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# Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy in Brief

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SUMMARY

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**Clayton Thomas**
Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs

# Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy in Brief

The aftershocks of Afghanistan's watershed year of 2021 continue to reverberate within Afghanistan, throughout its region, and in the United States. 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. Afghans and Americans alike, including Members of Congress and other U.S. policymakers, continue to grapple with the reality of the Taliban's renewed rule.

The Taliban government is dominated by former officials from the Taliban's prior rule or longtime loyalists, indicating that the Taliban have prioritized internal cohesion over outreach to other segments of Afghan society or similar gestures advocated by the United States and other countries. Some signs of dissension in the group's ranks along various lines have emerged, though the Taliban have a history of effectively managing internal disputes. Some Afghans have sought to advocate for their rights and express opposition to the Taliban in nonviolent demonstrations, which the Taliban have monitored and sometimes violently dispersed. Other anti-Taliban Afghans have taken up arms against the Taliban, claiming guerilla-style attacks against Taliban forces and calling for international assistance, and the regional Islamic State affiliate has conducted attacks against both Taliban forces and Afghan civilians.

Some Members of Congress have focused on a number of impacts of the Taliban's renewed rule on U.S. interests:

- **Counterterrorism.** The Taliban takeover has had different impacts on the Islamic State and Al Qaeda, historic Taliban adversaries and partners, respectively. With no U.S. military forces based in Afghanistan or neighboring states, the United States is pursuing an "over-the-horizon" counterterrorism approach.
- **Women and Girls.** 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 drastically curtailed.
- **Relocating U.S. Partners.** Some Members of Congress have closely followed ongoing U.S. efforts to relocate remaining U.S. citizens, as well as the tens of thousands of Afghans who worked for U.S. efforts and seek to leave the country.

Some Members have also expressed concern about dire humanitarian conditions in Afghanistan. Since the Taliban takeover, Afghanistan has faced intersecting and overwhelming humanitarian and economic crises, a result of challenges both preexisting (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). In response, the Biden Administration has provided over $1 billion in humanitarian assistance, issued general licenses authorizing various humanitarian and commercial transactions, and established a Switzerland-based "Afghan Fund" to disburse some of Afghanistan's central bank assets to support the Afghan economy.

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. Going forward, Congress may consider further reporting requirements, resources, or investigative efforts related to various U.S. interests as it evaluates the Biden Administration's budget request and defense authorization measures. Future reports from the congressionally created Afghanistan War Commission and other bodies may offer lessons for legislators

Congressional action is likely to be influenced, and likely constrained, by a lack of reliable information about events in Afghanistan and the historical legacy of U.S. conflict with the Taliban. Perhaps more challengingly, the Biden Administration and many in Congress seek to ameliorate humanitarian and economic conditions in Afghanistan, 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.

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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

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 it. In the subsequent 20 years, the United States suffered thousands of military casualties 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.

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

[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.

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 significant: 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 November 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, per a

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

[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 November 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.

June 2022 U.S. State Department report, 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 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 or to others from outside the movement as part of the Taliban's 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 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

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

[11] "Taliban supreme leader addresses major gathering in Kabul," *Al Jazeera*, July 1, 2022.

[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] "Cracks emerge within Taliban as Baradar-led group raises concern over Sirajuddin's pro-Pashtun stance," *ANI*, February 15, 2022.

[15] Abdul Basit, "How smoldering discontent affects the Taliban rule in Afghanistan," *TRT World*, August 4, 2022.

[16] Andrew Watkins, "One year later: Taliban reprise repressive rule, but struggle to build a state," United States Institute of Peace, August 17, 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.

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 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. The NRF has claimed numerous attacks against Taliban fighters, mostly in and around the central province of Panjshir, but it is difficult to assess the veracity of such claims, which the Taliban dismiss as "propaganda."[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 ISKP has claimed responsibility for a number of major attacks in 2022 (many targeting Afghanistan's Shia minority, the Hazaras).[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]

# 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

[18] Barnett Rubin, "Afghanistan under the Taliban: findings on the current situation," Stimson Center, October 20, 2022.

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

[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] "Afghanistan: ISIS group targets religious minorities," Human Rights Watch, September 6, 2022. Hazaras comprise 10%-15% of Afghanistan's population. Since their August 2021 takeover, the Taliban have demonstrated a more accepting official stance toward the Hazaras than was the case during their former rule, particularly in urban areas, despite some reports of killings and forced displacement in the Hazaras' historic homelands in central Afghanistan in fall 2021. 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. Nilly Kohzad, "'It doesn't matter if we get killed,' Afghanistan's Hazaras speak out," *Diplomat,* May 27, 2022.

[24] Fazal Muzhary, "Why the Islamic State in Afghanistan is too weak to overthrow the Taliban," Baker Institute, September 29, 2022; "Afghanistan's security challenges," op. cit.

for Pakistan's regional policy, pointing to statements of evident support for the takeover from Pakistani leaders.[25] 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, which appear to have broken down in late 2022.[26] Afghanistan-Pakistan relations are further complicated by the presence of over 1 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 intermittently clashed in 2022.[27]

**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, however, portend future tensions.[28]

**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 and offered shelter to the anti-Taliban National Resistance Front, 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.[29]

**China.** The prospect of greater Chinese influence and activity in Afghanistan has attracted some congressional attention since the Taliban takeover.[30] 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.[31] Despite concerns about Afghanistan-based Islamist terrorist groups, China has

[25] 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.

[26] Abdul Basit, "The impact of Ayman Zawahiri's killing on Pakistan-TTP reconciliation talks," Jamestown Foundation, October 21, 2022.

[27] Rubin, op. cit.

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

[29] Abubakar Siddique, "Hostilities grow between Taliban and Tajikistan amid border closure, truck seizures," *Gandhara*, May 19, 2022; Rubin, op. cit.

[30] See, for example, H.R. 5404, S. 2826, and Section 5404 of H.R. 7900.

[31] Jiayi Zhou et al., "Treading lightly: China's footprint in a Taliban-led Afghanistan," SIPRI, November 2022.

signaled tacit 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."[32]

# 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 November 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.

Long a significant U.S. counterterrorism concern, ISKP has clashed with the Taliban, as mentioned above. 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.[33] In February 2022, the U.S. State Department announced rewards of up to $10 million each for information related to ISKP leader Sanaullah Ghafari as well as those responsible for the August 26, 2021, ISKP attack at Kabul airport that killed and injured hundreds of people, including over 30 U.S. service members.[34]

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.[35] Despite (or perhaps because of) U.S. counterterrorism pressure, those ties have persisted for decades.[36] The circumstances of Zawahiri's residence in Kabul and what they might reveal about internal Taliban dynamics beyond continued AQ ties remain unclear. 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 movement.[37]

In any case, per a July 2022 U.N. sanctions monitors report, 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

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

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

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

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

[36] *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.

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

embarrassment."[38] 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.[39]

From the outset of the 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.[40] 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.[41] The Biden Administration has cited the Zawahiri strike as a demonstration of U.S. over-the-horizon capabilities.[42]

## Afghan Women and Girls

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 High Commission for Human Rights Michelle 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."[43]

The Taliban takeover appears to have reduced high levels of violence that characterized the conflict, a development particularly welcomed by those in rural areas,[44] but it has increased fears of many Afghans about repression and women's rights.[45] Systems formerly in place to support survivors of gender-based violence have been dismantled.[46] 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

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

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

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

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

[42] The White House, *National Security Strategy*, October 2022.

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

[44] 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.

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

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

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.[47]

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.[48] 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.[49] The United States and many other countries condemned the decision, and in October 2022, the State Department announced visa restrictions on several Taliban figures responsible for the repression of women and girls in Afghanistan.[50]

One analysis attributes the change to the advocacy of hardline clerics within the group and Akhundzada.[51] Other Taliban figures, including both Baradar and the Haqqanis, reportedly support secondary education for girls (and some educate their own daughters abroad).[52] The evidently greater influence of the group's traditionally conservative leaders, and the unwillingness or inability of more pragmatic figures to assert themselves, suggests that external actors may have limited leverage over Taliban decisions.

## 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."[53] 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.[54]

U.S. officials have characterized their efforts to secure the relocation of remaining U.S. citizens and eligible Afghan partners who seek to leave the country as an "enduring mission."[55] 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.

[47] Belquis Ahmadi, "Taliban escalate new abuses against Afghan women, girls," USIP, October 27, 2022.

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

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

[50] Announcement of Visa Restriction in Response to the Repression of Women and Girls in Afghanistan, U.S. Department of State, October 11, 2022.

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

[52] 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.

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

[54] 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.

[55] Secretary Antony J. Blinken Remarks to the Press, U.S. Department of State, November 11, 2022.

citizens come forward to ask for assistance to leave.[56] 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."[57] The number of Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) applicants, or those potentially eligible for an SIV or other forms of relief, who remain in Afghanistan is unclear. In a February 2022 report, an advocacy group for SIV-eligible persons stated that 78,000 of the estimated 81,000 SIV applicants in Afghanistan with visa applications pending as of August 15, 2021 remain in Afghanistan.[58] The State Department has disputed the accuracy of this report.[59] In May 2022, the State Department reportedly estimated that between 70,000 and 160,000 Afghans were eligible for SIVs.[60]

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 various accounts, the Taliban have carried out reprisals against figures aligned with the former government, including hundreds of killings.[61] 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."[62]

The Taliban have reportedly interfered with departure flights, including by demanding seats for Taliban-selected individuals to work abroad and remit money.[63] 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.[64] The United States has reportedly paid, through Qatar, for tickets on some Afghan airlines that fly to Qatar for individuals to leave Afghanistan.[65] Other impediments to relocations from Afghanistan includes logistical issues at Kabul's international airport (see textbox) and issues with Afghans obtaining travel documentation.[66]

**Status of Kabul Airport**

Relocation efforts have been complicated by the status of Kabul's international airport. After the final departure of U.S. forces, Qatar and Turkey worked to make the airport—which sustained damage to its runways, radar system, and other components during the U.S. evacuation effort and withdrawal—operational. As of November 2022,

[56] Department Press Briefing—April 12, 2022, U.S. Department of State.

[57] 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.

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

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

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

[61] Barbara Marcolini et al., "The Taliban promised them amnesty. Then they executed them," *New York Times*, April 12, 2022; Abubakar Siddique, "'Afghanistan is hell': Supporters of late Afghan general claim Taliban killings, persecution," *Gandhara*, November 2, 2022.

[62] Testimony of Secretary of State Antony Blinken, op. cit.

[63] 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.

[64] Testimony of Secretary of State Antony Blinken, op. cit.

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

[66] 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.

some domestic and regional airlines are carrying out flights from Kabul airport, but major foreign carriers have yet to resume operations. Despite a preliminary December 2021 deal with Qatar and Turkey to operate several airports in Afghanistan, the Taliban in September 2022 announced that they had reached a seemingly similar deal with the United Arab Emirates to operate three airports, including Kabul's.[67]

# Economic Collapse and Humanitarian Crisis

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.[68] Much of that development assistance halted with the Taliban's August 2021 takeover, leading the country's economy to contract by over 20% in 2021.[69] International assistance is "expected to mitigate some negative impacts of the contraction," according to the World Bank, but even that assistance "will not be sufficient to bring the economy back on a sustainable recovery path," given the ongoing financial crisis, persistently high inflation, and Taliban policies.[70]

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 further since August 2021: the World Food Programme asserted in November 2022 that "Afghanistan continues to face the highest prevalence of insufficient food consumption globally," with 90% of Afghans reporting not having enough to eat.[71] 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" for the winter of 2021-2022.[72] The winter of 2022-2023 may be more difficult yet, given increased food prices.[73] In November 2022, the U.N. Children's Fund (UNICEF) estimated that 1.1 million Afghan children are expected to need treatment for severe acute malnutrition.[74]

[67] Charlotte Seet, "UAE civil aviation authority to operate Afghanistan air traffic control," *Simple Flying*, September 8, 2022.

[68] 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.

[69] "Afghanistan: Overview," World Bank, October 7, 2022.

[70] Ibid.

[71] "Afghanistan Situation Report, October 31, 2022" World Food Program, November 2022.

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

[73] Areou Rezvani, "Afghans are bracing for a winter many fear will be even worse than the last," *NPR*, November 25, 2022.

[74] "Afghanistan: Humanitarian Situation Report #11, 1-31 October 2022," UNICEF, November 2022.

## U.S. Policy Responses

The United States has provided over $1.1 billion million in humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan and neighboring countries since the Taliban takeover.[75] While such assistance plays a crucial role 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.[76] Since the Taliban's takeover, the U.S. Department of the Treasury has issued several general licenses stating that U.S. sanctions on the Taliban do not prohibit the provision of assistance to Afghanistan and authorizing various humanitarian and commercial transactions.[77] 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.[78] 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.[79] In September 2022, the Administration announced the establishment of an "Afghan Fund" (based in Switzerland) to "make targeted disbursements of that $3.5 billion to help provide greater stability to the Afghan economy."[80] The fund's board met for the first time in November 2022.[81]

# Congressional Action and Outlook

The Taliban's takeover attracted intense congressional and public scrutiny. U.S. public attention appears to have decreased in the subsequent months, but Afghanistan remains the subject of

[75] United States Announces Humanitarian Assistance for Afghanistan, U.S. Department of State, September 23, 2022.

[76] "Economic causes of Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis," Human Rights Watch, August 4, 2022.

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

[78] CRS In Focus IF12052, *Afghanistan Central Bank Reserves*.

[79] See Executive Order at https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/126/afghanistan_bank_eo.pdf.

[80] The United States and Partners Announce Establishment of Fund for the People of Afghanistan, U.S. Department of State, September 14, 2022. See also SIGAR Quarterly Report, October 30, 2022, pp. 112-115.

[81] Readout of Fund for the Afghan People Board Meeting, U.S. Department of the Treasury, November 21, 2022.

congressional engagement 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.[82]

Congressional oversight of Afghanistan has been robust. Congressional committees held at least ten hearings specifically on Afghanistan in the weeks after the Taliban's takeover.[83] Senate Foreign Relations minority staff released an assessment of the August 2021 evacuation in February 2022, and the House Foreign Affairs Committee ranking member produced an interim report on the withdrawal in August 2022.[84] 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.

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 affect 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;

[82] Google Trends, "Afghanistan," "8/31/2021–11/22/2022," accessed November 22, 2022.

[83] 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).

[84] *Left Behind: A Brief Assessment of the Biden Administration's Strategic Failures during the Afghanistan Evacuation*, United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations Minority Report, February 2022; *House Republican Interim Report: A "Strategic Failure:" Assessing the Administration's Afghanistan Withdrawal*, Congressman Michael McCaul, August 14, 2022.

- 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.

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.

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 Administration budget requests, 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 a 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 some other contexts.[85]

[85] 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; "Has U.S. policy toward Taliban-ruled Afghanistan failed Afghans?" Brookings, September 29, 2022.

## Author Information

Clayton Thomas
Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs

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