

International Engagement

A Ban, a Resolution and a Meeting: A look at the May 2023 meeting in Doha and the reactions to it

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The 1-2 May 2023 gathering in Doha, hosted by United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres, brought together the representatives of 21 countries – the five permanent members of the Security Council, major donors and regional players, plus the European Union and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation. They spent two days talking about how to engage with the Taleban, who have now been in power for 20 months, but are still unrecognised as Afghanistan’s government. The gathering took place in the shadow of the extension of an Islamic Emirate ban on women working from NGOs to the UN and a chaotic few weeks for the UN. AAN’s Roxanna Shapour and Kate Clark have been sifting through Guterres’ press statement and the various reactions to the gathering. They ask some questions about the gathering in Doha – and try to answer them.

For detailed background to the gathering, what prompted it, how the ban on Afghan women working for the UN threatened to overshadow it, on the chaos within the UN beforehand and why the relationship between the Taleban and international players is quite so complicated and difficult, see our report, [The May 2023 Doha meeting: How should the outside world deal with the Taleban?](#), published on 30 April 2023.

What were the aims of the gathering, and did it fulfil them?

The key objective of this meeting was for the diverse countries and organisations invited ^[1] to find common ground on how to engage with the Taleban and develop what Guterres called in his press conference afterwards, “a common international approach” ^[2] (see [video](#) and [text here](#)). Guterres stressed the spirit of unity among the delegates, which he said followed on from “the unanimous Security Council resolution 2681 of 27 April calling for full, equal, meaningful and safe participation of women and girls in Afghanistan.”

Guterres said the participants had agreed on the “need for a strategy of engagement that allows for the stabilization of Afghanistan but also allows for addressing important concerns.” They had also agreed, he said, on what those concerns were:

The persistent presence of terrorist organizations — a risk for the country, the region, and further afield.

The lack of inclusivity, which importantly includes human rights, in particular those of women and girls, severely undermined by recent Taliban decisions.

And the spread of drug trafficking with all its dramatic consequences.

He said that different countries prioritised different concerns, but all recognised that the issues are intertwined, and none can be prioritised.

Guterres said to “achieve our objectives, we cannot disengage,” but that engagement had to be “more effective and based on [unspecified] lessons which we have learned from the past.” In that light, Guterres said he would be using the UN’s convening power to “advance a forward leaning approach, which puts the Afghan people first, and in a manner that is complementary to existing regional platforms and initiatives.” He said several initiatives were ‘going on’ and there were plans for another meeting as a platform for them to ‘come together’.

Guterres was strong on the unity of the delegates and vague about what engagement with the Taleban might look like. Possibly helping to flesh out the nature of that engagement is a newly-appointed Special Coordinator for the Assessment. Under [Security Council Resolution 2679](#), passed on 16 March, the appointee, Permanent Representative of Turkey to the UN and previously Turkey’s Foreign Minister, Feridun Sinirlioglu, is charged with coordinating an “integrated, independent assessment” – of what exactly the resolution does not say. However, he should consult “all relevant Afghan political actors and stakeholders, including relevant authorities, Afghan women, and civil society, as well as the region and the wider international community” and make “forward looking recommendations for an integrated and coherent approach by the international community to the current challenges facing Afghanistan.”^[3] Guterres introduced Sinirlioglu to the Doha gathering, saying he had already “begun his work in earnest.”

Guterres’ messaging was something of a relief after a couple of weeks in which senior UN officials appeared at loggerheads with each other and caused chaos and confusion both over the aims of the Doha gathering and UN policy over the working women ban (see our [curtain raiser](#) published on 30 April for details). In that light, Guterres’ statement to the press appeared designed to convey a sense of unity, purpose and coherence. Whether that holds and is useful in practice will become clearer as future meetings are held, as any engagement progresses, what senior officials say, and what the UN does on the ground.

What did Guterres say about the ban on women working for the UN and NGOs?

The extension of the ban from NGOs to UN agencies had threatened to eclipse the original aim of the Doha meeting, which was to discuss how to engage the Taleban. However, the idea for the gathering, as AAN has [reported](#), emerged in relation to the NGO ban, when Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed visited Kabul in January to try and get the ban lifted. She came away with the sense that a more political approach was needed in dealing with the Emirate. What to do in the face of the ban was then complicated further by remarks by the global head of UNDP, Achim Steiner, that the UN might have to pull out of Afghanistan and then by Deputy Special Representative and Humanitarian Coordinator Ramiz Alakbarov that it must “stay the course” and now was “not the time to turn our backs on the people of Afghanistan.”

In his press conference on 2 May, Guterres addressed the ban directly. He called it “unacceptable” and said it put lives “in jeopardy.” He said the UN would “never be silent in the face of unprecedented, systemic attacks on

women and girls' rights." While the ban violated international law, including the UN Charter and undermined the aid effort and Afghanistan's development, "throughout the past decades, we stayed, and we delivered. And we are determined to seek the necessary conditions to keep delivering," he said, stressing that UN's "commitment to support the people of Afghanistan" would not waver.

What do Guterres' remarks add up to? It sounds like negotiations with the Emirate about the ban will continue, with no sense given of plans to pull back, let alone pull out. The UN is not happy about the ban and will keep speaking up about women's rights, but other than that, it looks as if Guterres hopes the matter can be resolved. He gives no idea of a Plan B if it continues.

Meanwhile, word of discontent among some UN staff in Afghanistan has emerged in the form of a letter addressed to heads of agencies and sent in late April. The letter was endorsed, wrote [The New Humanitarian](#), which broke the story on 3 May, by about 125 staff working for 15 agencies in Afghanistan (out of about 4,000 staff in the country). The letter largely relates to how different agencies obeyed or ignored, to varying degrees, an order issued for all national staff, men and women, to stay at home while an operational review was carried out (it is due to end on 5 May). It also accuses agencies of directing "NGO partners and third-party contractors... to restart operations with significantly fewer female field workers and no female staff in offices. ^[4] The letter writers describe the UN approach as sending "the message to all its staff that female staff do not matter."

The difficulties of dealing with the Taleban over female employees are not to be underestimated, nor the strains the ban has put on staff and heads of UN agencies and NGOs – see our recent report, [Bans on Women Working, Then and Now: The dilemmas of delivering humanitarian aid during the first and second Islamic Emirates](#) for a wider discussion of the ethical and practical dilemmas. The Emirate has insisted that the employment of Afghan women is an internal affair and no one else's business. Government spokesman Zabiullah Mujahed told BBC Pashto on 31 December 2022 that the Emirate wanted to "preserve the dignity and chastity" of Afghan women and that "because these institutions are not under the control of the Emirate, the risk for women is high and we have received dangerous reports" (reported by [BBC Persian](#)). It may be that the leadership is unhappy about Afghan women mixing with foreigners and working for foreign organisations or in a sector it sees as 'foreign'. Yet, there is also the suspicion, whether justified or not, that the Emirate is deploying women's issues to put pressure on international actors to engage on sanctions, frozen assets and recognition. The Emirate's spokesman, Zabiullah Mujahed, in a brief [statement](#) issued on 12 April, as well as saying it was an internal matter, also linked the issue to those wider concerns:

[I]t is necessary that the member countries of the United Nations resolve the problem of freezing Afghan assets, banking, travel bans and other restrictions so that Afghanistan can progress in the economic, political and security areas. Afghans have the capacity to stand on their own feet.

In that sense, the ban and what to do about it feeds back into the wider discussion of engagement with the Taleban. However, Guterres refers to another issue that may actually be a greater threat to the UN's programme of humanitarian assistance, and that is funding. In the absence of any on-budget support, humanitarian funding represents the vast majority of aid given to the country. Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis, he said, is the largest in the world, and it is "difficult to overestimate the gravity of the situation." Yet the [2023 Humanitarian Response Plan](#), the detailing of Afghanistan's needs for the year, which had asked donors for USD 4.6 billion, has, as yet, he said, received "a mere USD 294 million – 6.4 per cent of the total funding required."

It is still early days. The launch of the Plan was delayed from January to 9 March, and in 2022, it took time and an international pledging conference before most pledges came in (see AAN reporting [here](#)). Still, for donors, the unconscionable restrictions put on female aid workers by the Taleban have made giving aid to Afghanistan less attractive at the very same time as other countries present equally pressing needs for support. (For more on this, see OCHA's [Global Humanitarian Overview 2023](#), published on 1 December 2022.) Most people have been expecting funding to diminish this year; see for example, USIP's William Byrd's recent report for [Lawfare](#).

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres addresses international envoys during talks on Afghanistan in Doha. Photo: Karim Jaafar/AFP, 2 May 2023.

What was the Taleban's response to the gathering?

The first response of the Taleban came ahead of the Doha meeting, in reaction to UNSC Resolution 2681 of 27 April, which unequivocally condemned the Emirate's ban on women working for the UN. An official statement, which was echoed by several Taleban officials in media interviews, called the ban "an internal social matter," which did not affect outside states and should be respected as one of Afghanistan's "sovereign choices" (see the foreign ministry's [statement](#) and media reporting by [ToloNews](#) and [BBC Persian](#)). The Emirate, the statement said, remained committed to ensuring all the rights of Afghan women, but stressed that "diversity" must be respected and not politicised. The statement did welcome certain parts of the resolution, including the acknowledgement that "Afghanistan faces multifaceted challenges" and that "engagement is the only realistic path," but stressed:

The path to a post-conflict recovery requires the unconditional removal of UN, multilateral, and unilateral sanctions and restrictions on the country, in addition to the provision of humanitarian and development assistance to the country.... While humanitarian assistance is appreciated, the reality is that this ongoing crisis can only be resolved by the removal of restrictions on the country and helping Afghanistan to address core climate change, economic, infrastructural, and development needs of its people.

After the meeting ended, the most comprehensive response came in an [exclusive interview](#) with BBC Persian by the Emirate's ambassador to Qatar and spokesperson for its political office, Muhammad Naim Wardak. He said the Taleban were not "pessimistic and that the media often portrays issues in a way that doesn't reflect the reality." He was unimpressed that the Taleban were not invited to the gathering:

Logic and international norms demand that a meeting about a particular country should include representatives from the country.... There is also a practical consideration, how can you solve a problem you have with a person if you don't sit down with that person.... Consensus can only happen when all sides sit together.

He was clear that the Taleban viewed the issues raised at the gathering as internal matters. "Let me put it clearly: others cannot determine Afghanistan's national interests," he said. Nevertheless, he said the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan welcomed any and all steps taken to solve Afghanistan's problems, provided they were in line with the country's values and national interests.

Asked about the protests in Afghanistan and abroad ahead of the meeting, which called on the UN not to recognise the Emirate, Naim said he thought the protesters were in the minority. The majority of Afghans, he said, believed there should be engagement with a view to solving any problems. "The system that exists in Afghanistan," he said, "is unprecedented in the past 50 years. We can see that what the [current] system has achieved is what 50 countries [in the US-led intervention] were unable to accomplish."

As to the issue of women studying or working, Naim said that the Emirate was not opposed to this in principle, but the issue required "interpretation in line with the mindset and sensibilities of Afghanistan's traditional Islamic society," which was in its substance different to that of other countries, particularly those in the West. He restated the Emirate's commitment to addressing the access of Afghan women and girls to education and to reversing the ban on them working for NGOs and UN agencies, but his refusal to commit to a timeline would have discouraged anyone hoping for the speed readmission of Afghan girls to secondary and university education and the return of women employees to NGOs and the UN.

As to how we will resolve [these issues], we need time. If you look at the advancements of other countries ... they did not come about in one day, two days, two years or five years. It took them 20-30 years to get anywhere.

Were there any responses from Afghan women?

Afghan women activists, both inside the country and abroad, and their supporters were prominent among those questioning the intentions behind the Doha meeting. Their suspicions had been sparked by remarks made by Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed on 18 April which appeared to suggest that recognition of the Emirate might be on the table at the Doha meeting (detailed in this [AAN report](#)). While the UN immediately and categorically denied that recognition was on the agenda, her words sparked a media and social media storm, prompting tens of thousands of tweets with the hashtags #NoToTaliban and #Don'tRecogniseTaliban, video messages and op-ed pieces. One small group of demonstrators, risking violent reprisal by the Taleban, took to the Kabul streets to tell the UN, "The Taleban is a terrorist and fascist group and do not represent the people of Afghanistan" (see this video tweeted by [Zan TV](#) and reporting in [Hasht-e Subh](#)). They said any engagement with the Taleban that denies women a seat at the table is unacceptable and stressed that the Afghan people, including women, had to be involved in decision-making.

An [open letter](#) sent from women activists inside and outside the country to Secretary-General Guterres called on him to ensure:

- *The UN is consistent in messaging on human rights, including women's rights and gender equality... [and] to immediately suspend all of Amina Mohammad's engagement with the Taliban;*
- *The UN does not comply with the Taliban's ban on women working for the UN;*
- *Diverse Afghan women are meaningfully consulted... including at the upcoming meeting of Special Envoys in May 2023;*
- *We also urge all parties not to grant the Taliban a seat at the UN.*

Former Afghan diplomat Asila Wardak in an op-ed published by [PassBlue](#), an independent, women-led news site that closely covers the work of the UN, also said that while she appreciated that the actions of the Taleban were "beyond the control of the international community," she questioned why Afghan women were excluded from the Doha meeting:

The global envoys — almost all men — will be talking about us without us. Why? We always ask for a seat at the table, and we have asked for just one hour of this two-day meeting. But we have been told it is not possible. What message does this exclusion send to the Taliban, to Afghan women and to the rest of the world about where the UN actually stands?

Women activists noted that even though the Taleban were not invited to the gathering, officials were in Doha and would take the opportunity to have meetings with officials. Several were tweeted about by the Taleban or reported by the media, although whether or not they were actually on the 'sidelines' of Doha, as portrayed by the Emirate or just normal routine meetings is questionable. Those were: a meeting with Norway's Special Envoy for Afghanistan Kjell-Gunnar Eriksen and Paul Koloman Bkar, its Chargé d'Affaires ([tweet here](#)); the Director for Afghanistan and Pakistan in the UK's foreign ministry, Andrew McCoubrey ([tweet here](#), [report here](#)); China's Special Envoy for Afghanistan, Yue Xiaoyong ([tweet from TOLONews here](#)); Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, Pakistan and Russia (reported by [Ariana](#)).

In the end, there was a virtual meeting, organised at the request of US Special Envoy for Afghan Women, Girls and Human Rights Rina Amiri on 1 May between some of the envoys and officials, including from the US and

EU, and dozens of women's rights activists, more than sixty, according to Mary Karimi, from the Together Stronger and other groups (see [tweet](#)). The women updated the special envoys about the dire economic situation of Afghan families, especially women, and restated their demand that the Taliban should not be recognised, Asila Wardak told the London-based Independent Farsi. While they gave assurances that the issue of recognition was not on the table at Doha, the envoys had nothing "new to say to the women, except for 'compassion and empty promises,'" said Wardak (see Independent Farsi reporting [here](#)).

Did any Afghans from the media, aid or civil society support greater engagement?

Not all Afghans have been arguing against engagement. Other groups, particularly made up of those working on the ground inside the country, suggested practical approaches to engagement, which they believe would provide useful paths to resolving the impasse between the Emirate and international actors. They also sent two open letters to the UN Secretary-General, one from individuals working in the media and civil society inside Afghanistan and another signed by dozens of Afghan NGOs, calling itself the Nexus Group.

The [letter](#) from the individuals living in Afghanistan and working across peace, civil society, humanitarian aid, human rights, media and business sectors called for a "principled, pragmatic, and phased approach to engagement," which would help remove what they said were the "roadblocks" to social and economic development against the backdrop of "the worst humanitarian crisis on the planet worsened by a weakened economy and a lack of a framework for political dialogue." The letter offered a number of recommendations on political, aid, economic and diplomatic tracks, including a call for the international community to engage directly with the Afghan people to "develop Afghan solutions to Afghan problems," expand support to local organisations, which it said had a proven track record of successfully negotiating access, and invest in women-led and owned organisations and areas where women and girls could still be active such as "local media, certain types of vocational institutes, cultural heritage preservation and arts programming."

The second [letter](#), from the Nexus Group, was signed by dozens of Afghan civil society organisations, argued against isolating Afghanistan and said: "A heavily sanctioned Afghanistan will not be conducive to regional security or human security inside the country." Afghanistan's civil society, the letter said, has shown "immense resilience" and has proven that meaningful working was possible in the current challenging environment: "Our potential to hold the de-facto authorities accountable is vast and can be leveraged by the international community to strengthen international pressure on the de-facto authorities." Finally, the letter urged donors to target their support to critical areas such as the health sector, which "are collapsing in the absence of development aid, creating current and future needs which fuel more costly humanitarian interventions later on."

Both letters stressed that they were from Afghans on the ground and working to improve people's lives. They did not feature any open criticism of the Taliban, but couched them as the de facto authorities who needed to be engaged with. As the signatories to the first letter said: "The current approach to Afghanistan has only increased the suffering in this country. Our people are innovative, determined, pioneering and resilient – let's work towards lifting the barriers to our progress."

What did the opposition say about the gathering?

There were few reactions from opposition groups or leaders outside Afghanistan. The only group that seems to have issued a statement is the National Resistance Council for the Salvation of Afghanistan. This group was established in the Turkish capital Ankara in March 2022 on the initiative of former vice-president and Jombesh-e Melli leader Abdul Rashid Dostum at a launch attended by several northern mujahedin heavyweights, including: two leaders from Jamiat-e Islami, Atta Muhammad Nur, former governor of Balkh, and Ahmad Wali Massud, Ahmad Shah Massud's son and National Resistance Front (NRF); Ittihad-e Islami leader and former MP Abdul Rabb Rasul Sayyaf, and; Hizb-e Wahdat Mardom leader and former Deputy Chief

Executive Muhammad Mohaqeq. ^[5]

A 1 May [declaration](#) issued by the National Resistance Council welcomed efforts to end the current crisis in Afghanistan, but expressed strong opposition to any move to recognise the Taliban; rather, it called for the Doha Agreement to be abandoned and urged the international community to find a “new and acceptable road map” and “the formation of a comprehensive transition mechanism and the return of sovereignty to the Afghan people through national elections.”

Former first vice president Amrullah Saleh [tweeted](#) his thanks to the UN for excluding “the Talibs from the UN led Doha conference,” calling it “a meaningful & constructive decision,” on 2 May. He called for the people of Afghanistan to be “given a chance to express their will & have a say in who should lead them and how.”

Why does this all feel vaguely familiar?

The authors did feel a sense of déjà vu over Guterres’ statement. The participants’ three ‘concerns’ that he cited appeared to come straight from the 1990s playbook of relations between the ‘international community’ and the Taliban’s first Emirate. Then also, the Taliban’s harbouring of terrorist groups, primarily al-Qaeda and its leader Osama bin Laden, their treatment of women and girls and their failure to control narcotics were all regularly cited by foreign powers and in Security Council resolutions (see resolutions 1267 (text [here](#)) and 1333 (text [here](#)) adopted on 15 October 1999 and 19 December 2000 respectively).

In those days, the terrorist issue was most pressing, as it probably is also today, but the issue of women’s rights and narcotics were also regularly cited. The issue of women’s rights is far more of a stumbling block to the aid programme than it was in the 1990s, given the Taliban are now trying to restrict freedoms which women and girls had (not universally, but in many places) been enjoying, rather than clamping down on a population cowed by a brutal civil war. (For more on this, see this recent AAN [report](#) comparing the two eras.)

Since 1999 Afghanistan’s production of narcotics – as the world’s leading supplier of illegal opiates – could be said to be the one single issue which harms the rest of the world the most. For the Taliban, both during their first rule and now, it was also the easiest international concern to deal with. In July 2000, they successfully banned opium poppy resulting in negligible cultivation in the 2000/2001 growing season – less than 10,000 hectares were planted with poppy, and that was in opposition-held areas, mainly in Badakhshan (see this report from the [UN International Drug Control Programme](#) (whether the eradication of poppy would have continued is moot as the Emirate was overthrown the following year).

Last year, on 3 April 2022, the Emirate again banned opium poppy cultivation and opiate production and trade (see AAN reporting [here](#)) and on 9 March 2023, it also [banned cannabis cultivation](#). ^[6] The Taliban issued the opium ban in the midst of the harvest season and granted a two-month grace period, which left the 2022 harvest largely unaffected by the ban, according to the [UN’s Office on Drugs and Crime](#) in a report issued in November 2022. ^[7] However, available media reports suggest that the ban has been strictly enforced on the new crop that was planted in the autumn of 2022 (see for example [here](#)).

In the 1990s, the poppy ban garnered the Taliban virtually no benefits in terms of relief from sanctions or steps towards recognition. There is no sense today, either, that these bans will help the Emirate’s case. This is even though their action appears to be in stark contrast to the failure of the US-supported Republic to make inroads in poppy production.

What is different this time is that the Taliban, with a cadre of diplomats honed by years spent talking to foreigners in Doha, are much more eloquent and on the front foot than in the 1990s, even though their message

is virtually the same: the outside world has no right to meddle in domestic issues and should recognise the Emirate as the rightful rulers of Afghanistan. There is also a greater diversity of Afghan voices speaking in opposition to or critical or at least independently of the Taleban. Despite the Taleban's clampdown on free speech, ^[8] some of those voices are from inside the country, named and identifiable people. This feels like a new phenomenon.

Edited by Jelena Bjelica

References

- 1** The delegates were from: China, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Iran, Japan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Norway, Pakistan, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, United States, Uzbekistan, plus the European Union and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation.
- 2** The aim of the two-day gathering, according to the Secretary-General's [spokesperson](#), speaking at his daily briefing in New York on the 1 May, was to:

[T]o reach points of commonality on key issues, such as human rights, especially for women and girls, inclusive governance, countering terrorism and drug trafficking... [and] achieve a common understanding within the international community on how to engage with the Taliban on these issues.

- 3** The resolution lists those challenges as “including, but not limited to, humanitarian, human rights and especially the rights of women and girls, religious and ethnic minorities, security and terrorism, narcotics, development, economic and social challenges, dialogue, governance and the rule of law; and to advance the objective of a secure, stable, prosperous and inclusive Afghanistan in line with the elements set out by the Security Council in previous resolutions.”
- 4** On 5 April, the UN [said](#) it had instructed “all national staff – men and women – not to report to the office until further notice” and again on 11 April, announced that “national personnel – women and men – have been instructed not to report to UN offices, with only limited and calibrated exceptions made for critical tasks.” The letter describes a wide variety of interpretations of this order, ranging from one agency deeming “all male staff ‘critical’ and offering female staff to return to work without any assurances for their safety, against the recommendation of the UN Country Team,” while multiple others “have not ensured the equal administration of this decision to all of its employees, with UN contract holders and 3rd party implementers held to different standards.” Only a few heads of agencies had framed the work-from-home mandate as a response to an “attack on women’s rights and the neutrality of the UN,” instead casting it as “purely a security measure.”

Perhaps more significantly, it says that following the December ban on NGOs employing women, instead of following UN operational guidelines issued by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (the

highest-level humanitarian coordination body within the UN) to ensure the “non-discriminatory delivery of aid,” in practice, “NGO partners and third-party contractors were directed to restart operations with significantly fewer female field workers and no female staff in offices.” This point was also raised in January by former AREU director, Orzala Nemat.

5 Whether those who attended the launch are members of the National Resistance Council for the Salvation of Afghanistan is not clear.

