

Who is Feeding the Taliban?

If you think there is nothing YOU can do to stop the plight of Afghan women and girls read this:

The majority of their cashflow comes from (\$m in order of magnitude):

- Illegal heroin trade (est. 2bn per annum 2022-2027)
- Overseas aid (est. 1bn per annum 2021-2027, assuming 80% funds diverted^{1,2})
- Taxes on local people across agriculture, trade, mining, services, and illicit sectors (0.85bn per annum)³
- Illegal arms sales (est. 0.7bn per annum 2022-2027, assuming 50% sold)
- Shareholdings in mining projects with overseas companies making inward investment (circa 6m per annum based on 40% shareholding over 30 years)
- Kidnap and extortion (unknown)

Self Sufficiency

Afghanistan has a fragile banking infrastructure⁴, high unemployment⁵, weak GDP growth⁶ and a widening trade deficit, with imports exceeding exports by \$6.7 billion in the first three quarters of 2024 (up from \$5.1 billion for the same period in 2023)⁷. The Taliban have issued over 100 decrees on appearance, vice and virtue⁸. We could find no evidence of decrees aiming to stimulate economic growth or plans to alleviate growing food and water shortages⁹. Since the Taliban came into power, 2.6 million jobs have been lost because of decrees restricting social and economic freedoms¹⁰. The annual economic cost of banning women from employment is estimated at \$1 billion (5% of GDP)¹¹. Over 78% of Afghan women are now not in employment, education, or training.¹²

Women made up a large share of Afghan medical staff—up to 50% in some humanitarian organizations¹³, and over 90% in some maternity hospitals¹⁴. Banning girls from medical education and women from healthcare jobs caused an acute shortage of female health practitioners, essential for treating female patients (as cultural norms often forbid women from being attended by men).

The loss of women from medical roles and the staffing pipeline is directly linked to higher maternal mortality—638 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2024, among the world's worst rates¹⁵. This is projected to rise 50% by 2026 due to the Taliban's actions¹⁶. The closure of midwifery and medical schools to women will take years (at least 7–8) to recover from¹⁷, drying up the next generation of female professionals.

Many NGOs and UN agencies have suspended or sharply reduced services because they cannot operate effectively or ethically without female staff^{18,19}. This blocks access to food distribution, education, protected spaces, legal aid, gender-responsive planning, and health interventions for women and children.

At the same time, living conditions for Taliban members and their families have generally improved compared to average Afghans^{20,21} due to increased control over resources, employment opportunities within government or security apparatus, and **access to aid and international currency flows**²².

The Taliban have implemented a relatively efficient and orderly tax system²³, collecting taxes on everyday goods (like cigarettes), agricultural production (including a 10% ushr tax and 2.5% zakat tax), transport fees, property, mining activities, and opium taxation²⁴. This generates around 0.85b per annum. The effect of these taxes is to increase the cost of goods and reduce profitability for farmers, increasing financial strain on businesses and individuals²⁵. The tax system enables the Taliban to extend their influence into local communities, rewarding supporters and punishing

dissenters through fiscal means²⁶, which can deepen social divisions and entrench authoritarian control.

In summary, the Taliban's actions have worsened the official trade deficit (it increased by 30%) and resulted in a reduction of 5% in GDP directly related to their ban on work and education for women. They have also worsened economic conditions by undermining the available workforce in decimating the health sector and creating unnecessary barriers to aid and support reaching those who need it.

Humanitarian Aid Earmarked for the Afghan People

Support from other Governments (\$million)

Country/Donor	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
United States	320	350	480	736.6	— *
Germany	220	200	110	82	5.8
European Union	277	160	161	160	161
United Kingdom	286	246	90	192	—
France	86	25	25	25	25
Italy	84	25	25	25	25
Japan	74	30	30	30	30
Sweden	65	30	26	24	22
Canada	63	40	42	58	40
Norway	59	30	32	29	20
Switzerland	54	20	22	19	14
Australia	41	18	15	12	8
Netherlands	39	16	13	9	7
Denmark	32	13	11	8	6
United Arab Emirates	30	12	10	8	6
Saudi Arabia	28	10	8	7	5
Belgium	24	10	8	7	5
China	19	8	7	6	5
Russia	19	7	6	5	4
Total	1820	1250	1096	1417.6	388.8

Sources: United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Financial Tracking Service (2021-2025 data); U.S. Foreign Assistance Database; European Commission Humanitarian Aid (ECHO); National aid ministry reports (Germany, UK, Japan, Canada, Australia, etc.); ReliefWeb humanitarian updates.

Close to 6 billion in government aid has gone to Afghanistan since 2021. That is approximately \$26.84 per head of population per annum, assuming the population is 44.5million. Or put another way, sufficient to fully feed \$1.26m Afghan adults per annum at today's food prices²⁷.

This aid was intended for food, healthcare, education, and livelihoods support. Many say the emphasis was on women and girls. It was delivered almost entirely through trusted international partners.

NGOs and Local Distribution

Direct Benefits to the Taliban

Multiple U.S. oversight reports and independent studies confirm that the Taliban use regulatory authority—sometimes including force and threats—to direct humanitarian aid toward their own networks and favoured communities (typically Pashtun/Taliban supporters), while minorities like Hazaras and Tajiks often receive far less, or are excluded altogether.^{28,29,30}

NGOs must often hire Taliban-linked individuals and businesses to function in Afghanistan³¹. Those that resist can be shut down or replaced. There are documented cases of Taliban officials and fighters benefiting from jobs, contracts, and direct distributions of aid intended for impoverished civilian recipients^{32,33}

Reports highlight that the Taliban have "infiltrated and influenced" most United Nations-managed donated aid initiatives, sometimes colluding with UN personnel to solicit kickbacks from vendors or divert resources³⁴. Significant proportions of food and supplies have been redirected to Taliban-controlled military facilities, with tragic consequences (e.g., an employee killed for exposing diversion)³⁴.

Aid organizations working in Hazara regions have repeatedly faced Taliban obstruction. Humanitarian groups have been barred or restricted from providing food assistance, medical aid, and other support to Hazaras, especially in remote and mountainous areas, compounding famine and malnutrition risk³⁵.

While no exact national percentage of diverted aid exists, reviews and interviews with insiders suggest that diversion and manipulation are systemic, not occasional. The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction and the Center for Strategic and International Studies estimate between 60-100% of aid is diverted to the Taliban^{1,2}.

The Taliban's control over resources, including vast amounts of foreign aid and lucrative mining contracts, serves as a critical tool for enticing boys and young men to join their ranks. By controlling these economic resources, the Taliban can offer financial incentives, jobs, and social status that attract vulnerable youth from impoverished communities. Once recruited, these young individuals are subject to systematic indoctrination³⁶, which aligns them ideologically with the Taliban's objectives and fortifies their ranks for continued governance and conflict³⁷.

This approach parallels tactics used by groups like Hamas³⁸, which similarly leverage control over resources and social services to gain influence among youth populations. Both organizations use economic dependency alongside ideological education to cultivate loyal supporters, ensuring the regeneration of their movements over time. Such strategies not only bolster immediate manpower but also embed long-term socio-political control through generational loyalty.

Indirect Benefits to the Taliban

UN and international donor cash shipments, meant for humanitarian relief, have helped stabilize the Afghan currency and provide basic services. The Taliban has leveraged these shipments for economic stimulus, including cash distributions and consumption, which indirectly and directly benefit Taliban families³⁹. These economic inputs have allowed the Taliban to claim credit for providing services without themselves funding them. Increased economic activity due to these cash infusions has resulted in more tax revenue and fees collected by Taliban authorities. Taliban families, especially those linked to the leadership, can participate in these revenue streams and enjoy elevated purchasing power²². Taliban families enjoy enhanced prestige and privileges compared to

marginalized ethnic, religious, and professional communities, who have been excluded from government and deprived of humanitarian assistance²⁰.

Black Market Arms Sales

The estimated value of U.S. weaponry and military equipment supplied to Afghan forces over 20 years was about **\$18. billion**. Of this, roughly **\$7.2 billion** worth of equipment⁴⁰—including rifles, Stinger missiles, aircraft, vehicles, communications gear, night vision devices, and explosives— was left behind in Afghanistan after the U.S. military withdrawal and the collapse of the Afghan government in August 2021. The Taliban seized 1 million weapons and at least half of this military equipment (around 500,000 items) remains "unaccounted for"⁴¹, likely entering local black markets or directly sold to militant networks, including al-Qaeda affiliates. Afghan arms dealers and criminal syndicates have been active in reselling smuggled arms⁴².

Satellite imagery and intelligence reports have tracked movements of military vehicles and equipment from Afghanistan into neighboring countries, correlating with spikes in attacks and enhanced capabilities of terrorist groups⁴³. Actual seizures and battlefield recoveries in Pakistan and Kashmir confirm the presence of ex-U.S. weaponry, some with serial numbers and markings linked to U.S. shipments to Afghan security forces⁴⁴.

Trading in Illegal Drugs

Afghanistan accounted for roughly 80% of the world's opiate (opium and heroin) supply up to at least 2022, when the Taliban regime announced a ban on opium poppy cultivation. Still, after the ban, fieldwork found that opium sale continues openly and often more ubiquitously, sometimes alongside legal goods in markets⁴⁵. Drug bazaars were closed but vendors simply moved their products into more everyday settings, in 2025 they still operate with tacit approval from authorities.

Opium prices skyrocketed from \$75/kg in 2022 to \$750/kg in 2024⁴⁶, driven by reduced supply but continuing demand. Despite seizures and enforcement, Afghanistan still holds massive stockpiles—estimated at 13,200 tons—and these are enough to meet global demand until at least 2027⁴⁷. This stockpile is worth **\$9.9 billion** at 2024 prices.

The illegal export chain remains robust, supplying heroin via routes through Pakistan, Iran, and Turkey into Europe and other global markets. Afghan heroin is continuously seized in destination countries, and the trade is considered highly profitable⁴⁸

Shareholdings in Foreign Companies

Foreign direct investment by Government and private corporations, willing to trade with the Taliban, is focused on resource extraction and energy projects:

Country	Sector	Investment Focus	Recent Projects
China ⁴⁹	Mining, Energy, Transport	Copper, Oil/gas, Rail, Hydro	Aynak, Amu Darya, Railways
Iran ⁵⁰	Mining, Transport	Oil/gas, Cement, Rail	Rail links, cement, mining
Turkey ⁵¹	Mining, Infrastructure	Iron, Cement, Construction	Mining/construction projects
Uzbekistan ⁵²	Mining, Infrastructure	Gold, Iron, Transport	Rail corridor, mining
Russia ⁵³	Oil/gas, Energy	Oil, Gas	Energy supply interests

Country	Sector	Investment Focus	Recent Projects
UAE ⁵⁴	Energy infrastructure	Solar, Wind, Hydro, Gas, Coal	Azizi Energy \$10bn project

Analysis reveals that the Taliban issued at least 205 mining contracts to over 150 companies since their takeover in August 2021 – a rate of more than one contract per week⁵⁵. Mining contracts with foreign companies (mostly China, Iran, Turkey, Uzbekistan) now total more than \$8 billion in announced value, with the Taliban extracting royalties and direct partnership stakes⁴⁵. The Taliban Ministry of Mines and Petroleum (MOMP) is an official shareholder in at least nine projects⁵⁶.

Turkish company Epcol is listed as a technical partner for multiple extraction deals⁴⁵.

Due to strict sanctions, anti-money laundering rules, and international restrictions, U.S., EU⁵⁷ and UK⁵⁸ businesses are barred from dealing with the Taliban⁵⁹. However, the public records list GBM and AD Resources as the named British technical partners⁶⁰. Other European entities operate primarily through Afghan partners, with their direct involvement often obscured for legal and reputational reasons⁴⁵.

UK-Linked Companies partnered with local Afghan company Shamsh for an iron ore project in Herat province:

- **GBM (GBM Minerals Engineering Consultants Ltd.)** led by Michael John Short, Managing Director and CEO. GBM's partnered contract with local Afghan entities (and other foreign companies including UK and Turkish firms) is part of the major round of mining deals signed in August 2023, collectively valued at **\$6.6 billion USD** for seven large-scale mining projects (iron ore, zinc, gold, and lead extraction)⁶¹. GBM is listed as the UK technical partner for the Herat iron ore extraction project, but the Taliban authorities do not publicly disclose the specific breakdown for each foreign company. The funds may be apportioned among several partners, with contracts lasting up to 30 years.
- **AD Resources** led by Ashley Daniels is also the principal owner of the company, as reflected in public business directories and the company's registration profile. AD Resources operates as a privately held consultancy.
- **Centar** a UK linked, family-owned mining company founded by British investment banker Ian Hannam. Centar is registered in the British Virgin Islands and is managed through Eastern European entities. Centar tried to secure major contracts for copper (Balkhab) and gold (Badakhshan) mines in Afghanistan pre-2021⁶². Contracts were signed under the previous regime but not yet revived under Taliban control.

Azizi Group, headquartered in Dubai and overseen by Mirwais Azizi, is the most prominent UAE-based foreign investor in Afghanistan's infrastructure and energy projects, with Azizi Energy (CEO: Korkut Öztürkmen, Turkey) leading its current multi-billion-dollar investments in the country^{45,63}. The Azizi family have direct investments in Afghan banking (Azizi Bank), real estate, hospitality, trading, and energy sectors.

Kidnap and Extortion

Since January 2024, there have been documented campaigns of abduction targeting young women and girls, especially in Kabul, Daikundi, and Herat provinces⁶⁴. These actions often relate to the enforcement of strict Taliban dress codes and broader gender apartheid policies. Hazara and Shia communities are particularly targeted.

Media and eyewitness reports confirm that families have received threats demanding ransom

payments to ensure their daughters' safety and release, and that proof-of-life videos and images have sometimes accompanied these demands⁶⁵. At least one cited case describes a family selling their home in Afghanistan to pay off a gang for the release of abducted female relatives, threatened with death if the ransom was not paid⁶⁶. The Human Rights Watch and UN reports detail widespread gender-based violence, abductions, and extortion, with girls and women facing an institutionalized system of discrimination and little protection under current Taliban authorities.

Conclusion

Recent evidence confirms the Taliban's primary revenue streams now include illicit narcotics (heroin), diverted overseas humanitarian aid, black-market arms sales, and state shareholdings in resource extraction and mining contracts—especially with Chinese, Iranian, Turkish, Uzbek, Russian, and UAE-linked companies. Since the Taliban's takeover, the Afghan economy and women's rights have suffered acute setbacks: trade deficits have widened, female unemployment has surged, and industry sectors dependent on women (notably healthcare and education) are facing collapse. Humanitarian aid, though substantial (nearly \$6 billion since 2021), is frequently diverted and manipulated by Taliban networks, reducing its reach and impact for the most marginalized populations, including ethnic minorities. Foreign investment in extraction industries continues to provide the Taliban with both funds and international legitimacy, while their regulatory control ensures material and prestige benefits primarily for Taliban supporters.

In addition to supporting civil society and remote education, the international community can leverage real human rights improvements through conditional aid, sanctions on the Taliban and companies engaging with them, accountability and religious instruction. The Taliban must be held internationally accountable for violating international law and human rights and should face repercussions for continued violations. Publicly elected Governments are bank rolling the Taliban, therefore everyone eligible to vote can apply pressure to make a difference.

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