Congressional Research Service
Informing the legislative debate since 1914

Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy In Brief

Updated January 31, 2020

Congressional Research Service
https://crsreports.congress.gov
R45122

CRS REPORT
Prepared for Members and
Committees of Congress

Congressional Research Service
Informing the legislative debate since 1914

SUMMARY

R45122

January 31, 2020

Clayton Thomas
Analyst in Middle Eastern Affairs

Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy In Brief

Afghanistan was elevated as a significant U.S. foreign policy concern in 2001, when the United States, in response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, led a military campaign against Al Qaeda and the Taliban government that harbored and supported it. In the intervening 18 years, the United States has suffered around 2,400 military fatalities in Afghanistan (including two in combat in 2020 to date) and Congress has appropriated approximately $137 billion for reconstruction there. In that time, an elected Afghan government has replaced the Taliban, and most measures of human development have improved, although future prospects of those measures remain mixed in light of a robust Taliban insurgency and continued terrorist activity. The fundamental objective of U.S. efforts in Afghanistan is "preventing any further attacks on the United States by terrorists enjoying safe haven or support in Afghanistan."

Until September 2019, U.S. military engagement in Afghanistan appeared closer to an end than perhaps ever before, as U.S. officials negotiated directly with Taliban interlocutors on the issues of counterterrorism and the presence of some 14,000 U.S. troops. However, on September 7, 2019, President Trump announced that those talks, led by U.S. envoy Zalmay Khalilzad, had been called off. In November 2019, President Trump made a surprise visit to Afghanistan, where he apparently confirmed reports that unofficial talks had been restarted and claimed that the Taliban "want to do a ceasefire," prompting expressions of confusion by some Afghan government officials and denials from Taliban spokesmen. In early December 2019, the State Department announced that Khalilzad would rejoin talks with the Taliban in Doha, though analysts debate whether the President's focus on a ceasefire represents a real change in the U.S. negotiating position. Talks were paused again in December 2019 after another Taliban attack. As of January 2020, those talks are ongoing, though U.S. and Taliban officials have described the subjects and status of those talks differently. Afghan government representatives have not been participants in U.S.-Taliban talks, leading some observers to worry that the United States would prioritize a military withdrawal over a complex political settlement that preserves some of the social, political, and humanitarian gains made since 2001. Observers speculate about what kind of political arrangement, if any, could satisfy both Kabul and the Taliban to the extent that the latter fully abandons armed struggle.

At the same time, President Trump has expressed his intention to withdraw U.S. forces from Afghanistan. The U.S. commander in Afghanistan stated in October 2019 that the United States has gradually been reducing the number of U.S. troops in the country in 2019, and the Pentagon has reportedly drawn up contingency plans to execute a withdrawal of all U.S. forces in the event President Trump makes such an order. Many observers assess that a full-scale U.S. withdrawal would lead to the collapse of the Afghan government and perhaps even the reestablishment of Taliban control. By many measures, the Taliban are in a stronger military position now than at any point since 2001, though some once-public metrics related to the conduct of the war have been classified or are no longer produced (including district-level territorial and population control assessments). Underlying the present negotiations is the unsettled state of Afghan politics, which is a major complicating factor. Preliminary results from the presidential election, which took place on September 28, 2019, were released in December 2019 and indicate a narrow victory for incumbent President Ashraf Ghani, but an ongoing recount, accompanied by allegations of fraud and multiple candidates' claims of victory, could presage contention and instability.

For additional information on Afghanistan and U.S. policy there, see CRS Report R45818, *Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy*, by Clayton Thomas. For background information and analysis on the history of congressional engagement with Afghanistan and U.S. policy there, as well as a summary of recent Afghanistan-related legislative proposals, see CRS Report R45329, *Afghanistan: Issues for Congress and Legislation 2017-2019*, by Clayton Thomas.

Contents

Overview 1
U.S.-Taliban Negotiations 2
December 2019: Talks Officially Resumed 3
Afghan Political Situation 5
Military and Security Situation 5
U.S. Military Presence and Operations 6
U.S. Adversaries: The Taliban and Islamic State 7
ANDSF Development and Deployment 8
Regional Dynamics: Pakistan and Other Neighbors 9
Economy and U.S. Aid 10
Outlook 11

Figures

Figure 1. Number of Weapons Released (Manned and Remotely Piloted Aircraft strike assets) by year 7

Appendixes

Appendix. U.S. Strikes by Month, July-October 2019 14

Contacts

Author Information 15

Overview

The U.S. and Afghan governments, along with partner countries, remain engaged in combat with a robust Taliban-led insurgency. While U.S. military officials maintain that Afghan forces are making progress against the Taliban, by some measures insurgents are in control of or contesting more territory today than at any point since 2001.[1] The conflict also involves an array of other armed groups, including active affiliates of both Al Qaeda (AQ) and the Islamic State (IS, also known as ISIS, ISIL, or by the Arabic acronym *Da'esh*). Since early 2015, the NATO-led mission in Afghanistan, known as Resolute Support Mission (RSM), has focused on training, advising, and assisting Afghan government forces; combat operations by U.S. forces, along with some partner forces, also continue.

President Donald J. Trump has expressed his desire to withdraw U.S. forces from Afghanistan, saying in August 2019 that he wants to do so "as quickly as we can."[2] The U.S. commander in Afghanistan stated in October 2019 that the United States has gradually been reducing the number of troops in the country in 2019, and the Pentagon reportedly maintains contingency plans to execute a withdrawal of all U.S. forces should the President decide to issue such an order.[3]

Alongside the military campaign, the United States has been engaged in a diplomatic effort to end the war through direct talks with Taliban representatives—a reversal of previous U.S. policy. A draft framework, in which the Taliban would agree to prohibit terrorist groups from operating on Afghan soil in return for the eventual withdrawal of U.S. forces, was reached between U.S. and Taliban negotiators in January 2019, and talks appeared close to concluding in the early fall. However, on September 7, 2019, President Trump announced that those talks had been called off.

Afghan government representatives were not directly involved in U.S.-Taliban talks, leading some Afghans to worry that the United States would prioritize a military withdrawal over a complex political settlement that preserves some of the social, political, and humanitarian gains made since 2001.[4] During a November 2019 surprise visit to Afghanistan, President Trump appeared to confirm reports that informal U.S.-Taliban meetings are again taking place, and about a week later the State Department announced that Khalilzad would rejoin talks with the Taliban in Doha, Qatar. However, inconsistent remarks by President Trump about the necessity of a ceasefire have sparked some expressions of confusion.[5]

Further complicating U.S. policy is the unsettled state of Afghan politics: the release of preliminary results from the critical presidential election, which took place on September 28, 2019, were released after months of delay in December 2019. The election was characterized by low turnout, allegations of fraud, and multiple candidates' claims of victory. Preliminary results indicate a narrow victory for incumbent President Ashraf Ghani, but a partial recount remains ongoing as of January 2020. The Afghan government has made some progress in reducing

[1] U.S. Department of Defense (DOD), *Remarks by Secretary Esper in a Joint Press Conference With Senior Afghan Officials and Resolute Support Mission Commander*, October 21, 2019.

[2] "Trump Wants to Get Out Of Afghanistan 'As Quickly As He Can,'" *Tolo News*, August 1, 2019.

[3] Carol Lee and Courtney Kube, "Pentagon Draws up Plans for Quick Afghanistan Withdrawal in Case Trump Blindsides Military," *NBC News*, October 21, 2019.

[4] See, for example, Mushtaq Mojaddidi, "Young Afghans Wary as Possible US-Taliban Deal Nears," Agence France Presse, August 3, 2019.

[5] Mujib Mashal, "In Afghanistan, Trump Creates Confusion Over U.S. Policy on Taliban," *New York Times*, November 29, 2019.

corruption and implementing its budgetary commitments,[6] but faces domestic criticism for its failure to guarantee security and prevent insurgent gains.

The United States has appropriated approximately $137 billion in various forms of reconstruction aid to Afghanistan over the past 18 years, from building up and sustaining the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) to economic development. This assistance has increased Afghan government capacity, but prospects for stability in Afghanistan appear distant. Some U.S. policymakers still hope that Afghanistan's largely underdeveloped natural resources and/or geographic position at the crossroads of future global trade routes might improve the economic life of the country, and, by extension, its social and political dynamics. Nevertheless, Afghanistan's economic and political outlook remains uncertain, if not negative, in light of ongoing hostilities.

U.S.-Taliban Negotiations

In August 2017, President Trump announced what he termed a new strategy for Afghanistan and South Asia in a nationally televised address.[7] Many Afghan and U.S. observers interpreted the speech and the policies it promised (expanded targeting authorities for U.S. forces, greater pressure on Pakistan, a modest increase in the number of U.S. and international troops) as a sign of renewed U.S. commitment to Afghanistan.[8] Less than a year later, in July 2018, the Trump Administration reportedly ordered the start of direct talks with the Taliban that did not include the Afghan government. This development represented a reversal of U.S. policy, which had previously been to support an "Afghan-led, Afghan-owned" peace process.[9]

In September 2018, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo appointed former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad to the newly created post of Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation.[10] For almost a year, Khalilzad held a near-continuous series of meetings with Taliban representatives in Doha, Qatar, along with consultations with the Afghan, Pakistani, and other regional governments. In March 2019, Khalilzad announced that an agreement "in draft" had been reached on counterterrorism assurances and U.S. troop withdrawal. He asserted that after the agreement was finalized, "the Taliban and other Afghans, including the government, will begin intra-Afghan negotiations on a political settlement and comprehensive ceasefire."[11]

By August 2019, the process appeared to be reaching its conclusion. In a September 2, 2019, interview with Afghanistan's TOLO News, Khalilzad confirmed, "we have reached an agreement in principle" in which the United States would withdraw about 5,000 troops from five bases within 135 days if the Taliban reduced violence in Kabul and another key province (Parwan). The remainder of the U.S. troops would be withdrawn from Afghanistan within 16 months, or by the

[6] See, for example, United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan, *Afghanistan's Fight Against Corruption: Groundwork for Peace and Prosperity*, May 2019.

[7] The White House, Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia, August 21, 2017.

[8] Pamela Constable, "In Afghanistan, Trump's Speech Brings Relief to Some. To Others, 'It Means More War, Destruction,'" *Washington Post*, August 22, 2017.

[9] Mujib Mashal and Eric Schmitt, "White House Orders Direct Taliban Talks to Jump-Start Afghan Negotiations," *New York Times*, July 15, 2018.

[10] Khalilzad served as Ambassador to Afghanistan (2003-2005), Ambassador to Iraq (2005-2007), and U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations (2007-2009) during the George W. Bush Administration.

[11] U.S. Special Representative Zalmay Khalilzad, Twitter, March 12, 2019, at https://twitter.com/US4AfghanPeace/status/1105513781705302016.

end of 2020, arguably fulfilling a key Taliban demand for the removal of foreign forces. It was less clear what specific concessions the Taliban would make in return. As part of the tentative deal, U.S. officials reportedly "expected" the Taliban to enter direct negotiations with the Afghan government after a U.S. withdrawal begins.[12]

That process came to an abrupt halt on September 7, 2019, when President Trump revealed in a series of tweets that he had invited "major Taliban leaders" and President Ghani to meet with him separately at Camp David on the following day. He wrote that, because a Taliban attack had killed several people, including a U.S. soldier, in Kabul on September 5, he had "immediately cancelled the meeting and called off peace negotiations."[13] Some questioned why the September 5 attack prompted President Trump to cancel the negotiations; 17 U.S. troops had been killed in combat in 2019 before that, and the Taliban conducted multiple large-scale bombings of civilian targets during the talks in Doha (alongside their ongoing military campaign against Afghan forces). Other potential factors motivating the cancelation included negative reactions to the prospective deal from some Members of Congress.[14]

December 2019: Talks Officially Resumed

Taliban officials responded to President Trump's decision to cancel the Camp David summit by warning that the United States would "regret" abandoning talks while maintaining that "our doors are open for negotiations."[15] Within a month, news reports indicated that unofficial talks between Khalilzad and Taliban representatives in Pakistan had begun.[16] Momentum toward reopening talks was strengthened by the President Ghani's announcement on November 12 of the planned release of three high-profile Taliban prisoners from Afghan government custody in exchange for an American and Australian held by the Haqqani Network (a U.S.-designated terrorist organization and semi-autonomous component of the Taliban).[17]

On November 28, 2019, President Trump made a surprise Thanksgiving visit to Afghanistan. During the trip, President Trump both expressed ambivalence about a potential "deal" with the Taliban ("If they make it, fine. If they don't make it, that's fine") and argued that the Taliban "want to make a deal very badly."[18] In response, a Taliban spokesman said, "The Americans walked away from the negotiating table, and now the ball is on their side – it is up to them to come back if they want to solve this…Our positions remain the same."[19]

President Trump also stated that "we're meeting with them [the Taliban], and we're saying it has to be a ceasefire. They didn't want to do a ceasefire, but now they do want to do a ceasefire, I

[12] Karen DeYoung, Missy Ryan, Anne Gearan, and Philip Rucker, "Trump and senior aides discuss withdrawal from Afghanistan as talks with Taliban advance," *Washington Post*, August 16, 2019.

[13] Donald J. Trump, Twitter, September 7, 2019, at https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1170469618177236992.

[14] Lindsey Graham and Jack Keane, "We Can't Outsource Our Security to Anyone—Especially the Taliban," *Washington Post*, opinion, August 28, 2019.

[15] "Afghanistan war: Taliban tell Trump their 'doors are open,'" *BBC*, September 18, 2019.

[16] Asif Shahzad and Jonathan Landy, "U.S. Afghanistan envoy meets Taliban in Pakistan: sources," *Reuters*, October 4, 2019; Jessica Donati, "U.S. Moves to Restart Taliban Peace Process," *Wall Street Journal*, October 13, 2019.

[17] For more background on the Haqqani Network, see CRS In Focus IF10604, *Al Qaeda and Islamic State Affiliates in Afghanistan*, by Clayton Thomas.

[18] The White House, "Remarks by President Trump and President Ghani of Afghanistan After Bilateral Meeting, Bagram, Afghanistan," November 28, 2019.

[19] Mashal, "In Afghanistan, Trump Creates Confusion Over U.S. Policy on Taliban," op. cit.

believe." While the Afghan government has also sought to precondition talks on a broad ceasefire, some analysts argue that doing so could forestall talks entirely given the Taliban's relatively strong military position and President Trump's publicly stated desire for a U.S. withdrawal.[20] On December 4, the State Department released a statement announcing Khalilzad's departure for Kabul, followed by travel to Doha to "rejoin talks with the Taliban to discuss steps that could lead to intra-Afghan negotiations and a peaceful settlement of the war, specifically a reduction in violence that leads to a ceasefire."[21] Talks were paused again after a Taliban attack near Bagram Air Field on December 12, but restarted in early January 2020. Talks continue, as of January 2020, though Taliban officials have said that negotiations are now focused on the signing of the agreement, ahead of which the Taliban "have agreed to scale down military operations," according to a spokesman.[22]

It remains unclear what kind of political arrangement could satisfy both Kabul and the Taliban to the extent that the latter abandons its armed struggle. Afghan President Ghani has promised that his government will not accept any settlement that limits Afghans' rights and has warned that any agreement to withdraw U.S. forces that did not include Kabul's participation could lead to "catastrophe," pointing to the 1990s-era civil strife following the fall of the Soviet-backed government that led to the rise of the Taliban.[23] Afghans opposed to the Taliban doubt the group's trustworthiness, and express concern that, in the absence of U.S. military pressure, the group will have little incentive to comply with the terms of an agreement, the most crucial aspect of which would arguably be concluding a comprehensive political settlement with the Afghan government.[24] The Taliban have given contradictory signs, and generally do not describe in detail their vision for post-settlement Afghan governance beyond referring to it as a subject for intra-Afghan negotiations."[25] While many Afghans, especially women, who remember Taliban rule and oppose the group's policies and beliefs remain wary,[26] a December 2019 survey reported that a "significant majority" of Afghans are both aware of (77%) and strongly or somewhat support (89%) efforts to negotiate a peace agreement with the Taliban.[27]

[20] Wesley Morgan, "How Trump trips up his own Afghan peace efforts," *Politico,* August 16, 2019; Karen DeYoung and Susannah George, "Trump's talk of Afghanistan cease-fire appears to surprise the Taliban, Afghan government," *Washington Post,* November 29, 2019.

[21] Office of the Spokesperson, "Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad Travels to Afghanistan and Qatar," December 4, 2019.

[22] Ismail Khan, "Afghan Taliban see deal with US by end of month," *Dawn,* January 18, 2020.

[23] Hasib Danish Alikozai and Mohammad Habibzada, "Afghans Worry as US Makes Progress in Taliban Talks," *Voice of America,* January 29, 2019.

[24] Pamela Constable, "Afghans voice fears that the U.S. is undercutting them in deal with the Taliban," *Washington Post,* August 17, 2019.

[25] Middle East Media Research Institute, "Afghan Taliban Spokesman Suhail Shaheen On Failed U.S.-Taliban Talks," September 19, 2019. One spokesman said in January 2019 that the group is "not seeking a monopoly on power;" another in May spoke of the group's "determination to reestablish the Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan." Kathy Gannon, "Taliban Say They Are Not Looking to Rule Afghanistan Alone," *Associated Press,* January 30, 2019; Abdul Qadir Sediqi and Rupman Jain, "Taliban Fighters Double as Reporters to Wage Afghan Digital War," *Reuters,* May 10, 2019.

[26] Pamela Constable, "The Return of a Taliban Government? Afghanistan Talks Raise Once-Unthinkable Question," *Washington Post,* January 29, 2019.

[27] The Asia Foundation, "Afghanistan in 2019: A Survey of the Afghan People," released December 3, 2019.

Afghan Political Situation

The unsettled state of Afghan politics is a major complicating factor for potential negotiations. Afghanistan's October 2018 parliamentary elections were marred by logistical, administrative, and security problems; the new parliament was inaugurated in April 2019, but the lower house quickly fell into a months-long dispute, including physical confrontation among parliamentarians, over the election of a speaker.[28] A presidential election, originally scheduled for April 2019, was held after two delays on September 28, 2019. The election went forward despite widespread expectations that it would again be delayed to facilitate the formation of an interim national unity government (leading most candidates to forgo campaigning) and despite concerns about the potentially destabilizing effect of election-related violence or an outcome seen as illegitimate.[29]

While the U.N. reported a lower level of violence during the September 2019 presidential election than the 2018 parliamentary election, hundreds of civilians were wounded or killed in election day violence in 2019.[30] Afghanistan's Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) validated 1.8 million votes, putting turnout at about 20% of Afghanistan's 9 million registered voters (out of a total population of around 35 million).[31] The campaigns of President Ghani and Chief Executive Officer Abdullah Abdullah, the two frontrunners, both claimed victory within days of the vote, without presenting concrete evidence. This has led to fears of a repeat of the circumstances surrounding the 2014 presidential election, which prompted a dispute between the same two candidates that nearly led to violence and required intensive U.S. diplomacy to broker a fragile power-sharing agreement that largely held through 2019.[32]

After months of delays, the IEC released preliminary results on December 22 showing President Ghani with 50.6% of the vote, compared to 39.5% for Abdullah (the remaining 10% was split between twelve other candidates). As of January 2020, the IEC is conducting a partial vote recount to address candidate concerns. In the event that President Ghani's vote share drops below 50%, the Afghan constitution requires a runoff vote between the two top candidates (as happened in 2014 between Ghani and Abdullah). However, harsh weather conditions make large parts of the country inaccessible during winter, perhaps necessitating a delay until spring or summer 2020 that would extend political uncertainty and complicate potential negotiations.

Military and Security Situation

Since early 2015, the NATO-led mission in Afghanistan of 16,700 troops, known as Resolute Support Mission (RSM), has focused on training, advising, and assisting Afghan government

[28] Mujib Mashal and Jawad Sukhanyar, "Long, Rowdy Feud in Afghan Parliament Mirrors Wider Political Fragility," *New York Times*, June 19, 2019.

[29] Cara Anna and Tameem Akhgar, "Afghanistan Election in Doubt as US, Taliban Near Deal," *Associated Press*, August 9, 2019; Pamela Constable, "With U.S.-Taliban peace talks canceled, Afghan president is on the hot seat," *Washington Post*, September 9, 2019.

[30] United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, Special Report: 2019 Election-related Violence, October 2019.

[31] Ali Yawar Adili and Jelena Bjelica, "Afghanistan's 2019 Election (23): Disputed biometric votes endanger election results," *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, November 7, 2019.

[32] Abdul Qadir Sediqi and Rod Nickel "Front-runners each claim victory in Afghan election," *Reuters*, September 30, 2019.

forces. Combat operations by U.S. forces also continue and have increased in number since 2017. These two "complementary missions" comprise Operation Freedom's Sentinel.[33]

Since at least early 2017, U.S. military officials have assessed that that the conflict is "at a state of strategic stalemate."[34] Arguably complicating that assessment, the U.S. government is withholding many once-public metrics of military progress. Most notably, the U.S. military is "no longer producing its district-level stability assessments of Afghan government and insurgent control and influence."[35] This information, which was in every previous Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) quarterly report going back to January 2016, estimated the extent of Taliban control and influence in terms of both territory and population; SIGAR reports that it was told by the U.S. military that the assessment is no longer being produced because it "was of limited decision-making value to the [U.S.] Commander."[36] The last reported metrics from SIGAR in its January 30, 2019, report, illustrated that the share of districts under government control or influence fell to 53.8%, as of October 2018. This figure, which marked a slight decline from previous reports, was the lowest recorded by SIGAR since tracking began in November 2015; 12% of districts were under insurgent control or influence, with the remaining 34% contested.[37]

U.S. Military Presence and Operations

On multiple occasions, President Trump has publicly declared his frustration with how long U.S. forces have been in Afghanistan and his intention to withdraw them from the country. General Austin S. Miller, the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan, said on October 9, 2019 that the number of U.S. forces had been gradually reduced by 2,000 over the past year, to between 12,000 and 13,000.[38] Secretary of Defense Mark Esper said in December 2019 that he was "confident that we could reduce our numbers in Afghanistan and still ensure that place doesn't become a safe haven for terrorists who could attack the United States."[39] President Ghani has given public support to a partial drawdown, saying in January 2020 that "we are totally ready for a withdrawal of 4,000 troops any time [President Trump] decides."[40]

At the same time, U.S. air operations have escalated considerably under the Trump Administration, as measured by the number of munitions released; the U.S. dropped more munitions in Afghanistan in 2019 than any other year since at least 2010 (see **Figure 1**). These operations have reportedly contributed to a sharp rise in civilian casualties; the U.N. reported that the third quarter of 2019 saw the highest quarterly civilian casualty toll since tracking began in 2009, with over 4,300 civilians killed or injured from July 1 to September 30.[41] Though the

[33] Lead Inspector General for Overseas Contingency Operations, *Operation Freedom's Sentinel, Quarterly Report to Congress, July 1 to September 30, 2018*, November 19, 2018.

[34] Department of Defense Press Briefing by Secretary Esper and General Milley in the Pentagon Briefing Room, December 20, 2019.

[35] SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, April 30, 2019.

[36] Ibid.

[37] SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, October 30, 2018.

[38] Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Mujib Mashal, "U.S. Is Quietly Reducing Its Troop Force in Afghanistan," *New York Times*, October 21, 2019.

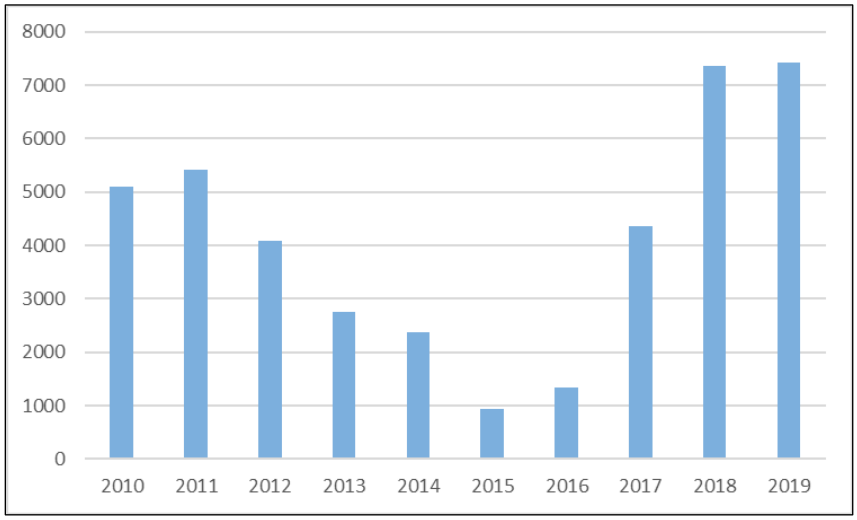
[39] Phil Stewart, "Exclusive: U.S. troop drawdowns in Afghanistan 'not necessarily' tied to Taliban deal – Esper," Reuters, December 2, 2019.

[40] Tom Porter, "Afghanistan's president says the country is 'totally read' if Trump scales back the US military presence in the country," *Business Insider*, January 23, 2020.

[41] United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), *Quarterly Report on the Protection of Civilians in*

majority of civilian casualties are attributed to anti-government forces, the U.N. reported in October that civilian casualties from air operations (885 killed or injured) set a record in the first nine months of 2019, with 74% of those casualties resulting from operations by international forces. Between July and October, U.S. forces conducted 3,257 strikes in 31 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces (see **Appendix**).[42]

Figure 1. Number of Weapons Released (Manned and Remotely Piloted Aircraft strike assets) by year



Source: Combined Forces Air Component Commander 2013-2019 Airpower Statistics.

U.S. Adversaries: The Taliban and Islamic State

The leader of the Taliban is Haibatullah Akhundzada, who is known as e*mir al-mu'minin*, or commander of the faithful; the Taliban style themselves as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Haibatullah succeeded Mullah Mansoor, who was killed in a 2016 U.S. airstrike in Pakistan; Mansoor had succeeded Taliban founder Mullah Omar, who died in hiding of natural causes in April 2013. Formerly a figure in Taliban religious courts, Haibatullah is generally regarded as "more of an Islamic scholar than a military tactician."[43] Still, under his leadership the Taliban have achieved some notable military successes and the group is seen as more cohesive and less susceptible to fragmentation than in the past.[44] There are an estimated 60,000 full-time Taliban fighters.

The Taliban retain the ability to conduct high-profile urban attacks while also demonstrating considerable tactical capabilities; SIGAR reported in October 2019 that "enemy attacks have been more effective" in the third quarter of 2019 compared to both earlier in the year and the same period in 2018.[45] Reports indicate that ANDSF fatalities have averaged 30-40 a day in recent

Armed Conflict, October 17, 2019.

[42] U.S. Forces-Afghanistan, *September 2019 Strike Summary*, October 27, 2019.

[43] Matthew Dupee, "Red on Red: Analyzing Afghanistan's Intra-Insurgency Violence," *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 11, iss. 1, January 2018.

[44] Andrew Watkins, "Taliban Fragmentation: A Figment of Your Imagination?" *War on the Rocks*, September 4, 2019.

[45] See also Alec Worsnop, *From Guerilla to Maneuver Warfare: A Look at the Taliban's Growing Combat Capability*, Modern War Institute, June 6, 2018.

months, and President Ghani stated in January 2019 that over 45,000 security personnel had paid "the ultimate sacrifice" since he took office in September 2014.[46] Insider attacks on U.S. and coalition forces by Afghan nationals are a sporadic, but persistent, problem.

Beyond the Taliban, a significant share of U.S. operations have been aimed at the local Islamic State affiliate, known as Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP, also known as ISIS-K). Estimates of ISKP strength generally ranged from 2,000 to 4,000 fighters until ISKP "collapsed" in late 2019 due to offensives by U.S. and Afghan forces and, separately, the Taliban.[47] Special Representative Khalilzad recognized the Taliban's role in progress against ISKP, while warning that ISKP "hasn't been eliminated."[48] ISKP and Taliban forces have sometimes fought over control of territory or because of political or other differences.[49] Some U.S. officials have stated that ISKP aspires to conduct attacks in the West, though there is reportedly disagreement within the U.S. government about the nature of the threat.[50] ISKP also has claimed responsibility for a number of large-scale attacks, many targeting Afghanistan's Shia minority. Some raise the prospect of Taliban hardliners defecting to ISKP in the event that Taliban leaders agree to a political settlement or to a continued U.S. counterterrorism presence.[51] While Al Qaeda's presence in the country is diminished, the UN reports that Al Qaeda views Afghanistan as a "continuing safe haven for its leadership, relying on its long-standing and strong relationship with the Taliban leadership."[52]

ANDSF Development and Deployment

The effectiveness of the ANDSF is key to the security of Afghanistan. Congress appropriated at least $86.4 billion for Afghan security assistance between FY2002 and FY2019, according to SIGAR.[53] Since 2014, the United States generally has provided around 75% of the estimated $5-6 billion a year required to fund the ANDSF, with the balance coming from U.S. partners ($1 billion annually) and the Afghan government ($500 million).

Concerns about the ANDSF raised by SIGAR, the Department of Defense, and others include absenteeism, the fact that about 35% of the force does not reenlist each year, and the potential for rapid recruitment to dilute the force's quality; widespread illiteracy within the force; credible allegations of child sexual abuse and other potential human rights abuses;[54] and casualty rates often described as unsustainable.

---

[46] "Afghanistan's Ghani says 45,000 Security Personnel Killed Since 2014," *BBC*, January 25, 2019.

[47] Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Mujib Mashal, "ISIS Is Losing Afghan Territory. That Means Little for Its Victims," *New York Times*, December 2, 2019.

[48] U.S. Special Representative Zalmay Khalilzad, Twitter, December 3, 2019, at https://twitter.com/US4AfghanPeace/status/1201956898616025093.

[49] See, for example, Amira Jadoon et al., "Challenging the ISK Brand in Afghanistan-Pakistan: Rivalries and Divided Loyalties," *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 11, iss. 4, April 26, 2018; Najim Rahim and Rod Nordland, "Taliban Surge Routs ISIS in Northern Afghanistan," *New York Times*, August 1 2018.

[50] Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Julian Barnes, "U.S. Military Calls ISIS in Afghanistan a Threat to the West. Intelligence Officials Disagree," *New York Times*, August 2, 2019.

[51] David Ignatius, "Uncertainty Clouds the Path Forward in Afghanistan." *Washington Post*, July 22, 2019.

[52] *Twenty-fourth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and Associated Individuals and Entities*, S/2019/570, July 15, 2019.

[53] SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, January 30, 2020.

[54] See SIGAR Report 17-47, *Child Sexual Assault in Afghanistan: Implementation of the Leahy Laws and Reports of Assault by Afghan Security Forces*, June 2017 (released on January 23, 2018).

Total ANDSF strength was reported at about 273,000 as of October 2019, up 19,000 from the previous quarter. The U.S. military attributed the increase to changes in enrollment verification processes and added that "quarter-to-quarter changes in ANDSF assigned strength do not solely reflect changes to the number of personnel actually serving in the ANDSF."[55] Other metrics related to ANDSF performance, including casualty and attrition rates, have been classified by U.S. Forces-Afghanistan (USFOR-A) starting with the October 2017 SIGAR quarterly report, citing a request from the Afghan government, although SIGAR had previously published those metrics as part of its quarterly reports.[56] In both legislation and public statements, some Members of Congress have expressed concern over the decline in the types and amount of information made public by the executive branch.

Regional Dynamics: Pakistan and Other Neighbors

Regional dynamics, and the involvement of outside powers, are central to the conflict in Afghanistan. The neighboring state widely considered most important in this regard is Pakistan, which has played an active, and by many accounts negative, role in Afghan affairs for decades. Pakistan's security services maintain ties to Afghan insurgent groups, most notably the Haqqani Network.[57] Afghan leaders, along with U.S. military commanders, attribute much of the insurgency's power and longevity either directly or indirectly to Pakistani support; President Trump has accused Pakistan of "housing the very terrorists that we are fighting."[58] U.S. officials have long identified militant safe havens in Pakistan as a threat to security in Afghanistan, though some Pakistani officials dispute that charge and note the Taliban's increased territorial control within Afghanistan itself.[59]

Pakistan may view a weak and destabilized Afghanistan as preferable to a strong, unified Afghan state (particularly one led by an ethnic Pashtun-dominated government in Kabul; Pakistan has a large and restive Pashtun minority).[60] However, instability in Afghanistan could rebound to Pakistan's detriment; Pakistan has struggled with indigenous Islamist militants of its own. Afghanistan-Pakistan relations are further complicated by the presence of over a million Afghan refugees in Pakistan, as well a long-running and ethnically tinged dispute over their shared 1,600-mile border.[61] Pakistan's security establishment, fearful of strategic encirclement by India, apparently continues to view the Afghan Taliban as a relatively friendly and reliably anti-India

[55] SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, January 30, 2020.

[56] Shawn Snow, "Report: US Officials Classify Crucial Metrics on Afghan Casualties, Readiness," *Military Times*, October 30, 2017.

[57] For more, see CRS In Focus IF10604, *Al Qaeda and Islamic State Affiliates in Afghanistan*, by Clayton Thomas.

[58] White House Office of the Press Secretary, *Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia*, August 21, 2017.

[59] Author interviews with Pakistani military officials, Rawalpindi, Pakistan, February 21, 2018.

[60] Pashtuns are an ethnic group that makes up about 40% of Afghanistan's 35 million people and 15% of Pakistan's 215 million; they thus represent a plurality in Afghanistan but are a relatively small minority among many others in Pakistan, though Pakistan's Pashtun population is considerably larger than Afghanistan's. Pakistan condemns as interference statements by President Ashraf Ghani (who is Pashtun) and other Afghan leaders about an ongoing protest campaign by Pakistani Pashtuns for greater civil and political rights. "Pakistan cautions Afghan president against 'interfering' in internal matters," *Express Tribune*, January 27, 2020.

[61] About 2 million Afghan refugees have returned from Pakistan since the Taliban fell in 2011, but 1.4 million registered refugees remain in Pakistan, according to the United Nations, along with perhaps as many as 1 million unregistered refugees. Many of these refugees are Pashtuns (see Amnesty International, *Afghanistan's Refugees: Forty Years of Dispossession*, June 20, 2019). Pakistan, the United Nations, and others recognize the Durand Line as an international boundary, but Afghanistan does not.

element in Afghanistan. India's diplomatic and commercial presence in Afghanistan—and U.S. rhetorical support for it—exacerbates Pakistani fears of encirclement. Indian interest in Afghanistan stems largely from India's broader regional rivalry with Pakistan, which impedes Indian efforts to establish stronger and more direct commercial and political relations with Central Asia. India has been the largest regional contributor to Afghan reconstruction, but New Delhi has not shown an inclination to pursue a deeper defense relationship with Kabul.

In his August 2017 speech, President Trump announced what he characterized as a new approach to Pakistan, saying, "We can no longer be silent about Pakistan's safe havens for terrorist organizations, the Taliban, and other groups that pose a threat to the region and beyond."[62] He also, however, praised Pakistan as a "valued partner," citing the close U.S.-Pakistani military relationship. In January 2018, the Trump Administration announced plans to suspend security assistance to Pakistan, a decision that has affected billions of dollars in aid.[63]

Since late 2018, the Trump Administration has been seeking Islamabad's assistance in facilitating U.S. talks with the Taliban. One important action taken by Pakistan was the October 2018 release of Taliban co-founder Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, who was captured in Karachi in a joint U.S.-Pakistani operation in 2010. Khalilzad, who has since met with Baradar several times in Doha, said in February 2019 that Baradar's release "was my request," and later thanked Pakistan for facilitating the travel of Taliban figures to talks in Doha.[64] A biannual Department of Defense report on Afghanistan released in January 2020 asserted that "Pakistan is supporting the Afghan reconciliation," describing Pakistan's role as "constructive but limited."[65]

Afghanistan largely maintains cordial ties with its other neighbors, notably the post-Soviet states of Central Asia, whose role in Afghanistan has been relatively limited but could increase.[66] In the past two years, multiple U.S. commanders have warned of increased levels of assistance, and perhaps even material support, for the Taliban from Russia and Iran, both of which cite IS presence in Afghanistan to justify their activities.[67] Both nations were opposed to the Taliban government of the late 1990s, but reportedly see the Taliban as a useful point of leverage vis-a-vis the United States. Afghanistan may also represent a growing priority for China in the context of broader Chinese aspirations in Asia and globally.[68]

Economy and U.S. Aid

Economic development is pivotal to Afghanistan's long-term stability, though indicators of future growth are mixed. Decades of war have stunted the development of most domestic industries,

[62] White House Office of the Press Secretary, *Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia*, August 21, 2017.

[63] Mark Landler and Gardiner Harris, "Trump, Citing Pakistan as a 'Safe Haven' for Terrorists, Freezes Aid," *New York Times*, January 4, 2018. Pakistan closed its ground and air lines of communication to the United States after the latter suspended security aid during an earlier period of U.S.-Pakistan tensions in 2011-2012.

[64] "Mullah Baradar released by Pakistan at the behest of US: Khalilzad," *The Hindu*, February 9, 2019.

[65] DOD, *Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan*, December 2019 (released January 23, 2020).

[66] Humayun Hamidzada and Richard Ponzio, *Central Asia's Growing Role in Building Peace and Regional Connectivity with Afghanistan*, United States Institute of Peace, August 2019.

[67] In October 2018, the Trump Administration sanctioned several Iranian military officials for providing support to the Taliban. U.S. Department of the Treasury, *Treasury and the Terrorist Financing Targeting Center Partners Sanction Taliban Facilitators and their Iranian Supporters*, October 23, 2018.

[68] Ibid; Michael Martina, "Afghan Troops to Train in China, Ambassador Says," *Reuters*, September 6, 2018.

including mining.[69] The economy has also been hurt by a steep decrease in the amount of aid provided by international donors. Afghanistan's gross domestic product (GDP) has grown an average of 7% per year since 2003, but growth slowed to 2% in 2013 due to aid cutbacks and political uncertainty about the post-2014 security situation. Since 2015, Afghanistan has experienced a "slight recovery" with growth of between 2% and 3% in 2016 and 2017, though the increase in the poverty rate (55% living below the national poverty line in 2017 compared to 38% in 2012-2013) complicates that picture.[70] Social conditions in Afghanistan remain equally mixed. On issues ranging from human trafficking to religious freedom to women's rights, Afghanistan has, by some accounts, made significant progress since 2001, but future prospects in these areas remain uncertain.

Congress has appropriated nearly $137 billion in aid for Afghanistan since FY2002, with about 63% for security and 26% for development (with the remainder for civilian operations and humanitarian aid).[71] In September 2019, the Administration announced it would withhold $160 million in direct funding to the Afghan government for various development projects due to "the Afghan government's inability to transparently manage U.S. government resources" and "failure to meet benchmarks for transparency and accountability in public financial management."[72]

The Administration's FY2020 budget requests $4.8 billion for the ANDSF, $400 million in Economic Support Funds, and smaller amounts to help the Afghan government with other tasks like counternarcotics.[73] This is down from both the FY2019 request, as well as the FY2018 enacted level of about $5.5 billion in total funding for Afghanistan (down from nearly $17 billion in FY2010). Other than ANDSF funding and other DOD contributions, these figures are not included in the cost of U.S. combat operations (including related regional support activities), which was estimated at a total of $776 billion since FY2002 as of September 2019, according to the DOD's Cost of War report. In its FY2020 budget request, the Pentagon identified $18.6 billion in direct war costs in Afghanistan, as well as $35.3 billion in "enduring theater requirements and related missions;" it is unclear how much of the latter figure is for Afghanistan versus other theaters.

Outlook

Insurgent and terrorist groups demonstrated considerable capabilities in 2019, throwing into sharp relief the daunting security challenges that the Afghan government and its U.S. and international partners face. At the same time, prospects for a negotiated settlement, driven by direct U.S.-Taliban talks, are uncertain in light of the Taliban's continued refusal to talk to the Afghan government.

---

[69] Much attention has been paid to Afghanistan's potential mineral and hydrocarbon resources, which by some estimates could be considerable but have yet to be fully explored or developed. Once estimated at nearly $1 trillion, the value of Afghan mineral deposits has since been revised downward, but those deposits reportedly have attracted interest from the Trump Administration. Mark Landler and James Risen, "Trump Finds Reason for the U.S. to Remain in Afghanistan: Minerals," *New York Times*, July 25, 2017. Additionally, Afghanistan's geographic location could position it as a transit country for others' resources.

[70] "Afghanistan," CIA World Factbook, last updated July 10, 2019.

[71] SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, January 30, 2020.

[72] U.S. Department of State, *Statement on Accountability and Anti-Corruption in Afghanistan*, September 19, 2019.

[73] For more, see CRS Report R45329, *Afghanistan: Issues for Congress and Legislation 2017-2019*, by Clayton Thomas.

U.S. officials generally assess that the Taliban do not pose an existential threat to the Afghan government, given the current military balance. That dynamic could change if the United States alters the level or nature of its troop deployments in Afghanistan or funding for the ANDSF. President Ghani has said, "[W]e will not be able to support our army for six months without U.S. [financial] support."[74] Notwithstanding direct U.S. support, Afghan political dynamics, particularly the willingness of political actors to directly challenge the legitimacy and authority of the central government, even by extralegal means, may pose a serious threat to Afghan stability in 2020 and beyond, regardless of Taliban military capabilities. Increased political instability, fueled by questions about the central government's authority and competence and rising ethnic tensions, may pose as serious a threat to Afghanistan's future as the Taliban does.

A potential collapse of the Afghan military and/or the government that commands it could have significant implications for the United States, particularly given the nature of negotiated security arrangements. Regardless of how likely the Taliban would be to gain full control over all, or even most, of the country, the breakdown of social order and the fracturing of the country into fiefdoms controlled by paramilitary commanders and their respective militias may be plausible, even probable. Afghanistan experienced a similar situation nearly thirty years ago. Though Soviet troops withdrew from Afghanistan by February 1989, Soviet aid continued, sustaining the communist government in Kabul for nearly three years. However, the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991 ended that aid, and a coalition of mujahedin forces overturned the government in April 1992. Almost immediately, mujahedin commanders turned against each other, leading to a complex civil war during which the Taliban was founded, grew, and took control of most of the country, eventually offering sanctuary to Al Qaeda. While the Taliban and Al Qaeda are still "closely allied" according to the UN,[75] Taliban forces have clashed repeatedly with the Afghan Islamic State affiliate. Under a more unstable future scenario, alliances and relationships among extremist groups could evolve or security conditions could change, offering new opportunities to transnational terrorist groups.

In light of these uncertainties, Members of Congress and other U.S. policymakers may reassess notions of what success in Afghanistan looks like, examining how potential outcomes might harm or benefit U.S. interests, and the relative levels of U.S. engagement and investment required to attain them.[76] *The Washington Post*'s December 2019 publication of the "Afghanistan Papers" (largely records of SIGAR interviews conducted as part of a lessons learned project) has ignited debate, including reactions from some Members of Congress, on these very issues (for more, see CRS Report R46197, *The Washington Post's "Afghanistan Papers" and U.S. Policy: Main Points and Possible Questions for Congress*, by Clayton Thomas).

The present condition, which is essentially a stalemate that has existed for several years, could persist; some argue that the United States "has the capacity to sustain its commitment to Afghanistan for some time to come" at current levels.[77] In May 2019, former National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster compared the U.S. effort in Afghanistan to an "insurance policy" against

[74] Anwar Iqbal, "Afghan Army to Collapse in Six Months Without US Help: Ghani," *Dawn*, January 18, 2018.

[75] *Twenty-second report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities*, United Nations Security Council, July 27, 2018.

[76] See, for example Jim Banks, "The Public Deserves an Afghanistan War Progress Report," *National Review*, October 23, 2018; Seth Jones, *The U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan: The Perils of Withdrawal*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 26, 2018.

[77] Semple, op. cit.

the negative consequences of the government's collapse.[78] Others counter that "the threat in Afghanistan doesn't warrant a continued U.S. military presence and the associated costs—which are not inconsequential."[79]

The Trump Administration has described U.S. policy in Afghanistan as "grounded in the fundamental objective of preventing any further attacks on the United States by terrorists enjoying safe haven or support in Afghanistan."[80] For years, some analysts have challenged that line of reasoning, describing it as a strategic "myth" and arguing that "the safe haven fallacy is an argument for endless war based on unwarranted worst-case scenario assumptions."[81] Some of these analysts and others dismiss what they see as a disproportionate focus on the military effort, arguing that U.S. policy goals like countering narcotics and safeguarding human rights are "not objectives that the U.S. military…is well suited to addressing."[82]

Core issues for Congress in Afghanistan include Congress's role in authorizing, appropriating funds for, and overseeing U.S. military activities, aid, and regional policy implementation. Additionally, Members of Congress may examine how the United States can leverage its assets, influence, and experience in Afghanistan, as well as those of Afghanistan's neighbors and international organizations, to encourage more equal, inclusive, and effective governance. Congress also could seek to help shape the U.S. approach to talks with the Taliban, or to potential negotiations aimed at altering the Afghan political system, through oversight, legislation, and public statements.

How Afghanistan fits into broader U.S. strategy is another issue on which Members might engage, especially given the Administration's focus on strategic competition with other great powers.[83] Some analysts recognize fatigue over "endless wars" like that in Afghanistan but argue against a potential U.S. retrenchment that could create a vacuum Russia or China might fill.[84] Others describe the U.S. military effort in Afghanistan as a "peripheral war," and suggest that "the billions being spent on overseas contingency operation funding would be better spent on force modernization and training for future contingencies."[85]

---

[78] Kyle Rempfer, "H.R. McMaster Says The Public Is Fed A 'War-Weariness' Narrative That Hurts US Strategy," *Military Times*, May 9, 2019.

[79] Charles Pena, "We Can't Win-and Don't Have To-In Afghanistan." *Real Clear Defense*, October 9, 2018.

[80] U.S. Department of State, *Integrated Country Strategy: Afghanistan*, September 27, 2018.

[81] A. Trevor Thrall and Erik Goepner, "Another Year of the War in Afghanistan," *Texas National Security Review*, September 11, 2018. See also Micah Zenko and Amelia Mae Wolfe, "The Myth of the Terrorist Safe Haven," *Foreign Policy*, January 26, 2015.

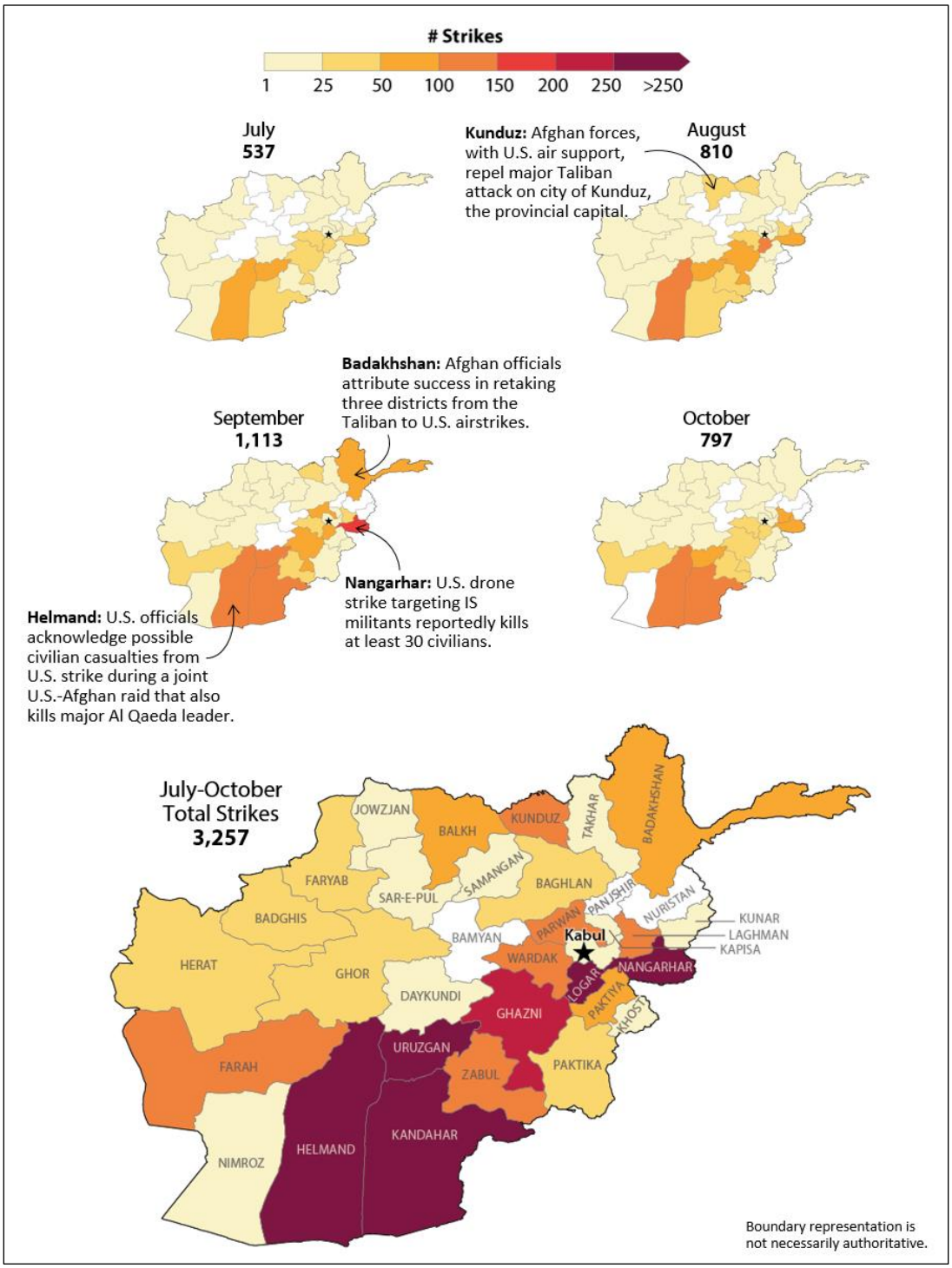
[82] John Glaser and John Mueller, "Afghanistan: A Failure to Tell the Truth," *LobeLog*, September 13, 2019.

[83] See CRS In Focus IF11139, *Evaluating DOD Strategy: Key Findings of the National Defense Strategy Commission*, by Kathleen J. McInnis.

[84] Eric Edelman, *The US Role In The Middle East In An Era Of Renewed Great Power Competition*, Hoover Institution, April 2, 2019.

[85] Benjamin Denison, "Confusion in the Pivot: The Muddled Shift from Peripheral War to Great Power Competition," *War on the Rocks*, February 12, 2019.

Appendix. U.S. Strikes by Month, July-October 2019



Source: Created by CRS. Data from NATO Resolute Support Strike Summaries; boundaries from GADM.

Note: According to Resolute Support, summaries include "all strikes conducted by fighter, attack, bomber, rotary-wing, or remotely-piloted aircraft, rocket-propelled artillery and ground-based tactical artillery." Resolute Support defines a strike as "one or more kinetic engagements that occur in roughly the same geographic location to produce a single, sometimes cumulative effect in that location" against the Taliban and other armed groups.

Author Information

Clayton Thomas
Analyst in Middle Eastern Affairs

Acknowledgments

The graphic "U.S. Airstrikes by Month" was prepared by Amber Wilhelm, Visual Information Specialist, based on data analysis by Sarah Collins, Research Assistant.

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.