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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 rising Taliban insurgency, and Congress appropriated over $146 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.

In February 2020, Trump Administration officials signed an agreement with the Taliban in which the United States committed to the withdrawal of all international military forces by May 2021, in return for which the Taliban committed to prevent other groups (including Al Qaeda) from using Afghan soil to threaten the United States. Amid increased violence between the Taliban and Afghan government and continuing Taliban links with Al Qaeda, the Trump Administration drew down U.S. forces to a low of 2,500 in January 2021. Several months later, President Joseph Biden announced that the United States would complete the troop withdrawal by September 2021. 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 August 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 advocated by the United States and other countries. Some anti-Taliban Afghans 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.

Members of Congress 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 at 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. The Taliban's return to power also has implications for Afghanistan's neighbors and regional dynamics more broadly.

Since the Taliban takeover, Afghanistan has faced intersecting and overwhelming humanitarian and economic crises, a result of challenges both pre-existing (such as natural disasters 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 given the Taliban's evident aversion to make compromises in response to international pressure and its apparent willingness to accept considerable humanitarian and economic suffering as the price of that uncompromising stance.

Congressional oversight of U.S. Afghanistan policy has featured numerous hearings, past and ongoing investigations, and the creation of the Afghanistan War Commission. Congress has also imposed a variety of reporting requirements to monitor dynamics in Afghanistan and their implications for U.S. policy. Congress may consider further reporting requirements as it evaluates the Biden Administration's FY2023 budget request and defense authorization measures.

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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] U.S. officials committed to continue to provide financial support to Afghan forces and expressed confidence about their capabilities vis-a-vis the Taliban, while conceding that those forces remained reliant on U.S. support.[2]

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.[3]

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:

[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] See House Oversight and Reform Subcommittee on National Security Holds Hearing on Pathway for Peace in Afghanistan, *CQ Congressional Transcripts*, February 19, 2021.

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

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.[4] 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.[5]

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.[6] 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.[7] The Taliban captured their first provincial capital on August 6, after which the collapse of the Afghan government and its security forces accelerated. 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 on August 15 and reportedly remains, as of August 2022, in the United Arab Emirates.[8] Taliban fighters began entering Kabul that same day, taking effective control of the country.

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.[9] 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."[10]

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 photograph of him is known to be publicly available.[11] Nearly all members of the government are former officials from the Taliban's prior rule 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

[4] 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.

[5] 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.

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

[7] 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.

[8] Charles Davis, "Afghanistan's last president, Ashraf Ghani, rejects comparison to Ukraine's Zelenskyy, says he's 'lived an honorable life,'" *Yahoo News,* August 23, 2022.

[9] It remains unclear as of August 2022 how or in what sense these "caretaker" positions differ from permanent positions. 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.

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

[11] 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.

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) that is responsible for numerous attacks against U.S. and other international targets in Afghanistan.

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 government positions and are reportedly staffing ministries with military and/or religious figures with little relevant experience, exacerbating the group's administrative challenges and some internal tensions.[12]

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.[13] 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;[14] between a leadership that seeks stability and rank and file fighters who are struggling to adjust to post-conflict life;[15] and between those with different ideological perspectives and ethnic identities.[16]

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 so much as a lack of support for the former government.[17] Many elements of Afghan society, particularly in urban areas, appear to view the Taliban with skepticism, fear, or hostility, and small numbers of Afghans have demonstrated nonviolently to advocate for their rights and express opposition to the Taliban.[18] The Taliban appear to have monitored most protests, and violently dispersed some.[19]

The Taliban face organized armed opposition from two very different quarters. The first is the National Resistance Front (NRF), made up of figures aligned with the former Afghan state. NRF leaders have appealed for U.S. and international support and have retained Washington, DC-based

[12] 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.

[13] Andrew Watkins, "The Taliban one year on," *CTC Sentinel*, August 2022.

[14] 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.

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

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

[17] "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.

[18] Loveday Morris and Ruby Mellen, "Portraits of fear and loss," *Washington Post*, January 12, 2022; "Afghans say they feel safer but less hopeful under Taliban rule," Associated Press, February 15, 2022.

[19] "Taliban disperses Afghan women's march for 'work and freedom,'" *Al Jazeera*, August 13, 2022.

representation.[20] 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. It is difficult to assess the veracity of claimed NRF operations against Taliban fighters, which the Taliban dismiss as "propaganda," but NRF operations appear to be increasing in frequency as the group carries out guerilla-style attacks against Taliban forces, mostly in and around the central province of Panjshir.[21] Still, the NRF does not appear to have either the military capabilities or the broad-based public support that would likely be necessary to seriously threaten the Taliban's position.[22]

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.[23] Experts disagree about the potency of the ISKP threat and the Taliban's self-asserted ability to counter the group without external assistance.[24]

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

Renewed Taliban rule in Afghanistan has implications for a number of U.S. policy interests. It has created opportunities and challenges for the various terrorist groups that have a presence in Afghanistan, and has rendered 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, have also focused on securing the relocation of remaining U.S. citizens and Afghans who previously worked for the U.S. government, a halting effort that remains ongoing as of August 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. ISKP and Al Qaeda (AQ) are two of the most significant of these terrorist groups, and the Taliban's takeover has affected them differently.

ISKP, which has clashed with the Taliban as mentioned above, has long been a significant U.S. counterterrorism concern. Under the former U.S.-backed Afghan government, the United States launched airstrikes in support of Taliban offensives against ISKP, a rare area of prior U.S.-Taliban cooperation.[25] In February 2022, the U.S. State Department announced rewards of up to $10

[20] Ali Maisam Nazary, "What the Taliban really fear," *Foreign Affairs*, August 19, 2022.

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

[22] "Afghanistan's security challenges under the Taliban," International Crisis Group, August 12, 2022.

[23] Claire Parker, "How strong is the Islamic State in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan?" *Washington Post*, August 19, 2022.

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

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

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. service members.[26]

While ISKP is seen as more operationally ambitious and capable in Afghanistan than Al Qaeda, the July 2022 killing of Al Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahiri in Kabul attracted considerable attention to the issue of AQ-Taliban ties.[27] Despite (or perhaps because of) U.S. counterterrorism pressure, those ties have persisted for decades.[28] 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.[29] The circumstances of Zawahiri's residence in Kabul and what they might reveal about internal Taliban dynamics beyond continued AQ ties are not yet clear. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan has suggested that some elements of the Taliban might not have supported or even been aware of Zawahiri's presence in Kabul, possibly leading to tensions within the ground.[30] Observers speculate about the impact (if any) of Zawahiri's killing on AQ capabilities and AQ-Taliban ties.[31]

In any case, per U.N. sanctions monitors, Al Qaeda "is not viewed as posing an immediate international threat from its safe haven in Afghanistan because it lacks an external operational capability and does not currently wish to cause the Taliban international difficulty or embarrassment."[32] The U.S. intelligence community assessed in March 2022 that AQ "will gauge its ability to operate in Afghanistan under Taliban restrictions" as Al Qaeda and the Taliban recalibrate their relationship and activities.[33]

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 ISKP and Al Qaeda 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.[34] 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. U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) Commander General Michael Kurilla described over-the-horizon capabilities as "extremely difficult but not impossible" in February 2022 testimony.[35] President Biden has asserted that the Zawahiri strike vindicated his decision to complete the removal of U.S. ground forces from Afghanistan and pursue an over-the-horizon approach. With no U.S. military or diplomatic presence in Afghanistan, and the nearest U.S. military bases hundreds of

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

[27] CRS Insight IN11976, *Al Qaeda Leader Zawahiri Killed in U.S. Drone Strike in Afghanistan*, by Clayton Thomas.

[28] *Thirtieth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2610 (2021) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities*, U.N. Document S/2022/547, released July 15, 2022.

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

[30] "The National Security Advisor's very busy week," *NPR*, August 4, 2022.

[31] CRS Insight IN11976, *Al Qaeda Leader Zawahiri Killed in U.S. Drone Strike in Afghanistan*, by Clayton Thomas.

[32] *Thirtieth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team*, op cit.

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

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

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

miles away, the United States is reportedly working to increase its intelligence-gathering capabilities elsewhere in the region.[36]

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."[37]

The Taliban takeover appears to have reduced high levels of violence that characterized the conflict, a development particularly welcomed by those in rural areas,[38] but it has increased fears of many Afghans about repression and women's rights.[39] 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. 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.[40] Amnesty International reported in July 2022 that increasing numbers of women and girls have been arrested for violating these policies.[41] Those restrictions, together with the overall economic collapse, have led to a decline in women's participation in the workforce.[42]

Of particular concern to many U.S. policymakers are Taliban policies toward education for Afghan girls. Taliban spokespersons said in early 2022 that girls' secondary 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.[43] However, on March 23, with some girls already present in schools, the Taliban abruptly reversed course and announced that secondary schools for girls would remain closed, shocking many observers.[44] One analysis attributes the change to the advocacy of hardline clerics within the group and Akhundzada.[45] Other Taliban figures, including

[36] Karoun Demirjian, "U.S. works to scale up intelligence networks in Central Asia," *Washington Post*, June 21, 2022.

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

[38] Anand Gopal, "The Other Afghan Women," *The New Yorker*, September 6, 2021; Susannah George, "A year of peace in one of Afghanistan's deadliest provinces," *Washington Post*, August 12, 2022.

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

[40] "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.

[41] *Death in Slow Motion: Women and Girls under Taliban Rule*, Amnesty International, July 2022.

[42] 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.

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

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

[45] Ashley Jackson, "The ban on older girls' education: Taleban conservatives ascendant and a leadership in disarray,"

both Baradar and the Haqqanis, reportedly support secondary education for girls (and some educate their own daughters abroad).[46] 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.

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.[47] 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.[48] 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.[49]

Ongoing Relocations of U.S. 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."[50] Since that operation ended on August 30, 2021, the State Department has said that it has assisted in the departure of 13,000 Afghans from the country, in addition to 800 U.S. citizens and 600 lawful permanent residents as of August 2022.[51]

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."[52] 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 ask for assistance to leave.[53] On April 28, 2022, Secretary Antony 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."[54]

Afghanistan Analysts Network, March 29, 2022.

[46] 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.

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

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

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

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

[51] Some of those evacuated U.S. citizens reportedly traveled to Afghanistan after August 2021. Department Press Briefing – August 15, 2022, U.S. Department of State; Andrew Desiderio et al., "800 Americans evacuated from Afghanistan since Taliban takeover," *Politico,* August 14, 2022.

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

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

[54] Testimony of Secretary of State Antony Blinken, in U.S. Congress, House Committee on Foreign Affairs, *The State*

One December 2021 press report, citing a State Department official, stated that around 62,000 Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) applicants remain in Afghanistan.[55] 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.[56] The State Department has disputed the accuracy of this report.[57] In May 2022, the State Department reportedly estimated that between 70,000 and 160,000 Afghans were eligible for SIVs.[58]

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.[59] 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."[60]

The Taliban have reportedly interfered with flights at times, including by demanding seats for Taliban-selected individuals to work abroad and remit money.[61] 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.[62] The United States has reportedly paid, through Qatar, for tickets on some Afghan airlines that fly to Qatar for individuals to leave Afghanistan.[63] Other impediments to relocations from Afghanistan includes logistical issues at Kabul's international airport (see textbox) and issues with Afghans obtaining travel documentation.[64]

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,

Department's Foreign Policy Priorities and the FY23 Budget Request, op. cit.

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

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

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

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

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

[60] 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.

[61] 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.

[62] 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.

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

[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.

and other components during the U.S. evacuation effort and withdrawal—operational. As of August 2022, some domestic and regional airlines are reportedly carrying out flights from Kabul airport, but major foreign carriers have yet to resume operations.[65] 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.[66]

Economic Collapse, Humanitarian Crisis, 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 U.S. policy actions, 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, appear relevant to the economic breakdown that underlies the humanitarian crisis.

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.[67] 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.[68] Humanitarian aid, including cash transfers, has "supported some economic stabilization," according to the World Bank, but Afghanistan's economic outlook remains "stark."[69]

The economic collapse has exacerbated what was already a severe humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan prior to August 2021, due primarily to conflict, drought, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Indicators suggest that conditions have worsened significantly since August 2021: the World Food Program asserted in August 2022 that 92% of Afghans reported not having enough to eat, an increase from the 80% of Afghans that had insufficient food before the Taliban takeover.[70] WFP also reported in June 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.[71] In August 2022, the U.N. Children's Fund (UNICEF) estimated that 1.1 million Afghan children are expected to need treatment for severe acute malnutrition.[72]

In terms of U.S. policy, the United States has provided over $900 million in humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan since the Taliban takeover.[73] While such assistance plays a crucial role

[65] Tamim Shahir, "Major airlines still not making flights to Kabul," *TOLONews*, August 8, 2022.

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

[67] 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.

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

[69] Ibid.

[70] "Afghanistan Situation Report," World Food Program, August 15, 2022.

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

[72] "Afghanistan: Humanitarian Situation Report #8, 1-31 July 2022," UNICEF, August 2022.

[73] USAID press releases, August 12, 2022.

in averting further humanitarian suffering, it is different in many ways from former U.S. security, development, and stabilization assistance, which averaged over $5 billion annually between FY2019 and FY2021. In addition to providing some humanitarian assistance, those funds paid the salaries of Afghan soldiers and civil servants, supported key government services, and ultimately made up a large portion of Afghanistan's economy. 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.

Beyond assistance, the two U.S. policy areas that appear to have the greatest relevance to the economic and humanitarian situation are sanctions and the ongoing U.S. hold on Afghanistan's central bank reserves. 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 2022 that sanctions have "held back" their operations.[74] Since the Taliban's takeover, the U.S. Department of the Treasury has issued several general licenses stating that U.S. sanctions do not prohibit the provision of assistance to Afghanistan and authorizing various humanitarian and commercial transactions.[75] 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*.

The Biden Administration's hold on U.S.-based Afghan central bank assets has also drawn scrutiny. Imposed days after the Taliban entered Kabul to prevent the Taliban from accessing the funds, the Taliban and some foreign leaders have urged the United States to release the hold on those assets, which total around $7 billion. On February 11, 2022, the Biden Administration announced that it would "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.[76] The Administration has reportedly engaged with the Taliban on the issue, including a potential Switzerland-based trust fund.[77] 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

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

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

[76] 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/.

[77] Jonathan Landay, "Exclusive: U.S. commits to Afghan asset talks despite frustration with Taliban," *Reuters*, August 22, 2022.

for Pakistan's regional policy, pointing to statements of evident support for the takeover from Pakistani leaders.[78] 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.[79] 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 2022.[80]

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. Disputes in 2022 over water rights and refugees could portend future tensions.[81]

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 opposed the Taliban, 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.[82]

China. The prospect of greater Chinese influence and activity in Afghanistan has attracted some congressional attention since the Taliban takeover.[83] 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.[84] Despite concerns about Afghanistan-based Islamist terrorist groups, China has

[78] 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.

[79] Rhea Sinha, "TTP-Pakistan peace talks: the pitfalls and their implications," ORF, August 18, 2022.

[80] 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, "Pushed over the edge: political and military dynamics at the Afghanistan-Pakistan border," Middle East Institute, May 9, 2022.

[81] Christian Hoj Hansen and Halimullah Kousary, "Can Iran get along with the Taliban?" *War on the Rocks*, June 7, 2022.

[82] Abubakar Siddique, "Hostilities grow between Taliban and Tajikistan amid border closure, truck seizures," *Gandhara*, May 19, 2022.

[83] See, for example, H.R. 5404, S. 2826, and Sec 5404 of H.R. 7900.

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

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."[85]

Congressional Action and Outlook

The Taliban's takeover attracted intense congressional and public attention. U.S. public attention appears to have decreased in the subsequent months, 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.[86]

Congressional oversight of Afghanistan appears robust. Congressional committees held at least ten hearings specifically on Afghanistan in the weeks after the Taliban's takeover.[87] Senate Foreign Relations minority staff released an assessment of the August 2021 evacuation in February 2022, and the House Foreign Affairs Committee ranking member said he would produce his own investigative report in August 2022. In addition, Congress established the Afghanistan War Commission (AWC, Section 1094 of 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.

Congress has also increased reporting requirements related to Afghanistan. In the FY2022 NDAA, Congress directed the Administration to submit reports covering a number of topics, including U.S. over-the horizon counterterrorism capabilities; the status of U.S.-supplied military materiel in Afghanistan; and the lessons of Afghanistan for other U.S. security cooperation programs. Reports required in the House-passed FY2023 NDAA (H.R. 7900) include a strategy for reimbursing U.S. personnel who expended personal funds in support of evacuation efforts and an assessment of China's activities in Afghanistan. The bill would also mandate an interagency inspector general review of efforts to support and process evacuees from Afghanistan, including screening procedures, and a full accounting of the number of individuals evacuated in 2021 disaggregated by age, SIV eligibility, and other categories. An amendment to add an additional reporting requirement on the humanitarian impact of U.S. sanctions and the hold on central bank assets was made in order but did not come up for a vote. Members may consider directing the Administration to provide additional reports on other topics of interest, such as the impact of the U.S. diplomatic withdrawal and conditions for its reinstatement.

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

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

[86] Google Trends, "Afghanistan," "Past 12 months," accessed August 26, 2022.

[87] 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).

- 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.

Perhaps more fundamental is the challenge of how to pursue U.S. policy priorities that may be difficult to reconcile: stabilizing Afghanistan and providing support to Afghans while avoiding actions that might benefit the Taliban. While providing humanitarian aid may be sufficient to stave off mass casualties, it is unlikely to sustainably improve economic conditions. 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. In considering the Administration's FY2023 budget request, Members of Congress may weigh these and other options, including conditions on U.S. assistance.

The Taliban have called for international recognition, assistance, and sanctions relief, but since returning to power they have not shown willingness to make compromises on important issues to obtain them. Nearly every country, U.S. partners and adversaries alike, has urged the Taliban to form a more inclusive government, and many countries have joined the United States in calling for the group to lift restrictions on women and girls and break ties with terrorist groups. In response, the Taliban have stalled, equivocated, and ultimately either ignored or rejected outright these calls. Foreign policy tools that the United States has traditionally used as leverage may not be as effective in Afghanistan as in other contexts.[88]

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

- 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 secondary 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, including resources devoted to those efforts, obstacles to further relocations, and Administration plans to overcome those obstacles;
- 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; and
- Congress may examine the impact and efficacy of oversight of previous U.S. efforts in Afghanistan to shape future U.S. policy efforts (e.g., H.R. 8560, 117th Congress), congressional authorizing and appropriations measures, and oversight mechanisms, (including those intended to oversee U.S. assistance to other foreign partners, such as Ukraine). Relevant reports from the AWC and the Department of Defense (and the federally funded research and development center with whom the Department contracts, as directed by Section 1323 of P.L. 117-81) are due to be submitted within approximately one and two years, respectively.

[88] See, for example, Marvin Weinbaum, "America can't change the Taliban," *National Interest*, August 15, 2022; Kate Bateman, "A year after the Taliban takeover: what's next for the U.S. in Afghanistan?" U.S. Institute of Peace, August 11, 2022.

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