AFGHANISTAN
Risk updates since January 2024

ACAPS ANALYSIS HUB AFGHANISTAN

Thematic report
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OVERVIEW

In November 2023, ACAPS facilitated a workshop that considered areas of potential risk in Afghanistan and identified the likely risks associated with each. The report, published in January 2024, identified seven areas, although not all were assessed as posing immediate risks (i.e. likely to occur within six months) to Afghans (ACAPS 25/01/2024). The areas of potential risk are:

- opium poppy (and other narcotics) ban
- economic pressures
- population movements
- climate hazards
- tensions and armed conflict
- increasing ITA control over the population
- humanitarian response capacity.

This update, based on a review of secondary data, considers how each risk area has developed since January and assesses whether the identified risks have materialised or whether their probability levels have increased, decreased, or remained the same.

Opium poppy (and other narcotics) ban

The risks associated with continuing or broadening the ban on narcotics production – reduced income for many rural households, harm to the rural economy, and local insecurity – have materialised, but the Interim Taliban Authority (ITA) remains united in continuing the ban (Alcis 18/04/2024). There is a growing divide among farmers; those with major inventories remain largely supportive of the ban as prices have risen, while smaller farmers with depleted stockpiles feel victimised, as the ban has forced them into asset liquidity, food insecurity, outmigration, and rioting (Alcis 18/04/2024; AAN 14/03/2024). Since January 2024, the ITA has destroyed around 545 acres of poppy fields across seven provinces – Balkh, Farah, Helmand, Kandahar, Laghman, Nangarhar, and Uruzgan – with dozens arrested (Al Emarah 05/02/2024, 30/03/2024, 24/02/2024, and 06/02/2024; AAN 14/03/2024). Violent uprisings are increasing in the northeast, where stockpiles tend to be lower (AAN 14/03/2024; VOA 05/05/2024). April and May 2024 saw violent uprisings as farmers retaliated against the ITA's poppy field eradication, resulting in military undertakings by the ITA in northern and eastern regions, such as Badakhshan's Darayim and Argo districts in the north and Nangarhar in the east, where household stocks are typically low (VOA 05/05/2024; Al Emarah 04/05/2024; Alcis 18/04/2024). Incidents of rioting and violence are likely to continue into 2025, as the ban contributes to economic strain and increasing tensions from poppy field eradication in rural areas (Reuters 07/05/2024).

Economic pressures

Economic pressures continue to be a major concern as the economy remains stagnant. Forecasts predict high unemployment and underemployment rates deepening into 2025, with flooding also affecting many. Despite declining inflation, the risk of these pressures destabilising parts of the country and increasing poverty remains. Exports fell by 5% in January 2024 compared to January 2023, including an 87% fall in coal exports to Pakistan, while imports grew at a faster rate (37%) (WB 09/03/2024). With a lack of economic growth and employment opportunities, poverty is expected to remain high, with 69% of the population lacking basic resources in 2023 (UN 07/03/2024). Inflation has fallen to record levels, reaching −14.4% in February 2024, leading to low food prices (which fell 15% year-on-year). Still, a high unemployment rate persists (close to 20% in 2023), and low wages continue to cool the economy and erode household purchasing power (USIP 02/05/2024; WFP 18/04/2024). Severe and devastating floods from 10–12 May 2024 in several provinces resulted in the loss of lives, an estimated 3,000 homes, farmland, and livestock. As livestock and agriculture are the main income sources for many households, the economic impact of flood events will heighten economic pressure countrywide (UNICEF 12/05/2024).

Population movements

The economic impact of high return levels remains the same. It drives economic vulnerability, albeit at a lower rate than envisioned, as needs grow – including for financial support and employment. Although the rate of forced returns from Pakistan has slowed since January 2024, almost 18,000 people returned each month during the first quarter of 2024 (IOM 19/04/2024 and

23/05/2024). The main need of returnees from Pakistan is financial support (82%), followed by shelter and employment (IOM 19/04/2024). Many returnees lack local market connections and have been actively seeking employment during a period of economic downturn, likely adding pressure on an already strained socioeconomic scenario with rising unemployment (TNH 10/04/2024; EC 22/01/2024). The poor educational profile of returnees compared to the host population may increase poverty and limit livelihood opportunities in some host regions (UNHCR et al. 04/05/2024).

Climate hazards

This short-term risk has materialised, with increases in heavy rains triggering floods, flash floods, and mudslides in 25 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces since the end of February 2024 (IFRC 15/05/2024). These have led to casualties, displacement, widespread housing and infrastructure damage, and food security concerns as a result of significant crop and livestock losses (UN Climate Crisis Coordinator 16/05/2024; IFRC 15/05/2024). These events followed the end of an exceptionally dry winter season that delayed crop planting, threatening a fourth consecutive year of drought (AJ 14/04/2024; FEWS NET 01/05/2024).

Precipitation and temperature anomalies associated with the combined effects of El Niño–Southern Oscillation and climate change are expected to continue during the second half of 2024 (ACAPS 06/02/2024). Temperatures are also expected to remain above normal in the entire country for the same period (WMO accessed 15/05/2024). Seasonal precipitation forecasts for June–August anticipate above-average rainfall, particularly in southeastern regions (C3S accessed 15/05/2024; WMO accessed 15/05/2024). These anticipated increases in precipitation and temperature may trigger additional flooding and landslides between June–September. From July, the South Asian monsoon will increase the flood risk in southeastern provinces and particularly over the Kabul River Basin, where the monsoon's influence has become more prominent and flooding more frequent in recent decades (ACAPS 21/05/2024). Particularly at risk are Kabul, Kapisa, Nangarhar, and Parwan provinces.

Tensions and armed conflict

Afghanistan's relations with Iran have shown signs of improving (Al-Monitor 14/03/2024, The Diplomat 20/03/2024). On the other hand, tensions with Pakistan have escalated, with air strikes on Afghanistan's eastern border provinces of Khost and Paktika (Reuters 18/03/2024). Reports of Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) movement in both Pakistan and Afghanistan further imply TTP's close relationship with the ITA (RFE/RL 07/05/2024 and 17/05/2024; USIP 16/11/2023). The ITA's security relations with Iran and Central Asian neighbours have not worsened despite concerns over border security and drug smuggling (VOA 17/01/2024). Internally, in the first half of 2024, there was no evidence of escalated tensions arising from land disputes and reclamation from the continuous forced return of Afghans from Pakistan, and non-state armed group activities have not increased. The main risk of increased conflict is the border with Pakistan, where TTP operates.

Increasing ITA control over the population

While no new regulations have been introduced in 2024, and the overall level of control over the population remains similar to that in January, much of society and many rights – especially those of women and girls – remain restricted. Much of the population has adapted to the current restrictions, and this normalisation is a concern. For example, work opportunities for women remain limited, and some who are employed continue to work from home because of travel restrictions (UN Women 30/04/2024). The ban on girls' education beyond sixth grade has further affected an estimated one million girls in the 2024 school year (NBC 20/03/2024). Recently, however, the government has permitted female 12th-grade graduates to enrol in medical institutions in more than a dozen provinces, re-establishing one aspect of women's rights (VOA 20/02/2024).

HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE CAPACITY

Humanitarian operations in the first half of 2024 were subjected to similar constraints as in 2023. These constraints will likely continue in the second half of the year. For instance, only USD 605.5 million (19.8%) of the USD 3.06 billion requested in the 2024 Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan has been funded, seriously limiting the operational potential to serve the 17.3 million people identified as in dire need of food, water, healthcare, education, and WASH assistance (OCHA accessed 04/06/2024). Recent floods across different provinces also continue to highlight the absence of early warning systems and the limited disaster awareness and management planning efforts of the government, keeping flood-prone, vulnerable communities at risk of natural hazards and inaccessible to humanitarian responders (Hasht-e Subh Daily 08/05/2024). People with disabilities have continued to face challenges in accessing essential humanitarian assistance because of the ITA's restrictive policies (VOA 18/04/2024; HRW 12/02/2024; AP accessed 11/06/2024). Restrictions on the number of women working in the humanitarian sector have also continued to affect the implementation of aid and assistance programmes and resulted in less aid access for female civilians (UN Women 30/04/2024).

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