

# The Afghan Government's Rebirth: Peril or Progress?

Luke Hwang<sup>1</sup> and Anthony van Moppes<sup>#</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Korea International School, Republic of Korea

<sup>#</sup>Advisor

## ABSTRACT

In August 2021, two decades after the outbreak of the Afghan war, the United States (U.S.) withdrew its troops from Afghanistan. As the U.S. forces departed, the Taliban launched a rapid offense, capturing key provinces and cities. At the time, widespread corruption and distrust plagued Afghanistan's administrative apparatus, so the U.S. could not accurately predict when the government would collapse as gathering reliable information was nearly impossible. As the Taliban took control of Afghanistan more swiftly than anticipated, it was expected that militant Islamic factions such as the al-Qaeda and Islamic State would enter Afghanistan to compete for political dominance (Center for Preventive Action, 2021). Additionally, China's concerns grew as they feared that the spread of jihadist elements from Afghanistan could fuel separatist movements among the Uyghur population in Xinjiang. The fall of the Afghan government, which had largely been sustained by the presence of U.S. forces from 2001 to 2021, and the subsequent rise to power of the Taliban, who had limited and controversial governing experience from their previous rule from 1996 to 2001, led to a grim outlook for the country's future (Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2022). As 2024 marks three years since the U.S. withdrawal, it is necessary to examine the Taliban's effectiveness in establishing governance structures, maintaining social order, and fostering economic development to determine whether the country is progressing toward a functional state administration.

## Introduction

The U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 was triggered by the September 11 terrorist attacks, which were orchestrated by al-Qaeda while the group operated under the protection of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, as reported by the Council of Foreign Relations (CFR)—an American think tank specializing in U.S. foreign policy and international relations (CFR, 2021). When the Taliban refused to hand over Osama bin Laden, the founder of al-Qaeda, the U.S. launched a military invasion in October 2001 as part of the broader “War on Terror” (CFR). The U.S. sought to dismantle al-Qaeda and remove the Taliban from power, ultimately aiming to establish a democratic government in Afghanistan. In December 2001, the Bonn Conference convened Afghan factions (excluding the Taliban) to form an interim government led by Hamid Karzai (CFR). By 2004, Afghanistan adopted a new constitution, and Karzai won the presidential election. His administration, supported by the U.S. and international allies, was tasked with stabilizing the country and rebuilding state institutions. However, the Afghan government quickly faced serious challenges, including widespread corruption and an emerging Taliban insurgency (CFR). Despite significant U.S. military, financial, and developmental aid, the government struggled to establish legitimacy and extend its control beyond Kabul, Afghanistan's capital. The Taliban gradually regained influence, particularly in rural areas, as they adopted guerrilla tactics which U.S. and NATO forces found difficult to counter (Witte, 2021).

The prolonged conflict resulted in immense financial and human costs for both the U.S. and Afghanistan. Thousands of U.S. troops were deployed over the two decades with significant casualties, while Afghan civilians also suffered greatly from the violence (Welle, 2021). As the war continued, international criticism grew regarding the inability to establish a stable and functional Afghan government. Clayton Thomas—a specialist at the Middle Eastern Affairs at the Congressional Research Service, a federal legislative branch agency located within the Library of

Congress—further argued that internal issues such as tribal divisions, narcotics trafficking, and factional infighting, further weakened the central government and hindered U.S. efforts to foster a cohesive state (Thomas, 2021). Eventually, by the early 2010s, the U.S. sought to exit the conflict (Thomas). Under President Obama, troop withdrawals began, but escalating Taliban attacks delayed a complete withdrawal. In February 2020, the Trump administration negotiated a peace agreement with the Taliban and set a timeline for the full withdrawal of U.S. forces by 2021. When President Biden took office, he accelerated the process, with the final deadline set for August 31, 2021 (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

However, the withdrawal led to a rapid collapse of the Afghan government, and the Taliban swiftly took control of Kabul (Cambridge University Press). This rather chaotic end to the U.S. intervention sparked widespread criticism and raised questions about the long-term consequences of the war (Cambridge University Press). Despite the U.S. involvement for over two decades, the broader goals of creating a stable and democratic Afghanistan were not achieved. Instead, the country returned to Taliban control, and only profound instability and significant human and financial costs were left (Cambridge University Press). This turn of events revealed the fragile foundation on which U.S. efforts had been built, highlighting the deep-rooted challenges that had not been effectively addressed during the occupation.

Following the U.S. withdrawal, the global community raised concerns about Afghanistan's future under Taliban rule. There were fears of Afghanistan becoming a haven for terrorist groups like al-Qaeda alongside the possibility of people's rights being severely violated, especially for women and ethnic minorities, as John Sifton from Human Rights Watch—an international organization defending the rights of 100 countries—reported (Sifton, 2022). Afghanistan's economic situation also worsened due to the halt on foreign aid and international sanctions being imposed, leaving concerns of widespread poverty and a potential humanitarian crisis (Sifton). The rapid transition back to Taliban control compounded these concerns, as many questioned the group's capacity to address these social and economic challenges, especially after years of dependence on foreign assistance.

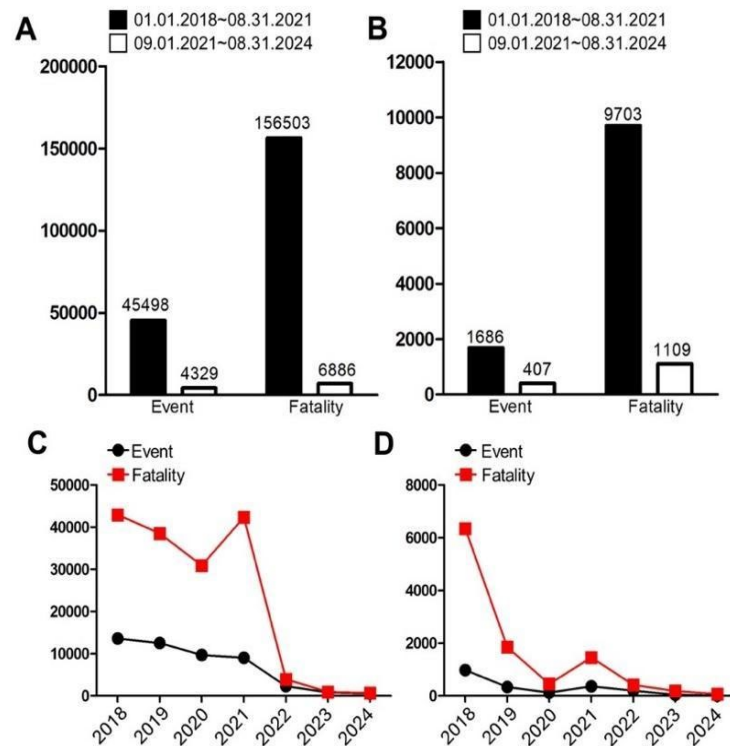
This paper examines Afghanistan's socio-economic landscape three years after the U.S. withdrawal; by evaluating key indicators such as governance and economic conditions, whether Afghanistan under the Taliban is moving toward stability or remains entrenched in deep uncertainty and dysfunction will be assessed.

## Security in Afghanistan

### Successful Suppression of Organized Violence in Afghanistan

Following the U.S. military withdrawal in August 2021, the Taliban, after toppling the pro-Western Afghan government, appeared to have ramped up efforts to suppress nearby armed groups. The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED), an international non-profit organization collecting data on violent conflict, focused on organized violence in Afghanistan and calculated total event and fatality counts. The data revealed that from January 1, 2018, to August 31, 2021, there were 45,498 incidents of organized violence and 156,503 associated fatalities (ACLED, n.d., Figure 1A). In contrast, from September 1, 2021, to August 31, 2024, these numbers sharply decreased to 4,329 incidents and 6,886 fatalities (ACLED, Figure 1A).

Next, by examining organized violence linked to Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and Islamist militias from the database, it can be concluded that from January 1, 2018, to August 31, 2021, these groups were responsible for 1,686 violent events and 9,703 fatalities (ACLED). However, from September 1, 2021, to August 31, 2024, the number of violent events dropped to 407, and fatalities decreased to 1,109, indicating a substantial decline (ACLED, Figure 1B). Furthermore, the data from Figure 1A and B were analyzed on a yearly basis. Consistently, it was observed that the yearly event counts and fatality counts of organized violence sharply declined after the Taliban came into power (ACLED, Figure 1C and D).



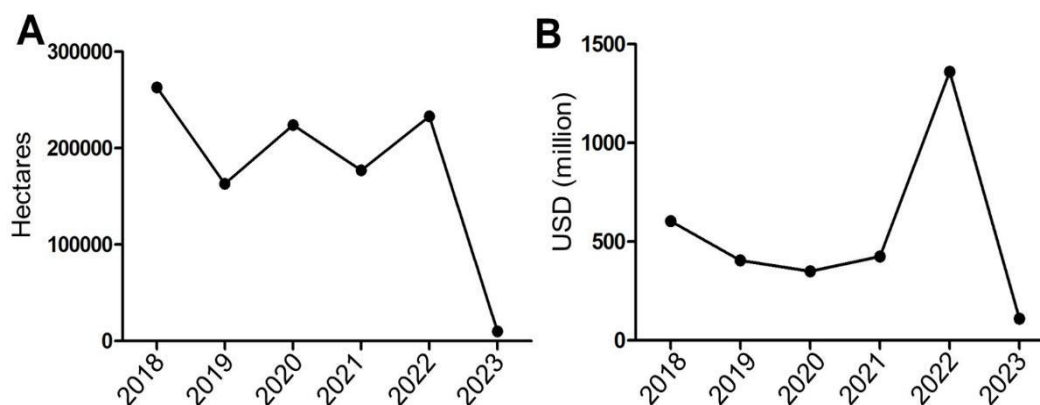
**Figure 1.** Counts of event and fatality by organized violence in Afghanistan. A. Total counts of event and fatality by organized violence. B. Counts of event and fatality by Al-Qaeda, Islamic States, and Islamist Militia in Afghanistan. C. Yearly counts of events and fatality by organized violence. D. Yearly counts of events and fatality by Al-Qaeda, Islamic States, and Islamist Militia. Organized violence includes battles, explosions/remote violence, violence against civilians. All data have been retrieved from the ACLED. Luke Hwang, the author, has analyzed retrieved data and created graphs.

Thus, the Taliban, as the most powerful force in Afghanistan, has effectively subdued surrounding armed groups and secured control over the country's territory. Furthermore, this result suggests that under Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, civilian casualties due to armed conflict have dramatically decreased, security is being restored, and unnecessary loss of life is being sharply reduced.

### Active Suppression of Opium Production in Afghanistan

A critical indicator of the Taliban-ruled government's success in consolidating security in Afghanistan is the significant reduction in opium cultivation. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the global leader in the fight against illicit drugs under the United Nations, Afghanistan had long been the world's largest producer of opium; revenues from its cultivation and trafficking represent a major source of income for rural farmers (UNODC, 2023). Moreover, militant groups have historically exploited the opium trade to generate substantial funding for their operations and terrorism. Since taking control after the U.S. military withdrawal, the Taliban administration has implemented stringent measures to eradicate opium cultivation, aiming to dismantle the opium economy and its influence on Afghan society. This has resulted in a marked decrease in the land area dedicated to opium production under the Taliban administration (UNODC, Figure 2A). Consequently, the income for farmers, who rely on the opium trade, has sharply declined (UNODC, Figure 2B). Additionally, non-state militant groups, which previously derived

significant revenues from opium trafficking, have seen their financial resources significantly curtailed due to these counter-opium initiatives.



**Figure 2.** Reduction of opium cultivation leads to a significant decline in income from opium production.

A. Area under opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan (Hectares). B. Farmers' income from selling the opium harvest to traders (US dollars). Farmers' income has been calculated based on an average sales price of opium during harvest time. All data have been retrieved from the UNODC. Luke Hwang, the author, has analyzed retrieved data and created graphs.

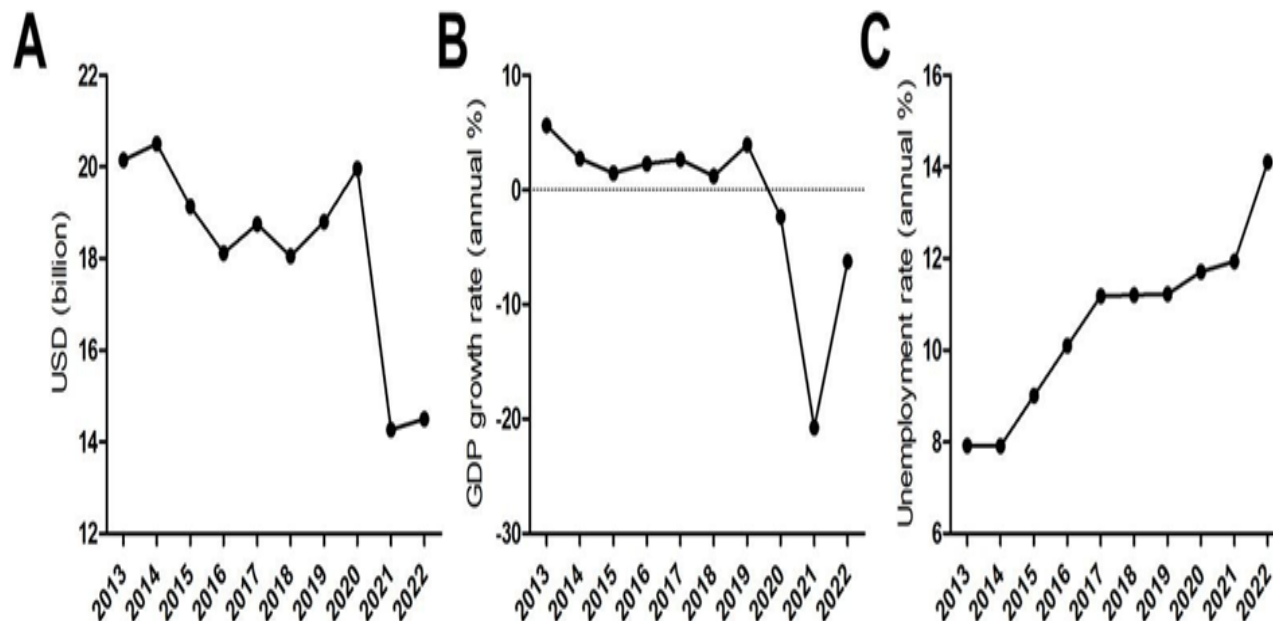
The Taliban's security strategy has largely focused on undermining the economic foundations of militant organizations by prohibiting opium cultivation. As revenues from the opium trade diminished, the operational capacity of these groups to engage in violent activities has likely been weakened. Therefore, the Taliban appears to be successfully consolidating security in Afghanistan by enforcing strict anti-opium policies, curtailing the activities of militant networks, and cutting off their key revenue sources.

## The Taliban's Engagement in Diplomatic Efforts

### The Severe Economic Crisis in Afghanistan

Due to prolonged warfare, Afghanistan's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has experienced stagnation for an extended period. In 2013, the GDP stood at approximately 20.1 billion USD, but it gradually declined after 2014, reaching around 18.1 billion USD in 2016, followed by a slight increase in 2017 (World Bank, 2024). During this period, the U.S. was gradually withdrawing its military forces, making the Afghan government responsible for maintaining security. As the withdrawal progressed, political and economic uncertainty in Afghanistan grew significant. Notably, Afghanistan's economy at the time was heavily reliant on international aid, and the reduction of U.S. military presence likely contributed to a decrease in economic support from the international community. In August 2021, with the complete withdrawal of U.S. forces, Afghanistan went into further chaos. Additionally, because economic aid and foreign investments from various countries decreased due to the unstable political situation, Afghanistan's GDP in 2021 plummeted to 14.2 billion USD (World Bank, Figure 3A). In line with this trend, the annual GDP growth rate, which had already seen a negative correlation in 2020, hit a record low of -20% in 2021 (World Bank, Figure 3B). Moreover, following a record decline in economic growth in 2021, Afghanistan's unemployment rate rose to 12%, continuing an upward trend that began in 2013 (World Bank, Figure 3C). The nation's negative growth and soaring unemployment rates are likely to exacerbate the quality of life for the Afghan people, potentially leading to increased social unrest in

the future. Although the Taliban-led administration has managed to maintain security by significantly suppressing terrorist activities from armed groups in Afghanistan, the growing dissatisfaction among the Afghan population regarding their economic conditions is likely to trigger new security challenges. Therefore, the Taliban government now faces the challenge of restoring Afghanistan's severely deteriorated national economy.



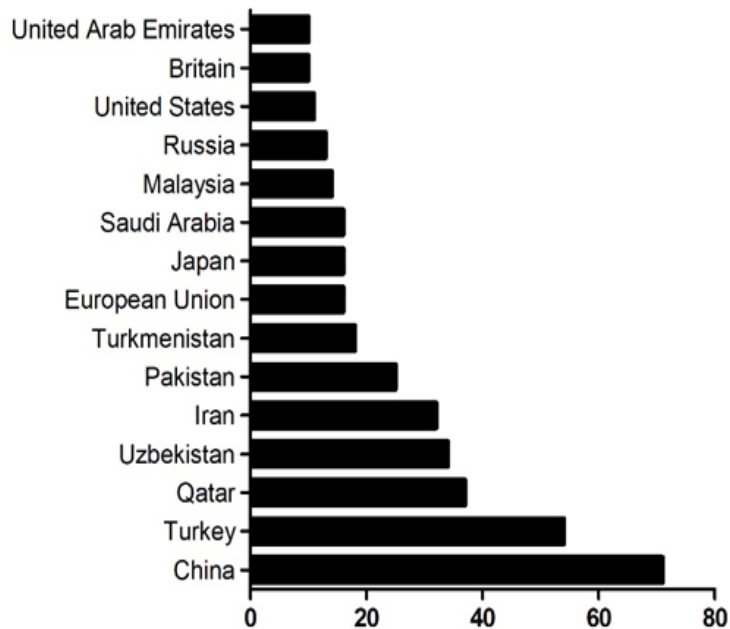
**Figure 3.** Economic indicators of Afghanistan. A. Growth Domestic Product (GDP) of Afghanistan. B. GDP growth rate. C. Unemployment rate of Afghanistan. All data have been downloaded from World bank open data. Luke Hwang, the author, has analyzed retrieved data and created graphs.

### The Usage of Diplomacy to Address Economic Crises

The Taliban has shifted from insurgency to diplomacy, seeking to establish itself as a legitimate governing force. In line with this change, they have actively engaged in international diplomacy. By August 2023, the Taliban-led government had conducted 440 meetings with officials from 35 countries, focusing on humanitarian aid, governance, and economic cooperation (The Washington Institute, 2022). The Taliban used these diplomatic efforts to seek international assistance, investment, and political cooperation, aiming to address Afghanistan's severe economic crises. China has engaged in the most diplomatic activities with the Taliban, having held an impressive 71 diplomatic meetings from August 2021 to August 2022 (The Washington Institute). Following China, Türkiye held 54 diplomatic meetings (The Washington Institute). Key countries from the Middle East—including Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates—also held numerous diplomatic meetings with the Taliban (The Washington Institute). Additionally, Western countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom were among those that engaged in a significant number of diplomatic meetings (The Washington Institute, Figure 4).

Since the Taliban took control of Afghanistan in August 2021, China has provided humanitarian aid worth over 350 million RMB, which included cash, food, medical supplies, and winter necessities to support the Afghan people (The Washington Institute). Economically, bilateral trade between China and Afghanistan experienced growth; from January to December 2022, trade between the two countries reached 595 million USD that signified a 13.6%

year-on-year increase (The Washington Institute). These developments show China's continued efforts to build both humanitarian and economic relations with Afghanistan under Taliban leadership.



**Figure 4.** List of Top 15 countries for diplomatic meetings with Taliban from August 2021 to August 2022. Data have been retrieved from The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, an American think tank based in Washington D.C. focusing on foreign policy of the United States in the Near East. Luke Hwang, the author, has analyzed retrieved data and created graphs.

Overall, the Taliban's diplomatic strategy aims to position itself as a stable governing entity while carefully navigating its foreign policy to maintain its ideological base at home. Despite the lack of formal recognition, these efforts suggest that the Taliban is working towards gaining broader international legitimacy and the resources needed to rebuild Afghanistan.

## Discussion

### Opium Suppression and Security in Afghanistan

One notable success of the Taliban-led government in stabilizing Afghanistan is its crackdown on opium production, a critical source of funding for terrorist groups. By suppressing opium cultivation, the Taliban has successfully weakened the financial power of various militant factions, thereby contributing to a reduction in violence. This approach is reminiscent of successful efforts in other countries that have suppressed drug-related revenues to reduce terrorism. For example, Colombia's fight against the Marxist-Leninist guerrilla groups involved strict measures to reduce coca production, a major income source of Marxist-Leninist guerrilla groups (Adriaan Alsema, 2016). Although the situations differ their scopes, both demonstrate how cutting off funding from narcotics can effectively limit the capacity of insurgent groups. By undermining the economic base of these groups, the Taliban has been able to establish tighter control over security in Afghanistan.



## Economic Challenges and Societal Impact from Opium Suppression

While opium suppression has curtailed the flow of funds to insurgent groups, it has also created significant economic hardships for rural farmers who relied on opium cultivation for their livelihoods. Afghanistan, as the largest producer of opium globally, has seen a drastic reduction in its agricultural income since the enforcement of the Taliban's anti-opium policies (UNODC, 2023). This decrease in income threatens to destabilize local economies, and without viable alternative income sources, the loss of opium-related revenues may exacerbate poverty, fuel unemployment, and lead to further social unrest (Byrd, 2023).

This economic strain could become a source of societal instability, undoing the Taliban's pursuit of security. Without measures to support affected communities, disenfranchised farmers may turn to insurgent groups or other illicit activities as a means of survival, creating a vicious cycle of unrest. To prevent this, the Taliban must introduce alternative income sources for farmers, such as promoting legal agricultural products or developing new sectors like mining and infrastructure. Thailand's successful transformation from an opium-based economy to one focused on legal agriculture provides an example of how this shift could be managed (UNODC Regional Office for Southeast Asia and the Pacific, 2024). By implementing a similar strategy, Afghanistan can help its farmers transition to sustainable livelihoods, minimizing the potential for future instability.

## Diplomatic Efforts and Economic Relations with China

One of the most significant relationships the Taliban established is with China, which has provided humanitarian aid and increased trade with Afghanistan. China's involvement aligns with its broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), where Afghanistan could serve as a key route for expanding China's influence in Central Asia (Roy, 2017). This partnership represents a critical opportunity for Afghanistan to rebuild its economy. However, it also poses risks of dependence that could limit the country's autonomy in the long term.

However, China's financial assistance through the BRI has been linked to debt dependency in several countries, such as Sri Lanka and Pakistan, which found themselves unable to repay loans, leading to economic instability (Janjua, 2024). Afghanistan must carefully manage its relationship with China, avoiding over-dependence on any single foreign partner. Diversifying its economic and diplomatic ties, particularly with regional powers like Iran and Turkey, will help Afghanistan maintain sovereignty and build a more balanced and self-sufficient economy.

## The Future of Afghan Refugees

One critical issue often overlooked in discussions of Afghanistan's future is the fate of the millions of Afghan refugees who fled the country due to conflict, instability, and the harsh policies of the Taliban regime. Since the U.S. withdrawal and the subsequent Taliban takeover, many Afghan refugees remain in neighboring countries such as Pakistan and Iran, while others have sought refuge in Europe, the U.S., and other regions (D'Souza, 2024). For these refugees, the possibility of returning to Afghanistan depends on several factors, including security, economic stability, and human rights conditions under Taliban rule.

While the Taliban has progressed in reducing organized violence and suppressing insurgent groups, the economic instability in Afghanistan presents a significant barrier for the return of refugees. Afghanistan's high unemployment, stagnant GDP, and limited opportunities, coupled with deteriorating healthcare, education, and social services, hinder its capacity for reintegrating returning populations, leaving refugees hesitant to return without basic service assurances (Curry et al., 2023).

Another factor to consider is the protection of human rights—particularly for women and minorities—under Taliban rule. Many Afghan refugees, especially women, fled due to the restrictive policies imposed by the Taliban regarding education, employment, and freedom of movement. Although the Taliban claims to be more moderate in its

current governance, concerns regarding the protection of individual rights may discourage refugees from returning in the near future.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, while the Taliban has made commendable progress in maintaining security by suppressing militant groups and opium production, it faces immense economic challenges. The reduction in opium production, while beneficial for security, has led to economic hardships for farmers, which could foster new forms of social unrest if not adequately addressed. Long-term stability will require economic diversification, careful diplomatic engagement, and the creation of alternative livelihoods for its population. By learning from both regional and global precedents, Afghanistan can navigate these challenges and work toward establishing a more stable state.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Mr. van Moppes for providing me with excellent insight and guidance throughout the writing of this research paper.

## References

- Adriaan Alsema. (2016, June 9). *The FARC and drug trafficking: The evidence so far*. Colombia News | Colombia Reports; Colombia News | Colombia Reports. <https://colombiareports.com/amp/farc-22-4m-drug-profits-colombias-chief-prosecutor/>
- Afghanistan* | Data. (n.d.). Data.worldbank.org. <https://data.worldbank.org/country/afghanistan?view=chart>
- Afghanistan opium cultivation in 2023 declined 95 per cent following drug ban: new UNODC survey*. (2023, November 5). United Nations : Office on Drugs and Crime. [https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/press/releases/2023/November/afghanistan-opium-cultivation-in-2023-declined-95-per-cent-following-drug-ban\\_-new-unodc-survey.html](https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/press/releases/2023/November/afghanistan-opium-cultivation-in-2023-declined-95-per-cent-following-drug-ban_-new-unodc-survey.html)
- Byrd, W. (2023, June 8). *The Taliban's Successful Opium Ban is Bad for Afghans and the World*. United States Institute of Peace. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/06/talibans-successful-opium-ban-bad-afghans-and-world>
- Cambridge University Press. (2021). U.S. Withdraws from Afghanistan as the Taliban Take Control. *American Journal of International Law*, 115(4), 745–753. <https://doi.org/10.1017/ajil.2021.50>
- Center for Preventive Action. (2021, October 19). *War in Afghanistan*. Global Conflict Tracker. <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/war-afghanistan>
- Council on Foreign Relations. (2021). *A Timeline of the U.S. War in Afghanistan*. Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-war-afghanistan>
- Curry, D., Roby, B., Bevier, E., & Moran, A. (2023, September 19). *Afghanistan's Two Years of Humanitarian Crisis Under the Taliban*. United States Institute of Peace. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/09/afghanistans-two-years-humanitarian-crisis-under-taliban>



D'Souza, S. (2024, January 15). *The Plight of Deported Afghans*. Thediplomat.com.  
<https://thediplomat.com/2024/01/the-plight-of-deported-afghans/>

*Explorer*. (n.d.). ACLED. <https://acleddata.com/explorer/>

Janjua, H. (2024, August 2). *How Chinese loans trapped Pakistan's economy*. Dw.com; Deutsche Welle.  
<https://www.dw.com/en/how-chinese-loans-trapped-pakistans-economy/a-69841139>

*Leaving poppy behind – permanently: how the findings from UNODC's new Afghan opium survey could affect vulnerable populations*. (n.d.). United Nations : Office on Drugs and Crime.  
[https://www.unodc.org/unodc/frontpage/2023/November/leaving-poppy-behind--permanently\\_-how-the-findings-from-unodcs-new-afghan-opium-survey-could-affect-vulnerable-populations.html](https://www.unodc.org/unodc/frontpage/2023/November/leaving-poppy-behind--permanently_-how-the-findings-from-unodcs-new-afghan-opium-survey-could-affect-vulnerable-populations.html)

*Looking for Legitimacy: Taliban Diplomacy Since the Fall of Kabul*. (n.d.). The Washington Institute.  
<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/looking-legitimacy-taliban-diplomacy-fall-kabul>

Roy, M. S. (2017). Afghanistan and the Belt and Road Initiative: Hope, Scope, and Challenges. *Asia Policy*, 24, 103–109. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26403208>

Sifton, J. (2022, September 7). *UN Report Details Taliban Abuses in Afghanistan*. Human Rights Watch.  
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/09/07/un-report-details-taliban-abuses-afghanistan>

*Thai alternative development projects showcased at international workshop*. (2024). United Nations : UNODC Regional Office for Southeast Asia and the Pacific.  
<https://www.unodc.org/roseap/en/2011/12/alternative-development-chiang-mai/story.html>

Thomas, C. (2021). *U.S. Military Withdrawal and Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan: Frequently Asked Questions*. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46879>

Welle, D. (2021, October 6). *How the US invasion changed afghanistan* | DW | 06.10.2021. DW.COM.  
<https://www.dw.com/en/how-the-us-invasion-changed-afghanistan/a-59427641>

*Why the Afghan Government Collapsed*. (2022, November). Www.sigar.mil; Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction. <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/evaluations/SIGAR-23-05-IP.pdf>

Witte, G. (2021). Afghanistan War. In *Encyclopædia Britannica*.  
<https://www.britannica.com/event/Afghanistan-War>