

# **“We Cannot Abandon the People of Afghanistan”: UN’s Quest for UNAMA Renewal**

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## **Abstract**

*The United Nations Charter (UN) pledges “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war”.<sup>1</sup> The landlocked nation of Afghanistan has been at war for several generations and it is likely — with the present impending humanitarian and socio-economic deficits — the conflict will continue to endure. With Afghanistan ‘hanging by a thread’ post six months of the US pull-out and subsequent Taliban takeover, the world cannot abandon the country now for the sake of its citizens and universal global security. This is also what the UN Secretary-General António Guterres stated when he addressed the UN Security Council (UNSC) on 26 January 2022.<sup>2</sup> Historically speaking, the UN has played a pivotal role in Afghanistan ever since the Soviet Union’s military intervention of the 1980s. Scholarly research on civil wars and peace in Afghanistan points to multisided conflict swelling up unchecked and at a threatening pace. The only manner in which the UN can avoid losing much of its twenty years of progress is to chart out a pathway for continued engagement with the Taliban. Hence, there is an urgent need to particularise the UN mission in the country to better mitigate the all-encompassing crises in Kabul.*

## **Introduction**

**S**ince the Soviet Union’s invasion on 27 December 1979, the United Nations has been deeply engaged with Afghanistan.<sup>3</sup> However, the extent and nature of its involvement have greatly

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differed over the years. In light of this shift, the landlocked nation of Afghanistan has been heavily impacted by its neighbouring linkages, underhand power politics of international players and pulsating local animosities. Undoubtedly, the UN has faced major challenges in its mission of steering Kabul in the direction of peace and security by facilitating international agreements leading to the Soviet withdrawal, state-building, peace agreements, intra-Afghan political dialogue and humanitarian aid amongst other initiatives. To briefly put it, the war-torn land of Afghanistan has metamorphosed over the following events:

- 1979-1992: The invasion by the Soviet Union, new Cold War and the dawn of United Nations involvement in Afghanistan.
- 1992-1996: The Afghan civil war, growth of Mujahedeen factions and victory of the Taliban.
- 1996-2001: The clerical dictatorship of the Taliban and its subsequent abandonment.
- 2001-2004: The commencement of U.S' War on Terror, Kickstarting anti-Taliban movements and the establishment of a constitutional government in Afghanistan.
- 2005-2019: Rebuilding of state, increased socio-economic and military role of the US and the United Nations.
- 2020-2021: Resurrecting the Doha Agreement, Trump administration initiates reduction of US forces, Kabul falls to the Taliban, swift and absolute take-over by the Taliban.

This article attempts to bring clarity to the possible list of duties of the UNSC with Taliban commanding Kabul. It is an endeavour to analyse the convergences and contradictions in the responses of concerned authorities seated in the UNSC who face a serious dilemma today. Instrumental in the peace process is the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) originally instituted in 2002, after the US successfully toppled the Taliban. Ever since then, UNAMA has stayed put, serving as a lightning rod, meant to absorb shock waves during violent engagements with the neo-Taliban.<sup>4</sup> This mission serves as the UN's right arm in any negotiations with the Taliban. It is also monitoring human rights situations and synchronising with other UN agencies. All in all,

UNAMA has sturdily grounded itself as Kabul’s humanitarian watchdog.<sup>5</sup>

The Taliban also appears keen on the mission’s continuity. Compared to their first stint in power, the ‘Taliban 2.0’ is rendering greater importance to its governance image internationally.<sup>6</sup> However, the unfolding of the terms in which the group plans to help UNAMA in its task remains foggy. With the Taliban as an unreliable lead, some may argue that they have already won peace through violence. But Kabul’s history itself is a testament to why forceful military solutions are unpopular and fragile.<sup>7</sup> The changed context has led the UNSC in splits over the amount of signification that is to be granted to various facets of the mandate. What now remains to be answered is - whether UNAMA will throw more light on humanitarian issues or will it absorb more political cases under its roof? As for Afghanistan, the vigorous Talibanisation of its socio-economic and political institutions have caught its back against the wall, inciting prolonged uncertainty and unrest.

### **Reorganisation and the UNAMA**

The UNAMA was established as the UN’s poster child, pushing prospects of peace in Afghanistan. The nodal agency was namely solicitous of rendering humanitarian relief, facilitation of economic recovery and rehabilitation. As per the 2001 Bonn Agreement, UNAMA was urgently born to assist the interim authority in the ‘Graveyard of empires’.<sup>8</sup> In addition to this monumental document, two other agreements lay down the overall Afghan reconstruction between the international community and the Afghan government: the Afghanistan Compact Agreement (2006) and the Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS, 2008).<sup>9</sup>

The scope of UNAMA was envisioned to be different from most peace mandates. The UN was well aware of its highly ambitious humanitarian state-building projects, in one of the world’s poorest and conflict-prone countries - Afghanistan.<sup>10</sup> The UNAMA’s qualitatively distinctive feature was simply embedded in the fact that it would strive for peace only under the condition of it being Afghan-owned and Afghan-led.<sup>11</sup> The UN never lost hope in UNAMA as it meticulously planned to implement it based on ‘light footprint’ theory.<sup>12</sup> This meant for Afghanistan to be rebuilt by the Afghans themselves rather than a third party with the international

community at bay to lend a helping hand. This tightly conceived idea produced wondrous reactions on paper as powerful neighbours were asked to step up for different sectors, whilst maintaining a decent amount of breathable distance for Afghanistan's personal growth and sustainability.<sup>13</sup> However, this development was short-lived as complications for the UN increased with it acting as a buffer organisation between diverging American and Pakistani interests in the region.<sup>14</sup> Many political commentators regard the UN's peacebuilding measures as a futile verve, given the selfish interests pursued by unfriendly international actors in the war-ravaged country.<sup>15</sup>

Despite such adversaries, the UN has instilled immense trust in UNAMA and continues to work for it with full energy. As outlined in UN Security Council Resolution no. 1947, 17 March 2011, which stressed that the "UNAMA and the Special Representative of the Secretary-General will continue to lead the international civilian efforts following the London and Kabul Conference Communique. Such a role, as laid out in the resolution, involved co-chairing the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board (JCMB), in cooperation with the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), as well as leading international civilian efforts. The activities of the UNAMA are within their mandate and guided by the principle of reinforcing Afghan sovereignty, ownership, and leadership. The lead coordinating role has been central to the UN mandate from the outset of the Bonn Process".<sup>16</sup>

### **How 'functional' is the present mandate?**

In this context, based on the present political situation prior to the Taliban's triumph, the UNAMA mandate is often referred to as the "Christmas tree" mandate. It is called so, due to being garlanded with sundry goals and aspirations.<sup>17</sup> Since April 2020, Deborah Lyons of Canada — the Secretary-General's special representative for Afghanistan — is sanctioned to coordinate and head international civilian efforts on land.<sup>18</sup> Within this position, the individual, along with other staff members, is expected to dispense advice to the Afghan government on matters of state-building, human rights, foster pro-democracy sentiments, urge regional cooperation and build capacity-based rule of law effectively.

The convoluted adoption of UNAMA under the new Taliban regime has been notoriously intriguing. Once Kabul’s regime change settled, most visibly, the UNAMA’s respected teams of human rights monitors halted publishing their much-anticipated reports on protection of civilians, which earlier served as a paramount public resource. Assorted teams of UN experts desisted from conducting election analysis and dropped preparations for anticipated future voting rounds for Afghan parliamentary seats, all in the fresh period of nervous calm as the take-over ended.<sup>19</sup> Any progress made on the legal front, in terms of releasing reports on anti-corruption measures, or lack thereof, was briskly stranded in the wake of the Taliban’s *tour de force*. Albeit, the termination of intelligence gathering was reduced, some operational aspects of UNAMA found themselves to be busier than before. The special representative and her team were among the first to call for a new “modus vivendi” between the Taliban-controlled government and the outside world, trying to encourage cooperation — most immediately, to address the humanitarian and economic crisis.<sup>20</sup> To summarise, in its limited capacity, the staff at UNAMA contributed to mapping out new-fangled Transnational Engagement Frameworks, explicitly setting out how donors could spend \$ 8 billion in the coming year to avoid a state collapse.<sup>21</sup> Finally, with the evacuation of many embassies, the continued presence of UNAMA on the ground became essential for day-to-day troubleshooting with what the UN calls the “de facto authorities” — the new Taliban government. Incontrovertibly, relying on the Taliban to validate security concerns is likely to raise discomfiting qualms for both the UN and for member states funding the organisation’s activities in Afghanistan.<sup>22</sup>

### **What next for UNAMA?**

The fate of UNAMA is pinned on the much-anticipated Secretary-General’s report, bringing out newly-found changes to the mission. Consequently, one may safely deduce the foreseeable report to offer very little variations from its current form. Even so, it is believed that the UN would accustom the mission to match the recent circumstances while keeping the old structure intact. UNAMA is set to continue to pilot facilitation, coordination, and humanitarian delivery, but it would focus more on these tasks as the humanitarian response balloons in size. Additionally, the mission aims to resume human rights reporting, focused especially on the exploitation of

Afghan women, children and minorities. Ultimately, this revamp would ensure UNAMA shifts recourses in the coming months away from defunct operations (i.e., elections, peace talks) and reassigning fresh priorities like comprehending the Afghan political economy and shoring up coordination among international donors. However, an integral question remains unresolved as to how specifically the new mandate will include the Taliban? Some UN officials and Security Council members argue against detailing the tasks for the renewed mission because it could constrain the day-to-day flexibility required by UN staffers on the ground in an uncertain and evolving situation. They argue that the new mandate should instead focus on outlining the UN's new priority areas, leaving room to interpret them.

Given the above, a staggering amount of funding is required to stave off famine in Afghanistan: the UN's humanitarian approach by itself, excluding other aids, is record-breaking at \$ 4.4 billion for 2022.<sup>23</sup> Typically, any time that international organisations and donor states drastically enlarge operations in conflict/post-conflict zone, numerous risks involved in funding horrifically surface. To clarify, UNAMA had been brought to life as a small Risk Management Unit at its debut. Hence, under the new provisions, the resources and scope for expansion may skyrocket.<sup>24</sup> While this is a requisite demand, the stakes for the UN go higher up. There is always a tendency of lump-sum aid money falling into culpable power-hungry houses promoting crumbling political and economic fallout, worse than the one we are witnessing today. Although, the Taliban claim they will continue allowing access for humanitarian and development workers, including female staff. The new authorities also go on to claim to collect customs and other revenues more efficiently than their predecessors, intending to wean the state off foreign assistance. All these claims need to be checked, and checked again, in the coming years. As the response in Afghanistan turns into the world's biggest aid effort, donors should plan for an unprecedented level of scrutiny to avoid boondoggles.

Through these tidings, the UNSC finds itself disjoined over international engagement on Afghanistan, apart from the specifics of the UNAMA ratification.<sup>25</sup> But, on confronting these new realities, a few European members agree on the large-scale humanitarian response as well as some measures that stronghold the fragile



Afghan state. However, they are held back by their deep suspicions over the eruption of another grisly migration crisis.<sup>26</sup> Notwithstanding, the council at odds, France opposes extending any nature of aid or engagement that may elucidate the Taliban's legitimacy internationally. On the other hand, the United States is hypervigilant with its acknowledgement and actions on Afghanistan's economic activity. Even as the US officials admit to sanctions undercutting humanitarian efforts, Washington sees this as a new form of leverage over the region's politics.

Correspondingly, the Security Council has arrived at a compromise and declared an international effort to prune benefits to the Taliban. Exponentially, this exerts added pressure on UNAMA to solidify 'vague' instructions into execution, all whilst dodging instant state collapse and without generously endorsing the new rulers of Afghanistan. In this regard, questions over retaining UNAMA's political identity could be an essential sticking point.<sup>27</sup> Thus, priority must be granted to effectual UN presence on-ground to navigate day-to-day engagement necessary for averting unwarranted diversion of funds. Therefore, it is important to look at it in the fragile political context, though underscored by some UNSC members' views that the UN must abstain from conferring validation and legitimacy to the Taliban. Disagreements are likely to arise on matters concerning the nature and degree of the UN's jurisdiction and future role in holding the Taliban accountable. Predictably so, Russia and China have objected to UN missions in conflict regions scanning human rights. The Council members — including India, the US, European contingents — conjure up a mission that surveils the Taliban's movements closely. These sensitivities indicate that Council members, especially Norway and Estonia — who like the 'penholders' on the Afghanistan issue drive the drafting of council resolutions regarding UNAMA — will have to hammer out frail compromises as the new UNAMA mandate frames the UN's overall relationship with the Taliban.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, all Council members must arrive at the same station and finally reach a consensus on dialogue with the Taliban. For this reason, the special representative requires a tight mandate and political clout to rally the heterogeneous disputing external actors.<sup>29</sup>

## Conclusion

What the UNAMA has achieved in Afghanistan is no small feat. It is fair to be concerned with the wrongful impact global players may have in Afghanistan, with unilateral engagements with the Taliban. With Western donors, humanitarian agencies, regional powers, and international financial institutions implementing their own versions of 'beneficial' policies for Afghanistan, the emanating clutter would only push the population towards mass starvation and allow the 'de facto' authorities to wring out divergences. The avant-garde UNAMA must exist to serve not only for the welfare the Afghan population but also as an authentic voice calling out the Taliban for its foreseeable menace. The West's disorderly exit must not continue to dampen the success of UNAMA. UNAMA's rhetoric may pave the way to ensure the Taliban's isolation tactics, that characterised their rule in the 1990s, are not repeated. Afghanistan's problems are not constrained to the nation alone, thus a structured policy dialogue between the Taliban de-facto authorities and other stakeholders will boost stability, peace, and international support.

## Endnotes

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