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

Updated February 17, 2022

Congressional Research Service
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R45122

CRS REPORT
Prepared for Members and
Committees of Congress

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SUMMARY

R45122

February 17, 2022

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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 publics and 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 approximately $144 billion for reconstruction and security forces there. At the same time, an elected Afghan government replaced the Taliban and, with significant U.S. and international support, made limited 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 by the Trump Administration in 2018, U.S. 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 February 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 be welcomed by the United States and other countries. Other than a regional Islamic State affiliate, no armed opposition to the Taliban appears to exist as of February 2022, although some anti-Taliban Afghan leaders have sought U.S. support. The Taliban's renewed rule has been detrimental for the status of women and girls in Afghanistan, a long-standing U.S. policy interest. 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.

Since the Taliban takeover, Afghanistan has faced intersecting and overwhelming humanitarian and economic crises, a result of challenges both old (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. forces, the lowest U.S. force level since 2001, in advance of the full troop 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 critical financial support to Afghan forces and expressed optimism 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 militarily resisted the Taliban when the group was in power in the 1990s,

[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.

making their rapid 2021 fall to the Taliban particularly significant. One source 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, factional infighting, pervasive corruption, and the gradual deterioration of Afghan forces, fled the country that same day and remains, as of February 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 new 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] One Taliban spokesman reportedly said in September 2021 that the group intends to temporarily "implement" the 1964 constitution of the former Afghan monarchy "without any content that contradicts Islamic law and the principles of the Islamic Emirate," with another speculating that the group might draft a new constitution in 2022.[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 reportedly exists.[9] Mohammad Hassan Akhund, who served as governor of Kandahar and foreign minister in the 1990s Taliban government, is the Acting Prime Minister. One analyst has described Akhund as "relatively weak," an "uncontroversial" figure

[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] S. K. Khan, "Taliban to implement monarch-era Constitution in Afghanistan," *Anadolu Ajansi,* September 28, 2021; "Taliban plans to form 'commission' in 2022 to draft new constitution," *ANI,* September 23, 2021.

[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.

whose selection forestalls competition among more powerful figures and factions within the Taliban.[10] Abdul Ghani Baradar, who led Taliban negotiations with the United States from 2018 to 2021, is the Acting Deputy Prime Minister.

The composition of the Taliban government is overwhelmingly homogeneous. Nearly all members of the "caretaker cabinet" are former Taliban officials or longtime loyalists. All are male, and the vast majority are ethnic Pashtuns (Afghanistan's largest ethnic group, which represents a plurality though not a majority 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). Some argue the role of Haqqani Network-associated figures in the Taliban caretaker government is a reflection of their outsized military import and could make U.S. cooperation with the Taliban more difficult.[11]

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.[12] The Taliban are reportedly staffing government positions with military and/or religious figures with little relevant experience, including some long resident in neighboring Pakistan, exacerbating the group's administrative challenges.[13]

In the immediate wake of the Taliban's takeover, some reports indicated dissension in the Taliban ranks, largely between the group's political wing (which reportedly advocates for greater inclusion of diverse elements from within Afghan society, with an eye toward international recognition, e.g., Baradar) and its military wing (which opposes such compromises, e.g., the Haqqanis).[14] Other analysts emphasize the Taliban's history of effectively managing internal disputes.[15] Even if the Taliban succeed in limiting factional infighting, their exclusive approach to governing may carry its own risks of inspiring opposition or insurgency against its rule. Central governance has often proved challenging throughout Afghan history, though the Taliban's current position appears relatively secure.

Current and Potential Opposition

While the Taliban's August 2021 takeover was swift, its triumph, according to many analysts, does not reflect massive popular support for the movement but rather a lack of support for the former government.[16] Many elements of Afghan society, particularly in urban areas, appear to

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

[11] Stephanie Findlay, "Haqqani network's clever game culminates with Afghan government roles," *Financial Times*, September 10, 2021.

[12] "Who Will Run the Taliban Government?" op. cit.

[13] Zia ur-Rehman and Emily Schmall, "The Taliban have staffing issues. They are looking for help in Pakistan," *New York Times*, January 13, 2022.

[14] Khudai Noor Nasar, "Afghanistan: Taliban leaders in bust-up at presidential palace, sources say," *BBC*, September 15, 2021; Ali Latifi, "How deep are divisions among the Taliban?" *Al Jazeera*, September 23, 2021.

[15] Andrew Watkins, "An Assessment of Taliban Rule at Three Months," *CTC Sentinel*, November 2021.

[16] "How the Taliban engineered 'political collapse' of Afghanistan," Reuters, August 17, 2021; Shadi Hamid,

view the Taliban with skepticism, fear, or hostility.[17] Sporadic protests against the group's rule, and the Taliban's uncompromising response to them, point to a potential for future unrest as well as future repression.

One initial effort to form an armed resistance to the Taliban was short-lived and evidently collapsed in September 2021. That brief armed resistance attempted to form a base in the central province of Panjshir, which was never conquered by the Taliban during their prior rule, but Taliban forces quickly quelled the resistance. The Taliban appear to effectively control the entire country, unlike in the 1990s when Taliban foes (the former Northern Alliance) represented significant armed opposition and held roughly 10% of the country's territory. The Taliban also have stronger ties with regional powers, including some that once supported the Northern Alliance against the Taliban, such as Russia and Iran. Still, if they were to emerge, the existence of resistance factions, in Panjshir or elsewhere, could serve as a rallying point or galvanize Taliban opponents in the country, who might then make additional appeals for U.S. or other international assistance. It is not clear how likely this prospect is. Formerly Panjshir-based opposition leaders (including Ahmad Massoud, son of famed Northern Alliance leader Ahmad Shah Massoud) formed the National Resistance Front (NRF) in the aftermath of the Taliban's takeover; the location of its leaders, who have retained Washington, D.C.-based representation, is unclear.[18] In a January 2022 visit to Tehran, Taliban leaders reportedly met with an NRF delegation including Massoud.[19]

An armed threat to the Taliban does exist in the form of the local Islamic State affiliate (Islamic State-Khorasan Province, ISKP, also known as ISIS-K), a longtime Taliban adversary. The group has escalated its attacks against both Afghan civilians and Taliban forces, challenging the Taliban's legitimacy. Experts disagree about the potency of the ISKP threat and the Taliban's self-asserted ability to counter the group without external assistance.[20] Some Afghans, including former members of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF), have reportedly taken up arms with ISKP, purportedly attracted by ISKP cash payments and by the group's status as the sole active armed opposition to the Taliban.[21]

In the weeks after the takeover, some Afghans demonstrated nonviolently to advocate for their rights and express opposition to the Taliban. Protests by hundreds of women in Kabul in September gained international attention, and some Afghans demonstrated in Jalalabad, Kandahar, and other cities as well to protest Taliban actions.[22] The Taliban monitored most protests, and violently dispersed some. The Taliban-led Interior Ministry issued a decree on September 8, 2021, banning unapproved demonstrations though some sporadic, small-scale

"Americans never understood Afghanistan like the Taliban did," Brookings Institution, August 23, 2021.

[17] Loveday Morris and Ruby Mellen, "Portraits of fear and loss," *Washington Post,* January 12, 2022.

[18] Trevor Filseth, "After Renegade Province's Fall, Panjshir Resistance Leaders Surface in Tajikistan," *National Interest,* September 23, 2021; Lachlan Markey, "Taliban resistance ramps up U.S. lobbying efforts," *Axios,* October 27, 2021.

[19] "Shirshah Rasooli, "Resistance Front Proposed Transitional Govt to Islamic Emirate," *TOLOnews,* January 11, 2022.

[20] Samya Kullab, "Islamic State attacks test Taliban's control in Afghanistan," *Christian Science Monitor,* October 13, 2021; Amira Jadoon and Andrew Mines, "The Taliban can't take on the Islamic State alone," *War on the Rocks,* October 14, 2021.

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

[22] Susannah George and Ezzatullah Mehrdad, "Space for dissent opened in Afghanistan after the Taliban was ousted 20 years ago. Now the militants are trying to slam it shut," *Washington Post,* September 12, 2021; "Thousands protest against Taliban in Kandahar over evictions," *Reuters,* September 14, 2021.

protests have continued.[23] U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet said on September 13 that Taliban forces had used "increasing violence against protesters and journalists."[24] The Taliban have publicized demonstrations in favor of Taliban rule, in which some reportedly participated under duress.[25]

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 Afghanistan, and complicates (if not rendering obsolete) original 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; those rights appear at risk with the Taliban back in power. Looming over these and other developments is the critical humanitarian and economic crisis that Afghanistan now faces.

Counterterrorism

For decades, a variety 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.[26] In October 2020, Afghan forces killed a high-ranking AQ operative in Afghanistan's Ghazni province, where he reportedly was living and working with Taliban forces, underscoring the close and interrelated connections between the groups and their operatives.[27] In May 2021, U.N. sanctions monitors reported that Al Qaeda "minimized overt communications with Taliban leadership in an effort to 'lay low' and not jeopardize the Taliban's diplomatic position."[28]

Estimates of how the Taliban takeover is likely to affect AQ capabilities differ. According to media accounts, U.S. officials reportedly told some Senators in August 2021, "terror groups like al-Qaida may be able to grow much faster than expected" in Afghanistan under the Taliban.[29] 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.[30] On the other hand, some analysts argued in the immediate aftermath of the Taliban

[23] "Afghan women call for rights, protest alleged Taliban killings," *Al Jazeera*, December 28, 2021.

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

[25] "Were Afghan women forced to attend the pro-Taliban rally?" *TRT World*, September 15, 2021.

[26] *Twelfth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2557 (2020) concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace, stability and security of Afghanistan,* U.N. Document S/2021/486, released May 27, 2020.

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

[28] U.N. Document S/2021/486, op. cit.

[29] Michael Balsamo, et al., "Concerns over US Terror Threat Rising as Taliban hold Grows," *Associated Press*, August 15, 2021.

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

takeover 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.[31] U.N. sanctions monitors reported in February 2021 that the Taliban's takeover had given Al Qaeda "a significant boost" and that Al Qaeda has since "maintained a strategic silence, likely an effort not to compromise Taliban efforts to gain international recognition and legitimacy."[32]

The Islamic State affiliate in Afghanistan, on the other hand, has opposed the Taliban since its 2015 establishment, and the two groups have often clashed. ISKP (with 1,500-2,200 fighters, per U.N. sanctions monitors) views the Taliban's Afghanistan-focused nationalist political project as counter to its own universalist vision of a global caliphate. The Taliban have deployed hundreds of fighters to eastern Afghanistan, where ISKP attacks appear most frequent, and have been accused of extra-judicial killings of suspected ISKP members.[33] 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.[34] 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."[35] A Taliban spokesperson reportedly rejected such cooperation in October 2021, saying, "We are able to tackle [ISKP] independently."[36]

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.[37] With the Taliban in control of Afghanistan, the United States will have 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. Incoming CENTCOM Commander General Michael Kurilla described over-the-horizon capabilities as "extremely difficult but not impossible" in February 2022 testimony.[38]

Human Rights: Women and Ethnic and Religious Minorities

Present-day Afghanistan is in many ways a different country than the one the Taliban last ruled in 2001. Women have been active participants in many parts of Afghan society; protections for them, and ethnic and religious minorities, were enshrined in the country's 2004 constitution. Since taking power in August 2021, Taliban officials have reiterated their commitment to

[31] Ahmad Siddiqi, "The West is getting Afghanistan wrong—again," *Al Jazeera*, September 12, 2021; Daniel Byman, "Will Afghanistan Become a Terrorist Safe Haven Again?" *Foreign Affairs*, August 18, 2021.

[32] *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.

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

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

[35] Secretary of Defense Austin and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Milley Press Briefing on the End of the U.S. War in Afghanistan, Department of Defense, September 1, 2021.

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

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

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

protecting women's rights "within the framework of *sharia*,"[39] and their early actions suggest at least some moderation from their highly oppressive 1996-2001 rule. Nonetheless, their return to power has ushered in "immediate and dramatic reversals on women's rights and fundamental freedoms," according to the United Nations.[40]

The Taliban are often portrayed as the prime drivers of Afghan women's oppression. Some observers have noted, however, that many people within Afghan society hold restrictive views of women's rights, particularly in rural areas, where 76% of the population resides.[41] For some Afghans, including some women, the Taliban takeover may represent an improvement over high levels of violence that characterized the Taliban's insurgency.[42] This may be particularly so for those in rural areas more affected by conflict.

For other Afghans, particularly in urban areas, the Taliban's takeover has increased fears of repression, and has created longer-term concerns over the future of women's rights under a Taliban government.[43] 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 interpretation of Islam in the 1990s.[44] Guidance issued by that ministry in late December 2021 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.[45] The disappearance of several women activists (some of whom were involved in protests mentioned above) in January 2022 attracted considerable international attention and raised fears of a broader Taliban crackdown on women's rights.[46]

Of particular concern to many U.S. policymakers are Taliban policies toward education for Afghan girls. Some signs suggest that the Taliban may permit education for women and girls in at least some cases, with secondary public schools for girls having reopened in some provinces.[47] In many other provinces, however, a de facto ban on girls' education, at least above the primary level, remains in place. For months, Taliban officials have said that they intend to create "a safe learning environment" in which girls' schools can reopen,[48] but many women's rights advocates are skeptical of these claims and fearful that the group never intends to officially allow such education. In the 1990s, the Taliban did not formally ban secondary or higher education for girls, but similarly prohibited it on an ostensibly temporary basis due to unspecified security concerns,

[39] "Transcript of Taliban's first news conference in Kabul," *Al Jazeera*, August 17, 2021. Sharia refers broadly to concepts and principles of Islamic religious jurisprudence that vary in their interpretation under different schools of practice. For more, see Matthew Nelson, "The Taliban's (Islamic) Isolation," Chatham House, October 21, 2020.

[40] "Women's Rights in Afghanistan: Where Are We Now?" United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, December 2021.

[41] John R. Allen and Vanda Felbab-Brown, "The fate of women's rights in Afghanistan," Brookings Institution, September 2020.

[42] Anand Gopal, "The Other Afghan Women," *The New Yorker*, September 6, 2021.

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

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

[45] "No long-distance travel for women without male relative: Taliban," *Al Jazeera*, December 26, 2021.

[46] Patricia Grossman, "Afghan women's rights activists forcibly disappeared," Human Rights Watch, January 24, 2022; Sudarsan Raghavan, "Faced with disappearances, beatings and intimidation, Afghanistan's women's rights activists go quiet on the streets," *Washington Post*, February 8, 2022.

[47] Kate Clark, "Who gets to go to school? (1): What people told us about education since the Taleban took over," *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, January 26, 2022.

[48] "Girls to return to secondary school 'soon as possible': Taliban," *Al Jazeera*, September 21, 2021.

a de facto ban that lasted the entirety of the group's five-year rule.[49] A Taliban spokesman said in a January 2022 interview that the group intended to reopen girls' schools across the country by March 2022, describing the delay as a "question of capacity."[50] Public universities reopened in February 2022 with women permitted to attend but only when separated from men.[51]

Taliban rhetoric and action with regard to ethnic and religious minorities have also received scrutiny. 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.[52] Since their August 2021 takeover, the Taliban have demonstrated a more accepting official stance toward the Hazaras, particularly in urban areas, even as reports emerge of killings and forced displacement in the Hazaras' historic homelands in central Afghanistan.[53] Surveying these mixed messages, one observer speculated in early September 2021 that "the Taliban political leadership's more pragmatic approach toward the Hazara is necessary to maintain its fragile control over all of Afghanistan," but that persecution could increase in the absence of international attention.[54]

Ongoing Relocations of American Citizens and Certain Afghans

The Taliban's entry into Kabul on August 15 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. That effort largely came to a close with the final departure of U.S. military forces on August 30. U.S. officials say that they intend to secure the relocation of all remaining U.S. citizens and eligible Afghan partners who seek to leave the country, but some Members of Congress and other observers express concern about the pace of relocations.

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, which General Milley described as "the largest air evacuation in US history."[55] 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.[56] It is not clear how many of those departed via overland routes or via the U.S.-backed Qatar Airways charter flights that periodically left Kabul, despite issues with the international airport there (see text box).

The number of U.S. citizens remaining in Afghanistan appears to be in flux. The State Department said on December 13 that it was in contact with "fewer than a dozen U.S. citizens"

[49] Margot Buff, "'Our Futures Will Be Ruined': Afghan Girls Fear Denial of Education Under Taliban," *Gandhara*, September 21, 2021; Rasmussen and Nazari, op. cit.

[50] Kathy Gannon, "The AP Interview: Taliban pledge all girls in school soon," Associated Press, January 15, 2022.

[51] Ehsan Popalzai and Hande Atay Alam, "Afghan universities reopen to female students but with strict rules on mixing," *CNN*, February 3, 2022.

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

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

[54] Tom Mutch, "Afghanistan's Hazaras Get Mixed Messages From the Taliban," *Foreign Policy*, September 4, 2021.

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

[56] U.S. Department of State, "Afghanistan Relocation and Resettlement Update," December 13, 2021. On January 11, 2022, a State Department spokesperson similarly noted that the State Department had directly assisted with the departure of 479 U.S. citizens, 450 lawful permanent residents, and approximately 2,000 Afghans.

who wanted and were prepared to leave Afghanistan; a spokesperson said on January 11, 2022, "We are working currently with a few dozen U.S. citizens and their families who have identified themselves as prepared to depart and who have the necessary travel documents to do so."[57] That spokesperson added that there were "probably fewer than 200" U.S. citizens in Afghanistan, leaving "about 150 other U.S. citizens who don't want to leave Afghanistan at this point or [are] otherwise not ready to depart."[58]

One December 2021 press report, citing a State Department official, stated that around 62,000 Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) applicants remain in Afghanistan.[59] This figure excludes the tens of thousands of Afghans at risk who are not eligible for an SIV.

Status of Kabul Airport

Relocation efforts are complicated by the status of Kabul's international airport. Since the final departure of U.S. forces, Qatar and Turkey have been working 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 in early September 2021, but international flights 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.[60] In late December 2021, Qatar and Turkey reportedly signed an agreement to operate the Kabul airport jointly, along with four other airports in Afghanistan.[61] The United Arab Emirates reportedly has also held talks with the Taliban about operating the Kabul airport, possibly in a bid to diminish the influence of Qatar, its regional rival.[62] The foreign minister of Turkey, which in 2022 improved relations with the UAE, raised the prospect of a trilateral arrangement as talks with the Taliban continue.[63]

Beyond logistical problems at Kabul airport, another impediment to continued relocations has been the issue of travel documentation, particularly passports, without which Afghans cannot leave the country. The Taliban began reissuing passports several weeks after taking control of the country, but the operations of passport offices have been sporadic and hamstrung by delays, long lines, and administrative challenges.[64]

Additionally, some Afghans who seek to relocate remain in hiding, fearing Taliban retribution against individuals who worked for the former Afghan government and/or with the United States. The Taliban issued a general amnesty after coming to power, but U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres reportedly stated in January 2022 that the United Nations has received "credible allegations" of Taliban reprisals against those individuals, including dozens of killings.[65]

In mid-December 2021, reports emerged that the Taliban had halted evacuation flights from Afghanistan after Qatar ceased providing seats on chartered Qatar Airways flights for Taliban-

[57] Ibid.; Department Press Briefing—January 11, 2022, U.S. Department of State, January 11, 2022.

[58] Department Press Briefing—January 11, 2022, op. cit.

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

[60] Aftab Khan, "PIA prepared to run regular flights to Kabul: CEO," *Express Tribune*, November 13, 2021.

[61] "Turkey, Qatar Await Taliban Green Light to Run Afghan Airports," *Voice of America*, December 28, 2021.

[62] Alexander Cornwell, "EXCLUSIVE: UAE holds talks with Taliban to run Kabul airport—foreign diplomats," *Reuters*, November 24, 2021.

[63] "Kabul Airport May be Run Jointly by Turkey, Qatar, UAE," *TOLOnews*, December 28, 2021.

[64] 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.

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

designated individuals to work abroad and earn money to be remitted back to Afghanistan amid the country's severe economic difficulties. While some suggest Qatar forced the Taliban to cease this practice at the behest of the United States, others have stated that this dispute is entirely between the Taliban and Qatar.[66] Qatar, Turkey, and the Taliban have had negotiations on resuming airport operations, and reportedly reached a preliminary agreement on airport security in January 2022.[67] The first relocation flight in several months, a Qatar Airways charter paid for by the U.S. State Department, reportedly left Kabul in late January 2022.[68]

Humanitarian and Economic Crisis[69]

The Taliban's return to power has triggered what U.N. officials describe as potentially the worst humanitarian crisis in the world in Afghanistan, long one of the world's poorest and most aid-dependent countries.[70] 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.

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 December 2021 that the proportion of Afghans with insufficient food had increased from 80% to 98% since the Taliban's takeover.[71] In October 2021, the U.N. Children's Fund (UNICEF) estimated that "at least 1 million" Afghan children are "at risk of dying due to severe acute malnutrition without immediate treatment."[72]

The United States and other international donors provided billions of dollars each year to support the former Afghan government, financing over half of the government's $6 billion annual budget and as much as 80% of total public expenditures.[73] 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 has contracted as much as 40% since August 2021

[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] Callie Patteson, "Turkey, Qatar in talks to restart Afghan evacuation flights," *New York Post*, December 28, 2021; Tuvan Gumrukcu, "Turkey, Qatar reached preliminary deal on Kabul airport security- Turkish sources," *Reuters*, January 20, 2022.

[68] Courntey Kube et al., "First flight of American evacuees in months leaves Kabul airport for Qatar," *NBC News*, January 27, 2022.

[69] See CRS In Focus IF12039, *Afghanistan: Humanitarian Crisis, Economic Collapse, and U.S. Sanctions*.

[70] "Get the facts: What's happening now in Afghanistan," United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), January 18, 2022.

[71] "Afghanistan Food Security Update," World Food Program, December 8, 2021.

[72] "Half of Afghanistan's children under five expected to suffer from acute malnutrition as hunger takes root for millions," UNICEF Afghanistan, October 5, 2021.

[73] 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.

as of December 2021.[74] The U.N. Development Program (UNDP) warned in November 2021 that, under various scenarios, poverty rates could reach as high as 97% by July 2022.[75]

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.[76] 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.[77]

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 country's banking system. In October 2021, Secretary-General Guterres urged "the world to take action and inject liquidity into the Afghan economy to avoid collapse," and 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."[78]

The World Bank in December 2021 decided to release $280 million in Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF) monies to U.N. agencies to support Afghan health and education workers' salaries, injecting much-needed money into the Afghan economy; the United States has reportedly "encouraged" the World Bank to release additional ARTF funds.[79] Additionally, the Asian Development Bank approved $405 million in grants to four U.N. agencies to provide food, health care, and education to millions of Afghans.[80]

Both the Taliban and some foreign leaders (including Secretary-General Guterres) 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.[81]

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[74] Yaroslav Trofimov, "For a Taliban-Ruled Afghanistan, and the Rest of the World, a Crisis Looms," *Wall Street Journal* December 13, 2021.

[75] "Afghanistan: Socio-Economic Outlook 2021-2022," UNDP Afghanistan, November 30, 2021.

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

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

[78] Jonathan Landay, "U.N. chief: Liquidity needed to stem Afghanistan economic, humanitarian crises," *Reuters*, October 11, 2021; U.S. Department of State, "Secretary Antony J. Blinken at a Press Availability," December 21, 2021.

[79] David Ignatius, "How the U.S. is helping vulnerable Afghans without recognizing the Taliban," *Washington Post*, January 18, 2022.

[80] "$405 million in ADB grants to support food security, health, and education in Afghanistan through United Nations," Asian Development Bank, January 25, 2022.

[81] 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/.

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. Pakistan's security services maintain ties to Afghan armed groups, most notably the Haqqani Network.[82] Former Afghan leaders, along with U.S. military commanders, attributed much of the Taliban's strength either directly or indirectly to Pakistani support.[83] The Trump Administration sought Islamabad's assistance in U.S. talks with the Taliban in 2018, and U.S. assessments of Pakistan's role were generally more positive thereafter.[84] Many analysts regarded the Taliban takeover at least initially as a triumph for Pakistan's regional policy, pointing to Pakistan's long history of support for the Taliban and statement of evident support for the takeover from Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan and others.[85] 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 serious 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 an Afghan Taliban-mediated ceasefire with the TTP that ended in December 2021.[86] Moreover, state-run Pakistan International Airlines ended its flights to Kabul in October 2021 due to the Taliban's "unprofessional attitude."[87] 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.[88] Taliban and Pakistani government forces reportedly clashed at the border in December 2021 and January 2022.[89]

Iran. Iran, with which Afghanistan shares its western border, opposed the Taliban's 1990s rule but has maintained relations with the group in recent years while emphasizing the need for

[82] For more, see CRS In Focus IF10604, *Terrorist Groups in Afghanistan*, by Clayton Thomas.

[83] White House, *Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia*, August 21, 2017. Some Pakistani officials disputed that charge and noted the Taliban's increased territorial control within Afghanistan itself. Author interviews with Pakistani military officials, Rawalpindi, Pakistan, February 21, 2018.

[84] "Mullah Baradar released by Pakistan at the behest of US: Khalilzad," *The Hindu*, February 9, 2019. Baradar had been imprisoned in Pakistan since his capture in Karachi in a joint U.S.-Pakistani operation in 2010. Baqir Sajjad Syed, "Pentagon chief praises Pakistan's role in Afghan peace process," *Dawn*, March 23, 2021.

[85] 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.

[86] "Pakistani Taliban ends ceasefire, future of peace talks uncertain," *Al Jazeera*, December 10, 2021; Abdul Sayed, "The Evolution and Future of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 21, 2021.

[87] Aftab Khan, "PIA prepared to run regular flights to Kabul: CEO," *Express Tribune*, November 13, 2021.

[88] 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.

[89] Asfandyar Mir et al., "Afghanistan-Pakistan Border Dispute Heats Up," U.S. Institute of Peace, January 12, 2022.

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, including the only regional rejection of the group's government. 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 official engagements with the Taliban (such as a visit to Kabul by the Uzbek foreign minister in October 2021 and a visit to Turkmenistan by the Taliban's acting foreign minister in January 2022).[90] 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 historical struggles with Islamist militancy as well as ethnolinguistic ties with Afghan Tajiks (the country's second largest ethnic group), some of whom oppose the Taliban's rule. Tajikistan has reportedly offered refuge to prominent anti-Taliban Afghan leaders, and its officials have criticized the Taliban government, prompting the Taliban to warn Tajikistan against interfering in Afghan affairs.[91]

China. The prospect of greater Chinese influence and activity in Afghanistan has attracted some congressional attention since the Taliban takeover.[92] China, which played a relatively limited role in Afghanistan under the former government, has made some economic investments in Afghanistan (particularly in the development of Afghan minerals and other resources) but major projects have not come to fruition due to instability, lack of infrastructure, and other limitations.[93] China initially signaled support for the Taliban but has not formally recognized the group to date, and may be reluctant to pursue closer relations due to concerns about Afghanistan-based Islamist terrorist groups.[94]

Congressional Action and Outlook

President Biden's April 2021 announcement of his intention to fully withdraw U.S. forces by September 11, 2021, drew both praise and criticism across partisan lines from some Members of Congress who for years had debated the relative costs and benefits of the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan. Some welcomed the announcement, citing what they characterize as U.S. counterterrorism successes or a need to reprioritize U.S. global interests.[95] Other Members urged President Biden to reconsider in favor of a conditions-based approach.[96]

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[90] Bruce Pannier, "For the Turkmen and Uzbek leaders, a meeting of minds on Afghanistan," *RFE/RL*, October 9, 2021; Orkhan Jalilov, "Turkmen, Afghan Officials Discuss Energy and Transport Projects," *Caspian News*, January 18, 2022.

[91] Vinay Kaura, "Tajikistan's evolving relations with the Taliban 2.0," Middle East Institute, December 1, 2021.

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

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

[94] Atal Ahmadzai, "Why China Is Slow-Rolling Taliban Cooperation," *Foreign Policy*, January 27, 2022.

[95] Representative Andy Kim, "Congressman Kim Statement on Announcement of U.S. Troop Withdrawal from Afghanistan," April 13, 2021; Senator Ed Markey (@SenMarkey), Twitter, April 13, 2021, 1:29PM.

[96] Senator Jim Inhofe (@JimInhofe), Twitter, April 13, 2021, 1:26PM.

The Taliban's takeover attracted intense congressional and public attention. Many Members characterized the August 2021 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.[97] 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.[98] Some of these hearings focused on contemporaneous U.S. policy actions, whereas others sought to examine the two decades of U.S. policy decisions that preceded the Taliban's takeover. Perhaps the most comprehensive effort to investigate U.S. efforts in Afghanistan is Congress's establishment of the Afghanistan War Commission (Section 1094 of the FY2022 National Defense Authorization Act, NDAA, P.L. 117-81). The Commission's 16 members are to be appointed by the chairs and ranking members of the Senate and House armed services, foreign affairs, and intelligence committees, as well as by House and Senate majority and minority leaders, within 60 days of enactment. They are charged with examining "the key strategic, diplomatic, and operation decisions that pertain to the war in Afghanistan" 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. Some of these Members argue that a U.S. failure to remain engaged in Afghanistan may lead to a broader societal collapse and civil war akin to the environment in which Al Qaeda thrived and planned the September 11, 2001, attacks after the 1989 Soviet withdrawal.[99]

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.[100] 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.[101]

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

[98] 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, 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).

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

[100] See, for example, CRS Report R43838, *Renewed Great Power Competition: Implications for Defense—Issues for Congress*, by Ronald O'Rourke.

[101] 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.

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.

Changes in dynamics in Afghanistan, such as further deterioration of the humanitarian situation or actions by the Taliban (including the planned March 2022 reopening of public education for Afghan girls), could prompt some Members to initiate or call for new U.S. policy measures. In addition to direct congressional action (including appropriating, authorizing, or limiting funding for various purposes), congressional options for overseeing the Administration's approach to Afghanistan include continued hearings, letters to executive branch officials, public statements, reporting requirements, requesting assessments from the Government Accountability Office (GAO), and legislation pertaining to sanctions policy or other issues. The Administration's February 2022 announcement on the disposition of U.S.-based Afghan central bank assets may be one policy area for congressional engagement and oversight.

Beyond the challenges of how to formulate U.S. policy toward the new situation in 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.[102]

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 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.

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[102] See S. 2863.

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