



Sabawoon Samim and Ashley Jackson

# TALEBAN PERCEPTIONS OF AID: Conspiracy, corruption and miscommunication



AFGHANISTAN  
ANALYSTS  
NETWORK

Afghanistan Analysts Network

**Economy, Development, Environment**

July 2023

**Despite publicly claiming to welcome international aid, the Taleban government has exercised a growing influence over humanitarian operations within Afghanistan at both national and local levels. This includes bans on women working for NGOs and the United Nations and, more recently, an order to hand over all internationally funded education projects to the Ministry of Education. These more high-profile national edicts have been issued alongside hurdles and increasing suspicion at the local level, from demands for beneficiary lists to the detention of aid workers. In this report, Sabawoon Samim\* and Ashley Jackson\*\* look at the factors driving these restrictions on aid delivery and the dynamics that shape Taleban attitudes toward aid and aid workers.**

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## BACKGROUND

After assuming power in August 2021, the Taliban government was initially eager to reassure the United Nations and NGOs that they could continue aid operations. First impressions were of greater access, not surprising given that the establishment of the Islamic Emirate also represented, largely, an end to hostilities and greater security for aid workers. Nearly two years on, the Islamic Emirate has introduced restrictions on a number of issues affecting how aid is provided and by whom, including a ban on Afghan women working across most sectors for the UN and NGOs. While the Taliban insurgency historically sought to control and influence aid delivery in areas under its control, its approach as a government has been to seek control more gradually. While local and national-level restrictions mounted, the first significant national measure was not announced until February 2022, when the “Procedure for Control and Regulation of the Activities of Domestic and International Organisations”<sup>1</sup> was presented to the humanitarian community. This procedure assumes aid agencies are non-transparent and corrupt and require stricter oversight than they had been subject to under the Islamic Republic. Although some aspects of the procedure align with the 2005 NGO law, the main difference is that they are now being more rigorously enforced than under the Republic. The procedure also includes new provisions to prevent aid organisations from employing former government staff and requirements to share information about surveys and assessments with the government.

In many respects, the procedure was merely the start of a more aggressive regulatory stance towards aid work. According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), the government issued 173 national and local directives affecting aid delivery between December 2021 and June 2023, averaging just over two per week (see this UNOCHA access snapshot [here](#)). These restrictions ranged from limitations on female participation in aid work to demands for information about aid workers and aid recipients. This peaked with the bans on Afghan women working for NGOs in December 2022 and the UN in April 2023. At the same time, aid workers have been subject to increasing

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<sup>1</sup> The procedure has not been published online, but the authors have seen it and a copy is available with AAN.



Labourers take rest while distributing food aid from an NGO at a gymnasium in Kabul.

Photo: Wakil Kohsar/AFP, 17 January 2023.

attempts by local officials to influence who receives aid, who is hired to work on aid projects and how aid projects are carried out (see this NPR report [here](#)). The consequences of violating directives or otherwise arousing the Taleban's suspicions can range from arrests, beatings and detentions to the outright shutdown of projects. Yet, it is still possible to deliver aid in Afghanistan and for some to negotiate workarounds, often locally, but sometimes nationally, to many of the Taleban's harsher rules.

The Taleban's attitude toward aid is complicated. On the one hand, aid operations are vital to delivering certain services such as health and education and employ many Afghans. Foreign aid has been integral to keeping the economy afloat, with UN shipments of cash supporting the aid effort, injecting liquidity into the economy, stabilising the currency and keeping inflation in check. On the other hand, many government officials are deeply suspicious of aid actors and the motives of most donors, who have so far refused to recognise their government. While the government wants aid, it also wants to influence how it is spent and programmed.

One driver of tension is the nature of the aid. The vast majority of assistance that flows into Afghanistan is short-term humanitarian aid. This is a sharp change from the Republic era when development assistance accounted for the lion's share of the aid, was increasingly on-budget and explicitly provided to support the legitimacy and development of the then-government. Donors have now strategically opted for 'lifesaving' humanitarian aid over development or other kinds of aid precisely because it is intended to be delivered independently of state structures and in a politically neutral way via UN agencies and NGOs. Because humanitarian assistance can more easily bypass the Taleban government's input or control, it is more palatable to governments which oppose the Taleban. The many drawbacks of this strategy – short-termism, high overhead costs, the creation of structures parallel to government – have all been deemed preferable to working with the Taleban government or pulling out altogether.

While humanitarians portray their work as independent and apolitical, national governments rarely view it that way. Many governments, such as those in Sudan and Pakistan, tend to perceive humanitarian aid – which typically operates outside their systems – as encroaching on their sovereignty, undermining their authority and potentially fostering dependency rather than self-sufficiency. This fear is amplified in Taleban-ruled Afghanistan, where nearly all humanitarian aid is provided by countries that do not recognise the Taleban government (and whose armies fought the Taleban on the battlefield).

This report delves into Taleban views of aid and the factors driving their suspicion and hostility. It is based on 16 interviews with Taleban officials and those close to them in six provinces (Daikundi, Ghazni, Herat, Kabul, Kunar and Kunduz). It also incorporates interviews with aid workers and community members as part of a separate research project on the challenges of delivering aid in Afghanistan (see a summary of that research [here](#)). The first section of this report explores the roots of Taleban suspicion and distrust of aid and subsequently heads to their concerns of corruption within aid actors. The report then assesses the consequences of this suspicion and how and why the Taleban want to regulate aid. It also explains the existing misunderstanding between the Emirate and aid workers. Before summing up, the report looks back at the missed opportunities early on after the takeover to more positively influence Taleban attitudes toward aid.

## SUSPICION AND HOSTILITY TOWARD AID ACTORS

Although far from homogenous, Taleban beliefs about aid agencies can be divided into two main narrative strands. The first is that aid workers are spies or otherwise aligned with foreign interests and seek to promote un-Islamic values. As such, they are seen as explicitly or implicitly trying to undermine the Taleban government. Much of this belief is rooted in Taleban perceptions and experiences during the insurgency, as depicted in this account from a Taleban official in Ghazni:

*During the jihad, when the mashran [Taleban leadership] ordered us to let these people do their activities in our areas [ie under Taleban control], we allowed them. They were coming and working in different fields. In those days when musisato wala [NGO employees] were active, we lost many of our mujahedin in drone strikes. Though we couldn't arrest or didn't find evidence against them as we weren't allowed to investigate, it was very common that most of the time, when they left an area, a few mujahedin were hit by drones. They were sticking small GPS devices on the motorcycles of mujahedin and then the drones would directly target them.*

This belief that aid workers were spies and specifically that they were assisting in airstrikes targeting was relatively widespread during the insurgency (see, for example, this 2012 Overseas Development Institute (ODI) report by one of the authors [here](#)). “For 20 years,” said a Taleban official in Kunduz, “we have had a negative image of NGOs as puppets and foreigners’ spies. It will take a lot of time to change that image and perception.”

Some individuals believe that NGOs, often through needs assessment surveys or activities like demining, are still gathering intelligence that they then leverage for political gain. A government official in Kunduz stated plainly, “NGOs are mostly istikhbarati [intelligence],” adding that “in countries where the West has no presence, they use this method to collect intelligence and sow chaos.” To support this contention, he pointed out that several former Republic officials had previously held jobs with NGOs or other international organisations.<sup>2</sup> The

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<sup>2</sup> One interviewee particularly cited Rahmatullah Nabil, head of National Directorate of Security in the former Republic, who worked for UNCHR before 2001. Other officials who had worked for NGOs, the UN or similar organisations include Ashraf Ghani (World Bank, although not in Afghanistan), Hanif Atmar

widespread links between Republic officials and international organisations stand in stark contrast to the Emirate, where few national or local-level officials have had any direct links with aid organisations.

A significant source of suspicion for our interviewees lay in who funds aid efforts. Most humanitarian work is funded by governments whose armies fought the Taleban for twenty years, while the largest donor, the United States, forced them from power in 2001. Many Taleban officials struggled to reconcile the apparent contradiction between countries spending two decades fighting the Taleban and, from their perspective, continuing to fight through sanctions, travel bans and a refusal to recognise their government, and their wanting to help Afghans living under Taleban rule.

*For me, it is actually both laughable and sad. They killed our people for years. They bombarded our people, they unjustly imprisoned innocents, but now they've become so wary of us that they don't want us to die of poverty. They killed us with bombs and bullets when they had power and access, but now when they can't hit us anymore, they come and want to rescue us from hunger?! You tell me: Is there any logic behind the aid other than another means of killing – or something like that?*

– Taleban official in a provincial directorate

*Who gives money to NGOs? Western countries, of course. The same people who invaded the country and killed our people. The same people who have placed sanctions on our economy. The same people who don't want the Emirate to prevail. The same people who are afraid of Afghanistan's self-sufficiency. Why then are they so concerned about the plight of the people and want to help them? Does it make sense that the same people who've intentionally enabled a problem are also trying to resolve it? If they're honest, why have they not let the economy grow? Why are there sanctions? Why have they killed us for 20 years?*

– local official in Kunduz

Where they are seen as agents of the West, aid workers tend to receive a disproportionate amount of blame for Western governments' policy decisions, particularly with regard to sanctions and the Taleban's enforced international isolation. Typical of this view, one commander in Kunar said that although the

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(Norwegian Church Aid), Omar Daudzai (Swedish Committee for Afghanistan and UNDP) and Shah Mahmood Miakhil (several UN agencies), among others.

movement was “grateful” to the international donors for their assistance, “this human disaster that is going on is their fault.” He continued, “They want to show how much they care about humanity, but in reality, they created this situation by invading our country.” Similarly, a Taleban official in Ghazni pointed out that “on the one hand, the *duniawal* [international community] impose sanctions, don’t recognise the Emirate and have caused this economic hardship, but on the other hand, they’re helping the very same people.” Our interviewees were unable to distinguish between aid organisations and the governments that fund them and many saw aid actors as subordinate to the interests of Western countries.

While the involvement of major donor governments in the war was an important factor driving these views, there were also deeper, ideologically rooted issues. A Taleban-affiliated religious scholar from Ghazni saw it like this:

*Aid is just another tool for creating fitna [social discord that facilitates sin] in Muslim countries. How can an infidel be so generous that he spends billions on you to survive? Does he do so for God’s sake? Obviously not. In the contemporary world, no one is giving even a cent to another for free, let alone spending billions. So, I confidently say that those who provide aid have a hidden agenda. I’m not well aware of what certain countries or NGOs [musisat] are doing behind the scenes, but they’re truly doing something [negative] below the surface.*

Another interviewee, a Taleban-affiliated religious scholar from Kunduz, expressed similar views:

*A kafir [non-Muslim] never becomes a friend of a Muslim. Kafirs would never help Muslims. They’ve impeded the rise and spread of Islam through every possible way. Even a random person understands that when a person does everything to combat Muslims and Islam, how could it be possible that the same person genuinely helps the same Muslim people? Unless there were [ulterior] reasons rooted in Islamzid [anti-Islam] thinking, there would be no aid and no money.*

One official went so far as to speculate that aid workers were actually trying to incite *nifaq* [discord] in the ethnically mixed north by favouring some ethnicities over others. In the centre of the country, in Ghor province, aid operations have been particularly fraught. There has been a prolonged stand-off between aid actors and the governor, who has accused NGOs of sparking discord through aid



distribution. He even claimed NGOs were empowering former Republic security personnel and ISKP (Islamic State in Khorasan Province) fighters instead of needy people. The UN and aid actors have accused him of trying to divert aid. (This allegation has been covered by Pajhwok [here](#) and [here](#)).



A girl looks at a package clothing aid in an orphanage in Kabul. National and international NGOs support orphanages in Afghanistan, which has the countries with the highest number of orphans in the world. Photo: Muhammed Abdullah Kurtar/Anadolu Agency via AFP, 3 January 2023.

Attempts to work with women and girls have only heightened this suspicion of malicious intent. One Taleban official in Kunduz gave the example of an NGO convincing community members to send their girls to school by hiring female teachers from the community, with this potential extra income providing a greater incentive for families to educate their girls. The Taleban official criticised the ulema who supported these programmes, describing them as “a trap.” Another official, in Ghazni, also spoke about girls’ education programmes as changing community attitudes, saying they amounted to brainwashing. Again, a Taleban official from

Kunduz described what may have been simply efforts to introduce a project and better understand the community's needs in sinister terms. An NGO worker from a water project met community elders. After describing his work providing water, he began to ask the elders whether the girls in the village went to school:

*The villagers are sincere people and don't understand these complexities; they were all answering his question. Then I interfered and asked him how digging water wells was related to whether people send their daughters to school. He couldn't answer me correctly, and I told him to leave the village immediately and never come again. He was collecting such sensitive information under the banner of an NGO doing welfare work. This is just one example I came across; there are a lot of similar things that these people do.*

Public UN and NGO statements on the humanitarian crisis have also struck a nerve. Rather than seeing them as publicising the humanitarian needs in Afghanistan, many Taleban saw such statements as undermining the Emirate:

*Where are the thousands of children dying of hunger according to UNICEF or the thousands of people dying of hunger according to WFP? They cannot prove any of this. People have very little but are not dying of hunger. Many times in meetings, we asked: How did you come up with these beneficiary numbers that would need many millions [of dollars] assistance? The answer is silence. We know these NGOs do this because they want to represent Afghanistan badly to foreigners. We warned them not to make these false statements.*

– local official in Kunduz

*Some NGOs and the UN claim that there is this much and that much poverty. They say the majority of Afghans don't have food to eat. But when one sees people's dastarkhwan [people's meal table], their [NGOs] claims turn out to be factually incorrect. There is poverty, but certainly not to the extent these people project. In fact, what they say has more a political aspect than being a ground reality: it's to undermine the Emirate, blame it for the poverty and to show the world: look the Taleban can't govern a country and their population is dying of hunger.*

– local official in Kunduz

*What, so far, have these organisations done other than denouncing the Emirate? They often claim Afghanistan is insecure and people suffer severe poverty. They say the Taleban aren't respecting this and that peoples' [women*

*and minorities] rights. But all their judgements are based on their own agenda and are out of touch with reality. Everyone sees the security; no one has yet died of poverty. Women are protected and feel safer than ever. Still, NGOs and the UN only try to find the slightest problem and exaggerate it to an unbelievable extent – just to undermine our Islamic system.*

– mid-level official in Kabul

This belief again fed perceptions that aid workers were trying to compete with, or undermine, the Emirate.

*The more I observe these NGOs, the more I realize that their primary task is to function as a mawazi [parallel] government to the Emirate. Small [local] NGOs may not comprehend this, but at the higher levels, those who give money to [local] NGOs certainly have this in mind. By extending people a helping hand, NGOs try to show people that it is them, not the Emirate, who helps needy people. They also showcase that the problem of poverty came because of the Emirate and they [NGOs] only help people in these tough times. People in local areas are naïve; they believe them and become their adherents. For this purpose, those who give money [to local or small NGOs] have informed small NGOs not to allow Emirate officials to intervene in their affairs because when the Emirate takes the lead, their goals can't be obtained then.*

– local official in Kunduz

*The NGOs are trying to attract people, mostly educated people and separate them from the Emirate. They're also actively promoting a negative picture of the Emirate to the world and to Afghans by labelling the Emirate as the sole source of [economic] problems [in Afghanistan].*

– local official in Ghazni

Neither of these officials had concrete examples or specific evidence to back up these suspicions, but for them, the existence of ulterior motives was self-evident and the most reasonable way to explain why foreigners from non-Muslim countries would be trying to 'help' them. Others expressed suspicions that aid was aimed at persuading Muslims to convert to Judaism (a non-converting religion) or Christianity. This assumption seems to originate from mere anecdotes or rumours, compounded by a lack of understanding of how aid organisations work. Some, however, specifically traced their distrust to some verses in the Quran, which, according to their understanding, say non-Muslims cannot become friends, let

alone benefactors, to Muslims.<sup>3</sup> It is, however, worth pointing out that these views are not limited to the Taleban. Many within rural and, to a lesser extent, urban communities might hold similar views or suspicions.

Other, typically better-educated Taleban, tend to hold more ideologically vigorous objections rooted in their reading of hardline Muslim scholars and anti-Western narratives, which are available because of better access to international thinking via the online world and social media. One example is the 2014 book, '*Fikri Pohana*' (Intellectual Knowledge), which has been widely read by the Taleban. Its author, a Taleban thinker who writes under the name Abdul Hadi Mujahed, argues that NGOs, along with American universities, have been promoting Christianity among Muslims in various countries. The book claims that NGOs started this project in the 1980s in Pakistan, where they "openly distributed Christian books in [refugee] camps [for Afghans]" (p323).

Those who think this way often support their claims by arguing that Western countries reject Islamic regimes that do not fall in line with their 'orders', giving as examples, the US toppling of the Taleban's first Emirate and its invasion of Iraq. They also point to Egypt's 2015 post-election turmoil as another example of how the West attempts to undermine the Islamic government (although most observers would put the Muslim Brotherhood's winning and then losing power down to domestic politics rather than international interference). One senior Taleban official told one of the authors that, similarly, NGOs were a "good banner under which the West can achieve these objectives", ie undermine the Taleban's Islamic government. Another interviewee forwarded one of the authors a long WhatsApp text message about how China had only gained economic prosperity after it expelled Western NGOs.

This more ideologically motivated suspicion is not unique to the Taleban. Other Islamist groups, including ISKP, hold similar or more extreme views. ISKP, in its al-Azaim magazine, stated that aid is forbidden because, among other reasons,

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<sup>3</sup> Several verses in the Quran point to the relations between Muslims and non-Muslims; many are often interpreted out of context to fit a specific narrative. See for example, Surah Al-Ma'idah 5:51: "O YOU who have attained to faith! Do not take the Jews and the Christians for your allies: they are but allies of one another and whoever of you allies himself with them becomes, verily, one of them; behold, God does not guide such evildoers." See also Surah An-Nisa 4:139: "As for those who take the deniers of the truth for their allies in preference to the believers - do they hope to be honoured by them when, behold, all honour belongs to God [alone]?" (both translations by Muhammad Asad via <https://www.islamicity.org/quran/>).

it is used to facilitate the “spread of other religions, such as Christianity, Judaism and Shi’ism,” and that “they want to corrupt the minds of Muslims with their gifts and assistance.” ISKP contends that NGO employees are permissible military targets (see [here](#)). Hezb ut-Tahrir, a non-militant Islamist group, has recently accused NGOs of either “spreading non-Islamic values” or “pursuing political and intelligence tasks” (see [here](#)). They have urged that the activities of all NGOs be banned in Muslim countries.

Some community leaders, according to both Taleban interlocutors and authors’ conversations with elders, have objected to how aid is delivered. Unlike the Taleban’s more ideological objections, community elders are more concerned about the effects of aid on traditional values. One significant concern centres on how aid distribution has resulted in people becoming dependent on it and abandoning work. They perceive free aid distribution to be driving the spread of a ‘begging culture’ and that this is a deliberate attempt by NGOs to defile the dignity of Afghans and ‘enslave’ them. This, of course, is not particularly new; it was a common concern during the Republic and earlier eras.

## CONCERNS ABOUT CORRUPTION

The second main strand of Taleban narratives on aid paints aid workers as corrupt profiteers, more concerned with money and power than the welfare of poor people. Local officials consistently spoke about aid waste and lack of transparency. This also directly supports their arguments as to why they, as a government, need to strictly regulate aid work so they can root out corruption and ensure that Afghans receive aid according to need.

“During the Republic, a lot of money came, but this aid was stolen in many places at that time,” an official in Kunar said, “The Islamic Emirate is stopping this theft and helping needy people.” It was a familiar refrain as government officials sought to contrast their oversight of aid with the rampant aid corruption under the Republic. Others provided anecdotes told to them by government employees of graft and embezzlement during the Republic, or they detailed how the UN and international organisations exaggerated statistics to keep funding flowing. “To secure their own funding and salaries, they do every [kind of] wrongdoing,” said an

official in Kunduz. “They lie that Afghanistan is facing severe poverty.” Stories such as this from a government official in Kunduz were typical:

*We tell them [NGOs], if you want to work, then work on something that benefits the community rather than filling your pockets. That’s what the NGOs don’t like. A few days ago, an NGO stole half of the solar systems from a project. It happens, despite the fact that they’re scared of us and we check up on them. Yet they [still] try to steal, for example, solar panels. Now, if we did not check them, what do you think they would do?*



A Taliban fighter stands guard as recent earthquake affected people wait for aid from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Spera district, Khost province.

Photo: Ahmad Sahel Arman/AFP, 26 June 2022.

There was also an overriding sense that aid was an industry more concerned with keeping donor money flowing to itself – rather than addressing the root causes of humanitarian need. Taliban views that projects are inappropriate or unsustainable reinforce the underlying suspicions discussed above and fuel fears that aid workers are secretly trying to keep Afghans dependent on aid:

*If NGOs really want Afghans to get rid of poverty, then why don't they do infrastructure work? They spend millions of dollars distributing flour and oil and that's barely enough even for a month for a family. Why don't they instead build a road or a hospital? If they really want to help people, they should provide people with long-term working opportunities.*

– local official in Ghazni

*If the goal of the NGOs is to rid Afghanistan of poverty, why haven't they achieved it yet, despite spending billions of dollars in aid during the last 20 years.... NGOs say this is humanitarian aid and it shouldn't be spent on building infrastructure or other things that provide people with jobs. I don't see any logic to this. When your aim is to provide people with a livelihood, isn't it best to do it by giving people lasting jobs or work that keeps them out of poverty forever? Instead of giving people food packages, it's better they [should] build a factory where thousands of people can find a job.*

– local official in Kunduz

This official went on to speculate that the intention was “to have people dependent on them” and that “it's their agenda to keep people in poverty.”

A particular bone of contention is that many officials feel that aid workers do not sufficiently consult them or listen to their input on their activities. They deemed this as a part of the larger campaign of ‘profiteering’ by aid actors and their endeavour to perpetuate corruption:

*NGOs develop the same programmes as during the Republic, empowering corrupt local leaders.... We're not blind and we see who they work with and how much corruption is in their programmes. We closed down CDC [Community Development Councils] shuras because there was so much corruption. Some NGOs came up with another name, forming the same kind of shura with a different name. The NGOs did not even consult the Taleban in Daikundi province. The only thing these NGOs did inform us about was how they would distribute aid.*

– local official in Daikundi

Some might be sceptical of the Taleban's focus on corruption and waste when there have been claims that the Taleban themselves have behaved in corrupt ways. We asked interviewees about this. Officials denied demanding aid for personal gain, although one local official in Herat conceded that there might be

some isolated instances of corruption. “We heard complaints that the Taleban also use this monitoring in a way to take bribes from NGOs,” he said. “They hunt down the NGOs and investigate where and how they spent the money. If they find any problems, they take a share from the NGOs for themselves. I do not think it is true, there might be some cases but not to the scale that NGOs are claiming.” Where others conceded there might be some corruption in their ranks, they blamed aid workers for “corrupting” the Taleban. “NGOs bribe and assist our staff when they do not follow the rules and guidelines,” said an official in Daikundi. “We have dozens of cases.” In this context, it is worth noting that one aid worker mentioned that “some DFA [de facto authorities]<sup>4</sup> officials have been trying to root out corruption, but with these projects it is hard to do so due to the nature of the [food and non-food] distributions and Taleban members have also become clever in disguising the manipulations.”

## TALEBAN ATTEMPTS TO INFLUENCE AND CONTROL AID DELIVERY

As these accounts illustrate, the Taleban justify their regulation of aid actors by citing their concerns about corruption within the industry. Aid workers see things differently, viewing many Taleban demands as undue interference and tending to push back on attempts at Taleban involvement in their activities. This includes government officials at the national and local levels routinely putting forward lists of people to be included in needs assessments and pressuring aid actors not to assist specific individuals – such as families suspected of being affiliated to the Islamic State, former officials of the Republic, or its close supporters. Local government officials also try to influence aid worker recruitment, site selection and programme modalities.

Local officials deny ‘interfering’ with aid delivery, describing it rather as ‘accountability’ and consider their demands to be well within the rights of a government. One frustrated local government official in Herat said, “These

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<sup>4</sup> The ‘de facto authorities’ is the term used by the UN and many donors to speak about the Taleban government, given it is not recognised.



institutions consider the presence of the government as interference in their plans.” If they did insert themselves into the work of aid agencies, Taleban interviewees claimed, it was simply to ensure aid reached those who need it – and prevent aid organisations from diverting funds or wasting money.

*NGOs say that it is humanitarian aid and they don't give the Islamic Emirate the right to interfere, but we as a government must interfere to make sure the humanitarian assistance gets to the right people. The Islamic Emirate interferes to make sure there is no corruption.*

– local official in Kunar

*NGOs often complain that the Islamic Emirate interferes in their affairs, but if we didn't, NGOs wouldn't honestly provide this aid to needy people, but distribute it based on their [personal] relationships. So this is our responsibility as a government.*

– local official in Kunar

Some government officials said they were merely doing what the Republic should have done had it been a properly functioning government that served the people. “The Taleban officials go to the NGOs in order to ensure there is transparency,” he said. The real problem was that NGOs were not used to being held accountable: “In the past 20 years, no one has asked them to account for whatever money they spent, but now the Taleban are asking them to account for spending” – and that, he felt, was what NGOs complained about, as ‘Taleban interference’. To be sure, the Taleban do monitor aid activity more intensively than the Republic did. One aid worker provided the example that, while NGOs sometimes would not report at all to the Republic, the Taleban strictly follow up on all reporting requirements at district, provincial and national levels.

In interviews, there was often a sense that national pride and self-sufficiency were at stake. Afghanistan is a highly aid dependent country, a state of affairs many Afghans have long resented. The Taleban’s efforts to control aid derive in part from these sentiments. While some officials know that the economy will likely collapse in the near term without foreign aid, others think differently. In fact, there was an underlying sense in these conversations that Afghanistan could certainly survive without the foreign aid being given now. This has been echoed in recent public statements by the Taleban government. Responding to the UN’s temporary pause in activities after the ban on female workers, spokesman Zabiullah Mujahed

emphasised in a [tweet](#) the role of sanctions and the seizure of central bank assets in perpetuating the need for aid in the first place and emphasised that “Afghans have the capacity to stand on their own feet.” The message seemed to be that aid workers could either follow the government’s rules or leave.



People receive food aid distributed by international organisation for needy people in Kabul.  
Photo: Bilal Guler/Anadolu Agency via AFP, 21 May 2022.

Still, aid worker accounts paint a complicated and varied picture, with aid organisations subject to different local restrictions and pressures in different places. However, it is important to try to distinguish between officials trying to use aid for self-enrichment, to boost their personal standing or help their group or clan and those trying to influence aid for less self-interested reasons. For example, the actions of some local government officials appeared driven by the desire to be seen as giving something to communities and demonstrating that they were providing for the population. After all, the Taleban have few other resources to do so. As one aid worker described it, “As a responsible government, they can’t return [to rule over the population] empty-handed – if they don’t have any way of helping

them.”<sup>5</sup> This desire to take credit may explain why officials may insist on being present at critical activities such as beneficiary selection and food distributions, as well as concerns that NGOs may be seeking to influence Afghans through aid.

Some Kabul-level officials claimed they urged NGOs to change programming locations simply because they felt other areas had been neglected and required more urgent attention. Other similar demands to switch target locations appear very much to be driven by patronage. The degree of Taleban involvement and what motivates individuals appears to differ significantly according to local dynamics, personal interests and connections with NGOs working locally. Some examples flesh out the complexities of what might be behind ‘interference’.

In some instances, local officials simply do not see aid projects as appropriate. For example, one local official asked an NGO working on dispute resolution with young people to take half their budget that was devoted to holding workshops and gatherings and spend it on a computer lab instead. In the Taleban’s view, a computer lab would be more sustainable and appropriate for a project focused on youth engagement. In the NGO’s view, this was undue interference and a threat to their ability to work independently. Moreover, their donors would have been unlikely to agree to such a change in plans – especially if they knew the Taleban had requested it.

In another instance, local officials objected to an aid organisation giving cash to people without anything in return. They urged the NGO to pay people money for clearing a *karez* [irrigation canal] instead of just giving it for free. This, the Taleban official felt, would have the added benefit of ensuring the food would be distributed according to need, as few people with means would undertake such work.

Another major issue has been mobile health clinics. UN agencies and NGOs see mobile clinics as a valuable intervention, allowing those in remote areas to access care they would otherwise have to travel long distances for. The government sees them as wasteful, drawing away resources from the stationary clinics within the government system. More people, they argue, would go to a

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<sup>5</sup> The US military and other allies also used aid as part of a larger winning hearts and minds campaign, particularly after adopting a counter-insurgency strategy in 2010, to win over and detract communities from supporting the Taleban. See for example, [this](#) case study of Helmand, by Stuart Gordon, ‘Winning Hearts and Minds?: Examining the Relationship between Aid and Security in Afghanistan’s Helmand Province’, 2011, Tufts University.

clinic if mobile services did not exist and services at the clinics could be improved with more investment.

The targeting and selection of beneficiaries has been yet another bone of contention. In some instances, government officials directly try to influence who gets aid. In others, they are pushing for what they see as a more equitable distribution. In one case in Kunar, where an aid organisation had distributed aid according to their needs assessments, officials and community members objected because certain families would receive more than others. In their view, this would cause jealousy and conflict within the community. After the distribution, they directed those who received aid to return it to the government officials, who then worked together to distribute it equitably so that no one family received more than any other. One Taleban official described a similar dynamic in his district in Ghazni:

*In our village, they registered two homes as eligible [for aid], but we have more than two households which are poor and eligible. Then, those whose names weren't registered became disgruntled with the others and even had an argument. They [NGOs] even create problems at the village level. In one village, they list many people and in another, very few people. Then that village with a small number of registrations becomes hostile to the other village and they cut all relations with each other – all because of the NGOs.*

The Taleban's negative view of aid has been compounded by the level of complaints that officials said they receive from people about aid. In interviews with community members, people said they typically took their complaints to the local directorate for the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice and Hearing of Complaints (Amr bil-Maruf). While they knew how to complain to the government, few were aware of how to lodge their concerns with the aid organisations involved directly. Indeed, there is no centralised aid complaints mechanism in Afghanistan. Various individual agencies operate different complaints and accountability hotlines or other mechanisms. But for Afghans, who may not even know who is, in fact, providing the aid that they receive, navigating this web of different mechanisms can be difficult. The government, by contrast, has one central port of call in Amr bil-Maruf, which has widely disseminated information about its complaints mechanism in mosques and bazaars. People may also, if they wish, complain to the governor or police.

Afghans can also expect that the Taleban are more likely than aid organisations to do something about their complaints.

Nevertheless, these complaints created a headache for more sympathetic local officials and emboldened others who wanted to restrict aid further. Several local officials felt the Taleban leadership did not want NGOs to work in the country and it was only because of international attention that they continued to allow it. One commander in Kunduz talked about how people often complained to the officials about aid actors, which, he said, made his job more difficult because it supported the arguments of others who wanted to shut down NGOs. An official in Daikundi echoed this view:

*The NGOs don't want to fix it themselves.... I don't know how long the Taleban leadership will tolerate these problems. I'm afraid if these problems continue for another couple of years, the [Taleban] leadership will make some decisions to allow the Emirate to control the humanitarian assistance completely.*

## MUTUAL MISUNDERSTANDING AND MISCOMMUNICATION?

Our research suggests there is much that the Taleban does not understand about aid work – in itself, a confusing bureaucracy with different rules and principles that can easily seem counterintuitive to non-aid workers. This lack of understanding, in turn, reinforces their suspicions that aid workers have ulterior motives or are otherwise not to be trusted. One aid worker in Kunduz, for example, saw the situation as follows:

*The Taleban do not have experience with how to deal with NGOs. They want NGOs to work under them, for example, they think: Let us [the Taleban] decide what kind of projects should be funded with the available money, where and how. [We] should have a say in any contracts, surveys and distributions... The way these Taleban deal with their soldiers is also how they deal with the NGOs.*

Aid workers have not necessarily invested sufficiently in trying to explain their ways of working and potential value to Taleban. Yet even when they do, that can be

easily misunderstood. When one aid worker tried to explain to someone from the provincial government the importance of humanitarian principles and, specifically, the principle of independence, the reaction was hostile. The worker recounted how the official interpreted independence as the same as *yaghitub* [rebellion, or fighting against the state]. The aid worker recounted him saying they would not tolerate *yaghitub* and that ““whoever wants to work in Afghanistan must work under the IEA.”” For a government striving to bring the country under its complete control and suspicious of anyone trying to work outside the Taleban system, this reaction is not surprising. Nevertheless, it illustrates the gulf between the logic of aid work and the logic of the Taleban.

By the same token, aid workers seem to lack an understanding of how the Taleban works and what is driving its demands. While the UN has an engagement strategy for the Taleban, it is unclear if this is an effective approach for building a common understanding. For example, we were told UNOCHA had used a PowerPoint presentation to educate provincial and district officials on humanitarian principles. While well-intentioned, this may not be the best way to open a genuine dialogue about the real factors and concerns driving Taleban restrictions. It also implies that the UN has not fully understood where the problem with the Taleban lies and have not, for instance, attempted to address the major sources of suspicion and distrust discussed in this report.

Most aid worker engagement with government officials is transactional, ad hoc and operationally focused. They go to local officials when they have a project they need to implement or when there is a problem. There is little discussion between aid actors and officials about international norms governing aid provision and how that might differ from what the government (or indeed communities) want or expect from the aid being provided. While some aid organisations have a long history of negotiating with the Taleban stretching back decades, others have been reticent about engaging with the government for many reasons.

Some of this might be down to donor restrictions – driven by a fear of them perceiving aid as ‘benefitting’ the Taleban. This has had a chilling effect on dialogue about aid that is actually operationally necessary. Among some aid workers, lack of contact has been driven by personal distaste for the Taleban’s beliefs or fear of being seen to support their political agenda. “The problem is that both sides do not like each other. There is the perception that the Taleban hates NGOs. The NGOs still don’t see the Taleban as a government,” said one aid worker

in Herat. “So the problem is on both sides.” Aid workers often tried to avoid or minimise the government’s involvement in their work for fear of being seen as ‘too close’ to the Taleban or for other reasons.



A woman waits with others outside a United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) office in Kandahar to receive non-food items.

Photo: Javed Tanveer/AFP, 8 March 2022.

“During the Republic era, we would invite government officials, but they would not come,” remarked one aid worker, “But now we try not to include the Taleban representative in meetings and gatherings. It’s the Taleban who push for their staff to be present in events and gatherings.” Many said they did everything possible to avoid or limit coordination with government officials, seeing “coordination with the Taleban as breaking the donors’ rules and regulations” amid “a general feeling that as much as possible, one should stay away from the Taleban.” Some aid workers questioned this stance, but felt powerless to change it. This aloofness reinforces Taleban suspicions and hostility, as one official in Kunduz said:

*The NGOs aren't transparent about their budgets, staff, or activities. NGOs decide what is needed in Kunduz without asking the people or the government. There's a government who should be engaged before requesting a project, but NGOs completely ignore the Taleban and pretend as though we don't exist. We're the government here. And it's not the Republic government where anybody can bring projects to Kunduz. The Taleban must audit all projects before they start.*

Perceptions that aid actors are bypassing that state and not sharing information were widespread – particularly when government officials observed that different standards and practices were being applied than during the Republic era. After all, the new officials are often the same as the old officials: many civil servants in the line ministries dealing with aid workers are the very same people who served in those positions under the Republic. They remember how things worked then and very clearly see how the government is treated differently now. “NGOs during the Republican period always tried to invite civil servants in their programmes and they were present in their programmes,” said one government official in Herat. “But now the same NGOs avoid this issue and do not invite government employees in their programmes, which is very bad.”

The more aid actors have avoided contact, the more suspicious and hostile government officials have become and the more they have tried to control humanitarian actors. Many frontline aid workers felt this lack of consultation on project design drove bureaucratic delays and other issues. Yet, there were rarely consultations with officials about the project design before finalising proposals. This meant that the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) process – getting formal permission to work from the government – was often the first the government knew of a project, and then, not surprisingly, they often had questions, which, in turn, created delays.

During the Republic, the working relationship between the government and the UN and NGOs had its own difficulties and not all of these challenges are new. Government delays in approving MoUs, for example, were also common under the Republic. However, the underlying dynamics have fundamentally changed, with mutual distrust and lack of communication exacerbating an already fraught working relationship.



## MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

Many aid actors were caught on the back foot when the Taleban took over. Moreover, most UN agencies and NGOs were closely aligned with the Republic. They had a distorted understanding of the movement and lacked the right contacts to ensure the safety of their staff and organisations when the Taleban took over the country. As chaotic scenes played out over the evacuation at Kabul International Airport, the Taleban were also occupying multiple NGO compounds in Kabul, searching their premises, demanding food and other assistance, or actually taking them over. When it came to getting permission from the new government to continue their work, most aid agencies initially negotiated with the Taleban locally and bilaterally. Yet there was a sense that, immediately after the takeover and on the whole, the new government officials were surprisingly practical and somewhat flexible, seeking to provide security for aid actors and willing to talk about their concerns.<sup>6</sup> Aid workers said there was, for example, more space for technical debates and room for negotiation – although it is important to stress that this dynamic differed across locales, as well as depending on the personalities involved.

Among many aid workers interviewed who had been in Afghanistan at the time of the Taleban takeover, there was a strong sense that an opportunity was lost. One NGO director in Kabul described the Taleban's trajectory:

*When they first came in, they made these promises, because they thought: Well, it's going to be quite straightforward, there's quite a functioning state that we will take over and it will just tick along. But now everything has fallen apart. It's been really difficult for them. There's been no international recognition, and they've faced opposition and have to do all these house searches to root [the opposition] out. And now they have a bit of a siege mentality.*

This lingering hesitancy has been reinforced by the Emirate's increasingly draconian restrictions on women, specifically female aid workers. Even now,

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<sup>6</sup> See also Fiona Gall and Dauod Khuram, 'Between a Rock and a Hard Place – Multifaceted Challenges of Responders Dealing with Afghanistan's Humanitarian Crisis: A Report on the Perspectives of National NGOs', ICVA, 2022 [here](#).



Truckers prepare for their departure from Pakistan to Afghanistan carrying containers loaded with food and other relief items from the international NGO Muslim Hands.

Photo: Aamir Qureshi/AFP, 7 February 2022.

many aid workers, particularly expatriates, do not feel they have the tools or information required to understand the Taleban. This was compounded by the fact that they have been caught off guard by multiple events (not only the Taleban takeover but also the introduction of the ‘Procedure for Control and Regulation of the Activities of Domestic and International Organisations’ in February 2022, the ban on female schooling, cemented in March 2022 and the ban on women working for NGOs in December 2022 and the UN in April 2023). They are thus constantly reacting rather than planning or proactively engaging. One described it as constantly playing catch up and having little more than ‘gossip’ about the Taleban leadership to go on. That said, other organisations with deeper roots in local communities and a stronger understanding of local dynamics have been better able to negotiate with local officials and weather the volatility caused by the steady stream of national edits affecting their work.

As this report has argued, the problem is on both sides. Yet aid organisations have found themselves increasingly at the mercy of larger geopolitical tensions.

By seeking to use aid as leverage with the Taleban, donor governments and institutions have further undermined claims that this aid is truly being provided in an independent and neutral way. Donor governments have imposed politically motivated conditionalities on how aid can be used, and by providing mainly short-term humanitarian aid to address longer term issues such as poverty and lack of access to healthcare, they are reinforcing aid dependence. Meanwhile, the Taleban, increasingly frustrated with their international isolation, are taking that frustration out on the only symbols of the ‘international community’ left in Afghanistan: the UN and NGOs. Both the government and aid donors are playing politics with lifesaving aid, and aid organisations have been caught in between.

## CONCLUSION

Things look likely to get worse before they get any better, with the Taleban increasingly seeking to restrict the space for the UN and NGOs to provide services and deliver aid. Much of the tension and conflict between aid actors and government is not new or unique to this period in Afghanistan’s history and is quite natural: if it was Germany or the UK or Japan encountering foreign organisations providing aid, independent of government, in programmes which provided mass employment, skewed local power dynamics, sought to influence behaviour and values and brought in foreign income that amounted to a significant part of GDP, one can only imagine their reaction.

Understanding what specifically drives Taleban perceptions and actions is, nevertheless, important, even as the space to influence the Emirate continues to shrink. If not addressed more effectively, the distrust could further curtail aid for those who need it most. Conservative Taleban officials and ideologues have been looking at possibilities of closing down the entire aid community. Other Islamist movements, such as Hezb Ut-Tahrir, are also lobbying the officials to shut the NGOs (see this report on Tahrir’s official website [here](#)). ISKP also criticises the Taleban for their position toward international aid (see this Militant Wire report [here](#)). Moreover, the Taleban is concerned with ensuring that aid is not used, as they fear it might be, against them.



People load sacks of humanitarian aid on donkey for victims of the magnitude 6.1 earthquake that hit Khost province in June 2022.

Photo: Bilal Guler/Anadolu Agency via AFP, 27 June 2022.

However, ideologically motivated suspicion is not the sole source of distrust. Poorly implemented aid projects also engender mistrust and suspicion. Government officials receive complaints from community elders and ulema in particular. One serious and understandable objection is to the unsustainability of many current aid programmes. In our interviews for this report and other separate conversations, Taliban and community elders expressed a strong desire for the aid community to provide assistance where the benefits would be long-lasting. More recently, the spokesman for Khost Police Headquarters, Mustaghfer Gurbaz, quoted the provincial deputy governor telling NGOs: “Reach out to the needy properly, five litres of oil and a 20 kilos sack of flour are not enough for them; the damage [of unsustainable aid] is much higher than its benefits. Substantial work needs to be done for needy people to be truly saved from poverty.” (see this [tweet](#)). Many aid actors would agree with the deputy governor – all things being equal, but they are also constrained by donor restrictions on what aid they can deliver and how.

In spite of all this, many Taleban, both at senior and lower levels, do continue to welcome aid. Senior officials acknowledge, though privately, the macroeconomic effects of aid money flowing in to the country. Local officials and fighters tend to benefit from it, despite ideological objections. Those local aid workers with better communication skills, contacts, and understanding of the Taleban have better managed to continue their work, but few have found navigating the new dispensation easy. Caught between unrealistic and harmful donor demands on the one side and Taleban suspicions and restrictions on the other, aid actors find themselves with little room for manoeuvre. The Taleban's increasingly restrictive stance suggests the environment will not become easier any time soon. However, for those organisations who wish to continue working in Afghanistan, investing in improving relations with the Taleban and trying to change the authorities' perceptions of aid actors should be an urgent priority.

Cover photo:

Flood-affected people sit next to food aid distributed by the Afghanistan National Disaster Management Authority (ANDMA) in Herat.

Photo: Mohsen Karimi/AFP, 18 July 2023.

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Design and layout by Žolt Kovač