

# Mirage or Oasis? Assessing the Role of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan

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During a 20-year civil war, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) has served as a bastion of international support, democratic values, and humanitarian assistance. Highlighting democratization, security, economic assistance, and human rights, we employed over 20 years of United Nations (UN) archives to examine the effectiveness of its mission mandates, and found that UNAMA had reduced child labor and judicial corruption while increasing civil society and facilitating international humanitarian aid. However, UNAMA failed to improve security or establish an inclusive government, particularly with respect to human rights violations. After the US military withdrawal in 2021, the future of UNAMA is contingent upon political negotiations with the Taliban. Only time will tell whether contributions of the mission will persist into the post-conflict era.

**Keywords** UNAMA, political mission, Afghanistan, Taliban, US intervention

## Introduction

The 2021 withdrawal of American military forces from Afghanistan marked a significant shift in the country's history. The Taliban's swift takeover, except for Panjshir, surprised the world. While the current Taliban's approach appears different, with a willingness for compromise rather than revenge, it remains unclear whether these changes are temporary or lasting. However, the Taliban's adherence to Salafi-Jihadist Islamic fundamentalism and Pashtun-based supremacy creates conflicts with democracy, modernity, and human rights (Afshari 2021). Given these factors, the Taliban's international recognition may hinge on its ability to address concerns about domestic stability, adherence to international law, and its capacity to engage in diplomatic relations with other states.

Recent events in Afghanistan have taken place against a 20-year history of

United Nations (UN) peacekeeping and international intervention within the region. The General Assembly voted to create the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) in 2002. Since that time period, the nation has been riddled with conflict and third-party invasion—primarily by United States troops. US involvement in Afghanistan has been so extensive, that their withdrawal created a cascade of military events, which culminated in the decision of the UN Security Council (UNSC) to extend the mandate of UNAMA for one more year. Successful peacebuilding requires the existence of preconditions, the most important of which is the formation of the nation in the modern sense. However, in Afghanistan, tribal relations still rule this country, and the sense of collective belonging is weak. There has never been an agreement and reconciliation between the different clans, and no comprehensive national discourse has been formed. As a result, peacebuilding and human rights protections in Afghanistan still face enormous obstacles to implementation. Along these lines, it seems that UNAMA faces a difficult mission in Afghanistan, more difficult than at any time in the past. How will UNAMA pursue its objectives in light of the new Taliban government? Following the US military withdrawal, how have UNAMA mandates changed? How stable is UNAMA in the military vacuum left by the West in Afghanistan?

This project provides a critical analysis of the role of UNAMA in. How can a special political mission (SPM) create positive change throughout the course of a two-decade, internationalized civil war? Has UNAMA provided an oasis for the Afghan people—a source of stability, democracy, and protection from human rights abuses? In some ways, it has been an oasis; in other ways, its mandates are more of a mirage. To fully understand UNAMA's mandates and design, we employed textual information derived from UN archival reports, documents, and resolutions. Additionally, we analyzed statements from United Nations leaders, the UN General Assembly, and the Security Council. We combined these primary source materials with multiple longitudinal datasets on Afghanistan ranging from 1970-2022. Ultimately, we conclude that UNAMA has been associated with numerous positive changes within Afghan society over the last 20 years of its history. Where security provision has proven to be somewhat of a mirage, UNAMA still remains an oasis of democracy, international trust, collective action, stability, and voice for the marginalized. It is rare for an international organization to have built such a reputation of trust inside one of history's most archetypal extremist regimes. As an SPM embedded in a 20-year civil warzone, we must draw important lessons from UNAMA's past as we plan for its future.

## US Military Intervention, 2001-2021

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the United States (US) initiated airstrikes against

the Taliban to remove them from power and dismantle al-Qaeda's presence in Afghanistan (Connah 2021). Over the next two decades, UNAMA (2019) worked alongside the Afghan government and the international community to promote peace, stability, and development in the country. During the US presence, UNAMA focused on two key elements: (1) politics and (2) humanitarian assistance and/or development. In 2002, the UN urged the Afghan government to establish an emergency *Loya Jirga* for political legitimacy (Saikal 2012). The *Loya Jirga* is a traditional Afghan institution that has been used throughout history as a means of bringing together representatives from various tribes and regions to discuss and resolve important issues (Smith 2019). Moreover, UNAMA partnered with local institutions and ISAF to bolster regional stability and implement the 2006 Compact, which brought together Afghan government officials and international partners to establish a shared vision and framework for Afghanistan's reconstruction and development. It also led to community engagement efforts that resulted in a temporary ceasefire and facilitated the Polio Immunization Program (UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan 2009). UNAMA's mandate expanded in 2008, and its authority was reinforced by Security Council Resolution 1806 (UNSC 2008). Key areas of focus included supporting governance priorities, facilitating international support, fostering connections between the Afghan government and other countries, and empowering Afghan ownership and leadership (UNSC 2010). UNAMA also played a pivotal role in coordinating civilian reconstruction efforts and participating in important international conferences on Afghanistan (UNSC 2008; Margesson 2010). During this period, a significant development was the introduction of the *super envoy* concept through the UN Security Council Resolution 1806 in 2008, which facilitated coordination between the UN, NATO, and the European Union in Afghanistan. The Security Council further expanded UNAMA's activities in 2009, focusing on promoting cooperation with the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and strengthening political connections with local leaders (UNSC 2010).

In 2009 and 2010, UNAMA's role broadened to include electoral reforms and support for Afghanistan's elections. Despite challenges in the transition to democracy, UNAMA offered comprehensive electoral assistance, from registration to dispute settlement, and facilitated reforms to ensure fair and fraud-free outcomes (UNSC 2009; Kumar and Pant 2014; Sarwar 2010). UNAMA facilitated electoral oversight in Afghanistan's disputed 2014 presidential race, leading to Ashraf Ghani's election, and extended support for subsequent parliamentary and presidential elections in 2018 and 2019 (UNA-USA 2019). In summary, UNAMA has achieved mixed results in electoral processes and governance training in Afghanistan, garnering both criticism and credibility, notably for its role in investigating the 2010 parliamentary election fraud (Margesson 2010).

In addition, UNAMA has focused on counter-drug trafficking as part of its mandate, developing national drug control strategies and bolstering Afghanistan's police and judicial capabilities for combating opium production and smuggling. The United Nations Office on Narcotic Drugs and Crimes provides significant assistance to Afghanistan police to fight opium production and smuggling (Saikal 2012). Despite some improvements, including police training and infrastructure enhancement, UN efforts have not fully succeeded in curbing Afghanistan's role in the global opium trade (UNA-USA 2019).

### US Military Withdrawal and Taliban Takeover, 2021-present

Following the completion of the US military withdrawal in 2021, the political landscape in Afghanistan underwent a significant transformation, marked by the Taliban's return to power. The UN Security Council voted—with 14 in favor (including China) and one abstention (Russia)—to approve a resolution that details the new mission of the UN political delegation in Afghanistan for the next year (*Persian Euro News* 2022a). Notably, UN documents omitted any direct mention of the name, Taliban; instead, organizers chose to direct focus to UNAMA's international presence in Afghanistan. Although the resolution did not directly legitimize the Taliban, the draft permits UNAMA officials to continue their close consultation and cooperation with all actors and politicians in Afghanistan, including, the current leadership, if necessary (*Persian Euro News* 2022b). The Taliban government welcomed the extension of UNAMA and promised to cooperate with this international organization. Zabihullah Mujahid, the spokesman of the Taliban government, emphasized Kabul's readiness to cooperate with the UN (*ibid.*).

After the re-emergence of Taliban leadership, the UN renewed the mission mandate without substantial changes to prior objectives. Minor revisions included a response plan to counter the emergence of COVID-19 as a global pandemic and the initiation of renewed intra-Afghan talks. UNAMA continues to appeal to the Taliban to respect humanitarian law. Examples include enforcing international prohibitions against attacking citizens and civilians as well as a moratorium on suicide bombing (UNAMA 2019). Resolution 2678 (UNSC 2023a) reaffirms the UN's commitment to a multi-pronged and collaborative approach to foster peace and stability in Afghanistan. Calls on all relevant Afghan and international stakeholders to coordinate with UNAMA for its mandate's implementation. It serves as an endorsement of UNAMA's work and as a signal that the international community remains committed to Afghanistan's stability and sovereignty (UNSC 2023b).

Moreover, UN Security Council Resolution 2679 (UNSC 2023b) emphasizes women's participation and human rights protection in Afghanistan's peacebuilding.

It advocates for a coordinated approach among stakeholders and sets specific international expectations, signaling continued global engagement. Resolution 2679 sends a message to the Taliban and other stakeholders that the international community remains engaged and has specific expectations that need to be met (ibid.). While these resolutions provide a normative framework for peace, inclusive governance, and human rights, their on-the-ground implementation has been constrained by ongoing security challenges and geopolitical complexities. Although they bolster UNAMA's diplomatic standing, they do not significantly enhance its operational capacity.

## Evaluation of UNAMA Mandates

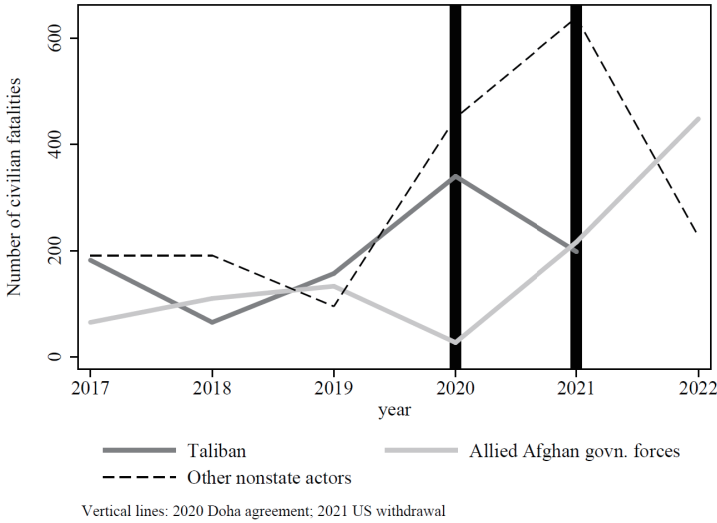
The following section takes a critical view of the UNAMA mission. Which, if any, of the UNAMA mission mandates were achieved? Furthermore, were gains realized during the US occupation fully eroded by the Taliban takeover?

### *Human rights and humanitarian efforts*

During the US intervention, UNAMA concentrated on human rights issues such as women's rights, child soldiers, and civilian protection. It aimed to lessen the impact of armed conflict on civilians through monitoring, reporting, and advocacy, while also promoting the integration of international humanitarian law into Afghanistan's constitution (Rani and Fuadi 2014). However, the prolonged conflicts in Afghanistan led to a large number of dead and displaced people. Limited data on these fatalities is available prior to 2017. For fatalities after 2017, reference Figure 1. During 2017, UNAMA recorded 5,243 civilian casualties (1,662 deaths and 3,581 injured), just between January 1 and June 30 alone (General Assembly 2017). According to UNAMA reports, most of the killings were carried out by anti-government groups. The UN report to the General Assembly referenced these fatalities with the statement, "43 percent to the Taliban, 19 percent to unidentified anti-government elements, and 5 percent to ISIL-KP), 18 percent to pro-government forces (15 percent to Afghan national security forces, 2 percent to international military forces, and 1 percent to pro-government armed groups)" (ibid., 7). UNAMA staff members also documented acts of violence such as enforced disappearances, detentions of individuals, extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests torture, and ill-treatment (General Assembly 2022).

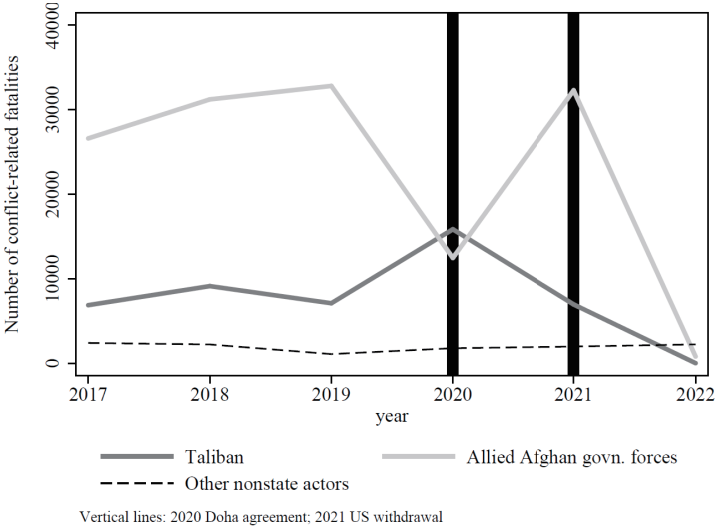
During the US intervention, UNAMA faced challenges in ensuring humanitarian access and reducing violence, largely attributing these issues to extremist groups like the Taliban and ISIS-KP. The documentation highlights that Anti-Government Elements (AGE), encompassing various extremist factions, were primarily responsible for casualties and serious violence (US Department of State 2019). Concurrently, UNAMA observed an increase in unidentified violent

**Figure 1.** Civilian Fatalities by Major Political Actors 2017-2022



Source: Author's own compilation based on ACLED 2022b

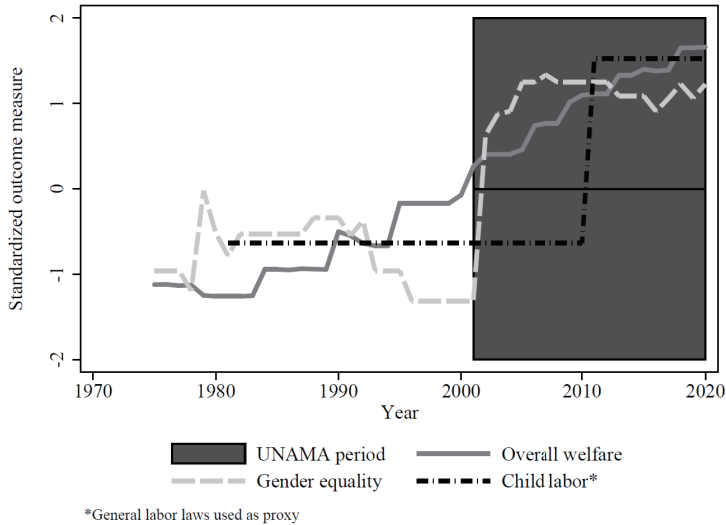
**Figure 2.** Conflict-Related Fatalities by Major Political Actors 2017-2022



Source: Author's own compilation based on ACLED 2022b.

incidents, correlating with a decline in episodes explicitly claimed by the Taliban or ISIL-KP (UN OHCHR 2021). Moreover, UNAMA efforts included both the protection of physical integrity rights, such as child labor, and the expansion of

Figure 3. Select Quality of Life Indicators 1975-2020



Source: Author’s own compilation based on International IDEA 2022

civil rights, such as gender equality. This data is presented in Figure 3. UNAMA focused on reducing child soldiering and has trained Afghan Security Forces and local authorities on children’s rights during conflict (General Assembly 2017). UNAMA also advocated for women’s rights, notably through supporting “Afghanistan’s Elimination of Violence Against Women Law, 2009 (EVAW Law),” which represented a key advancement towards legal protections for women (Van Uden 2020).

On the other hand, after the US withdrawal, just two months after the Taliban returned to power, there have been numerous reports of war crimes and human rights abuses by the Taliban forces (Gaston 2021). According to UNAMA reports, a temporal decrease in civilian casualties was observed following the Taliban’s takeover, attributed primarily to the cessation of hostilities between the Taliban and the forces of the former Afghan government (General Assembly 2022; Global Conflict Tracker 2021; also refer Figures 1 and 2). But again, violence against civilians increased in October 2021 and peaked in May 2022, with around 110 incident reports. Taliban forces are responsible for about 59 percent of attacks against civilians in the first half of 2022 (ACLEDD 2022a). In terms of battle deaths, limited data on these fatalities is available prior to 2017. For fatalities after 2017, reference Figure 1. According to the UNAMA annual report (2021), large-scale violence left Afghanistan among the deadliest conflict zones.

The participation of women in the labor force in Afghanistan under the Taliban remains among the lowest in the world. In the political sphere, women’s



activities are very limited, for example, the Taliban terminated the Ministry of Women's Affairs. Human Rights Watch (2022) reports that women's civil society organizations are facing many challenges and the Taliban's gender segregation policies have hindered women's rights and negatively impacted Afghanistan's economy. Despite seeking foreign aid for women's issues, the Taliban's misogynistic stance has deterred international donors. The decline in foreign aid post-US withdrawal led to the closure of many women-led organizations, exacerbating the need for female-focused humanitarian aid (Faria 2022; UNAMA Report 2023). Additionally, human rights defenders report ongoing persecution of religious and ethnic minorities by the Taliban in Afghanistan, with credible accusations of war crimes and ethnic cleansing. Several documents indicate that the Taliban is perpetuating severe abuses against religious and ethnic minorities, including war crimes and ethnic cleansing. The dissolution of independent human rights institutions has led to reduced accountability, while civil liberties, healthcare, and LGBTI rights have significantly deteriorated (General Assembly 2022; Global Conflict Tracker 2021).

### *Security Provision*

Security provision is another crucial component of the UN mission in Afghanistan, yet this goal remains more aspirational than real. Factors like slow reconstruction, drug trafficking, widespread corruption, and the Afghan government's limited reach contribute to instability. Nonetheless, Figure 5 demonstrates a clear reduction in judicial bribery during the UNAMA period, which suggests that UNAMA may have made limited inroads towards reducing judicial corruption. By and large, however, the continuous presence of independent militias has created major problems for the Afghanistan government and UNAMA. For a comprehensive list of nonstate militarized groups present within Afghanistan during recent years, see Table 1. Currently, there are over 80 domestic political actors within the territory, not including international government security forces. Thus, numerous criminal and extremist groups continually threaten any presumed security actions undertaken by UN operations.

During the US presence, evidence illustrates that terrorism posed a security threat and challenge to UN missions (Karlsrud 2017; Hinkkainen Elliott, Polo and Reyes 2021). According to Smit (2017), UN missions have encountered recurrent terrorist attacks and have engaged in countering violent extremist organizations in various nations, including Afghanistan. As a result, UN personnel have to fight against terrorism and engage in military counterterrorism (CT) rather than preventing violence (*ibid.*). Although UNAMA managed to disarm some of them, militarized nonstate actors (Margesson 2010). Overall, before the US military withdrawal, the conflict intensified due to the change in the government's decisions against the domination of some rural areas by the Taliban. This escalated the conflict between the government and anti-government



**Table 1.** Nonstate Political Actors Present in Afghanistan 2017-2022 (N = 88)

Achin Communal Militia (Afghanistan)	Harakat-e Islami
Afghanistan Freedom Front	Hazara Ethnic Militia (Afghanistan)
Al Qaeda	Hezbi Islami
Anar Khel Communal Militia (Afghanistan)	Hindu Kush Front
Anonymous Fighters	Hisar-e-Shahi Communal Militia (Afghanistan)
Anti-Taliban Forces	Hizb ut-Tahrir
Awshan Communal Militia (Afghanistan)	Islamic State (Afghanistan)
Chambel Communal Militia (Afghanistan)	Jl: Jamiat-e-Islami
Civilians (Afghanistan)	JMI: Junbish-i-Milli Islami
Freedom and Democracy Front	Jangali Communal Militia (Afghanistan)
Guerillas of the Freedom Corps Front	Jari Surkh Communal Militia (Afghanistan)
HQN: Haqqani Network	Kamanj Communal Militia (Afghanistan)
Kapisa Communal Militia (Afghanistan)	Protesters (Afghanistan)
Kenean Communal Militia (Afghanistan)	Protesters (Pakistan)
Keran wa Menjan Communal Militia (Afghanistan)	Qushtepa Communal Militia (Afghanistan)
Khair Mena Communal Militia (Afghanistan)	Rioters (Afghanistan)
Kharoti Tribal Militia (Afghanistan)	Saba Communal Militia (Afghanistan)
Khost Protection Force (Afghanistan)	Shinwar Communal Militia (Afghanistan)
Kuchi Tribal Militia (Afghanistan)	South Turkistan Front
LeI: Lashkar-e-Islam	Sulaiman Khel Communal Militia (Afghanistan)
Lost Soldiers of Hazaristan	Supreme Council of National Resistance
Mama Khel Communal Militia (Afghanistan)	TTP: Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan
Mangal Communal Militia (Afghanistan)	Tagab Communal Militia (Afghanistan)
Mangal Tribal Militia (Afghanistan)	Taliban
Militia (Ahmad Shah Massoud)	Taliban (Mullah Mansour Group)
Militia (Alipour)	Taliban - Red Unit
Militia (Ata Noor)	Taliban and/or Islamic State (Afghanistan)
Militia (Dostum)	Tangi Communal Militia (Afghanistan)
Militia (Ghoryani)	Tarnak Wa Barfak Communal Militia (Afghanistan)
Militia (Mahdi)	The Afghanistan Liberation Movement

Table 1. (continued)

Militia (Pro-Government)	The People's Democratic Party
Mutiny of Islamic State (Afghanistan)	Turkistan Freedom Tigers
Mutiny of Taliban	Unidentified Armed Group (Afghanistan)
National Liberation Front of Afghanistan	Unidentified Armed Group (Pakistan)
National Resistance Front	Unidentified Communal Militia (Afghanistan)
Nekhtai Communal Militia (Afghanistan)	Unidentified Tribal Militia (Afghanistan)
Obahkhil Communal Militia (Afghanistan)	Warsaj Communal Militia (Afghanistan)
Pashtun Tribal Militia (Afghanistan)	Watandost Front
Police Forces of Pakistan (2013-2018) Frontier Corps	Wolf Unit
Private Security Forces (Afghanistan)	Zarqan Killi Communal Militia (Afghanistan)
	Ziruk Communal Militia (Afghanistan)

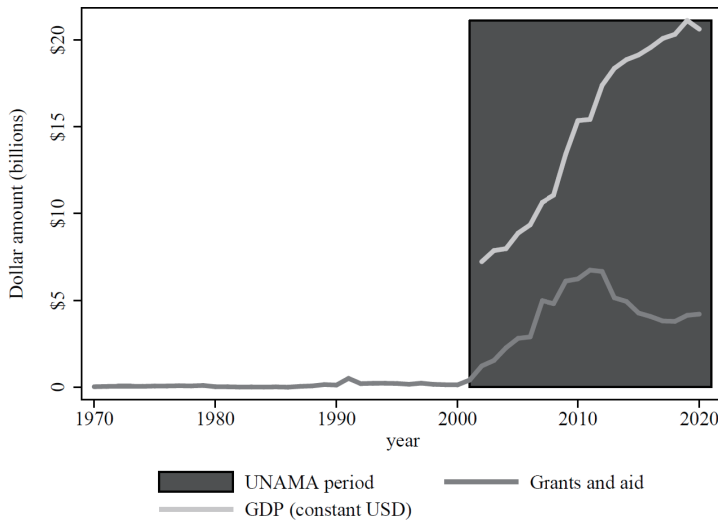
Source: Author's own compilation based on ACLED 2022b.

forces, which led to an increase in conflicts and killings (General Assembly 2017).

After the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan, the presence of armed groups expanded. It is difficult for UNAMA to estimate and evaluate the number and ability of these groups (General Assembly 2022). So far, statistics indicate that at least dozens of groups are active in 18 provinces. These groups—such as the National Resistance Front and the Afghanistan Liberation Front—mainly carried out attacks in different places and challenged security (*ibid.*). A General Assembly Report (*ibid.*) indicates that due to the deterioration of the economic situation after the Taliban regained power, crime rates and security incidents remain very high (see Figure 1). More importantly, in the new Taliban government, the other ethnic or political representatives are excluded from political power. This may lead to more instability and conflict in the future in Afghanistan as a diverse, multi-ethnic country (Gaston 2021). Security and justice institutions are seen as looters and exploiters. Disputes at the local level spill over into armed conflict, while organized crime is increasingly common (Haque, Roberts and Gustafsson 2021).

### *Economic Development*

During the US intervention, UNAMA effectively coordinated international aid in Afghanistan, working closely with the national government to optimize resource allocation and development efforts (Saikal 2012; see also Figure 4). Since the 2002 Tokyo donor conference, the Afghan government and UNAMA have collaborated with international donors on reconstruction and peacebuilding projects, with

**Figure 4.** Aid and National Income in Billions of Dollars 1970-2020

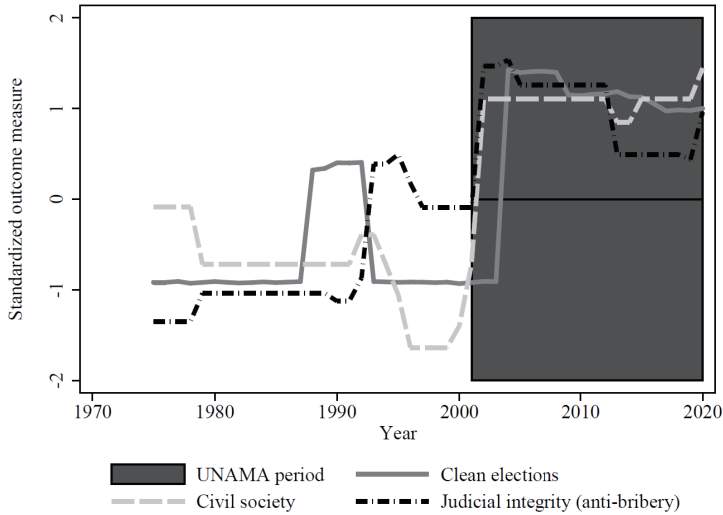
Source: Author's own compilation based on World Bank Data Group 2022

UNAMA also coordinating UN humanitarian activities (Margesson 2010). Under UNAMA's coordination, Afghanistan saw a surge in aid (see Figure 4), addressing issues like severe drought, refugee reintegration, and child vaccination. These efforts also aligned with US foreign policy goals in Afghanistan and other regions (General Assembly 2013).

Following the Taliban takeover and ensuing economic sanctions, Afghanistan experienced an extremely weakened economy, the destruction of economic infrastructure, and limited access to health and education. The transition in power led to a significant decline in international aid (General Assembly 2022). International donors suspended bilateral aid, and the World Bank and International Monetary Fund blocked access to its assets and credits. Thus, foreign donor aid, which previously supported about 75 percent of government spending in Afghanistan, was cut. See also Figure 3. However, the US Treasury announced a number of exceptions to the Afghanistan sanctions, for humanitarian activities and services (Gaston 2021). Moreover, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres warns of a humanitarian disaster in Afghanistan, worsened by bank closures, sanctions, and halted economic aid. An estimated 36% of Afghans face food insecurity, with 18 million needing urgent care (ibid.).

#### *Democratization and Election Coordination*

UNAMA undertakes critical tasks in democratization and election management in Afghanistan, aligning with US priorities for stability in the country. Afghan society is made up of various religious, linguistic, and ethnic sects, they have

**Figure 5.** Select Democratization Indicators 1975-2020

Source: Author's own compilation based on International IDEA 2022

never had a culture and tradition of democracy (Saikal 2012). Historically, Afghanistan has been dominated by authoritarianism, Islamic conservatism, and social divisions that create serious constraints to democratization. These social and cultural divisions in Afghanistan have restricted UN state-building efforts. Nonetheless, influenced by the United States, UNAMA has undertaken various measures—such as promoting transparent elections, bolstering civil society, and reducing judicial corruption—to instill democratic values in traditional Afghan society (see Figure 5). Involved in the democratization project and the power transfer process (*ibid.*). UN forces had to interact with other external actors such as the United States and NATO, as well as Afghanistan's neighbors—Pakistan, in particular. In some instances, external actors' conflicting interests hindered policy coherence for democratization and elections in Afghanistan, although foreign military and political involvement occasionally bolstered UN efforts, including those by UNAMA, to ensure electoral security (*ibid.*).

After the resurgence of the Taliban, UN reports suggest evidence of democratic backsliding. UNAMA has limited institutional capacity to implement its democratization mandate (Murid Partaw 2023). The Taliban has a history of authoritarian rule, characterized by strict limitations on political and civil rights, suppression of free speech and the press, and the use of violence to maintain control. This type of regime is not conducive to the establishment of democratic institutions and processes, as citizens are not able to participate in the political process, and there is a lack of accountability for those in power (Iqbal 2023). Furthermore, the Taliban's ideology is fundamentally at odds with

the principles of democracy. They have been known to discriminate against women and minorities. This would impede the formation of a pluralistic society where different voices and perspectives are heard and respected (Lombardi and March 2022). Consequently, subsequent UN resolutions following the Taliban's resurgence have pivoted from an explicit endorsement of electoral processes to broader objectives, such as the promotion of inclusive governance and the protection of human rights (UNSC 2022; 2023a; 2023b).

## Future Evolution of UNAMA

### *Strengthening regional partnerships for localization*

Over two decades, UNAMA has struggled with extremism in Afghanistan, historically relying on US and NATO support. The withdrawal of these forces and the Taliban's resurgence have created a security vacuum, posing threats both regionally and globally. In the absence of sufficient resources for militarization within its current mandate, the UN should contemplate deploying a more robust peacekeeping force. The idea of transitioning from a UN special political mission to a robust peacekeeping operation in Afghanistan, particularly for counter-terrorism efforts, has theoretical appeal (Karlsrud 2017) but is practically challenging. Although such a transition could enhance the UN's operational efficacy, current geopolitical complexities and the UN's limited historical mandate in counter-terrorism make it less feasible. Furthermore, although the recent UN Security Council Resolutions 2678 (UNSC 2023a) and 2679 (UNSC 2023b) signal international intent, they do not provide the requisite operational or enforcement mechanisms to facilitate a transition to a more robust peacekeeping mandate for UNAMA. Given these logistical, political, and security challenges, an alternative strategy could involve strengthening partnerships with regional actors for more localized conflict resolution and counter-terrorism initiatives. For instance, Pakistan, sharing a lengthy and porous border with Afghanistan, serves as an exemplary regional partner in this regard (Manish and Kaushik 2023). Stronger border controls instituted by Pakistan could significantly reduce the flow of terrorists, weapons, and illicit goods into Afghanistan. By leveraging these partnerships, more targeted and culturally sensitive conflict resolution could be developed and implemented.

### *Increased mediation and settlement facilitation*

In light of the mission's extensive history of negotiations and cumulative trust, there are important areas in which this organization can play a greater role in Afghanistan. UNAMA leaders facilitated the implementation of the Ben Agreement in 2001. They worked with the Afghan government to create the 2006 Afghanistan Compact and the 2008 Afghanistan National Development Strategy

(Margesson 2010; Pradhan and Smith 2022). The UN mission has used various tools like UN charters, diplomatic methods, and partnerships with countries like Uzbekistan to facilitate negotiations among diverse Afghan groups. Those successful negotiations underscore the effectiveness of the mission in terms of facilitating settlement. The mission must exploit and leverage these experiences in the future. While UNAMA has a track record of facilitating agreements, the Taliban's return poses new, complex challenges that make negotiations on inclusivity and human rights more difficult. This limits the mission's immediate impact. In the meantime, UNAMA has a unique position to lead this process. UNAMA can leverage countries—such as Qatar and Uzbekistan, both of whom were involved in previous Afghan talks and share cultural norms with Afghani people—to return to the bargaining table and coordinate additional settlement agreements (Barakat and Ponzio 2021; Özkan and Omonkulov 2020).

Engaging in communication with the Taliban leadership should not be misconstrued as an endorsement or recognition of legitimacy for the newly established regime (Esfandiari 2021). UN representative Lakhdar Brahimi, reflecting on his monitoring role in the Bonn process, acknowledged that a significant oversight on his part was the failure to engage in dialogue with the Taliban during 2002 and 2003. He expressed the view that it would have been prudent to communicate with those who demonstrated a willingness to engage in dialogue (Barakat and Ponzio 2021). Additionally, Dr. Erica Gaston at United Nations University has remarked, “The only way to forestall the looming humanitarian and economic crisis in Afghanistan is open up a broader political discourse with the Taliban. The international community is right to push for inclusive governance and respect for human rights, especially for women and girls” (Gaston 2021, 1).

#### *Collective action on behalf of the Afghan people*

The role of UNAMA in Afghanistan has become more critical after the Taliban regained control and many embassies and organizations closed their doors. Because of the mass exodus of international support, UNAMA represents a unique opportunity to speak on behalf of the Afghan people (Pradhan and Smith 2022). In a situation where the member states are still debating whether to recognize the Taliban, the UNAMA can play an important role in supporting the people of Afghanistan. The UN, Europe, and the US have conditioned their recognition of the Taliban on the adherence to human rights norms, the protection of women and girls, and the establishment of an inclusive governance structure. Conversely, while China and Russia have initiated diplomatic engagements with the Taliban, they have yet to signal formal recognition (Brookings Institution 2022). In fact, as an international organization, UNAMA can have responsibilities that no other international actors are willing to accept. Disengaging from the current regime in Afghanistan might limit the international

community's influence over the Taliban's policies, including those related to human rights. While recognition may be contentious, some level of diplomatic engagement could serve as a platform to address urgent human rights issues and hold the regime accountable for its actions.

UNAMA has the capacity to synthesize the needs and aspirations of various stakeholders within Afghanistan, including different ethnic, linguistic, and religious communities. In a society rife with internal divisions, UNAMA's role in articulating a collective vision for the future of Afghanistan could serve as a counterbalance to the forces that seek to exploit these divisions. Furthermore, the absence of UN media and peace radio initiatives as tools for stabilizing relations with local communities raises concerns about the mission's communication strategy. Media and radio programs are essential for building trust, sharing crucial information, and facilitating dialogue (Shafiei and Overton Forthcoming). By acting as a collective voice, UNAMA can ensure that marginalized groups are not excluded from dialogues that shape their futures, thereby reinforcing the principles of inclusive governance. Through regular reports and briefings to the UN Security Council, UNAMA has the capability to bring international attention to the human rights situation in Afghanistan, thus potentially influencing the actions of ruling factions' consciousness of their international image.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has undertaken a comprehensive descriptive analysis of UNAMA's activities in Afghanistan during two distinct periods: the era of US military intervention and the subsequent period characterized by the withdrawal of US forces and the resurgence of Taliban rule. Through this comparative lens, the paper has scrutinized how the shifts in geopolitical dynamics have necessitated an evolution in UNAMA's mandate and operational focus. During the US intervention, the paper has highlighted UNAMA's initiatives aimed at facilitating governance, bolstering democratic institutions, and enhancing human rights. UNAMA was a key supporter of the Afghan government, collaborating with global and regional actors to promote peaceful objectives, including election administration and aid coordination (Government Office of Sweden 2017). Despite these successes, the mission faced significant challenges in improving security conditions and reducing violence. As a result, UNAMA's achievements have been a mixed bag—successful in some areas like election administration and international aid facilitation yet falling short in others such as peacebuilding and security enhancement. The mission represents both an oasis and a mirage.

Following the Taliban's return to power in 2021 and the withdrawal of US troops, UNAMA has had to adapt its mandate and focus. The Taliban's resurgence jeopardizes UNAMA's achievements in democratization, holding elections,



women's rights, and participative governance, requiring UNAMA to serve as a key mediator and advocate for human rights. Given the uncompromising Taliban rule, the future of this mission will only be achieved through political negotiations. UNAMA must provide urgent humanitarian and emergency aid to the Afghan people. Additionally, UNAMA must serve as a democratic agent and a source of collective action for the Afghan people. Because of this unique context—and UNAMA's 20-year history as a stable political mission in a war-torn country—the mission must remain a point of stability and international trust in order to move Afghanistan into the future.

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