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# **RISK MANAGEMENT & DECISION MAKING UNDER UNCERTAINTY**

**DURING THE AFGHANISTAN CRISIS 2021**

September 2022

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank the Global Interagency Security Forum (GISF) and Humanitarian Outcomes for technically and financially supporting this project.

Their special thanks are extended to Heather Hughes and Chiara Jancke (GISF), and Abby Stoddard (Humanitarian Outcomes) who embraced this project at its early stage and afforded the authors their time and invaluable guidance in designing and concluding the research. The authors would also like to thank Constance Wilhelm for her technical advice on quantitative research and overall support to the project.

This project would not have been possible without the contributions of the many colleagues who shared with us their thoughts, experiences, and memories, especially the Afghan colleagues who at times had to recount difficult moments amidst challenging personal circumstances. We are grateful for their contribution, and we hope that this report, in addition to objectively analysing the events in question, reflects their experiences accurately and will be of support to humanitarian action in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

While this report would not have materialised without the contribution of all the above individuals, any mistakes or omissions are solely the responsibility of the authors.

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# KEY DEFINITIONS

## **CRISIS:**

A situation or event that causes significant negative impact on an organisation, and calls for immediate action and response to prevent further and mitigate existing impact

## **IMPACT:**

What happens as the result of an event, be that with regards to personnel, assets, reputation, or operations

## **LIKELIHOOD:**

The rarity of an event, usually dictated by its historical frequency

## **OPERATIONAL SECURITY:**

Security pertaining to people, physical assets, and real-world activities (distinct from, for example, cyber or information security)

## **RISK:**

The effect of uncertainty on objectives (ISO 31000 definition)

## **SECURITY RISK MANAGEMENT (SRM):**

The practice of meeting the effects of uncertainty that have an impact on the wellbeing and integrity of personnel, assets, activities, and/or reputation of an organisation

## **UNCERTAINTY:**

Unknown unknowns, i.e., that which is unknowable by nature; beyond prediction, influence or control



# ACRONYMS & ABBREVIATIONS

ANSF	Afghan National Security Forces
CD	Country Director
CMT	Crisis Management Team
DAC	District Administrative Centre
ERM	Emergency Response Mechanism
IEA	Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan
GISF	Global Interagency Security Forum
GoA	Government of Afghanistan
HPA	High Profile Attack
HKIA	Hamid Karzai International Airport
HoM	Head of Mission
HR	Human Resources
IDF	Indirect Fire
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
IMT	Incident Management Team
INSO	International NGO Safety Organisation
ISK	Islamic State, Khorasan
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
UN	United Nations
US	United States of America
SLT	Saving Lives Together
SRM	Security Risk Management
UNDSS	United Nations Department of Safety & Security
UNOCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

The Taliban takeover of Kabul in summer 2021 resulted in humanitarian organisations triggering contingency plans and crisis management mechanisms with varied and uneven results. Some were able to continue operations with minimal interruptions, whereas others dealt with chaotic evacuation responses. What transpired was an extreme example of witnessing crisis decision-making under conditions of radical uncertainty in real circumstances.

Drawing upon contemporary thinking on risk, uncertainty, and security risk management in the humanitarian sector, and through a combination of surveys and interviews, this research project explored the crisis management practices surrounding the Taliban takeover of Kabul, on 15th August 2021. Through targeted interviews and the surveying of humanitarian professionals in leadership positions in Afghanistan during the crisis, the research aimed to identify lessons that could benefit the humanitarian community and safety and security decision-makers. This report examines which security risk management (SRM) tools and practices humanitarian organisations had available for crisis management and how they used them. Moreover, it delves into how individuals and organisations engaged with the uncertain nature of the developments of the period in question, and what was the impact of uncertainty, narratives and cognitive biases on contextual analysis and its operational implementation. Lastly, it explores some of the behavioural and psychological aspects of crisis and security risk management the authors encountered in their research, and discusses how SRM could benefit from calibrating tools and processes to such human characteristics.

This project sought to test the proposition that with the application of contemporary thinking on risk management, NGO SRM can more effectively enable programming and operations under conditions of uncertainty. Indeed, the interviews conducted show that the organisations which maintained continuity of operations and managed to safely stay and deliver in Afghanistan, saw a steep increase in their operations and were able to rapidly deliver much-needed humanitarian aid on a massive scale at a critical juncture for the Afghan population. Research on uncertainty, behaviour and the subsequent impact on decision-making has already been effectively employed in other sectors, including marketing and government policy, and can also find fertile ground for application in humanitarian safety and security to further equip humanitarians in fulfilling their mandate under radically uncertain conditions.

In the case of the Afghanistan crisis, overall, the commonly employed SRM and crisis practices, such as hibernation and activation of Crisis Management Teams (CMTs), proved relevant to the humanitarian actors' core security needs, and in most of the cases examined, served the objective of enabling a structured response in a highly uncertain decision-making environment. Where SRM planning and tools were reported not to have worked or fallen short of expectations, this was mostly due to the lack of access to such tools or partial or late implementation. These were often the result of individual and organisational reliance on predictions and placing focus on a most likely scenario, along with an expectation of foreign – particularly American – forces' intervention as a "deus ex machina" resolution of the situation. Such expectations were heavily influenced by narratives dominating discussions and the collective understanding of developments among the international community in Kabul, despite individuals acknowledging the fundamentally uncertain environment in the country early, during, or before the crisis.

A central conclusion of this research is the need to engage with uncertainty as distinct from predictable risks, in a way that is missing from most current SRM processes. Operating under conditions of uncertainty is extremely challenging. It makes us vulnerable to our cognitive biases, the human tendency to use mental shortcuts, and exposes our inability to admit what lies outside our knowledge; it denies us a very fundamental need for comfort, order, and control. These human tendencies must be accounted for in our practices, through leadership and communication that place them at the front and centre of planning, and create the necessary space for discussing potential operational futures, especially those contradicting dominant narratives or implying negative repercussions for staff and programmes, without causing alarm, panic or pushback. Organisations can calibrate to the impact and challenges of making decisions under uncertainty ahead of crises in an integrated way, both through expansive yet inclusive interpretation of analysis, as well as through deliberate sensitisation of staff.



## KEY FINDINGS:

- Clear, concise, advanced planning (including scenario planning) which is appropriately shared throughout the organisation and exercised, leads to preparedness for a range of outcomes, even outlier events
- Small, agile, and diverse CMTs were championed as able to direct timely responses while integrating multiple facets of the meanings and implications of developments, at field and strategic levels
- Dominant narratives, along with other cognitive biases, distorted understanding of developments by validating a single, “deus ex machina” scenario, leading to delayed preparedness and action
- The analytical approach taken by the international community in Afghanistan did not lend itself to capturing the intangible, human elements of the developing situation, often failing to incorporate diverse Afghan perspectives
- Crisis management and SRM need to accommodate the needs of people as they are, as humans, including emotional responses and cognitive biases that can impact behaviour and decision-making
- Leadership must be proactively demonstrated by management through presence and structured, deliberate, and diverse internal communications, a lack of which caused confusion and was highly detrimental to the morale of staff, particularly Afghan staff
- The findings strongly support the use of the following elements in humanitarian SRM:
  - Structured and tested scenario planning methodologies, integrated into existing project and SRM cycles
  - SRM plans and tools that are ergonomic and cognisant of human responses, such as emotional effect and cognitive bias
  - Analytical approaches that integrate qualitative data from a diverse range of human sources, as well as quantitative data
  - Ensure the voices of national staff are integrated into all elements of SRM systems



While humanitarian needs remain on the rise globally, both humanitarian operations themselves as well as the politico-economic and physical environment in which they take place become exponentially more complex. In this context, prioritising preparedness over prediction is a guiding principle of SRM. While we are unable to specifically foresee when and how crises might materialise, it is possible to maximise understanding of the main inflection points of our operations and our organisations' risk thresholds. Mapping out known unknowns can reveal the preparedness steps required and the decision-making dilemmas which managers will face during it, regardless of the point in the future at which these come to pass.



# PART 1

## INTRODUCTION

When the Taliban ramped up their offensive in May 2021, there were few indicators that it would lead to an immediate collapse of the Western-backed Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, the multi-trillion-dollar project of the last twenty years. Unlike the fighting of past years, more than one provincial capital was attacked; offensives were concurrent, multiple, and bloody, backed by shrewd strategic intent that targeted international borders and transit routes throughout the country. By August, the resistance all but ceased, and no shots were fired as Taliban forces entered Kabul City, ending twenty years of US-led warfare.

These remarkable events formed the backdrop of some of the largest scale crisis management undertaken by the NGO sector in recent years, with many organisations forced to take unprecedented measures and make decisions under highly uncertain conditions.

Dealing with the risks associated with such remarkable events is however no longer an outlier occurrence. Barely six months later, on February 24th 2022, Russia launched an invasion of Ukraine. Swift, bold and unprecedented (at least in living memory) crises may well become more common, no longer outlier events, but hallmarks of business as usual for international organisations whose operations span the globe.

With this context in mind, the authors sought to learn from the Afghanistan crisis and the risk management responses surrounding it, in order to better equip security risk managers for uncertainty. The authors are interested in a behavioural approach to counter structural weaknesses with an interest in the relationship between people and uncertainty. Organisations cannot afford to be blindsided but must learn to adapt to managing crises as a reality of business continuity.

## This project sought to explore the following questions:

- How does the decision-making environment impact the choices made under uncertainty, as seen during the Afghanistan crisis, and how can this be improved?
- How would an approach anchored in preparedness differ from one anchored in prediction?
- Did NGOs engage in scenario planning, and, if so, how?
- Were there cognitive biases at work during the NGO response to the Afghanistan Crisis?

More widely, the authors introduce some of the notions of uncertainty and cognitive biases to debate and examine within the practice of safety and security.

This report consists of three parts. Firstly, an introduction, along with a description of the methodology employed by the project, as well as a timeline of the key events during spring/summer 2021 in Afghanistan, and the immediate aftermath of the crisis. This is followed by an exploration of ideas informing this work. The second part presents the findings of the research, starting with a chapter on how SRM practices were applied during the crisis. The next chapter explores how individuals and organisations analysed the situation. The last chapter studies some of the behavioural and psychological aspects of crisis management and SRM. Finally, the authors offer conclusions and recommendations on next steps for applying the findings of this research project.



The research had three main objectives:



## RESEARCH RESPONSE

To research, compile, and record the humanitarian community's response to the fall of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan government and the transition of power to the Taliban movement, with a specific focus on NGOs.



## IDENTIFY ACTIONS

To identify the key crisis management actions implemented (i.e., hibernation, evacuation, continuation of programmes, etc.) and the associated decision-making processes and practices enacted by specific actors that resulted in these actions.



## SRM CONCLUSION

To draw conclusions about SRM under conditions of uncertainty for the humanitarian community more widely.

In order to reach these objectives, a series of questions were developed to identify organisational views and practices adopted in response to the Taliban takeover.

These questions would be answered through analysis of the results of primary data collection. This research employed the following mixed qualitative and quantitative methods during the data collection period (December 2021 until June 2022):



**Literature review** of relevant decision-making science literature as applies to security risk management and decision-making under uncertainty.



**5 unstructured, exploratory interviews** with subject matter experts.



**24 survey responses to a survey** (including closed and open-ended questions), targeting humanitarian staff of the above profile.



**13 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)** targeting humanitarian staff who were either physically present or remotely involved in their organisation's response to the Afghanistan Crisis of 2021, as described in the timeline below

Participants were identified through multiple outreach efforts using the researchers' professional networks (via email and LinkedIn), as well as through network outreach efforts by the Global Interagency Security Forum (GISF),

inviting any security or humanitarian programme professionals present or involved in the NGO response during the Taliban takeover to share their experiences by participating in the survey. A number of those who volunteered at the end of the survey were contacted for a follow-up interview, while several interviewees had not participated in the survey.





The data collected overall fell short of initial goals for number of interviewees and survey respondents, owing to the level of experience and expertise of the individuals that were targeted, and who, as such, were necessarily limited in number and availability. Both Afghan and international NGO staff were targeted for this research, in order to reveal any differences in thinking or responses between these two groups; where appropriate, results were disaggregated both between these groups and between those that were in and out of the country at the time of the crisis. As such, the data and findings described in this report are indicative of trends and key findings amongst this targeted group of primarily humanitarian security professionals working in Afghanistan at the time of the crisis. All conclusions are triangulated amongst the different research inputs. In particular, the survey results are enriched and contextualised with information from KIIs, as there is significant overlap between survey respondents and those that wished to participate in in-depth interviews.

**THE SURVEY PARTICIPANTS** came from a wide range of actors involved in humanitarian work, specifically **14** NGOs (13 international and one national), **2** intergovernmental agencies, **2** aid and development contractors and **2** foreign government development agencies.



**Security professionals**  
(ranging from local to national, regional and headquarter staff)



**Foreign staff**



**Afghan staff**



**Country Directors**



**Program/management staff**

**THE KEY INFORMANTS** interviewed included:



**10 foreign staff**

**3 Afghans**

Who worked for:



**9 NGOs**



**2 Non-governmental, humanitarian research organisations**



**1 Intergovernmental humanitarian agency**



**1 Foreign government development agency**

Their backgrounds ranged across all levels of security management at the country, regional and headquarter levels, as well as Afghanistan programme and country leadership.



# PART 1: INTRODUCTION

## TIMELINE OF EVENTS

On August 15th 2021, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan collapsed, with the entry of the Taliban into Kabul, and the flight of the then President, Ashraf Ghani.

The reader may turn to a wealth of other sources for a deep analysis of the events leading up to the crisis; this section is intended simply as a foundational timeline to provide context to the developments and events referred to throughout the study.

### PRE-2021 (THE BASELINE)

Prior to 2021, the war in Afghanistan was fought between the Taliban and the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), who received significant support from a US-led NATO presence (Mission Resolute Support). High profile attacks (HPAs) frequently took place in Kabul City, carried out by the Taliban, the Haqqani Network, or since 2016, Islamic State - Khorasan (ISK). Outside of the capital, insurgency-style conflict took place throughout most provinces (Panjshir was almost unique in its low incident numbers, shortly followed by Bamyán), with varying levels of contestation across the country. Once or twice a year Taliban fighters would launch a major assault on a provincial capital, successful for the first time in 2016 when fighters took Kunduz City and held it for several days.





## PART 1: INTRODUCTION

# CONTEMPORARY THINKING ON RISK, DECISION-MAKING & UNCERTAINTY



## NGO SECURITY RISK MANAGEMENT (SRM) PRACTICES

Security risk management in the NGO sector relies on a process of security risk assessment, planning, and mitigation measures to meet the challenges of operating in insecure, complex, and at times hostile implementing environments (ODI/ HPN Good Practice Review 8, 2000). These settings are increasingly the focus of humanitarian operations, with conflict being a major driver of humanitarian need at the time of writing (WFP, 2020). In such an environment SRM is a key enabler of humanitarian operations (Stoddard, Haver and Czwarno, 2016).

In this framework, risk is defined as “the likelihood and potential impact of encountering a threat” (ODI/ HPN Good Practice Review 8 (2000, revised 2010), with threats (or hazards) being identified within a context as part of a risk assessment process. Such an approach allows threats and hazards to be rated and guide managers as to which threats or hazards need to be prioritised for mitigation using a combination of acceptance, protection, and in some cases deterrence measures (GISF 2017).

This approach has been vital in the measurement and ranking of risks faced by an organisation in its principled delivery of humanitarian assistance. However, it often does not equip managers and risk owners to engage with uncertainty, where events are unprecedented. This approach is also firmly rooted in historical data, and the risk matrix approach can cause high impact, low probability events to be diminished or de-prioritised. If an event has not taken place in the recent past, it is unlikely to be captured in

an Security Risk Assessment (SRA), and is therefore unlikely to be considered by risk owners.

When such uncertainty does have a significant impact on an organisation, such as a critical security incident or a political crisis as a result of contextual developments, organisations can react by activating its crisis management procedures. These include contingency plans detailing personnel hibernation, relocation or evacuation protocols, and actions for crisis management teams who have been briefed and trained.

However, the world is growing increasingly complex and fraught with unforeseen and high impact developments with far-reaching consequences.

Not only must organisations assess, mitigate and react to single incidents of violence or hazard, they must deal with complex, evolving, multi-faceted situations with potentially enormous impact on staff, assets, activities and reputation.

The days of the odd kidnapping or coup are over; crises are multiple, complex and far reaching. There is a gulf between planning for the day-to-day and crisis response, and even crisis response practices without sufficient preparation are unlikely to give organisations the agility required for programme continuity. Here, some of the thinking and practices from other sectors can be considered to harden NGO SRM and crisis practices to allow organisations to not only survive, but thrive under uncertainty.



### BLACK SWAN BLINDNESS

A key feature of the complex and uncertain contemporary environment is the eruption of improbable, high impact events that are predictable in hindsight, often called black swan events (Taleb, 2007). Black swan phenomena are those which, on paper, and by quantitative probabilistic standards, should never happen. Yet, they do, and organisations must cope. Not only the true black swans, but other outlier events such as COVID-19 are becoming business as usual for global organisations - circumstances under which operations must continue.

In explaining just why humans are so vulnerable to black swans, Taleb explores our relationship with randomness, our hunger for narrative, and the problem of induction, or the belief that 'our tomorrows are likely to be pretty much like our yesterdays' (Avishai, 2020).

These ideas are familiar in this case as analysis and context assessment in Afghanistan had always been typically anchored in the past. Past incident numbers would be studied, new events would be analysed against the backdrop of previous incidents, and forecasts would be based on precedents. Outlier events were generally treated as just that, and would be portrayed via a convincing narrative that implied a great degree of order and failed to account for whim, error or bad luck. This approach did not lend itself to dealing with unprecedented situations, such as those of the summer of 2021, that emerged from outside the prevailing narrative and were the result of the intangible rather than the measurable.

### PREPAREDNESS OVER PREDICTION

Taleb also emphasises that prediction simply does not work under conditions of radical uncertainty: "Do not try to predict precise Black Swans - it tends to make you more vulnerable to the ones you did not predict.... Invest in preparedness, not in prediction" (p208, 2007). While Taleb is referring here to the financial sector, whose numerical forecasts are easy to compare to what happened in reality and see how different the outcome was, the lesson is equally applicable to analytical practices in SRM. For example, the outlooks published in 2021 failed to account for the dominant event of 2022, the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Why can't we predict? What about the nature of the universe and people makes us such faulty oracles? It comes down to the fact that the future is quite simply unknowable; the array of possible outcomes is too great, and the extent of the role of chance is beyond



our grasp (Kahneman 2011, Taleb 2004). Sometimes we may get lucky, but this does not constitute a reliable or replicable method.

Rather than trying to make predictions for their own sake (although fun and useful exercises for thinking about the future should be undertaken), Taleb describes becoming 'antifragile' (Taleb, 2012). His idea suggests that rather than just surviving due to being robust, systems are strengthened by shocks and tribulations. This is particularly relevant to NGOs given the nature of the sector that sees crisis as a source of expansion; humanitarian crises require humanitarian responses, not hunkering down to weather the storm. By the very nature of the practice, organisations stand to benefit from having security risk management practices that are strengthened through crises.

# PART 1: INTRODUCTION

## CONTEMPORARY THINKING ON RISK, DECISION-MAKING & UNCERTAINTY

### COGNITIVE BIASES

Another thinker who influenced the authors' approach is Daniel Kahneman, whose work alongside collaborators, including Paul Slovic and Amos Tversky, upended how we think about human behaviour under conditions of uncertainty. Their identification of cognitive biases has particularly challenged the traditional notion of humans as rational and objective decision makers.

Works such as "Thinking Fast and Slow" (Kahneman, 2011) show us factors that influence how we make choices, such as availability heuristics, where we over-weight readily available information, or our overreaction to rapid, dramatic, and highly visible risks, and underreaction to far graver, slower burn issues. As examples, consider international responses to COVID-19 compared to climate change, or staff fears in Afghanistan over suicide bombings of NGO offices compared to road traffic accidents, the latter being far more likely than the former, but also less vibrant.

#### Other biases of relevance to this project that will be discussed at greater length later, are:

- Narrative fallacy, where causal relationships are imposed on data and events in order to create a story that is easier to retain and understand
- Confirmation bias, where information congruent with a held hypothesis is retained and acted upon, and information to the contrary is dismissed (often for seemingly logical reasons)
- Sunk cost fallacy, where behaviour is dictated by a sense of attachment to an investment
- Optimism bias can lead us to overestimate the likelihood of success, or imperviousness to harm

In terms of taking theory into practice, the impact of these biases has already been exploited by commercial entities to impact on our decision-making. In "The Choice Factory" (2018), Richard Shotton explores, bias by bias, how our behaviour around choices is harnessed by marketing and advertising.

Governments - who are faced with altering behaviour and citizen choices on a massive scale - have also demonstrated how successfully behavioural insights can be deployed. Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein were pioneers of the 'nudge', defined as any aspect of the choice architecture that alters people's behaviour in a predictable way without forbidding any options or significantly changing their economic incentives. Their 2009 book of the same title details their approach, and how it has been utilised in practice, as does David Halpern, who writes about his experiences "Inside the Nudge Unit" (2015) or "The Behavioural Insights Team of the UK Government", as it was formally called. His team used cognitive biases and choice architecture to get people to pay their taxes, get off income support benefits, and make responsible choices regarding their pensions. Their approach is a practical one rooted in experimentation and ergonomic approaches such as EAST (Easy, Attractive, Social, Timely) to make people more likely to make the choices beneficial to them when it is not always the instinctive choice.

Scenario planning emerges as a key tool against both uncertainty and biases, explored further in the context of business strategy with a foundation in the extractives industry, in van der Heijden's "Scenarios: The Art of Strategic Conversation" (1996). Rather than attempting to form specific predictions, scenario planning allows practitioners to 'order their thoughts about the future' (Kay & King 2021), consider alternatives, identify vulnerabilities and key interdependencies both internal and external, test business practices against various outcomes, challenge assumptions, and perhaps most importantly, brings a team to think together. As US President Eisenhower once said, "Peace-time plans are of no particular value, but peace-time planning is indispensable"; it's easier to think about the worst on a calm sunny day rather than in the heat of the crisis.

Cognitive biases affect human behaviour and decision-making, even when people are alerted to them, and SRM behaviour and decision-making are not exempt, as will be seen throughout this report. The knowledge and tools already exist to help practitioners navigate this landscape, and other sectors are already putting them to use.

### RISK VS. UNCERTAINTY

According to ISO 31000, risk is ‘the effect of uncertainty on objectives’. This definition is increasingly being adopted not only in humanitarian SRM approaches, but across the security industry generally. Rather than as a rating of a type of event (e.g., high risk of armed robbery), risks are considered in terms of their effects in relation to objectives.

Knight distinguishes between risk and uncertainty (1964):

“Uncertainty must be taken in a sense radically distinct from the familiar notion of Risk, from which it has never been properly separated.... it will appear that a measurable uncertainty, or ‘risk’ proper... is so far different from an unmeasurable one that it is not in effect and uncertainty at all”.

These are puzzles in contrast to mysteries; with risk one knows the denominator and entirety of possible outcomes; under conditions of uncertainty, one does not. In his most recent book with Mervyn King, “Radical Uncertainty” (2021), John Kay further explores the differences between risk and uncertainty, distinguishing them as resolvable and radical uncertainty; options out of a finite number of outcomes, compared to a situation where there are certain things (often the most important things) we simply cannot know.

Where SRM practices have homed in on the concept of risk, and are evolving to be more relative and proportional, uncertainty presents another problem for practitioners that must be reckoned with.

This is an important distinction in SRM practice, as under conditions of uncertainty we must learn to be comfortable with the intrinsically uncomfortable unknown. An amorphous future exposes us to our emotions (including both fear and hope), biases, and heuristics that undermine our status as ‘rational actors’, and decisions must be made with limited information that reflects a fraction of the total situation.

SRM practices can be calibrated to reflect this, limiting the potential negative impacts on decision-making.

Kay & King’s approach to aforementioned concepts of rational humans and cognitive biases is particularly interesting, rejecting the idea that we are somehow imperfect or inadequate because we often fail at games of logic<sup>1</sup>. Rather, they argue that our cognition has evolved for the real world, this big world of radical uncertainty, where we can seldom know all relevant factors. Humans cannot solve problems like a computer, but computers

cannot (yet) solve problems like humans either. Kay & King suggest methods to deal with an unknowable future, including “scenario planning as a way of ordering thoughts about the future, not of predicting it” (2021), as a key tool in navigating uncertainty.

Although the humanitarian SRM framework has made it possible for NGOs to operate insecure environments, the crisis in Afghanistan presented a situation that defied the thinking of the day. In the sections that follow, this report will explore how NGO crisis and security risk management practice met this situation, the impact of the cognitive and emotional impacts of uncertainty, and the ensuing results on the people and operations of the NGO community.



<sup>1</sup> If a bat and a ball cost \$1.10, and the bat costs \$1 more than the ball, how much is the ball? (Kahneman 2011).



# PART 2

## FINDINGS

**KEY FINDINGS:**

- The majority of humanitarian organisations who had crisis management planning in place found it to be useful in responding to the crisis
- In most cases, crisis management measures were implemented on or after August 15th, during or following the Taliban takeover of Kabul
- Small, agile, and diverse CMTs were commended as able to direct timely responses, while integrating multiple facets of the meanings and implications of developments at field and strategic levels
- A lack of communication, clarity, and transparency of decision-making caused confusion and was highly detrimental to the morale of staff
- Clear, advanced planning (including scenario planning) which was appropriately shared throughout the organisation and exercised, led to preparedness for a range of outcomes

Throughout this research process, the authors have seen a range of actions and practices that have been positive and effective in dealing with uncertainty and high impact events. Evacuation of international staff and at-risk Afghans, business continuity planning, scenario planning, traditional hibernation, relocation and evacuation plans, crisis communications, inter-agency coordination, and setup of crisis management teams (CMTs) were all recounted by participants.

OVERVIEW OF MEASURES IMPLEMENTED

The range of crisis management measures that humanitarian and development organisations employed in response to the crisis encompassed virtually all methods and practices of the humanitarian SRM arsenal. Where plans for such measures were not in place, or conditions prevented their implementation, improvised responses arose. In other cases, such measures were not activated at all despite prior preparedness. When examined individually, the combination of responses and tools employed differed widely between organisations.

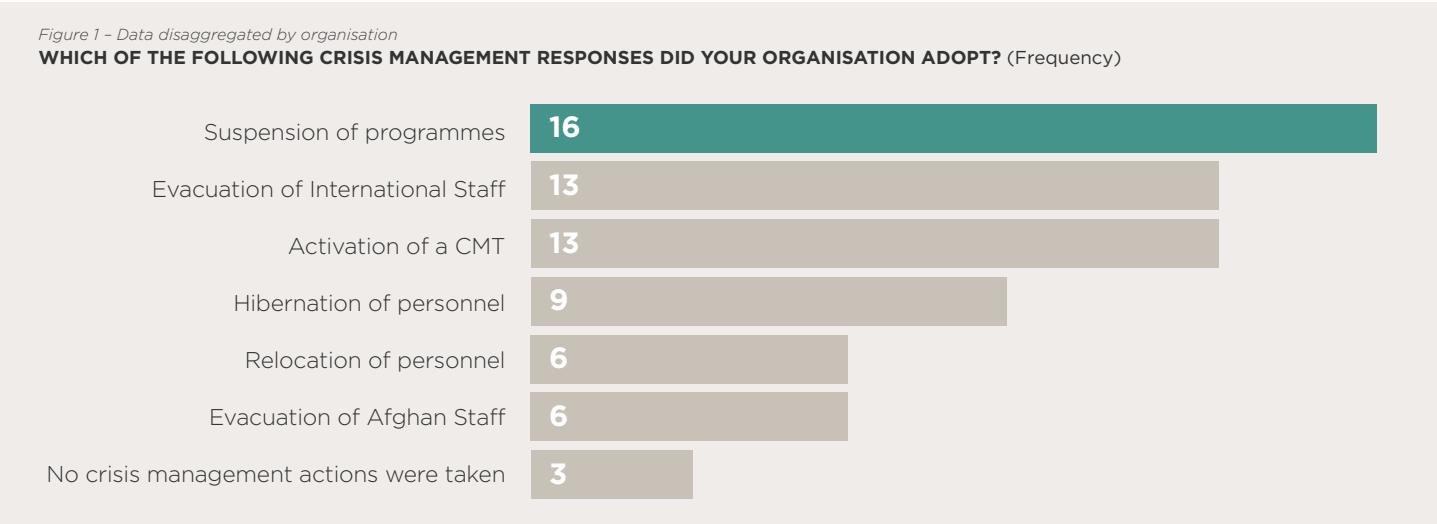
Figure 1 presents the frequency of different types of crisis management responses implemented by the organisations represented in the survey results. The most common response employed was suspension of programmes, which was implemented by 16 out of 20 organisations. Indeed, almost invariably, as the Taliban advanced towards district and provincial capitals in spring and summer 2021, organisations suspended their operations locally, until they ultimately did so with their county offices in Kabul. Suspension of programmes came both as a result of deliberate, advanced decision-making, when it was often accompanied by measures like relocation of non-local staff, as well as an impromptu response when organisations were overtaken by developments. In both cases, the uncertainty of continuing operations after control had changed hands in an area was deemed too high a risk, warranting an interruption in the normal course of programming.

Evacuation of international staff and activation of a Crisis Management Team (CMT) were also widely implemented by the organisations surveyed (by 13 organisations each). All organisations with international staff evacuated all or most of these staff, either in anticipation or as a response

to the crisis. Similarly, most organisations established a CMT. Those that did not either had no corresponding security planning in place (as in the case of some Afghan NGOs) or, in some rare occasions, leadership chose not to activate the CMT.

Other crisis response actions, like hibernation and relocation of personnel saw a comparatively lower use (nine and six organisations implemented these respectively). The main reasons explaining this is that several organisations had already relocated non-local staff as part of an early response or a drawdown plan leaving only Afghan colleagues who resided in their areas of employment in place. Additionally, based on the interviews, hibernation was, in some cases, interpreted as simply working remotely from home as opposed to coming to the office or going to a field location. That said, cases of hibernation where staff were asked to remain in their location out of fear for their security, until an appropriate moment for their relocation or evacuation could be identified, were also reported both at the provincial and the capital level.

Most participating organisations reported that the organisation's senior officer (Country Director (CD), Head of Mission (HoM) or equivalent) was not present in the country for part or the entire duration of the crisis. This was particularly the case for intergovernmental organisations and development organisations (UN, contractors etc.), whereas for NGOs 64% of the respondents reported that their CD/HoM was in the country for the duration of the crisis. The fact that many CDs or senior country focal points were out of country means that the decision-makers were already working remotely or were on leave. A comparison against other data points suggests that this could imply a less proactive response to developments and perhaps expectations for things to be the way they were before leaving the country (see Leadership section, below.)





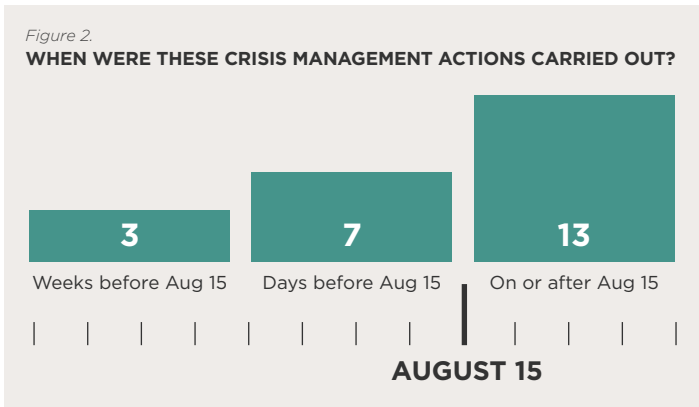
TIMING OF RESPONSE

The time at which participants started implementing measures also varied, as shown in Figure 2. Most participants (52%) reported that their organisational crisis response began on August 15th or later. The remaining 11 had started implementing crisis response measures in advance, starting days or weeks earlier than that day. Notably, less than half of those who took earlier action implemented measures weeks before August 15th, suggesting that the vast majority of organisations did not anticipate a crisis of that magnitude until at least mid-July. At this point, developments were predominantly political in nature and although kinetic conflict activity had increased, the first provincial capitals had not yet been taken.

Whilst no single factor from the collected data can clearly explain why certain organisations responded earlier than others, there are three clear points of correlation.

Firstly, all the governmental and intergovernmental agencies in the sample reported their organisations to have taken measures on or after August 15th. This clustering occurs, to an extent, because such agencies had already restricted their operations to Kabul and adjacent districts, whilst some had perhaps already downsized or otherwise initiated drawdown plans upon the announcement of the US military departure. At the same time, it also implies the expectation of a deterioration in the security context short of the fall of the country’s capital.

The overwhelming majority of interviewees consistently noted that perceptions regarding the military capabilities of the parties to the conflict, as well as the potential outcome of the peace negotiations, generated narratives among aid organisations suggesting that Kabul would ultimately not be subject to a military takeover (see also Expectations).



Secondly, those organisations that had conducted scenario planning exercises were much more likely to enact crisis management measures prior to the onset, or early in the crisis (see also Scenario Planning, below). This was probably due to the existence of pre-determined courses of action within these organisations’ plans.

According to interviewees whose organisations conducted scenario planning, they captured their results in indicators (e.g., the fall of certain provincial capitals) which functioned as triggers for a specific set of crisis response actions. Moreover, some of the same organisations had exercised such plans. This contrasted with a certain degree of indecisiveness from other humanitarian actors, which was described by one expert as “pushing back their lines, any time a red line was crossed”.

Thirdly, those organisations whose Country Director was in the country also appear to have acted earlier in the crisis (figure 3). The effect of scenario planning, leadership and the anchoring effect of pre-existing drawdown plans are examined in greater depth in subsequent sections of this report.

Finally, anticipated timeframes varied with regard to how long the crisis management measures would remain in place. Generally, organisations had no timeframe in mind. Some anticipated a very short timeframe, assuming that the situation would resolve itself within weeks, although this estimation came prior to the regime change.



### CRISIS MANAGEMENT TEAMS

Decision-making was often carried out through a Crisis Management Team (CMT), the second most frequent crisis response measure reported among organisations. CMT structures varied among respondents, with some comprising a single team drawing from HQ, while others used a split Crisis Management Team/Incident Management Team (IMT) structure, with the former often having a more executive role with HQ involvement and the latter an in-country information collection and implementation focus.

Others, however, had the CMT made up of a mix of country, regional and/or HQ staff. This mixed approach appeared to have its merits, with one respondent describing a

**"combination of HQ and in-country management team... HQ able to see what the country can't see and vice versa, different risk thresholds... complementary views"** (KII 6).

Similarly, the roles participating in the CMT also varied significantly (see Figure 4), with most including international senior staff, as well as country-level and regional senior staff. Additionally, some interviewees reported drawing on subject matter experts at different stages, such as communications or advocacy specialists, to handle media and external messaging regarding the organisational response to the developments:

"We had a very newly formed crisis management team, because in the back of the pandemic, we hired a crisis communications team and we had realised the benefit of having crisis communications." (KII 2)

Despite it being one of the most common responses among organisations, at least five of the organisations included in the data collection did not activate a CMT. Some local NGOs did not have such security planning in place, and in one instance took a more ad hoc approach:

"Well, no, nobody supports the training. We just sit together as a team." (KII 7).

In other cases, there was a reluctance to call a CMT against existing protocols as well as requests from security staff; action was inhibited by a sense that "everything would be ok", or a reactive approach, to wait and "see what happens". Occasionally, the events leading up to the crisis were perceived by HQ leadership to be exclusively political in nature rather than having safety and security ramifications. As a result, the response also saw the formation of non-security CMTs, to which security leadership was invited later (yet the structure was largely identical to what security professionals would recognise as a CMT).

There was also variation in decision-making styles, with some referring to a more military, or hierarchical style, where decisions were made by leaders and acted upon, and in other cases more consensual styles were employed. Respondents described some freedom in how those decisions were made, even if the decision itself came from senior leadership. However, some respondents found decision-making too centralised:

"the problem, I think was that there was too much centralisation of decision-making. And there was (sic) very, very closed loops in terms of the discussions. It was really something which we were advocating sort of sending emails into the vacuum and then the decisions came at a higher level and then they spread the information around" (KII 3).

For those to whom the question was applicable (i.e., those who were or felt they were part of decision-making processes), there was a variation on views on how formal

Figure 4.

IF A CRISIS MANAGEMENT TEAM (CMT) WAS ACTIVATED, WHICH ROLES AND POSITIONS PARTICIPATED IN IT?



processes were, and whether they allowed for creativity and improvisation. Some spoke of decision-making environments that facilitated creative, informed decisions, “throwing ideas around” (KII 6) that drew on a range of diverse voices; others claimed that although processes on paper were formal, these were abandoned, and informal practices took over (though not in a positive way).

Formality and creativity were not mutually exclusive to some participants, with once describing ‘creativity within a hierarchical structure’, another (who was largely satisfied and positive about the response of their organisation) speaking of trust in instinct, complemented by formal processes.

Either way, the importance of pre-defining and clearly defining the roles for the SMT/CMT, structures and approaches, was repeated by multiple respondents, as well as that of including a plan for who is the decision-maker and having a communications plan to alert senior management in different modalities.

COMMUNICATIONS & COORDINATION

Communications - frequent, inclusive, and intentional - were described as a core component of crisis management.

This applied at field level, with senior leadership holding calls to signal support to field teams, dedicated channels staffed 24/7 for addressing security concerns, and communicating management decisions.

“Important decisions from the CMT/SMT were communicated through a pyramid structure, and where possible done face to face, ‘with the safety of staff and communities at the heart of every message” (KII 6).

It also applied within an organisation more widely, setting up updates to alleviate constant requests for information. In some cases, dedicated e-mail addresses were set up, and case management systems to handle concerns from staff. The voices of senior leadership were key, and, in several cases, organisational leaders spoke directly to staff about the crisis.

In cases where communication was weak this corresponded with an overall dissatisfaction with organisational response; a lack thereof was felt sharply:

“Lacking in the last moment was the trust, no one was trusting each other... Breach of trust when expats left without telling anyone” (KII 9).

“I would say that it looked a lot like panic at times, in terms of the decision-making and the lack of communication” (KII 3).

Regarding external communications, there were a range of approaches adopted. Some opted to limit external communications beyond the essential, others communicated widely, for instance with donors and their governments.

There was a moderate degree of coordination reported between NGOs (Figure 5) with more than half of participants rating “some coordination”, with greater variation outside of the humanitarian community (i.e., UN, diplomatic missions, NATO, etc.), which ranged from complete isolation to extensive coordination (Figure 6). However, the fact that 25-30% of respondents claimed they had very little or no coordination with non-humanitarian actors may indicate that the rest of the coordination was informal and likely based on personal relations. Several interviewees expressed that they expected a more elaborate coordination with the UN under the Saving Lives Together (SLT) initiative.

Figure 5. ON A SCALE OF 1-5, TO WHAT EXTENT DID YOUR ORGANIZATION COORDINATE WITH OTHER HUMANITARIAN ACTORS IN ADDRESSING THE CRISIS AND IMPLEMENTING MEASURES?

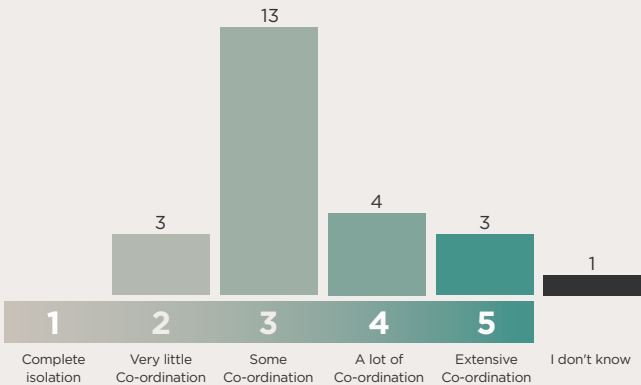
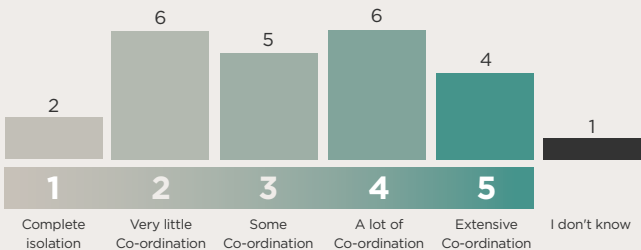


Figure 6. ON A SCALE OF 1-5, TO WHAT EXTENT DID YOUR ORGANIZATION COORDINATE WITH NON-HUMANITARIAN ACTORS, SUCH AS THE UN, DIPLOMATIC MISSIONS, OR NATO?



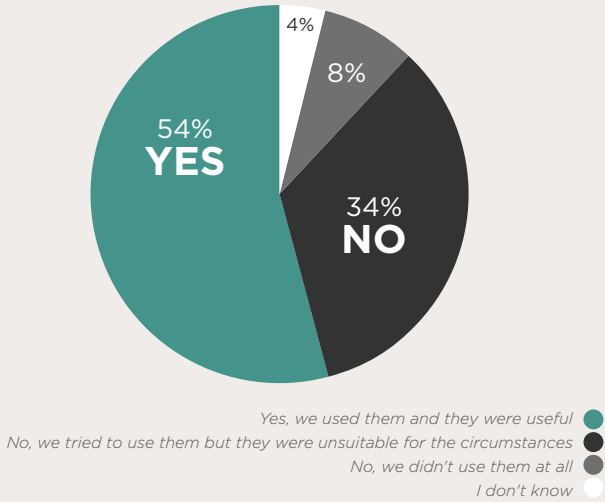
PLANNING & PREPAREDNESS

Organisations had generally already begun contingency planning in preparation for the NATO troop withdrawal (in one instance even planning their own organisational drawdown to coincide with the American exit on September 11th 2021). In some cases, this had an anchoring effect on planning that slowed adjustment to the developing situation by forming a fixed reference point that became a basis for decision-making, regardless of new information.

Scenario planning was undertaken by 11 participants' organisations, with the remaining 12 having either not done so (10), or not knowing if it had taken place (2).

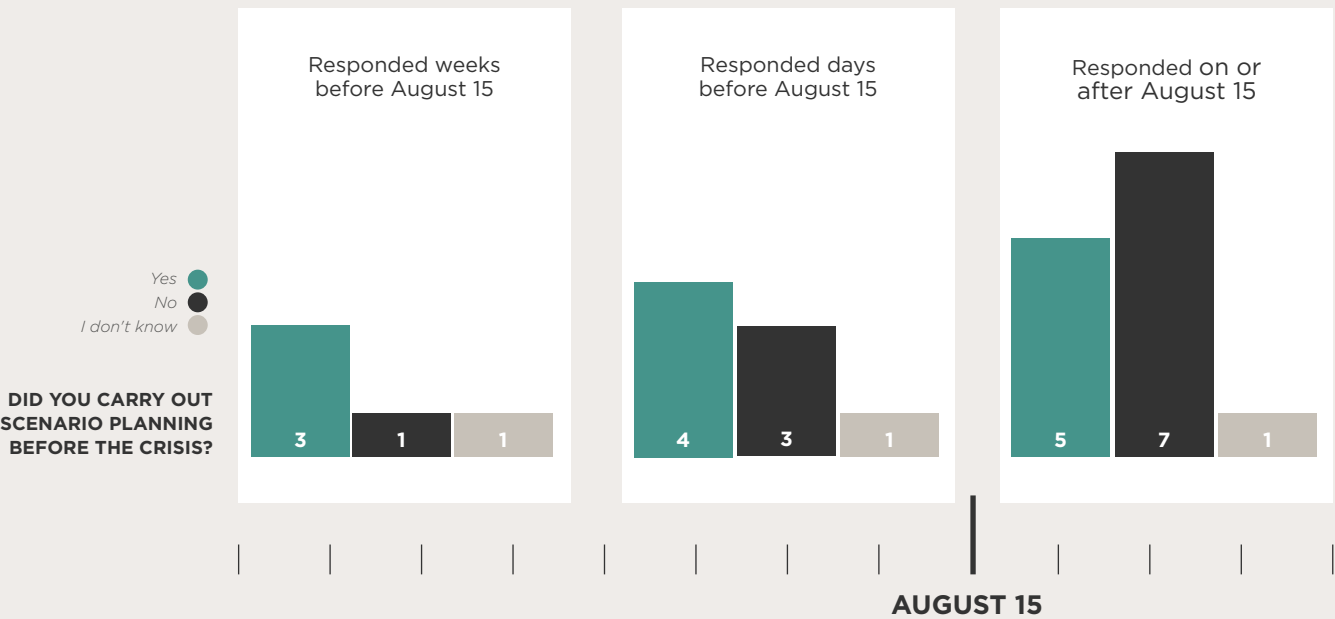
The majority of respondents reported that some kind of plans were in place already (SOPs, HRE Plans, Contingency or CMT plans) with four responding that they had none of the above. Regarding the use of these plans during the crisis, 57% of participants responded that "Yes, we used them and they were useful", and 35% responded "No, we tried to use them but they were unsuitable in the circumstances" (Figure 7). These findings reflect the ongoing concern of the security risk management community of such plans simply being compliance measures to broadly meet donor requirements that such documents exist, rather than actionable guidance to aid decision-making and project continuity.

Figure 7.  
WERE THE CONTINGENCY PLANS YOU HAD PREPARED USEFUL DURING THE AUGUST 2021 CRISIS?



Those organisations that had conducted scenario planning exercises were much more likely to enact crisis management measures prior to the onset or early in the crisis (Figure 8). Finally, those organisations whose Country Director was in the country also appear to have acted earlier in the crisis. The effect of scenario planning, leadership and the anchoring effect of pre-existing draw-down plans are examined in greater depth in subsequent sections of this report.

Figure 8.  
CORRELATION BETWEEN WHETHER AN ORGANISATION CARRIED OUT ANY SCENARIO PLANNING EXERCISES BEFORE THE CRISIS AND THE TIMING OF THEIR RESPONSE





## CRISIS MANAGEMENT CONCLUSIONS

This section explores the crisis and security risk management measures implemented by organisations during the leadup and in response to the Taliban takeover of Kabul.

A shared characteristic of those who were satisfied with their organisational response was the agreement on crisis management plans prior to events taking place. Furthermore, a key lesson was the importance of identifying triggers ahead of time, defining corresponding courses of action, and sticking to them. This is an example of tried and tested practice and procedure that may be abandoned in the face of crisis. Indeed, some participants lamented that although plans and procedures existed, they were not followed or utilised.

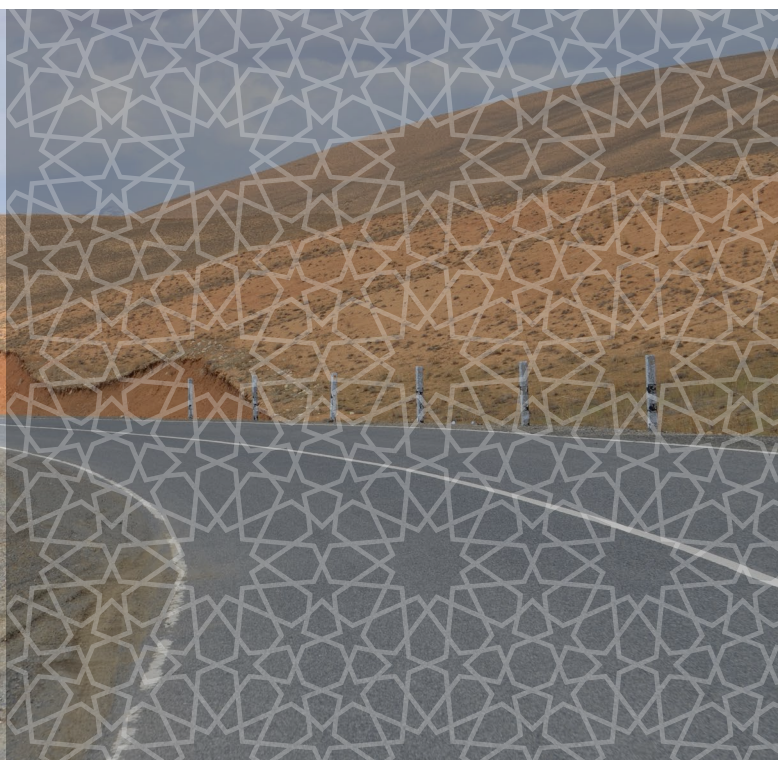
Processes and procedures were highlighted as a means to remove bias, subjectivity, and rash decision-making, but still allow for creativity and adaptation in the face of a rapidly developing situation. In some instances, this was achieved through the structure of CMTs (e.g., CMT/IMT structure), and in others through open and honest decision-making environments. Moreover, although CMTs took a variety of forms, demonstrating various approaches to team composition, smaller CMTs were championed for their relative flexibility, while larger groups were generally considered less effective.

Co-ordination and communication (internal and external) were key aspects of NGO responses, both within the humanitarian community, as well as with other actors. Organisations utilised communications to share information and manage the expectations of staff, and where communications were not strong, the impact on staff - particularly national staff - was negative and acute.

Returning once more to the importance of human agents in SRM implementation, easy to use and accessible security plans were championed. Respondents highlighted the relative importance of plans that work, rather than those that satiate compliance requirements.

**“Plans are not holy books, they are to be touched!” exclaimed one of our participants; “Get rid of 70-80 page security plan”**

Overall, the humanitarian community was able to respond in a highly uncertain environment by using crisis response mechanisms well established within humanitarian SRM. Preparedness and timely adherence to planned security actions arose as the central elements of a successful response by humanitarian staff with security management responsibilities, both amongst those respondents who were content with their organisation’s response, as well as those who thought there was room for improvement.



## PART 2: FINDINGS

# ANALYSIS & CONTEXTUAL UNDERSTANDING: EXPECTATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

### KEY FINDINGS:

- The Taliban takeover was seen as possible, but not probable in the near future, causing surprise among almost all survey participants and interviewees
- Organisations and individuals relied heavily on predictions and expectations, sometimes in the form of a 'most-likely scenario', although they knew they were operating in a fundamentally uncertain environment
- Dominant narratives, along with other cognitive biases, distorted understanding of developments by validating a single '*deus ex machina*' scenario, leading to delayed preparedness and action
- The analytical approach taken by the international community in Afghanistan did not lend itself to capturing the intangible, human elements of the developing situation, often failing to incorporate diverse Afghan perspectives
- Scenario planning is a key tool for navigating both biases and uncertainty



## PART 2: FINDINGS

### ANALYSIS & CONTEXTUAL UNDERSTANDING: EXPECTATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

The question of how humanitarian organisations engaged with and addressed uncertainty during the Afghanistan crisis is central to this research project, along with what lessons the humanitarian SRM sector can draw from their experiences. Unsurprisingly, mostly as a direct result of the US withdrawal announcement, by the beginning of the crisis, all research participants considered that the future of the country was uncertain and that their organisations would sooner or later need to adjust to a different operating context. Moreover, all organisations used some form of analysis as a means to grapple with the uncertainty they faced. Yet, the degree of confidence in their understanding as the crisis unfolded, as well as how analysis served organisational crisis responses, differed significantly, even between organisations of comparable sizes and resources. Furthermore, perceptions of how to understand the context, and expectations regarding the potential outcomes of the crisis varied, not only between different organisations and individuals, but they also exhibited contradictions within the responses of the same individuals when interviewed, and were the source of very strong responses by interviewees and survey participants.

Regardless of their personal and organisational expectations, interviewees' recounting of the crisis response was still overwhelmingly characterised by feelings of shock and surprise; phrases like "no one knew it would happen the way it did" or "I never [anticipated this outcome] in my wildest dreams" came up repeatedly in interviews.

Certainly, the historic significance and impact of the Taliban takeover, especially on the lives of Afghan colleagues, was a source of astonishment. Nonetheless, two additional reasons consistently arose as the possible source of the interviewees' surprise: that they did not see it coming, i.e., a personal and/or organisational failure

to conceive of the Taliban's military takeover of Kabul as it happened; and that, in retrospect, they had limited understanding of developments on the ground in the first place. The latter reflected the realisation that the analytical focus was placed on information that was not pertinent to that stage of the conflict. Additionally, some information which appeared relevant only in retrospect, particularly qualitative information, was not sought, or, where available, was inadequately factored into analysis before and during the crisis.

Such discontent regarding the inadequacy of situational understanding and predictions about the outcome of the crisis were expressed, regardless of how well-prepared or how successful different individuals perceived their response to be. Moreover, similar considerations were also raised in interviews with country and subject matter experts. These considerations pivot around two poles: one is the analytical processes and their application during crisis management and decision-making under uncertainty; the other centres on the impact of prediction on operational preparedness.

With these considerations in mind, in this section, we investigate how the analytical practices used by the NGO community in Afghanistan served security risk and crisis management in the lead up to and during the crisis. We begin by presenting the expectations and predictions regarding the crisis reported by humanitarian staff and exploring the analytical limitations they faced. We then explore the relationship between predictions and narratives, and whether certain dominant narratives impacted the response to the crisis and, if so, how. Before turning into specific human aspects of applying analytical findings to crisis decision-making, we examine how participants of our research perceived their concurrent understanding of this period's events. Finally, we identify scenario planning as a tool which served to address some of the inherent biases of both planning and decision-making during the crisis and discuss how it can be employed.



### EXPECTATION & PREDICTIONS: WHAT DID PEOPLE THINK WOULD HAPPEN? WHAT DID THEY THINK COULD HAPPEN?

Our research shows that prediction played a significant role in the Afghanistan crisis. Predictions were mostly based on deliberate analysis and metrics (like assessments of the military balance of power, equipment, capacity or historic trends of territorial advances) but were also influenced by narratives, clustering, and sentimentality as we will examine more elaborately below.

To better understand why the crisis shocked and surprised so many, survey participants were asked a series of questions regarding their pre-crisis expectations of a Taliban military takeover of Kabul. The responses varied depending on the timeframe established by the questions and whether the respondents answered close-ended questions or were asked for their predictions in open-ended format.

When asked whether they had thought before the crisis that the Taliban would achieve a military victory over Kabul, the majority responded positively (58%). 34% percent answered no, while 8% percent did not have an answer to this question (Figure 9). From those who

Figure 9.  
**IN THE MONTHS PRECEDING THE AUGUST 2021 CRISIS, DID YOU THINK THE TALIBAN WOULD ACHIEVE A MILITARY TAKEOVER OF KABUL?**

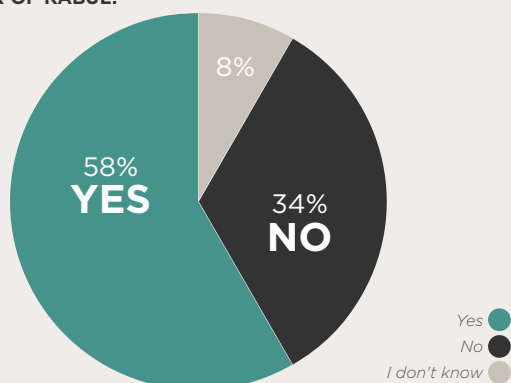
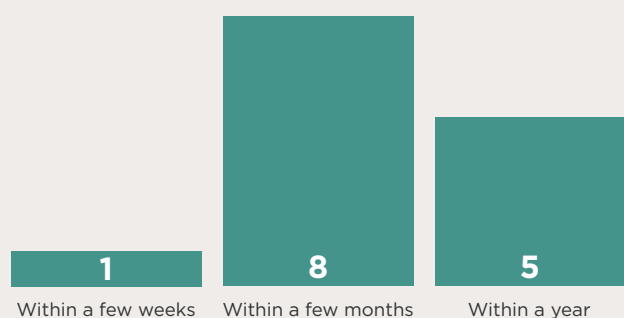


Figure 10.  
**HOW SOON DID YOU THINK THE TALIBAN COULD ACHIEVE A MILITARY TAKEOVER OF KABUL?**



answered positively to this first question (14), only one considered that a Taliban takeover of the capital would happen within a matter of weeks; the majority (eight) expected that this would happen within a few months, and five anticipated that such a development would materialise within a year (Figure 10). In other words, the vast majority of those who expected the Taliban to achieve a victory considered this a medium to long term prospect and not an imminent development. Moreover, this variation indicates that the element of time was a crucial, if not explicit, qualitative factor defining the expectations expressed (the sooner, the less probable.)

These findings were reinforced by key informant interviews. Several interviewees started out by stating that they expected a Taliban takeover of Kabul, but when more explicitly discussing their expectations and plans, they qualified this understanding as a prospect they considered within the realm of possibility in the more distant future. Indeed, ahead of the crisis (months or weeks leading up to August 15th), interviewees had considered the possibility of the Taliban taking over Kabul, but imagined it to be very low. Although there were some who claimed they anticipated the takeover of Kabul, no participants fully expected the events, especially highlighting the speed of the advance and the collapse of the government resistance.

Moreover, although a Taliban takeover of the capital was considered a possible future scenario, in most cases it was not central to the personal and organisational predictions regarding the security situation in the country. When the question of a Taliban takeover was removed from the picture and respondents were asked to present their own organisational predictions before the crisis, the majority described expectations which veered away from a decisive military outcome. As seen in Figure 11, "Peace settlement, power-sharing agreement between the government and the Taliban" was the most common response given, followed by "Deterioration of the security situation, escalation of conflict, protracted civil war". Five respondents described outcomes which included a complete Taliban takeover. These open-ended responses show more than any other that within and across different organisations there were implicit or explicit predictions regarding the outcome of the conflict and the future of the country.

Similar responses were provided during interviews. Such predictions included some kind of stalemate centred on Kabul, regional islands of stability, a negotiated truce or a peace agreement with a kind of unity or shared government. In the words of one interviewee, the expectation was for "peace talks, hopeful for a peace process type outcome, with key posts being given to the Taliban – for example the Ministry of Defence or Border Police. A kind of National Unity Government for one to two years, then elections being held."



# PART 2: FINDINGS

## ANALYSIS & CONTEXTUAL UNDERSTANDING: EXPECTATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

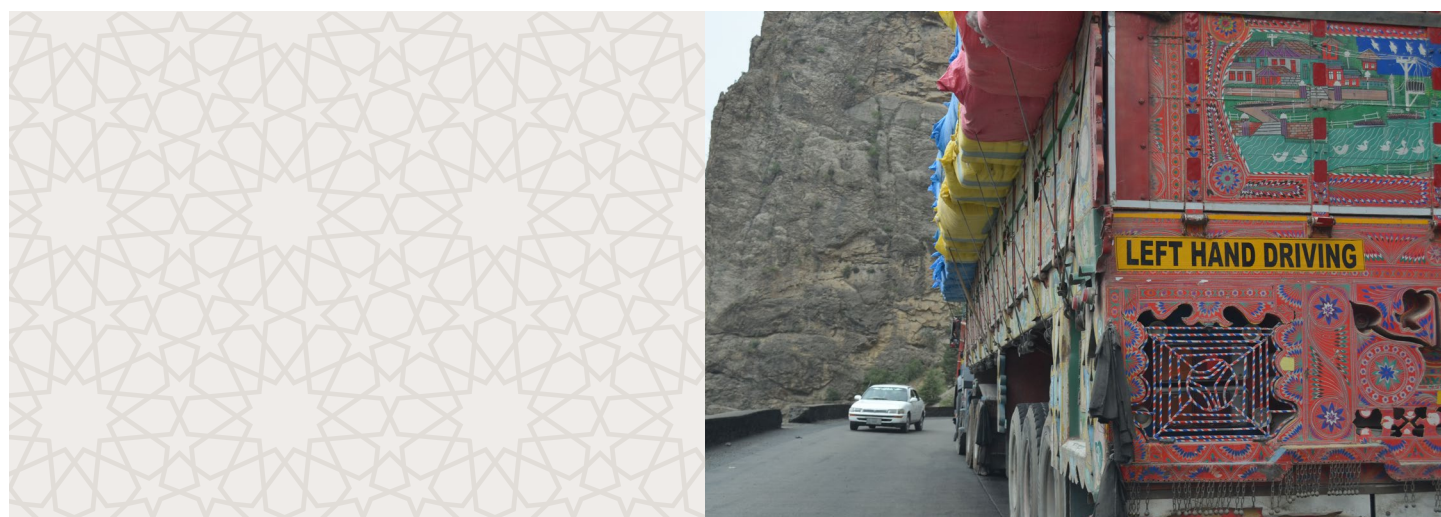
Figure 11.

**BEFORE THE TALIBAN ENTERED KABUL ON 15TH AUGUST, WHAT DID YOU OR YOUR ORGANIZATION SEE AS POSSIBLE CONCLUSIONS TO THE SECURITY DEVELOPMENTS IN THE COUNTRY?**



What becomes clear is that when thinking about the future before the crisis, there was a distance between what people thought could happen and what they thought would happen. Yet, the developments that materialised during the summer of 2021 in Afghanistan appear to have been within the horizon of possible futures examined by them. However, they often did not dedicate sufficient attention to this scenario, or instead focused on a different one. What is possible versus what is probable are important analytical distinctions, and people have an affinity for the latter rather than the former, as discussed later in the report.

When speaking about this differential, many interviewees expressed a need for a better understanding of why insufficient attention was given to the scenario of an imminent full Taliban takeover, and how it could have been incorporated in organisational preparation in a timely manner, despite not being seen as an imminent prospect. More widely, several survey respondents suggested that, in hindsight, the territorial gain and establishment of the informal governance systems by the Taliban during the preceding two years to August 2021 should have served as a warning, and that it is necessary to assess what was missed, and why organisations were caught off guard. In order to identify measures and tools to this effect, the following sections examine which conscious or unconscious processes and influences might have prevented this scenario from being considered more elaborately for organisational planning in the first place.



### EXPECTATIONS & NARRATIVES: COGNITIVE BIASES IN ANALYSIS

Several interviewees alluded to or explicitly spoke about a collective understanding of developments among the humanitarian and international community members in Afghanistan, in examining their expectations or elaborating on the processes which they employed to reach predictions. The words “we” and “nobody” were commonly used in reference to the predictions and expectations which saw that “Kabul will hold” and the Taliban as “not having the military capacity for a takeover”. Interviewees with varying backgrounds - country experts, security managers and programme managers - considered that the pre-crisis understanding of developments and the forming of expectations was heavily influenced by Kabul-centric narratives, which reflected the historic priorities of the Western alliance or wishful expectations of the Islamic Republic government structures.

Narratives are formed when factually correct yet not necessarily causally related information is linked together to form a story explaining developments or the occurrence of a specific event. The understanding offered by these stories often also forms the basis on which to predict future outcomes. Humans create narratives unintentionally, to make sense of their environment; it is a process that “allows us to construct the everyday meaning of events and happenings along with their causal implications” (Tuckett & Nikolic p5. 2017).

In other words, they help us navigate uncertainty and elect action.<sup>2</sup> The same can occur in the context of political and security analysis, with Heuer arguing that

“events will almost never be perceived intuitively as being random; one can find an apparent pattern in almost any set of data or create a coherent narrative from any set of events” (Heuer, p158, 1999).

Furthermore, the “local social or institutional environment” influences what information will be incorporated in narratives (Tuckett & Nikolic p12, 2017). Narratives can take on a life of their own - through media, professional networks, communities etc. - and may or may not incorporate emotional, ideological, political and at times conspiratorial beliefs or hopes from the environment to create a coherent, yet incomplete or incorrect understanding of events. This is called a narrative fallacy; that is, a false belief or understanding regarding why or how something happened (Taleb 2007, Kahneman 2011), that “makes us so blinded by one single outcome that we cannot imagine others” (Taleb p153, 2007). The same propensity can be at work when we are interpreting and applying political and security analyses.

Several elements of narrative fallacies become apparent when examining the lead up to the Afghanistan crisis. Firstly, several interviewees described an overarching, dominant narrative which focused exclusively on positive work and development over the past 20 years; of a successful, democratic, Afghan-led government with a strong and professional military empowered and equipped by NATO; and progressive women’s rights. This narrative offers a coherent story about and an explanation of international actors’ presence in the country over the past 20 years, as well as the sustainability of the Islamic Republic government.

However, according to some country experts and interviewees, this narrative was skewed by centring primarily on Kabul, which was at odds with the situation in the rest of Afghanistan, especially in recent years. This narrative failed to consider the reality on the ground for the majority of the country, for instance in rural Helmand or Kandahar (Gopal 2021). In the words of one interviewee:

“... they were not taking the threat seriously, they didn’t understand how disillusioned the people of Afghanistan were. With the current system, who was willing - I mean in the absence of the US and NATO that really structurally propped up the government - in the absence of that, who in their right mind would have fought for Ghani? ... Who felt that the elections were effective? Who felt that the government services were effective when there was so much corruption? There was a real lack of what the common people thought about the administration at large. And it had nothing to do with preferring the Taliban, it had to do with the fatigue of dealing with that system.” (KII 12)

This narrative permeated national and international thinking in Kabul, at least as it was publicly exchanged or (semi-)officially discussed. It would be safe to assume that supporting this narrative was an existential matter for the Islamic Republic government, as refuting it would demonstrate weakness and foster doubt about its survival. Similar political considerations might have existed among various international actors. In any case, the ultimate impact on the interpretation of developments and operational planning was the same, regardless of the insights of political actors: as this narrative was dominant, and pressure increased, it became difficult, cognitively and reputationally, to counter.

<sup>2</sup> For an example of how narratives work, consider: “The king died and the queen died,” compared to, “the king died then the queen died of grief” (Taleb p70, 2007; referring to an exercise presented by E.M. Forster illustrating the distinction between information and plot). There is something easier, more natural in our minds, about the latter rather than the former; while the first is just two pieces of information, the second offers a story and an explanation.

## PART 2: FINDINGS

### ANALYSIS & CONTEXTUAL UNDERSTANDING: EXPECTATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

In addition, this narrative was congruent with the commitment and sense of duty that national and international humanitarian personnel felt towards their beneficiaries, the country, and their work.

A military victory by the Taliban posed uncertainty for the continuation of humanitarian work or a reversal of decades of human rights efforts, which were predominantly supported by foreign donor countries. On the one hand, a stop could affect Afghan staff's livelihoods. On the other, individuals had dedicated their careers and lives to such efforts and, therefore, were emotionally and professionally invested in an outcome that preserved them.

Seen through this lens, the narrative generated the expectation that the US government was so invested in Afghanistan that they would not allow Kabul to fall; that, despite official announcements, there would be an external, non-ANSF, intervention to prevent the city from falling militarily to the Taliban. There was a *"deus ex machina"* expectation until the last moment as organisations moved their "red lines back, every time the Taliban crossed them" In fact, this narrative "blinded" people to alternative scenarios.

"I think [...] there was a level of wishful thinking that was maybe coming out of the diplomatic community that this couldn't happen, the Americans couldn't allow this loss of prestige, like the loss of Saigon. And I think that was a narrative that was very widespread in the media as well, particularly being pushed out by the various administrations" (KII 3).

These remarks also show how the narratives at play were heavily influenced by the environment. Embassies, foreign government agencies, and international military forces all fed these expectations, while the general emotional and ethical commitments of individuals and organisations could not imagine that decades of efforts would be in vain. Certainly not everyone embraced these perceptions, but combined, they coalesced into a narrative which operationally transmuted in the likely short-term scenario.

How can the impact of narrative fallacies be avoided, especially since each crisis context has not only its own narratives but also different actors and socio-political dynamics? Circumventing the negative effects of a narrative does not happen automatically. It requires a deliberate effort, which typically comes from structured analytical processes, like scenario planning (Kay & King 2020) or the analysis of competing hypotheses (Hueuer 1999). Structured processes are necessary to enable inclusive analysis and to ensure that all findings are considered from an operational perspective.

Narratives render analysis particularly vulnerable to confirmation bias, which sees us eschewing information that does not conform to our chosen hypothesis or prediction. Interviewees recounted instances when information that contradicted the above narrative - such as the extent of Taliban taxation applied in certain areas - was dismissed under the guise of a "person being too emotional" or other rationalisations. Thus, these narratives do not allow us to integrate new elements, or further information into our analysis if these contradict the narrative:

"new information elements that are congruent with the existing narrative reinforce conviction but non-congruent information elements are blocked"

(Tuckett & Nikolic, 2017).

In order to incorporate such information we need to build

"the emotional ability to tolerate feelings of doubt or ambivalence when they are aroused by thoughts and to retain curiosity about both their source and potential evolution. In such states, actors can reflect on alternative and contradictory narratives of the future and act even if some thoughts create unpleasant feelings because they know they threaten the outcome of plans" (Tuckett & Nikolic, 2017).

Indeed, tolerating ambivalence, alarmism, or fallibility were barriers expressed by interviewees. Applying structured analytical processes as a default method removes the fear of openly discussing outlying information.

Under conditions of uncertainty, shifting analytical focus from what is probable to what is possible, as part of a standard approach, maximises understanding of the potential impact organisations face. It directs attention towards incorporating information, examining undesirable or dissenting scenarios, thus countering the effect of narrative fallacies and confirmation bias.

A recurring theme in participants' comments was the role of hope, or an optimism bias (Kahneman, 2011). Although we will return to the subject of emotion, the emotional attachment felt by those involved in the crisis - or indeed those who have ever been involved in Afghanistan - was a powerful theme, and may have resulted in strong feelings of attachment, a strong desire for things to turn out for the best. Optimism was mentioned by several participants as a key theme in how the situation was approached:

“I always hoped for some kind of peace deal... I was convinced about that. And I’m in Afghanistan how long, seven, eight years? Maybe I got too attached to the country and I don’t want things to go wrong” (KII 1).

Feedback suggested a firmly-held belief that the worst-case scenario could or would not happen; there was hope for some kind of intervention:

“I think with hindsight, we, I think we didn’t want to think we were right. And so it’s difficult... We headed into those that took the provinces in the flow, the messaging was there, and I guess we didn’t want to see it. I guess we didn’t want to think that you know, Kandahar, Ghazni, Kabul was going to fall. You know, you think about the rhetoric in the messaging that you’ve been hearing from the US and coalition that 20 years, billions of dollars spent, X amount of hundreds of thousands of soldiers trained, they will not give up Kabul, Kabul will not fall. And then in fact, in my mind was, I don’t think we wanted to hear or see what may be our information” (KII 5).

This touches on another cognitive bias, known as the ‘sunk cost fallacy’ (Kahneman 2011), where more and more resources (often money) are invested despite a lack of results in a ‘can’t quit now’ mentality. Said one respondent,

“and, and I don’t know, there seemed to be a false belief that the US wouldn’t leave, or that the US wouldn’t allow Kabul to fall. And so I think a lot of people did their risk management based on those sort of false assumptions, and didn’t take into account the fact that actually it could happen quite quickly, and actually that yes, the US may not step in” (KII 12).

People talk not only in terms of the investment of international governments and NATO in Afghanistan, but also about their personal and professional investments, careers spent on international efforts in the country.

These biases can lead us to skew our intuitive perception of a situation. While many of us understand these biases, we discount their impact in our decision-making (Kahneman 2011), including in professional settings. Awareness of these biases and deliberate action thereon is required for individuals to counter their impact. Such calibration can be achieved through training and methodology, and there is a suggestion that making such awareness more widely available among decision-makers and analysts can greatly benefit our practice.

Figure 12. WHAT DATA OR INFORMATION SOURCES FED INTO ANALYSIS AND RISK DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES BEFORE AND DURING THE CRISIS?



INFORMATION SOURCES OF RISK ANALYSIS AND DECISION MAKING

During interviews participants also highlighted the following information sources as part of their informal channels:

All survey participants working for NGOs reported using INSO products as one of their information sources. The survey results showed a slight overlap between the use of commercial products and early implementation of crisis management measures, which however was not substantiated during interviews.



Local authorities



Local communities



Partners



Staff of their organisation



NGO / Dipomatic / Other networks



## PART 2: FINDINGS

### ANALYSIS & CONTEXTUAL UNDERSTANDING: EXPECTATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

#### ACCOUNTING FOR THE HUMAN FACTORS IN ANALYSIS

A recurring theme in interview responses was the importance of intangible, person-centred factors in explaining the 2021 crisis. For example, the collapse of ANSF morale, a lack of investment in the Afghan government, social and political dynamics, the absolute confidence of the Taliban, though all significant, were in some cases missing from organisational thinking and analysis:

“But I think in some cases, it was missing another sort of social inputs... because [in the] security perspective that social dimension was missing ... nobody was paying attention to the ground realities, that the communities were not supporting the government for many reasons – corruption, the rule of law... most of the people were deceived because everyone was looking into what’s coming from the formal channels, these texts, either for political reasons or for any other reason will not reflect [these social realities]” (KII 10).

**“The [Taliban] build-up in the 12 months preceding 15th August wasn’t necessarily military, but it demonstrated increased confidence”** (KII 6).

Or as a country expert commented:

“Traditional conflict incident mapping wasn’t working... People were looking at numbers, checkpoints, presence, etc., [but] none turned out to be good tests of strength of the government or provincial capitals. What was needed was appreciation of relationships and networks... often analysis took shortcuts to compensate for lack of genuine understanding”.

These reflections suggest an element of the situation was not necessarily captured by usual channels of analysis which focused on metrics such as casualties, checkpoints, airpower and military sizes, or numbers of incidents. Indeed, the quantitative-heavy techniques and data that dominated analytical practice (e.g., numbers of casualties or DACs held, as well as perception surveys about government and social services delivery) may not be able to account alone for this significant, shifting socio-political terrain that needed to be charted (in order to truly understand the situation). As one subject matter expert said, “all seemingly sophisticated analysis did not measure the relevant things”.

One respondent eloquently elaborated:

“There was the feeling that they [ANSF] were themselves withdrawing and could not defend the whole country. And even if it was a good strategic plan, I think it caused also an impact on the morale of the population as well as their troops. Because at the same time, you have the Taliban, engaging with tribal elders trying to say, hey, you know, just peacefully surrender, let’s negotiate peaceful surrenders and withdraws in these districts. So the Taliban were able to take advantage of that [morale issue]” (KII 12).

Analysis failed to consider the sentiment of the people in rural areas, and ultimately it appears that it was morale, deals, relationships, and public feeling, not bullets, checkpoints, or battlefield casualties, that decided the tide of events. This is a key lesson for approaching the analysis of other conflict situations, where victory or defeat is similarly determined elsewhere.

Undoubtedly, quantitative data are essential in driving SRM planning and serve many planning processes and contextual understanding. However, during decision-making they can easily overshadow newly arising factors, which lack historic elaboration but might prove central in future developments. Decision-makers can more effectively justify their actions by the use of concrete numbers rather than non-measurable information (which might be subject to praise or criticism as a “gut feeling” depending on the success of the action). As a result, it becomes more difficult to incorporate qualitative information within a data-driven reporting environment, especially during crisis.

Indeed, respondents who felt prepared and that they had a good understanding of the situation demonstrated high levels of engagement with a wealth of human knowledge: their national staff. Inclusion was a significant factor here: integration and engagement with Afghan nationals on CMTs was a hallmark of effective response:

“Because we convened several CMTs related to incidents before, we had a 50% Afghan team at CMT level, and there was open space for creativity, listening to and combining international policy approach with on the ground reality” (KII 6).

“I highly recommend as an Afghan and as [job-title] that the expats who are working in conflicted countries, especially Afghanistan, the expats should and must listen to their national colleagues. Their ideas and comments should be considered as priority, when it comes to safety and security issues” (survey response).



With factors such as morale, sentiment, political and social understanding being key to navigating context, engagement and consultation with national staff as part of decision-making is vital, especially during times of crisis.

Despite highlighting the importance of having Afghan staff on the CMT, one participant called attention to the hazards of treating national staff and commentators as a single monolith, and how onlookers fell into a confirmation bias, heeding the voices that confirmed their beliefs rather than reflected the reality on the ground. The interviews revealed a strong sentiment that Afghan staff were either not listened to or not taken seriously by senior organisational decision-makers, which could have a massive impact on an organisations' sensitivity to ground truth:

"[We Afghans were] not consulted during the crisis, [the organisation] is centralised, decision-making limited to Kabul, [we were] just being advised, not being asked questions, not asking what is the situation in your area" (KII 11).

This may be linked to several factors, including admissions that in some cases Afghan voices were written off due to them being perceived as coming from places of anger or terror, tied to the emotional factors discussed below. Indeed, emotional response could be an analytical data point in itself:

"[It's] not a bad idea to involve locals, even without a background of security, as the fear could tell you something.... Risk management [should] involve everyone – their fear, worries, what they see could tell you more" (KII 10).

"I think that there was a level of competing views from "I think that there was a level of competing views from [Afghan staff's] side, which we partially assigned to an emotional angle and I think we disregarded them, potentially more than we should have done, as a result of that" (KII 3)

With factors such as morale, sentiment, political and social understanding being key to navigating context, engagement and consultation with national staff as part of decision-making is vital, especially during times of crisis.

Yet, the structural impediments to this could be dictated by the context in which analysis took place. This framework of thinking was not necessarily a deliberate analytical approach by humanitarian organisations, to the extent that organisations utilised the information that was available and that was useful for their day-to-day operations. In a context that was heavily influenced, if not reliant, on the presence of international military forces and foreign government aid, the influence of embassies and government agencies on the narrative and the type of information selected had a significant impact on supporting this narrative.

SRM calls for highly granular, almost ethnographic understanding of contexts, one that grapples with complex cultural histories, personalities, and alliances, and that is independent of predictions. This understanding can then form the basis of preparation and planning, accounting for influential factors that may be obscured by exclusive reliance on quantitative data.

SCENARIO PLANNING IN ANALYSIS

The authors have been examining the limitations of a prediction-centred approach for crisis management. Scenario planning has been examined as one of the tools allowing for engagement with multiple alternatives of the future and preparation for the impact of each. In the current project the authors sought to investigate the extent of use of scenario planning and its relation to crisis response.

Overall, organisations that conducted scenario planning appeared to have been better prepared to respond to the crisis. Yet, the qualitative data shows that consideration of all possible scenario outcomes and engagement with their implications does not happen automatically. Moreover, capturing a wide range of scenarios and translating them into actionable items within contingency plans requires a systematic approach and process. The data indicates that having gone through the process of scenario planning, organisations and individuals seem to both feel and indeed be better prepared to engage with the crisis as it unfolds.

Those respondents coming from organisations that conducted scenario planning prior to the crisis were significantly more likely to have anticipated and prepared for the Taliban achieving a military takeover of Kabul. One direct explanation for this is that more of these organisations and/or staff had to systematically assess how a regime change might impact on the organisation, and engage with the prospect of what a Taliban military takeover might look like. Although there is no strong correlation, respondents whose organisations had conducted scenario planning prior to the crisis felt their organisation had some degree of understanding of what was going on during the crisis (Figure 13), and were slightly more likely to feel personally prepared to respond to the crisis (Figure 14). Furthermore, there is some correspondence with timing of response, as those that conducted scenario planning prior to the crisis were much more likely to enact crisis management measures prior to the onset of the crisis. This again suggests that organisations that were more engaged with understanding and anticipating possible outcomes and scenarios in Afghanistan were better able to assess, understand and respond.

In the words of John Kay & Mervyn King, scenario planning is a means to engage with uncertainty, “ordering thoughts about the future, not predicting it” (loc3357, 2021), opening thought to a multitude of possibilities, rather than anchoring to a single probability. This is particularly applicable here, as analysis during the crisis in Afghanistan suffered from a problem of induction (Taleb p40, 2007), rooted in historical trends, followed by a linear extrapolation of events.



Specifically, respondents spoke of expectations that a slow continuation of the current state of affairs made up their basis for planning. There was an over-reliance on ‘most-likely scenarios’ (often simply a linear continuation of the current and historical situation) preventing engagement with the ‘worst-case scenario’, the one that may have been the most useful given the outcome of the crisis.

Respondents cited stalemates, government holding on to provincial capitals, and continuation of peace talks as the basis of expectations:

“I anticipated that the conflict would be more drawn out into a gradual stalemate and then, then peace talks [...] I certainly didn’t anticipate, where the country would collapse as much as it did. [...] the framework I bought for that was more [...] that, this is a formalisation of the patterns of control that have existed for a long time, it’s that old cliché the Taliban control the countryside; the ANSF, the government controls the towns” (KII 3).

However, such approaches fail when seeking to understand or prepare for unprecedented or highly rare events that lack antecedents. Trends such as the Taliban’s territorial control developed in a linear fashion of gradual growth over several years, directing expectations towards further, gradual development, as opposed to the abrupt events that took place.



## PART 2: FINDINGS

### ANALYSIS & CONTEXTUAL UNDERSTANDING: EXPECTATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

This not only indicates the need for scenario planning on its own, but scenario planning that fully engages with the spectrum of possible outcomes and prevents attachment to one, “not as desired futures, but valid mental models for how the future might unfold” (Van der Heidjen, p201, 1996). Van der Heidjen also discourages the attachment of value statements when naming scenarios, such as thinking about good or bad futures (p198, 1996). This idea is valuable here, given what we have explored previously regarding people’s optimism when engaging with the context and possible outcomes.

Conducting and implementing scenario planning can come with its own challenges. Firstly, according to the authors’ experience as security risk managers, there is often resistance to improbable scenarios, the notion that we cannot consider all possible scenarios, or be prepared for all different ramifications. This argument is often based on the perception that each different scenario always implies a distinct set of preparations, as well as the difficulty of collecting a wide range of inputs without the exercise turning into speculation or fantasy. However, different scenarios might have similar components or crossover, and while some preparedness or decision-making elements might be distinct to one scenario, others will cover several at once, thus limiting the number of separate preparedness actions required. Additionally, in the case of Afghanistan, many interviewees focused on elements of decision-making and preparedness that had negligible

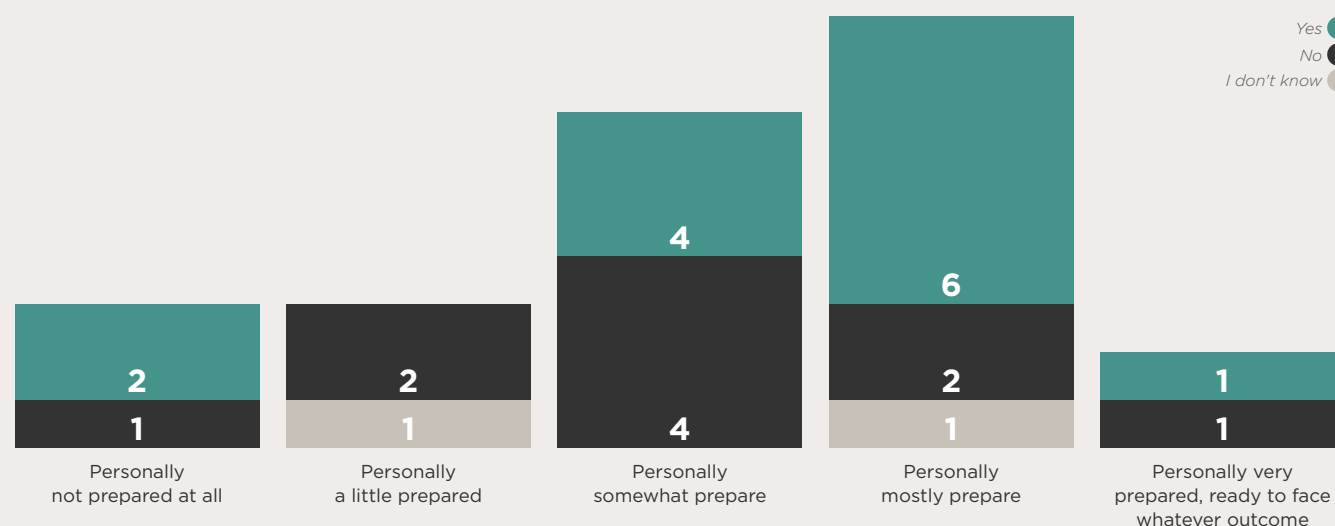
or no financial cost. Structured approaches also solve the issue of how to keep a scenario planning exercise creative yet focused.

Another challenge comes from the findings on implementation of an expansive scenario planning exercise. Scenarios that contradict organisational planning can be difficult to present, and implementing corresponding actions, or even discussing whether a worst-case scenario is underway, can be considered alarmist. Creating a consensus and embedding such scenario exercises as a standard approach in an organisation, or indeed a local humanitarian community’s safety culture can safeguard discussions against undue panic.

Those who carried out scenario planning saw tangible results in terms of their execution of contingency and crisis management actions, claimed a superior understanding of the context, and felt prepared to respond. However, scenario planning can result in an attachment to most likely scenarios, which can be vulnerable to confirmation biases and linear extrapolation of current dynamics that fail to shed light on possible outlier events. Furthermore, structured scenario planning can be seen as resource-intensive and full engagement can be difficult due to fear of being seen as alarmist. Therefore, scenario planning must be handled carefully, allowing engagement with multiple futures independent of preferential judgements and emotional attachments.

Figure 14.

#### CORRELATION BETWEEN WHETHER AN ORGANISATION CONDUCTED SCENARIO PLANNING AND STAFF’S PERSONAL SENSE OF PREPAREDNESS FOR THE CRISIS





## ANALYSIS & CONTEXTUAL UNDERSTANDING CONCLUSIONS

Despite some of the best intelligence in the world and years, indeed generations, of lived experience, the events of 2021 were still a shock and surprise to many. The confounding character of the events impaired the utility of analysis. People had to engage with uncertainty, which presents exceptional decision-making territory (Tuckett & Nikolic, 2017), amplifying the impact of biases and heuristics during decision-making, planning, and interpreting of the situation. Expectations about what the future might hold were influenced by vocational commitments, narratives, and biases.

The approach to analysis adopted by NGOs in Afghanistan was not best suited to outlier events that defied expectation. This was due to an over-reliance on prediction, an omission of human terrain and personal factors in events such as a morale, relationships,

allegiances, and political feeling, alongside an inability or unwillingness to engage with worst case scenarios, compounded by an attachment to the most likely ones, often coloured by sentiment.

The SRM community has processes and tools available to counter this, such as scenario planning. However, these still need work to be integrated fully into the vocabulary and operational practice of humanitarian crisis and security risk management. Drawing upon contemporary thinking about risk, the authors consider that accurately predicting which scenario will materialise under uncertain conditions is not only impossible, but can be detrimental to preparedness. Using structured analysis tailored to conditions of uncertainty, organisations can have a clear idea of those consequences that are unique to individual scenarios, or common across multiple scenarios, and design commensurate actions. Our understanding of the shortcomings as well as the benefits of different analytical tools and planning processes can maximise our ability to make informed decisions during crises.

## PART 2: FINDINGS

# THE HUMAN RESPONSE TO UNCERTAINTY: CALIBRATING CRISIS & SECURITY RISK MANAGEMENT TO PEOPLE

## KEY FINDINGS:

- Uncertainty, as well as decision-making and acting therein impacts the mental wellbeing of staff at all levels, an element which should be incorporated in personal and organisational crisis preparedness
- Crisis and security risk management must accommodate the needs of people as they are, as humans, including emotional responses and cognitive biases that can impact behaviour
- Leadership must be proactively demonstrated by management, through presence, visibility, and structured, deliberate, and diverse internal crisis communications
- Sensitisation of managers with security responsibilities and calibrating of SRM processes to common cognitive biases as part of training curricula could be a key mitigation measure

Throughout the course of this project, and indeed the observation of the crisis as it unfolded last year, the authors have heard repeatedly the importance of issues related to the social, behavioural, and psychological aspect of crisis and security risk management, and its lived reality.

Earlier in the report we discussed and explored the use and impact of communications during crisis management, the role of cognitive biases, as well as the importance

of appreciating qualitative elements in analysis, and integrating the voices, perceptions, and understanding of Afghan staff. Respondents who appeared satisfied and optimistic about the performance of their organisation during the crisis often described measures that put the psychosocial and emotional needs of staff front and centre. As one participant said, “acceptance starts in the office”(KII10) therefore “catering to the emotional experience of uncertainty” (Tuckett & Nikolic, 2017).



## LEADERSHIP IS VITAL IN CRISIS MANAGEMENT

The crisis in Afghanistan last year called on leaders and managers to make extremely challenging decisions under conditions of radical uncertainty. How should they respond to increasing violence? Should they relocate local staff? When? Should at-risk staff be evacuated? If so, what is defined as “at-risk”, and how could this be accomplished? What about competing priorities of protecting at-risk staff, and ensuring programme continuity, fulfilling the obligation to aid those most in need?

A key finding from the exchanges during this project was a link between the speed and effectiveness of measures taken, as well as perceptions of understanding of the developments of the crisis with the Country Director (CD) or in-country equivalent: present and visible leadership had a tangible impact on response.

Crisis Management Teams were more likely to be activated when the CD was in-country, and programmes were more likely to be suspended when the CD was remote, suggesting a correlation between more active and passive crisis management response actions between in-country and remote CDs, respectively. There was a correlation between the timing of crisis response actions and whether the CD was in-country at the time of the crisis,

suggesting a greater responsiveness to changing events on the ground amongst in-country leadership compared to those that were managing from elsewhere. There was also a slight correlation between whether the CD was in-country at time of crisis and the sense of the organisation’s understanding of what was happening during the crisis, and whether the individual felt personally prepared to respond to the crisis (indicating a role of leadership in supporting and reassuring staff at the time of the crisis).

The presence of the CD in-country was largely a case of circumstance rather than planning according to respondents: 64% of NGO respondents reported that their CD/HoM was in-country for the duration of the crisis. However, the role of leadership was referenced on several occasions. As a result of senior management teams being largely foreign, participants described a blow to morale when these staff were evacuated, highlighting the importance of present and visible leadership. People need leadership during times of crisis and fear, and as one respondent said:

“The CD was still in country communicating with national staff, assuring them [the organisation] was there to stay and deliver, even after all international staff had left” (K118).

Another stated,

“[The CD] stayed to set an example for staff, induce restraint in the Taliban ... The decision to stay helped our profile”.

64%

of NGO respondents reported that their CD/HoM was in-country for the duration of the crisis.





The crisis was marked by enormous concerns over the safety of national staff, and fears of reprisals against those who were perceived by the Taliban to have supported the international community. Respondents described staff having received death threats, and a powerful desire to evacuate from the country:

“Even before August 15th we received requests from staff to be evacuated, fearing reprisals due to affiliation with [the organisation] or international military forces – current and former employees... We received complaints by staff of death threats, but we were unable to verify validity, the majority of national staff requested to be evacuated” (KII 8).

Responding to these concerns was a huge challenge for leadership, addressing these fears and providing a tangible solution where the desired one, i.e. evacuation, was not an available option. Navigating such fraught terrain is a key example of where strong leadership was vital to prevent a deterioration in morale and trust.

Some organisations recognised significant concerns amongst staff not only about their safety, but also concerns over their livelihood,

“Worries from national staff as to if [the organisation] would stay and deliver, or if they would lose their jobs and be at the mercy of the Taliban; economic and financial distress on the side of national staff” (KII 8).

The importance of this was highlighted after the crisis too, with some organisations prioritising the return of international staff in order to signal that they intended to stay and deliver, not only to beneficiaries, but to staff, with one respondent citing the importance of having

“expat staff return as soon as possible to Afghanistan to signal that the organisation was there to stay and deliver, maintain operations, and to support beneficiaries and national staff” (KII 8).

Interview participants emphasised duty of care and staff safety as key drivers in the first instance. Indeed, the response to the Afghanistan crisis can be viewed as an example of where leadership paying attention to and prioritising duty of care of staff can pay enormous programmatic dividends later.

Respondents also highlighted the importance of having the right people in the right roles:

“[Successful crisis response has] a lot to do with HR policy, making sure we have the right people in these contexts, in these roles – senior managers need to have certain softer skills, able to listen, accept creative solutions and innovative thinking as well as act well under sustained pressure, manage several things at once” (KII 6).

Such comments indicate the importance of creativity, empathy, and active listening as key skills and attributes in addition to the more executive suite of leadership qualities, which even in times of crisis can conjure images of forceful, direct and almost authoritarian leadership.

In fact, some of the most effective leadership practices described were ones that integrated discussion and consultation amidst small, diverse and inclusive teams, yet implementing decisions with conviction:

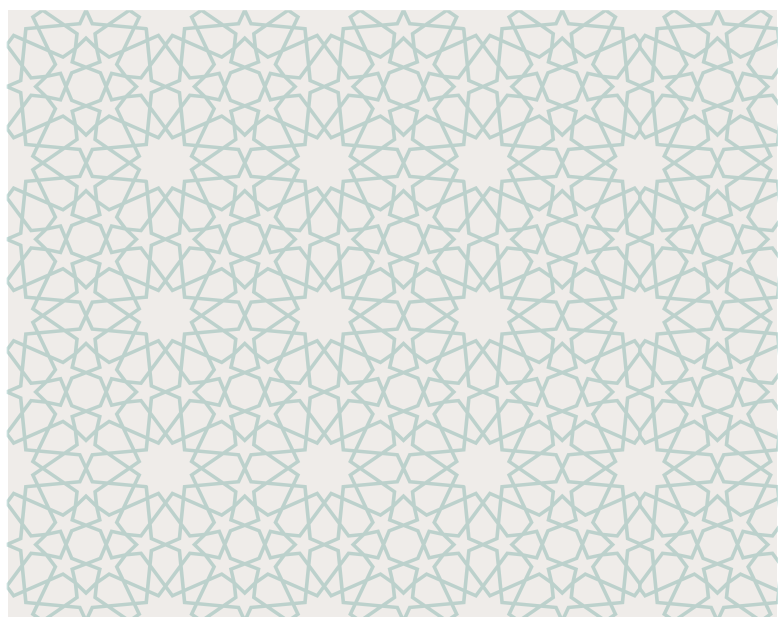
“We were a team, and we had a decision made by the team, not only by me, but I was the one who was take a final decision. But our idea was the same” (KII 7).

“Decision-making was always unusually clear and calm, a credit to the CD, who was pushing back against HQ, listening to national colleagues” (KII 6).

When leadership was not felt, this had a significant negative impact on staff, heard particularly in the Afghan colleagues interviewed:

“A lot of people were left behind on their own, not a co-ordinated process ... Take care of staff in terms of safety & security ... take care of our staff at least, not treated like we were this time” (KII 11).

The importance of communications has already been explored in the above sections, but must also be considered here as a key element of leadership. Sharing information, keeping staff updated on decisions and plans, and supporting the articulate exchange of information throughout fostered trust through clarity and transparency. Crisis communications planning and exercises can increase individual and organisational capacity to achieve timely and sufficient internal information sharing during uncertainty.



### EMOTION

A recurring theme throughout this report has been emotion. Feelings of fear, desperation, and anxiety from Afghan colleagues

"We got hopeless, especially at the beginning of what happened. We really became hopeless. And we were thinking that everything was finished and destroyed" (KII 7)

Feelings of guilt, misplaced hope, and attachment on the part of international staff

"We were obviously very committed... for the better part of two decades, there was obviously a huge amount of investment,[...] and I think we felt connection to the work that we were doing. We obviously had a lot of input from our staff who, you know, quite rightly, were very emotionally invested in the outcome of what was happening" (KII 3);

The dread and despair as the world looked on that summer (see Ben Wallace, UK Defence Minister, shedding tears).



The emotional charge of the situation, the images of HKIA during the airlift which held the world's attention, and the frenzy that accompanied the personal and organisational reactions struck the authors, as observers at the time. No one was immune, especially anyone who had ever been involved in Afghanistan. As one respondent said,

**"Human actions [are] difficult to separate from human emotion"** (KII 12).

In the survey, 75% of survey respondents cited either some or many emotional drivers impacting on decision-making. In some cases, this was linked to the personal and professional investment of those who have been working in Afghanistan; the optimism of Afghans who had seen changes over the past 20 years; and the fears of those who knew the Taliban of the 90s. The emotional investment of the international community was described not only by those in-country at the time, but also onlookers from afar. One respondent linked this emotional investment to the overwhelming sentiment at the time of "having to do something", no matter how insignificant or futile, surrounding the airport situation and attempts to evacuate at all costs.

Indeed, managers and leaders were faced with challenges in navigating the concerns of national staff. On the one hand, death threats were difficult to confirm and substantiate. On the other, the fears of staff could not be ignored and enormous organisational resources were placed on supporting staff in their bids for visas to other nations.



When thinking about the emotions surrounding the crisis, fear, anger, bitterness, fury, betrayal all come to mind. This said, interview participants described hope and optimism as the most common emotions that appeared to have an impact on decisions made. and we have explored earlier how this impacted on analysis and action. People appeared to have been unwilling or reluctant to abandon their optimism in the face of a 'worst case scenario'; the challenge with these plans is that it's obviously very hard to be that person who comes up and makes the outlandish claims, when "high value is placed on consensus seeking behaviour" (Van der Heijden p. 34, 1996). 'Surely something will happen', 'surely something will stop them', participants recalled. This resolute belief in intervention has a deus ex machina quality to it - the inexplicable plot device used to deliver resolution, consolation and order to an audience. But real life, real crisis, is not as kind as a classical tragedy. Interestingly, the two respondents who described low impacts of emotions both had elsewhere described extensive planning and preparation carried out by their organisation, as well as significant field experience of the personnel involved.



### COGNITIVE BIASES

The effects of cognitive biases have been a recurring theme throughout this paper, and the relationship between these and SRM was previously explored by the authors in the context of the role of choice architecture in SRM (Cole & Olympiou, 2021). People are, by nature, biased, with subjectivity and the use of heuristics intrinsic to how they function. This contrasts with the hyper-rational actors who are assumed to be carrying out contingency plans during times of crisis.

Cognitive biases have a role not only in analytical thinking, but also in how choices regarding planning and crisis management were made during the 2021 crisis. The authors saw anchoring at work, where people or organisations fixated on a particular outlook or interpretation of events: "As this was the date given by Biden for the total withdrawal, [we] expected deterioration around September 11th- after September 11 the plan was to phase staff back in.... The speed, timing of the deterioration caught people off guard, and plans had to urgently be brought forward" (KII 6). As a result, some people underestimated the significance of the developments and did not adjust for their implications. Perhaps the implication was too great to bear, and optimism, loss aversion, and sunk cost fallacy came into play: not only for the US, but such aversion may have also been applicable to those who had invested so much emotionally, personally, and professionally into the Afghanistan of the past 20 years. This may also have inhibited an honest and frankly pessimistic view of the reality of the situation.

The authors are aware that this fallacy may well have impacted the recounting of the events of 2021. 'Narrative fosters an illusion of inevitability' (Kahneman, 2011), and as participants construct the narrative of their experiences, causation may be attributed and the full array of choices available at the time can be obscured. However, we noticed a general openness, curiosity and introspection from many respondents that suggested their own narratives were not immutable.

### CONCLUDING CALIBRATING SRM TO PEOPLE

In this section, the human elements of crisis and SRM have been explored. This crisis - and indeed crises in general - was an extraordinarily challenging leadership environment, where present and visible leadership yielded dividends. Response measures were generally implemented more quickly by organisations whose Country Director or equivalent was in the country at the time.

Some organisations prioritised the return of their international staff, in acknowledgement of the importance of signalling to national staff that the organisation planned to remain in Afghanistan. These decisions were taken in recognition of the extreme anxiety and concern staff felt, not only for their safety, but for their livelihoods too.

This material response to the emotional needs of staff was an example of crisis management that heeds the impact of uncertainty on people, and acknowledges and responds to their staff as people, as they are, not as they should be, including dealing with significant emotional responses that may be at odds with other perceptions and interpretations.

Emotions were cited as playing a major part in decision-making, and indeed the crisis was characterised by its emotional charge. Fear and despair, but also hope and optimism had adverse effects on planning and execution of crisis management action. Communication and leadership were essential, and where these two elements failed, the impact on national staff was devastating; responding to the human needs of staff is a tangible and material element of SRM and crisis management.



# PART 3

## CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS



Drawing on contemporary thinking on risk, uncertainty, and SRM in the humanitarian sector, and through a combination of surveys and interviews, this research project has explored the crisis management practices employed surrounding the response to the Taliban takeover of Kabul, on August 15th 2021. The purpose was to identify lessons that can benefit the humanitarian community and SRM decision-makers. This report examined which SRM tools and practices humanitarian organisations had available for crisis management and how they used them. Moreover, it identified how individuals and organisations engaged with the uncertain character of the developments of the period in question, and assessed the impact of narratives and cognitive biases on contextual analysis and its operational implementation. Lastly, it explored some of the behavioural and psychological aspects of crisis and SRM the authors encountered in their research, and discussed how SRM could benefit from calibrating tools and processes to such human characteristics.

Overall, the commonly employed SRM and crisis management practices proved relevant to the humanitarian actors' core security needs, and, in most of the cases examined, served the objective of enabling a structured response in a highly uncertain and challenging decision-making environment. Where SRM planning and tools were reported not to have worked or to have fallen short of expectations, this was mostly due to a lack of access to such tools (as in the case of small organisations that had no security structures) or to partial or late implementation.

A central conclusion of this research is the need to engage with uncertainty ahead of crises in an integrated way. Such engagement is two-fold: on the one hand, employing processes and tools that ensure the inclusive, systematic, and rigorous interpretation of the information and analysis that feeds into preparation and action; on the other, consistently and deliberately sensitising and calibrating decision-makers and staff to the impact and challenges of making decisions and operating under uncertainty.

Operating under conditions of uncertainty is extremely challenging. It makes us vulnerable to our cognitive biases, the human tendency to use mental shortcuts, and exposes our inability to admit what lies outside our knowledge; it denies us a very fundamental need for comfort, order, and control. These human needs must be accommodated for in our practices.

Where previously practitioners may have rested quite comfortably on forecasts, outlooks or most likely scenarios, unforeseen and unimaginable events are becoming an increasingly common feature of our operating environments, especially as humanitarian action is increasing in size globally. Luckily, it is not necessary to imagine or predict; but rather be ready to observe, listen and understand, consider a range of possibilities, and build operations on such foundations to safely deliver programming under conditions of uncertainty.

Another consistent finding is that prioritising preparedness over prediction should be a guiding principle of SRM. While we are unable to specifically foresee when and how crises might materialise, it is possible to maximise understanding of the main inflection points of our operations and our organisations' risk thresholds. Mapping out known unknowns - those elements which security actors know that they do not know - can reveal the preparedness steps required and the decision-making dilemmas that managers might face, regardless of the timeframe in which these may come to pass.

It is challenging to openly discuss potential futures, especially those contradicting dominant narratives or implying negative repercussions for staff and programmes, without causing alarm, panic, or pushback. Approaching discussions about possible scenarios within the framework of a standard process allows the systematic and dispassionate examination of the potential impact on operations. This could be within organisations or across the humanitarian community.

As our operating environment changes, the authors see a need and an opportunity to innovate, learn and evolve SRM practices, drawing on the lessons from other sectors. This is not because existing practices are insufficient, but because the world is becoming more complex and uncertain, and the operational exposure of the humanitarian world is increasing. Uncertainty and risk are extremely challenging subjects that draw out complex elements of human behaviour and decision-making that must be navigated, rather than ignored in favour of rationalistic models. The Afghanistan crisis of 2021 not only provides evidence regarding the complexity of crisis management, it provides lessons on how to further develop and implement ever more successful SRM practices that allow NGOs to stay and deliver through uncertainty.

# ALL BETS ARE OFF: WHAT NOW?

As the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan demonstrated, humanitarian organisations are operating under conditions of uncertainty which challenge the implementation of existing crisis management and SRM processes and tools. Planning systems are required to encourage thinking around a wider range of outcomes in order to prevent reliance on group narratives, personal predictions, and a range of cognitive biases, that can result in poor preparedness and suboptimal responses to events.

Where can organisations put their resources, and what can the humanitarian community be focusing on in order to become less reactive, and more ‘anti-fragile’?

## **Planning ahead of crises, in an inclusive group, not just for the sake of plans, but for the process of planning.**

Shifting attention from solely security documentation to the security planning process that, where possible, includes a range of staff, capturing planning in an ergonomic and user-friendly fashion. Socialisation of security plans, and exercising them regularly remains the single most effective preparation approach, putting people at the heart of processes, plans and procedures. Planning to include coordination between humanitarian and non-humanitarian actors, to find solutions and provide mutual support. Growing professional networks by prioritising relationship building, and sharing ideas with peers across organisations before crises take place, not waiting for a time during or after. Time spent with peers pays dividends, even if it seems like a luxury amidst all competing priorities and demands for deliverables.

## **Calibration of SRM to people, cognisant of the emotional and psychological impact of uncertainty.**

Sensitisation of SRM leaders to cognitive biases that can impact the behaviour of staff, and adjusting security plans, processes and procedures to be considerate of such conditions, prioritising user-friendliness and accessibility (particularly under duress). While digital innovation enables acceleration and scale of operations, the functionality of SRM processes can be enhanced as much by technological solutions as by simplifying existing, analogue and physical procedures, communications, and documents - SRM leaders can benefit from examining a move in either direction, depending on their resources and context.

## **Expansion of context analysis and consideration of the effect of cognitive biases on how developments are interpreted.**

Consideration of what developments mean, not just in the context of the NGO perspective or international community, but other stakeholders such as local populations; an inclusive approach to context analysis that uses not only the data that is easy to quantify and measure, but also the less tangible - the anecdote, metaphor or sentiment - atmospherics that come from engaging with people, most importantly staff on the ground. Prioritisation of context analysis within strategy, planning, and SRM, so as to inform programmatic, operational, and contingency planning, through understanding the undercurrents of developments.

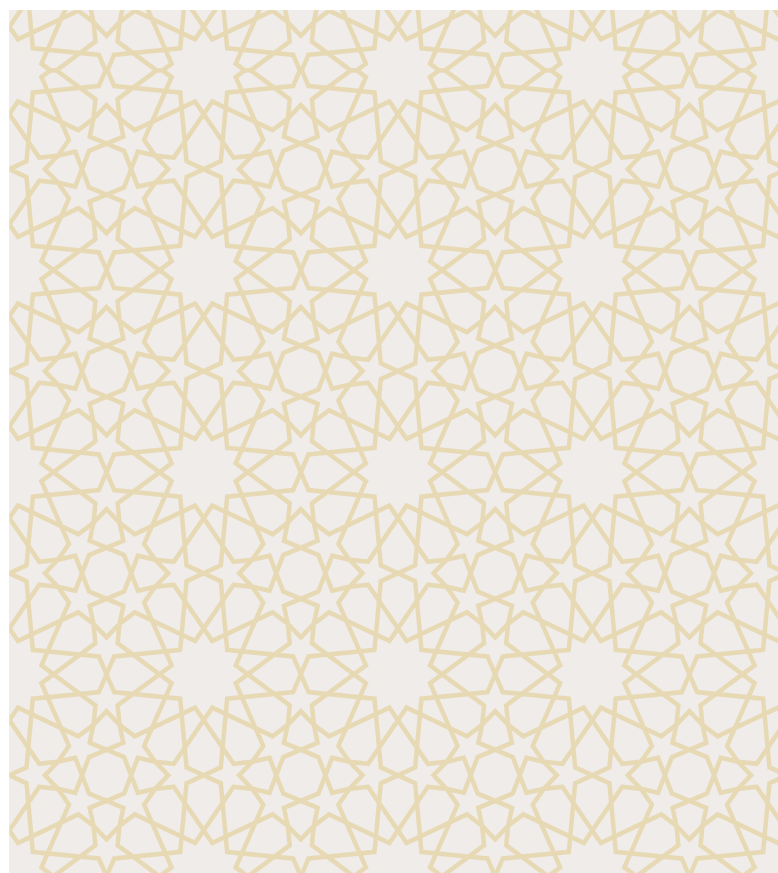
## **Creation of time and space for scenario planning, considering unlikely yet plausible scenarios.**

Integration of scenario planning not only into crisis management practices, but the ‘business as usual’ of SRM, synchronised with other programme management planning and reporting routines. This can be coupled with the creation of dedicated workshops and spaces, both physical and digital, eponymous and anonymous, where an inclusive examination of plausible scenarios can take place without the peril of alarmism or panic. Space for such regular scenario planning can be provided within individual organisations, locally and globally by humanitarian safety and security platforms, as well as by donors.



## **Enabling decisive leadership during crisis management, including development of structures and competencies ahead of crises.**

The design of structures and policies that encourage small yet inclusive CMTs, with clearly defined roles, which remains the nucleus of decision-making and compass for the direction of response. Such structures are best put in place not during crisis management, but during 'business as usual' SRM planning. Selection and cultivation of competencies in leadership positions, including emotional intelligence and sensitivity to needs for care, attention and communication, whilst maintaining a capacity for decisive action, are critical to effective leadership. Communication is also critical to leadership; it should be conducted frequently and with intent, including addressing the needs of national staff, international staff, HQ, partners, and other stakeholders, as well as addressing fears, even if they appear illogical or irrational. Structures and competencies are complementary elements of successful leadership. Physical presence and visibility of leadership throughout crises is paramount for staff morale as well as to understanding developments.



This project was driven by the authors' interest in the relationship between people and uncertainty, and in a behavioural approach to counter weaknesses in crisis and risk management. The aim was seeking knowledge, understanding and, above all, methods and practices to take NGOs forward to the next crisis, as uncertainty dominates many of the operating environments in which humanitarian organisations are working. Although such terrain presents complex challenges, it can be navigated by engaging with uncertainty and acknowledging the limits of what can be known, by prioritising preparedness over prediction, and acting in recognition of what it is to be human facing an unseen future.

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# **RISK MANAGEMENT & DECISION MAKING UNDER UNCERTAINTY**

**DURING THE AFGHANISTAN CRISIS 2021**

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