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Report executive summary

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Afghanistan: the collapse of the roadblock state

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Against the backdrop of current efforts by the Iranian government to restrict traffic through the Strait of Hormuz as a means of exerting leverage over the United States (US) and the global economy, this report summary presents the key findings of a larger research paper that focuses on how armed actors in Afghanistan, and on its borders, used their control of key roadblocks on major highways and border crossings to gain rent and power, depriving the central government of revenue and ultimately undermining political support for the Afghan Republic. The full report synthesises a body of primary data that has been reported, in parts, across earlier papers by the author, tracing how roadblock politics contributed both to the collapse of the Afghan Republic and to the Taliban's consolidation of power following their capture of Kabul in August 2021.[1]

Drawing on extensive empirical evidence – including in-depth interviews, high-resolution satellite imagery, and geospatial data – the full report quantifies and maps the volume and value of key trade flows and in most cases, the rents extracted by powerholders at strategic roadblocks under the Afghan Republic. It also offers a rebuttal to much of the reporting on insurgent funding, where all too often the media and some scholars focus on high-value commodities such as minerals and drugs – the "narco insurgency" narrative – while empirical data shows significantly more money is earned from the "everyday goods" – vehicles, spare parts, cigarettes, tea, and fuel – transported in bulk on national highways and roads. The key findings below represent the central conclusions of the larger paper.

Key findings

The politics of trade

During the 2002-2021 Afghan Republic, the official roadblocks at Afghanistan's borders and on its main arterial roads, most of them financed by international donors, were key loci for extraction of rent and exertion of power. Control over roadblocks was part of the political settlement between the administration in Kabul, provincial powerholders, and powerful local elites. Appointments to some of the most valuable roadblocks – the official border crossings – were subject to intense competition and led to disputes between government officials, parliamentarians, and important powerholders in the provinces. Key positions at these roadblocks brought significant patronage and revenues and, in some cases, led to acts of sabotage, and even violence, as rivals tried to deter trade and press for the dismissal of an incumbent. Internal roadblocks on the arterial road also proliferated, and came to represent valuable real estate, especially those on the route between Hairatan in the north and Kabul, through which NATO received most of its supplies after 2012. While ostensibly belonging to elements of the Afghan

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National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF), many of these roadblocks were directly linked with parliamentarians and provincial council members who influenced staff appointments, and who used these to give favour to political and commercial allies, and to collect rents from trade.

As an insurgency, the Taliban also engaged in roadblock politics, extracting substantial revenue from trade while projecting an image of a single, unified authority. Taliban roadblocks on the main highways emerged following the end of NATO's combat mission in 2014. Initially mobile, they subsequently became a permanent presence at five strategic points on Afghanistan's primary arterial roads in February 2020, following the Doha agreement. Their placement allowed the insurgency to maximise revenue collection from cross-border trade without overextending territorial control or committing excessive military forces. The Taliban also framed the fixed fees charged at these roadblocks as duties, known locally as masool, mirroring the Republic's terminology, and issued receipts to ensure that traders would not be charged again at additional Taliban checkpoints along the route. This projected the image of a unified government-in-waiting, in sharp contrast to the 180 roadblocks on the main highways operated by multiple Republic government institutions, each charging varying rates that often changed without explanation.

Afghanistan's neighbours sought to reroute trade and, in doing so, to shape the distribution of its political and economic benefits through trade policy and border infrastructure. Although Iran and Pakistan have typically presented their border-fencing efforts as security measures designed to curb the movement of drugs and people from Afghanistan, these initiatives also functioned to redirect and channel both formal trade and smuggled goods through selected border crossings. There are multiple examples where the construction of the border fence has been used by Tehran and Islamabad to curtail trade, divide tribal groups with populations straddling the border, and deny revenues to political opponents. At the same time, these measures have also canalized trade to official formal crossings, or to strategic gaps in the border fence where political allies have gained from higher revenues and patronage. The strategic significance of trade and canalizing it in support of allies is perhaps best exemplified in how quickly Islamabad moved to encourage an increase in cross border trade with Afghanistan after the Taliban took power in August 2021, following years of border disruptions, their subsequent closure of the official border crossings following clashes with the Taliban in October 2025, and the persistence of some informal routes despite the breakdown in border relations.

Western donor and international financial institution investments in official border crossings also contributed to roadblock politics in Afghanistan, often intersecting with neighbouring states' efforts to militarise and secure their frontiers. Although these interventions were framed as ways to strengthen regional connectivity and increase customs revenues for the Ministry of Finance, improvements to infrastructure and trade policy, combined with weak oversight and monitoring, created opportunities for significant corruption and the underreporting of cross-border trade. This enabled provincial powerbrokers to consolidate systems of political patronage and appropriate larger revenue streams, further eroding the authority of the central government in Kabul.

Roadblock revenues

Mapping and quantifying flows of commodities is critical to understanding the political economy of Afghanistan, the insurgency, and the subsequent collapse of the Afghan Republic. Official trade data has been inadequate for analysis as it is subject to significant bias, including systematic underreporting by governments in FCAS. For example, during the Afghan Republic, once estimates of undeclared, undervalued, and smuggled goods are included the annual volume and value of cross border trade between Afghanistan and its neighbours was estimated to have reached nearly US$20 billion - more than three times the level recorded in official statistics at the time. This was the equivalent in value of Afghanistan's GDP in 2020. Therefore, mapping trade routes and how they changed over time, the factors responsible, the different populations benefitting, and how armed groups derive revenue and power from these trade flows, is an essential component of political analysis in a country like Afghanistan.

Given the volume and value of international trade, control over roadblocks at the Afghan border and along the main highway generated significant revenues, thereby undermining the Afghan Republic's fiscal position and political authority. At the official border crossings, the Ministry of Finance lost an estimated US$767 million in government revenue in 2020 due to corruption and the volume of goods entering the country undeclared or undervalued. An additional US$650 million per annum was siphoned off at internal roadblocks by many of the provincial powerholders who influenced appointments at the official border crossings, including parliamentarians, council members and governors, who had little interest in building a strong central state.

The Taliban are estimated to have earned approximately US$245 million per year from taxing the movement of fuel and container trucks along Afghanistan's highways and arterial roads – substantially more than the revenues they are estimated to have derived from illegal drugs and minerals, up to US$35 million and US$22 million per year, respectively. Taliban roadblocks were strategically located on most of the main routes from the official crossings to maximise revenue. The earnings on the two primary roadblocks in the north at Cheshmashir in Baghlan (US$66.7 million per annum), and Khanaqa in Jawzjan (US$64.6 per annum) were particularly significant, as these extracted payments on goods for NATO and the Afghan Ministry of Defence routed from the official border crossings at Hairatan and Aqina to Kabul, which would not have been officially taxed by the Afghan Republic due to their duty-free status. Confronting and removing these and other roadblocks would have had significantly more impact on insurgency finance and made the collapse of the Afghan Republic less likely than many of the counternarcotics efforts pursued, including the push for widespread eradication of opium poppy and the aerial bombing of suspected drugs labs. In particular, greater oversight of the volume of goods and customs handling at the official border crossings would have improved the financial viability of the central government, as well as denied revenue and patronage to provincial powerholders who worked to undermine the authorities in Kabul.

Roadblocks on routes for smuggled goods were far less predatory than those on the main highways, and the informal rules that governed them resulted in jobs, income, and rents to populations in sensitive border areas. Most of these smuggling routes were well known and visible to both government forces and the Taliban insurgency, yet interference was limited. Many have a long history and are dominated by influential populations straddling both sides of border, whom central governments have often been reluctant to alienate. Although hundreds of millions of dollars in trade were conducted along these routes during the Republic, the roadblocks governing passage tended to be less numerous than on the main highways, extract lower rents, and were locally managed. Often consisting of entrepot where smuggled goods were stored and cross decked onto other forms of transport for the difficult onward journey across the border, these roadblocks created significant employment for the local population, and garnered political support. Some of these routes persist and see significant amounts of trade despite the closure of the formal border crossings between Afghanistan and Pakistan in October 2025, and reflect their continued importance in the political economy of key border areas.

The role of roadblock politics in the collapse of the Republic and the Taliban takeover

By substantially curtailing US aerial support for Afghan government forces, the Doha Agreement proved pivotal to the collapse of the Afghan Republic: it enabled the Taliban to consolidate control over key sections of the main highway while constraining logistical support to the ANDSF, thereby forcing government forces to abandon their roadblocks and withdraw into urban centres. In turn, this deprived provincial powerholders of the patronage and revenue streams that had been central to sustaining their support for the government in Kabul. As the Republic lost control over more of the highways, the Taliban moved against the official border crossings, cutting off revenue collection and further undermining the political settlement on which the government in Kabul depended for its finances and support from provincial powerholders. As each border crossing fell, so did the provincial centres, culminating in the loss of Kabul on 15 August 2021. It took only 54 days from the loss of the first border crossing at Sherkhan Bandar in the north, and 9 days from the loss of the border crossing at Ziranj in the southwest – and the first provincial centre - for the Afghan Republic to collapse.

Upon taking power, the Taliban moved quickly to reinstate and regulate international trade, centralise revenues, and eliminate corruption at the official border crossings. The Taliban moved quickly to replace staff, reconnect the Automated System for Customs Data (ASYCUDA) software and digital scales that had frequently been sabotaged by corrupt officials during the Republic, and enforce the regulations that their predecessors had largely ignored or manipulated for rent extraction. In most cases, Afghanistan's neighbours cooperated to minimise the disruption to international trade and maintain the flow of revenues. At the time, Pakistan – a political ally of the Taliban and keen to offset the loss of coal exports from its principal suppliers, South Africa and Indonesia, following COVID-19 – proved particularly supportive. While its fence building project helped to canalise trade through official crossings where revenue could be collected, it also adopted more lenient trade policies and, within a matter of months, improved infrastructure at several key crossings, allowing them to operate 24/7.

In tackling corruption at the borders, the Taliban also disassembled the patronage system that had prevailed on the roads and undermined support for the Afghan Republic. They dismantled the network of roadblocks that proliferated under the Republic, where substantial amounts of informal rents were collected by provincial powerholders. While some of the roadblocks remained, the only ones demanding payments under the Taliban were those at the outskirts of the cities responsible for weighing trucks and ensuring they were not overladen. The Taliban were also especially prompt in punishing any commander that sought to establish their own roadblocks and thereby an independent source of revenue. While there are justifiable questions about the durability of this arrangement and the nature of the patronage system the Taliban have put in its place, they have nonetheless achieved a degree of centralised control over cross-border value chains and revenue collection that did not exist during the Republic.

While these changes in roadblock politics helped the Taliban centralise political power and prevent the emergence of rival powerbases in the provinces, they have also been a response to a financial imperative. Denied the massive economic assistance that the Afghan Republic received from the international donor community, the Taliban had to become far more efficient in raising domestic revenues than their predecessors. The speed at which the Taliban acted – reestablishing trade at their borders, centralising the payment of duties and taxes to the Ministry of Finance, and even regulating the trade along smuggling routes, including drugs and irregular migration – was a response to the need to maximise revenue collection. The appointment of Taliban commanders with experience raising revenues during the insurgency to key financial posts in the new administration further reflects the priority the Taliban gave to fiscal consolidation after taking power. Like many insurgencies that maintained strategic roadblocks straddling cross border value chains to generate hundreds of millions for their war fighting, once in power, the Taliban have been adept at exploiting their knowledge and links in the business sector, to set tax rates and maximise revenues for the de facto authorities.

Changes in roadblock politics after the Taliban takeover replaced the Republic's visible system of extraction with a more opaque one, rendering Afghanistan's current political settlement harder to discern and its underlying sources of power more difficult to assess. Commanders seeking a "war dividend" now appear more reliant on government appointments, mining contracts, aid distribution, and the illicit drugs economy. Disputes over access to these benefits – including claims that southern Pashtuns have benefited disproportionately – point to growing tensions, particularly in the north. Any resurgence of corruption at official border crossings or rent extraction at internal roadblocks would therefore suggest that the Taliban's centralised control over revenue and power is beginning to weaken. In this sense, the re-emergence of roadblock politics would be more than a sign of corruption: it would indicate that the fiscal and political foundations of Taliban rule are beginning to unravel.

About the authors

Dr David Mansfield is the primary author, responsible for designing and managing the research. David has been conducting research on illicit economies in Afghanistan and on its borders since 1997. David has a PhD in development studies, is the author of "A State Built on Sand: How opium undermined Afghanistan" and has produced more than 80 researchbased products on rural livelihoods and cross-border economies, many for the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, working in partnership with Alcis Ltd. This work has included extensive research on irregular migrants travelling from Afghanistan to Europe.

About XCEPT

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