

World Watch Research

# Afghanistan: Background Information

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Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- Background country information (published annually in summer)
- Persecution dynamics (published annually in January).

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## Map of country



Afghanistan: Population (UN estimate for 2024)	Christians	Chr%
43,373,000	thousands	OD estimate

## Recent history

It is not often that a single date turns out to be a game-changer for a whole country, but Afghanistan experienced such a date. The 15 August 2021 marked the date when the Taliban took over power after the elected government had fled the country. The take-over was surprisingly swift and they consolidated power quickly, so comparisons with their first rule of the country in the 1990s are being made. The [prediction](#) in the WWL 2022 documentation has unfortunately come true: "In 1996 the Taliban seized control of Kabul and imposed radical Sharia law until 2001 when they were ousted from power by the US-led international military invasion. There are signs that many of the Taliban's policies of the 1990s are now making a re-appearance" (WWR, Afghanistan - Full Country Dossier, January 2022, p.8). These signs continue to amass, especially when it comes to the treatment of women and minorities, one of the latest examples is the edict ordering the resumption of [stoning of women](#) as criminal punishment (The Guardian, 28 March 2024).

In 2004 the first presidential and in 2005 the first parliamentary elections were held for more than 30 years. Hamid Karzai became the first president.

In 2014 NATO formally ended its combat mission in Afghanistan. However, international troops continued to be based in the country and the Taliban continued to control certain areas. Talks between the US government and the Taliban collapsed in September 2019, but the USA [signed](#) an agreement with the Taliban on 29 February 2020 and withdrew almost one third of its remaining troops by end of June 2020 (The Guardian, 29 February 2020). The new US administration's [announcement](#) in April 2021 to withdraw all of its troops by 11 September 2021 at the latest was a real game-changer - and the hasty and messy process of withdrawal by the end of August 2021 damaged the image of the USA far beyond Afghanistan. While Taliban rule is by-and-large unchallenged, continued attacks by the Islamic State group (ISKP) show that not all is well, as does the Kabul regime's relationship with and hosting of the Pakistan Taliban (TTP). The killing of al-Qaeda leader Aiman al Zawahiri at the end of July 2022 in a downtown district of Kabul belied the Taliban's claims of having nothing to do with al-Qaeda (see below: *Security situation*).

Another big challenge the Taliban are facing is the fact that neighboring countries [Pakistan](#) (GG2, 3 January 2024) and [Iran](#) (PAN, 3 January 2024) have begun to force the repatriation of many thousands of Afghan refugees. This can only put immense pressure on Afghanistan's already strained economy and social fabric. Large camps have been set up close to the border of Pakistan (see below: *Social and cultural landscape*).

The small groups of Christians in the country have had to adapt to the new circumstances by either relocating within the country, seeking refuge abroad for security reasons, or by trying to stay put but more deeply hidden. They are affected by the insecurity and the difficult economic situation (which has worsened since the COVID-19 crisis). As the Taliban enjoys widely unchallenged power and is implementing a strict version of Islamic Sharia law, Christians cannot expect any space in society and they may also be affected by possible infighting between the various Taliban factions as well as by the Taliban's battle against ISKP.

## Political and legal landscape

The swift Taliban advance, taking over the country in a few weeks in 2021 and the more or less non-existent resistance of the Kabul authorities, shocked observers but also showed that institution-building in Afghanistan had remained weak. It also proved true what has been said already for many years, namely that Afghan loyalty is first to one's family and clan or tribe, not to a country or nation. A resistance movement did emerge in the mountainous north, bolstered by the remains of the Afghan National Defense Force. However, the Taliban took control of the [whole of Afghanistan](#) after a successful final military offensive in the mountainous province of Panjshir, 100km north of Kabul (BBC News, 6 September 2021). Amnesty International reported that the suppression in the Panjshir valley amounts to the war crime of [collective punishment](#) (Amnesty, 8 June 2023). Opposition forces have proved negligible (bordering non-existent) and never held any appreciable amount of territory; they have not been supported by neighboring countries and cannot be classed as a coordinated armed resistance movement (for more details, see below: *Security situation/National Resistance Front*).

There were no real [surprises](#) when, on 7 September 2021, the Taliban announced the names of various officials whose task was to form a new interim government (ICG, 9 September 2021); it is worth

remembering that the earlier Taliban government was termed ‘interim’ throughout their time in power between 1996 and 2001. All calls for an inclusive government went unheard. None of those serving in the former government under President Ghani were included in the Taliban government, nor were any women included. The fact that the ethnic set-up is almost exclusively Pashtun - of the 33 ministers only two are Tajik and one Uzbek - shows that consolidation of power and unity within the Taliban movement were dominant motives. The inclusion of ministers still appearing as ‘wanted’ on international terrorist lists and the strong representation of the Haqqani network (which has strong ties with Pakistan) show that another main goal may have been to share the spoils of victory. The Taliban’s final [government line-up](#) added nothing substantial to make it more inclusive of ethnic minorities or even women (Afghan Analysts Network - AAN, 7 October 2021). Nothing has changed in this respect in the WWL 2025 reporting period and consequently, international recognition is still a long way off..

It also did not come as a surprise that the Taliban leader ordered the [re-introduction of harsh Sharia punishments](#) (including amputations and executions) for certain crimes, (BBC News, 15 November 2022). On 17 May 2023, the Taliban temporarily [appointed](#) a new Prime Minister, Abdul Kabir, as the incumbent had been ill, but a policy change is not to be expected (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty - RFE-RL, 19 May 2023).

The announcement in March 2022 that secondary schools for girls would re-open soon, only to be canceled at the last minute when girls were already lining up to enter schools, shows at least two things: First, the Taliban is not unified in its policy approach; and secondly, it does not really seem to care about the echo of international donors, given that this drama unfolded shortly before a major international donor conference held on 31 March 2022. It seems that conservative elements in the Afghan government are dominant, at least for the time being. Although details in reports vary about how the U-turn came to pass, it is clear that such a decision could only have been taken by the [highest authority of the Taliban](#), Emir Hibatullah Akhundzada, himself (AAN, 29 March 2022). The Taliban has continued to show that Islamist ideology has little respect for the needs of the Afghan people after women were (partly) banned from working for NGOs in December 2022. This led some NGOs to [suspend their programs](#), since this ban effectively stopped all projects aimed at helping women and children (CNN, 26 December 2022). And the Taliban has banned not just NGOs from [employing women](#), but also the UN, a move condemned in the strongest terms by the international organization (BBC News, 6 April 2023).

In a rare public outburst, Taliban Minister of the Interior Sirajuddin Haqqani [criticized](#) Afghanistan’s leadership for “monopolizing” power (VOA, 13 February 2023). At a religious gathering in his home province, Khost, he said: "Our views and thoughts have dominated us to such an extent that power monopolization and defamation of the entire [ruling] system have become common", adding that the Taliban should not adopt policies that drive a wedge between “the [ruling] system and the people, allowing others to exploit it to defame Islam.” However, as far as can be seen, all Taliban factions agree on the supreme goal of consolidating their rule over the country.

While China still does not recognize the Taliban as the official government, it accepted the Taliban’s choice of ambassador in Beijing by receiving his credentials. Reportedly, India is likewise improving diplomatic relations without full official recognition. This comes as a boon for the Taliban, but does not mean that things are getting any easier for them. On 30 June and 1 July 2024, a Taliban delegation

from Afghanistan attended a United Nations conference in Doha, Qatar, marking the first time they have participated in the UN's "Doha Program of Action for the Least Developed Countries for the Decade 2022-2031". Participants focused on facilitating aid, protecting human rights, and ensuring the security of vulnerable populations in the war-torn country. This conference marks the first time that the United Nations agreed to the demands of the Taliban, namely that they are to be regarded as the exclusive voice and legitimate government of Afghanistan and that no other representatives, either from within the country or from its sizeable diaspora, should be allowed a voice when discussing the nation's future.

The small Christian community faces a difficult future. At the same time as the Taliban are consolidating and shaping power, Afghan society faces an emboldened ISKP which has been reinforced with radical elements freed from prison, disgruntled Taliban fighters and other insurgents. As early as November 2021, the UN Special Representative for Afghanistan, Deborah Lyons, stated that the ISKP is now [active in all provinces](#) (Reuters, 17 November 2021), although estimations of their size vary. Signs of any [organized resistance](#) against the Taliban – whether inside or outside the country – appear non-existent (Jamestown Foundation, 31 March 2023). This does not mean it is not happening, but ethnic-based fighting or the emergence of warlords is unlikely in the short term. Should the Taliban continue to neglect ethnic minorities or restrict them, this might change. More important and, at least in the short term, more threatening is the quickly deteriorating relationship with the new government in Pakistan, even leading to [Pakistani attacks](#) on Afghan soil in an effort to fight the Pakistan Taliban movement TTP (Al Jazeera, 18 March 2024). With growing volatility, the Christian minority can easily find themselves caught in the middle of such confrontations.

### Gender perspective

Women's rights in Afghanistan have long been fragile, even prior to the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021. Reflecting this, Afghanistan performed poorly in Georgetown's [Women, Peace and Security Index 2019/20](#), ranking 166th out of 167 countries and criticized for several discriminatory laws. Under Taliban rule, it has now slipped even further to last place: 177/177 ([GIWPS Afghanistan profile](#), accessed 24 June 2024). Since the start of the peace process, the Taliban consistently claimed to guarantee women's security in Afghanistan. Upon taking over the country, they [publicly stated](#) that women would be allowed to continue to be active in society and benefit from their rights, working 'shoulder to shoulder' with the Taliban within Islamic Sharia (Al-Jazeera, 21 August 2021). Since the Taliban take-over however, human rights organizations have consistently condemned the Taliban's treatment of women. Women are no longer allowed to travel further than [75km](#) without a 'mahram' (UNHCR, 8 March 2023). In a move that has to be understood as symbolic, the Taliban dissolved the Ministry of Women's Affairs and re-installed in the very same building the notorious and dreaded Ministry of Vice and Virtue, a body that was notorious for some of the worst violations against women in the Taliban's previous reign of power ([HRW 2022, country chapter Afghanistan](#)). USIP has a comprehensive [timeline](#) detailing dozens of Taliban policies limiting women and their rights (United States Institute of Peace, last accessed 21 July 2023).

Child marriage rates remain high, with 28% of girls and 7% of boys being married before the age of 18 (Girls Not Brides Afghanistan), and is expected to rise under Taliban rule due to the increasingly dire economic situation; parents are selling their young daughters in order to make the remainder of the family survive ([UNICEF statement, 12 November 2021](#); [World Vision, August 2022](#)).

## Religious landscape

Afghanistan: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	thousands	-

According to OD-estimate

When directly asked, a Taliban spokesman [denied outright that any Christians exist](#) in Afghanistan (Voice of America, 16 May 2022); this is the official standpoint of the Taliban.

The Open Doors estimate for the number of Christians in Afghanistan remains "thousands", despite the fact that many have left the country in recent years. According to WCD May 2024 statistics, more than 99% of the population is Muslim and there are also small groups of Hindus, Bahai and Buddhists (among others). For security reasons, no WCD breakdown of religious groups is shown here. 90% of Muslims in Afghanistan follow Sunni Islam, while approximately 9.7% adhere to Shiite Islam. The Hazara tribe is predominantly Shiite, while the main ethnic group in Afghanistan, the Pashtu, are Sunni. They dominate the political landscape but are in need of such minorities as the Uzbeks and Tajiks to exercise power.

Even before the Taliban took power, from an official point of view, there were no Christians in the country apart from some international military staff, diplomats and NGO workers. After the withdrawal of international troops and the related exodus of other international staff, the number of Christians has indeed declined, although they are still a sizeable number. Indigenous Christians (mostly those with a Muslim background) are in hiding as much as possible.

### Gender perspective

Against this religious backdrop, daily life is challenging for both Christian men and women and they are forced to live out their faith in secret. Female converts, whose conversion becomes known, may be forcibly married to a Muslim or confined to the walls of their home while men face imprisonment, torture and death threats. Under Taliban rule, women are now expected to cover-up fully in public ([El Pais, 8 March 2023](#)), and men are also pressured to conform to Taliban expectations, such as growing a beard and having an approved haircut ([EUAA, January 2023, p.75](#)).

## Economic landscape

According to the [UNDP Human Development Report Afghanistan](#) (data updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **Gross National Income per capita:** 1,335 USD (in 2017 PPP) (2022)
- **Rate of multidimensional poverty:** 55.9% of the population are in multi-dimensional poverty and a further 18.1% are vulnerable to it. 54.5% of the population are living below the national poverty line (2015/16). There are no recent statistics, but it is safe to say that the situation has deteriorated.

According to [World Bank Afghanistan data](#) (accessed 24 June 2024):

- Afghanistan is classified by the World Bank as a low-income economy.
- **GDP per capita, PPP (constant 2017 international USD):** 1.516 (2021)
- **Birth rate:** The birth rate has been declining over the decades and stands at 2.9.

- **GDP per capita growth rate:** The annual GDP growth rate is declining and stood at an estimated 1.54% for 2019, -2.4% for 2020 and -23% for 2021
- **Poverty gap at 6.85 USD a day (2017 PPP):** n/a
- **Remittances:** 2.2% (2021)

A recent summary of socio-economic data in Afghanistan can be found in the "World Bank Afghanistan [Economic Monitor](#)" published on 9 March 2024.

Afghanistan is a land-locked country and faces multiple challenges in its economy. Maybe the most obvious is that due to decades of civil war, the country has suffered widespread destruction. Its infrastructure is in poor condition and limited in capacity; it also has a very challenging geography with high mountains and harsh weather conditions. The country cannot currently take advantage of its rich mineral resources (most likely including oil and gas as well) as these commodities need foreign investment and safe transportation, which in turn require political stability. Even China, which is commodity-hungry and willing to take more risks than most other investors, remains cautious, although the Taliban are turning to China in looking for investment in economic and infrastructural [development](#), (Axios, 9 May 2023). The first contracts have reportedly been [signed](#) (BBC News, 7 January 2023), but any meaningful investment has still to be forthcoming. For development to benefit the general population, the security situation has to stabilize, which was not yet the case in 2023. The challenges of [governing the TAPI pipeline](#) (delivering oil from Turkmenistan via and to Afghanistan, Pakistan and India) is a telling example (NBR, 22 June 2021). Despite Beijing's desire to see the Belt and Road Initiative make further progress, China is well aware of Afghanistan's reputation of being a "graveyard of empires". According to reports, al-Qaeda however is thriving from [mining gold](#) and gems in Afghanistan (Foreign Policy, 22 March 2024).

For many years, Afghanistan was classified as a "rent-seeking" economy, meaning that a broad segment of its income came from international donors. According to an AAN Special Report published in May 2020, [48% of the current government budget](#) was funded by international aid. But those were just the official figures: The report estimated the actual percentage to be closer to 75% - and in former years this probably even reached 90%. These funds largely dried up with the withdrawal of international troops and many international NGOs, and was accelerated by the withdrawal or program-downsizing carried out by many NGOs after the Taliban limited the employment of women. Almost immediately after the Taliban took over power in Afghanistan, the IMF estimated that its economy would [fall by 30%](#) (Reuters, 19 October 2021).

The Taliban continued the development of the [Qosh Tepa Canal](#) in Afghanistan, hoping to improve irrigation and thus, agriculture and the economy and well-being of the people (The Diplomat, 1 December 2023). Of the 285 kilometers projected, the Taliban have completed 100. However, there are [several risks](#) connected with this project as well. It receives its water from the Amu Darja river, which is also an important lifeline for countries like Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, so it is very possible that a completed canal could strain relations. At the same time, the Taliban lack experience and (engineering) expertise for such a project; reports have indicated that a lot of the water is likely to filter into the ground unused (Zentralasien-Analysen, No.162, 28 February 2024, "Der Kusch-Tepa-Kanal in Nordafghanistan: Faustpfand für die Taliban, Bürde für Zentralasien?", only available in German). The Taliban are trying to improve the economic situation of the country by other means as well. While the opium ban led to an [economic downturn](#) and added to the already significant level of unemployment



(AAN, 14 March 2024), the Taliban reportedly [invested 35 million USD](#) in the development of the Iranian port of Chabahar (RFE/RL, 15 March 2024), possibly in an effort to lessen its dependence on Pakistan, where diplomatic relations are souring.

Most Western donors are struggling to find ways of keeping humanitarian aid flowing without recognizing or even supporting the Taliban government. And while the World Bank reports that an increase of humanitarian contributions in the form of 'in-kind support' has helped Afghan people to survive (and to some extent avoid expected disasters), distributing humanitarian aid in a [collapsed economy](#) while navigating a very uncertain political situation poses its very own challenges (AAN, 23 May 2022). The Western 'donors' fatigue' is causing shortfalls in the level of funds required for the mere survival of the Afghan population. This has led some observers to challenge the international community, especially the Western donor countries, into [rethinking its policy](#) of not engaging diplomatically with the Taliban (The Interpreter, 13 April 2023). However, it does not seem likely that any such direct engagement will happen within the next months.

Not surprisingly, farmers and other citizens have often relied heavily on the production of illicit drugs to make money and earn a living. Traditionally, this has been opium and the crop was still widely planted and harvested in 2022. The Taliban issued a [ban](#) on its growing and processing in April 2022 (AAN, 14 April 2022), and the implementation in 2023 seems to be strict. According to a November 2022 UNODC report, opium cultivation in Afghanistan [grew by 32%](#) (UNODC Research Brief, 1 November 2022). However, as reported by Alcis on 7 June 2023, as a result of the announcement of a ban on the cultivation and production of opium in Afghanistan in April 2022 (just seven months after taking power), the Taliban have subsequently managed to reduce poppy cultivation to levels not seen since their 2000-2001 prohibition.

In March 2023, a further ban targeted the cultivation of cannabis and the production of hashish. According to the BBC, the Taliban had already banned ephedra cultivation used for the methamphetamine industry in 2021 (BBC News, 12 December 2021). But the consequences of this policy will only be felt in the years to come. As an in-depth study published by AAN on 15 June 2023 concludes: "Much will depend on whether the ban is maintained into a second and subsequent years, as lost harvests hit the incomes of richer farmers, traders deal with dwindling stockpiles of opium, the government deals with a loss of income and Afghanistan's national economy suffers. 2024 and future years will be the real test for the Taliban's anti-drug policy." Opium produced and stored before the ban is reportedly being [openly sold](#) at Afghan markets (RFE-RL, 18 August 2023). An [update](#) of the AAN report, published on 15 November 2023, confirms an apparently strict ban and even refers to a new law dating from August 2023, but concludes: "For the authorities, eradication carries risks if people feel they are being unfairly targeted or that the government is forcing them into penury. And will the IEA really put a good portion of its rural, work-able population in prison, or turn on traders? As the IEA's policy on narcotics moves into its second year, it is clear that the consequences are not just economic, but could have repercussions for politics and social peace." As opium stores begin to empty, the impact of the ban is beginning to be felt more strongly; however, not everyone directly or indirectly related to the business suffers in the same way (with examples from Helmand province, [AAN, 14 March 2024](#)).

Another challenge has been the surge in production of chemical drugs such as methamphetamine, as has been [reported in detail](#) by the European Monitoring Center for Drugs and Drug Addiction in

November 2020. Observers are particularly [concerned](#) about this because significant amounts of these drugs are always consumed in-country (BBC News, 24 November 2020). In this respect, the ban on opium and actions against the production places will need to be watched.

Farms are also facing increasing challenges. 42.8% of the total workforce are employed in agriculture and according to the World Bank even 60% of all households derive at least some income from agriculture and 74% are still living in rural areas. Even those farmers producing fruit and licit crops faced challenges, as the fall-out from the war, a persistent drought in the southern Kandahar region and closed borders led to [fruit and crops](#) being harvested, but then rotting on trucks as farmers were unable to export them (AAN, 7 April 2022). Meanwhile, there are claims that [global warming and climate change](#) are leading to a thinning and breaking apart of Afghan glaciers and a change in the pattern of rainfall, causing droughts to become more common and widespread (AAN, 6 June 2022). Pressure to improve efficiency is high: While the population has tripled since the 1960s, the amount of available arable land has not increased. A series of powerful earthquakes in the western province of Herat caused great [devastation](#) and showed how vulnerable Afghanistan is to natural disasters (AAN, 10 November 2023).

The Taliban announced that in the first seven months of 2022, Afghanistan had [exported 1.85 billion USD](#) of goods; the main markets have been neighboring Pakistan, India, Tajikistan and China (Tolo News, 8 November 2022). The Taliban government also signed a [preliminary deal](#) with Russia on the delivery of gas and wheat (Al-Jazeera, 28 September 2022). Even though it needs to be seen how such a deal will be implemented, it signals a broadening of international ties, especially remarkable given the history of the Soviet-Afghan war in 1979-1989. While there is no reliable data on the Afghan economy, it seems that it is very challenging, but not as dire as some observers feared. Nevertheless, it is clear that the [level of welfare](#) of most households has declined considerably (AAN, 7 November 2023).

Christians in Afghanistan share the lot of their fellow countrymen. Since any exposure of their Christian faith would certainly mean discrimination, the loss of livelihood and possibly even their very life, they are careful to hide their faith. Due to their Christian convictions, they will not actively participate in opium production and the general drug trade, but it is difficult for them to stand up against it as well.

### **Gender perspective**

Women have long been among the most economically vulnerable in Afghanistan, in part due to low education and employment rates, and patrilineal inheritance practices. Afghanistan's education system has historically suffered from decades of sustained conflict, with low enrolment rates in rural areas, particularly for girls ([UNICEF, accessed June 2023](#)). Since the resurgence of Taliban rule, only the re-opening of schools for boys was announced in September ([BBC News, 27 March 2023](#)). Women, especially married women, have become increasingly reliant on men as the breadwinners, due to diminishing employment and education opportunities (see above: *Political and legal landscape*, and below: *Social and cultural landscape*). The Taliban's [policy](#) on women working with NGOs and INGOs has only further restricted outreach to disadvantaged women, especially single women, and widows (Save the Children, 15 February 2023).

## Social and cultural landscape

According to the [World Factbook Afghanistan](#) (accessed 24 June 2024) and [UNDP Human Development Report Afghanistan](#) (data updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **Main ethnic groups:** The largest ethnolinguistic groups are Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, Aimak, Turkmen, Baloch and others. The Afghan Constitution mentions 14 different ethnic groups
- **Main languages:** The two main languages are Dari (a Farsi dialect) and Pashtu
- **Urbanization rate:** While it is difficult to come across reliable data, according to a 2016 World Bank report, 54% of the urban population in Afghanistan lived in Kabul and its urbanization rate is one of the highest of the world. The official CIA figure is 26.9%.
- **Literacy rate:** 37.3% (15 years and older)
- **Mean years of schooling:** 2.5
- **Health and education indicators:** Afghanistan has a pupil-teacher ratio in primary school of 49:1. There are 2.8 doctors and 4 hospital beds per 10,000 people

According to World Bank Afghanistan data:

- **Age:** The population under the age of 14 is 43%; the population above 65 is 2.4% (2022)
- **Education:** The completion rate for primary education is 86% (2019)
- **Unemployment:** 15.4%, the rate of vulnerable employment is 80.1% (modeled ILO estimate, 2023)
- **IDPs/Refugees:** According to the UN's International Organization for Migration ([IOM](#), accessed 23 April 2024), since September 2023, more than 524,000 people have returned to Afghanistan, mostly living as IDPs. According to the [UNHCR](#) (accessed 23 April 2024), the total number of IDPs is more than 3.2 million as of 31 December 2023.

[UNDP Human Development Report Afghanistan](#) (data updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **Human Development Index (HDI):** With a score of 0.462, Afghanistan ranks 182nd of 191 listed countries
- **Life expectancy:** 62.9 years
- **Gender inequality:** With a score of 0.665, Afghanistan ranks 162nd of 191 listed countries
- **Unemployment:** The unemployment rate is 11.1%, the youth (between 15 and 24) unemployment rate 17.4%, the rate of youth neither in school or employment is 41.8%.
- **Labor Force Participation rate:** 48.9% (23.3% female and 77.1% male)

Afghanistan faces a multitude of challenges besides the recovery from decades of war and the continued attacks by ISKP. The country is split up into a variety of ethnic groups which are strong in different parts of the country. It seems that all are aiming to secure their own position and are not interested in the well-being of Afghanistan as a whole. The Pashtuns are often regarded as being most dominant, but even within the Pashtun community, divisions occur along tribal lines as well. These splits became apparent in the 'peace talks in Doha as well. The Taliban are a Pashtun movement and are clearly dominated by this ethnicity. A well-known Afghani saying states: "First my tribe, then my people and then the country". Political cooperation is constantly affected by mistrust and it is worrying that ethnic groups see the need to arm themselves and publicly state that they will defend their people against insurgents.

An understanding of terms like 'civil society' has never become firmly rooted in Afghanistan, so pressure groups caring for social development and/or issues concerning women, minorities or human rights can do little to influence the country's political development and can even become a target for attacks. Groups supporting the rule of law, participation in the political process or government accountability are quickly suspected of being agents of the international community, furthering the agenda of the West. These are also often labelled as 'non-believers'. This would seem to apply also to Western NGOs working in the country, including the few Christian ones. The Taliban has carried out [targeted killings](#) of "collaborators" with the old government and of citizens claimed to be "militants" (Human Rights Watch, 7 July 2022).

Since their takeover in 2021, the Taliban has not paid any pensions to the 150,000 retired civil servants. What is more, from April 2024 onwards they are [no longer](#) deducting contributions from civil servant salaries for future pensions, thus effectively abolishing the pension system altogether (RFE/RL, 26 April 2024). This is pushing hundreds of thousands of people into dire poverty, including some (hidden) Christians, who worked for the old government.

Finally, the strict ban on poppy and other drug precursors will have an economic and social toll as well, even though this will only show after a few years (see above: Economic landscape). Such bans impose "[huge economic and humanitarian costs](#) on Afghans and it is likely to further stimulate an outflow of refugees. It may even result in internal challenges for the Taliban itself" (USIP, 8 June 2023).

A [UNICEF country report](#) published in May 2018 showed what the dire situation in Afghanistan means for civilians, especially for children: 44% of all children in the age between 7 and 17 were not attending school, 60% of whom were girls. The out-of-school rate increased for the first time since 2002. According to the [UNICEF](#) 2021 Humanitarian Situation report, at least four million children were out of school. It is hard to see how the next generation will have any real perspectives without education and without any improvement in security and the economic situation. Before the Taliban took over full government control in 2021, in those areas ruled by the Taliban, schools were often allowed to function and, in some regions, girls were allowed to attend classes up to a certain age. However, many school buildings were dilapidated and damaged by the war and the Taliban did nothing to repair or renovate them, as a [report](#) from April 2020 showed (USIP, 30 April 2020).

The immediate aftermath of the Taliban take-over of the government in Kabul in August 2021 sent mixed signals in this respect. Even before the take-over was complete, reports were coming in from the provinces that women were being [forced to leave their jobs](#), for example in banks (Reuters, 13 August 2021). The subject of education illustrates perfectly that the Taliban is not yet following a uniform approach. It was reported that girls in northern Afghanistan (such as in [Mazar-e-Sharif](#)), can still attend school classes as long as they follow strict dress regulations (Reuters, 12 October 2021). However, the so-called 'Islamic Emirate' (as Taliban likes to refer to its government set-up) had at that time only been in full power for a few months and it could be that such regional differences will gradually disappear with time. The delayed and then largely cancelled re-opening of secondary school education for girls (see above: *Political and legal landscape*) has a [devastating](#) impact on the future perspectives for girls (Reuters, 30 June 2022).

According to the report by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction ([SIGAR](#)) published on 12 July 2019, the number of users of drugs (such as opium and heroin) within Afghanistan

rose to between 2.9 million and 3.6 million in 2015, which is one of the world's highest per capita rates (more recent numbers are not available). This also indicates that many people, especially the younger generation, are lacking any real future perspectives.

Most people find themselves struggling with the consequences of the economic collapse in family life, and the harsh weather conditions, especially in [winter](#), add an extra burden on making ends meet, even in Kabul (AAN, 28 February 2023). [The January 2023 UN Humanitarian Needs Overview](#) stated that two thirds of the population (or 28.3 million people) require urgent humanitarian assistance, which illustrates the size of the challenge, exacerbated by the fact that Afghanistan is struggling with donor fatigue and a plethora of other crises competing for attention and funds. Neighboring countries are also reluctant to help and anyway cannot meet the level of support needed. In the growing desperation, reports emerged from IDP camps that families have been increasingly resorting to [selling their girls](#), some as young as four, to survive (CNN, 2 November 2021). Many others are simply looking for a way to flee or migrate out of Afghanistan.

In a summarizing report, AAN quoted different agencies and NGOs saying that 3.2 million children under 5 and an estimated 840,000 pregnant and lactating women suffer from [severe or moderate acute malnutrition](#) (AAN, 7 July 2023). The UNDP Socio-Economic Outlook (18 April 2023, pp.63-64) shows in [detail](#) the ways households try to cope with the challenge of surviving: "[M]ore than 4.3 million households have borrowed simply for securing food. Many households have mortgaged their future, having sold productive assets such as their last female animals (1.1 million) or other income-generating equipment or means of transport (over 0.6 million), and even their houses or land (over 0.3 million). In many cases, households were forced to mortgage their children's future by seeking recourse to child labor (more than 850,000) or marrying their daughters earlier than intended (nearly 80,000), to combat extreme food insecurity."

The governments of Pakistan and Iran have announced that they intend to force the [repatriation of millions](#) of Afghan refugees, regardless of whether they have been officially registered or not (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 29 September 2023). The Iranian Minister of Interior announced that Iran would shortly deport five million Afghans who have been living 'illegally' in the country. Likewise, Pakistan announced they would be sending back one million. The Taliban government has a strained relationship with both neighboring countries (for Iran, see: [WWR, 19 June 2023](#)), but the main reason for the mass deportation may be that both countries are suffering from a serious economic downturn. However, in comparison, Afghanistan is in a veritable economic freefall due to the withdrawal of much of the international help the country was depending on. If these announced plans are implemented, the social and economic situation in Afghanistan will become even more dire than before. Of course, religious minorities will not be excluded from the widespread suffering, but most will remain silent, so as to avoid drawing attention to themselves. Many people are therefore trying to leave the country, but for many of them, the [quest for passports](#) is an insurmountable problem and even bribes do not always go far enough (AAN, 4 February 2024).

### **Gender perspective**

Afghanistan is heavily dominated by Islamic tenets and discriminatory restrictions which relegate women to '[second-class citizens](#)' (AI, 26 May 2023). The serious restrictions for women working with NGOs or the United Nations (see above: *Political landscape*) also means that thousands of dependent

families are without any income (AAN, 28 December 2022). At the same time, restrictions on the movement of women are having an effect on men as well, especially in households with only a few men to accompany women to necessary appointments such as visits to the doctor or the provision of basic needs. The time male relatives spend on accompanying them, they are not available for work.

Women and girls face restrictions in almost all areas of daily life and became increasingly vulnerable within the context of the COVID-19 crisis and under Taliban rule (Unherd, 27 May 2022). The dire economic and social situation and the restrictions not to leave the house are especially hard for widows, of which there are tens of thousands - if not hundreds of thousands - in the country. Their and their families' survival is in jeopardy (AAN, 20 July 2022). There have also been several allegations of sexual violence perpetrated by members of the Taliban since the take-over, especially against women in detention centers (AI, 10 March 2023; IPS, 16 May 2023).

## Technological landscape

According to DataReportal Digital 2024: Afghanistan (23 February 2024) / Survey date: January 2024:

- **Internet usage:** 18.4% of the population
- **Social media usage:** 8.6% of the total population  
(According to Napoleon Cat, as of May 2024 only 17% of Facebook users were women).
- **Active cellular mobile connections:** 64.6% of the total population

According to available data, Afghanistan is one of the few countries in the world where the number of Internet users has decreased or is at least stagnant, but these statistics are not very reliable. Still, it is likely that citizens (converts from Islam in particular) will have more access to online Christian resources (especially resources in Farsi, which is related to the Dari language). As long as intervention from the new Taliban government remains low, this is likely to strengthen the small Christian community, which is often made up of isolated converts. However, Internet access is more available in urban areas, especially Kabul, which alone makes up more than half of the country's urbanization. With the Taliban taking over control of the country, it is likely that such access will become increasingly difficult and risky.

Due to country instability, Afghanistan was not listed in the Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2023 report. However, in November 2017, VOA News reported that the authorities had at times blocked social media services temporarily to prevent insurgency groups using WhatsApp, Telegram, Twitter and Facebook to spread propaganda. Independent media reporting has become much more difficult and dangerous with the government take-over by the Taliban (AAN, 7 March 2022). Not only is the Taliban putting pressure on reporters and published content (leading not least to self-censorship), but the dire economic situation has also caused numerous independent media outlets to go out of business.

As Afghanistan Analysts Network showed in a series of reports, access to telecom services (AAN, 13 June 2019) was limited particularly by Taliban control. The Taliban also enforced cellphone checks in the regions they controlled (prior to the August 2021 take-over) in order to make people follow their strict rules (Gandhara, 30 October 2020). This applied predominantly to rural areas; it should be noted that the World Bank claims that the urbanization rate of Afghanistan is the highest in South Asia (World Bank Factsheet, accessed 8 January 2022), only topped by smaller countries such as the Maldives and

Bhutan. So, the gap between cities and rural areas is growing. Overall, the country's technological development is slow and severely hindered by the dire security situation.

The Taliban has been providing returnees - i.e., refugees who have been pushed back across the border from Pakistan - with [free SIM cards](#) (Rest of the World, 14 January 2024). This may seem surprising at first, but while it helps them connect with society and authorities, it can also be used for surveillance and control purposes. And while Christians do not stand out in any of these processes, it should not be forgotten that, as a tiny minority, they are among those trying to leave Afghanistan and among those who have recently been pushed out of Pakistan and Iran.

China has become the first country to [appoint a new ambassador](#) to take up residence in Kabul since the take-over by the Taliban regime in August 2021 (Reuters, 13 September 2023). China has reportedly been [exporting surveillance equipment](#) to Afghanistan. A network of roughly 62,000 cameras has been installed across Kabul, the Taliban Ministry of the Interior said it hopes to expand the network nationwide within the next four years (RFE-RL, 1 September 2023). Such a system can easily be adapted to monitor the general public in many ways. This will likely add an additional layer of pressure on religious minorities in the country, especially those which can only survive by remaining deeply hidden.

### **Gender perspective**

Reflecting the gender gap in relation to technology access, Georgetown reported that Afghanistan scored very low for female cell phone usage out of 170 countries ([GIWPS Afghanistan profile, accessed 24 June 2024](#)). While this statistic suggests that women may find it more difficult to access digital Christian resources or online Christian communities, there are many reports that women use their time in confinement in their homes to watch TV and surf the Internet, where available.

## **Security situation**

### **Al-Qaeda and ISKP**

While violence has not ceased completely (especially against minorities and foreign contacts), the general level of violence has decreased compared to the situation before August 2021. The UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) published a [report](#) on the number of civilian casualties caused by improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in the period 15 August 2021 - 30 May 2023 (27 June 2023). According to the report: IED attacks on places of worship, mostly Shia Muslim sites, accounted for more than one-third of all civilian casualties recorded during the reporting period. In addition to attacks on Shia places of worship, the report said there were at least 345 (95 killed, 250 wounded) casualties as a result of attacks targeting the predominantly Shia Muslim Hazara community in schools and other educational facilities, on crowded streets and on public transportation.

Al-Qaeda remains present and active in the country, even though the Taliban claim otherwise; the Islamic State group has made inroads into the country, boosted by an influx of foreign Sunni militants, many calling themselves "Islamic State of the Khorasan Province" (ISKP), and formed largely out of splinter groups of former Taliban fighters. On 5 September 2022, ISKP conducted the first embassy attack since the Taliban took control in August 2021. The suicide bomb blast targeted [the Russian embassy](#) in Kabul, killing two employees (Al-Mayadeen, 5 September 2022), showing that the security situation is less stable than the Taliban would like to admit. ISKP has mainly been targeting [religious](#)

[minorities](#) like the Hazara and other Shiites in an effort to sow further sectarian discord (HRW, 6 September 2022). Afghanistan is also likely to continue serving as a gathering-point for groups from the Taliban, al-Qaeda and other dismantled militia, who opposed the peace negotiations with the USA. The [killing](#) of al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri by a US drone strike in the early hours of 31 July 2022 in central Kabul left the Taliban in an awkward position due to their claim that al-Qaeda was not present in the country (BBC News, 2 August 2022). The Taliban was also surprised by [a suicide attack](#) in their de facto capital, southern Kandahar, leaving 21 people dead (RFE/RL, 22 March 2024). This shows that the threat from their radical Islamic rivals, ISKP, is far from over. ISKP also appears bold enough to [branch out](#) and launch attacks in other countries, such as Iran, Turkey and Russia. Western countries are also among its targets, although it is not clear how such attacks are being financed (The Diplomat, 30 April 2024).

## China

China runs a military base in Tajikistan on the border to Afghanistan (RFE/RL, 14 October 2021) and is building a second one. ISKP fired [rockets](#) across the border to neighboring Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in April and May 2022, showing that the Taliban is not completely in control and is struggling to keep its promise that no attacks on other countries would be made from Afghan territory (Gandhara, 11 May 2022). While in November 2022, a more general sweep against “[Chinese imperialism](#)” in Afghanistan and elsewhere had been noted (Jamestown Foundation, 18 November 2022), a successful ISKP-attack against a hotel in Kabul in December 2022 triggered a wave of anti-Chinese jihadist propaganda in January 2023 (Jamestown Foundation, 6 January 2023).

## Pakistan

The relationship with neighboring Pakistan has sharply deteriorated. While the old Pakistani government was quick in praising the Taliban take-over of Afghanistan, the new government is coming to realize that the relationship with its neighbor’s new rulers will pose serious challenges. Radical Islamic groups in Pakistan (such as the TTP) have been emboldened by this victory and one TTP emir even said that his organization is a branch of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (Long War Journal, 15 December 2021). While this statement by the TTP emir may be an outlier, it shows how close the ties between Afghan and Pakistani Taliban are, illustrated especially by, but not limited to, the Haqqani network. Another sign that being neighbors with an Afghanistan ruled by Taliban is not smooth sailing were the border clashes along the Durand line, which Pakistan has been fencing off (Dawn, 3 January 2022). Taliban leader Hibatullah Akhundzada keeps on [protecting](#) the TTP in Pakistan, despite the fact that many of the Taliban involved in day-to-day politics in Kabul would prefer a policy limiting the TTP’s violent operations (USIP, 14 February 2023). A strong sign of Pakistan's strained relationship with the Taliban was the start of repatriating up to 1.7 million undocumented Afghan refugees to Afghanistan at the end of 2023, although many were born in Pakistan. This was followed by Pakistani [airstrikes](#) against camps belonging to radical Islamic Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in Afghanistan on 18 March 2024 (Memri, 20 March 2024). Pakistan’s armed forces estimate the number of TTP fighters to be around 5,000 - 6,000 and although this may be an overestimation, it is clear that the TTP has found a safe haven in Afghanistan. It has been able to increase its attacks against Pakistan’s interests, including action against Chinese nationals, an example being a [suicide attack](#) that killed five Chinese engineers on 26 March 2024 (CNN, 27 March 2024). Pakistan’s airstrikes against targets on Afghan soil represent



an escalation and may also be used to justify exerting additional pressure on Afghan refugees in Pakistan to return.

## Iran

Another neighbor where relationships are increasingly strained is Iran. Al-Jazeera reported on 30 May 2023 that [border clashes](#) between Afghanistan and Iran took place, in which one Afghan and two Iranian troops were killed. The clashes were connected with a dispute over a 1973 water-sharing agreement concerning the Helmand river. Iran has claimed that it is not receiving its agreed amount of water and that there has been no improvement since the Taliban took over in 2021. Relations with Afghanistan had already been tense due to the fact that the Shiite Hazara minority is being frequently targeted for attack both by the [Taliban](#) (Amnesty International, 15 September 2022) and the [Islamic State group](#) (HRW, 6 September 2022), and Iran is predominantly Shia. Like Pakistan, Iran has also started repatriating thousands of unofficial Afghan refugees. Iran banned Afghan citizens from [travelling](#) to and within 16 of its 31 provinces, severely curtailing mobility and the ability to work in Iran and send remittances to their families in Afghanistan (RFE/RL, 4 December 2023).

## National Resistance Front

The National Resistance Front poses a challenge as well (Foreign Affairs, 19 August 2022), although the claim that it is actively fighting in 12 provinces is almost certainly an exaggeration, especially as it is not an organized armed opposition with foreign support. If reports turn out to be true that TTP fighters - and thus Pashtuns - are [relocating to the North](#) (MEMRI, 21 June 2023), it is possible this could trigger a rallying cry for resistance by the Tajik and Uzbek ethnic minorities which are concentrated in the North. Whether this develops into an open and armed resistance remains to be seen. After the ISKP suicide attack on a Hazara Shiite mosque in northern Kunduz which killed at least 46 in October 2021 (AP News, 8 October 2021), the Taliban were quick to promise Hazaras that they would be protected like all other Afghan citizens. However, with each successful ISKP-attack, trust in the Taliban's ability and/or willingness is being put to the test.

## Gender perspective

Against the backdrop of decades-long conflict and instability, life has always been immensely challenging for Christians. In rural locations, the social control is much higher, not just by families, but also by society at large. Following on from the Taliban take-over in August 2021, the security of both Christian men and women has become increasingly fragile, causing many to flee the country. In an increasingly Islamic context however, the rights of women and minorities are a primary point of concern. Afghan women took to the streets to protest new policies in September 2021 and to demand equal rights, although were violently beaten ([HRW, 20 October 2022](#)). Christian girls reportedly fear being abducted, forcefully converted to Islam and forcibly married ([Forbes, 8 May 2020](#)) while men and boys' risk being forcibly recruited into the new army as in earlier years ([US Department of State, 2022 Trafficking in Persons Report: Afghanistan](#)).

## Christian origins

Christianity may have reached Afghanistan by the 2nd century AD. According to traditions passed on by Eusebius of Caesarea (260-339 AD), the apostles Thomas and Bartholomew brought the Christian message to Parthia and Bactria, which includes today's north-western Afghanistan. The congregations which grew up developed into the Nestorian Church and Afghan cities like Herat, Kandahar and Balkh became bishopric seats. In the 13th century a Christian ruler converted to Islam and became Sultan, leading to a decline in the number of followers of Christianity, which was nearly completely extinguished by the reign of Timur in 1405.

In the 17th century, Armenian merchants came to Kabul and in time a small Christian community developed, but this Armenian community was forced to leave the country by 1871. Attempts at building a Protestant church in Kabul came to an end in 1973. Before the Taliban take-over, there was reportedly a legally recognized church in the basement of the Italian embassy serving expatriate Christians. However, today, all Christianity has been pushed underground completely.

## Church spectrum today

For security reasons no WCD breakdown is shown here. Most Christians are converts from other religions, but no details can be published.

## Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

These are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Afghanistan>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>.
- [Afghanistan - What does the Taliban takeover mean for other jihadists - August 2021](#)

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