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Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy: In Brief

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SUMMARY

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Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy: In Brief

Even by the standards of Afghanistan's tumultuous history, 2021 marked a major watershed for the country. In 2021, U.S. and international forces departed after nearly two decades of operations in Afghanistan; the internationally backed Afghan government and its military forces collapsed; and the Taliban, a Sunni Islamist extremist group that formerly ruled the country from 1996 to 2001, retook power. The aftershocks of these events continue to reverberate within Afghanistan, throughout its region, and in the United States as Afghans and U.S. policymakers alike grapple with the reality of the Taliban's renewed rule.

The chapter of Afghan history that ended in 2021 arguably began 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 Afghan Taliban government that harbored and supported it. In the subsequent 20 years, the United States suffered over 22,000 military casualties (including about 2,400 fatalities) in Afghanistan, mostly at the hands of the robust and growing Taliban insurgency, and Congress appropriated over $140 billion for reconstruction and security forces there. During this same period, an elected Afghan government replaced the Taliban and, with significant U.S. and international support, made modest but uneven improvements in most measures of human development, though Afghanistan remained one of the world's poorest and most corrupt countries.

After over a year of negotiations initiated in 2018, Trump Administration officials signed a February 2020 agreement with the Taliban in which the United States committed to the withdrawal of all international military forces and contractors by May 2021, in return for which the Taliban committed to take unspecified action to prevent other groups (including Al Qaeda) from using Afghan soil to threaten the United States and its allies. Throughout 2020 and 2021, U.S. officials contended that the Taliban were not fulfilling their commitments, given increased violence between the Taliban and Afghan government and continuing Taliban links with Al Qaeda, even as the Trump Administration drew down U.S. forces, which reached a low of 2,500 in January 2021. Afghan officials sought to downplay the impact of the U.S. military withdrawal on their own forces' capabilities, but some official U.S. assessments indicated that the withdrawal could lead to gains by the Taliban, who already controlled or contested half of the country by 2020.

In 2021, President Joseph Biden announced that the United States would withdraw its troops, though several months later than the date to which it agreed in the U.S.-Taliban accord. On August 15, 2021, two weeks before that withdrawal was to conclude, the Taliban entered Kabul, the culmination of a rapid nationwide military advance that shocked many in the United States and Afghanistan. In the last two weeks of August, U.S. military forces oversaw the evacuation of over 120,000 individuals, including U.S. and international diplomatic personnel and Afghan partners, from Kabul's international airport, before departing on August 30, 2021. No U.S. military or diplomatic personnel are in Afghanistan as of June 2022.

The Taliban announced the formation of a new government dominated by Taliban loyalists on September 7, 2021. The composition of that government and the Taliban's suppression of peaceful protests against its rule indicate the group has prioritized internal cohesion over outreach to other segments of Afghan society or similar gestures that might have been welcomed by the United States and other countries. Some anti-Taliban Afghan leaders have sought U.S. support and have claimed guerilla-style attacks against Taliban forces. However, the regional Islamic State affiliate may pose a more potent threat to the Taliban.

U.S. policymakers have focused on a number of impacts of the Taliban's renewed rule, including the status of the Islamic State, Al Qaeda, and U.S. efforts to counter these groups "over the horizon." Taliban actions have been detrimental for the status of women and girls in Afghanistan, a longtime U.S. policy concern, with girls prohibited from attending school above the secondary level and women's roles curtailed. The status of ethnic and religious minorities, as well as the tens of thousands of Afghans who worked for U.S. efforts and seek to leave the country, also remain closely scrutinized by U.S. policymakers. Since the Taliban takeover, Afghanistan has faced intersecting and overwhelming humanitarian and economic crises, a result of challenges both pre-existing (such as droughts, the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, and Afghanistan's weak economic base) and new (such as the cut-off of international development assistance, U.S. sanctions on the Taliban, and the U.S. hold on Afghan central bank assets). The Biden Administration and many in Congress seek to ameliorate these crises, but without taking any action that boosts the Taliban's position or that may be perceived as doing so. Pursuing these policies in tandem may prove complicated.

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Introduction

The aftershocks of the Taliban's August 2021 return to power continue to reverberate in Afghanistan and the United States alike. This report provides background information and analysis on developments in Afghanistan and implications for U.S. policy, including

- the Taliban's government and the impact of their rule on terrorist groups, human rights, and the ability of U.S. Afghan partners to leave the country;
- regional dynamics; and
- the intersecting humanitarian and economic crises facing the country.

The report also provides information on legislation and other congressional action related to Afghanistan. The challenge at the heart of many U.S. policy debates over which Congress has influence (including humanitarian assistance, U.S. sanctions, and the status of U.S.-based central bank assets) is how to prioritize and, if possible, reconcile two U.S. interests: supporting the Afghan people and refraining from bolstering the Taliban's rule.

Background: Taliban Takeover

At the outset of 2021, the Afghan government was a close U.S. counterterrorism partner, the result of nearly 20 years of substantial U.S. and international support, including the deployment of hundreds of thousands of troops and the provision of tens of billions of dollars in assistance. President Donald Trump had withdrawn all but 2,500 U.S. troops, the lowest U.S. force level since 2001, in advance of the full military withdrawal to which the United States agreed in the February 2020 U.S.-Taliban agreement.[1] Still, U.S. officials committed to continue to provide financial support to Afghan forces and expressed confidence about their capabilities vis-a-vis the Taliban, emphasizing the Taliban's failure to capture any of Afghanistan's provincial capitals.

At the same time, the Taliban were arguably at their strongest since 2001, when they were driven from power by U.S., international, and U.S.-backed Afghan forces, having steadily gained territory and improved their tactical capabilities over the course of their resilient two-decade insurgency. The Afghan government against which the Taliban fought was weakened by deep internal divisions, factional infighting, and endemic corruption, and Taliban forces enjoyed certain advantages over their Afghan government counterparts, including greater cohesion and financial sustainability, according to one January 2021 outside assessment.[2]

Several weeks after President Joseph Biden confirmed that international forces would depart Afghanistan by the fall of 2021, Taliban forces began a sweeping advance that captured wide swaths of the country's rural areas, cementing the group's hold on some districts in which it already had a significant presence. The Taliban's seizure of other districts was more surprising: some northern areas had successfully resisted the Taliban militarily when the group was in power in the 1990s, making their rapid 2021 fall to the Taliban particularly significant. One source

[1] After more than a year of negotiations, U.S. and Taliban representatives signed a bilateral agreement on February 29, 2020, agreeing to two "interconnected" "guarantees": the withdrawal of all U.S. and international forces by May 2021, and unspecified Taliban action to prevent other groups (including Al Qaeda) from using Afghan soil to threaten the United States and its allies. The text of the agreement is available at https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf. Nonpublic annexes accompanied the agreement.

[2] Jonathan Schroden, "Afghanistan's Security Forces Versus the Taliban: A Net Assessment," *CTC Sentinel*, January 2021.

estimated that the Taliban took control of over 100 of Afghanistan's 400 districts in May and June 2021.[3] The speed of the Taliban's advance reportedly surprised even some within the group, with one commander saying that his forces were intentionally avoiding capturing provincial capitals before the scheduled departure of U.S. forces.[4]

The Taliban's advance was secured through both combat and negotiation. While the Taliban faced stiff, if ultimately unsuccessful, resistance from government forces in some areas, others were taken with minimal fighting.[5] In many of these areas, the Taliban reportedly secured the surrender or departure of government forces (and the handover of their weapons) with payments or through the mediation of local elders seeking to avoid bloodshed.[6] The Taliban captured their first provincial capital on August 6, after which the collapse of the Afghan government and its security forces accelerated. Within a week, the Taliban were nearing Kabul, which they entered on August 15, 2021. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, whose seven-year tenure was characterized by electoral crises, pervasive corruption, and the gradual deterioration of Afghan forces, fled the country that same day and remains, as of June 2022, in the United Arab Emirates.

Taliban Government

On September 7, 2021, the Taliban announced a "caretaker government" to rule Afghanistan. The Taliban refer to their government, as they have for decades referred to themselves, as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. It is unclear by whom members of this government might be replaced going forward and why, or in what sense these "caretaker" positions differ from permanent positions.[7] The Taliban, who did not enact a formal constitution during their 1996-2001 rule, have said they intend to govern according to Islamic law (*sharia*) but have not established "a clear and cohesive legal framework, judicial system, or enforcement mechanisms."[8]

Haibatullah Akhundzada, Taliban leader since the 2016 killing of his predecessor in a U.S. drone strike, holds supreme power as the group's emir. He has made few reported public appearances and only one verified photograph of him reportedly exists.[9] Mohammad Hassan Akhund, who served as foreign minister in the 1990s Taliban government, is the Acting Prime Minister. One analyst has described Akhund as "relatively weak," an "uncontroversial" figure who more powerful figures and factions within the Taliban prefer to their rivals.[10] Abdul Ghani Baradar,

[3] Kate Clark and Obaid Ali, "A Quarter of Afghanistan's Districts Fall to the Taleban amid Calls for a 'Second Resistance,'" *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, July 2, 2021.

[4] Dan De Luce, Mushtaq Yusufzai, and Saphora Smith, "Even the Taliban are surprised at how fast they're advancing in Afghanistan," NBC News, June 25, 2021.

[5] "Afghanistan: Taliban continue attacks on three major cities," *BBC*, August 1, 2021.

[6] Susannah George, "Afghanistan's military collapse: Illicit deals and mass desertions," *Washington Post*, August 15, 2021; David Zucchino, "Collapse and Conquest: The Taliban Strategy That Seized Afghanistan," *New York Times*, August 18, 2021.

[7] One analyst has described the Taliban's government during the 1990s as "nominally interim." "Who Will Run the Taliban Government?" International Crisis Group, September 9, 2021.

[8] U.S. Department of State, *2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Afghanistan*, June 2, 2022.

[9] Fazelminallah Qazizai, "The Mysterious Public Appearances of the Taliban's Supreme Leader," *Newlines*, December 20, 2021; "Haibatullah Akhundzada: Shadowy Taliban supreme leader whose son was suicide bomber," *Reuters*, September 7, 2021.

[10] Martine van Bijlert, "The Focus of the Taleban's New Government: Internal cohesion, external dominance," Afghanistan Analysts Network, September 12, 2021.

who led Taliban negotiations with the United States from 2018 to 2021, is the Acting Deputy Prime Minister.

Nearly all members of the government are former Taliban officials or longtime loyalists. All are male, the vast majority are ethnic Pashtuns (Afghanistan's largest ethnic group, which represents a plurality of the population), and most are from southern Afghanistan. Over half were, and remain, designated for terrorism-related U.S. and/or U.N. sanctions, including the Acting Interior Minister, Sirajuddin Haqqani. The U.S. Department of State has for years offered a reward of up to $10 million for information leading to the arrest of Haqqani, who is the head of the Haqqani Network, a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO).

In the initial days of the transition, some observers had speculated that the Taliban might reach out to former Afghan government officials (such as former President Hamid Karzai, who held some meetings with senior Taliban figures after the August 2021 takeover) or to others from outside the movement as part of their promise to establish an "inclusive government." The Taliban have not, however, reached beyond their own ranks to fill senior positions and are reportedly staffing government positions with military and/or religious figures with little relevant experience, exacerbating the group's administrative challenges and some internal tensions.[11]

Some reports since the Taliban takeover have indicated dissension in the group's ranks along various lines. While the Taliban have a history of effectively managing internal disputes, governing Afghanistan in 2022 presents new and unique challenges to the group's consensus-based decision-making. Points of tension reportedly exist between members of the group's political wing (such as Baradar) and its military leaders (such as the Haqqanis) over who deserves the most credit for the group's victory;[12] between a leadership that seeks stability and rank and file fighters who are struggling to adjust to post-conflict life;[13] and between those with different ideological perspectives and ethnic identities.[14]

Current and Potential Opposition

While the Taliban's August 2021 takeover was swift, its triumph, according to many analysts, did not reflect massive popular support for the movement but rather a lack of support for the former government.[15] Many elements of Afghan society, particularly in urban areas, appear to view the Taliban with skepticism, fear, or hostility despite ascribing a lack of violence unseen in decades to the group's takeover.[16] Both armed opponents and sporadic peaceful protests against the Taliban's rule point to a potential for future unrest as well as future repression.

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[11] Zia ur-Rehman and Emily Schmall, "The Taliban have staffing issues. They are looking for help in Pakistan," *New York Times*, January 13, 2022; *Thirteenth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2611 (2021) concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace stability and security of Afghanistan*, S/2022/419, May 26, 2022.

[12] Khudai Noor Nasar, "Afghanistan: Taliban leaders in bust-up at presidential palace, sources say," *BBC*, September 15, 2021; "Cracks emerge within Taliban as Baradar-led group raises concern over Sirajuddin's pro-Pashtun stance," *ANI*, February 15, 2022.

[13] Stephanie Glinski, "Taliban struggle to maintain unity six months into their reign," *Foreign Policy*, February 28, 2022.

[14] Sudarsan Raghavan, "A popular Uzbek commander fought for the Taliban for more than two decades. He was arrested anyway," *Washington Post*, February 1, 2022.

[15] "How the Taliban engineered 'political collapse' of Afghanistan," Reuters, August 17, 2021; Shadi Hamid, "Americans never understood Afghanistan like the Taliban did," Brookings Institution, August 23, 2021.

[16] Loveday Morris and Ruby Mellen, "Portraits of fear and loss," *Washington Post*, January 12, 2022; "Afghans say

The most coherent effort to oppose the Taliban militarily is the National Resistance Front (NRF), formed by figures aligned with the former Afghan state after the Taliban takeover. An attempt by the NRF to resist the Taliban in the central province of Panjshir, which was never conquered by the Taliban during their prior rule, collapsed in September 2021 but the group has claimed responsibility for a rising number of guerilla-style attacks on Taliban forces, mostly in and around Panjshir.[17] NRF leaders have appealed for U.S. and international support and have retained Washington, DC-based representation.[18] They have not won public backing from any foreign countries, perhaps due to the Taliban's relatively stronger military position and closer Taliban ties with regional powers, including some that formerly supported Taliban opponents in the 1990s, such as Russia and Iran. The Taliban dismiss NRF claims as "propaganda," but continued NRF attacks undermine the Taliban's legitimacy and could galvanize further opposition to the group.[19]

An arguably more potent armed threat to the Taliban is the local Islamic State affiliate (Islamic State-Khorasan Province, ISKP, also known as ISIS-K), a longtime Taliban adversary. ISKP has opposed the Taliban since its 2015 establishment, viewing the Taliban's Afghanistan-focused nationalist political project as counter to the Islamic State's universalist vision of a global caliphate. Since the Taliban takeover, ISKP's ranks have swelled to as many as 4,000 fighters despite a concerted Taliban offensive, and a series of major attacks claimed by or attributed to ISKP in spring 2022 (many targeting Afghanistan's Shia minority, the Hazaras) raises the prospect of greater violence.[20] Experts disagree about the potency of the ISKP threat and the Taliban's self-asserted ability to counter the group without external assistance.[21] Some Afghans, including former members of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF), have reportedly taken up arms with ISKP, purportedly attracted in part by ISKP cash payments.[22]

Beyond armed resistance, some Afghans have demonstrated nonviolently to advocate for their rights and express opposition to the Taliban. The Taliban appear to have monitored most protests, and violently dispersed some. The Interior Ministry issued a September 2021 decree banning unapproved demonstrations, and U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet said on September 13, 2021, that Taliban forces had used "increasing violence against protesters and journalists."[23] Some sporadic, small-scale protests have nevertheless continued.[24]

U.S. Policy Impacts of the Taliban's Return to Power

The Taliban's August 2021 takeover has implications for a number of U.S. policy interests. It may create opportunities and challenges for the various terrorist groups that have a presence in

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they feel safer but less hopeful under Taliban rule," Associated Press, February 15, 2022.

[17] Zia Ur Rehman, "Afghanistan's resistance alliance aims to pry Taliban's grip loose," *Nikkei Asia*, June 13, 2022.

[18] Ahmad Massoud, "The mujahideen resistance to the Taliban begins now. But we need help," *Washington Post*, August 18, 2021; Lachlan Markey, "Taliban resistance ramps up U.S. lobbying efforts," *Axios*, October 27, 2021;

[19] Zia Ur Rehman, op. cit.

[20] Susannah George, "Taliban sends hundreds of fighters to eastern Afghanistan to wage war against Islamic State," *Washington Post*, November 22, 2021.

[21] Abdul Sayed, "Why Islamic State Khurasan poses an indigenous threat to the Afghan Taliban," *Nexus*, May 9, 2022.

[22] Yaroslav Trofimov, "Left Behind After U.S. Withdrawal, Some Former Afghan Spies and Soldiers Turn to Islamic State," *Wall Street Journal*, October 31, 2021.

[23] "Oral update on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan" 48th Session of the Human Rights Council, September 13, 2021.

[24] "Afghan women call for rights, protest alleged Taliban killings," *Al Jazeera*, December 28, 2021; Julian Busch, "Standing up to the Taliban's burqa decree," *Spiegel International*, June 9, 2022.

Afghanistan, and renders obsolete former U.S. plans to partner with Afghan authorities to counter terrorist threats "over-the-horizon." Advancing protection of women's and other human rights has been another major U.S. policy goal in Afghanistan since 2001; the Taliban have taken numerous actions to roll back those rights since retaking power. U.S. policymakers, including many Members of Congress, also remain focused on securing the relocation of Afghans who previously worked for the U.S. government, a halting effort that remains ongoing as of June 2022.

Counterterrorism

A number of Islamist extremist terrorist groups have for decades operated in Afghanistan, and the Taliban have related to them in varying ways. Al Qaeda (AQ) and ISKP are two of the most significant of these terrorist groups, and the Taliban's takeover is likely to affect them differently.

Despite (or perhaps because of) U.S. counterterrorism pressure, AQ ties with the Taliban, which go back to the 1990s, appear to have remained strong.[25] In October 2020, Afghan government troops killed a high-ranking AQ operative who reportedly was living and working with Taliban forces, underscoring the close and interrelated connections between the groups.[26] U.N. sanctions monitors reported in February 2022 that Al Qaeda has "maintained a strategic silence, likely an effort not to compromise Taliban efforts to gain international recognition and legitimacy," in light of counterterrorism commitments made by the Taliban to secure the withdrawal of U.S. forces.[27]

Estimates of how the Taliban takeover is likely to affect AQ capabilities differ. Central Command (CENTCOM) Commander General Frank McKenzie said in a December 2021 interview that the AQ presence in Afghanistan had "probably slightly increased" since August 2021.[28] On the other hand, some analysts have argued that Al Qaeda is unlikely to resurge in Afghanistan given two decades of U.S. counterterrorism pressure, the existence of other safe havens around the world, and potential Taliban constraints.[29] The U.S. intelligence community assesses that AQ "will gauge its ability operate in Afghanistan under Taliban restrictions" as the two groups recalibrate their relationship and activities.[30]

On the other hand, the Islamic State affiliate in Afghanistan has clashed with the Taliban, who have struggled to contain the group's growth since the Taliban takeover (as mentioned above). ISKP has long been a significant U.S. counterterrorism concern, and under the former U.S.-backed government, the United States launched airstrikes in support of Taliban offensives against ISKP, a rare area of prior U.S.-Taliban cooperation.[31] At a September 1, 2021, press conference, when asked about the possibility of future U.S. coordination with the Taliban against ISKP, General Milley said, "It's possible."[32] A Taliban spokesperson reportedly rejected the notion of

[25] *Twenty-ninth 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,* U.N. Document S/2022/83, released February 3, 2022.

[26] Jeff Seldin, "US Calls Death of al-Qaida Official a Major Setback for Terror Group," *Voice of America*, October 26, 2020.

[27] *Twenty-ninth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team*, op cit.

[28] Robert Burns and Lolita Baldor, "US commander: Al-Qaida numbers in Afghanistan up 'slightly,'" *Associated Press*, December 10, 2021.

[29] Daniel Byman and Asfandyar Mir, "How strong is Al-Qaeda? A debate," *War on the Rocks*, May 20, 2022.

[30] Office of the Director for National Intelligence, *Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community*, March 2022.

[31] Wesley Morgan, "Our secret Taliban Air Force," Washington Post, October 22, 2020.

[32] Secretary of Defense Austin and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Milley Press Briefing on the End of the

such cooperation in October 2021.[33] In February 2022, the U.S. State Department announced rewards of up to $10 million each for information related to ISKP leader Sanaullah Ghafari as well as those responsible for the August 26, 2021, ISKP attack at Kabul airport that killed and injured hundreds of people, including over 30 U.S. servicemembers.[34]

From the outset of the 2021 U.S. withdrawal, U.S. officials said that the United States would maintain the ability to combat terrorist threats in Afghanistan such as AQ and ISKP without a military presence on the ground there by utilizing assets based outside of Afghanistan, in what U.S. officials describe as an "over-the-horizon" approach.[35] With the Taliban in control of Afghanistan, the United States has had to alter any plans that had been predicated on the continued existence of the former Afghan government and its security forces. Cooperation with Taliban authorities may prove impossible or too diplomatically or politically fraught. Collaboration with non-Taliban-affiliated Afghans via clandestine or covert action authorities could yield counterterrorism gains, but would also carry risks. In practice, according to the Department of Defense's Acting Inspector General, over-the-horizon "relies primarily on unmanned aerial vehicles operating from U.S. facilities in Doha, Qatar," but the United States has not conducted any airstrikes in Afghanistan since August 2021, as of a May 2022 Office of the Inspector General report.[36] CENTCOM Commander General Michael Kurilla described over-the-horizon capabilities as "extremely difficult but not impossible" in February 2022 testimony.[37]

Human Rights: Focus on Women and Ethnic and Religious Minorities

The Afghanistan in which the Taliban came to power in August 2021 was in many ways a different country than the one they last ruled in 2001. After 2001, women became active participants in many parts of Afghan society; protections for them, and ethnic and religious minorities, were enshrined in the country's 2004 constitution. While some early Taliban actions suggested a possible measure of moderation from their highly oppressive 1996-2001 rule, UN Rapporteur Bachelet said in June 2022 that "what we are witnessing in Afghanistan today is the institutionalized, systematic oppression of women" and that "Afghan women are rapidly facing the worst-case scenario many-feared."[38]

The Taliban takeover appears to have reduced high levels of violence that characterized the conflict, particularly welcomed by those in rural areas,[39] but it has increased fears of many Afghans about repression and women's rights.[40] The Taliban have closed the Ministry of Women's Affairs, which had been a part of the former Afghan government, and have reinstated the Ministry of Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, which enforced the Taliban's

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U.S. War in Afghanistan, Department of Defense, September 1, 2021.

[33] Kathy Gannon, "Taliban say they won't work with US to contain Islamic State," Associated Press, October 9, 2021.

[34] U.S. Department of State, "New Initiatives in the Fight Against ISIS-K," February 7, 2022.

[35] See, for example, Remarks by President Biden on the Way Forward in Afghanistan, White House, April 14, 2021.

[36] *Lead Inspector General for Operation Freedom's Sentinel and Operation Enduring Sentinel, Quarterly Report to the United States Congress,* May 17, 2022.

[37] See transcript at http://www.cq.com/doc/congressionaltranscripts-6450846?3&search=8TnqSQnx.

[38] United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, "High Commissioner updates the Human Rights Council on Afghanistan," June 15, 2022.

[39] Anand Gopal, "The Other Afghan Women," *The New Yorker,* September 6, 2021; Salar Bazaar, "On former front line in long Afghan war, an appreciation for peace," *Christian Science Monitor,* April 18, 2022.

[40] Margherita Stancati, "After Taliban Return, Afghan Women Face Old Pressures From Fathers, Brothers," *New York Times,* December 15, 2021.

interpretation of Islam in the 1990s.[41] The ministry has issued guidance that seeks to impose new restrictions on Afghan women, including by directing that women should not be allowed to travel long distances without a male guardian and that male relatives of women who do not wear a *hijab* that fully covers their bodies should be punished.[42] Those restrictions, together with the overall economic decline, have led to a decline in women's participation in the workforce.[43]

Of particular concern to many U.S. policymakers are Taliban policies toward education for Afghan girls. Taliban spokespersons said in early 2022 that girls' schools, effectively shuttered in most of the country since the August 2021 takeover, would reopen with the start of the new school year in late March 2022.[44] However, on March 23, with some girls already present in schools, the Taliban abruptly reversed course and announced that schools for girls would remain closed, shocking many observers.[45] One analysis attributes the change to the advocacy of hardline clerics within the group and Akhundzada.[46] Other Taliban figures, including both Baradar and the Haqqanis, reportedly support secondary education for girls (and some educate their own daughters abroad).[47] The evidently greater influence of the group's traditionally conservative leaders (over that of pragmatists who urge greater engagement with the outside world) suggests that external actors may have limited leverage over Taliban decisions. In response to the reversal, the United States canceled meetings on economic issues with the Taliban and the World Bank reportedly suspended $150 million in education programming in Afghanistan.

Taliban rhetoric and action with regard to ethnic and religious minorities have also received scrutiny from U.S. policymakers. Many Hazaras (Shia Muslims who comprise 10-15% of Afghanistan's population and represent one of the country's largest ethnoreligious minorities) previously expressed fear about the Taliban's possible return.[48] Since their August 2021 takeover, the Taliban have demonstrated a more accepting official stance toward the Hazaras, particularly in urban areas, despite some reports of killings and forced displacement in the Hazaras' historic homelands in central Afghanistan in fall 2021.[49] While the Taliban government has not persecuted Hazaras, many Hazaras fault the Taliban for not establishing an inclusive government and not stopping the ISKP attacks that have repeatedly targeted Hazaras in 2021 and 2022.[50]

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[41] Rachel Pannett, "Who leads Afghanistan's new government? Here's what we know about the Taliban's top officials," *Washington Post,* September 8, 2021.

[42] "No long-distance travel for women without male relative: Taliban," *Al Jazeera,* December 26, 2021; David Zucchino and Safiullah Padshah, "Taliban impose head-to-toe coverings for women," *New York Times,* May 7, 2022.

[43] International Labor Organization, "Employment prospects in Afghanistan; A rapid impact assessment," January 2022; Ruchi Kumar and Hikmat Noori, "'We are worse off': Afghanistan further impoverished as women vanish from workforce," *Guardian,* May 16, 2022.

[44] Kathy Gannon, "The AP interview: Taliban pledge all girls in schools soon," Associated Press, January 15, 2022.

[45] Kathy Gannon, "Many baffled by Taliban reneging pledge on girls' education," Associated Press, March 24, 2022.

[46] Ashley Jackson, "The ban on older girls' education: Taleban conservatives ascendant and a leadership in disarray," *Afghanistan Analysts Network,* March 29, 2022.

[47] Stephanie Glinski and Ruchi Kumar, "Taliban u-turn over Afghan girls' education reveals deep leadership divisions," *Guardian*, March 25, 2022; Sabawoon Samim, "Who gets to go to school? (3): Are Taleban attitudes starting to change from within?" *Afghanistan Analysts Network,* February 7, 2022.

[48] David Zucchino and Fatima Faizi, "They Are Thriving After Years of Persecution but Fear a Taliban Deal," *New York Times,* March 27, 2019.

[49] Shirin Jaafari, "'Why don't you have mercy?': Afghanistan's Hazara people increasingly face eviction, violence under Taliban rule," *PRI,* October 5, 2021.

[50] Nilly Kohzad, "'It doesn't matter if we get killed,' Afghanistan's Hazaras speak out," *Diplomat,* May 27, 2022.

Ongoing Relocations of American Citizens and Certain Afghans

The Taliban's entry into Kabul on August 15, 2021 triggered the mass evacuation of tens of thousands of U.S. citizens (including all diplomatic personnel), partner country citizens, and Afghans who worked for international efforts and/or the former Afghan government. U.S. officials say that U.S. military forces facilitated the evacuation of 124,000 individuals, including 5,300 U.S. citizens, as part of Operation Allies Refuge, "the largest air evacuation in US history."[51] Since that operation ended on August 30, 2021, the State Department said that as of December 13, 2021, it has assisted in the departure of 479 U.S. citizens, 450 lawful permanent residents, and over 2,200 Afghans.[52] On April 28, 2022, Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated in testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee that the State Department had directly assisted in the departure of 636 American citizens and "many" lawful permanent residents.[53]

U.S. officials have said that their efforts to secure the relocation of remaining U.S. citizens and eligible Afghan partners who seek to leave the country have "no deadline."[54] According to the State Department, the number of U.S. citizens it has identified in Afghanistan has fluctuated in the midst of continued relocations and because of cases in which additional U.S. citizens come forward to make themselves known, and, in many instances, ask for assistance to leave.[55] On April 28, 2022, Secretary Blinken said, "There are at present 126, as of a few days ago, American citizens remaining of whom 37 seek to leave and that we are assisting."[56]

One December 2021 press report, citing a State Department official, stated that around 62,000 Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) applicants remain in Afghanistan.[57] This figure excludes the tens of thousands of Afghans who may be at risk and eligible for other forms of relief but have not applied or are not eligible for an SIV. In a February 2022 report, an advocacy group for SIV-eligible persons stated that 78,000 of the estimated 81,000 SIV applicants in Afghanistan with visa applications pending as of August 15, 2021 remain in Afghanistan.[58] The State Department has disputed the accuracy of this report.[59] In May 2022, the State Department reportedly estimated that between 70,000 and 160,000 Afghans were eligible for SIVs.[60]

Status of Kabul Airport

Relocation efforts have been complicated by the status of Kabul's international airport. After the final departure of U.S. forces, Qatar and Turkey worked to make the airport—which sustained damage to its runways, radar system, and other components during the U.S. evacuation effort and withdrawal—operational. Domestic flights restarted

[51] Statement available at https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Printed%2028%20Sep%20SASC%20CJCS%20Written%20Statement.pdf.

[52] U.S. Department of State, "Afghanistan Relocation and Resettlement Update," December 13, 2021.

[53] Testimony of Secretary of State Antony Blinken, in U.S. Congress, House Committee on Foreign Affairs, *The State Department's Foreign Policy Priorities and the FY23 Budget Request*, op. cit.

[54] "Afghanistan Relocation and Resettlement Update," op. cit.

[55] Department Press Briefing – April 12, 2022, U.S. Department of State, April 12, 2022.

[56] Testimony of Secretary of State Antony Blinken, in U.S. Congress, House Committee on Foreign Affairs, *The State Department's Foreign Policy Priorities and the FY23 Budget Request*, op. cit.

[57] Jessica Donati, "More Than 60,000 Interpreters, Visa Applicants Remain in Afghanistan," *Wall Street Journal*, December 16, 2021.

[58] Association of Wartime Allies, "On The Ground Report - Feb 2022."

[59] Dan De Luce, "U.S. 'left behind' 78,000 Afghan allies in chaotic withdrawal: NGO report," *NBC News*, March 1, 2022.

[60] Alex Thompson and Allie Bice, "Biden's broken promise to SIV holders," *Politico*, May 16, 2022.

in early September 2021, but flights by foreign carriers have been mostly limited to charter Qatar Airways flights as carriers cite high insurance charges as well as security and logistical concerns as impediments to regular commercial air travel.[61] Despite a preliminary December 2021 deal with Qatar and Turkey to operate five airports in Afghanistan, the Taliban in May 2022 announced that they had reached a seemingly similar deal with the United Arab Emirates; the terms of that agreement remain unclear.[62]

Beyond logistical problems at Kabul airport and issues with Afghans obtaining travel documentation,[63] some Afghans who seek to relocate reportedly remain in hiding, fearing Taliban retribution. The Taliban issued a general amnesty after coming to power, but, according to a press account, a report from U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres to the Security Council in January 2022 stated that the United Nations has received "credible allegations" of Taliban reprisals against those individuals, including dozens of killings.[64] In April 2022, Secretary Blinken noted attacks by the Taliban against "those who are part of the former government," adding that most appeared to be happening "at a local level" and were not "centrally directed."[65]

The Taliban have reportedly interfered with flights at times, including by demanding seats for Taliban-selected individuals to work abroad and remit money.[66] Secretary Blinken said in late April 2022 that the Taliban had allowed freedom of movement to some degree but cautioned that there were still limited means of transportation to enable individuals to leave Afghanistan.[67] The United States has reportedly paid, through Qatar, for tickets on some Afghan airlines that fly to Qatar for individuals to leave Afghanistan.[68]

Humanitarian Crisis, Economic Collapse, and U.S. Policy

The Taliban's return to power has exacerbated one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world in Afghanistan, long one of the world's poorest and most aid-dependent countries. A number of interrelated factors, including the cut-off of international development assistance, U.S. and international sanctions on the Taliban, and the U.S. hold on Afghanistan's central bank assets, have all contributed to the economic breakdown that underlies the humanitarian crisis.

[61] Susannah George, "Taliban signs deal to hand control of Afghan airports to UAE company," *Washington Post*, May 24, 2022.

[62] Rahim Faiez, "Taliban say deal signed with UAE firm to manage airports," *Diplomat*, May 25, 2022.

[63] Amy Cheng and Haq Nawaz Khan, "Hundreds of Afghans gather outside passport office as Taliban resumes issuing travel documents," *Washington Post*, October 6, 2021; "Painful Passport Problems in Afghanistan," *RFE/RL*, January 16, 2022.

[64] "UN chief accuses Taliban of scores of revenge killings since seizing control in Afghanistan," *RFE/RL*, January 30, 2022.

[65] Testimony of Secretary of State Antony Blinken, in U.S. Congress, House Committee on Foreign Affairs, *The State Department's Foreign Policy Priorities and the FY23 Budget Request*, op. cit.

[66] Courtney Kube, Dan De Luce and Josh Lederman, "The Taliban have halted all evacuee flights out of Afghanistan for the past two weeks," *NBC News*, December 23, 2021.

[67] Testimony of Secretary of State Antony Blinken, in U.S. Congress, House Committee on Appropriations Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs, *Fiscal Year 2023 Budget Request for the Department of State*, hearings, 117th Cong., 2nd sess., April 28, 2022.

[68] Dan De Luce and Cortney Kube, "Biden admin relies on Taliban-controlled airline to help Afghans flee Afghanistan," *NBC News*, June 8, 2022.

Prior to the Taliban's August 2021 takeover, a severe humanitarian crisis already existed in Afghanistan, due primarily to conflict, drought, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Indicators suggest that conditions have worsened significantly since August 2021: the World Food Program reported in June 2022 that 92% of Afghans reported not having enough to eat, a slight decrease from the previous month but an increase from the 80% of Afghans that had insufficient food before the Taliban takeover.[69] WFP also reported that global food price increases and supply chain delays caused by the war in Ukraine are "having a direct impact on WFP's Afghanistan operations." The U.N. Special Representative for Afghanistan said in March 2022 that due to emergency assistance from international donors, "we have perhaps averted our worst fears of famine and widespread starvation," though the situation remains dire.[70] Nonetheless, in May 2022, the U.N. Children's Fund (UNICEF) estimated that 3.2 million Afghan children are expected to suffer from acute malnutrition in 2022, with 1 million children potentially at risk of death.[71]

The United States and other international donors provided billions of dollars a year to support the former Afghan government, financing over half of its $6 billion annual budget and as much as 80% of total public expenditures.[72] Much of that development assistance halted with the Taliban's August 2021 takeover, plunging the country into what U.N. officials describe as economic "free fall" as the country's economy contracted by as much as a third in the last four months of 2021.[73] Humanitarian aid, including cash transfers, has "supported some economic stabilization," according to the World Bank, but Afghanistan's economic outlook remains "stark."[74] The Biden Administration's FY2023 budget request proposes $345 million for health, education, and other forms of assistance in Afghanistan; the lack of a U.S. diplomatic presence in Afghanistan may complicate or constrain the implementation and/or oversight of U.S. funding.

U.S. sanctions on the Taliban (in place in various forms since 1999) remain, but it is unclear to what extent they are affecting humanitarian conditions in Afghanistan; the head of the Norwegian Refugee Council said in January 2021 that sanctions have "held back" their operations.[75] Since the Taliban's takeover, the U.S. Department of the Treasury has issued several general licenses outlining the U.S. position and stating that U.S. sanctions do not prohibit the provision of humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan.[76] Still, the continued existence of sanctions might lead financial institutions or other actors to "de-risk" Afghanistan by refusing to engage in the country rather than risk violation of U.S. sanctions. For more on U.S. sanctions on the Taliban, see CRS In Focus IF12039, *Afghanistan: Humanitarian Crisis, Economic Collapse, and U.S. Sanctions*.

In at least some parts of the country, food is available but many Afghans do not have money with which to pay for it, illustrating the impact of the country's economic crisis on humanitarian conditions. Afghanistan is a highly cash-dependent society, but shipments of dollars halted with the U.S. freeze on Afghan central bank assets in August 2021 and Afghanistan does not have the ability to print its own currency. The result is a severe liquidity crisis that threatens to destroy the

[69] "Afghanistan Situation Report," World Food Program, June 10, 2022.

[70] "Briefing by Special Representative Deborah Lyons to the Security Council," United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, March 2, 2022.

[71] "Afghanistan: Humanitarian Situation Report #5, 1-31 March 2022," UNICEF, May 26, 2022.

[72] Roxanna Shapour, "Realpolitik and the 2021 National Budget: The toxic struggle for money and power that undermined Afghanistan's republic," *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, December 21, 2021.

[73] "Afghanistan: Overview," World Bank, April 13, 2022

[74] Ibid.

[75] See interview at https://twitter.com/nrc_norway/status/1486778209387565058.

[76] See Treasury Department Fact Sheet, December 22, 2021, at https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/126/afg_factsheet_20211222_nu.pdf.

country's banking system. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in December 2021 that the United States was "looking intensely at ways to put more liquidity into the Afghan economy, to get more money into people's pockets ... in a way that doesn't directly benefit the Taliban."[77]

Both the Taliban and some foreign leaders have urged the United States to release the hold on Afghan central bank assets, which total around $7 billion. On February 11, 2022, the Biden Administration announced that it will "seek to facilitate access of $3.5 billion [of the assets] ... for the benefit of the Afghan people," pending ongoing litigation related to the September 11, 2001, attacks.[78] The Administration has not detailed how it intends to dispose of the assets for the Afghan people; possible uses include funding for humanitarian relief through U.N. agencies or other organizations. Alternatively, the $3.5 billion could contribute to "the potential recapitalization of a future central bank...and the recapitalization of a financial system," according to Tom West, the State Department's Special Representative for Afghanistan. For more, see CRS In Focus IF12052, *Afghanistan Central Bank Reserves*.

Regional Dynamics: Pakistan and Other Neighbors

Regional dynamics directly affect developments in Afghanistan, which is landlocked and has throughout its history been the object of intervention by its neighbors and other foreign powers. Events in Afghanistan also have consequences for those neighbors.

Pakistan. The neighboring state widely considered most important in this regard is Pakistan, which has played an active, and by many accounts destabilizing, role in Afghan affairs for decades, including by actively supporting the Taliban during its 1990s rule and much of its subsequent insurgency. Many analysts regarded the Taliban takeover at least initially as a triumph for Pakistan's regional policy, pointing to statements of evident support for the takeover from Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan and others.[79] Senior Pakistani officials have held numerous meetings with the new Taliban government, both in Kabul and Islamabad, since August 2021.

However, there are some indications that the Taliban's return to power may pose challenges for Pakistan. The Taliban's victory may provide a morale and perhaps material boost to Pakistan-based Islamist terrorist groups, including the so-called Pakistani Taliban (Tehreek-i Taliban-i Pakistan, or TTP, a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization). TTP attacks against Pakistani security forces increased after August 2021, reportedly prompting the Pakistani government to seek the Afghan Taliban's mediation of several ceasefires, most recently in June 2022.[80] Afghanistan-Pakistan relations are further complicated by the presence of over one million Afghan refugees in Pakistan, as well as a long-running and ethnically tinged dispute over their shared 1,600-mile border, at which Taliban and Pakistani government forces have intermittently clashed in the past six months.[81]

[77] U.S. Department of State, "Secretary Antony J. Blinken at a Press Availability," December 21, 2021.

[78] See Executive Order at https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/126/afghanistan_bank_eo.pdf and briefing at https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/02/11/background-press-call-on-u-s-support-for-the-people-of-afghanistan/.

[79] Ishaan Tharoor, "Pakistan's hand in the Taliban's victory," *Washington Post,* August 18, 2021; Husain Haqqani, "Pakista''s Pyrrhic Victory in Afghanistan," *Foreign Affairs,* July 22, 2021.

[80] Umair Jamal, "Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan declares unilateral ceasefire," *Diplomat,* June 13, 2022.

[81] Pakistan, the United Nations, and others recognize the 1893 Durand Line as an international boundary, but successive Afghan governments, including the Taliban, have not. See Vinay Kaura, "The Durand Line: A British Legacy Plaguing Afghan-Pakistani Relations," Middle East Institute, June 27, 2017; Asfandyar Mir et al., "Afghanistan-Pakistan Border Dispute Heats Up," U.S. Institute of Peace, January 12, 2022.

Iran. Iran, with which Afghanistan shares its western border, opposed the Taliban's 1990s rule but has maintained relations with the group while emphasizing the need for representation for Afghanistan's ethnic and religious groups with which Iran has close ties (namely Tajiks, who speak a variant of Persian, and Hazaras, who are mostly Shia Muslims). Official Taliban visits to Tehran preceded the group's August 2021 takeover, and have continued since then, including with the visit of the Taliban's acting foreign minister in January 2022.

Central Asia. Afghanistan's Central Asian neighbors (Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) have responded in varying ways to the Taliban's takeover. The Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan governments appear to be prioritizing economic ties, including the planned Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) natural gas pipeline, and have had numerous official engagements with the Taliban. Tajikistan, on the other hand, has rejected the Taliban's government and emerged as the group's chief regional antagonist, a result both of Tajikistan's own struggles with Islamist militancy as well as ties with Afghan Tajiks (the country's second largest ethnic group), some of whom oppose the Taliban's rule. Anti-Taliban leaders initially fled to Tajikistan after the Taliban takeover.

China. The prospect of greater Chinese influence and activity in Afghanistan has attracted some congressional attention since the Taliban takeover.[82] China, which played a relatively limited role in Afghanistan under the former government, made some economic investments in Afghanistan (particularly in the development of Afghan minerals and other resources) prior to the Taliban takeover, but major projects have not come to fruition due to instability, lack of infrastructure, and other limitations.[83] Despite concerns about Afghanistan-based Islamist terrorist groups, China has signaled acceptance of the Taliban's rule, with its foreign minister emphasizing in a May 2022 visit to Kabul that China "respects the independent choices made by the Afghan people."[84]

Congressional Action and Outlook

The Taliban's takeover attracted intense congressional and public attention. Many Members characterized the August 2021 U.S. military withdrawal as chaotic and damaging to U.S. interest and global standing; some said they supported the removal of U.S. troops but not the way in which it was carried out.[85] In the months since the Taliban entered Kabul, U.S. public attention appears to have decreased, but Afghanistan remains the subject of significant congressional interest as some Members seek to account for the evident failure of U.S. efforts and grapple with the reality of the Taliban's renewed rule.

At least six congressional committees held hearings on Afghanistan in the weeks after the Taliban's takeover,[86] and Congress established an Afghanistan War Commission (Section 1094 of

[82] See, for example, H.R. 5404 and S. 2826.

[83] Matthew Funaiole and Brian Hart, "Afghanistan Is No Treasure Trove for China," *Foreign Policy*, September 28, 2021.

[84] Shannon Tiezzi, "China signals it's back to business as usual with Taliban government," *Diplomat*, March 25, 2022.

[85] Barbara Sprunt, "There's a bipartisan backlash to how Biden handled the withdrawal from Afghanistan," *NPR*, August 17, 2021.

[86] Hearings on Afghanistan include those held by: House Foreign Affairs Committee (September 13, 2021, with Secretary Blinken); Senate Foreign Relations Committee (September 14, 2021, with Secretary Blinken); Senate Armed Services Committee (September 28, 2021, with Secretary Austin, General Milley, and General McKenzie); House Armed Services Committee (September 29, 2021, with Secretary Austin, General Milley, and General McKenzie); Senate Armed Services Committee (September 30, 2021, with outside witnesses); House Foreign Affairs Committee (October 5, 2021, with former U.S. officials); Senate Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs Committee (October 5,

the FY2022 National Defense Authorization Act, NDAA, P.L. 117-81) charged with examining the war and developing "a series of lessons learned and recommendations for the way forward" in a final report to be issued within three years. In the meantime, some Members express an intent to remain focused on developments in Afghanistan, arguing that a U.S. failure to remain engaged in Afghanistan may lead to the sort of broader societal collapse in which Al Qaeda thrived and planned the September 11, 2001, attacks after the 1989 Soviet withdrawal.[87]

How Afghanistan fits into broader U.S. strategy is one issue on which Members might engage, especially given competing fiscal priorities in light of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as competing U.S. policy priorities. The Biden Administration initially framed and has since defended the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan as helping to make the United States more prepared to confront other, and ostensibly more strategically important, challenges, such as those posed by Russia and China.[88]

Going forward, U.S. policy, including congressional action, will be influenced and likely constrained by a number of factors, including

- a dearth of information about dynamics in Afghanistan, given the lack of U.S. diplomats and other on the ground observers and Taliban-imposed limitations on journalists; and
- the historical legacy of U.S. conflict with the Taliban, which may make cooperation with the group, even to advance U.S. policy priorities, politically difficult.

Beyond the challenges of how to formulate U.S. policy toward Afghanistan, Members may seek to articulate and shape *what* U.S. goals in Afghanistan should be. Many Members express an interest in minimizing humanitarian suffering, containing regionally based terrorist groups, and continuing support for Afghan women and girls. At the same time, many Members (with the evident support of the Biden Administration) evidently seek to avoid any actions, including the provision of development assistance, that might have the effect of benefiting the Taliban or improving the group's position in power.[89] Some of these priorities may come into tension: providing purely humanitarian aid may be sufficient to stave off mass casualties, but is unlikely to boost the Afghan economy. Financial assistance could improve the Afghan economy, ameliorating the humanitarian situation, but comes with the risk of diversion of some funds or broader benefits to the Taliban. Going forward, Members may weigh the financial and social costs of providing humanitarian assistance indefinitely with the political and moral costs of boosting (or at least refraining from undermining) the Taliban's rule.

In shaping U.S. policy toward Afghanistan, Congress may consider a number of policy options, including:

2021, with outside witnesses); House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on International Development, International Organizations, and Global Corporate Impact (October 6, 2021, with SIGAR); Senate Armed Service Committee (October 26, 2021, with DOD witnesses); and Senate Foreign Relations Committee (November 17, 2021, with former U.S. officials).

[87] Letter available at https://crow.house.gov/media/press-releases/representatives-crow-malinowski-meijer-press-president-biden-release.

[88] See for example "Remarks by President Biden on the Way Forward in Afghanistan," White House, April 14, 2021; "Remarks by President Biden on the End of the War in Afghanistan," White House, August 31, 2021; Department Press Briefing—January 24, 2022, U.S. Department of State.

[89] See S. 2863.

- Congress may request or mandate additional information from the Administration about its "over-the-horizon" plans to counter terrorism in Afghanistan to assess the feasibility of those plans, and may consider adjustments to the resources and/or authorities it provides to the Executive Branch to carry them out;
- Congress may examine how U.S. assistance, and conditions thereon, may impact Taliban actions, including with regard to women's rights more broadly and the ability of Afghan girls to attend schools in particular, to inform congressional consideration of the Administration's budget request and action on FY2023 appropriations;
- Congress may request or mandate additional information from the Administration about the number and status of U.S. citizens and Afghan partners who remain in Afghanistan and about the status of U.S. efforts to secure their relocation;
- Congress may examine the impact of U.S. sanctions on the targeted individuals, the Afghan economy, and Afghan society more broadly, including by requiring reporting thereon from the Administration and/or the Government Accountability Office, to assess whether they are achieving their intended objectives;
- Congress may request or mandate additional information from the Administration about its plans for Afghan central bank assets held in the United States (though opportunities for congressional action may be limited in light of ongoing litigation); and
- Congress may examine the impact and efficacy of oversight of previous U.S. efforts in Afghanistan to shape future oversight mechanisms, including those intended to oversee U.S. assistance to other foreign partners (such as Ukraine).

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