



# CAPTURED STATE:

*Corruption and Kleptocracy  
in Afghanistan Under the Taliban*

*By Jessica Ludwig and Albert Torres*

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GEORGE W. BUSH  
INSTITUTE

*Jessica Ludwig serves as Director of Global Policy at the George W. Bush Institute*

*Albert Torres serves as Program Manager of Global Policy at the George W. Bush Institute*

### *About the Series*

*Captured State* is a series of three reports published by the George W. Bush Institute that explores how the Taliban have relied on corrupt and kleptocratic behavior to consolidate power in Afghanistan. The report series examines Taliban corruption, the disproportionate impact on women, girls, and other vulnerable communities, and the role of foreign enablers in perpetuating the Taliban's kleptocracy to identify new and underutilized policy options to advance peace, stability, and freedom in Afghanistan.

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Due to ongoing safety and security concerns in Afghanistan and the sensitive nature of these reports, some experts we spoke with cannot be cited publicly. Though we are unable to name them here, the project team remains incredibly grateful for the contributions of these individuals to this effort.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Afghanistan under the Taliban should be understood as a kleptocracy, where a mafia-like group has captured the state and rule at the expense of the people. While corruption and the strategic diversion of wealth for power has long been a feature of governance in Afghanistan, the Taliban should be measured against their own self-declared standards. Despite claims that they would crack down on corruption and reform their brutal ways, the Taliban are leveraging their capture of the Afghan state – now sprawling after two decades of investment by the United States and its allies to build out its institutions – to loot the wealth of the country for their own private gain.

Two years after the Taliban retook power in Afghanistan, the world cannot continue to neglect the intense suffering of the Afghan population and the profound destabilizing impact of the gender apartheid it has imposed. Most concerning, the country has again become a haven for terrorism.

The revenue streams by which the Taliban reward themselves represent the biggest untapped pressure point that can be targeted by the international community. For the sake of both the people of Afghanistan and international security, the United States, its allies, and the broader international community must act now in the following ways:

### Our recommendations:

- The United States, its allies, and the international community should target illicit and corrupted financing streams that the Taliban abuse for personal gain.
- The United States and its allies need to pressure foreign enablers of Taliban corruption and reputation laundering to stop facilitating corrupt economic trading activities, illicit trafficking, and moving and stashing personal wealth outside Afghanistan.
- The United Nations should update its list of sanctioned Taliban members and seek member state support for enforcing its travel ban on senior Taliban leaders. This will limit opportunities for money and reputation laundering abroad.
- The United Nations and other international organizations providing humanitarian aid and government budgetary support should demand greater accountability for how aid is spent and distributed.
- International donors should support civil society initiatives that address information gaps and collect data that sheds light on the Taliban's behavior and expenditures.
- Media and civil society organizations should leverage technology to enhance reporting through crowdsourcing.

## INTRODUCTION

More than two years after capturing power in Kabul, the Taliban have intensified their campaign to impose authority over all of Afghanistan's territory and society through dictates and brutality. Although their extremist ideology caters to their hardline followers, their claims to legitimacy are shaky at best.

Formal recognition from the international community would reinforce the Taliban's claim to power and strengthen their position, but their motivations for seeking it are complex.

More than a stamp of approval from the rest of the world, the Taliban also want to increase their access to cold, hard cash.

Running a totalitarian operation that relies on violence and fear requires compelling incentives to maintain control over society. The Taliban must purchase loyalty from fighters and send a clear message to anyone who resists. In capturing the Afghan state, the Taliban have significantly upgraded their access to resources to accomplish these ends. Not only have they weaponized their hold on Afghanistan's resources by controlling access to the country's goods and the government's services, but they are in the perfect position now to loot it for their own individual gain.

By recognizing this systematic capture of the country's resources by the Taliban for private gain as kleptocracy – which means “rule by thieves” – the international community can adopt new forms of leverage that aim to restrict the Taliban's access to the sources of revenue they rely on for repression and individual security.

Afghanistan's rulers throughout [history](#) have relied on the distribution of wealth, tribute, or subsidy to accumulate power and exercise authority and manage the rugged, diverse, and challenging land, as author Sarah Chayes has described. Relationships and loyalties may be based on complex webs of familial, tribal, and other cultural and geographic ties, but it is ultimately the ability of the ruler to provide followers with tangible benefits that has served as the oil greasing the wheels of power and authority. Instability triggered by the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan and the decades of violence that followed only served to accelerate the population's reliance on whomever could capture and redistribute goods to meet their needs due to the destruction of Afghanistan's economy.

Such practices proved too deeply ingrained to be systematically uprooted by reformers during the 20 years of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan – 2001-2021 – and [corruption](#) found ample opportunities to flourish as international aid flowed into the country. The hollowing out of Afghanistan's nascent democratic institutions by corrupt actors was a significant contributing factor to the rapid collapse of the government during the international community's withdrawal from the country.

Throughout their campaign to retake Afghanistan, the Taliban asserted that they would eliminate the corruption that had become rampant under the previous government. To support this claim, they adopted a façade of cracking down on corruption and have tried to distance themselves from their prior reliance on drug trafficking as a source of income by launching a highly promoted campaign to reduce poppy cultivation. But this performance is merely smoke and mirrors. A closer look at their activities and

### Corruption

*cor-rup-tion*

The abuse of perceived authority for private gain.

### Kleptocracy

*klep-toc-ra-cy*

The systematic capture of the state and its resources by political actors for private gain.

the experiences of ordinary Afghans suggests that patterns of corruption have merely shifted and are now harder to observe.

The Taliban today have only evolved in the sense that they have learned to leverage corruption while restoring the ideological brutality of their previous stint in power in Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001. And this time around, the impacts of the Taliban's kleptocracy are significantly worse.

Various sources of the country's wealth – and even international humanitarian aid – are being siphoned off at a time when the [United Nations Development Program](#) reported that in 2023, 89% of Afghan

**89%**

of Afghan households identified food as their primary need in 2023

**69%**

of Afghans could not meet their basic needs in 2023

households identified food as their primary need and 69% could not meet their basic needs. The Taliban's viciousness toward anyone who questions their authority or performance has strangled free speech, forced [independent media](#) out of business or underground, and undercut any preexisting forms of transparency and accountability that might otherwise reveal how effective or ineffective the Taliban are at maintaining a hold on power in the country.

## WHY THIS MATTERS NOW

The stability of Afghanistan and the welfare of its people remain extremely tenuous two years after the Taliban retook power.

The world cannot afford to neglect the intense suffering of the Afghan population and fragility of the current power dynamics playing out in the country. It's past time for the international community to take a close look at the Taliban's capture of the Afghan state. Before continuing to offer de facto displays of recognition and funneling unconditional international aid into channels that the Taliban ultimately control, the world must reevaluate whether the Taliban are upholding key tenants of the [Doha Agreement](#): preventing the use of Afghan soil as a staging ground for terrorism against the United States and its allies and working toward peace through an intra-Afghan political settlement.

Experience with the Taliban has demonstrated that they cannot be taken at their word and must be measured by their actions. Despite [assurances](#) that women and girls would be able to pursue education and employment outside the home, the Taliban have steadily tightened restrictions. Even more alarmingly, Afghanistan under the Taliban has again become a [haven](#) for terrorist groups.

There are many questions about where Taliban leaders who are stealing the wealth of Afghanistan are stashing their ill-gotten gains, but initial evidence suggests it flows outside the country. The international community thus bears responsibility for pressuring the foreign actors who enable the Taliban's amassment and laundering of stolen wealth – especially because it could be used to finance terrorist activities abroad as easily as it might be used for Taliban members' own personal gain.

*“For 29 years, the Taliban have been using dialogue as a mechanism to strengthen themselves, rather than believing in the exchange of ideas and coming up with compromises.”*

– Mahmoud Saikal

Former Permanent Representative of Afghanistan to the United Nations

In this first in a series of three reports, we will scrutinize the sources of income to which the Taliban have gained access, examine how they are

exploiting new and existing revenue streams for private gain, and recommend steps to counter these activities. In the second paper, we will examine the ways in which Taliban corruption disproportionately impacts women and girls and explore how the long-term effects of Taliban brutality will further destabilize the tenuous conditions in Afghanistan. The third report will spotlight the Taliban's foreign enablers – the countries and nonstate actors that are holding and creating space for the Taliban to maneuver without insisting on sufficient conditionality in return.

## OPPORTUNITIES AND AVENUES FOR TALIBAN CORRUPTION

Some observers believe that the Taliban have modernized over the last two decades. Taliban communication methods may have become more sophisticated, but their brutal and extremist mentality remained the same.

Some specific forms of petty corruption have declined under the Taliban, and they have been quick to capitalize on these indicators to portray themselves as efficient government administrators [boosting tax revenue](#) by cracking down on corruption.

For example, only 8% of Afghan businesses surveyed by the [World Bank](#) in June 2022 indicated that they had paid a bribe to revenue department officials when paying their taxes that year, compared with 62% before August 2021. Customs collections at border crossings – checkpoints that were notorious touchpoints for demanding bribes under the previous government – also appear to have become [more efficient](#) since the Taliban extended control over the whole of the country.

Such forms of transactional corruption, previously experienced acutely and arbitrarily by citizens in their daily lives, certainly contributed significantly to the loss of support for the former government.

Yet the Taliban have published only minimal information about how collected revenues are being spent. Customs revenue in particular also serves as a significant source of foreign currency, which has become critical to the Taliban's ability to stabilize the value of the Afghani and conduct international trade since the international community cut off Taliban access to Afghanistan's [foreign currency reserves](#).

A [mini-budget](#) of planned expenditures published by the Taliban's Ministry of Finance for December 2021 to March 2022 revealed that the largest share of outlays (41%) was earmarked for internal security. Leaked documents related to the [Taliban's 2023-24 budget](#) also revealed that ministries related to internal security would continue to receive the greatest budget share.

Whether funds are actually distributed across the security sector according to their designated purpose is unclear. One account published by a [freelance journalist](#) who embedded with Taliban border patrols near Tajikistan documented how soldiers hadn't received their salaries in over six months, lacked basic military equipment, and relied on a commander's private vehicles for two out of three trucks available as transportation.

An in-depth March 2023 analysis of the mini-budget and other available budgetary information conducted by the [Afghan Analysts Network](#) determined that transparency around financial matters has diminished under the Taliban.

"The emirate's reputation for lack of corruption is far from justified," the report states, citing the inability to compare actual expenditures to revenues.

While the Taliban's punishment for theft has historically been severe – and its deterrent effect may explain why many forms of bureaucratic corruption have decreased – the twisted logic of the group's zealous ideology permits the Taliban to use the ends to justify the means.

## Capturing the state bureaucracy

The Taliban received an enormous opportunity to engage in both overt and more discreet forms of corruption when they captured the Afghan state.

There is no public accounting of how the Taliban establish criteria for awarding government contracts, property sales, and other licenses and concessions, and the government lacks the external accountability mechanisms that would otherwise provide some degree of transparency in procurement.

According to Habib Khan, founder and President of Afghan Peace Watch, close family members of at least two current Taliban acting ministers have rented private offices in Kabul's affluent Wazir Akbar Khan district through which Afghan and foreign petitioners can prearrange government contracts and request other political favors for an off-the-books fee. A network of entrepreneurial fixers and middlemen – many of whom also advised high-level officials working for the previous government and who remain in Kabul – have purportedly helped Taliban leaders looking to monetize access to their government positions establish protocols for running such side operations.

Government employment is another means through which the Taliban are now able to reward fighters and loyalists while also punishing anyone who does not curry favor with the Taliban. Although the Taliban initially allowed many former government bureaucrats to maintain their positions – part of a supposed “amnesty” announced shortly after recapturing Kabul – the Taliban have over time gradually and deliberately manipulated government payrolls in ways that might escape the attention of international observers.

In the first six months after recapturing the Afghan government, Taliban leaders recruited from among [former militants](#) living in exile in Pakistan who had been working as bakers, merchants, and menial laborers to fill a range of prominent, bureaucratic, and technical positions for which they generally lacked necessary qualifications.

The Taliban have demonstrated a clear preference for awarding employment based on ideology or affiliation rather than competency. In September 2022, the Taliban began introducing a [religious test](#) for government employees that has been used arbitrarily as justification to fire workers at public hospitals and at all levels of the Ministry of Education, according to a former government official who spoke with the authors. This followed on the heels of an official decree that female civil servants at the [Ministry of Finance](#) should send male family members to work in their place, regardless of whether the men possessed the required education, experience, or technical knowledge to perform a specific job.

The ban on women and girls receiving an education can also be seen through the lens of corruption. The Ministry of Education is converting the educational system into a conduit for extremist propaganda under the hardline ideology of its top leader, Haibatullah Akhundzada. But at the same time, it's turning into a cash cow for supporters of the regime.

The Taliban are prioritizing opening their own madrassas for purported religious education and are [replacing university administrators and academic professors](#) with members of the Taliban. Before the Taliban captured power in 2021, the Afghan government reported [200,000 teachers](#) employed across

the country by the Ministry of Education. The subsequent [reductions](#) in teachers' pay and the [firings](#) of female teachers have had a profound economic impact across the country, contributing to its deepening humanitarian crisis as many heads of household are no longer able to support their families.



On Nov. 28, 2021, Afghan boys read the Quran, Islam's holy book, at an Islamic religious school under Taliban rule in Kandahar, Afghanistan. Photo by Alfred Yaghobzadeh/Abaca/Sipa USA (Sipa via AP Images)

The Taliban monopoly on information makes it difficult to comprehensively monitor whether government employment is being awarded on merit. The closed nature of the Taliban's activities makes it impossible to systematically track firings and hirings across different Afghan state ministries, one former Afghan government official told the authors in a conversation, lamenting the end of a system of qualification measures for civil service employment put in place by the previous Afghan government.

Allegations that Taliban leaders were appointing their own sons and other male relatives to government positions became serious enough that Taliban supreme leader Akhundzada issued a [March 2023 decree](#) ordering officials to stop.

Taxation has provided the Taliban a crucial source of income. Since their takeover, they have prioritized centralizing control over revenue-generating streams in cross-border trading and internal economic sectors, generating nearly [60%](#) of the country's \$2.2 billion in total revenue for 2022, according to the World Bank. Informal roadside checkpoints run by regional or local powerbrokers that previously collected "taxes" from exporters have been [eradicated](#), enabling state ministries under Taliban control to act as the sole tax and customs authority.

The Taliban have also enhanced their taxing network with systems capable of automating electronic taxation of local citizens and businesses. Their capture of networks developed by the Afghan republic created a hybrid structure that simultaneously operates with hand-to-hand payments for practices



that range from car registration to the installation of business signs. Yet, despite being adept at tax collection, there is no transparency around the Taliban's use of the funds, a possible sign of misappropriation and graft.

Taxes are also collected informally, including through door-to-door [visits](#) in a ransom-style revenue system. For Afghans, the [failure](#) to pay customs and taxing duties typically results in imprisonment, threats, and acts of violence. The combination of an elaborate taxing network and a failing economy [complicates](#) the lives of Afghans to meet basic needs. Meanwhile, the Taliban continue to develop new legal requirements to justify additional taxes on the private sector. According to an Afghan human rights activist who spoke with the authors, local business owners have reported [paying](#) exorbitant fees to operate.

The Hawala system, an ancient Islamic financial practice that operates on trust through complex networks spanning international borders, is also vulnerable to exploitation under new regulations imposed by the Taliban. Hawala currently offers Afghanistan one of the only links to the international economic sphere. Over the last two years, it has become more widely used by organizations and individuals outside Afghanistan as a trusted means to transfer funds into the country. [Hawaladars](#) have been forced to register as businesses and have their financial activity supervised. Likewise, exchangers must comply with a depository requirement into Afghanistan's central bank. Due to the lack of a stable financial industry and economy, the hawala system is a necessary lifeline for Afghans. [Estimates](#) from the Migration Data Portal show that the market covers approximately 90% of all financial transactions in Afghanistan and that there are over 900 hawaladars countrywide.

Pressure on businesses has been applied across the private sector. Several experts who spoke with the authors described cases in which the Taliban have made a range of demands on international and local businesses. Business owners have been pressured by the Taliban to discreetly purchase food and other necessities for Taliban fighters, provide in-kind services, and cover Taliban leaders' travel expenses.

Humanitarian organizations and vendors that operate in Afghanistan are often required to pay taxes and other fees, purportedly to provide security, for example. Businesses that don't comply with requests typically run the risk of having their offices shut down, licenses revoked, or property and assets seized. For example, the Taliban [directed](#) all taxis be painted turquoise, which is likely an attempt by the Islamic emirate to regulate the industry and increase tax revenue and licensing fees.

The Taliban also collect revenue through the distribution of various licenses and the provision of services for which they can charge official fees and unofficial bribes. Access to these services is also generally facilitated by an affiliation with the Taliban, while those who are not linked through family, tribal, ethnic, or other ties are likely to encounter greater difficulty acquiring state services. For example, the Taliban-controlled passport department generated approximately [US\\$50 million](#) in issuance fees in 2022. Additionally, passport applicants reported paying bribes totaling US\$800 to US\$3,000 per passport to brokers in partnership with the Taliban Passport Department, which is part of the interior ministry, according to [Voice of America](#) and Fatema D. Ahmadi, a fellow with the School of Public Affairs at American University.

Under Taliban control, the price of [identification cards](#) also increased by 60% to US\$5, which is significant burden particularly for the more than [half](#) of Afghan citizens who live on less than US\$1.90 per day. Since seizing power, the Taliban have distributed around 4 million ID cards.

## Siphoning off and manipulating humanitarian aid

The Taliban have tapped into humanitarian aid to supplement modest government revenue streams and cement the loyalty of fighters, their families, and supporters. The Taliban rely on oppressive and violent means – or the threat thereof – to coerce humanitarian organizations to comply with demands, often resorting to extortion and intimidation. John Sopko, the Special Inspector General of Afghanistan Reconstruction, [testified](#) at a November 2023 [U.S. congressional hearing](#) that the Taliban are diverting or otherwise benefiting from a considerable amount of U.S. assistance.

*“The root cause of the humanitarian crisis is the Taliban’s policy.”*

*– Afghan journalist*

Initial reports of the Taliban siphoning off and redirecting funds intended to alleviate some of the consequences of the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan date back to at least [October 2021](#), just two months after seizing the state. Following the takeover, assistance mainly came from a few foreign allies, namely China and Pakistan, after most international donors and organizations withdrew to avoid financing the terrorist organization. Shortly thereafter, as global flows of humanitarian assistance began to reenter under the largest international humanitarian aid appeal ever launched in support of a single country, the Taliban started to develop a network capable of extracting the influx of cash for their benefit.



On Feb. 16, 2022, in Herat, Afghanistan, a family waited to receive aid parcels. Photo via Shutterstock.

One of the most common tactics reported is coercing and commandeering the capacity of local nongovernmental organizations that have a track record of working with international organizations in delivering humanitarian aid. The Taliban have inserted loyalists and even their own members into strategic positions within many organizations, allowing them direct access to incoming assistance. One editor from an Afghan media organization described to the authors how new hires forced upon nongovernmental organizations have been able to siphon or redirect funds to Taliban-issued lists that include Taliban family members, disabled soldiers, veterans, and Taliban-backed madrassas. In some communities, mullahs who serve as community leaders act as interlocutors with the Taliban and help facilitate entry onto aid distribution lists in exchange for a bribe.

Taliban governors and police commanders often direct [United Nations](#) agencies and subcontractor nongovernmental organizations to serve their family members, with certain arrangements requiring that up to 15% of total aid go directly to Taliban members. The aforementioned Afghan media editor also noted that qualified individuals who manage to receive aid are usually taxed, in some cases up to 66% of the aid received.

When the Taliban haven't been directly involved in manipulating distribution lists, they have threatened some recipients of humanitarian aid with violence to [turn over](#) a portion or all of their allotment to local Taliban commanders.

In some cases, the Taliban have used donated foreign aid supplies as payment to state workers or to implement projects in a work-for-food scheme. Only men with ties to the Taliban were selected to participate in the so-called labor programs, according to locals who had applied for these employment programs multiple times and were interviewed by [Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty \(RFE/RL\)](#). One Taliban leader in the agricultural ministry publicly admitted that approximately 40,000 workers received donated wheat as payment for daily labor. Such arrangements exclude women, many of whom are among the most vulnerable and thus should be unconditionally qualified to receive humanitarian aid.

The Taliban have established hundreds of new charities and nongovernmental organizations since taking over the country, according to multiple Afghan civil society leaders who spoke with the authors. These organizations have been able to register with the Afghan Ministry of Finance under Taliban control and are positioned to receive humanitarian aid from international organizations and distribute it in localities around the country as Taliban leaders see fit.

In addition to ensuring that Taliban fighters and their family members are prioritized on aid distribution lists, the Taliban manipulate geographical assistance to benefit areas with greater political, ethnic, regional, and religious affinities. *Zan Times* [reported](#) cases of suspected ethnic discrimination of Hazara communities in Bamiyan and Daikundi provinces and in the Western neighborhoods of Kabul where internally displaced Hazara have migrated. Regions of the country dominated by other ethnic minorities or nomadic populations have also received little to no humanitarian aid, despite deep poverty.

## Natural resources

Afghanistan is rich in mineral reserves and other raw materials valued between [US\\$1 trillion and \\$US3 trillion](#). Although Afghanistan's extractive industries are underdeveloped, the Taliban's capture of the state allows them virtually unchecked influence over the rights, extraction, and export of Afghanistan's [mineral wealth](#). This includes aluminum, coal, copper, gold, gypsum, iron, precious gemstones, marble, onyx, talc, and lithium.

Developments such as the [highly publicized](#) awarding of seven mining contracts valued at US\$6.5 billion in August 2023 signal the Taliban's intent to leverage access to mineral and metal deposits as a new revenue stream. Afghanistan's lithium deposits, which may potentially [rival](#) Bolivia's 21 million tons in reserves, have attracted the attention of Chinese investors looking to lock up access to mining sites. Gochin, a Chinese company, offered the Taliban-controlled Ministry of Mines and Petroleum [US\\$10 billion](#) for concession rights.

Exports and customs duties connected to natural resources have also substantially boosted the Taliban's revenue. In 2022, roughly 14,000 tons of coal were shipped, mainly to Pakistan, with reported profits totaling around [US\\$40 million](#) in the first half of the year. However, these reported values are likely incomplete, as the coal industry has no legal framework that binds the sector together, and it's difficult to estimate how many tons of coal may have been exported illegally. Coal mining has, however, remained one of the few reliably profitable industries and steadiest sources of employment in Afghanistan since the Taliban took power. But it's also increasingly reliant on [child labor](#) that is readily abundant as desperately impoverished Afghan families struggle to put food on the table.



Afghan children work in a brick factory on the outskirts of Kabul, Afghanistan, Aug. 20, 2022. (AP Photo/Ebrahim Noroozi)

Illicit mining is a rampant issue in the country. One United Nations report [indicated](#) that the Taliban also smuggle gemstones and semiprecious metals to Central Asia, Europe, and the Persian Gulf.

It's unclear how the mining sector and natural resources are being developed, particularly since the Taliban have effectively captured the industry for their own ends. In a conversation with the authors, Afghan Peace Watch's Khan recounted how concession rights, especially for coal extraction, are typically awarded to members of the Taliban or other loyalists.

Similarly, illegal logging and timber exports have become profitable for the Taliban. According to Matt

Zeller, co-founder of No One Left Behind and an Adjunct Fellow at the American Security Project, logging exports to Pakistan were banned under the previous government over environmental and labor rights concerns, prompting loggers to outsource operations to the black market. The Taliban, seeking a financial opportunity, facilitated the timber movement until the 2021 takeover, when they officially opened the market to capture increased revenue. The Haqqani network, an Islamist militant terrorist organization within the Taliban that havens in Pakistan, is said to have successfully monopolized the industry, particularly through exports from southeastern Afghanistan.

## Arms and military equipment trafficking

*After the Taliban seized power in Afghanistan, the estimated [US\\$7 billion](#) in abandoned U.S. military equipment and weaponry became a profitable stockpile that the group could exploit through their smuggling operations.*

Shortly after the U.S. withdrawal, the Taliban's intelligence agency [conducted](#) door-to-door searches of former military members and seized any weapons discovered. Latifullah Hakimi, the Taliban's Inspector General of the Ministry of Defense, claimed that the group [obtained](#) around 300,000 light arms, 26,000 heavy weapons, and approximately 61,000 military vehicles left throughout several abandoned military bases. With the permission of the Taliban, weapons dealers established bazaars in the Helmand, Kandahar, and Nangarhar regions. Weaponry found in the bazaars include imports from Austria, China, Pakistan, Russia, and Turkey.

Part of the monetization structure of seized weapons includes Afghans obtaining a license or registration to buy, sell, or transport equipment. Individual reports from civilians and Taliban members [suggest](#) that equipment such as night vision goggles sells for US\$500 to US\$1,000, with some individuals from China willing to pay up to US\$2,500. According to journalist Lynne O'Donnell, M4 carbines [reach](#) up to US\$2,400 in the Afghan weapons markets. However, due to the opacity of the black-market industry, it's difficult to determine how much the Taliban are profiting from sales.

Experts interviewed by the authors described smuggling routes to Pakistan through the south of Afghanistan. Field work conducted by Afghan Peace Watch and the [Small Arms Survey](#), an organization that researches armed violence and the illicit trade of small arms, suggests that the southern border has seen an increase in weapons trafficking, with the Tora Bora and [Torkham](#) regions farther north also serving as major smuggling routes. Across the border in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa region, [RFE/RL](#) observed an increase in black market sales of weapons.

The Taliban have also been identified as being directly involved in weapons trafficking. During the fall of Afghanistan, Neda Mohammad, then the Taliban Governor of Nangarhar and currently the Minister of Higher Education, announced that the Taliban seized around 70,000 weapons in the region. Afghan Peace Watch's Khan shared in a conversation with the authors that only 40,000 weapons were returned, while the rest of the stock remains missing. Additionally, Khan noted that Taliban Governor Haji Mohammad Yousuf Wafa controls a weapons smuggling route from Kandahar to Pakistan.

Initial reports of arms proliferation involving leftover weapons were recorded as early as October 2021, just two months after the Taliban captured Afghanistan, when weapons dealers in Kandahar indicated that the southern region began to see an

*“The Taliban are a transportation company. They will move anything across the border and get it to another dealer.”*

– Steve LePlante

Managing Partner, Veros Global Solutions

influx of American weapons and military equipment that ranged from pistols to night-vision goggles. Consequently, weapons trafficking is likely propping up terrorism in the region, with reports of U.S. weapons being used in attacks between terrorist organizations in the [Kashmir](#) region between India and Pakistan.

## Drug trafficking

The Taliban have [profited handsomely](#) from illicit drug trafficking, despite an ideological aversion to drug consumption, and have [increased their involvement in and income](#) from every phase of narcotics production over the last two decades, according to experts such as Gretchen Peters, founder of the Alliance to Counter Crime Online, and Vanda Felbab-Brown of the Brookings Institution.

In an attempt to launder their reputation as drug traffickers, the Taliban in April 2022 announced a ban on the cultivation of poppies, which produce opium, the key ingredient in heroin and other narcotics. Taliban Supreme Leader Akhundzada declared in June 2023 that opium poppies had been [completely eradicated](#) in the country. This announcement came a few weeks after a [geographic information services \(GIS\) survey](#) conducted by the British firm Alcis and led by narcotics industry researcher [David Mansfield](#) concluded there had been a 99% reduction in opium poppy cultivation in Helmand province between 2022 and 2023.

*Since the Taliban captured Afghanistan in 2021, the country continues to supply 80% of heroin trafficked and consumed globally, according to the [United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime \(UNODC\)](#).*

Yet it would be premature to suggest that the Taliban are effectively eradicating the illicit narcotics industry in Afghanistan. A November 2023 UNODC report on [Opium Cultivation in Afghanistan](#) found that land dedicated to opium poppy cultivation had been reduced by 95%, but also documented that remaining opium poppy cultivation is concentrated in Kandahar and other southwestern provinces of the country – the Taliban’s traditional stronghold of support.

Opium poppy cultivation levels alone are also an insufficient measure of the extent to which the Taliban continue to profit from narcotics trafficking. While growing poppies for opium paste may provide farmers with an income generous enough to sustain a large family and for sharecroppers to pay off debts to landowners, the November 2023 UNODC report observed that most small-scale farmers cannot afford to hold their inventories. Without speculating on who benefits, the report acknowledged that “higher opiate prices benefit those with larger opium inventories – and such actors are already in a better economic position.” Processing opium into heroin and morphine and trafficking it out of the country yield significantly larger value-added profits.

Many of the experts we spoke with, as well as other [analysts](#) who have studied [narcotics](#) production in Afghanistan over time, recalled how heroin prices rose significantly when the Taliban enforced a ban on poppy cultivation in 2000. During that period, Taliban leaders continued turning a profit from stockpiled opium paste when demand pushed up the price on a limited supply. RFE/RL’s [Radio Azadi](#) observed opium markets that were still open and seemingly thriving in Kandahar and Helmand provinces in July 2023.

Indeed, following the ban on poppy cultivation, opium prices that traffickers paid to farmers tripled year over year from 2021, according to [UNODC](#). Seizures of illicit narcotics in countries along established heroin trafficking routes out of Afghanistan after August 2021 suggest that opiate trafficking activity continued unabated and even [intensified](#) southward through Pakistan and the west coast of India, based on incidents tracked by the [UNODC Drug Monitoring Platform](#).

Experts have questioned whether the Taliban will be able to sustain a ban on poppy opium cultivation over an extended period of time, given the rural population's economic dependency on opium paste. In June 2023, the [Washington Post](#) profiled a local Taliban fighter in Nangahar province – another region of significant opium poppy cultivation – who was reluctant to fully enforce eradication efforts or punish impoverished farmers who relied on the crop as their primary source of livable income.

Afghanistan has also become the fastest-growing producer of [methamphetamine](#), according to an [August 2023 UNODC report](#). Methamphetamine production in Afghanistan has surpassed opiate production in the period since the Taliban takeover, a [June 2023 United Nations sanctions monitoring report](#) documented.

The country's methamphetamine industry has traditionally been linked to the native ephedra plant, which is harvested from natural growing areas in the mountains rather than cultivated in a field and can be more difficult to track. The Taliban have supposedly banned methamphetamines, and Alcis' GIS survey documented the disappearance of a [major ephedra market](#) and nearby laboratories in Bakwa. But the June 2023 U.N. report described several methamphetamine laboratories and dual heroin-methamphetamine trafficking routes linked to members of the Haqqani Network. The Taliban may also turn to [synthetic production](#) if they can import sufficient precursor chemicals.

The ability to independently monitor the extent of narcotics smuggling in Afghanistan has been severely curtailed under the Taliban. Afghanistan's drug interdiction equipment at Kabul International Airport – provided to the previous government by UNODC – was destroyed by the Taliban after the U.S. withdrawal, according to a former law enforcement official in a conversation with the authors. Law enforcement agents experienced in interdicting smuggled narcotics have either fled the country, been captured, or remain in hiding due to threats from the Taliban in retaliation for prosecuting Taliban smugglers under the previous administration. UNODC's only remaining [activity](#) in Afghanistan revolves around providing donated medical and other basic supplies to drug treatment centers that struggle to remain open in the country and serve the addicted population, estimated at 3.5 million people.

Since taking power, the Taliban have effectively reversed the terms of the relationship with drug traffickers, observed Said Jawad, former Ambassador of Afghanistan to Russia (2021-2022); the United Kingdom (2017-2020); and the United States (2003-2010).

“The interesting relationship that existed in the past between the narcotraffickers and Taliban was that powerful narcotraffickers in Helmand, Kandahar, and other provinces determined which Taliban commander they would work with to gain protection and make sure the transit route was safe for them,” he said in a conversation with the authors. “What’s happening now is the Taliban are determining which traffickers should be allowed to operate, cultivate, and process narcotics. The reason they banned cultivation is because they want to exert their authority. The Taliban want to decide if it can be cultivated or not, and if it is cultivated in areas, they will give the permission.”

Afghan Peace Watch's Khan confirmed that in Helmand and Kandahar, Taliban provincial governments have issued official licenses allowing drug dealers to operate in designated areas (notably, at some distance from highways, where such activities would be less visible). Such licenses allow the Taliban to profit from both the initial permitting process and by taxing drug dealers over time.

## Human trafficking, forced marriage, and forced labor

The Taliban have a record of engaging in human trafficking, and their continued role in enabling and profiting from it urgently merits attention. Given the rapid deterioration of the Afghan economy, the State Department's [2023 Trafficking in Persons Report on Afghanistan](#) highlighted that "the Taliban did not report any activities to prevent human trafficking or raise awareness, despite a large number of vulnerable Afghans internally displaced or migrating by irregular means to other countries."

While senior Taliban leaders have announced bans on human trafficking networks that profit from Afghans trying to leave the country, individual Taliban guards are not above accepting bribes to look the other way at border checkpoints, according to reporting by [RFE/RL](#) and another expert who spoke with the authors.

The Taliban also facilitate forced labor. Amid a harsh crackdown on drug addiction, an investigation by [Zan Times](#) documented how Taliban officials entered a deal with the operator of one of Afghanistan's largest salt mines to transport individuals with drug addictions, whose families were unwilling or unable to support them, to work in the remote location. Those sent involuntarily to work at the salt mine reported their below-market wages, which were supposed to be paid directly to their families, were withheld. Family members interviewed also said they had not received any of the promised wages.

The rapid rise of extreme poverty and lack of economic opportunity triggered by the Taliban ban on women working have pushed many Afghan families to make desperate decisions to survive, including [selling their own children](#). In too many cases, it is an underage daughter who is sold into an arranged marriage. [Amnesty International](#) and others have documented an increase in child marriages.



A young girl begs in the streets of Kabul, Afghanistan, on July 22, 2022. Photo via Shutterstock.



In the Taliban power structure, where wives are considered a status symbol, Taliban leaders, officials, and fighters are fueling this practice by offering families above-market “bride prices.” Some families may see it as advantageous to marry their daughters to members of the Taliban to solidify a blood relationship that will offer security and financial benefit later. In other cases, women have been forced to see their daughters married to Taliban leaders through [violence](#) or the threat thereof.

Top Taliban leader Akhundzada issued a [decree](#) in January 2021 – seven months before the Taliban recaptured Kabul – that directed Taliban members to avoid taking second, third, or fourth wives because of concerns it would fuel corruption and damage the militant group’s image. The concern was that larger families are more expensive to support and might send Taliban leaders in pursuit of new funds.

But senior Taliban officials have continued to seek multiple wives since taking the country by force; the Taliban’s interpretation of Islamic law permits a man to have up to four wives. The Taliban sometimes pay families a bride price of up to 1 million to 2 million Afghanis, according to the independent Afghan media outlet [Hasht e Subh](#).

*“There are more than 100 cases, perhaps even hundreds, of senior Taliban officials taking on second, third, or fourth wives,” noted Habib Khan of Afghan Peace Watch in what he described as an emerging trend.*

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Recognizing that the international community’s leverage has changed following the withdrawal of international military forces from Afghanistan, the Taliban’s revenue streams represent a significant untapped pressure point the international community should lean on to improve the prospects for the people of Afghanistan and advance international security.

*The United States, its allies, and the international community should target illicit and corrupted financing streams that the Taliban abuse for personal gain.*

Focusing on the financial flows that fund the Taliban’s patronage networks provides new opportunities and options for leveraging influence to incentivize behavior changes from the Taliban. They have failed to comply with agreements and guarantees offered to the international community in exchange for the withdrawal of foreign military forces, and the international community should do more to hold them accountable. Targeting Taliban revenue streams requires devoting resources to systematically investigating and documenting evidence of suspected nepotism, corruption, and international money laundering to better inform and calibrate potential policy options. Accountability mechanisms should also be put in place and enforced to safeguard legitimate sources of economic activity from exploitation.

*The United States and its allies need to pressure foreign enablers of Taliban corruption and reputation laundering to stop facilitating corrupt economic trading activities, illicit trafficking, and moving and stashing personal wealth outside Afghanistan.*

Foreign enablers of Taliban corruption include governments, private sector entities, and international financial systems and institutions. While some of the foreign governments enabling Taliban corruption, such as Iran and Russia, are in many ways isolated themselves from the international community, Afghanistan’s regional neighbors share fundamental concerns about the implications of instability in Afghanistan fueled by economic turmoil, illicit trafficking, and terrorism. Foreign jurisdictions such as

Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Pakistan, and Turkey, which have been willing to provide individual Taliban leaders a safe haven for their individual assets or for their families, should be pressed to reconsider how allowing the Taliban entry to their country and marketplace has a corrosive effect that risks fueling greater regional instability over the long term.

*The United Nations should update its list of sanctioned Taliban and seek member state support for enforcing its travel ban on senior Taliban leaders.*

The United Nations Security Council hasn't reviewed the list of internationally sanctioned individuals and entities affiliated with the Taliban under [Resolution 1988 \(2011\)](#) since before the Taliban's capture of the Afghan government in August 2021. New crimes warranting inclusion on the list have taken place, while other listed Taliban members are understood to be deceased and should therefore be delisted.

The existing sanctions against individual Taliban leaders require U.N. member states to freeze their assets and ban international travel unless the U.N. Security Council Committee grants a specific [exemption](#). A June 2023 [sanctions monitoring report](#) by the U.N. determined that member states in several cases allowed sanctioned Taliban leaders to enter while failing to submit exemption requests with adequate advance notice or sufficient levels of detail that would allow for a proper review process by the committee. In some cases, travel exemption requests weren't received until after sanctioned Taliban leaders had concluded travel. The ability of Taliban leadership to travel to foreign countries provides them an opportunity to move personal financial assets abroad and thus should be given close scrutiny.

*The United Nations and other international organizations providing humanitarian aid and government budgetary support should demand greater accountability for how aid is spent and distributed.*

Considering that the Taliban have manipulated and stolen from humanitarian aid streams to distribute benefits to Taliban fighters and supporters, foreign organizations providing aid still have leverage to establish criteria under which they will continue to operate in the country. International humanitarian organizations should rely on their own criteria for recipient inclusion on aid distribution lists. Aid organizations should also insist that monitoring and accountability mechanisms be put in place that would allow them to track and analyze where and how aid is being distributed.

*International donors should support civil society initiatives that address information gaps and collect data that sheds light on the Taliban's behavior and expenditures.*

Taliban restrictions on freedom of movement and speech and the group's suppression of an independent press make Afghanistan's information environment difficult to navigate. The Taliban have also stopped reporting (and, likely, collecting) statistics that would shed light on the Afghan government's performance.

Supporting independent media – especially those that continue to operate on the ground – is more crucial than ever to identify and document corrupt and kleptocratic activities in which the Taliban are engaged. Fearing for their own safety, many experienced journalists have left the country. Media outlets also face tighter controls. The Taliban's restrictions on access to education, especially for women, will make it increasingly difficult to train a new generation of journalists that can report on issues reflecting the diversity of Afghan society. Trainings and platforms for citizen journalism could be leveraged to help supplement the efforts of formal media organizations, many of which have been forced to conduct

their work underground. Support for citizen journalists could also serve as a stopgap amid the country's education crisis and supplement [limitations](#) on conducting formal journalism education and trainings. The U.S. Agency for Global Media should also continue to invest and increase support for RFE/RL's Radio Azadi, which reports on Afghanistan in English, Pashto, and Dari. Although the Taliban have banned Radio Azadi broadcasting on FM stations inside the country, it remains available to Afghan audiences on medium wave and short wave broadcasts sent from transmitters outside the country.

*Media and civil society organizations should leverage technology to enhance reporting through crowdsourcing.*

Technology platforms that enable organizations to crowdsource information have already begun emerging to shed light on the frequency and geography of localized incidents taking place in Afghanistan. For example, [Afghan Peace Watch](#), as well as [Afghan Witness and C4ADS](#), are cataloging and mapping verified evidence of human rights abuses, protest expressions, and security incidents collected on social media or through direct submissions. Donors should consider extending and increasing support required to sustain crowdsourcing platforms, ensure the security of reporting channels, and make the submission process more widely available and known to Afghan citizens.



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