Narrative Review Article

From Norms to Non-Recognition to Humanitarian Crisis

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ABSTRACT

Afghanistan's recent history shows that decisions about recognizing a government determine who lives, who suffers, and who receives help. The non-recognition of the Taliban from both 1996-2001 and 2021-2025 not only withheld diplomatic status but also intensified humanitarian concerns. This issue raises a central question: To what extent is Afghanistan's paradox a logical consequence of shared cultural norms, rather than other significant factors such as economic instability or geopolitical interests? Henceforth, this paper seeks to fill this interpretive gap by analyzing Afghanistan's humanitarian crises through the dual lens of constructivist and postcolonial theory. It identifies non-recognition not as a passive form of diplomacy but as an active social phenomenon that creates legitimacy and perpetuates global hierarchies. This paper does not support the diplomatic recognition of the Taliban regime; instead, it contends that international involvement should be redefined as a humanitarian duty rather than a reward for moral and ethical alignment. To ensure that moral principles do not undermine the humanitarian imperatives they aim to uphold, policymakers should consider implementing gradual recognition mechanisms and strategies leaning toward local engagement.

Keywords: United Nations; Afghanistan; constructivism; postcolonialism; humanitarian crisis; governance; politics; non-recognition

INTRODUCTION

International non-recognition of a state implicates important humanitarian concerns within that state. The situation in Afghanistan under the Taliban, across both regimes, highlights how non-recognition exacerbates a country's internal struggles. Haruyuki Shimada from Ritsumeikan University (1) argues that an "aid paradox" arises from the limited engagement of international actors with the Taliban, blurring humanitarian obligations in light of ethical policies. For instance, the withdrawal of international support after 2021 led to over 23 million Afghans facing acute food insecurity by 2022, a drastic increase in hunger across the country (2). Nevertheless, international relations theory has never been applied to adequately explain the justification for this non-recognition and whether it is a logical consequence in a world of traditional power structures and widely accepted norms, or, as this paper defines it, internationally accepted norms.

This narrative synthesis examines how internationally accepted norms and traditional power structures have influenced Afghanistan's non-recognition and the ensuing humanitarian crisis. These issues are analyzed through the frameworks of constructivism (exploring the role of norms) and postcolonialism (examining power structures rooted in colonial histories), which best uncover the symbolic and power-related dimensions of recognition in Afghanistan's context. The review synthesizes literature on constructivism, postcolonialism, and state recognition

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and analyzes current research through five themes: historicity, theories of state recognition, constructivist theory, postcolonial theory, and the interplay between the two. It argues that non-recognition is an active practice that produces international legitimacy hierarchies and restricts humanitarian capacity, and calls for reconsideration of engagement with de facto authorities lacking international legitimacy.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Two Taliban Regimes

The broad history of the Taliban regime is important in understanding the function of non-recognition. In this section, there is little theoretical analysis related to constructivist or postcolonial theory. Rather, the purpose of the following paragraphs is to synthesize the context of the Taliban regime's isolation, to avoid presentism, and to best mitigate bias in later sections of analysis. These sections also serve to inform policies and practices and to help avoid mistakes previously made by international or foreign actors. Thus, historicity serves as a prerequisite for the main theoretical question: whether non-recognition is shaped by internationally accepted norms and existing power structures.

With this introduction, the rise, fall, and resurgence of the Taliban, a religious-ideological group emerging in the mid-1990s, have drastically shaped Afghanistan's contemporary history. The Taliban emerged as a reconstructive force from the civil war, which consumed Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal (3). With logistical support from Pakistan as well as the support of Afghanistan's religious institutions, the Taliban moved quickly from its base of operations in Kandahar to the capital city of Kabul in 1996, declaring the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. The Taliban regime lasted until late 2001 and was characterized by extensive restrictions on women and girls, public executions, severe repression of dissent, and its exceedingly strict interpretation of Islamic legal practices (3). International criticism of the Taliban regime for its abuses of human rights and destruction of cultural heritage was unquestionable. Therefore, the role of domestic and international norms is crucial for understanding the Taliban regime's initial non-recognition.

Resulting from the Taliban's extremism, international engagement with the Taliban regime became limited. Only three states—Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates—recognized the Taliban as the de jure government of Afghanistan. Even so, each country had its reasons for pursuing recognition. For instance, the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence provided support to the Taliban during its foundation, and by 2001, Pakistan was providing the Taliban regime "with hundreds of advisors" (4). Separately, regarding sanctions on Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda, which intensified after the September 11th attacks, the Taliban were brought into direct conflict with the US and the international community. In 2001, with the support of a UN mandate, the Taliban was ousted from its majority de facto stake in Afghanistan and reduced to an insurgency operating in border provinces along Pakistan (4). In between, the United Nations Security Council called for six resolutions to cease aid to the Taliban regime between 1996 and 2001 (3). Afterward, the US-supported intervention became a two-decades-long experiment in externally supported state-building. During this time, Afghanistan experienced enormous gains in education, health services, and the rights of women and minorities, even as it struggled with insurgencies, high levels of corruption, and unprecedented reliance on international assistance (5). Nevertheless, the Taliban regime took control of Afghanistan in 2021 following the collapse of the Islamic Republic preceded by the withdrawal of US and NATO military forces. Despite promising moderation, the Taliban reverted to many of its traditional stances, as evidenced by the regime's marginalization of women in education and employment (2). Therefore, Afghanistan was again disconnected from the international community. Its authority was recognized solely as "de facto" and not legal by every other sovereign nation but Russia in 2025.

Isolation, Frozen Assets, and Humanitarian Crisis

Afghanistan under the Taliban regime was also economically isolated from global markets. The material consequences of the Taliban regime's non-recognition, as Achakzai (6) notes, are extensive. Following the Taliban takeover in 2021, Afghanistan's foreign currency and gold reserves were frozen. The US and the International Monetary Fund restricted the Taliban regime's access to reserve accounts while halting new development loans, justifying this through concerns of Taliban governance (6). Despite warnings about the "great possibility of human disaster" raised by Afghan researchers, such as Amin Stanikzai of the Rokhan Institute of Higher Education, the freeze then brought Afghanistan's banking sector to a halt, leading to currency depreciation and a trade impasse (7). Moreover, initial information regarding the freeze was limited, leading to even more

confusion and mistrust toward Afghan institutions (6). Ultimately, by 2021, the Taliban regime in Afghanistan had become economically isolated. The funds allotted by Western or international backers from previous years to the Islamic Republic froze.

Additionally, the political consequences of the Taliban regime's non-recognition added to Afghanistan's isolation. Shimada elucidated those diplomatic contacts with the Taliban regime remained extremely limited, and that very few sovereign states maintained consistent but purely non-recognitional relations (1). These countries, like China, were ultimately motivated by security threats and economic opportunities presented by the Taliban regime. Moreover, the United Nations (UN) had uniformly not endorsed the de jure sovereign recognition of Taliban governance. Instead, the UN had advocated that aid be delivered through a parallel NGO-managed framework (1). Hence, Afghanistan remained functionally severed from the rest of the world and lacked sufficient political representation in major international organizations, such as the United Nations. This, in turn, furthered Afghanistan's political isolation, thereby contributing to the nation's humanitarian struggles.

Aid Effectiveness, Health Systems, and New Delivery Challenges

Afghanistan not only bore the brunt of political isolation but also experienced the woes of ineffective aid. Throughout the republican period (2001-2021) and the second Taliban regime (2021-2025), aid ineffectiveness posed immense challenges for humanitarian efforts.

Under the former (Islamic Republic) government, Shimada elaborates on how Afghanistan became an experiment in Western aid—backing, ownership, alignment, harmonization, results-based management, and mutual accountability (1). While these principles were formalized in agreements such as the Paris Declaration, their application in Afghanistan demonstrated their limitations. For instance, military aid combined with state fragility, given that the Islamic Republic was still fighting Taliban insurgents across the country, often undermined donor coordination, leading to substantial inefficiencies or corruption (1). Therefore, even under the Islamic Republic, when Afghanistan's controlling authority enjoyed international recognition, internal conflicts within the country itself ultimately undermined humanitarian efforts. The precedent set here underscores the importance of considering extenuating factors, such as military conflict, for international recognition and its relation to humanitarian assistance.

Meanwhile, under the latter (Taliban) regime, Bizhan (8) argued that aid effectiveness conceptions had become limited, irrelevant, and counterproductive. Thereby, actors (such as the United Nations) applying restrictive frameworks enhanced the domestic control of the Taliban regime while harming many Afghan civilians in need of humanitarian assistance (8). This is because, as Shimada (1) puts it, a recognition aid paradox had emerged. On the one hand, there existed a normative commitment to non-recognition, grounded in human rights and international law (1). On the other hand, urgent humanitarian needs subsisted (8). Paterson (9) adds that strictly avoiding the Taliban regime negatively impacted coherent service delivery, as demonstrated by the humanitarian response in health sectors across Afghanistan and northwest Syria. So, while global actors follow normative procedures for state recognition to protect humanitarianism, they are, in fact, indirectly hurting Afghans on the ground through various aid-withholding mechanisms, such as the aforementioned frozen sanctions. Moreover, this synthesis lends credibility to the claim that non-recognition has dire consequences for aid access, particularly in healthcare services. All in all, this historical synthesis analytically proves the Taliban regime's persistent isolation, crises, and aid ineffectiveness, and thereby lends a neutral ground to later theoretical interpretations.

THEORIES OF STATE RECOGNITION

In international relations theory, state recognition has been the cornerstone of statehood, determining whether a regime has the rights and obligations that accompany it (10). Foundational theorists and practitioners of state recognition, such as Robinson (10), make the analytical distinction between de facto recognition (acceptance of control/authority) and de jure recognition (international legitimacy under the UN). The traditional definition of effective control was the exercise of prescribed authority, or the actual governance of a population and territory. However, recognition now encompasses multiple conditions related to human rights, democratic credentials, and compliance with international governance norms (11). Of course, this new definition has dire consequences for the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, as it now finds itself excluded from full recognition and the benefits that come with its prestige. This is how, in the present, while the Taliban regime does have more infrastructure than its predecessor regime after decades of Western involvement, it nevertheless fails to meet

international standards in relation to global governance moving into the 2020s. Consequently, foreign actors justify non-recognition through the DFA's opposition to progressive reform.

Nevertheless, there is one category in which the Taliban regime fits. Casperen *et al*. (12) classify the Taliban regime as part of the typology of "unrecognized states." According to Casperen, to be an unrecognized state, the entity must have effective control over most of the territory and institutions in which it claims authority, the leadership must be looking to solidify their legitimacy and build state functions further, the entity must have made an overt claim to independence or statehood, the entity must have been denied large-scale recognition in the international system, and this entity's situation must have continued for a span of years. Afghanistan under the Taliban regime meets these criteria, as did the junta in Myanmar and entities such as Palestine and Northern Cyprus, thereby raising the global stakes of discussions on the politics of recognition (5, 8, 10). Independently, from here on forth in this paper, any reference to the Taliban regime is synonymous with the acronym for *de facto authorities* (DFA), a distinction in line with UN papers on Afghanistan.

CONSTRUCTIVISM

Constructivist Theory in International Recognition

A particular area of interest in international relations theory is constructivism. Constructivist theory argues that, rather than material worth or power, global politics is shaped by norms and ideas (13). By doing this, constructivism interrogates static categories and legal positivism that often characterize state identity. Thus, evaluating the DFA through a constructivist lens sheds light on the lingering question of the extent to which global norms influence non-recognition. It is crucial to recognize that these norms are not monolithic; within Western powers, there are significant disagreements on the recognition of regimes like the DFA. Such intra-Western dissent demonstrates that normative alignment is a negotiation rather than a given, further highlighting that global norms are contested and dynamic rather than absolute and unchanging.

First, existing interpretations indicate that constructivist theory promotes non-recognition as a trend. Klich (13) amalgamates constructivism to explore the de facto formation of state identity in sidelined states within the international system. Klich shows, through case study analysis in Nagorno-Karabakh, Somaliland, and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, that there is a divergence between international and parent-state interactions. Grzybowski (14) further analyzes state identification in international relations and international law, highlighting its indeterminacy. Grzybowski argues that constructivism demonstrates how performative acts at the in-between margins conjure and recreate the international imaginary, in which state identification is a socially rather than legally based phenomenon. Klich and Grzybowski's findings are significant for non-recognition for two main reasons. First, they indicate recognition as an engagement that is both legally grounded and deeply entrenched in social systems and discursive practices. Second, they demonstrate how constructivism permits scholars to examine how DFAs become stagnant or fluid within the international system through negotiations and shared expectations. In this way, non-recognition becomes a trend in which countries align to permit certain internationally accepted norms. This issue is especially relevant to the DFA regime's non-recognition. Even though many sovereign states lack grounds to deny international recognition to the DFA in Afghanistan, they nonetheless align with the internationally accepted norms upheld by major world powers, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, thereby denying the DFA international legitimacy under the UN. This reasoning also explains why Russia is the only country to recognize the DFA as of 2025, as it demonstrates the country's willingness to separate itself from the internationally accepted norms upheld in the status quo. Figure 1 showcases the scope of international recognition of the DFA in 2025. The country in black is Afghanistan; the country in gray is Russia (Figure 1).

Figure 1. *International recognition of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in 2025. Afghanistan is in black, and the sole recognizing country, Russia, is in gray.*

Moving on, constructivist theory further demonstrates that non-recognition can change through conflict or negotiation, like a spectrum. Černy (15) destabilizes the binary of fake versus real that dominates conventional understandings of DFAs and sovereignty. Černy argues that sovereignty is a virtuality in which statehood may or may not exist and in which the past and present coexist. Taiwan is the example given. The region's existence and ongoing developments suggest that statehood is not the main feature of the international system, but rather that sovereignty is relational, contextual, and open to continuous negotiation and conflict. This model effectively disentangles sovereignty and statehood and offers a paradigm that highlights dynamic recognition. This realization is critical to Afghanistan's situation under the DFA. As mentioned above, non-recognition has resulted in massive humanitarian concerns, specifically regarding Afghanistan's banking crisis. Therefore, the fluidity in recognition and negotiations allows foreign actors to fund aid efforts without legitimizing abusive governance. Combining Klich, Grzybowski, and Černy enables the normative analysis of the later sections of this paper.

Constructivist Theory: 1996 to 2001

Constructivist theory is especially relevant in the context of the first DFA from 1996 to 2001. For two reasons, we cannot separate the humanitarian state under the DFA from the ideological interplay of identity and exclusion.

First, from a constructivist perspective, the non-recognition of the first DFA demonstrated that international legitimacy under the UN is socially constructed rather than territorially determined. The DFA controlled most of Afghanistan after 1996, but the UN, the European Commission, and donor states were unwilling to accord recognition (16). The UN restricted engagements to "life-saving assistance only," and the European Commission cut off development money to Kabul, so there was no construction of irrigation or roads and no medicines (16). While phrased as ethically derived sanctions, the actions of foreign and international actors led to cuts in humanitarian assistance across all forms. The DFA was not unrecognized because of its limited capacity to govern, but rather because of its identity. The DFA's symbolism conflicted with accepted global values of human rights and gender equality. Thereby, withholding recognition from a newly found Islamist government allowed international actors to parade their actions in the name of the internationally accepted norms mentioned earlier. In this way, norms played a large role in the Taliban regime's non-recognition, especially highlighted by the domineering position of the United States following the collapse of the Eastern Bloc. This is doubly true given the fact that Islamic countries that shared many norms with Taliban-controlled Afghanistan (Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and the United Arab Emirates) all lent recognition to the 1996-2001 government. Figure 1 showcases the scope of international recognition of the Taliban regime from 1996 to 2001. The country in black is Afghanistan; the others in gray are Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (Figure 2).

Figure 2. *International Recognition of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001. Afghanistan is in black, and the recognized countries (from left to right), Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, are in gray.*

Second, constructivist theory showed that expressions of normative identity between the DFA and international actors were in conflict. International institutions presented the DFA as being beyond reform and unworthy of engagement (18). When non-recognition prevented capacity building, unsuitable commanders filled ministries. As a result, drought and poverty were left unchecked: by 1999, some 4.1 million Afghans required immediate assistance, representing approximately 15 percent of the population (19). Moreover, aid was provided through fragmented NGO networks that lacked coordination or infrastructure. In the UN-Taliban Memorandum of Understanding, the UN spoke of authority rather than government to disperse aid without implying international legitimacy (7). After that, Médecins Sans Frontières accused the UN of giving the DFA too much power. The DFA, in turn, condemned international supervision as interference. There are a few key takeaways from this diplomatic breakdown. First, the discourse of international institutions became self-fulfilling, as a lack of training resulted in unqualified

leaders assuming power. As a result, the world read this anomaly back as evidence of DFA incompetence. Therefore, non-recognition not only becomes a principle of conviction but also a producer of reality. Both sides saw the other as a moral infraction, and assistance nearly collapsed. Constructivism sees the incident as a failure of mutual recognition. Hence, it is important to understand that differences in norms, even if not through non-recognition, channel humanitarian threats through various means.

Constructivist Theory: 2021 to 2025

Constructivist theory is also especially relevant in the context of the second DFA from 2021 to 2025. After two decades of the DFA's deposition, international actors returned to a pattern of non-recognition, operating under conditions of heightened normative regimes and financial interdependence. Not only did international actors continue their moral non-compliance from 1996, but they also formally bureaucratized it. Prior to 2021, aid accounted for 75 percent of public spending and 40 percent of GDP in Afghanistan (19). However, when the DFA became Afghanistan's DFA in 2021, aid was halted, resulting in the loss of US$600 million in funding for the *Sehatmandi* health project and in only 17 percent of the 2300 clinics opening (18). Meanwhile, US$9 billion was held in foreign reserves (20), causing a liquidity crisis, tripling food prices, and pushing 20 million people into hunger in Afghanistan. As a result, the UN's Transitional Engagement Framework (2022) and Strategic Framework (2023–25) (1) sought to ensure the coordination of aid without granting international legitimacy, describing the DFA only as "de facto authorities."

These sources offer a specific area for interpretation. The decision to withhold recognition and freeze assets was justified as a principled stand in support of democratic norms. However, it clearly led to the economy falling apart, people going hungry, and health systems breaking down. In this sense, recognition actively produced the conditions for a humanitarian disaster. Moreover, the international community's refusal to engage with the DFA, except under highly restrictive conditions, created a framework in which aid delivery was politically fraught. The nature of non-recognition thus became clear: by denying international legitimacy under the UN, international actors sought to signal moral commitment, but the outcome was the reinforcement of the very governance they aimed to delegitimize. In sum, a constructivist interpretation of the DFA from 2021-2025 signals that shared norms, when bureaucratized as policy, have consequences that undermine humanitarian objectives and entrench suffering among civilian populations. All in all, when combined with the interpretation from the first DFA, internationally accepted norms conclusively result in non-recognition, thereby raising humanitarian concerns.

POSTCOLONIALISM

Postcolonial Theory in International Recognition

A separate area of interest in international relations theory is postcolonialism. Postcolonial theory examines the power relations that underlie international recognition, moving beyond legal positivism to question the historical and present consequences of colonialism (21). Hence, postcolonialism serves as a prerequisite for the global norms outlined in constructivism, and the patterns of historical power structures in the Afghan context are therefore crucial to understanding the DFA's non-recognition. It is important to note that, despite this prerequisite, postcolonial theory is interpreted independently from constructivist theory according to the synthesis below.

First, international non-recognition operates not simply as a diplomatic stance, but rather as a powerful mechanism that, occasionally, reinforces marginalization and moral judgment. Visoka (21) argues that research into state recognition should aim to make the politics of knowledge more transparent, seek epistemic justice, revisit decolonization in the field, examine recognitional regimes across studies of competing frames, performances, and agential ensembles, and evaluate the bases for state recognition, including the duty to recognize new states. Visoka's arguments emphasize epistemic justice and, in the context of the DFA, underscore how international recognition reinforces cycles of dependency rather than enabling meaningful engagement.

Second, historical legacies of colonialism continue to shape the process of recognition. Badarin (22) identifies certain precursors to normative rights (self-determination, independence, decolonization). These precursors become contentious, contested, and otherwise qualified alongside provisional, politically based conditions of external engagement. Sweden's recognition of Palestine and Western Sahara provides illustrative examples: while colonial inheritance confers some intrinsic normative rights, the underlying recognition is grounded in realpolitik, diplomatic understandings, and changing international affiliations. Badarin's findings have several important implications for the DFA in

Afghanistan. First, they demonstrate the importance of diplomatic engagement. The non-recognition of the DFA regime remains subject to complex political negotiations and the interests of external powers. Second, it elaborates on the constructivist argument of Černy (12) by demonstrating how the recognition of the DFA is not a single, one-time legal act. Rather, it is a dynamic and evolving process influenced by international power relations and shifting alliances. Therefore, the impact of politics in non-recognition is incredibly important, and while norms also play a large factor, the latter should not be ignored through a postcolonial lens.

Postcolonial Theory: 1996 to 2001

Postcolonial theory is embedded in the DFA rule from 1996 to 2001. First, based on Visoka's interpretations, the DFA regime's first isolation was in continuity with colonial efforts. Images of women excluded from public work or study depicted the DFA as emblems of backward Eastern oppression (23). This serves as evidence that international actors positioned themselves as liberators of Afghan women. This attitude essentialized Afghanistan as outside modernity and replicated what postcolonial theorists identify as the "white man's burden": foreign actors prioritizing a position of leverage that leads to aid conditionality, indirectly prolonging civilian suffering. Contemporary donor perspectives echo this sentiment. For example, a donor might state, "Our responsibility is to uplift the Afghan people from their regression," highlighting a neo-colonial mindset that positions the West as a necessary savior. While these foreign actors identified themselves as guardians of certain indisputable, fundamental human rights, in postcolonial terms, they also re-articulated the colonial hierarchy between donor and recipient.

Second, the assistance granted to refugees demonstrates the civilizing attitude of foreign actors. Pakistan's decision to recognize the DFA opened space for humanitarian engagement, and Afghan refugees transitioned from aid dependency to organizing local committees with the help of Pakistani authorities. Iran, on the other hand, reflecting an international stance on non-recognition, confined refugees to camps and curtailed their mobility (17). However, Pakistan was part of a former European dominion until its independence in 1947 and was therefore strengthened to the normative rights Badrin identifies, particularly decolonization. In postcolonial terms, Pakistan shows that inclusion of any kind presents opportunities for undermining the structural hierarchies to which non-recognition condemns people. If foreign non-recognition viewed Afghans as passive victims, here the Pakistanis re-established them as agents in their networks of relief.

Postcolonial Theory: 2021 to 2025

Moving on to contemporary postcolonial theory, we observe very similar, if not identical, changes within the DFA from 2021 to 2025. The donor-recipient relationship within the initial regime continued. However, many of Afghanistan's economic harms also became self-inflicted. Viewed as a universal norm of liberation, conditional aid for women's rights and education imploded into unworkable terms under the DFA (24). The bypassing of Afghanistan's institutions reinscribed dependency on the condition that funds could be accessed only through foreign agencies (25). So, aid was ultimately contracted out to neutral organizations, such as the UN and educational NGOs (28). Nevertheless, capacity-building was deemed illegal under the terms of existing sanctions (8). As a result, the freezing of reserves and the cessation of poppy production destroyed the economic base of thousands of families (26). Furthermore, the *Hawala* system promoted the liquidation of Afghanistan's remaining funds, thereby entrenching Afghanistan in an informal economy (27). Ultimately, the DFA issued a series of 173 decrees that forbade NGOs from using certain means, imposed taxes on relief flows, and prohibited female staff members from all operations (24).

There are a few key postcolonial takeaways from Afghanistan's recent humanitarian collapse under the DFA. First, aid was transformed into a mechanized process for exerting control. Afghan academics described international aid as a form of "soft power" that tended to enforce outcomes aligned with foreign views (24). The barrier of international recognition proves this, as efforts to undermine the DFA's economy and international legitimacy under the UN, like sanctions, were meant to uphold the inalienable rights of various oppressed groups, the most obvious being the rights of Afghan women. However, the second takeaway is that postcolonial bureaucratization led to additional harms for the Afghan people. In addition to the ineffectiveness of humanitarian aid in unrecognized states, training and capacity-building were consistently denied. As a result, the DFA, again, implemented harmful policies that directly hurt the Afghan people and hurt the values that the international community aimed to uphold. Sanctions forced a last-resort reliance on the Hawala system, which resulted in the loss of any remaining transparency, and poor integration into the international

community ultimately led the DFA to prohibit women from participating in operations, thereby undermining any potential victory in the pursuit of justice. Therefore, under both time periods of the DFA, Afghanistan's isolation became externally structured and internally enabled through postcolonial mechanisms.

CONTINUITIES AND CHANGES

In the sections above, constructivist and postcolonial theories have been analyzed independently, alongside interpretations drawn from both, using existing historical research. Therefore, the purpose of this section is to combine all independent syntheses into one cohesive narrative. The DFA in Afghanistan allows this paper to identify internationally accepted norms as a major cause of non-recognition and enables postcolonialism to reframe these norms as rooted in colonial legacies. Alone, while constructivism explains the DFA's normative standing, it does not account for the colonial and geopolitical circumstances that led to the production of these norms. As a result, there is no new synthesis in this section. Rather, all information here is based on combining the original interpretations in the arguments above with new interpretations drawn from previous theoretical descriptions and quantitative analysis. This paper, therefore, breaks down three areas of interest based on the narrative above: evolving administrative capacities, humanitarian aid and responses, and the overall non-recognition of the DFA. All three areas of interest have their own continuities and changes, which are elaborated in their individual sections. In summation, Table 1 shows the qualitative differences in non-recognition and humanitarian responses between the periods (Table 1).

Evolving Administrative Capacities

This paper's synthesis examines Afghanistan's evolving administrative capacities as its first area of interest. During both periods, international non-recognition, grounded in normative and power-hierarchical logics, hindered the DFA's ability to develop robust administrative solutions. As a result, Afghans remained reliant on external humanitarian frameworks, with few opportunities to build sustainable self-governance. Nevertheless, following foreign state-building efforts, the DFA returned to Afghanistan with far greater institutions and governmental infrastructure, thereby signaling an evolving administrative capacity to, at the very least, mitigate humanitarian concerns. Due to non-recognition and international sanctions, however, this capacity had never come into fruition.

Table 1. *Comparative narrative analysis employing postcolonial and constructivist theory. There are six themes discussed below, alongside the similarities between Taliban-controlled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001 and 2021 to 2025, a brief description of the chosen themes, and corresponding reference numbers (1-8, 15-28).*

Theme	Similarity	Description	References
Administrative capacity of the Taliban	No	From 1996 to 2001, Taliban infrastructure was nonexistent. From 2021-2025, following state-building efforts, there existed far more institutions	(4-8)
Channeling of humanitarian aid from abroad	Yes	In both 1996–2001 and 2021–2025, formal non-recognition pushed aid to indirect channels like NGO networks and UN frameworks	(1, 4, 6, 15-20)
Fragmented humanitarian response from abroad	Yes	In 1996-2001, aid arrived through NGO networks with minimal infrastructure. From 2021 to 2025, layering sanctions fragmented UN efforts	(15-28)
Nature of international engagement	No	Engagement in the first regime was ad hoc; in the second, it was bureaucratic	(23-24)
Scale of crisis in Afghanistan	No	The economy of the second regime was more interdependent than the first	(1-8)
Scope of formal recognition to the DFA	No	The 1996-2001 regime received recognition from three Muslim-majority states, while the 2021-2025 regime was recognized solely by Russia	(1-3)

Humanitarian Aid and Responses

The second area of interest revolves around humanitarian aid. Constructivist and postcolonial theories both converge to offer a clear narrative to explain Afghanistan's humanitarian collapse. Internationally accepted norms justified the gradual colonial bureaucratization, which exacerbated Afghanistan's humanitarian concerns over time. The quantitative contrast expectancy illustrates this change. Between 1996 and 2001, Afghanistan's population was ≈ 27 million, with 4.1 million persons (15 percent) in need of aid (17). By 2025, the population numbered ≈ 41.13 million, of whom 23.7 million (57 percent) needed aid (29). Norms meant to uphold human rights, while beneficial on the surface, severely harmed millions across the country. In 1996, non-recognition was merely a symbolic refusal; by 2021, non-recognition had become synonymous with non-engagement, freezing banks, controlling aid scattering, and systematizing exclusion. Postcolonialism has evolved from simply defining Afghanistan's backwardness in the 1990s to reproducing this definition through policy in the contemporary era. The intention remained unchanged: to maintain global self-identity by denying the DFA international legitimacy under the UN (Table 2).

Non-Recognition of the Taliban Regime

The last area of interest this paper examines is the legal non-recognition of the DFA. Throughout both eras, similarly, internationally accepted truths delegitimized the DFA and justified widespread international non-recognition. Nevertheless, the countries recognizing the DFA changed. From 1996 to 2001, three Muslim-majority nations recognized the DFA. This recognition implies that norms play a massive role in recognition, given that those three countries, including Saudi Arabia, shared many views up to that point, not dissimilar to those of the DFA. More pressingly, all three of those nations became fully sovereign in the 20th century, underscoring the possibility that decolonized nations may share a sense of solidarity with other formerly colonized countries. But by 2025, the narrative shifted. Now isolated from the international sphere, Russia became the sole international legal recognizer of the DFA. In this regard, Russia emerged as an anomaly, questioning globally recognized realities and defying convention by endorsing a government that drew widespread international condemnation. Together, these three areas of interest demonstrate how constructivist and postcolonial theories reveal the implications of international non-recognition.

CONCLUSION

This review aimed to understand how international non-recognition of the Taliban de facto authorities (DFA) created humanitarian crises in Afghanistan across two eras, 1996-2001 and 2021-2025, through constructivist and postcolonial theory. It asked whether non-recognition is an agent of internationally accepted truths and existent power structures, and whether that non-recognition exacerbates forms of material privation.

The significance of this synthesis extends beyond the Afghan context. First, in the theoretical context, they lend weight to constructivist views, namely that recognition is not merely declarative but constitutive of social being. Across both regimes of the DFA, Afghanistan faced significant humanitarian crises at the hands of internationally accepted norms. Second, they provide an example of the postcolonial critique that humanitarianism serves as an imperial tangent through institutional design. The DFA's oppression led to the non-recognition of the authority in Afghanistan, which became a test of membership for subjects related to international modernity. Moreover, the replacement of Afghan institutions with NGOs mirrored colonial structures with donor-recipient relationships.

Henceforth, this narrative offers one main policy suggestion. Foreign actors should reevaluate the freezing of Afghan funds and explore innovative ways to foster greater flexibility with the DFA's authorities, thereby increasing the accessibility of foreign aid. Admittedly,

Table 2. *Total population of Afghanistan, the population of those in need of aid in Afghanistan, the percent of the population in need of aid proportionate to the total population, and acronyms of countries that internationally recognized the DFA under the UN between 1996-2001 and 2021-2025 (17, 29). The acronyms correspond to the following recognizing states: AE, United Arab Emirates; PK, Pakistan; SA, Saudi Arabia; RU, Russia.*

	Population	Population in need of aid	% of population in need of aid	Recognizing States
1996-2001	27,000,000	4,100,000	15.19%	AE, PK, SA
2021-2025	41,130,000	23,700,000	57.38%	RU

these actors do have valid concerns in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. Women's rights are consistently denied, and government corruption is rampant to the point where direct aid to the DFA will most likely harm humanitarian concerns (2). Nevertheless, policymakers should consider developing tiered or conditional engagement models. These models aim to allow international institutions to release frozen assets progressively, tied to verified human rights outcomes. This approach enables engagement with the DFA without legitimizing governance.

In terms of the academic field, further research should conduct case studies of other unrecognized regimes (Myanmar and Somaliland) to explore the replicability of Afghanistan's patterns. Furthermore, regions or sovereign states, such as Palestine, should reference a similar interpretive analysis that aligns with constructivist and postcolonial rhetoric. This paper supports humanitarianism over broad ethics, but it does not endorse the recognition of the DFA in Afghanistan. But through further research and interpretation, it can be fully proven that postcolonial structures that enable the aid paradox stemming from normative rights actively harm civilians.

With that said, it is crucial to acknowledge that this narrative synthesis faces several limitations. First, in its constructivist interpretation, while excelling at explaining actors' justifications, it struggles to offer clear policy prescriptions, thereby reducing its practical utility. Moreover, constructivism overall underestimates material factors, such as security concerns, in explaining the decisions of these actors. This limitation necessitates the inclusion of a historical background section in this paper. Second, postcolonial theory has the possibility to generalize Afghanistan's internal politics and unique geographic situation. The tendency toward structural determinism can downplay contemporary agency and thus be more polemical than analytical. Again, this limitation also necessitates the inclusion of a historical section in this synthesis.

This review concludes that the humanitarian disaster in Afghanistan is not abnormal but the logical result of a world order in which humanitarianism and morality are tied to recognition. Over the course of three decades, constructivist models of identity building and postcolonial hierarchies have worked together to produce a chain in which values were negotiated above lives. Non-recognition constituted not merely a legal status, but an active power structure informed by normative behavior. Across 1996-2001 and 2021-2025, international exclusion fostered a sense of dependency, paralyzed governance, and transformed moral ethics into a cause of human suffering. At its heart, this synthesis shows that global systems are neither static nor impartial but rather socially constructed (constructivism) and layered in time (postcolonialism). Through both conditions, Afghan civilians became the indirect victims of an international order signifying its moral worth, even when that worth came at the cost of survival. To unravel this chain, the international community must rethink recognition as a humanitarian enterprise—to be obliged to engage without endorsing, to support without subjugating. Only by such an amendment can moral principles once again demonstrate their application: to be of service to life before legitimacy and to human survival before sovereign performance—non-political engagement.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest related to this work.

ABBREVIATIONS

DFA	De facto authorities
GDP	Gross domestic product
IEA	Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan
IMF	International Monetary Fund
ISI	Inter-Services Intelligence
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Non-governmental organization
PK	Pakistan
RU	Russia
SA	Saudi Arabia
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UN	United Nations
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
US	United States
USD	United States dollar

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