The President of the Security Council presents his compliments to the members of the Council and has the honour to transmit herewith, for their information, a copy of a letter dated 8 November 2023 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council, and its enclosure.

This letter and its enclosure will be issued as a document of the Security Council under the symbol S/2023/856.

9 November 2023
8 November 2023

Dear Mr. President,

Pursuant to paragraph 1 of resolution 2679 (2023), adopted by the Security Council at its 9283rd meeting on 16 March 2023, I have the honour to transmit the independent assessment, as outlined in paragraph 2 of that resolution.

I would be grateful if you could bring the present document to the attention of the members of the Security Council and request its publication as an official document.

Please accept, Mr. President, the assurances of my highest consideration.

António Guterres

His Excellency
Mr. Zhang Jun
President of the Security Council
New York
Part I. INTRODUCTION

On 16 March 2023, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2679 requesting the Secretary-General to provide the Security Council an independent assessment on Afghanistan, no later than 17 November 2023.

The Security Council requested that the independent assessment provide forward-looking recommendations for an integrated and coherent approach among relevant political, humanitarian, and development actors, within and outside of the United Nations system, in order to address the current challenges faced by Afghanistan. The overarching goal is to advance the objective of a secure, stable, prosperous and inclusive Afghanistan in line with elements set out by the Security Council in previous resolutions.

As part of the consultations for this assessment, my team and I have spent extensive time in Afghanistan, travelling to all regions of the country, from the capital, Kabul, to remote districts. I have travelled to a number of Member State capitals, engaging with key regional and international stakeholders, as well as engaging with many Afghan stakeholders residing outside of the country.

Both inside and outside of the country, we have engaged with Afghan political actors and stakeholders, including representatives of the de facto authorities (DFA) at a national and subnational level, other political figures, Afghan women, men and youth from diverse backgrounds, civil society, businessmen, community and religious figures. I have also taken note
of United Nations reports on Afghanistan, as well as United Nations-verified data and statistics and other sources of research relevant to the scope of the assessment.

- The consultations have underlined that the status quo of international engagement is not working. It does not serve the humanitarian, economic, political or social needs of the Afghan people, nor does it sufficiently address the leading priorities and concerns expressed by international stakeholders, including the neighbouring countries. A method of engagement is required that learns from previous efforts, focuses on the needs of the Afghan people, and acknowledges the political realities in Afghanistan today.

- Since the political transition in August 2021, Afghan stakeholders in and outside of the country, neighbouring countries, UN bodies and mechanisms, and other international stakeholders have raised serious concerns about the state of governance and the protection of rights under the DFA, as well as the potential threats to regional stability and security emanating from Afghanistan.

- All stakeholders have expressed concerns regarding the situation of women and girls in Afghanistan, and the broad implications this has for Afghanistan and for international peace and security. The restrictive bans on girls’ secondary and higher education, and on women’s right to work, among other restrictions, are not consistent with the fundamental values embodied in the UN Charter or under international law, nor are they conducive to Afghanistan’s political and economic stability.

- For their part, the DFA, having assumed full territorial control and many of the responsibilities of governing the state of Afghanistan, have appealed unsuccessfully for political and economic normalisation. The current situation has led to an impasse, leaving much of the international community’s relations with Afghanistan in a state of uncertainty, with serious repercussions for the Afghan people.

- Donor countries’ restrictions on development and technical assistance, largely in reaction to the DFA’s curbing of the rights of women and girls, limit the degree to which international aid can sustainably meet the basic needs of Afghans and support their resilience as a society facing numerous social, economic, environmental and other needs. Formal and informal financial sanctions and lack of confidence have crippled Afghan banking and the private sector. The economy has stabilised since the crisis situation of late 2021, however only at a very low equilibrium and remains fragile. The likely impending reduction in donor funding, driven by competing global demands and the restraints on aid delivery in Afghanistan that largely derive from restrictive DFA policies, could further destabilise the fragile economic and humanitarian situation.

- The health, well-being, prosperity and security of Afghans is not only a matter of domestic interest. Historically, culturally and politically, Afghanistan and its diverse communities have deep ties with neighbouring and regional states. What affects the people of Afghanistan affects the entire region and beyond. Afghanistan has the potential to thrive as a regional hub for trade, connectivity, and people-to-people contacts that enrich the region. But it also has the potential to generate destabilising effects – as an origin country for illegal narcotics, as a base for transnational terrorism and extremist ideologies, and as a potential source of mass migration and displacement.

- Neither the international community, nor the vast majority of Afghans, wish to see renewed armed conflict in Afghanistan. This desire for local, national, and regional stability is a fundamental common ground, and a basis for future international engagement. We must identify a political

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1 See Annex for a summary of the scope of consultations.
pathway by which the interests of all sides – the Afghan people, the international community, and the DFA – can be fairly discussed and deliberated.

- The endstate of these discussions is the definition of a future where the State of Afghanistan is fully reintegrated into the international system without passing through a further cycle of violence while respecting all legal obligations.
- In response to the mandate of the Security Council, and based on consultations with numerous stakeholders, this report offers proposals for a way forward and an engagement architecture to guide and bring more coherence to political, humanitarian and development activities; and a substantive roadmap that will enable more effective negotiation and implementation of the priorities of Afghan and international stakeholders.

PART II. KEY ISSUES AND PRIORITIES IDENTIFIED IN THIS ASSESSMENT

- The mandate for this assessment is to consider “the current challenges faced by Afghanistan, including, but not limited to, humanitarian, human rights and especially the rights of women and girls, religious and ethnic minorities, security and terrorism, narcotics, development, economic and social challenges, dialogue, governance and the rule of law.”
- The consultations yielded important findings across all of these issue areas. In particular, perspectives on both the challenges and potential next steps for addressing the key priorities identified in the May 2023 meeting of Special Envoys on Afghanistan, convened by the Secretary-General. These included concerns on stability in Afghanistan and the region; the presence of terrorist organisations; inclusivity and human rights, specifically the rights of Afghan women and girls; and narcotics trafficking.
- Stakeholders consulted for the assessment largely reiterated these priorities. Many also called for greater means to improve the economic situation in Afghanistan, to better meet the basic and differentiated needs of all Afghans and ensure a more stable situation for Afghanistan and the region.

A. Human Rights, in Particular the Rights of Women and Girls

- Equal and full protection of human rights for all citizens represent fundamental obligations of Member States of the United Nations and are essential for long-term development, economic growth, and stability. In the current context, restrictions and violations of Afghan citizens’ rights – in particular those of women and girls – have significantly contributed to the current political impasse.
- The State of Afghanistan has committed to specific obligations as a party to key international conventions and human rights treaties. Upholding these obligations requires not only refraining from violations but also the creation of an environment where human rights are respected, through

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3 Secretary-General's opening remarks at press encounter on Afghanistan, 2 May 2023.
4 Some of these key treaty obligations include: Convention against Torture and Other Cruel Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT); International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR); Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (CED); Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW); International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD); International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR); International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (CMW); Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC); Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Related to their international humanitarian law commitments, Afghanistan is also party to the four Geneva Conventions, and their two additional protocols. It is also party to the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention, and the Convention on Cluster Munitions, among other treaty commitments related to methods and means of warfare.
establishing and maintaining institutions, laws and policies that ensure the rule of law, and promote accountability.  

- Since the takeover, the DFA have taken measures that comply with some of these obligations. These include the establishment of a human rights office or other ombudsmen posts in several ministries, introduction of certain safeguards for detainees, announcement of a “general amnesty” for former officials and security forces associated with the previous regime, and responsiveness to some international treaty bodies, international monitors, and other accountability mechanisms, where specific violations or reporting have been brought to their attention.

- The DFA issued a decree in December 2021 that banned forced marriages, and protected a widow’s right to inheritance and a woman’s right to choose her own husband. However, the protective provisions of this decree have been under-enforced, and its overall effects have been undermined by the dismantling of legal rights and protection institutions available to women and girls.

- The situation of women and girls, and the restrictions on girls’ education in particular, was the single most common issue raised in consultations. It was highlighted not only by Afghan women and girls, but by every Afghan stakeholder group consulted – the business community, religious clerics, tribal elders, civil society, health and education professionals, former government officials, as well as by many DFA representatives. Afghan stakeholders inside and outside of the country underscored that the current restrictions are not representative of Afghan society, culture, and traditions, and should be removed immediately.

- The restrictions on women and girls instituted since September 2021 contravene Afghanistan’s obligations under numerous international treaties, including the Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which the country ratified in 2003.

- These include edicts and decrees restricting girls’ education above grade six, women’s right to work in certain professions or types of employment, and women’s freedom of movement and ability to participate in a range of public spaces. The scope of the restrictions on women and girls is so significant that some international monitors and UN human rights mechanisms have called for international accountability measures.

- A range of international stakeholders, including neighbouring countries, Islamic countries, and other Member States and UN institutions assert that the basic rights of women and girls and their role and space in society must be respected. The DFA have tried to justify these restrictions as being part of the Islamic faith and Afghan traditions. However, similar restrictions do not exist in any other member state of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and many Afghans reject the DFA’s characterisation of local traditions.

- The basic rights of women and girls, including the right to education and to work, and representation in public and political life – are not only fundamental obligations of a state, but also critical to build state capacity for long-term development and economic growth and peace and security. Any formal re-integration of Afghanistan into global institutions and systems will require the participation and leadership of Afghan women.

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5 A/HRC/54/21, ¶5.
6 See, A/HRC/54/21, ¶¶12-17.
7 The Ministry of Women’s Affairs and other institutions and infrastructures that were designed to ensure full protection of women’s rights and participation in public life have been dismantled. A/HRC/54/21, ¶ 24.
8 To date, the DFA has issued approximately 80 edicts, with 54 edicts focusing on women and girls in relation to schools, universities, travel, justice, employment; in the media; outside the home and recreational activities. For further detail see A/HRC/54/21, ¶32.
9 The report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan and the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls concludes “that exclusion of and discrimination against women and girls is institutionalised and, as such, is a grave and systematic human rights violation that breaches the Charter of the United Nations.” A/HRC/53/21, ¶¶95-96.
• The consultations also underlined other patterns of unequal treatment and discrimination. Citizens from a number of ethnic or religious minority groups expressed a sense of marginalisation and provided examples of discrimination and disparity of treatment when they tried to access government services, raise concerns, or exercise their rights to religious, political, or cultural expression.

• Reports of extrajudicial killings and detentions, including reprisals against former government officials and security forces continue, notwithstanding the announcement of general amnesty.\(^\text{10}\) While some senior DFA officials have made statements reinforcing the amnesty, there have been few public investigations of alleged violations of the amnesty policy and very few evident disciplinary or accountability measures. This has created an environment of impunity and fear.

• Civic space in Afghanistan has shrunk significantly, following increasing restrictions, surveillance, and harassment of civil society and the media, extending to arbitrary detention of some individuals.\(^\text{11}\) Journalistic reporting calling out such abuses has been effectively banned through vague media regulations.\(^\text{12}\)

• Rights protections and access to justice have been further undermined by the DFA’s dismantling of key elements of the legal and judicial system. The Office of the Attorney General and the Afghanistan Independent Bar Association have been eliminated.\(^\text{13}\) Due process has been effectively eliminated from judicial proceedings, with no standardised procedures or statutes for judges or lawyers to follow and no rules regarding fair trial.\(^\text{14}\)

• These human rights concerns were conveyed and shared by Afghan stakeholders in the consultations across the country, as practices that inhibit the daily lives of ordinary Afghans and contribute to the DFA’s lack of legitimacy among large segments of the population.

B. Counterterrorism, Counternarcotics and Regional Security

• As observed in the Secretary General’s quarterly reports on Afghanistan since 15 August 2021, security conditions have improved inside Afghanistan, easing travel and transport. Economic predation by armed actors and some forms of corruption have sharply reduced.

• Many international stakeholders have acknowledged DFA efforts on behalf of global counterterrorism interests, especially against terrorist groups such as the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP).

• However, a number of Member States attest to the persistent presence of terrorist groups and individuals inside Afghanistan, including members of Al Qaeda.\(^\text{15}\) According to these reports, significant numbers of fighters for the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) appear to have free movement and shelter in Afghanistan, and are carrying out an intensifying campaign of violence

\(^{10}\) UNAMA reported that between 15 August 2021 and 30 June 2023, the DFA were responsible for at least 218 extrajudicial killings and 424 arbitrary arrests and detentions. United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, “A barrier to securing peace: Human rights violations against former government officials and former armed force members in Afghanistan: 15 August 2021 – June 30 2023”, August 2023.


\(^{13}\) See, A/HRC/54/21, ¶¶12-17.

\(^{14}\) Special Rapporteur Margaret Satterthwaite and Special Rapporteur Richard Bennett, ” UN experts: legal professionals in Afghanistan face extreme risks, need urgent international support”, media statement, 20 January 2023.

\(^{15}\) See S/2023/370, 1 June 2023.
inside Pakistan.\textsuperscript{16} UN reporting has noted that some of these groups have relations with elements of the DFA.

- The DFA have demonstrated limited responsiveness to international engagement on the presence and treatment of such groups. They have shown willingness to enforce certain containment or control measures, but according to consultations, these measures do not satisfy the concerns of Member States that face the most immediate risks of destabilising violence.

- Stakeholders noted that robust border management and security controls are essential for containing and mitigating a host of threats and concerns. They report that engagements between Afghanistan and its neighbours on border security controls have professionalised over the past two years, including the establishment of bilateral interagency working groups at several international borders. The DFA and neighbouring states emphasise that this requires further cooperation and improvement, including technical assistance from regional and international stakeholders.

- The DFA have demonstrated significant progress in their announced campaign to reduce and eventually eliminate the cultivation, processing and trafficking of narcotics.\textsuperscript{17} Many stakeholders expressed interest in exploring greater international cooperation in this area, in particular on alternative crops and livelihoods for the hundreds of thousands of Afghans that have relied on the production and trade of narcotics for income.

- There is both a need and interest in further engagement on these regional, border, and security dynamics. The common interests of the DFA and the international community offer the potential for cooperation on a number of areas, although further exchange of views to address both Afghan and international concerns is needed.

\textbf{C. Economic, Humanitarian and Development Issues}

- Stakeholders across the spectrum urged that any international engagement strategy must give attention to the combined humanitarian, development, and economic challenges facing Afghanistan. Neighbouring countries stressed that a robust and healthy Afghan economy is crucial for regional trade and reduces economic risks to their countries, as well as the potential of uncontrolled migration. Many Afghans consulted requested urgent relief, but also an ability to fully invest in and pursue their own economic futures and livelihood opportunities freely.

- Prior to August 2021, aid flows amounting to 40 to 45 percent of GDP financed around 75 percent of public spending, including approximately half of the government budget. That assistance halted abruptly in August 2021, and access to the international banking system and offshore foreign exchange reserves were frozen under certain sanctions regimes. This triggered a complex economic crisis. Basic services were disrupted, including in health and education, while private sector activity collapsed and macroeconomic stability was threatened. According to the latest OCHA reporting, 29.2 million Afghans are in need of humanitarian assistance, of which 15.3 million face acute food insecurity.\textsuperscript{18}

- While the economy has since stabilised at a new, very low equilibrium at the macro-level, at the household level welfare conditions remain severe.\textsuperscript{19} Existing levels of aid are insufficient for all

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid. Other regional stakeholders expressed concerns on different UN sanctioned armed groups, including the East Turkestan Islamic Movement and the Turkestan Islamic Party (ETIM/TIP), and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).

\textsuperscript{17} As noted repeatedly in UN reporting, including the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan’s briefing to the Security Council on 26 September 2023.

\textsuperscript{18} UN OCHA, “Asia Pacific Humanitarian Update”, September 2023.

Afghans who require assistance. More reductions are widely anticipated, which could destabilise the economic and humanitarian situation.

- The banking system is still not functioning normally and international financial flows are constrained.\(^{20}\) Trade and other payments occur almost entirely through informal channels. Remittances from overseas, which have long been a critical source of resilience for Afghan households, have also been impeded. Banks are dependent on current forbearance measures, and the intermediation function of the banking sector is not being fulfilled, with almost no private sector lending.

- The chilling effect on the banking sector and lack of confidence in Afghanistan’s economy since August 2021 has also been due to policy choices by the DFA. Failure to institute measures of fiscal transparency, abrogation of the judicial system and basic legal guarantees, and lack of equal economic participation among all sectors of society have all contributed to continued low confidence among international donors and investors. A number of ministries lack sufficient technical capacity – due in part to the flight of professionals, but also to the DFA’s exclusionary policies vis-a-vis those who served under the Republic, including technical professionals and female civil servants.

- Although Afghanistan’s economy has temporarily stabilised, it remains fragile, and the economy faces major downside risks, in addition to the already reduced level of gross domestic product.

- International aid flows and regular cash shipments required for the provision of humanitarian assistance have, as a secondary effect, contributed to macroeconomic stability. However, both international and Afghan stakeholders raised concerns over these cash shipments, and they are not sustainable in their current form.

- The recent DFA ban on opium production, while a positive measure in terms of the global fight against illicit drugs, is likely to have severe negative impacts on Afghanistan’s rural economy, household welfare, and macroeconomic stability, unless coupled with comprehensive support from donors on alternative livelihoods.

- Existing restrictions by most donors on the provision of development assistance, and on the way that assistance can be provided—for example preventing any sort of technical assistance—limits the degree to which international aid can respond to basic needs in a sustainable and cost-effective way. Because of political sensitivities, aid is deliberately bypassing government systems and being delivered through an overlapping network of UN agencies and (I)NGOs, often at high costs with insufficient coordination, and not at a scale needed across the country. Most assistance since the collapse of the Republic has been in the form of short-term humanitarian assistance.

- The current limitations on technical assistance and cooperation limit progress in key sectors, including in agriculture and water management, other livelihood support areas, demining, and public health campaigns. Many noted Afghanistan’s de facto isolation from global climate discussions and from most climate adaptation and resilience funding, despite that it ranks among the top 10 most vulnerable countries to climate change.\(^{21}\) Consultations with Afghan stakeholders repeatedly emphasised concern on the future of water management.

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\(^{21}\) In the last published version of the ND-Gain Index (2021), Afghanistan ranked 179 out of 185 countries. The index ranks countries according to vulnerability to climate change combined with readiness. See [https://gain.nd.edu/our-work/country-index/rankings/](https://gain.nd.edu/our-work/country-index/rankings/).
Stakeholders suggested a number of avenues for improving aid effectiveness, ameliorating humanitarian conditions, or placing Afghanistan on a more stable and sustainable economic recovery pathway. However, the triggers that have led to the current situation are as much political as economic, and economic recovery will depend significantly on a political decision, by donors in particular, to promote the development of the economy for the benefit of the Afghan people.

D. Inclusive Governance and Rule of Law

An inclusive form of governance that serves and engages all Afghans is a key demand of many Afghan stakeholders and of the international community. Afghanistan is a diverse, multi-ethnic, multi-sectarian, multi-linguistic, and multi-cultural society. The inclusion of all Afghan communities in the nation’s governance structures is central to the social and political stability of Afghanistan.

Many Afghans expressed perceptions of exclusion and discriminatory practices on the basis of ethnicity, language and gender under the DFA. Part of the perceived lack of inclusion relates to the disenfranchisement of most Afghans from full ability to participate in political life. Many have observed a marked decline in the space for political engagement, and greater limitations on citizens’ ability to raise concerns or provide input to policy making. This especially affects women, who had played prominent political and governance roles under the Republic as well as in earlier periods of modern Afghan history.

Member States, multilateral institutions, and the Security Council have called for the DFA to establish an inclusive system of governance. Many neighbouring countries and near-neighbours view inclusion and establishment of a balanced, broad-based, inclusive, accountable and responsible government as both a reflection of fundamental rights and as a key ingredient for peace, stability and harmony within the country and in the region.

DFA have interpreted this as a demand for power-sharing, and specifically for a return to government of some former political leaders. They also maintain that their own government is inclusive in that it represents Afghanistan’s various ethnic groups and because they have retained much of the civil service. This is however considered insufficient by both Afghan and international stakeholders.

There are many ways to enable the meaningful participation of all Afghans in public affairs, including mechanisms that are well grounded in Afghan traditions of consultation and dialogue.

The DFA have established some forms of political consultations, usually at a subnational level, as well as mechanisms in different ministries for the population to report and raise issues with the DFA. While welcome, these forms are still limited, in particular for Afghan women, and lack transparency or consistency.

Afghan stakeholders outside of the DFA have also taken their own steps towards inclusivity, through continued efforts at dialogue and at participation in public life. Despite the challenges, resource limitations, and constraints imposed, many Afghan civil society actors have continued to build bridges and create spaces for dialogue among themselves and with the DFA on an informal basis.

These existing pathways could be built upon and be complemented by national dialogue to establish more regular means of consultation and participation from Afghans of all backgrounds and ways.

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23 UN Security Council Resolution 2513 (2021); UN Security Council Resolution 2681 (2023), the Declaration of the Moscow Format Consultations on Afghanistan, 29 September 2023; European Union Council Conclusions on Afghanistan, 15 September 2021.
of life. Re-establishing a justice and rule of law system that protects equal participation and fulfilment of rights would advance inclusive governance, while also contributing to economic growth and stability.

E. Political Representation and Implications for Regional and International Priorities

- The DFA have called for their political recognition and diplomatic representation both bilaterally and in the United Nations. They have asserted that they meet the requirements for occupying Afghanistan’s seat at the UN General Assembly. In 2021 and 2022, the UN General Assembly Credentials Committee postponed its consideration of the credentials pertaining to the representatives of Afghanistan. The DFA and some stakeholders have expressed dissatisfaction with the provisional participation of the previously credentialled representatives of the Islamic Republic at the United Nations.

- In consultations, international stakeholders remained aligned behind the position expressed at the Secretary-General convened meeting of Special Envoys on Afghanistan in May 2023, which supported engagement with Afghanistan and the development of a common international approach, but that acknowledged the DFA should not be recognized at this stage.

- The lack of determination on Afghanistan’s representation in international organisations including the United Nations ultimately disadvantages the Afghan people and limits the country’s ability to address many regional and international priorities. These include, for example, restrictions and practical challenges to Afghans’ ability to access identification and travel documents and visas, both inside and outside the country.

- The political impasse has also negatively impacted regional interests and concerns, including on trade, connectivity, and transboundary resource management, by limiting the avenues in which to discuss and resolve these issues.

PART III: RECOMMENDATIONS

The Status Quo of Engagement and the Way Forward

- There has been a high degree of engagement between the international community and the de facto authorities over the last two years on issues such as humanitarian access, human rights violations, regional economic cooperation and trade, cooperation in counter-narcotics and counter-terrorism.

- There is overall consensus that the current political impasse and approach for international engagement – largely ad hoc, at the initiative of individual member states and actors, and reactive to crises - have dire consequences for the Afghan people and entire region.

- As a result, many stakeholders would support increased international engagement, but in a more coherent, coordinated, and structured manner, and with clear understanding of the outcomes and commitments from all sides. This will be necessary to address Afghan needs, to open space for dialogue between Afghans, and to relieve the burden on humanitarian actors currently at the forefront of engagement.

- A key component missing from current engagement is intra-Afghan dialogue. Addressing this gap could build toward national reconciliation and the establishment of domestic legitimacy, rule of law and constitutional order -- all of which would be critical factors in the acceptance of the government of the State of Afghanistan as a full-fledged member of the international system.

- There are some measures that could be taken immediately to create more sustainable and effective responses to the current economic and humanitarian challenges and to better address the needs of the Afghan people and the interests of the region and the international community.
• In order to move forward on political issues, there is a need for a more structured process, with clear conditions and expectations for all sides, and mechanisms of coordination that will ensure greater coherence in engagement going forward.

• The objective of this process should be a clear end state of an Afghanistan at peace with itself and its neighbours, fully reintegrated into the international community. Several recommendations are proposed:

  1. A series of proposed measures that can be taken immediately and aimed at addressing the basic needs of the Afghan people and strengthening trust through more structured engagement.
  2. A call for international attention to and cooperation on issues that impact regional and global security and stability.
  3. A proposed roadmap for political engagement designed to reintegrate Afghanistan fully into the international community, in line with the State of Afghanistan’s international commitments and obligations, and with a degree of domestic input and inclusivity conducive to future peace and stability.
  4. A set of mechanisms and formats to ensure the coordination and implementation of all the above.

1. Building Confidence by Addressing the Immediate Needs of Afghans

• The urgent needs of the population require a general shift away from politically driven aid approaches towards increased and more sustainable assistance, especially in key sectors such as food security, livelihoods and health.

• It will be necessary to pivot from short-term stopgap efforts to more sustainable aid modalities that avoid problems of aid coordination and fragmentation. Ensuring greater unity among and employing trust funds (such as the Special Trust Fund for Afghanistan and the Afghanistan Resilience Trust Fund) would facilitate coordination, allow for planning for scale and reach, and offer third-party monitoring arrangements to help protect against aid diversion and other risks.

• Throughout, adherence to principles of non-discrimination and inclusion, respect for women’s rights and efforts toward their meaningful participation, and respect for fundamental rights and freedoms of all Afghans should be ensured and advanced.

• Greater engagement, including through cooperation on these priorities, can contribute towards better relations, improve mutual understanding through active communication, and build confidence between international and Afghan stakeholders, and among Afghans themselves.

• Priority areas could include:

  a) Expanding international assistance that contributes to the basic needs of the Afghan people, including providing technical assistance to improve capacities of relevant Afghan institutions to deliver services to Afghan people more effectively.

  Supporting food security and agricultural livelihoods, including the DFA’s ongoing counternarcotics campaign; environmental security and water management; the health sector, including support to people with disabilities and those affected by the war, as well as treatment for drug users; and demining. Assistance should prioritise the most vulnerable groups and women and girls.

  Finalisation of some near-finished infrastructure projects that were started before August 2021, particularly those with a direct impact on Afghan well-being and those that, if left unfinished, pose severe environmental, security or humanitarian risks.
b) **Establishing economic dialogue and reforms to begin to resolve the many barriers to economic recovery.** This could include identifying ways to reduce the effects that the existing sanctions regime has had on the banking sector, supporting financial reforms, and enabling economic dialogue and eventual coordination with the de facto authorities’ financial bodies.

International stakeholders should support the rehabilitation of Afghanistan’s central bank, upon steps by the DFA to demonstrate transparent and accountable fiscal governance, and greater conformity with a range of international financial regulations.

Economic dialogue may positively impact blockages to private investment and banking transactions, but will not fully resolve the informal chilling effects of sanctions on the Afghan economy. These are based on concerns about the unpredictability and risks of the current governance system, and reputational issues due to restrictions on women and girls, and are therefore only likely to ease after significant policy changes taken by the DFA.

Progress in dialogue and in reforms on economic issues should prompt the Switzerland-based Fund for the Afghan People to disperse funds in line with its statutes, including for foreign exchange rate and price stabilisation objectives. It might also enable alternatives to and a gradual transition from current cash shipment-based assistance.

c) **Enable partial restoration of regular transit, trade, and other means of connectivity between Afghans and the world.** This could include measures to improve airport safety and capacity for the limited number of carriers currently operating in Afghanistan, and to reduce barriers to normal air carrier operations at Kabul International Airport.

Regular administrative processes for Afghans in the country and abroad should be restored, and could require support to ensure the continued issuance of passports and visas, which depend in part on international printing and other facilitation and coordination measures.

d) **Encouraging and assisting activities that help Afghans realise their political, economic, cultural and social rights.** This should include support for media and civil society, measures that protect and expand civic and political space, support to initiatives related to cultural preservation, and measures to support victim-centred approaches to justice and reconciliation. This could include:

Specific support for women and girls, such as support for educational opportunities, including for online learning, employment, micro-finance, preventing gender-based violence and providing psycho-social support.

Continuing to offer sustainable assistance to women and girls and vulnerable Afghan groups and individuals who have sought protection and refuge outside Afghanistan.

Continued dialogue with the DFA on human rights obligations, including on cases of reported violations, raising awareness of human rights standards and facilitating engagement with relevant treaty bodies.

2. **Continuing Cooperation on Key Security, Regional and Political Issues**

- International stakeholders and UN bodies have universally expressed an expectation that the State of Afghanistan manage, mitigate and prevent threats to regional and global stability. Identified
concerns include the use of Afghan soil to threaten or attack any other country, the planning and financing of terrorist acts, and the production, sale and trafficking of illegal narcotics.  

- The State of Afghanistan and the de facto authorities have also entered into multilateral and bilateral commitments to prevent the use of Afghan territory to threaten the security of other countries, as well as commitments related to counter-narcotics, and other regional issues.

- Addressing these challenges effectively will require coordination and cooperation between the DFA and international stakeholders on a bilateral and multilateral basis. International stakeholders should reciprocate cooperative action on the part of the DFA with assistance and support, in full accordance with international human rights law, treaties and conditions.

- There are also a number of other regional and global interests, many with the potential to impact stability and security, that could be better advanced through more coherent and focused attention and engagement. Priority areas could include:
  
a) **Supporting bilateral and multilateral security cooperation**, including provision of assistance related to addressing key security and regional stability issues. Addressing threats to other countries by groups and individuals based or operating in Afghanistan will require significant capacity and resources, and action from multiple stakeholders.
  
b) **Cooperating with international counter-narcotics efforts**, in policy and law, including further steps to maintain the current trajectory of the eradication of illegal narcotics.
  
c) **Strengthening international borders, including effective border controls** and controls on issuance of identity papers and travel documents, as emphasised in Security Council resolutions 1624 (2005) and 2178 (2014), to combat terrorism and human and narcotics trafficking.
  
d) **Expanding international cooperation and assistance in areas that advance regional and global priorities**, including in the fields of climate adaptation and response, and transboundary natural resource management; counter-narcotics; advancing global health security; and other areas of transnational interest and regulation.
  
e) **Reviewing and updating relevant provisions of the UN 1988 Sanctions list** pursuant to resolution 1988 (2011), per past UN recommendations. An update would facilitate better compliance and processing of travel exemptions, and make the sanctions regime more relevant to current realities.
  
f) **Gradually resuming diplomatic engagement inside Afghanistan** to facilitate more continuous dialogue with all Afghan stakeholders, to more effectively implement and support aid delivery and development assistance, and to enable international stakeholders’ better understanding of threats, challenges and ground realities.

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26 See the Fourteenth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2665 (2022) concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace stability and security of Afghanistan. S/2023/370.
3. A Roadmap for Reintegration of the State of Afghanistan into the International System

- Concurrent with the above steps, the international community and Afghan stakeholders should begin a more coherent political engagement process. More integrated and coherent international engagement should be pursued through a performance-based roadmap.

- The below outline of this roadmap sets out (A) international obligations of the State of Afghanistan with suggested benchmarks to indicate progress in meeting them, and (B) a call for an intra-Afghan political process that will build toward inclusive constitution-making. Progress in both of these components will build toward (C) an end state of the international community’s normalisation of relations with the State of Afghanistan.

A. Obligations of the State of Afghanistan

- The founding principles of the UN Charter, as set out in its preamble, are “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war”, “to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women,” and to “establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained.”

- The DFA have asked to be recognized as the governing authority for the State of Afghanistan. Doing so comes with acceptance of their obligations and commitments in international conventions, and good faith measures to comply with these through policy, legislation and in practice. These international obligations, along with other commitments and expectations for the State of Afghanistan, are part of assuming the mantle of state responsibility, and of being accorded legitimacy as such, and apply to all states in the international community.

- Afghanistan has committed to multiple treaties, including equal treatment of all citizens, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, identity or political opinion; equal opportunities for political participation, expression, employment, and education; equality of access in healthcare and other basic services; freedom from torture and bodily harm; freedom of political expression, assembly and religious practices. These treaty obligations also protect citizens’ freedom of movement, including freedom to travel outside the country.

- Considering the specific policies on women and girls in place since August 2021, it is important to emphasise the commitments and obligations of the State of Afghanistan as a signatory to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and as a party to the CEDAW, ICCPR, ICESCR. Obligations under the CEDAW, ICCPR, ICESCR, and other instruments include ensuring that women and girls enjoy equal rights with men to education at all levels, employment and occupation, and to participate in government policy-making and other forms of public life. Other key obligations reference women’s right to work in international organisations, and to participate in non-governmental organisations and associations.

- These treaty commitments require protection of these rights in law and policy, and the establishment of institutions and regular rule of law practices that enable their enforcement.

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27 UN Charter, Preamble. These principles were further expanded upon in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was adopted by the General Assembly in December 1948 during its 183rd plenary meeting, A/RES/217(III). Many of its provisions are considered part of customary international law, and replicated in other binding treaty commitments.

28 CEDAW articles 7, 8, 10, 11. CEDAW, Article 10 specifies that there should be the same conditions for women and men to have access to studies, including “in pre-school, general, technical, professional and higher technical education, as well as in all types of vocational training;” and equal curricula, and examinations. These principles are also supported in ICESCR articles 3, 7, and 13; ICCPR articles 3, 26; CRC article 24, among other international law provisions.

29 CEDAW, Articles 7, 8.
Measures should be taken to uphold these universal treaty commitments; to prevent human rights violations; and to hold perpetrators to account.\footnote{A/HRC/54/21, ¶5.}

- Demonstration that the DFA recognize and are able to carry out the state of Afghanistan’s treaty obligations and commitments under international law is a key step within this roadmap, and would be necessary for any forward progress on normalisation and recognition. Progress would be indicated by measurable steps to implement the following key benchmarks:

  1) Fulfilling Afghanistan’s treaty obligations and other commitments under international law by immediately removing restrictions on the rights of women and girls to secondary school and higher education; on their employment opportunities and occupation choice, including working for the United Nations and NGOs; and on unconditional freedom of movement and access to public spaces and essential facilities.

  2) Taking meaningful steps to improve Afghanistan’s compliance with its treaty obligations, notably with regard to equal treatment and access. Steps along these lines would include:

     a) review of current laws and policies to ensure they are in line with the key standards mandated under Afghanistan’s treaty obligations;

     b) ensuring legal protections for key rights are embedded within the law and that regular, codified rule of law processes exist for enforcing and protecting those rights;

     c) ensuring that institutions and mechanisms that allow for investigation of rights violations exist across all ministries, and that they are linked to appropriate accountability measures, with means of redress accessible to all Afghans.

  3) Reinforcing and establishing inclusive forms of governance that are accessible and serve all sections of the population, across the country, including Afghan women, men and youth, and that promote participatory decision-making processes, non-discrimination and predictability in governance.

B. Pursuing intra-Afghan dialogue to Achieve More Inclusive Governance

- In addition to progress on the commitments of the State of Afghanistan, there is a need to take steps towards an Afghan national dialogue that would establish inclusive governance and ensure sustainable peace and social, cultural and economic development after 45 years of armed conflict. This has been called for by Afghan stakeholders, the UN Security Council, regional and international formats, and Member States, and is what the Taliban also committed to in the past.\footnote{The UN Security Council Resolution 2681 (2023) expressed “its support for the principle of a comprehensive and inclusive, Afghan-led and Afghan-owned determination of the country’s political future and development path”. The Taliban also committed to “intra-Afghan dialogue and negotiations” in the “Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the United States of America and the Taliban” (2020). These were not specified as negotiations with the former regime – the agreement stipulated dialogue with “Afghan sides” to determine the formation of the new post-settlement Afghan Islamic government. The UN Security Council reflected this bilateral commitment in its Resolution 2513 (2021) that encouraged “all parties to seek an inclusive, negotiated political settlement, with the full, equal and meaningful participation of women,” and in “adherence to the rule of law.” Most recently, the Declaration of the Moscow Format Consultations on Afghanistan, held in Kazan on September 29, 2023, urged the establishment of “a practical, outcome-oriented dialogue with the representatives of alternative ethno-political groups with a view to completing the process of peaceful settlement and forging a balanced, broad-based, inclusive, accountable and responsible government in Afghanistan”.}

- A national political dialogue that reflects the views and participation of all Afghans should lead to the establishment of a predictable rule of law-based governance and an inclusive constitutional order that enshrines the rights of citizens in law and creates a predictable legal landscape.
Several steps would be required to prepare such a process. Traditional Afghan institutions/mechanisms could be drawn upon to frame and guide the process. Specific strategies should be considered to ensure meaningful participation of Afghan women in the process throughout.

Afghan stakeholders, including the DFA, should commit to engaging in and exploring avenues for a dialogue about the future of the country. Preparatory meetings, inside and outside Afghanistan, could help prepare the ground and determine the process. The international community should support Afghan stakeholders to ensure inclusive and representative participation in such a dialogue.

This dialogue should seek to determine the parameters of an inclusive constitution-making process. The composition of all bodies involved in the process, such as the formation of a constitutional jirga (assembly) should reflect and represent the whole of Afghan society.

A national political dialogue would also assist in a process of how the nation and its citizens – all of whom are victims of conflict after decades of war – can reconcile with each other and achieve common goals for a more secure, stable, prosperous and inclusive Afghanistan.

Given the current political climate among Afghans both in the country and abroad, it is likely that the recommended steps would require significant support from international stakeholders, but such a process would only succeed based on the political will, commitment and independence of Afghan stakeholders.

C. Normalisation and Representation of the State of Afghanistan

Significant and measurable progress on upholding the obligations of the State of Afghanistan as set out above, and on inclusive governance and intra-Afghan dialogue, would permit movement toward the end state of full normalisation and integration of Afghanistan within the international system.

Afghanistan’s full integration into international institutions would include membership in key financial institutions and fully accredited representation of Afghanistan in the UN General Assembly and other associated forums.32

Normalisation would allow for expansion of international assistance towards more regular levels and types of development aid, including as relates to infrastructure, and technical dialogue and cooperation. With demonstration of de facto authorities’ ability to maintain Afghanistan’s commitments and to govern inclusively, the international community should move swiftly to identify a solution to the current dilemma of Afghanistan’s frozen assets, revisit the various sanctions regimes, and move toward more permanent economic solutions, such as the recapitalization of the Da Afghanistan Bank.

4. Mechanisms to Support Engagement

Advancing the recommendations of this report will require dedicated capacities and platforms for coordination and cooperation to aid and facilitate a more structured engagement and address obstacles along the way.

Where there have been competing claims to represent a Member State in the UN General Assembly, or when a transition period has left in question the legitimacy of a transitional government, the question has usually been settled by an affirmative statement on the issue by either the UN General Assembly, the Security Council, or both. For past practice concerning the cases of the Congo (1960); Kampuchea (1979); Afghanistan (1996); and others, see United Nations Juridical Yearbook, 1997 (United Nations Publications, New York: 2004), pp. 465-68. See also A/RES/63/301 (2009) (“Situation in Honduras: democracy breakdown); UN Press, “Libya: After Much Wrangling, General Assembly Seats National Transitional Council of Libya as Country’s Representative for Sixty-Sixth Session,” 16 September 2011. In this case, given that both the UN General Assembly and/or the Security Council have previously issued statements declining recognition of the Islamic Emirate, affirmative reversal would likely be necessary. See Security Council Resolution 2513 (2020); UN General Assembly resolution 75/90, The Situation in Afghanistan (75th sess.: 2020-2021).
• Stakeholder consultations outlined strong support for the UN to play a coordinating role, and to spearhead the more structured and coherent engagement processes set out above. The mechanisms proposed here would be coordinated by the UN, but would also rely on strong support and active contribution of Member States and other international organisations.

• These mechanisms would operate alongside and work closely with existing regional formats and international coordination platforms that are playing a vital role in addressing the challenges facing Afghanistan.

• These mechanisms should support the implementation of the measures to address the immediate needs of Afghan people; advance and facilitate the preparations for a broad-based intra-Afghan political dialogue; and identify ways to further deepen engagement toward an end state of Afghanistan’s full reintegration into the international system.

• For each of these mechanisms, steps should be taken to ensure consultation, input and participation with the full range of Afghan stakeholders. It is imperative that Afghan women participate in all fora impacting Afghanistan’s future, and that options for Afghan women’s meaningful and consistent participation are actively developed and implemented.

• The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), through its mandate to monitor, report and engage on a range of topics at national and subnational levels, has played an important role as a bridge between the international community and Afghans. It should continue its work in support of deepening engagement.

**UN-Convened Large Group Format**

• The most broad-based platform that currently exists, the Secretary-General convened format of Special Envoys initiated in May 2023 (hereafter “large group” format) should continue to meet in a regular manner, to sustain international unity and improve cooperation in engagement. It could meet at the Special Envoy or, as appropriate, Foreign Minister level.

• As a first step to advancing the recommendations, the UN should initiate consultations with all stakeholders to convene, in a timely manner, another meeting of the large group format where the conclusions and recommendations from this assessment can be discussed, particularly in relation to this format and the contact group proposed below.

**International Contact Group**

• A smaller contact group should be formed, selected from, and linked to, the large group format. This contact group would coordinate action and approaches among international stakeholders, sustain and deepen engagement, and could take a more frontal role in active and continuous political engagement with Afghan stakeholders including the DFA.

• It would be important for the contact group to be able to act with the support of all international stakeholders. The Group’s effectiveness would be enhanced by affirmations of support from the UN Security Council.

**UN Special Envoy**

• A UN Special Envoy should be appointed to ensure sufficient and dedicated resources to facilitate engagement among international and Afghan stakeholders, spearhead coordination, and connect with the proposed and existing platforms. The Special Envoy should represent the UN in the aforementioned international contact group and support its functions and regular convening.

• The Envoy’s mandate should focus on the diplomacy between Afghanistan and international stakeholders as well as on advancing intra-Afghan dialogue. It should be complementary to that of the UN in Afghanistan.
Part IV. CONCLUSION

It is my hope that this assessment and its recommendations will offer ideas and guidance to Afghan and international stakeholders, Member States, UN and international organisations, and that it provides the much needed impetus to shift from the current status quo.

I extend my sincere appreciation to all who contributed to the Independent Assessment. In particular, I continue to be inspired by the courage and determination shown by Afghan women and girls.

It is clear from my consultations that we are universally united in our vision of an Afghanistan that is at peace with its people, its neighbours, and the international community. All stakeholders have a role to play in building a more peaceful, prosperous and predictable future for Afghanistan to the benefit of all Afghans. Afghanistan should feel like home to all Afghans, by working together to create space for all voices, this is possible.

Istanbul
26 October 2023
Annex: SCOPE OF CONSULTATIONS

The Security Council requested that the independent assessment provide forward-looking recommendations for an integrated and coherent approach among relevant political, humanitarian, and development actors, within and outside of the United Nations system, in order to address the current challenges faced by Afghanistan, including, but not limited to, humanitarian, human rights and especially the rights of women and girls, religious and ethnic minorities, security and terrorism, narcotics, development, economic and social challenges, dialogue, governance and the rule of law; and to advance the objective of a secure, stable, prosperous and inclusive Afghanistan in line with the elements set out by the Security Council in previous resolutions.

The Security Council requested consultation with all relevant Afghan political actors and stakeholders, including relevant authorities, Afghan women, and civil society, as well as the region and the wider international community, as part of the assessment process. Given this mandate, the independent assessment team took particular care to ensure sufficient coverage and balance in consulting with Member States and regional organisations (particularly those in the region or with long-standing interests and engagement in Afghanistan); Afghanistan’s de facto authorities (DFA); Afghan civil society and other Afghan stakeholders, including notably women and girls; thematic and regional subject-matter experts; and those working within the United Nations system.

The purpose of these consultations, as well as other information-gathering, was to assess the challenges that exist in Afghanistan and the approaches that have been taken to respond so far; identify feasible pathways for the international community to respond to these challenges in the future; and to develop recommendations for a more integrated and coherent approach among relevant political, humanitarian, and development actors (within and outside the UN system).

As part of these consultations, the Special Coordinator travelled to 15 Member States, and to Afghanistan. He also consulted with senior representatives of an additional 14 Member States and regional organisations. A total of 117 representatives of Member States (other than Afghanistan) were consulted.

The Special Coordinator visited Afghanistan twice for in person consultations, where he met with the DFA at the ministerial level, Afghan political, civil society and business leaders, journalists, youth, students and other stakeholders. He consulted with ambassadors, special envoys and chargés d'affaires present in Afghanistan. He also consulted with the Secretary-General’s Special Representative and head of the UN Assistance Mission to Afghanistan, the Deputy Special Representatives, and the UN country team heads of agencies, funds and programmes.

Additionally, the Special Coordinator’s assessment team conducted in-person consultations across seven provinces of Afghanistan, consulting with individuals from 17 different provinces of Afghanistan who represented a wide range of Afghan and international stakeholders. These included consultations with representatives of de facto authorities at a ministerial, provincial and district level, and with Afghan men and women working in public health and education, humanitarian and development assistance, women business owners, and in the civil service. The consultations also included a large share of civil society actors, journalists, students and other individuals negatively impacted by events since August 2021, including those subject to rights violations.

Recognising the extraordinary circumstances that displaced and dispersed Afghans during and after the events of August 2021, the Special Coordinator and his team also took steps to solicit views from Afghans currently located outside of Afghanistan, both during travels to other Member states and through online consultations. These included one large open-call virtual consultation organised through the Non-Government Liaison Service of the General Assembly, and several smaller, non-public focus-group discussions with particular groups of stakeholders or focused on particular sub-themes of the assessment.
All total, the assessment team consulted with 768 individuals, of which 365 (48%) were women, and 389 (51%) men.\textsuperscript{33} Sixty-seven per cent of those consulted were Afghan, and 32 percent of other nationalities.

In addition to consulting extensively with United Nations field staff during consultations inside Afghanistan, the independent assessment engaged with representatives from a wide range of United Nations entities based in New York, Geneva, and elsewhere. All total, the assessment team consulted the expertise of 124 UN staff or representing other UN agencies, funds, and programmes.

The assessment team also consulted with Afghan and international experts on the key themes of this report, including those specialising in humanitarian aid, human rights and especially the rights of women and girls, religious and ethnic minorities, security and terrorism, narcotics, development, economic and social challenges, dialogue, governance and the rule of law. This included consulting with a wide range of humanitarian actors engaged in service delivery in Afghanistan. Specifically on gender, the Special Coordinator had access to full-time gender expertise in his team and updated UN-verified data, statistics and analyses from within the UN system and from external sources.

\textsuperscript{33} This breakdown of the gender of participants does not include consultation with 14 individuals during one focus group discussion on LGBTQI+ rights, who preferred that their gender not be viewed in binary terms.