with the problems facing contemporary Afghanistan. To the knowledge of the authors, no anthologies on the current situation in Afghanistan have been published, and we have discovered only a single special issue in *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, Vol. 21, Issue 3: “Ethnic Nationalism and Politicized Religion in the Pakistan-Afghanistan Borderland” from August 2023 (edited by Brasher and Ramsey). Most publications on Afghanistan have, rather, been backward-looking, focusing on “lessons learned” from 20 years of military engagement from the perspective of the United States or other NATO countries. Examples of this are *Armed Forces and Society*, Vol. 49, Issue 4: “Special Issue: Symposium on the Afghanistan War” from October 2023 (edited by Inbody and Shields, 2023) or the anthology *The Great Power Competition Volume 4 – Lessons Learned in Afghanistan: America’s Longest War* from May 2023 (edited by Farhadi and Masys, 2023).

In terms of individual academic articles and book chapters, the literature on contemporary Afghanistan and the Taliban as per August 2024 is sparse and somewhat scattered. Dissecting this, a few overall clusters of themes appear. One revolves around issues of COVID-19 and public health in Afghanistan, global health responsibilities of the international community and the psychological health of the Afghan youth under Taliban rule (see Acuti Martelluci et al., 2021; Jain et al., 2021; Neyazi et al., 2023). A second cluster explores different issues of conflict and security, both in exploring the implication of the Taliban takeover for regional security dynamics in South Asia (see Bhattacharya, 2023) and the threat of international terrorism emanating from Afghanistan, with specific attention given to the status of Al-Qaeda and ISKP (see Jones, 2023; Steinberg & Albrecht, 2023; Hassan, 2022; Omarkhail and Guozhu, 2023). A third cluster can be described as “outside-in” perspectives on Afghanistan and revolves around issues of international engagement, such as diplomatic efforts for international recognition or foreign aid management (Halimi & Jawad, 2023; Solhdoost 2023; Shah & Rosenbaum, 2023). Fourth, a number of papers give focus to the present predicament of women in Afghanistan, describing different aspects of the current “femicide” happening in Afghanistan, exploring the status and the lack of rights of women and girls under Taliban rule (Wani, 2024; Amiri, 2024; Dariush et al., 2023). The fifth and final category comprises papers focusing on the Taliban governance of Afghanistan and how the IEA interacts with the Afghan people.

Most authors in this category approach this from a “top-down” perspective, describing aspects of Taliban state, organisation structure, policy and international relations (see Achakzai, 2023; Sharma, 2024; Khan & Durrani, 2024; Jackson & Weigand, 2023), while a few use a “bottom-up” perspective to explore the attitudes of the Afghan public (Ahmadi & Hikmat, 2023).

Taken together, the lack of reliable reporting from Afghanistan is caused by a lack of intelligence, data and unbiased information naturally leading to limited research and analysis on the topic. This serves to significantly hinder the global – and especially Western – understanding of Afghanistan. This is a problem not just for Afghans but also for regional stability and global security. As highlighted repeatedly throughout this anthology, it remains important to understand and to engage with Afghanistan. Not for reasons of Western idealism of morality, but because history shows that limited knowledge of the complexities and the security developments in Afghanistan and the wider region can lead to catastrophe in a global context.

Scope and Focus

As editors of this anthology, our primary objective was to scrutinize the dilemmas confronting Afghanistan and the international community’s role post-August 2021. With this volume, we attempt to provide contemporary analyses of Afghanistan and the Taliban in order to contribute to engagement with, and better understanding of, the country. As such, this volume includes a broad range of current topics, aiming to address present and future challenges in Afghanistan; it does not aim, that is to say, to contribute to the historical evaluation of previous engagements. Every contributor was thus urged to adopt a forward-looking analysis, offering tangible recommendations based on current insights and contemporary issues. The exception to this scope is the first chapter by Barnett Rubin, which critically examines the unsuccessful Western engagement in Afghanistan, tracing its implications to the present day and contextualizing these within the current state of interactions with the Taliban.

Recognizing that the current situation in Afghanistan offers something of a moving target across an overabundance of topics, every contributor was encouraged to provide a smaller chapter. Shortening the time-span of the publishing phase, we hope, will serve the relevance of what the anthology contains. The authors were also encouraged to prioritize empirical

evidence over theoretical considerations: chapters are not meant to fill a gap in the academic literature first and foremost. Finally, contributors were also asked to provide specific and tangible policy recommendations within their specific area of expertise.

This anthology focuses on issues of security, economics and the humanitarian situation, the human rights of women and girls, intelligence, international law and diplomacy towards Afghanistan, internal peace building processes, Taliban governance and state-building, and regional dynamics. Although it covers a broad range of topics, with many chapters having overlapping themes, each topic has been deliberately chosen to provide insights into different aspects of the society while best reflecting the expert knowledge offered by our willing contributors. With the exception of the first cluster on health, the anthology contributes to all clusters mentioned on the previous pages. The intention is to produce the most complete and holistic overview of the contemporary state of Afghanistan we can.

As previously noted, writing about Afghanistan and the Taliban is often a politicized and even “toxic” endeavour. To ensure that this anthology remains balanced in terms of biases and political affiliation, the editors have meticulously selected contributors who are analysts, scholars, and practitioners with deep expertise on Afghanistan, often affiliated with respected universities, think-tanks, and institutions. Each chapter has been rigorously revised by the editors before undergoing a double-blind peer-review process by external reviewers who are experts in this field.

We, as editors, are proud of the scholarly rigour and the depth of analysis presented in this anthology. While we believe it will be of interest to a broad audience, it is particularly valuable for policymakers and practitioners currently engaged with Afghanistan, especially in Western countries, as many chapters offer specific recommendations directly relevant to decision-makers in Europe and the U.S.

Findings

This anthology consists of 12 chapters, including this introduction, each providing a specific perspective on the current situation in Afghanistan. Every chapter can be read as an individual contribution.

The first chapter begins with a critical reflection on the U.S. policy towards the Taliban, going back to 2001, establishing some context and background for the rest of the volume. Framed through the idea of

“the two trillion-dollar misunderstanding”, Barnett R. Rubin articulates a critical reassessment of U.S. policy in Afghanistan. Rubin argues that the American failure stemmed from a fundamental misunderstanding of Afghanistan’s socio-political dynamics, exacerbated by “War on Terror” dogma equating the Taliban with transnational terror groups like al-Qaeda. As a veteran academic and diplomat on Afghanistan, Rubin highlights missed opportunities for peace, particularly in the immediate aftermath of the 2001 Bonn Agreement, when the opportunity to include the Taliban in a political process was squandered through the U.S. insistence on a military solution. Rubin’s analysis suggests that these early decisions seeded long-term instability, leading to a prolonged conflict and ultimately the chaotic withdrawal of U.S. forces in 2021, underscoring a costly misadventure in both human lives and financial resources. Providing a historical context and setting the stage for the rest of volume, the first chapter is closely connected with the sixth chapter on intra-Afghan dialogue by Obaidullah Baheer: both discuss the issue of inclusivity in governance and peace processes, the first in historical perspective, the second in a contemporary.

The second chapter, Amin Saikal’s “Regional Response to the Taliban’s Return to Power”, provides an overview of the complex regional political landscape surrounding the Taliban’s control of Afghanistan. Professor Saikal explores the intricate dynamics between Afghanistan’s geographical position, its diverse population, its history of authoritarianism and power struggles, and the significant impact of foreign interventions. These elements collectively influence the ongoing instability and naturally impacted the regional responses to the Taliban’s ascent to power in 2021. The chapter delves into how regional powers, including Pakistan, Iran, the Central Asian republics, China, and Russia, have managed their relations with the Taliban since the takeover, balancing security concerns and the strategic benefits of engagement.

Providing a regional overview, Chapter 2 is closely connected with the following chapter, “Ghost Wars Redux: Covert Action and Proxy War in the Second Era of Taliban Rule” by Steve Coll. In it, offering an understanding of the regional security dynamic, Coll illuminates the complex interplay of intelligence agencies in Afghanistan; building on his earlier books, he outlines the instrumental role played by these agencies in the years since the Soviet invasion of 1979, emphasizing their continued impact under the Taliban’s second spell of rule. He critically examines the paradoxical relationships between the Taliban, regional powers like Pa-

kistan and Iran, and Western intelligence, particularly highlighting Pakistan's struggles with the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), now exploiting Afghan territory as safe havens for its operations on Pakistani territory. The chapter underlines how the "Ghost Wars" of Afghanistan are still ongoing, as foreign and domestic spy operations continue to shape Afghanistan's security and political landscape.

In the fourth chapter, "Local Responses to Authoritarianism under the Taliban Emirate", Michael Semple explores how local Afghan communities, particularly in the Zurmat District of Paktia, adapted and reacted to the stringent and authoritarian rule reinstated by the Taliban in 2021. By applying data from fieldwork inside Afghanistan, Professor Semple illustrates subtle forms of resistance and adaptation by local actors who, despite severe restrictions, engage in set-piece dialogues with local Taliban officials, undertake community self-help initiatives, and navigate the perilous waters of limited public criticism and civil disobedience. The chapter provides a microcosmic view of the broader Afghan struggle to maintain a semblance of autonomy and cultural identity under a regime that has dramatically curtailed freedoms and imposed a monolithic vision of governance and social order.

Examining the details of daily life in Afghanistan, the chapter shares connections with Chapter 5, Belquis Ahmadi's "Erosion of Women's Rights by the Taliban: Long-Term Consequences": both describe the challenging lives of ordinary Afghans, and in particular, Afghan women. Ahmadi's chapter explores the severe and systematic dismantling of women's rights under Taliban rule since August 2021. The chapter stresses that women have been relegated to second-class citizens, barred from education beyond grade six, prohibited from employment, and permitted only limited access to the justice system. These restrictions have led to widespread psychological distress among Afghan women. Despite the oppressive environment, many continue to advocate for girls' education and women's rights, facing severe risks. The chapter draws on consultations with Afghan women and the author's observations, emphasizing the urgent need for a coordinated and consistent international engagement to address this human rights crisis and to support Afghan women and girls. Examining an issue with wide-ranging implications, and central to an understanding of contemporary Afghanistan, several other chapters in this anthology, including those by Michael Semple (Chapter 4), William Byrd (Chapter 7), and Scott R. Anderson (Chapter 10), echo its themes.

In Chapter 6, “Intra-Afghan Dialogue: Prospects and Challenges”, Obaidullah Baheer explores the complexities of achieving national dialogue and establishing an inclusive government in Afghanistan under Taliban rule. Baheer evaluates the challenges and potential paths toward inclusivity, considering both the international community’s expectations and the Taliban’s historical and ideological constraints. The chapter discusses the initial efforts and subsequent failures of the Taliban to form an inclusive government, and analyses the implications of its governance strategies, including the approach of drafting a new constitution and the role of civil society in fostering democratic initiatives. Baheer also includes an analysis of the international community’s role in facilitating an inclusive political process with Afghan civil society as an approach to creating a sustainable democratic framework in Afghanistan. Focusing on the intricacies of Taliban politics and organisation, the chapter can be read alongside the first chapter (Barnett R. Rubin), describing the historical precedents, and the eighth chapter (David Mansfield), discussing how local and national Taliban politics intertwine.

Chapter 7, William Byrd’s “A Weak, ‘Famine Equilibrium’ Economy with Large Humanitarian Aid Needs and No Improvement in Sight”, analyses Afghanistan’s dire economic state and the humanitarian situation following the Taliban’s takeover. Despite initial macroeconomic stabilization efforts by the Taliban, which helped prevent complete economic collapse, Afghanistan remains in a fragile state referred to as a “famine equilibrium,” in which stability is superficial and the population, with many even below subsistence level, still struggle to survive. This precarious balance heavily relies on substantial humanitarian aid provided by Western states, especially the United States, which experienced a significant inflow in 2022. However, with decreasing aid and compounding challenges like the opium ban and the restrictions on the participation of women in the economy, the chapter argues that the future looks increasingly grim for the Afghan people. Dr. Byrd stresses that while immediate economic relief is critical, strategic shifts towards sustainable aid and policy adjustments by the Taliban are necessary to mitigate the ongoing crisis. Having a comprehensive focus on the Afghan economy and the topic of humanitarian aid, the chapter can be read in parallel to other chapters dealing with key aspects of the Afghan economy, including Chapter 5 by Belquis Ahmadi describing the exclusion of women from the workforce and Chapter 8 by David Mansfield discussing the illicit drug economy in Afghanistan.

In the eighth chapter, “Whistling in the Wind: The Inevitable Return of Poppy Cultivation to Afghanistan”, David Mansfield examines the Taliban’s drug ban, particularly on poppy cultivation, which began in April 2022. Through on-site interviews and fieldwork in Afghanistan supplemented by satellite imagery, Mansfield argues that despite initial reductions in cultivation, the ban is unsustainable, predicting a resurgence of poppy production due to the lack of alternatives for rural Afghan farmers. The enforcement of the ban has been inconsistent, leading to potential rural unrest and exposing divisions within the Taliban. Aligned with the argument presented in Chapter 7 by William Byrd, this chapter discusses the socio-economic impacts and political challenges of the ban, forecasting its eventual failure.

In Chapter 9, “Climate Crisis in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan: The Need for an Alternate Approach”, Shanthie Mariet D’Souza explores how natural disasters linked to climate change have exacerbated Afghanistan’s severe humanitarian and economic crisis, and how this has worsened under Taliban rule. The Taliban’s incapacity to effectively respond to these disasters, coupled with reduced international aid, has intensified the hardships faced by ordinary Afghans. Emphasizing the necessity of the international community reengaging with Afghanistan on issues of climate governance and disaster management, the chapter advocates an international strategy both focusing on building local capacities for crisis management and including the Taliban in global climate discussions. D’Souza argues that neglecting Afghanistan’s climate crisis could lead to mass displacement, an increase in extremism, and regional instability. As the chapter discusses the limitations of Taliban authorities and highly emphasizes the need for international engagement, it can be read in close relation to the Chapter 10 by Scott R. Anderson, which also discusses the social implications for the Afghan people in the IEA.

Scott R. Anderson’s “Recognition and the Taliban’s De Facto Future” assesses the issue of “formal” or “diplomatic” recognition in the context of international law. Anderson analyses the international community’s reluctance to recognize the Taliban as Afghanistan’s legitimate government despite their territorial control, and unfolds the implications of this unrecognized status for a population suffering the consequences of a government limited in its functioning. Anderson suggests that the international community could mitigate the consequences for the civilian population by acknowledging the Taliban as a de facto authority, capable of performing es-

sential governmental functions – a legitimate government, without formal state recognition. This approach would use international legal frameworks to allow the Taliban to address the population’s needs while maintaining oversight to prevent potential abuses. While providing a unique perspective from international law, the chapter’s discussion of the implications of non-recognition (and a general lack of international engagement) can be read together with Chapter 7 (William Byrd) and Chapter 9 (Shanthie Mariet D’Souza).

In the eleventh and final chapter, “The Fund for the Afghan People,” Jeff Rigsby takes a closer look at the establishment and operational challenges of a Swiss-based trust fund established in September 2022 to manage part of Afghanistan’s central bank’s foreign reserves. The fund aimed to secure these assets against legal claims in the United States and to enhance Afghanistan’s international economic integration by facilitating cross-border transactions – but despite its specific goals, it has struggled with slow progress and operational inefficiencies, achieving its initial objective of asset protection only in early 2024. The chapter offers an analytical window into the political, legal, and economic intricacies that have hindered the Fund’s activity. Rigsby concludes by recommending a strategic application of the Fund’s assets with the aim of revitalizing, or at least to support the process of revitalizing, Afghanistan’s isolated economy. While addressing a somewhat niche topic, the chapter can be read in close conjunction with Chapter 8 by William Byrd and Chapter 9 by David Mansfield; all provide insights into the challenges faced by the Afghan economy.

Key Recommendations

The chapters in this anthology provide an overview of the condition of Afghanistan politically and economically, in the state of human rights, in matters of security, and in humanitarian issues arising as a consequence of its condition. We do not claim this to be a perfectly comprehensive, all-encompassing, or exhaustive, overview, but we do believe it to provide a rare snapshot of Afghanistan following August 2021.

Developing, editing and publishing this anthology has been revelatory in several ways. As researchers, the lack of reporting from Afghanistan became evident early in the process. Collecting reliable data on the country’s economy and security situation is notoriously difficult. Even the quality and reliability of statistics from major organisations such as the World

Bank or the UN is somewhat equivocal given the increasing difficulty process of gathering, logging and storing large datasets under Taliban rule. Thus the on-the-ground fieldwork providing the empirical data for several chapters in this anthology is of great importance for the unique insights into the current situation it offers. Further, the number of researchers engaging with Afghanistan in the United States and European countries has diminished significantly. Identifying relevant contributors for this volume was a challenge: today, few Western academics or analysts give their full attention to Afghanistan, preferring to maintain it as secondary topic in their research portfolio. This is also the case at the editors' own institution, the Royal Danish Defence College, where only a handful of people still conduct research on Afghanistan, and of these most focus on historical analysis and "lessons learned" processes and evaluations. Guided by national defence and security politics, the Western world, in particular, has shifted its focus, both in terms of research and policy, to other, more overt, security issues such as the war in Ukraine. During the editing process, our primary objective of understanding and engaging with Afghanistan grew increasingly significant as we came to realize the profound extent to which the Western world, in particular, is distancing itself from it.

A key purpose of this volume was to present specific policy-recommendations for decision-makers on Afghanistan today. Most Western countries have approached the new Afghanistan with reluctance or outright non-engagement. A consistent recommendation across most chapters is for the international community to increase engagement with Afghanistan and the Taliban, and to manage this engagement in a systematic and coordinated manner. International engagement with Afghanistan can function as both a reward or incentive, as much as punishment or deterrent – both carrot and stick have a role to play in interactions with the Taliban's Islamic Emirate. The following points include both approaches, and can be seen as specific pathways of engagement as highlighted in this anthology:

In Chapter 5, Belquis Ahmadi advocates that the international community should support the Afghan population and to continue to hold the Taliban accountable through the continued and combined use of diplomatic pressure, economic sanctions, humanitarian aid, and human rights advocacy, leveraging the religious and moral authority of prominent Islamic institutions.

Acknowledging that aid for Afghanistan will diminish, in Chapter 7 William Byrd advises donors to keep as much aid as possible flowing to

Afghanistan, to scale down aid in a gradual manner if possible, and to attempt to rethink *how* humanitarian aid is distributed.

In chapter nine, Shanthie Mariet D’Souza proposes that the international community should provide economic and technical support to the Taliban government institutions in order to guarantee the functioning of those state capabilities necessary for climate mitigation, disaster management and relief. Further, D’Souza argues for greater interaction with the Taliban on climate stress and disaster management, and the building of platforms of cooperation to include Afghans in global climate conversations.

In Chapter 10, Scott R. Anderson uses international legal frameworks to argue that the Taliban be acknowledged as a *de facto* authority, without formal state recognition, so affording it the capability of performing essential governmental functions.

Engagement of this nature entails political risk; some will object that it might serve only to embolden and legitimize the Taliban’s power over Afghanistan. While such objections must be taken seriously, they do, however, fail to provide any alternative to the current stalemate between the Taliban and the international community. As Scott R. Anderson writes in Chapter 10, “neither the Taliban nor the international community appear willing to capitulate to the other’s demands, leaving innocent Afghans trapped in between” (Anderson, 2024).

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