



## Revised Role for the UN in Afghanistan: Pragmatic Presence Today; Preparing for Opportunities Tomorrow



THE UNIVERSITY  
of EDINBURGH



**PeaceRep**  
Peace and Conflict  
Resolution Evidence  
Platform



**CONCILIATION  
RESOURCES**

Authors: Professor Michael Semple and Atta Ur Rahman Saleem

PeaceRep: The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform  
School of Law, Old College, The University of Edinburgh  
South Bridge, Edinburgh EH8 9YL

Tel. +44 (0)131 651 4566

Fax. +44 (0)131 650 2005

E-mail: [peacerep@ed.ac.uk](mailto:peacerep@ed.ac.uk)

[PeaceRep.org](http://PeaceRep.org)

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/peacerep/>

This research is supported by the Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform (PeaceRep), funded by UK International Development from the UK government. However, the views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies. Any use of this work should acknowledge the authors and the Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform.

The authors would like to thank multiple colleagues that have provided advice and feedback on this paper. Thanks also to Rick Smith of Smith Design Agency for production work.

#### About the authors:

Michael Semple has researched and advised on the Afghan conflict and the Taliban Movement. He is a professor at the Senator George Mitchell Institute for Global Peace Security and Justice, Queen's University Belfast.

Atta ur Rahman Saleem is a veteran Afghan peacemaker and served as deputy to the Afghan High Council for National Reconciliation.

Cover images: All images may be subject to copyright. Getty Images ©2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7488/era/6935>

# Contents

Executive Summary – Key Findings and Recommendations	01
<hr/>	
Introduction	03
<hr/>	
The Taliban's Extremist Ideological Project – Four Key Pillars	04
<hr/>	
Revised Role for the UN – Surviving the 'Lean Years' and Building Preparedness	07
<hr/>	
Endnotes	11
<hr/>	

## Executive Summary – Key Findings and Recommendations

The UN should renew its political mission in Afghanistan in March 2026 – but with a revised role to avoid unattainable goals of reforming the Taliban regime. The Taliban's extremist ideological project leaves no immediate prospect of progress for peace or normalised international relations. Nevertheless, UNAMA can pursue useful and attainable objectives today, while preparing to renew ambition to help Afghans attain peace when opportunities open up tomorrow.

### The Taliban's extremist ideological project – four key pillars:

*Pillar 1) Asserting Islamic legitimacy* – The Taliban Amir claims divine inspiration – the laws he signs off on are 'God's laws'.

*Pillar 2) Autocratic power* – Amir Haibatollah is the sole arbiter of policy. Critical figures in the Taliban leadership know he can sideline them at the stroke of a pen.

*Pillar 3) Cultural revolution* – remaking state and society: purging western 'cultural pollution'; removing women from the public sphere; and rewriting education curricula.

*Pillar 4) Glorifying armed jihad* – establishing ideologically reliable security forces; memorialising suicide bombers; and supporting the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan.

*Taliban materialism and discrimination* – outside the ideological project, elements of the Taliban regime are enriching themselves through ethnically targeted corruption.

### Revised role for the UN

*The objectives of the UN's current comprehensive approach are currently unachievable* – international reintegration of Afghanistan through a participatory process including the full involvement of Afghan women has been categorically blocked by the Taliban.

*Pragmatic presence today – five core missions for a revised UN presence* – The Taliban's Islamic Emirate may not prove to be permanent. The UN mission can trim down to core functions, while building preparedness to grasp openings as they arise.

***Mission 1) Political reporting*** – Quarterly UN political reports have been essential, drawing on Afghan networks to establish facts on key issues – from public finance, to migration, security, narcotics and extremism.

***Mission 2) Human rights reporting*** – The UN is well-placed to generate authoritative assessments of the consequences of multiple restrictions imposed by the Taliban on women, and of the Emirate's curtailment of civic and political rights.

***Mission 3) Working-level engagement with Islamic Emirate officials*** – this has been functioning productively on key governance issues – such as returnees, irregular movement and counternarcotics – showing constructive relations with the Taliban are possible.

***Mission 4) Monitoring international aid*** – UNAMA will not be able to exert leverage or implement aid conditionality. However, it can usefully monitor and analyse international aid flows and their impact on the economy and society.

***Mission 5) Convening future-oriented political dialogue*** – despite the Taliban's 'radical intransigence', the UN can build on recent efforts to convene future-oriented Afghan political dialogue among Afghan men and women.

***Preparing for opportunities tomorrow – anticipating openings*** – changes pushed by the Taliban Amir through his ideological project are too far-reaching for their consequences to remain confined to Afghanistan. A 'lean' UN mission can help the UN anticipate these, and maintain a viable presence to lead international responses to future eventualities.

## Introduction

The Taliban leadership is uncompromisingly pursuing an ideological project irrespective of the wishes of Afghanistan's people. This means that there is little immediate prospect of progress towards either an internal Afghan political settlement or the normalisation of Afghanistan's international relations. Nevertheless, despite the current Afghan impasse and crowded international agenda, it is important to recommit to the United Nations' political mission. The renewal in March 2026 of the mandate of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) is an opportunity to reposition it for what might be considered Afghanistan's 'lean years' – when strategic progress through engagement with Taliban senior leadership is impossible.

The extremist nature of the Taliban's ideological project suggests that, sooner or later, Afghanistan may again disturb regional peace and stability. The Taliban's adventurism both makes it important for the international community to maintain a UN presence in the country, and also constrains what the UN can realistically do there. Avowedly modest objectives would enable the mission to maintain valuable engagement without unrealistically promising to transform the Taliban. This will ensure that the mission is credible and valuable, and also available to help Afghans attain a just and sustainable peace when new opportunities for progress open up.

## The Taliban's Extremist Ideological Project – Four Key Pillars

The ideological project of the Taliban's Islamic Emirate rests on four pillars: first, vigorous assertion of Islamic legitimacy; second, an autocratic approach to power; third, a cultural revolution; and fourth, glorification of armed jihad.

### **Pillar 1 – asserting Islamic legitimacy**

The Taliban repeatedly assert that they have established an Islamic system, while all other jihadi movements or governments in Muslim countries have compromised and failed. The Taliban Amir claims divine inspiration, so that the laws he signs off on are to be treated as God's law. The Taliban assert that any rebellion against the Islamic Emirate is tantamount to enmity with God and must be subdued ruthlessly.<sup>1</sup> This logic is of course familiar to their Iranian neighbours. It justifies the deployment of repressive apparatus to secure the regime.<sup>2</sup>

### **Pillar 2 – autocratic power**

The Taliban Amir has positioned himself as chief champion of the ideological project. Although the Taliban have largely retained the inherited Afghan state structure, Haibatollah rules without a constitution. He has unchallengeable supreme authority to issue decrees and orders. He directly controls state appointments and resources. The Amir is the sole arbiter of policy. He listens to a small circle of conservative Sunni clerics, a handful of whom also serve in the cabinet, though most members of cabinet have zero influence over the Amir. Taliban watchers can list various more pragmatic figures in the leadership who seem critical of the hardline policies.<sup>3</sup> But all of them know that the Amir controls appointments and can sideline them at the stroke of a pen. They rarely speak up.

As a matter of doctrine, the Taliban exercise a monopoly of state office and employment. Only Taliban and Taliban-approved clerics can be part of the state. The Taliban refer to this as 'rule by the religious'. As Taliban ideologues state, the arc of Afghan history bends towards this blessed state of rule by the religious!<sup>4</sup>

### **Pillar 3 – cultural revolution**

The Taliban's cultural revolution involves an ambitious effort to remake state and society in line with the Amir's vision of Islamic rectitude. Much of this is framed as purging Afghanistan of western cultural pollution from the era of democracy. Democracy, in the Taliban lexicon, is a byword for corruption.

The Amir has accorded women a totemic role in the cultural revolution. He has made removing them from the public sphere and education – and being seen to resist external pressure to relax restrictions – key to his claim to be implementing God's law. The restored morality police, *amr bil maroof*, have been given a lead role in enforcing the Taliban version of a moral code.

Much of the focus is on outward shows of conformity. Men are cajoled to grow beards, wear turbans and attend congregational prayers. Potentially more dangerous is the overhaul of the education system. School and university curricula are being rewritten, removing hundreds of topics and subjects deemed contrary to Taliban doctrine. The fundamental purpose of the education system has been declared as inculcating Taliban values and readying Afghans to defend the Islamic system against a hostile world. A nationwide network of jihadi madrassahs has been established to train the Taliban's next cohort of mujahideen.<sup>5</sup>

#### **Pillar 4 – glorification of armed jihad**

Through their statebuilding, the Taliban try to position themselves as heirs to Islam's glorious history of armed jihad. They rapidly stood up security forces supposedly only consisting of ideologically reliable fighters. In practice, this was difficult in a society accustomed to clannishness. The security forces have been subject to multiple rounds of 'purges' to maintain the purity of the ranks. Veterans of the insurgency and jihadi madrassah students alike are urged to prepare to sacrifice themselves in the next round of jihad. There are efforts to memorialise the suicide bombers of the insurgency campaign, whose sacrifice leaders often invoke.

The Taliban leadership has deliberately been coy about openly associating itself with jihadi causes beyond Afghanistan's borders. Instead, the Amir has ordered the semi-covert hosting of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and support for its insurgency in Pakistan. The fighting in Pakistan provides an outlet for thousands of Afghan Taliban to indulge their jihadi fervour by volunteering. Pakistan has thus become the first country to which Taliban have deliberately and at scale exported their jihad.<sup>6</sup>

#### **Taliban materialism and discrimination**

The Taliban's ideological project does not fully account for its actions in power, however. Elements of the regime are deeply materialist and fully focused on enriching themselves through all means available. Reporting often claims that corruption is as endemic as during the Republic.<sup>7</sup>

There is also an ethnic character to Taliban rule, despite the movement's claim to stand above issues of tribe and ethnicity. The regime is in effect dominated by Pashtuns, whose tribal networks have benefited from economic opportunities, such as the award of mining licences. This has disrupted a delicate balance in ethnic relations and is a major source of grievance.<sup>8</sup>

There is also a pragmatic tendency within the regime – Taliban who are prepared to contemplate compromise with Afghan non-Taliban and to address international concerns. However, while materialist and ethnically motivated figures have found ways of pursuing their interests under the umbrella of Haibatollah's project, the pragmatists have been able to exercise no discernible influence on Taliban decision-making.<sup>9</sup>

### **Vulnerabilities of the Islamic Emirate**

In their first four years back in power, the Taliban successfully consolidated their regime, imposed their authority throughout the national territory, positioned their insurgent force as the core of new national security forces and funded a budget from domestic resource mobilisation. However, they remained unable to address key vulnerabilities, each of which poses a potential threat to the regime's long-term survival.

Internally the movement is deeply divided over issues of fundamental policy and factional control.<sup>10</sup> Rather than trying to expand their support base, the Taliban have alienated swathes of the population and many of their own supporters. They rule without popular consent. In contrast to their success at mobilising resources domestically, the Taliban have no access to external finance. Therefore, their ability to spend depends upon current revenue collections, and they have no way to cushion their spending against shocks. Perhaps most ominously, the 2025 break down in relations with Pakistan has deprived the Taliban of their erstwhile most reliable backer.

## Revised Role for the UN – Surviving the ‘Lean Years’ and Building Preparedness

### Challenges with the ‘mosaic’ approach to engaging with the Taliban

UN efforts to make political progress on Afghanistan over the past couple of years have been defined as a ‘comprehensive approach’ and draw their mandate from UNSC resolution 2721 (2023).<sup>11</sup> The resolution stated the objective as establishing an ‘Afghanistan at peace with itself and its neighbours, fully reintegrated into the international community and meeting international obligations’, with ‘full, equal, meaningful and safe participation of Afghan women in the process throughout’.

The first impasse arose when the UN Secretary-General could not get consensus to appoint a proposed Special Envoy to head the process.<sup>12</sup> Then, when the UN tried engaging with the Taliban, they found that the movement was opposed to any political process which questioned the status quo in Afghanistan. The Taliban were unprepared to address international concerns over a move to inclusive government, restoration of human rights and effective control of international terrorists sheltered in Afghanistan.

Attention was focused on these issues in 2025 when UNAMA framed them, along with Taliban counter-demands for the UN seat and unfreezing assets, as the ‘Mosaic issues’ – a flexible framework for phased engagement with the Taliban on various elements such as political dialogue, human rights, regional cooperation and economic engagement. This was linked to a gradual transitional process where countries or institutions can choose to engage on specific elements without necessarily committing to formal recognition of the Taliban.<sup>13</sup>

But instead of moving towards compromise, the Taliban position hardened. During the response to the Kunar earthquake in August 2025, Taliban authorities strengthened their application of the ban on women working in the UN by preventing UN field missions proceeding if they included Afghan women personnel.<sup>14</sup> This direct interference with UN operations seemed like a turning point, occasioning heated internal discussions about how to proceed. But the strategic intent of the Taliban, as expressed in their ideological project, is fundamentally at odds with the objectives around which the UN’s comprehensive approach was constructed. There should therefore be little surprise that, apart from some low-key cooperation in technical working groups, the comprehensive approach has in effect been blocked.

### **Pragmatic presence today: five core missions for the UN**

For an image of how the UN should reimagine its role in the face of Taliban stonewalling, it is illustrative to draw on the tale of ancient Egypt as described in the Koran and the Old Testament. The Prophet Joseph counselled belt-tightening during seven 'lean years', so that people would survive to thrive when a rejuvenated River Nile brought back abundance.

The UN lacks the means to transform the situation as advocated in the comprehensive approach. But the Taliban regime is not fully consolidated. It is reasonable to expect that the current power structure in Afghanistan is not permanent, even if how change may come about is not yet clear. For now, the UN political mission in Afghanistan can move to 'lean years-mode': dropping over-ambitious objectives, trimming down to core functions and building preparedness for when there is again an opening for public participation and return of pluralism and inclusive government. Five core mission functions remain relevant and practicable for this pragmatic phase, despite the impasse over Afghan governance.

#### **Mission 1 – political reporting**

Political reporting is key. The authors have been involved in documenting the trajectory of the Taliban's state-building project for a long time, and thoroughly commend the mission's reporting on Afghanistan. In particular the quarterly reports delivered in the name of the Secretary-General help the key international and regional actors towards an agreed set of facts.<sup>15</sup> The UN's team on the ground, including field offices in the provinces, is able to access extensive Afghan networks and conduct reality checks on issues such as the Talibanisation of the civil service, public finance, economic policy, migration, security, counterterrorism, narcotics and promotion of extremism.

#### **Mission 2 – human rights reporting**

Given the Taliban's doubling down on excluding women from public life, education and most of the economy, human rights reporting remains a key UN function. The UN is well placed to generate the most authoritative assessments of the real-world consequences of the multiple restrictions imposed by the Taliban on women and their curtailment of civic and political rights.<sup>16</sup>

#### **Mission 3 – working-level engagement with Islamic Emirate officials**

The UN should also sustain and indeed expand its working-level engagement with Emirate officials on a range of governance issues with a cross-border dimension, requiring immediate attention, unconnected to the issues of system overhaul or recognition.

The management of migration is a prime candidate issue on which the UN can demonstrate its usefulness. The UN serves as an interlocutor with Taliban officials seeking a modus operandi on reception and protection of returnees and checking irregular movement of Afghan migrants abroad. The gradual progress of the working groups convened by the UN on counternarcotics and private sector development suggests that productive relations are possible at the working level.<sup>17</sup>

#### **Mission 4 – monitoring international aid**

While no one should expect UNAMA to exert leverage or implement aid conditionality, it should be tasked with monitoring and analysis of international aid flows and their impact on the economy and society. Despite recent cuts, the relatively high volumes of international assistance delivered to Afghanistan since the Taliban takeover have been a notable feature of the economy. Donors remained committed to the country despite the intractable Taliban positions on women's work and education.

For the first two years of Taliban rule, international aid continued at levels higher than the Taliban's domestic revenue raising. Only in 2024 did the value of aid drop below the level of the Taliban budget. World Bank projections for 2025 and 2026 have aid continuing at around 12 per cent of Afghan GDP, equivalent to over two thirds of what the Taliban raises themselves.<sup>18</sup> Arguably, in macro-economic terms, the continued flow of donor resources has helped protect Afghanistan from the kind of severe economic pressure which triggered unrest in Iran. As long as aid continues at scale, UN monitoring and reporting should be a part of its stewardship.

#### **Mission 5 – convening future-oriented political dialogue**

Any ideas for a UN role in promoting inclusiveness must take account of the Taliban's unwillingness to contemplate dilution of their monopoly of power or tinkering with their Emirate system of government. Nevertheless, in 'lean years' mode, the UN can still usefully convene future-oriented Afghan political dialogue. This would be an appropriate continuation of the work undertaken by former UN Special Coordinator Ambassador Feridun Sinirlioglu to encourage the emergence of consensus on what an Afghanistan at peace with itself would look like, in the light of the manifest failings of the Taliban's Emirate and of the Republic before it.<sup>19</sup>

In its convening role, the UN should listen most carefully to Afghan groups who show some agency and find creative ways of mobilising inside the country. However, the Taliban's authoritarian tendencies mean that meaningful dialogue will largely have to take place outside the country, with participants duly protected from retaliation. Ambassador Francesc Vendrell's dialogue with the Peshawar, Cyprus and Rome groups in the years before 9/11 provides a relevant example of how dialogue, on a fairly open agenda, helped fashion the building blocks of a future political process.<sup>20</sup> However, there should be low expectations of any Taliban contribution to dialogue and consensus-building as long as the Amir remains in power and wedded to his ideological project.

### **Preparing for opportunities tomorrow – anticipating peace openings**

It is not yet time to close the book on Afghanistan. East and West should find a shared interest in renewing the mandate for a political mission in Afghanistan, appropriately reformatted for the current realities of the Taliban's Islamic Emirate. The changes pushed by the Taliban Amir through his ideological project are too far-reaching for their consequences to remain confined to Afghanistan. A 'lean years' mission should help the UN anticipate those consequences and maintain the organisation's competence to lead international response to future eventualities.

*[Much of the analysis of the Taliban's Islamic Emirate in this report draws on extensive PeaceRep research, which will be published in a PeaceRep research report in spring 2026]*

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Semple, M and Atta Ur Rahman Saleem PeaceRep (2026 – forthcoming), *The Taliban's Islamic System*, PeaceRep Research Report.
- <sup>2</sup> Qari Abdul Sattar Saeed (2025), *Emirate shenasi* ('Emirate Studies: introduction and a concise history of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, Farsi edition.
- <sup>3</sup> Clark, Kate (2025), *A year of Propagating Virtue and Preventing Vice: Enforcers and 'enforced' speak about the Emirate's morality law*, Afghan Analysts Network Report, 21 August, <https://shorturl.at/N7F5D>. Afghan Analysts Network (2025), *Unofficial translation of the Islamic Emirate's 'Law on propagation of virtue and prevention of vice'*, 13 April, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/category/resources/>
- <sup>4</sup> This point is made in the 'Emirate shenasi' (op. cit.)
- <sup>5</sup> Semple, M and Atta Ur Rahman Saleem PeaceRep (2026 – forthcoming), *The Taliban's Islamic System*, PeaceRep Research Report.
- <sup>6</sup> Mehran, W and A Jobard (2025): *Old ties, new relations? Taliban's victory and violent jihadi groups in Afghanistan*, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, Routledge, DOI: [10.1080/09592318.2025.2523383](https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2025.2523383)
- <sup>7</sup> Ludwig, J and A Torres (2024), *Captured State: Corruption and Kleptocracy in Afghanistan Under the Taliban*, George W. Bush Institute, February
- <sup>8</sup> Ibrahimji, N (2023), *A Violent Nexus: Ethnonationalism, Religious Fundamentalism, and the Taliban*, *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 21 (3), 22–37, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2023.2235809>
- <sup>9</sup> Semple, M and Atta Ur Rahman Saleem PeaceRep (2026 – forthcoming), *The Taliban's Islamic System*, PeaceRep Research Report.
- <sup>10</sup> BBC News (2026), *Rift at top of the Taliban: BBC reveals clash of wills behind internet shutdown*, 15 January, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cg7vdp12vo>
- <sup>11</sup> United Nations (2023), Resolution 2721, Security Council, 29 December, [https://docs.un.org/en/s/res/2721\(2023\)](https://docs.un.org/en/s/res/2721(2023))
- <sup>12</sup> Afghan Analysts Network Report (2024), *From Doha to Doha: The contest over a UN Special Envoy lingers as discussions and disagreements drag on*, 1 March, <https://shorturl.at/ShvEK>
- <sup>13</sup> United Nations (2025), *United Nations Engagement with Afghanistan's De Facto Authorities Seeks to Address, Not Normalize, Restrictive, Discriminatory Policies*, UN Meetings Coverage 23 June, <https://press.un.org/en/2025/sc16096.doc.htm>
- <sup>14</sup> United Nations (2025), *Afghanistan: New restrictions on women nationals working for UN, put aid efforts at risk*, UN News, 11 September, <https://shorturl.at/L4zrk>
- <sup>15</sup> Security Council Report, *UN Documents for Afghanistan: Secretary-General's Reports*, <https://shorturl.at/mrytN>
- <sup>16</sup> United Nations, Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, Afghanistan, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/countries/afghanistan>
- <sup>17</sup> United Nations (2025), *The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security*, Report of the Secretary-General, <https://shorturl.at/Vp0Jd>
- <sup>18</sup> <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/ece486358b8822699ada5d12cdb5cd09-0310012025/original/Fall-ADU-November-2025-Final-for-Publication.pdf>
- <sup>19</sup> Afghan Analysts Network Report (2023), *UN Security Council Resolution on Afghanistan: Just another 'much ado about nothing'?*, 31 December, <https://shorturl.at/XsnS1>.
- <sup>20</sup> Loyn, D (2022), *Francesc Vendrell in Afghanistan 2000–2008: Talking to the Taliban, the Bonn Accords, and USA-Iran Talks*, *Asian Affairs* Vol 53 Issue 3, Taylor and Francis.

## About Us

Conciliation Resources is an international organisation committed to stopping violent conflict and creating more peaceful societies. They work with people impacted by war and violence, bringing diverse voices together to make change that lasts. Working across society, they connect community perspectives with political dialogue. Learning from peace processes around the world, they share experience and expertise to find creative solutions to violent conflict.

<http://www.c-r.org/>

PeaceRep is a research consortium based at Edinburgh Law School. Our research is rethinking peace and transition processes in the light of changing conflict dynamics, changing demands of inclusion, and changes in patterns of global intervention in conflict and peace/mediation/transition management processes.

**PeaceRep.org**

PeaceRep: The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform | [peacerep@ed.ac.uk](mailto:peacerep@ed.ac.uk)

University of Edinburgh, School of Law, Old College,  
South Bridge, EH8 9YL

PeaceRep is funded by UK International Development from the UK government.



PeaceRep: The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform  
[peacerep@ed.ac.uk](mailto:peacerep@ed.ac.uk) | <https://peacerep.org>

University of Edinburgh, School of Law, Old College, South Bridge EH8 9YL

Conciliation Resources, Burghley Yard, 106 Burghley Road, London NW5 1AL, UK  
[www.c-r.org](http://www.c-r.org) | [cr@c-r.org](mailto:cr@c-r.org)

*PeaceRep is funded by UK International Development from the UK government.*