



INTERNATIONAL
PEACE
INSTITUTE

A Humanitarian Perspective on the Independent Assessment in Afghanistan

JUNE 2023

On May 16, 2023, the International Peace Institute (IPI) held a roundtable for humanitarian organizations, member states, UN Secretariat entities, and other relevant actors, including those based in Geneva and Afghanistan, to inform the independent assessment on Afghanistan mandated by UN Security Council Resolution 2679 (2023). This discussion was the first in a series of roundtables within the framework of IPI's project "Bridging New York and Geneva on Humanitarian Action," which aims to bring the humanitarian perspective of Geneva to the work of the United Nations in New York, creating an exchange between the peace and security and humanitarian sectors.

This meeting note summarizes the main points raised in the roundtable discussion under the Chatham House rule of non-attribution and does not necessarily represent the views of all participants.

This project is partially funded by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation Office in New York.

Introduction

In March 2023, the UN Security Council extended the mandate of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) for a twelve-month period.¹ In parallel, the council adopted Resolution 2679 (2023), which requested that the UN secretary-general provide the Security Council with an integrated, independent assessment of the international community's approach to Afghanistan by November 17, 2023. Two years after the Taliban's takeover of Kabul, the council identified the need for an independent assessment to make recommendations for the international community's united reengagement with Afghanistan.

While the Security Council mandated an independent review of UNAMA in 2017, this is the first time the council mandated an independent assessment of the UN system-wide presence and other actors in Afghanistan.² The secretary-general appointed Feridun Sinirlioğlu of Türkiye as the special coordinator to lead the independent assessment team in April 2023. At the time of publication, the rest of the team is still being onboarded.³

The International Peace Institute (IPI) hosted a roundtable on May 16, 2023, to discuss the independent assessment process and provide input from humanitarian experts during the preparatory phase of the assessment. This roundtable provided a platform for exchanges between humanitarian organizations, the UN Secretariat, member states, civil society groups, and independent experts, including those based in Geneva and Afghanistan.

Participants welcomed the independent assessment as a chance to depoliticize discussions and unite behind a single strategy at a time when the Taliban are playing on divisions within the council. Participants agreed that including a humanitarian perspective throughout the assessment process is critical. At the same time, participants emphasized that any action in Afghanistan must be based on a political and security solution, not humanitarian aid alone. In particular, participants recognized a need to invest in development to alleviate the country's poverty crisis. Finally, participants stressed the need for the international community to engage with the Taliban without recognizing their government.

¹ IPI, Stimson Center, and Security Council Report, "Prioritizing and Sequencing of Security Council Mandates in 2023: The Case of UNAMA," March 2023.

² Daniel Forti, "Independent Reviews of UN Peace Operations: A Study of Politics and Practice," IPI, October 2021.

³ UN, "Secretary-General Appoints Feridun Sinirlioğlu of Türkiye Special Coordinator, Independent Assessment Mandated by Security Council Resolution 2679 (2023)," Press Release SG/A/2194, April 25, 2023.

The main recommendations for the independent assessment include to:

- Ensure the team includes humanitarian and gender experts;
- Facilitate an inclusive, meaningful, and safe process;
- Avoid duplicating other efforts and leverage existing platforms;
- Account for the diversity and complexity of the humanitarian sector;
- Consider the broader challenges facing the humanitarian sector;
- Make recommendations for a sustainable response that goes beyond humanitarian action; and
- Produce a strategic report rather than a detailed operational roadmap.

Humanitarian Situation in Afghanistan

The humanitarian situation in Afghanistan is one of the most complex in the world, with over 28 million people (more than two-thirds of the population) dependent on humanitarian assistance. The Taliban's takeover of Kabul in 2021 has worsened the humanitarian crisis, which many participants referred to as an enduring "poverty crisis." This crisis is driven by financial, legal, political, and security challenges and is further compounded by climate change and the lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Rapid changes in the country have forced the humanitarian sector to adapt its operations to respond to the magnitude of the crisis. With the withdrawal of US and NATO military presences and most diplomatic representatives, humanitarian organizations are among the only international actors operating in Afghanistan. Without an overarching international political process to address the challenges driving Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis, humanitarian actors operate under immense pressure and risk, facing challenges far beyond the typical operational difficulties.

Overreliance on Humanitarian Aid

Participants recalled that before August 2021, the international response in Afghanistan was focused on development with no large humanitarian presence. Twenty months later, the complete cessation of development funding has amplified reliance on humanitarian aid, and most of the population is aid-dependent. As a result, humanitarian aid has been the predominant form of international engagement in Afghanistan. While humanitarian aid has provided an entry point for maintaining a presence and delivering assistance, as well as facilitating dialogue with the de facto authorities, the current situation is not sustainable. Humanitarian action cannot replace political engagement and development assistance.

The absence of other forms of international engagement also raises the risk that the Taliban politicize aid and use it as a bargaining chip. Participants emphasized that aid should not be leveraged for ulterior motives but solely deployed to address the urgent humanitarian needs of the Afghan population.

Given the pressure on the humanitarian sector, a participant also noted the terrible mental health situation of both Afghans and humanitarian workers, raising the question of humanitarian organizations' "duty of care" vis-à-vis their own staff. This strain on mental health affects both international and national humanitarian workers.

Bans on Afghan Women Working for NGOs or the UN

Participants discussed the Taliban's bans on women working for humanitarian organizations and for the UN, which have grave humanitarian consequences for Afghan women in particular.⁴ As noted in the secretary-general's latest report on UNAMA, "Following the decision to bar women from working for NGOs, a survey by UN Women found that 94 percent of 127 women-led national civil society organizations working in the civil

⁴ UN Women, "Statement: The Decree Barring Women in Afghanistan from Working in Non-Governmental Organizations Is Yet another Stark Violation of Women's Rights," December 27, 2022; International Crisis Group, "Taliban Restrictions on Women's Rights Deepen Afghanistan's Crisis," February 23, 2023; Norah Niland, "Afghanistan: Deja Vu All Over Again," United Against Inhumanity, February 25, 2023; UN Women, "Humanitarian Access Working Group: Tracking Impact Report on the Recent Ban on Women Working with NGOs and INGOs in Afghanistan (13–30 January 2023)," February 8, 2023.

society sector had either fully or partially ceased their activities.”⁵ Participants noted that the situation of women in the country has since worsened. Sexual and gender-based violence has increased, and there are no tailored programs to support survivors, which would not be exempt from the bans.

These bans raise serious operational, legal, and ethical dilemmas for humanitarian organizations and the UN, which abide by the principle of non-discrimination. Some international humanitarian organizations have decided to continue their operations despite the restrictions, with the understanding that their withdrawal from the country could have dramatic humanitarian consequences. These organizations have attempted to continue operating with female workers and to serve female beneficiaries in line with the humanitarian principle of non-discrimination, in some cases negotiating exemptions to the ban with the de facto authorities at the provincial and national levels. Yet these exemptions are case-by-case, time-bound, and fragile, and negotiations are time-intensive. Participants mentioned that when exemptions cannot be negotiated, programs are often paused or closed.

Financial and Economic Crises

The collapse of the banking sector following the US and other governments’ decision to cut off Afghanistan’s central bank from the international banking system has catalyzed economic, financial, and trade crises.⁶ Cash shortages have hampered humanitarian efforts, leading the UN to transport weekly shipments of about \$40 million in cash to the country. Humanitarian organizations also rely on informal and less regulated systems such as *hawala* for money transfers within the country.⁷ Despite the cost and risk of these processes, they remain “the most feasible means of ensuring donor

funds can quickly reach the millions of Afghan men, women, and children who are in urgent need of aid.”⁸ Additionally, humanitarian efforts in Afghanistan remain underfunded. By the conclusion of the first quarter, the 2023 Afghanistan Humanitarian Response Plan, which aimed to secure \$4.6 billion, had received a meager \$250 million, about 5.4 percent of the total funding needed.⁹

Sanctions, Restrictive Measures, and Humanitarian Carve-Outs

Overcompliance with UN and bilateral sanctions on the Taliban continues to hamper humanitarian assistance. The UN sanctions include a humanitarian exception that permits the processing and payment of funds, financial assets, and economic resources, as well as the provision of goods and services necessary to ensure the timely delivery of humanitarian assistance and support basic human needs.¹⁰ Additionally, the US Treasury Department has issued General License 20, which allows certain transactions involving Afghanistan or its governing institutions.¹¹

Despite these exceptions, the financial sector remains risk-averse and over-complies with the sanctions on the Taliban due to a misunderstanding of the rules.¹² In particular, de-risking practices—that is, banks’ delaying of or refusal to transfer funds—have compounded existing challenges to the delivery of humanitarian assistance. Further, donors continue to apply restrictive terms and conditions to the release of their funding—terms that sometimes run counter to the impartiality principle of humanitarian aid. Despite these restrictions, counterterrorism institutions and sanctions bodies are increasingly concerned that sanctioned groups and individuals may divert aid in the country.

5 UN General Assembly and UN Security Council, *The Situation in Afghanistan and its Implications for International Peace and Security*, UN Doc. A/77/772-S/2023/151, February 27, 2023.

6 Human Rights Watch, “Afghanistan: Economic Roots of the Humanitarian Crisis,” March 1, 2022.

7 William Byrd, “Afghanistan Requires a Change from Humanitarian Business as Usual,” *Lawfare*, March 30, 2023.

8 UNAMA, “Cash Shipments to the UN in Afghanistan: Info Sheet,” January 9, 2023.

9 UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), “Humanitarian Update: Afghanistan,” March 2023.

10 UN Security Council Resolution 2615 (December 22, 2021), UN Doc. S/RES/2615. On this, see: Agathe Sarfati, “An Unfinished Agenda: Carving Out Space for Humanitarian Action in the Security Council’s Counterterrorism Resolutions and Related Sanctions,” IPI, March 2022.

11 US Department of Treasury, “U.S. Treasury Issues General License to Facilitate Economic Activity in Afghanistan,” press release, February 25, 2022.

12 Erica Moret, “Barriers to Afghanistan’s Critical Private Sector Recovery,” Norwegian Refugee Council, March 2023.

Security Concerns

Finally, some humanitarian organizations face increasing difficulties accessing Afghans in need.¹³ Immediately following the Taliban takeover, humanitarian access across the country improved due to the decrease in violent conflict.¹⁴ More recently, however, increasing concerns over the safety and security of humanitarian staff have reduced access. This is due not only to the increasingly restrictive conditions enforced by the Taliban—affecting women in particular—but also to the growing threats from armed groups designated as terrorist organizations, such as the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), al-Qaida, and Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan.¹⁵ The ISKP has attacked some international and humanitarian organizations in Afghanistan in recent years and has recently expanded its anti-humanitarian propaganda campaigns.¹⁶

Rationale for the Independent Assessment

The decision to commission an independent assessment of the Afghanistan situation arose from concerns about the highly politicized nature of the file in the Security Council, which has hindered the pursuit of a coherent international response. This lack of coherence was exacerbated by the Taliban's imposition of discriminatory measures against women. The co-penholders of the resolution, Japan and the United Arab Emirates, aim to obtain independent recommendations detached from political dynamics and foster an objective decision-making process. The goal, according to participants, is to unite the international community around a common set of principles and a shared strategic approach toward the country.

According to UN Security Council Resolution 2679 (2023), the independent assessment is aimed at

providing “forward-looking recommendations for an integrated and coherent approach among relevant political, humanitarian, and development actors, within and outside of the United Nations system.”¹⁷ This assessment thus extends beyond UNAMA to other parts of the UN system. Noting the call for an “integrated approach,” participants recognized the need for the UN Secretariat and other actors to work in a collaborative fashion, ensuring the involvement of multiple UN entities. Moreover, they noted that the assessment goes beyond the purview of the UN system and will incorporate recommendations for actors outside the UN, including member states, regional organizations, the private sector, women's groups, and other civil society organizations.

At the time of publication, the independent assessment team is still being onboarded. The UN Secretariat is still drafting the terms of reference for the team, as well as its lines of inquiry, and scoping the composition of the “red team,” whose role is to challenge the assumptions and findings of the independent assessment. As the Secretariat is still agreeing upon the process, methodology, and possible outcomes of the independent assessment, participants discussed good practices on independent assessments and reviews to inform the process.¹⁸ They also expressed their views on the potential outcome of the assessment, noting that the goal should be to produce a strategic report rather than a detailed operational roadmap for all stakeholders. Additionally, participants emphasized the importance of the Security Council having access to the complete report, as per the resolution.¹⁹ While the report may not be made available to the general public in its entirety, participants believed that having the council review the report in full (as foreseen by the resolution) would be valuable, enabling council members to make informed policy decisions based on a comprehensive assessment.

13 OCHA, “Afghanistan: Humanitarian Access Snapshot (September 2022),” October 5, 2022.

14 ACAPS, “Afghanistan: Country Overview,” 2023.

15 Soufan Center, “IntelBrief: Islamic State Khorasan Remains a Stubborn Threat in Afghanistan,” March 29, 2023; Counter Extremism Project and Konrad Adenauer Foundation, “The Taliban's Takeover in Afghanistan: Effects on Global Terrorism,” December 2022.

16 Andrew Mines, “Refuting the Lying Tongues: Unpacking the Islamic State Khorasan Province's Campaign against Humanitarians in Afghanistan,” Program on Extremism at George Washington University, February 2023.

17 Security Council Report, “Afghanistan: Vote on Two Draft Resolutions,” March 15, 2023. This language comes from preambular paragraph 6 of Security Council Resolution 2626 (2022) mandating UNAMA.

18 Daniel Forti, “Independent Reviews of UN Peace Operations: A Study of Politics and Practice,” IPI, October 2021.

19 UN Security Council Resolution 2679 (March 16, 2023), UN Doc. S/RES/2679.

The Humanitarian Sector's Recommendations for the Independent Assessment

Participants shared several recommendations for the independent assessment team:

- **Ensure the team includes humanitarian and gender experts:** Participants highlighted the imperative for the independent assessment team to possess a diverse range of expertise, particularly in humanitarian response and gender perspectives. They stressed the importance of incorporating individuals who possess an in-depth understanding of the complex humanitarian context in Afghanistan and the distinct challenges encountered by women. Considering the discriminatory decrees enacted by the Taliban, participants underscored the critical need for the team to include gender experts, enabling a comprehensive and inclusive approach that addresses the needs and experiences of women and girls in Afghanistan.
- **Facilitate an inclusive, meaningful, and safe process:** Participants emphasized that it is crucial for the independent assessment team to prioritize Afghans' perspectives in the review, underscoring that "Afghans know what they want and need." Therefore, the team should engage in consultations with a broad segment of the Afghan population, including political opponents of the Taliban, human and women's rights activists, and youth. To ensure inclusivity and meaningful participation, participants stressed the importance of creating a safe environment and enabling anonymous input. They also emphasized the need for civil society's continuous involvement, as well as the need to establish a feedback loop to inform those consulted on how their input informed the process. Additionally, consultations with stakeholders both inside and outside Afghanistan were deemed vital. Toward this end, participants recommended exploring remote participation options to increase inclusivity and active participation throughout the assessment process. Participants also acknowledged, however, that it would be impractical to incorporate the concerns of all those consulted in the final report, highlighting the importance of managing expectations.
- **Avoid duplicating other efforts and leverage existing platforms:** Participants emphasized the importance of avoiding duplicative efforts. They therefore advocated for building upon other recent review processes undertaken by the UN system in Afghanistan, including the recent internal review conducted by UNAMA. Participants further highlighted the need to leverage existing consultation platforms, such as those established by the humanitarian country team. However, they acknowledged that these platforms might not capture the perspectives of all segments of society.
- **Account for the diversity and complexity of the humanitarian sector:** Participants noted that it is crucial to recognize that the humanitarian sector is comprised of a diverse array of actors that operate in different regions of the country and have different mandates. Thus, participants stated that it is essential to bring a diverse range of humanitarian actors to the table, including both international and national and both UN and non-UN actors. Participants also noted that in order to understand the challenges encountered throughout the humanitarian cycle, the independent assessment team should also consult beneficiaries and donors.
- **Consider the broader challenges facing the humanitarian sector:** Participants emphasized that the assessment should not solely focus on humanitarian action or become a review of the humanitarian sector. Instead, participants encouraged the team to strive for recommendations for preserving the humanitarian space and humanitarian principles. Toward that end,

participants recommended that the assessment consider the bigger picture and address other challenges—including challenges related to finance, security, and human rights—that impede the ability of humanitarian actors to operate. Tackling these broader issues will help preserve the humanitarian space and alleviate the humanitarian crisis.

- **Make recommendations for a sustainable response that goes beyond humanitarian action:** Participants urged the independent assessment team to recommend interventions beyond the humanitarian sphere, stressing that the cessation of development programming has driven up humanitarian needs, and the current focus on humanitarian efforts is unsustainable. According to participants, it is thus crucial for the international community to take risks by investing in longer-term development programs that address persistent challenges like rural poverty and the impact of climate change. Such development-oriented initiatives should transcend political considerations and resonate with a broad range of stakeholders, necessitating a nuanced approach that navigates the complexities of engaging with the Taliban without officially recognizing their government.

In addition, participants recommended that the

independent assessment team produce a strategic report rather than a detailed operational roadmap.

Conclusion

Amid the escalating humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, and almost two years after the takeover by the Taliban, UN Security Council Resolution 2679 (2023) mandated that the UN secretary-general provide the council with an integrated, independent assessment of the international community's approach to Afghanistan by November 17, 2023. The independent assessment is an opportunity to unite the international community behind an independent and depoliticized process, which could lead to an objective set of recommendations on the international community's approach to Afghanistan. The process is meant to be far-reaching, inclusive, and integrated.

The main takeaway from the workshop is that despite the current focus on humanitarian action, it is urgent to recenter the international community's attention on the political, development, financial, and security factors driving the crisis. As such, the independent assessment team must be aware of the risks of politicizing humanitarian aid in Afghanistan and must strive to protect the humanitarian space. This requires interacting not only with humanitarian organizations but also with beneficiaries, donors, the financial sector, and other relevant actors beyond the humanitarian sector.

The **INTERNATIONAL PEACE INSTITUTE** (IPI) is an independent, international not-for-profit think tank dedicated to managing risk and building resilience to promote peace, security, and sustainable development. To achieve its purpose, IPI employs a mix of policy research, strategic analysis, publishing, and convening. With staff from around the world and a broad range of academic fields, IPI has offices facing United Nations headquarters in New York and in Manama.



777 United Nations Plaza, New York, NY 10017-3521, USA
TEL +1-212-687-4300 FAX +1-212-983-8246

52-52 Harbour House, Bahrain Financial Harbour
P.O. Box 1467, Manama, Bahrain

www.ipinst.org