

MIDDLE EAST

UN-led Meeting with the Taliban on Afghanistan: Seizing Opportunities or Betraying Promises?

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Since the Taliban took power in August 2021, Doha has hosted three UN-led meetings on Afghanistan. The latest was held on June 30 and July 1, and it marked the first time that representatives from the Taliban's Islamic Emirate (specifically, from the Ministries of Counter-Narcotic, Trade, and Foreign Affairs) attended these meetings.

At the first UN-led meeting, in May 2023, the Taliban were not invited. The Taliban [refused to participate](#) the second meeting, in February 2024, because the UN extended the invitation to Afghan diaspora groups, civil society organizations, and human rights activists with whom the Taliban was not willing to engage.

However, things went differently this time, and the Taliban's Ministry of Foreign Affairs [posted on X](#) that the Taliban decided to participate after the agenda and participation list of the Doha meeting was agreed in discussions with the UN. The agreed-upon agenda focused on international restrictions on Afghanistan's financial and banking system, the growth of the Afghan private sector, and efforts to counter drug trafficking in and from Afghanistan. The list of participants included Taliban representatives, UN officials, and envoys from 25 countries.

The situation in Afghanistan

After the fall of the Afghan government in 2021, the situation in Afghanistan has worsened considerably. According to a [World Bank report](#), "half of Afghanistan's population lives in poverty, with 15 million people facing food insecurity." Afghanistan also faces infectious disease outbreaks, with a [WHO report](#) from last May reporting that the measles outbreak "has shown a continuous increasing trend since the beginning of 2024." Reports by the UN Office

for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) also [estimated that](#) 22.1 million require humanitarian assistance.

However, the situation is especially dire for minorities and women. Since the earliest months of their government, the Taliban have effectively erased women from Afghanistan's public life, depriving them of many of their rights. Women and girls have been [banned from getting education](#) beyond primary school, they have been [excluded from most jobs](#), they have been [barred from public spaces](#), including parks, and they [have been prohibited](#) from travelling without a male guardian. Human rights monitors have described the Taliban's policies as akin to "[gender apartheid](#)" and "[crimes against humanity](#)".

Minorities have also been targeted by the Taliban. Religious minorities including Shia, Sikhs, and Hindus and ethnic minorities [such as the Hazaras](#) have suffered repeated [marginalization, prejudice, and discrimination](#) and they are not represented in the Taliban's government. They have faced restrictions on [religious events and celebrations](#), such as the major Shia Ashura commemoration. The Taliban have also [excluded Shia jurisprudence](#) from the education system. In this environment, attacks against religious and ethnic minorities have increased, and the Taliban authorities [seem to invest little efforts](#) into identifying those responsible and offering reparations (or even protection) to the targeted communities.

Limitations and opportunities of the Doha talks

Despite the appalling situation that women and minority are facing in Afghanistan, the topic was not significantly discussed during the Doha meeting. Rather, [topics of great interest to the Taliban](#) -drug trafficking, support for the Afghan private sector, and international restrictions on Afghanistan's financial and banking system - were at the top of the agenda. On more than one occasion over the past three years, in fact, the Taliban has [dismissed international criticism](#) towards its policies and has refused any attempt by the international community to engage in a discussion on those. The third Doha meeting also failed to include representatives from Afghan civil society, women, or human rights defenders.

The move has aroused much international criticism. [Human Rights Watch](#) said that holding a meeting without women's rights on the agenda or Afghan women in the room is shocking. [Amnesty International](#) also warned that a meeting that fails to involve women human rights

defenders and other relevant stakeholders from Afghan civil society is not credible.

For their part, UN officials defended the decision, arguing that the meeting with Afghan civil society representatives took place before and after the talks with Taliban officials. In the words of the [Head of the UN Mission in Afghanistan](#), “this sort of engagement is not legitimization or normalization”, but rather an attempt to encourage the Taliban to adopt policies that would allow their reintegration into the international community. The [UN Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs](#) also said that the dialogue on various issues during the meeting “moved us a little closer” to resolving some of the problems in Afghanistan.

However, the (perhaps uncomfortable) truth is that the talks were a greater victory for the Taliban than for the international community. At a time in which the Taliban government lacks international recognition, the Doha talks gave them the opportunity to engage with international actors (both during the talks and during [smaller side meetings](#)), profess to the Afghan people that they are working to improve their situation, push for recognition and economic benefits, and dictate the topics on the agenda. It is thus unsurprising that upon returning to Kabul the [Taliban chief spokesperson reported that](#) foreign officials “had a good spirit of cooperation vis-a-vis Afghanistan and we could see that their policies for Afghanistan have positively changed.”

As noted by the Head of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, the importance of the international community engaging in direct dialogue with the Taliban cannot be overlooked. Regardless of what one might think of the Taliban government, they are Afghanistan’s de facto authority and failure to engage with them may risk condemning the Afghan people to greater isolation, poverty, and suffering. At the same time, however, allowing the Taliban to dictate who could and who could not attend the Doha meeting risks setting a dangerous precedent in which dialogue with the Taliban occurs exclusively on the latter’s terms. It also risks emboldening further the Taliban, who may come to see the international community as not serious in its calls for human rights protection in Afghanistan.

Certainly, the complexities of engaging with the Taliban are not easy to navigate. However, the international community, led by the UN, should use more of its leverages to ensure that future talks with the Taliban take place in an environment that is inclusive and representative of all

Afghanistan's voices.

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