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U.S. Military Withdrawal and Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan: Frequently Asked Questions

August 20, 2021

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R46879

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Prepared for Members and
Committees of Congress

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SUMMARY

R46879

August 20, 2021

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U.S. Military Withdrawal and Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan: Frequently Asked Questions

On August 15, 2021, the Taliban entered the Afghan capital of Kabul, completing a rapid takeover over the country that surprised many Afghans and Americans alike. The Taliban's advance came as the United States was completing the military withdrawal to which it agreed in the February 2020 U.S.-Taliban accord. The fall of the elected Afghan government, supported by billions of dollars in U.S. assistance over the course of nearly two decades, raises significant questions about past, present, and future U.S. policy for Members of Congress. This report provides material related to select questions associated with U.S. policy in Afghanistan, including

- Background information useful for understanding the current situation in Afghanistan;
- The Taliban takeover and Afghan government's collapse;
- U.S. policy implications of the Taliban takeover;
- Social and economic implications of the Taliban takeover;
- Regional reactions to the Taliban's takeover;
- U.S. military operations; and
- Budgetary implications of the U.S. withdrawal.

Some additional lines of inquiry that Congress may wish to explore with the Executive Branch are included alongside specific topics as appropriate. The report concludes with some strategic considerations Congress may wish to contemplate as it assesses the situation in Afghanistan and its implications for the future.

With a general U.S. target date for the completion of the military withdrawal and evacuation operation set at August 31, 2021, the situation on the ground remains extremely fluid. This report will be updated to reflect major changes in U.S. policy or developments in Afghanistan that may significantly affect U.S. decisions.

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Background

Who are the Taliban and what was U.S. policy toward the Taliban before 9/11?[1]

In 1993-1994, Afghan Muslim clerics and students, mostly of rural, Pashtun origin, formed the Taliban movement. Many were former anti-Soviet fighters known as *mujahideen* who had become disillusioned with the civil war among *mujahideen* parties that broke out after the 1989 Soviet withdrawal and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet-supported government in 1992. Many members of the movement had studied in seminaries in Pakistan and chose the name Taliban (plural of *talib*, a student of Islam) to distance themselves from the *mujahideen*.[2] Pakistan supported the Taliban because of the group's potential to "bring order in chaotic Afghanistan and make it a cooperative ally," thus giving Pakistan "greater security on one of the several borders where Pakistani military officers hoped for what they called 'strategic depth.'"[3] Taliban beliefs and practices were consonant with, and derived in part from, the conservative tribal traditions of Pashtuns, who represent a plurality (though not a majority) of Afghanistan's complex ethnic makeup and who have traditionally ruled Afghanistan.[4]

The Taliban viewed the post-Soviet government of President Burhanuddin Rabbani as weak, corrupt, and anti-Pashtun. The four years of civil war between the *mujahideen* groups (1992-1996) created popular support for the Taliban as they were seen as less corrupt and more able to deliver stability; as U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad wrote in his 2016 memoir, "I, like many, was optimistic about the Taliban" at the outset.[5] The Taliban took control of the southern city of Kandahar in November 1994 and launched a series of military campaigns throughout the country that culminated in the capture of Kabul on September 27, 1996.

The Taliban quickly lost international and domestic support as the group imposed strict adherence to its interpretation of Islam in areas it controlled and employed harsh punishments, including public executions, to enforce its decrees, including bans on television, Western music, and dancing. It prohibited women from attending school or working outside the home, except in health care, and publicly executed women for alleged adultery. In March 2001, the Taliban drew international condemnation by destroying monumental sixth-century Buddha statues carved into hills above Bamyan city, which the Taliban considered idolatrous and contrary to Islamic norms.

The United States had played a major role in supporting anti-Soviet *mujahideen*, but U.S. attention to Afghanistan declined with the withdrawal of Soviet troops after the 1988 Geneva Accords; the U.S. embassy in Kabul was evacuated for security reasons in January 1989 and remained closed until 2001. The United States sustained some military assistance to *mujahideen*

[1] This section was prepared by Clayton Thomas, Analyst in Middle Eastern Affairs.

[2] See Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (Yale University Press, 2000).

[3] National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States*, (2004) p. 64.

[4] Like Taliban founder Mullah Omar, most of the senior figures in the Taliban regime were Ghilzai Pashtuns, one of the major Pashtun tribal confederations; most modern Afghan rulers have been from the Durrani Pashtun tribal confederation.

[5] Zalmay Khalilzad, *The Envoy: From Kabul to the White House, My Journey Through a Turbulent World* (St. Martin's Press, 2016), p. 84.

groups who continued to fight the Soviet-supported Afghan government. After that government fell in 1992, there was little appetite to maintain U.S. engagement.[6]

By the time the Taliban took control of Kabul in 1996, U.S. policy toward the group was unclear as, according to one observer, "American officials issued a cacophony of statements—some skeptical, some apparently supportive—from which it was impossible to deduce a clear position."[7] Rising international and U.S. popular attention to the plight of Afghan women, and a renewed focus on human rights under Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, led to, by 1997, U.S. policy shifting against the Taliban. This shift occurred despite support for the group from U.S. partner Saudi Arabia (one of the three countries, along with Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates, that recognized the Taliban as the government of Afghanistan).

The Taliban's sheltering of Al Qaeda (AQ) leader Osama bin Laden eventually became the central issue affecting U.S. views of and relations with the Taliban. In 1996, bin Laden moved from Sudan to Afghanistan, where he had previously spent most of the 1980s as a high profile financier and organizer of efforts to aid the *mujahideen*. Pakistani intelligence officers reportedly introduced Bin Laden to Taliban leaders in Kandahar;[8] bin Laden established an alliance with the Taliban whereby he provided millions in financial aid to the group (and military support for Taliban efforts to complete their conquest of the country) and the Taliban provided safe haven for AQ recruits and training camps. Over 10,000 AQ fighters may have trained at AQ camps in Afghanistan.[9] U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Bill Richardson visited Kabul in April 1998, the highest ranking U.S. official to do so in decades. In response to Richardson's request that the Taliban expel bin Laden, the group "answered that they did not know his whereabouts. In any case, the Taliban said, [bin Laden] was not a threat to the United States."[10]

The threat posed by bin Laden became clearer on August 7, 1998, when Al Qaeda operatives simultaneously bombed U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, killing over 200 people. In response, the United States launched cruise missile attacks on AQ targets in Afghanistan that were unsuccessful in either killing bin Laden or persuading the Taliban to expel him. U.S. pressure on the Saudis and Pakistanis to use their influence to convince the Taliban to expel the AQ leader proved equally unsuccessful. In July 1999, President Bill Clinton imposed sanctions on the Taliban that were equivalent to those imposed on governments deemed state sponsors of terror (E.O. 13129). United Nations Security Council travel and economic sanctions against the Taliban were added in October with United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1267 and expanded with UNSCR 1333, which included an arms embargo against the Taliban, in December 2000. In the face of these threats, Taliban leadership was unmoved; their relationship with bin Laden was "sometimes tense" but "the foundation was deep and personal," according to the 9/11 Commission Report.[11]

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[6] Special Envoy to the Afghan Resistance (1989-1992) Peter Tomsen, quoted in Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (Penguin, 2005), p, 239.

[7] Coll, *Ghost Wars*, p. 338.

[8] The 9/11 Commission Report, p. 64.

[9] The 9/11 Commission Report, pp. 66-67.

[10] The 9/11 Commission Report, p. 111.

[11] The 9/11 Commission Report, p. 125.

Why did the United States initially deploy military forces to Afghanistan?[12]

On September 11, 2001, AQ operatives conducted a series of terrorist attacks in the United States that killed nearly 3,000 people. In a nationwide address before a joint session of Congress on September 20, 2001, President George W. Bush demanded that the Taliban hand over AQ leaders, permanently close terrorist training camps, and give the United States access to such camps, adding that the Taliban "must hand over the terrorists, or they will share in their fate."[13] Taliban leaders refused, citing bin Laden's status as their guest.[14]

Pursuant to an authorization for the use of military force (AUMF) enacted on September 18, 2001 (P.L. 107-40), U.S. military action began on October 7, 2001, with airstrikes on Taliban targets throughout the country and close air support to anti-Taliban forces in northern Afghanistan. Limited numbers of U.S. Army Special Forces, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) paramilitary forces, and some conventional ground forces began deploying in Afghanistan less than two weeks later.[15] By November 13, the Taliban evacuated Kabul, which was soon retaken by those Afghan forces (known as the Northern Alliance).

As U.S.-backed Afghan forces drew closer to the southern city of Kandahar, birthplace of the Taliban movement and home of Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar, Taliban leaders reportedly offered terms of surrender, including an amnesty for Taliban fighters who would lay down their arms. U.S. officials rejected such an amnesty and while many Taliban fighters and leaders were killed or captured by U.S. or Afghan forces, others (including Mullah Omar) sought shelter in remote or rural parts of Afghanistan or escaped to Pakistan.

What was the post-2001 mission of U.S. forces in Afghanistan?[16]

In December 2001, Afghan delegates convened in Bonn, Germany, by the United Nations selected Hamid Karzai to serve as head of an interim national government, marking the beginning of post-Taliban governance. No attempt appears to have been made to include the Taliban in those talks.[17] No Taliban members participated in the 2002 emergency *loya jirga* (consultative assembly) that elected Karzai as president.

The creation of the new Afghan government also represented the beginning of a major new mission set for U.S. forces and their international partners: helping defend and develop that government and its nascent military. Karzai attended the January 2002 State of the Union address where President Bush previewed this expanded mission, saying that the United States and Afghanistan were "allies against terror" and that "we will be partners in rebuilding that country."[18] Congress supported the Bush Administration in this approach, authorizing and

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[12] This section was prepared by Clayton Thomas, Analyst in Middle Eastern Affairs.

[13] "Text: President Bush Addresses the Nation," *Washington Post*, September 20, 2001.

[14] Steve Coll, *Directorate S: The CIA and America's Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (Penguin Press, 2018), pp. 69.

[15] For more on the first year of U.S. operations in Afghanistan, see Walter L. Perry and David Kassing, "Toppling the Taliban: Air-Ground Operations in Afghanistan, October 2001-June 2002," RAND Corporation, 2015.

[16] This section was prepared by Clayton Thomas, Analyst in Middle Eastern Affairs.

[17] Khalilzad later wrote, "I am skeptical that the international community could have lured the Taliban to the table at Bonn." Khalilzad, p. 121.

[18] "President Delivers State of the Union Address," White House (archived), January 29, 2002.

appropriating funds for more expansive U.S. military and civilian assistance missions (e.g., via the Afghanistan Freedom Support Act, 2002, P.L. 107-327, reauthorized and expanded in the Afghanistan Freedom Support Act Amendments of 2004, Section 7104 of P.L. 108-458). U.S. officials declared an end to major combat operations in Afghanistan on May 1, 2003, though then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld said that "pockets of resistance in certain parts of the country remain."[19]

By 2005, scattered Taliban forces had already begun to regroup in the Pashtun heartland of eastern and southern Afghanistan, as well as across the border in Pakistan, where many observers suspected that Pakistan's security and intelligence services were tolerating, if not actively supporting them.[20] The Taliban described continuing U.S. and coalition military operations in Afghanistan as a military occupation and characterized their Afghan government adversaries as puppets of foreign powers.[21]

In response to growing Taliban activity, the United States gradually increased forces to around 30,000 by the end of the George W. Bush Administration. Under the Obama Administration, the United States and its partners further increased international force levels as part of a "surge" which peaked at over 130,000 troops (of which around 100,000 were U.S. troops) in 2010-11, but set a goal to end combat operations by the end of 2014.

U.S.-Taliban Talks Under the Obama Administration

Secret negotiations between a Taliban representative and some U.S. officials began in late 2010. Then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton framed those talks by stating in an early 2011 speech that the Taliban's breaking with Al Qaeda, renouncing violence, and abiding by the Afghan constitution were "necessary outcomes" of a prospective negotiation rather than "preconditions."[22] The talks centered largely on confidence-building measures, specifically the issues of a prisoner exchange and the opening of a Taliban political office in Doha, Qatar.

Multiple factors, including opposition from then-President Karzai, caused the talks to collapse in early 2012. Qatari and Pakistani mediation led to a 2013 agreement to allow the Taliban to open an office in Doha. However, the Taliban opened that office in June 2013 with the trappings of an official embassy, in direct violation of the terms of the agreement; the Qatari government responded by shuttering the office less than a month later.[23] In June 2014, Qatar coordinated the release of U.S. prisoner Bowe Bergdahl in exchange for five high-ranking Taliban officials imprisoned at Guantanamo Bay–individuals who later joined the Taliban team that negotiated with the United States in Doha.[24] No further talks between U.S. and Taliban officials occurred under the Obama Administration.

Though that "surge" was arguably successful in weakening Taliban advances, by 2010 the Obama Administration assessed that military means alone would not resolve the conflict.[25] Preliminary U.S.-Taliban negotiations were constrained by U.S. policy to require the inclusion of the Afghan

[19] "Rumsfeld: Major combat over in Afghanistan," CNN, May 1, 2003.

[20] See, for example, Matt Waldman, "The Sun in the Sky: The Relationship between Pakistan's ISI and Afghan Insurgents," Crisis States Research Centre, June 2010.

[21] See Matthew Calvin, "The Use of English-Language Internet Propaganda by the Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan, 2007-2010," *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*, June 2011, available at https://digitalcommons.du.edu/etd/108; Thomas Ruttig, "How Tribal are the Taliban?" Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2010.

[22] Hillary Clinton, *Hard Choices* (Simon and Schuster, 2014), p. 152.

[23] See Coll, *Directorate S*, pp. 503-508, 578-585, 636-641.

[24] The five figures, and their positions during the Taliban's period of rule, were Mullah Mohammad Fazl, the chief of staff of the Taliban's military; Noorullah Noori, the Taliban commander in northern Afghanistan; Khairullah Khairkhwa, the Taliban regime Interior Minister; Mohammad Nabi Omari, a Taliban official; and Abdul Haq Wasiq, the Taliban regime's deputy intelligence chief. Mujib Mashal, "Once Jailed in Guantánamo, 5 Taliban Now Face U.S. at the Negotiating Table," *The New York Times*, March 26, 2019.

[25] Rod Nordland, "Troop 'Surge' in Afghanistan Ends with Mixed Results," *New York Times*, September 21, 2012.

government, with which the Taliban refused to meet, in any settlement (see textbox above).[26] As international force levels were reduced in advance of the scheduled 2014 transition, NATO began gradually transferring security duties to Afghan forces starting in 2011. Afghan forces assumed full responsibility for security nationwide at the end of 2014 with the end of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and the start of the noncombat Resolute Support Mission (RSM) that began on January 1, 2015. In addition to training, advising, and assisting Afghan forces as part of RSM, U.S. troops in Afghanistan also conducted counterterrorism operations; these two "complementary missions" comprised Operation Freedom's Sentinel.

How much has DOD spent on the war in Afghanistan?[27]

According to the most recent DOD *Cost of War* quarterly report, from September 11, 2001, through March 31, 2021, the Department obligated a total of $837.3 billion in current dollars for military operations (i.e., Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Freedom's Sentinel[28]) and reconstruction activities in Afghanistan.[29] (An obligation is a commitment for the payment of goods and services.)[30] According to DOD, department annual obligations in current dollars for activities in Afghanistan peaked at $98 billion in FY2012 and decreased to $40 billion in FY2020, the last full fiscal year for which data are available.[31]

According to SIGAR's most recent quarterly report to Congress, from October 1, 2001, through June 30, 2021, Congress has appropriated or the U.S. government has otherwise made available approximately $145 billion in current dollars to federal agencies, including DOD, for reconstruction and related activities in Afghanistan.[32] According to SIGAR, of that total, approximately $83 billion in current dollars went to the ASFF, which is included in the *Cost of War* figure above.[33]

Some nongovernmental observers provide higher estimates of the cost of U.S. government activities in Afghanistan over the past two decades. For example, as of April 15, 2021, the Costs of War Project of the Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs at Brown University estimated U.S. costs to date for the war in Afghanistan at $2.26 trillion.[34] In addition to funding

[26] Evan MacAskill and Simon Tisdall, "White House shifts Afghanistan strategy towards talks with Taliban," *The Guardian* (UK), July 19, 2010.

[27] This section was prepared by Brendan McGarry, Analyst in U.S. Defense Budget.

[28] Operation Freedom's Sentinel is the U.S. contribution to the NATO-led Resolute Support Mission to train, advise, and assist Afghan security forces and institutions. For more information, see NATO, "Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan," updated July 6, 2021, at https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_113694.htm.

[29] DOD, *FY 2021 Quarter 2 Cost of War Update as of March 31, 2021*, on file with author.

[30] GAO, *A Glossary of Terms Used in the Federal Budget Process*, GAO-05-734SP, September 2005, p. 70, at https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-05-734sp.pdf. This document states in part: "An agency incurs an obligation, for example, when it places an order, signs a contract, awards a grant, purchases a service, or takes other actions that require the government to make payments to the public or from one government account to another."

[31] DOD, *FY 2021 Quarter 2 Cost of War Update as of March 31, 2021*, on file with author.

[32] Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, July 30, 2021.

[33] Ibid. DOD, *Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller)/Chief Financial Officer, May 2021, Defense Budget Overview, United States Department of Defense, Fiscal Year 2022 Budget Request*, p. 7-2, at https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2022/FY2022_Budget_Request_Overview_Book.pdf.

[34] Figure is in nominal dollars. Brown University, Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, *Costs of War* website, accessed August 16, 2021.

for overseas contingency operations of the DOD and State Department, the estimate includes amounts for what it describes as other war-related costs, such as interest on the national debt from borrowing, increases to the DOD base budget, and medical care for U.S. veterans who served in Afghanistan.[35]

When and why did the U.S. military withdrawal begin?[36]

When President Donald Trump came into office in January 2017, approximately 11,000 U.S. troops were reportedly in Afghanistan, with U.S. force levels having declined from their 2009-2011 high point of approximately 100,000 U.S. troops.[37] In June 2017, President Trump delegated to then-Secretary of Defense James Mattis the authority to set force levels, reportedly limited to around 3,500 additional troops; Secretary Mattis signed orders to deploy them in September 2017.[38] Those additional forces (all of which were dedicated to NATO-led RSM) arrived in Afghanistan within months, putting the total number of U.S. troops in the country between 14,000 and 15,000 by the end of 2017.[39]

By mid-2018, President Trump was reportedly frustrated with the lack of military progress against the Taliban, and he ordered formal and direct U.S.-Taliban talks without Afghan government participation for the first time. As those talks developed under Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad, President Trump continued to express frustration with the U.S. military mission in Afghanistan and a desire to withdraw U.S. forces, saying in August 2019 that he wanted to do so "as quickly as we can."[40] U.S. force levels began to lower in 2019: at an October 9, 2019, news conference, General Austin S. Miller, the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan, said that the number of U.S. forces had been gradually reduced by 2,000 over the past year, to between 12,000 and 13,000.[41]

In February 2020, the United States and the Taliban signed a formal agreement in which the United States committed to withdrawing all of its troops, contractors, and nondiplomatic civilian personnel from Afghanistan, with a drawdown in military forces to 8,600 by mid-July 2020 and a complete withdrawal by the end of April 2021. In return, the Taliban committed to prevent any groups, including Al Qaeda, from threatening the United States or its allies by not allowing those

[35] Ibid.

[36] This section was prepared by Clayton Thomas, Analyst in Middle Eastern Affairs, and Kathleen McInnis, Specialist in International Security.

[37] While the level was reported publicly at 8,400, media outlets reported in August 2017 that the figure was actually around 11,000 on any given day due to units rotating in and out of theater. See Gordon Lubold and Nancy Youssef, "U.S. Has More Troops in Afghanistan Than Publicly Disclosed," *Wall Street Journal*, August 22, 2017. See also CRS Report R44116, *Department of Defense Contractor and Troop Levels in Afghanistan and Iraq: 2007-2020*, by Heidi M. Peters.

[38] Tara Copp, "Mattis signs orders to send about 3,500 more US troops to Afghanistan," *Military Times*, September 11, 2017.

[39] Dan Lamothe, "Trump added troops in Afghanistan. But NATO is still short of meeting its goal," *Washington Post*, November 9, 2017; Greg Jaffe and Missy Ryan, "Up to 1,000 more U.S. troops could be headed to Afghanistan this spring," *Washington Post*, January 21, 2018. As of September 30, 2017, the total number of active duty and reserve forces in Afghanistan was 15,298. Defense Manpower Data Center, Military and Civilian Personnel by Service/Agency by State/Country Quarterly Report, September 2017.

[40] Kevin Baron, "Trump Says US Troops Shouldn't be 'Policemen' in Afghanistan. So Why Are They There?" *DefenseOne*, July 22, 2019; "Trump Wants to Get Out Of Afghanistan 'As Quickly As He Can,'" *TOLOnews*, August 1, 2019.

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

groups to reside, train, or fundraise in Afghanistan. The U.S. withdrawal commitment was not conditioned on the Taliban reducing violence against the Afghan government, making concessions in intra-Afghan talks, or taking other actions.

Throughout 2020, U.S. officials stated that the Taliban were not in full compliance with the agreement, U.S. force levels continued to drop, reaching 8,600 one month ahead of the mid-July 2020 deadline in the U.S.-Taliban accord.[42] Confusion about the United States' future military posture grew in October 2020 due to contradictory visions expressed by senior Trump Administration officials, including President Trump's tweet that, "We should have the small remaining number of our BRAVE Men and Women serving in Afghanistan home by Christmas!"[43]

On November 17, 2020, then-Acting Secretary of Defense Christopher Miller announced, "we will implement President Trump's orders to continue our repositioning of forces" from Afghanistan, and that 2,500 U.S. forces would remain in Afghanistan by January 15, 2021. Acting Secretary Miller characterized the drawdown (announced alongside a similar reduction of U.S. forces from Iraq) as "consistent with our established plans and strategic objectives," and said it "does not equate to a change in U.S. policy or objectives."[44] On January 15, 2021, Acting Secretary Miller confirmed that the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan had reached 2,500.[45]

President Biden, who took office on January 20, 2021, reportedly opposed the Obama Administration's decision to increase U.S. force levels as Vice President in 2009, and expressed skepticism about troop levels in Afghanistan as a candidate during the 2020 primary campaign.[46] As President, he said in a March 16, 2021, interview that the U.S.-Taliban agreement was "not a very solidly negotiated deal" and that meeting its May 1 withdrawal deadline "could happen" but would be "tough."[47] He also said an Administration review of U.S. policy in Afghanistan was "in process" and that reaching a decision would not take "a lot longer." At a March 25, 2021, press conference, he said "I can't picture" U.S. troops in Afghanistan next year.[48]

On April 14, 2021, President Biden announced that the United States would begin a "final withdrawal" on May 1, to be completed by September 11, 2021.[49] In a written response, the Taliban accused the United States of breaching the February 2020 agreement and stated that the U.S. decision to stay beyond May 1 "in principle opens the way for [Taliban forces] to take every necessary countermeasure, hence the American side will be held responsible for all future consequences."[50] A senior Administration official said after the withdrawal announcement, "We

[42] Kylie Atwood and Ryan Browne, "US troop drawdown in Afghanistan running ahead of schedule," CNN, April 30, 2020; "Taliban not living up to its commitments, U.S. Defense Secretary says," Reuters, May 5, 2020; Robert Burns, "US General: Taliban Not Yet Met Conditions for US Withdrawal," Associated Press, June 10, 2020.

[43] "U.S. troops in Afghanistan should be 'home by Christmas': Trump," Reuters, October 7, 2020.

[44] "Acting Secretary Miller Announces Troop Levels in Afghanistan and Iraq," Department of Defense, November 17, 2020.

[45] "Statement by Acting Defense Secretary Christopher Miller on Force Levels in Afghanistan," Department of Defense January 15, 2021.

[46] Coll, *Directorate S*, op. cit., pp. 353-354, 367; "Transcript: Joe Biden on Face the Nation," *CBS News*, February 23, 2020.

[47] "TRANSCRIPT: ABC News' George Stephanopoulos interviews President Joe Biden," ABC News, March 17, 2021.

[48] "President Biden Holds News Conference," C-SPAN, March 25, 2021.

[49] White House, "Remarks by President Biden on the Way Forward in Afghanistan," April 14, 2021.

[50] "Statement of Islamic Emirate regarding recent announcement by US President Joe Biden," *Voice of Jihad*, April 15, 2021.

have communicated to the Taliban in no uncertain terms that if they do conduct attacks against U.S. or allied forces … we will hit back hard."[51]

Some observers contend that the Biden Administration could have chosen to ignore the agreement and retained a small force in the country comprising several thousand troops in order to facilitate an intra-Afghan peace agreement.[52] According to this view, the costs of retaining such a force would have been small compared to the security risks associated with the Afghan government's collapse. By contrast, President Biden argued that retaining such a force would not have been feasible; the small number of U.S. troops would not have been sufficient to deter Taliban forces and a re-escalation of U.S. forces and military capabilities into Afghanistan would ultimately have been required.[53] Still others contend that even assuming a minimal footprint could have been feasible, doing so would not have been worth risking further U.S. resources and lives.[54]

The final stage of the planned U.S. military withdrawal began on May 1, 2021, and by June, United States Central Command (CENTCOM) reported that as much as 44% of the "retrograde process" was complete.[55] Most NATO allies and other U.S. partners withdrew their forces by July.[56] On July 8, President Biden announced that "our military mission in Afghanistan will conclude on August 31st." A rapid Taliban advance, culminating in the August taking of Kabul and the emergency evacuation of U.S. embassy personnel and some Afghans out of Afghanistan, prompted the United States to deploy several thousand additional troops to facilitate the evacuation.

On August 14, President Biden released a statement saying in part, "One more year, or five more years, of U.S. military presence would not have made a difference if the Afghan military cannot or will not hold its own country. And an endless American presence in the middle of another country's civil conflict was not acceptable to me."[57] He reiterated that position in an August 16, 2021, address, saying, "there never was a good time to withdraw U.S. forces."[58]

Some contend that the United States did not fully factor effective war termination into its Afghanistan campaign strategies and force designs, resulting in a military effort that did not enable a satisfactory conclusion to the war.[59] At an operational level, some observers question the robustness of the plan to withdraw U.S. troops and key Afghan partners from Afghanistan.[60] Such questions are also related to intelligence estimates of ANDSF abilities to resist the Taliban

[51] White House, "Background Press Call by a Senior Administration Official on Afghanistan," April 13, 2021.

[52] United States Institute for Peace, *Afghanistan Study Group: Final Report*, February 2021.

[53] The White House, *Remarks by President Biden on the Drawdown of U.S. Forces in Afghanistan*, July 8, 2021.

[54] Vanda Felbab-Brown, *The US decision to withdraw from Afghanistan is the right one*, The Brookings Institution, April 15, 2021.

[55] "Update on withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan May 31, 2021," CENTCOM, June 1, 2021.

[56] Geir Moulson and Kathy Gannon, "Most European troops exit Afghanistan quietly after 20 years," Associated Press, June 30, 2021.

[57] The White House, "Statement by President Joe Biden on Afghanistan," August 14, 2021.

[58] The White House, "Remarks by President Biden on Afghanistan," August 16, 2021.

[59] Christopher D. Kolenda, *Zero Sum Victory: What We're Getting Wrong about War* (University Press of Kentucky, Forthcoming).

[60] Devan Cole, Daniella Diaz, Melanie Zanona, Lauren Fox and Jennifer Hansler, "Top Republican on foreign affairs committee slams Biden over 'unmitigated disaster' in Afghanistan," *CNN Politics*, August 15, 2021. See https://www.cnn.com/2021/08/15/politics/michael-mccaul-afghanistan-withdrawal-criticism-cnntv/index.html

advance. Congress may scrutinize whether, and how, military campaign planning could have managed these perceived strategic and operational flaws.[61]

Taliban Takeover and Afghan Government Collapse

When and how did the Taliban overcome Afghan government forces?[62]

Throughout 2020 and 2021, Afghan officials sought to downplay the potential detrimental impact of the U.S. troop withdrawal while emphasizing the need for continued U.S. financial assistance to Afghan forces.[63] In a May 2021 press conference, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley said "bad outcomes" were not "inevitable," given what he characterized as the strengths of the Afghan government and military.[64] In its 2021 annual threat assessment, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence reported that "the Afghan Government will struggle to hold the Taliban at bay if the Coalition withdraws support."[65]

An external assessment published in January 2021 concluded that the Taliban enjoyed a strong advantage over the Afghanistan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) in cohesion and a slight advantage in force employment and that the two forces essentially split on material resources and external support. The one ANDSF advantage, size, was assessed as much narrower than often assumed. The author concluded in his net assessment that the Taliban enjoyed a narrow advantage over the government.[66] The Taliban had also come to control significant territory: in October 2018, the last time the U.S. government made such data publicly available, the group controlled or contested as much as 40% of Afghanistan and the group continued to make gradual gains in subsequent years.

In early May 2021, the Taliban began a sweeping advance that captured wide swaths of the country's rural areas, solidifying the group's hold on some areas in which it already had a significant presence. The Taliban's seizure of other districts was more surprising: some northern areas had militarily resisted the Taliban when the group was in power in the 1990s, making their 2021 fall to the Taliban particularly significant. One source estimated that the Taliban took control of over 100 of Afghanistan's 400 districts in May and June 2021.[67] The speed of the Taliban's advance reportedly surprised some within the group, with one commander saying that his forces were intentionally avoiding capturing provincial capitals before the departure of U.S. forces.[68] In July, the Taliban began seizing border crossings with Tajikistan, Iran, and Pakistan,

[61] See, for example, discussion in Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction, *What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction*, August 2021.

[62] This section was prepared by Clayton Thomas, Analyst in Middle Eastern Affairs, and Kathleen McInnis, Specialist in International Security.

[63] Zahra Rahimi, "ANDSF Showcases Air Force as Country Braces for US Pullout," *TOLOnews*, April 26, 2021.

[64] Transcript: Secretary of Defense Austin and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Milley Press Briefing, Department of Defense, May 6, 2021.

[65] Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community, Office of the Director of National Intelligence, April 19, 2021.

[66] Jonathan Schroden, "Afghanistan Security Forces Versus the Taliban: A Net Assessment," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 14, Issue 1, January 2021.

[67] 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.

[68] Dan De Luce, Mushtaq Yusufzai, and Saphora Smith, "Even the Taliban are surprised at how fast they're advancing

depriving the Afghan government of critical customs revenues. On July 21, 2021, General Milley estimated that over 200 districts were under Taliban control, but emphasized that the Taliban had not seized any provincial capitals, where Afghan forces had been consolidated.[69]

On August 6, 2021, the Taliban captured the provincial capital of Zaranj, seat of the southwestern province of Nimroz. Amidst heavy fighting in the strategic southern cities of Kandahar and Lashkar Gah (capital of Helmand province), the Taliban then captured a series of provincial capitals in northern Afghanistan (Shebergan in Jawzjan on August 7; Kunduz, Sar-e Pol, and Taloqan in Takhar on August 8; Aybak in Samangan Province on August 9; Fayzabad in Badakhshan and Pol-e Khomri in Baghlan on August 10).[70] The capitals of Farah in the west and Ghazni south of Kabul (both of which the Taliban had attempted to seize in 2018) fell on August 10-11. The key cities of Kandahar (Afghanistan's second largest city, one of its historic capitals, and the 1994 birthplace of the Taliban movement) and Herat (Afghanistan's third largest city) were captured by the Taliban on August 12, along with Lashkar Gah and Qala-e-Now in the northern province of Badghis.

Figure 1. Afghanistan

Source: Created by CRS. Boundaries from U.S. State Department, GADM, and Esri.

The Taliban's capture of half of Afghanistan's provincial capitals in less than a week surprised many observers and, reportedly, U.S. officials.[71] By August 13, U.S. officials were reportedly concerned that the Taliban could move on Kabul within days. With the fall of Jalalabad in the east

in Afghanistan," NBC News, June 25, 2021.

[69] Secretary of Defense Austin and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Milley Press Briefing, U.S. Department of Defense, July 21, 2021.

[70] BBC News, Afghanistan: Taliban continue attacks on three major cities, August 1, 2021. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58040141

[71] Zeke Miller, et al., "Biden team surprised by rapid Taliban gains in Afghanistan," Associated Press, August 15, 2021.

and Mazar-e-Sharif in the north, the Taliban captured the last major cities and eliminated the final outposts of organized Afghan government resistance. On the morning of August 15, 2021, the Taliban entered Kabul, completing their effective takeover of the country. As of August 19, one pocket of possible resistance remained, led by First Vice President Amrullah Saleh in the central and historically significant province of Panjshir, but its viability remains unclear.

While the Taliban faced stiff, if ultimately unsuccessful, resistance from government forces in some areas,[72] some provincial capitals and other areas were taken with minimal fighting. In many of these areas, the Taliban reportedly secured the departure of government forces (and the handover of their weapons) through payments or through the mediation of local elders seeking to avoid bloodshed.[73]

Experts have offered a number of explanations for why the ANDSF did not stem the Taliban advance.

- Reportedly high casualty and attrition rates in the ANDSF in recent years.[74] While the ANDSF's official force level was reported to be just under 300,000, most observers assess its actual strength was lower.
- Widespread corruption within the Afghan military and government, often leading to soldiers going without salaries or even food, which arguably undermined the government's authority and alienated former and potential supporters.[75]
- A lack of preparation on the part of Afghan civilian and military leaders, who, according to some analysts, did not believe that the United States would ultimately withdraw troops and contractors.[76]
- A political calculation by the Afghan government to not cede vulnerable rural outposts to the Taliban, leaving Afghan forces overstretched and easily isolated by Taliban fighters.[77]
- The February 2020 U.S.-Taliban agreement, which reportedly "demoralized" Afghan forces and prompted ever-growing numbers of Afghan soldiers to accept Taliban payments to surrender.[78] Some also argue that the end of largescale U.S. airstrikes after the February 2020 agreement allowed the Taliban time to regroup and further weakened Afghan forces' will to fight.[79]

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[72] BBC News, Afghanistan: Taliban continue attacks on three major cities, August 1, 2021. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58040141.

[73] Susannah George, "Afghanistan's military collapse: Illicit deals and mass desertions," *Washington Post*, August 15, 2021.

[74] Once-public statistics on ANDSF metrics were withheld by the U.S. military starting in October 2017. Shawn Snow, "Report: US officials classify crucial metrics on Afghan casualties, readiness," *Military Times*, October 30, 2017.

[75] Chas Danner, "Why Afghanistan's Security Forces Suddenly Collapsed," *New York Magazine*, August 17, 2021. https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2021/08/why-afghanistans-security-forces-suddenly-collapsed.html ; Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Taimoor Shah, "The Taliban Close in on Afghan Cities, Pushing the Country to the Brink," *New York Times*, July 9, 2021.

[76] Amy Kazmin, et. al., "Low morale, no support and bad politics: why the Afghan army folded," *Financial Times*, August 15, 2021.

[77] Benjamin Jensen, "How the Taliban did it: Inside the 'operational art' of its military victory," Atlantic Council, August 15, 2021.

[78] George, "Afghanistan's military collapse."

[79] Yaroslav Trofimov, "How the Taliban Overran the Afghan Army, Built by the U.S. Over 20 Years," *Wall Street Journal*, April 14, 2021.

- The withdrawal (per the U.S.-Taliban accord) of U.S. and international contractors, upon whom Afghans depended for maintenance of their own air force as well as intelligence and close air support.[80]
- The centralized structure of the Afghan military, with some observers arguing that the United States trained a centralized national military ill-fitted to Afghanistan's unique circumstances, specifically its ethnic diversity and history of locally organized and led security forces.[81]
- The prioritization by the United States of the *quantity* of ANDSF forces over their *quality*, which led to decisions about ANDSF end strength that was unaffordable without international support.[82]

What is the status of the deposed Afghan government?[83]

President Ashraf Ghani, whose seven-year tenure was characterized by electoral crises, factional infighting, and the gradual deterioration of Afghan forces, reportedly fled the country on the morning of August 15, 2021. Hours later, High Council for National Reconciliation Chairman Abdullah Abdullah appeared to confirm those reports in a video calling Ghani the "former president" who "God should hold … accountable."[84] On the evening of August 15, Ghani posted on Facebook that he left Kabul to prevent bloodshed and that the "Taliban have won the judgment of sword and guns and now they are responsible for protecting the countrymen's honor, wealth and self-esteem."[85] After days of questions about his location, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation announced on August 18 that "the UAE has welcomed President Ashraf Ghani and his family into the country on humanitarian grounds."[86] On August 18, Ghani released a video statement defending his flight from the country, saying he had been "evicted."[87] As of August 18, he does not appear to have formally resigned his office.

Many other government-aligned elites, formerly regarded as influential powerbrokers, also have left the country: Ismail Khan was captured by the Taliban in fighting in the western city of Herat before being allowed to relocate to Iran; Abdulrashid Dostum and Atta Mohammad Noor convened their forces in the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif and subsequently fled to Uzbekistan. Another group of Afghan political leaders, including Abdullah, former President Hamid Karzai, and former Islamist insurgent leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, formed a "council" to negotiate a

[80] Jack Detsch, "Departure of Private Contractors Was a Turning Point in Afghan Military's Collapse," *Foreign Policy*, August 16, 2021.

[81] Tara Copp, "The US Spent $83 Billion Training Afghan Forces. Why Did They Collapse So Quickly?" *Defense One*, August 14, 2021.

[82] For a previous discussion of this point, see Rebecca Zimmerman, Training Foreign Military Forces: Quantity versus Quality,' *War on the Rocks*, July 15, 2015.

[83] This section was prepared by Clayton Thomas, Analyst in Middle Eastern Affairs.

[84] "Afghan president Ghani flees the country as the Taliban moves on Kabul," CNBC, August 15, 2021.

[85] Chantal Da Silva, Ahmed Mengli and Mushtaq Yusufzai, "From Afghan nation-builder to life in 'exile': Ashraf Ghani flees country in defeat," *NBC News*, August 16, 2021. https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/afghan-nation-builder-life-exile-ashraf-ghani-flees-country-defeat-n1276826

[86] UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Statement on President Ashraf Ghani, August 18 2021.

[87] "Ghani breaks silence, says left Afghanistan to avoid bloodshed, refutes claims of fleeing with 'cars full of money," *India Today*, August 18, 2021.

coordinated transition to Taliban rule, but it is unclear to what extent, if at all, the Taliban are prepared to negotiate with these or other figures as they begin their rule.

First Vice President Amrullah Saleh claimed on Twitter on August 17 to be the "legitimate care taker [sic] President" and to be "reaching out to all leaders to secure their support & consensus."[88] Saleh had previously vowed to never submit to Taliban rule and called on Afghans to join him in resisting the group. He reportedly has relocated to the central province of Panjshir, whose strategic location and historic legacy (it was never occupied by the Soviets in the 1980s or the Taliban in the 1990s) give it outsized import. He is joined by the son of the late Northern Alliance commander Ahmad Shah Massoud. They have stated they intend to form an armed resistance to the Taliban and have appealed for U.S. and international support.[89]

The Taliban appear stronger relative to this nascent opposition than they were vis-à-vis the former Northern Alliance: the Taliban control more territory and military materiel now than they did in the 1990s, and they have stronger ties with regional powers (including some that once supported the Northern Alliance against the Taliban). Still, the existence of even a small resistance faction could serve as a rallying point or galvanize Taliban opponents nationwide, who might then make additional appeals for U.S. or other international assistance.

How have the Taliban acted since taking power?[90]

The Taliban have controlled territory in parts of Afghanistan for years, but their takeover of the country in August 2021 puts them in control of urban areas for the first time since 2001. The Afghanistan that the Taliban are preparing to govern in 2021 is different in economic, political, and social terms from the country the group ruled two decades ago. It remains to be seen how the Taliban will oversee this different society, but they seem poised to make major changes to the Afghan political system and possibly other aspects of life in Afghanistan.

In the years before the Taliban's takeover, the group's leaders did not lay out specifics of their vision for governance in Afghanistan, and in the days since their August 15 takeover, their ultimate aims remain unclear. One Taliban leader told Reuters on August 18, "There will be no democratic system at all because it does not have any base in our country," and that the country's political system would be "sharia law and that is it."[91] He added that Taliban leader Hibatullah Akhdundzada (who has been in hiding for years) would be the supreme governing authority, with a deputy playing the role of president. Two of Akhundzada's three deputies remain in hiding: Mullah Yaqoob (son of original Taliban leader Mullah Omar and, since 2020, leader of the Taliban's military commission) and Sirajuddin Haqqani (son of former mujahideen leader Jalaluddin Haqqani and leader of the Haqqani Network, a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization). The third deputy, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, oversaw the Taliban's negotiating

[88] Amrullah Saleh, Twitter, August 17, 2021, 9:59AM, https://twitter.com/AmrullahSaleh2/status/1427631191545589772. Section 60 of the Afghan constitution provides that the first Vice President "shall act in accordance with the provisions of this Constitution" in the event of the president's "absence, resignation or death." Section 67 of the Afghan constitution provides that the first Vice President shall assume the responsibilities of president in the case of the president's resignation, impeachment, or death; the president is to "personally tender" his resignation to the National Assembly.

[89] Ahmad Massoud, "Opinion: The mujahideen resistance to the Taliban begins now. But we need help," *Washington Post*, August 18, 2021.

[90] This section was prepared by Clayton Thomas, Analyst in Middle Eastern Affairs.

[91] "Exclusive: Council may rule Afghanistan, Taliban to reach out to soldiers, pilots," Reuters, August 18, 2021.

team in Doha and has led regional diplomacy for the group; he returned to Kandahar from Doha on August 17, 2021.

Armed Taliban fighters retain a heavy presence throughout Kabul, where they operate checkpoints (including outside of Kabul airport) and have reportedly conducted searches of individuals' homes.[92] Women have appeared in public but reportedly in far fewer numbers than before the Taliban's entry.[93] Some Afghans reportedly remain at home due to concerns about the behavior of Taliban fighters or due to the absence of clear information about the group's policies and fears that some signs of relative moderation do not reflect the group's true intentions.[94] Outside of Kabul, the picture is less clear but equally mixed.

At an August 17, 2021, press conference, longtime Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid (making his first appearance in public) said, "The current situation … resembles a martial law kind of situation. It will soon come back to normal."[95] In that same press conference, Mujahid reiterated the Taliban's proclaimed amnesty for government employees, saying

> I would like to assure all the compatriots, whether they were translators, whether they were with military activities or whether they were civilians, all of them have been important. Nobody is going to be treated with revenge…. Thousands of [Afghan] soldiers who have fought us for 20 years, after the occupation, all of them have been pardoned.

Observers noted that the Taliban made similar statements after taking control of Kabul in 1996, only to contradict them with brutal repression and human rights violations.[96] It is unclear whether or how the Taliban will be able to administer the functions of government and security nationwide without the participation of individuals who had previously supported the elected Afghan government. It is possible that the Taliban may coerce such individuals to obtain their compliance.

While the Taliban have stated they intend to rule in an inclusive manner, protests against the group have occurred in several cities. In the eastern city of Jalalabad, three protesters were reportedly killed by Taliban fighters on August 18.[97]

What are some of the implications if the Taliban is recognized as the official government of Afghanistan by the United States and the international community?[98]

The United States has not commented on whether it will recognize an Afghan government led by the Taliban. While the Taliban arguably control and govern Afghanistan at this point from a practical, or "de facto," perspective, the international community has not accepted the Taliban as the legitimate, or "de jure," government of the country. Pursuant to the law of nations, official

[92] Jake Dima, "Taliban spokesman suggests imposters are behind door-to-door raids in Afghanistan," *Washington Examiner*, August 16, 2021.

[93] Clarissa Ward, et al., "The Taliban have been in charge of Kabul for 48 hours. Women have already disappeared from the streets," CNN, August 17, 2021.

[94] Farnaz Fassihi and Dan Bilefsky, "For Afghan Women, Taliban Stir Fears of Return to a Repressive Past," *New York Times*, August 18, 2021.

[95] "Transcript of Taliban's first news conference in Kabul," *Al Jazeera*, August 17, 2021.

[96] Graeme Wood, "This Is Not the Taliban 2.0," *The Atlantic*, August 18, 2021.

[97] "Three killed as Afghan protests test Taliban's promise of peaceful rule," Reuters, August 18, 2021.

[98] This section was prepared by Matthew C. Weed, Specialist in Foreign Policy Legislation.

recognition of a foreign government acknowledges that a government has the right to control a state's territory and exercise sovereign state power,[99] and makes such government responsible for meeting that state's international obligations, including complying with U.N. Security Council resolutions, of which many currently apply to Afghanistan. Each state makes the decision to formally recognize the government of another state; recognition can occur via overt declaration or other positive statement of recognition, or be implied by the actions of the recognizing state, such as by concluding an international agreement with the government being recognized.[100] Recognition is usually a prerequisite for the establishment of diplomatic relations. In the United States, recognized governments may sue in U.S. courts as a foreign sovereign, and benefit from sovereign immunity from suit in certain circumstances. Under domestic law, the authority to recognize foreign governments in the conduct of international relations lies with the President.[101]

When the Taliban took control of Afghanistan in 1996, and acted as the de facto government until the U.S. invasion in 2001, neither the United States nor the wider international community recognized the Taliban regime as the legitimate government of Afghanistan. Three individual states, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Pakistan, officially recognized the Taliban. Afghanistan was represented at the United Nations by the Permanent Representative and other officials of the predecessor Afghan government, with the Credentials Committee of the U.N. General Assembly deferring indefinitely the question of whether the representatives of the predecessor government or the Taliban should represent the country.[102] A U.N. Security Council resolution required states to close official Taliban diplomatic offices on their territory.[103] In March 2020, U.N. Security Council Resolution 2513 held that the Taliban were "not recognized at the United Nations, and furthermore the Security Council does not support the restoration of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.... "[104] The current Afghan Permanent Representative spoke on behalf of Afghanistan before the Security Council on August 16, 2021. According to at least one observer, the Taliban could be prevented from representing Afghanistan even if no competing representatives challenged its authority to do so.[105]

Whether or not a government is democratically elected has become a central issue in the recognition practice of many states, including the United States.[106] The question of recognition of the Taliban could be influenced if the Taliban seek accommodation with or appoint to government posts officials of the former Ghani administration. This could be seen as a counterweight to any illegitimacy problems the Taliban may face by having taken power from a democratically elected Afghan government.[107] In addition, the Taliban have long sought recognition as a legitimate

[99] Restatement (Third) of Foreign Relations Law of the United States § 203, Comment *a*, p. 84 (1986).

[100] I. Brownlie, *Principles of Public International Law*, p. 93 (7th ed., 2008).

[101] Zivotofsky ex rel. Zivotofsky v. Kerry, 576 U.S. 1, 11 (2015).

[102] See PRACTICE OF THE UNITED NATIONS IN CASES OF CHALLENGED REPRESENTATION OF A MEMBER STATE—GENERAL ASSEMBLY RESOLUTION 396(V) OF 14 DECEMBER 1950, *1997 U.N. Juridical Yearbook*, pp. 465-67; see also "Credentials," *Rules of Procedure of the General Assembly of the United Nations*, Part IV, Rules 27-29, https://www.un.org/en/ga/about/ropga/credent.shtml.

[103] Para. 8(a) of S/RES/1333.

[104] S/RES/2513.

[105] See Larry D. Johnson, "How Can The Taliban Be Prevented From Representing Afghanistan In The United Nations?", *Just Security*, August 18, 2021.

[106] See Restatement (Third) of Foreign Relations Law of the United States § 203, Reporter's Note 1.

[107] Tess Bridgeman and Ryan Goodman, "Recognition and the Taliban," *Just Security*, August 17, 2021.

governing entity, and some observers maintain has improved its foreign policy apparatus since first governing Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001.[108]

Some states and international organizations might wish to use recognition as a tool to hold the Taliban accountable for Afghanistan's obligations under international law, such as conditioning recognition on such compliance or withholding diplomatic relations until such conditions are met.[109] Only a recognized Afghan government can request foreign assistance, including military and humanitarian aid and economic assistance from international financial institutions. On August 15, 2021, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, without mentioning the Taliban, has stated that an Afghan government that abides by its international obligations and protects the human rights of its people "is a government we can work with and recognize."[110] China, Russia, and other prominent states seem to have indicated that recognition of the Taliban is a possibility, citing the Taliban's effective, albeit nascent, rule of the majority of the country.[111] At present, it seems most states are prepared to monitor the Taliban's actions domestically and internationally to determine whether to recognize and form official relations with the Taliban, instead pledging their continued support for the Afghan people, their human rights, and humanitarian assistance.[112]

Some additional questions that Congress may ask the executive branch include

- At what point might the United States consider extending official recognition to a Taliban-led Afghan government? Short of recognition, are there opportunities for U.S. cooperation with such a government?

U.S. Policy Implications of the Taliban Takeover

How is the Taliban's takeover affecting the U.S. diplomatic presence in Afghanistan and evacuations of U.S. citizens?[113]

On August 12, State Department spokesperson Ned Price announced that "we are further reducing our civilian footprint in Kabul in light of the evolving security situation," drawing down to a "core diplomatic presence," but that the U.S. embassy would remain open in some form.[114] The State Department had in April ordered the departure of U.S. personnel at the embassy whose functions could be performed outside of Afghanistan in April.[115] The Taliban's entrance into Kabul expedited plans to remove staff; the State Department confirmed on August 15 that it evacuated the embassy compound and that all embassy personnel were located on the premises of

[108] See Barnett R. Rubin, *Leveraging the Taliban's Quest for International Recognition*, Afghan Peace Process Issues Paper, United States Institute of Peace, March 2021.

[109] See Bridgeman and Goodman, op. cit.

[110] See CNN, *State of the Union*, August 15, 2021 (transcript).

[111] Andrew Osborne, "Russia says Kabul seems safer under Taliban than it was under Ghani," *Reuters*, August 16, 2021.

[112] See, e.g., State Department Office of the Spokesperson, *Joint Statement on Afghanistan*, August 15, 2021; Afghan Regional Conference, *Final Chairman Statement*, August 12, 2021.

[113] This section was prepared by Cory Gill, Analyst in Foreign Affairs.

[114] U.S. Department of State, "Department Press Briefing—August 12, 2021," August 12, 2021.

[115] U.S. Department of State, "Afghanistan Travel Advisory, June 28, 2021.

Hamid Karzai International Airport.[116] On August 16, a Pentagon spokesperson confirmed that the departure could be characterized as a "non-combatant evacuation operation" (NEO).[117]

The Pentagon and the State Department have announced an increased security presence that could total nearly 6,000 U.S. forces in Afghanistan for the sole purpose of securing the airport for the safe departure of U.S. diplomats and other American citizens who have been resident in Afghanistan, Afghans employed at the U.S. mission in Kabul and their families, and other particularly vulnerable Afghan nationals (See "What U.S. military operations are now being conducted in Afghanistan?").[118] U.S. officials estimated there were approximately 11,000 U.S. citizens in Afghanistan as of August 17. The United States resumed evacuation flights after halting them on August 16, when several individuals were killed at the airport after thousands of Afghans fled there in attempt to evacuate the country.[119] On August 19, President Biden said in an interview that "If there are American citizens left, we're going to stay until we get them all out."[120]

Some Members of Congress have asserted that the United States must be clear with the Taliban that they will face "grave consequences" if they impede U.S. evacuation efforts amid reports that Taliban fighters are harassing and blocking some civilians attempting to reach the airport.[121] National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan has stated that the United States is seeking to "resolve" this issue through discussions with the Taliban.[122] On August 18, Secretary of Defense Austin said, "We don't have the capability to go out and collect up large numbers of people. ... I don't have the capability to go out and extend operations currently into Kabul. And where do you take that? I mean, how far can you extend into Kabul, you know, and how long does it take to flow those forces in to be able to do that?"[123]

State Department officials in Afghanistan are overseeing diplomatic operations and evacuation efforts. Most U.S. diplomats previously assigned to the U.S. embassy have left Afghanistan. As of this date, the senior U.S. civilian official in Afghanistan, Chargé d'Affaires Ross Wilson, remains at the airport with a small number of diplomatic personnel and is leading U.S. diplomatic engagement in Afghanistan. Additionally, the State Department has sent former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan John Bass (there has not been a U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan since Ambassador Bass left the post in January 2020) to Kabul to oversee the evacuation of U.S. citizens and eligible Afghans.[124]

The State Department has indicated that it will maintain a diplomatic presence in Kabul "for as long as it is safe and responsible for us to do so."[125] Several factors may play a role in

[116] David Martin, "U.S. Embassy in Kabul successfully evacuated," *CBS News*, August 16, 2021.

[117] DOD, "Pentagon Press Secretary John F. Kirby Holds a Press Briefing," August 16, 2021.

[118] "Joint Statement from the Department of State and Department of Defense: Update on Afghanistan," August 15, 2021.

[119] U.S. Department of State, "Department Press Briefing—August 17, 2021," August 17, 2021.

[120] President Biden interview with ABC News, August 19, 2021.

[121] Daniel Flatley, "Afghan Airlift Deadline Must Be Extended, Lawmakers Tell Biden," *Bloomberg News*, August 17, 2021, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-08-18/afghan-airlift-deadline-must-be-extended-lawmakers-tell-biden.

[122] White House, "Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jen Psaki and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, August 17, 2021," August 17, 2021.

[123] Secretary of Defense Austin and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Milley Press Briefing, August 18, 2021.

[124] U.S. Department of State, "Department Press Briefing—August 17, 2021," August 17, 2021.

[125] U.S. Department of State, "Department Press Briefing—August 16, 2021," August 16, 2021.

determining the future U.S. diplomatic presence in Afghanistan. These include whether the United States extends diplomatic recognition to a new Taliban government, decisions by U.S. and Taliban officials regarding whether it is in their interests to pursue a multifaceted diplomatic relationship, and security concerns or other matters affecting the health and safety of U.S. diplomatic personnel assigned to Afghanistan.

Some additional questions that Congress may ask the executive branch include

- What is the status of efforts to allow American citizens and eligible family members to depart Afghanistan?
- What means are in place to facilitate the exit of United States citizens who are not in Kabul or who are in Kabul and not able to reach the airport?

How might the reestablishment of Taliban rule affect terrorist groups in Afghanistan?[126]

Since 2001, counterterrorism has been an important component of U.S. operations in Afghanistan, where a number of terrorist groups operate. With the Afghan government's collapse, the United States has lost an important counterterrorism partner, leading to questions about the viability of U.S. efforts to counter future terrorist threats emanating from Afghanistan. Al Qaeda and the regional Islamic State affiliate (Islamic State-Khorasan Province, ISKP) are two of the most significant terrorist groups, and the Taliban's takeover is likely to impact them in different ways.

The Taliban are not a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization (despite at least one past congressional attempt to call for such a designation), though the group (since 2002) and many of its members have been designated as Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGTs) under Executive Order 13224. SDGTs are denied access to their U.S.-based assets, U.S. persons are prohibited from engaging in transactions with them, and any foreign financial institution found to have conducted or facilitated a significant transaction on behalf of the SDGT can be prohibited from using the U.S. banking system.

Al Qaeda is still assessed to have a presence in Afghanistan and its decades-long ties with the Taliban appear to have remained strong in recent years. In October 2020, Afghan forces killed a high-ranking AQ operative in Afghanistan's Ghazni province, where he reportedly was living and working with Taliban forces, underscoring questions about AQ-Taliban links and Taliban intentions with regard to Al Qaeda.[127] In May 2021, U.N. sanctions monitors reported that Al Qaeda had "minimized overt communications with Taliban leadership in an effort to 'lay low' and not jeopardize the Taliban's diplomatic position."[128]

In its report on the final quarter of 2020, the DOD Office of the Inspector General relayed an assessment from the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) that the Taliban maintain ties to Al Qaeda and that some AQ members were "integrated into the Taliban's forces and command structure."[129] In a semiannual report released in April 2021, the Department of Defense stated,

[126] This section was prepared by Clayton Thomas, Analyst in Middle Eastern Affairs.

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

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

[129] *Operation Freedom's Sentinel: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, October 1, 2020 - December 31, 2020,* released February 17, 2021.

"The Taliban have maintained mutually beneficial relations with AQ-related organizations and are unlikely to take substantive action against these groups."[130] AQ-Taliban ties have been reinforced by the groups' shared struggle in Afghanistan and personal bonds, including marriage links.

In the U.S.-Taliban agreement, the Taliban committed to not allow any terrorist groups, including Al Qaeda, to use Afghan soil to threaten the security of the United States and its allies, including by preventing such groups from training, fundraising, recruiting, or residing in Afghanistan. The accord does not provide for verification mechanisms to monitor Taliban compliance. The Taliban have claimed in recent years there are no "foreign fighters"—a term generally used to denote non-Afghan personnel fighting with, or alongside, the Taliban—in Afghanistan. In February 2021, the group reportedly issued a directive barring Taliban fighters from "bringing foreign nationals into their ranks or giving them shelter."[131]

One analyst argues that while some parts of the Taliban oppose the group's ties with Al Qaeda, citing the costs of the relationship in terms of the Taliban's international image and U.S. pressure, shared ideology links the two groups. While the Taliban do not have transnational aims like Al Qaeda does, Al Qaeda, he argues, "sees the Afghan Taliban as an important partner in its stewardship of global jihad," as evidenced by the allegiance successive AQ leaders have pledged to successive Taliban leaders.[132] U.S. officials reportedly told Senators in August 2021 that "terror groups like al-Qaida may be able to grow much faster than expected" In the wake of the Taliban takeover.[133] AQ figures were reportedly among the thousands of prisoners released from Parwan Detention Facility by the Taliban in August 2021.[134]

The Islamic State affiliate in Afghanistan (ISKP), on the other hand, opposes the Taliban and the two groups have often clashed. The Islamic State views the Taliban's nationalist political project as opposed to their own universalist vision of a global caliphate. The Taliban's takeover likely represents a setback for ISKP; Taliban forces reportedly executed an imprisoned former ISKP leader after the Taliban captured an Afghan government prison in Kabul.[135] Taliban compromises on certain issues as the group begins governing could prompt hardliners to defect to ISKP, as happened in the past. The United States previously supported Taliban offensives against ISKP, potentially foreshadowing a rare area of future U.S.-Taliban cooperation.[136]

Beyond Afghanistan, some argue the Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan could boost terrorist groups worldwide; AQ supporters reportedly greeted the Taliban takeover as a victory for the cause of global jihadism.[137]

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[130] U.S. Department of Defense, *Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan*, December 2020, released April 23, 2021.

[131] Ayaz Gul, "Afghan Taliban Ask Fighters Not To Harbor 'Foreign' Militants as US Reviews Peace Deal,'" *Voice of America*, February 2, 2021.

[132] Asfandyar Mir, "Untying the Gordian Knot: Why the Taliban is Unlikely to Break Ties with Al-Qaeda," Modern War Institute at West Point, August 10, 2021.

[133] Michael Balsamo, et al., "Concerns over US terror threat rising as Taliban hold grows," Associated Press, August 15, 2021.

[134] Nick Paton Walsh and Sandi Sidhu, "Al Qaeda and Taliban members among thousands of prisoners left under Afghan control in jail next to deserted US air base," CNN, July 6, 2021.

[135] Yaroslav Trifimov, et al., "Taliban Consolidate Control in Afghanistan's Capital as Thousands Remain Stranded," *Wall Street Journal*, August 17, 2021.

[136] Wesley Morgan, "Our secret Taliban air force," *Washington Post*, October 22, 2020.

[137] Warren Strobel and Dustin Volz, "Extremists Celebrate Taliban Takeover of Afghanistan on Social Media," *Wall Street Journal*, August 17, 2021.

Amid the U.S. withdrawal in the summer of 2021, U.S. officials said that the United States would maintain "over-the-horizon" capabilities to combat terrorist threats. With the Taliban in control of the country, the United States might have to alter those plans, for instance by replacing manned flights with drone operations, flown from U.S. bases in the Persian Gulf region that are remote from Afghanistan's borders.[138] The lack of a U.S. military presence or partner force on the ground may also restrict intelligence gathering capabilities. The governments of Pakistan, China, Iran, and the Central Asian republics are all concerned, to varying degrees, about the possibility of Afghanistan-based terrorist threats and may cooperate with the United States and provide additional incentive for the Taliban to constrain AQ and other groups.[139]

What are the prospects for continued U.S. civilian assistance to Afghanistan?[140]

As of June 30, 2021, the United States had allocated approximately $36.29 billion in current dollars for "governance and development assistance" in Afghanistan since FY2002, representing 25% of total U.S.-provided reconstruction assistance.[141] Such funding has aimed to support a range of development goals, including expanding education, combating corruption, promoting good governance and civil society, and empowering women and girls. The majority of civilian assistance has been implemented by nongovernmental partners such as multilateral entities, nonprofit organizations, universities, and private sector actors.

Congress regularly enacts laws that require the withholding of U.S. assistance subject to various conditions including, for Afghanistan, those related to counternarcotics efforts, corruption, and women's rights.[142] Successive Administrations have, pursuant to these laws, certified Afghan compliance with these conditions and no U.S. funds have been withheld.[143] However, with the Taliban takeover and the Afghan government's collapse, bilateral aid that has traditionally been implemented by nongovernmental entities may be reduced or eliminated pursuant to existing conditions included in annual Department of State, Foreign Operations and Related Programs (SFOPS) appropriations measures. For example, current Economic Support Fund and International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement assistance appropriated for Afghanistan

> may not be made available for any program, project or activity that—(i) cannot be sustained, as appropriate, by the Government of Afghanistan or another Afghan entity; (ii) is not accessible for the purposes of conducting effective oversight in accordance with applicable Federal statutes and regulations; (iii) initiates any new, major infrastructure

[138] Missy Ryan and Souad Mekhennet, "After Taliban triumph, Biden faces even greater test in preventing extremist resurgence in Afghanistan," *Washington Post*, August 16, 2021.

[139] Steve Erlanger, "The Taliban Are Back. Now Will They Retrain or Support Al Qaeda?" *New York Times*, August 17, 2021.

[140] This section was prepared by Emily Morgenstern, Analyst in Foreign Assistance and Foreign Policy.

[141] SIGAR, *June 30, 2021 Quarterly Report*, p. 25. According to SIGAR, other reconstruction assistance includes security assistance, humanitarian aid, and agency operations.

[142] For example Section 7044(a)(2)(B) of the FY2016 SFOPS appropriations bill (Division K of P.L. 114-113) required that prior to obligating Economic Support Fund and International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement Funds, the Secretary of State certify that the Government of Afghanistan had met or was meeting certain requirements. These included " ... continuing to implement laws and policies to govern democratically and protect the rights of individuals and civil society, including steps to protect and advance the rights of women and girls ... " and " ... reducing corruption and prosecuting individuals alleged to be involved in illegal activities ... ", among others.

[143] For more, see "Aid Conditionality and Oversight" in CRS Report R45818, *Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy*, by Clayton Thomas.

> development; or (iv) includes the participation of any Afghan individual, organization, or government entity if the Secretary of State has credible information that such individual, organization, or entity is knowingly involved in acts of grand corruption, illicit narcotics production or trafficking, or has committed a gross violation of human rights.[144]

Bilateral U.S. aid to government entities in Afghanistan may also cease depending on Administration determinations. This action might occur pursuant to Section 7021(b) of the FY2021 SFOPS appropriations measure, which prohibits funds from being made available to any foreign government, which the President determines "grants sanctuary from prosecution to any individual or group which has committed an act of international terrorism" or "otherwise supports international terrorism."

Taliban control of Afghanistan could also raise significant concerns about the long-term effectiveness and sustainability of any U.S.-administered assistance programs, regardless of which implementing partners carry out such programs. The current security situation in Afghanistan and resulting evacuations of U.S. diplomatic and development staff might also directly affect program oversight capabilities, potentially requiring the United States to rely heavily or solely on third-party monitoring for any assistance programs that may continue. As the situation in Afghanistan evolves, it remains to be seen how, if at all, civilian assistance could be delivered, administered, and overseen, and how Congress might evaluate its funding for and conditions on assistance to the country.

Some additional questions that Congress may ask the executive branch include

- What nonmilitary options (e.g., diplomacy or development assistance) might be available to engage with the Taliban regime and/or Afghan communities?
- Are there concerns that civilian assistance to the country could be at risk of diversion by the Taliban or other, nonstate malign actors?

What might the Taliban takeover mean for security cooperation as a national security tool?[145]

A central aspect of the U.S. and coalition campaign in Afghanistan was training and equipping the ANDSF.[146] Some observers, citing long-standing deficiencies in certain components of the ANDSF, as well as recent events, have questioned the efficacy of U.S. efforts to build the security capacity of allies and partners writ large.[147] Drawing on this example, the fact that the ANDSF did not forestall a Taliban takeover could suggest to some that such capacity-building efforts are strategically problematic and that the U.S. should exercise caution when trying to build foreign militaries. Others have countered that the situation in Afghanistan was unique, that train and equip efforts were being conducted during wartime, and that there were myriad other factors leading to the collapse—including the failings of the Afghan government and the unique dependence of the Afghan military on U.S. support—that are not always present in other security

[144] Section 7044(a)(1)(C) the FY2019 SFOPS bill (Division F of P.L. 116-6). Section 7044(a)(1)(F) of the FY2021 SFOPS bill (Division K of P.L. 117-260), reaffirms the provision's applicability for FY2021 appropriated funds.

[145] This section was prepared by Kathleen J. McInnis, Specialist in International Security.

[146] Craig Whitlock, "Afghan security forces' wholesale collapse was years in the making," *The Washington Post*, August 16, 2021.

[147] Anthony Capaccio," As Kabul Fell, U.S. Watchdog Wrote Sad Coda to a 20-Year Failure," Bloomberg News, August 17, 2021; Kori Schake, Why the Afghan Army Folded: America has historically struggled to train foreign militaries, *The Atlantic*, August 17, 2021.

cooperation endeavors.[148] A 2014 Rand Corporation study of the relationship between security cooperation and fragility found that U.S. security cooperation efforts did correlate with a reduction in partner state fragility, but that that (a) most of the effect was concentrated at lower funding levels; and (b) the correlation was stronger in more democratic states and those with stronger institutions.[149] In 2020, the Fund for Peace, a nongovernmental organization, ranked Afghanistan among the ten most fragile states in the world.[150] Members of Congress and others may seek to draw lessons from security sector reform efforts in Afghanistan and determine what lessons, if any, might be transferable or relevant in other contexts.

Some additional questions that Congress may ask the executive branch include

- With the collapse of the Afghan military, is there potential for U.S.- and coalition-trained and armed Afghan forces to join the Taliban or regional terrorist groups? If this happens, what are the possible threats posed by these individuals?
- Likewise, is there a possibility that some Afghan Special Forces or other elements could form the nucleus of a credible counter-Taliban resistance movement? Under what circumstances might the U.S. government provide support to such a group, if any?

Social and Economic Implications of the Taliban Takeover

What might be the implications of the Taliban takeover for Afghan women and girls?[151]

Decades of war after 1978 and the repressive five-year rule of the Taliban severely undermined the rights and development of Afghan women, who had been granted equal rights under the 1964 constitution. These rights were not always observed, but prior to 1978, women were present in legislative bodies, universities, and work places, particularly in urban areas. During their rule between 1996 and 2001, the Taliban "perpetrated egregious acts of violence against women" as part of a "war against women," according to a 2001 State Department report.[152] Based on their particularly conservative interpretation of Islam and Pashtun social norms, the Taliban prohibited women from working, attending school after age eight, and appearing in public without a male blood relative and without wearing a *burqa*. Women accused of breaking these or other restrictions suffered severe corporal or capital punishment, often publicly.

To date, the Taliban have not described in detail how they now view women's rights or what role women would play in a future Taliban-governed society. In February 2020, deputy Taliban leader Sirajuddin Haqqani wrote of "an Islamic system … where the rights of women that are

[148] CRS Report R44313, *What Is "Building Partner Capacity?" Issues for Congress*, coordinated by Kathleen J. McInnis; Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction, *What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction*, August 2021.

[149] Michael J. McNerney, et al., "Assessing Security Cooperation as a Preventive Tool," Rand Corporation, 2014.

[150] Fund for Peace, Fragile States Index, 2020, https://fragilestatesindex.org/.

[151] This section was prepared by Sarah R. Collins, Research Assistant. For additional background, see CRS In Focus IF11646, *Afghan Women and Girls: Status and Congressional Action*, by Clayton Thomas and Sarah R. Collins.

[152] U.S. Department of State, *Report on the Taliban's War Against Women*, November 17, 2001.

granted by Islam—from the right to education to the right to work—are protected."[153] Skeptics note that a pledge to safeguard the rights of women "according to Islam" and their interpretation of sharia is subjective and echoes similar pledges made by the Taliban while previously in power. In some areas taken since May 2021, the Taliban have reportedly forced women to marry Taliban fighters,[154] imposed other restrictions on women's rights, and carried out targeted killings of women.[155]

The Taliban are accused of numerous attacks on girls' schools during their insurgency. The Taliban claim to not oppose education for girls, and in Taliban-controlled areas some girls had been attending primary school. In some cases where the local community advocated for girls' education, the Taliban have allowed it until sixth grade; where it does not, the Taliban have closed girls' schools. A 2018 study could not identify a single girls' secondary school open in areas of heavy Taliban influence or control.[156]

Since taking power in August 2021, Taliban officials have reiterated their commitment to protecting women's rights "within the framework of Sharia."[157] Some observers question whether the statements by the Taliban are an attempt to assuage concerns that a rollback of women's rights is imminent and to dispel "rumors" about reported actions recently carried out by the group, such as forced marriages.[158] Taliban leaders have called on women government employees to return to their posts, as long as they wear the *hijab* (headscarf), and granted "amnesty" to all who worked with foreign powers.[159]

The Taliban are often portrayed as the prime drivers of Afghan women's oppression. Others have noted that many people within Afghan society hold restrictive views of women's rights that in some cases predate the Taliban movement, particularly in rural areas where 76% of the population resides: "For many rural women, particularly in Pashtun areas but also among other rural minority ethnic groups, actual life has not changed much from the Taliban era, formal legal empowerment notwithstanding."[160] Moreover, the physical and psychological toll of the conflict's violence have further undermined women's development. According to the 2021 SIGAR lessons learned report on gender equality

> One outcome of the U.S. involvement in Afghanistan was supposed to have been a steady improvement in the lives of Afghan women—and, to be sure, improvements have happened. But these gains have occurred alongside, and in many cases in spite of, the misery wrought by the last two decades of war. Violence continues to be one of the biggest challenges facing Afghan women, both directly and indirectly [...] every civilian casualty brings with it a series of potential ripple effects: increasingly desperate poverty, mental

[153] Sirajuddin Haqqani, "What We, the Taliban, Want," *The New York Times*, February 20, 2020.

[154] Lynne O'Donnell, "As Taliban Expand Control, Concerns About Forced Marriage and Sex Slavery Rise," Foreign Policy, July 23, 2021.

[155] Restrictions have included ordering women not leave the home without a male guardian, closing girls and mixed-gender schools, and banning the use of television. Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, "Escalation of Violent Confrontations and a Rise in Violations of Human Rights, June 22 to July 6, 2021," July 17, 2021.

[156] Ashley Jackson, "Life Under the Taliban Shadow Government," Overseas Development Institute, June 2018.

[157] "Transcript of Taliban's first news conference in Kabul," Al Jazeera, August 17, 2021.

[158] Lynne O'Donnell, "As Taliban Expand Control, Concerns About Forced Marriage and Sex Slavery Rise," Foreign Policy, July 23, 2021.

[159] "Taliban urges government staff to return to work," Ariana News, August 16, 2021.

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

> trauma, and the social stigma and discrimination that accompany permanent disability and widowhood.[161]

For some Afghan women, particularly those in rural areas more affected by conflict, the Taliban takeover may represent an improvement over high levels of violence that have characterized recent years, if the group can prevent further violence and improve security conditions. Fieldwork conducted in 2019 and 2020 found that "peace is an absolute priority for some rural women, even a peace deal very much on the Taliban terms."[162] Some have credited the Taliban's takeover in 1996 with reducing the widespread sexual and gender-based violence perpetuated by militias during the preceding civil wars.[163] For other women, the Taliban's takeover in 2021 has increased fears of sexual violence, retaliation, and displacement, and highlight longer-term concerns over the future of women's rights under a Taliban government.[164]

The future of women's rights and status in Afghanistan could depend on many factors, including

- Consensus, or a lack thereof, within the Taliban over which rights will be afforded under an Islamic system;
- The security situation and the level of violence;
- Levels of international development aid and the ability of donors to implement programs for women; and
- The degree to which international or domestic induce the Taliban to institute policies respecting women's rights.

How has the Taliban advance affected the humanitarian situation on the ground in Afghanistan?[165]

The humanitarian situation since the Taliban takeover is fragile and subject to change. Humanitarian needs are expected to rise significantly and, where possible, humanitarian organizations are updating assessments. Current conditions could further constrain humanitarian efforts, hinder assistance delivery, and risk the safety of humanitarian personnel. The United Nations has confirmed its commitment to stay, deliver assistance, and support the humanitarian response in Afghanistan,[166] stating that "the humanitarian community—both the U.N. and nongovernmental organizations—remain committed to helping people in Afghanistan."[167] It has also called for a de-escalation in violence and a permanent ceasefire, highlighting its concerns

[161] SIGAR, *Support for Gender Equality: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan,* February 2021, pp. 11-12.

[162] Allen and Brown, "The fate of women's rights in Afghanistan"; International Crisis Group, "What Will Peace Talks Bode for Afghan Women?" briefing note, April 6, 2020.

[163] Aisha Ahmad, "Afghan Women: The State of Legal Rights and Security," *Policy Perspectives,* Vol. 3, No. 1 (January - June 2006), pp. 25-41.

[164] See e.g. "'I worry my daughters will never know peace': women flee the Taliban—again," *The Guardian,* August 12, 2021; Farnaz Fassihi and Dan Bilefsky, "For Afghan Women, Taliban Stir Fears of Return to a Repressive Past," *The New York Times,* August 17, 2021.

[165] This section was prepared by Rhoda Margesson, Specialist in International Humanitarian Policy.

[166] Humanitarian assistance is provided according to principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence.

[167] U.N. Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, "Statement by Dr. Ramiz Alakbarov, U.N. [Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General] DSRSG and Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator on UN staying to support aid response in Afghanistan, August 17, 2021. UNOCHA, "Daily Noon Briefing Highlights: Afghanistan," August 17, 2021. Specific U.N. entities have issued similar statements.

over civilian casualties and the need for humanitarian access to those in need.[168] The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), which has been in Afghanistan since 1987 and provided assistance across the country (including in Taliban-controlled areas), also plans to continue its efforts along with the Afghan Red Crescent Society.[169] The status and operational plans of many national and international humanitarian organizations are not publicly available.

Prior to the Taliban takeover, Afghanistan already faced a severe humanitarian crisis. An estimated 18.4 million people, out of an estimated population of around 35 million, were in need of humanitarian and protection assistance, of which more than 3.4 million were displaced.[170] Conflict and natural disasters (most recently drought conditions) have driven ongoing humanitarian needs, resulting in chronic vulnerability among the general population. Limited resources, government capacity shortcomings, and security constraints on humanitarian operations have contributed to basic needs, especially in recent years, not being fully met. Systematic violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law by the Taliban and other armed groups ranged from deliberate attacks on health and education facilities to targeted killings and the forced recruitment of children as child soldiers.[171] In 2021, an estimated one third of the population was facing emergency and crisis levels of food insecurity, with emergency levels of acute malnutrition in 27 of 34 provinces.[172]

The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic (and worsening conflict) exacerbated the humanitarian situation with immediate and secondary impacts that resulted in nearly double the number of people requiring assistance from 9.4 million in January 2020 to 18.4 million in January 2021.[173] The urgent need to shift programming and resources towards the COVID-19 response came at the expense of some other humanitarian priorities. The 2021 U.N. global humanitarian appeal for Afghanistan, conducted before the Taliban takeover, totaled $1.3 billion to meet basic needs such as food, water, shelter, protection, and medical services (including those related to COVID-19).[174] To date, the U.S. government has been the largest donor of humanitarian assistance for the Afghan population, including those displaced internally or as refugees.

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[168] UNHCR, "UNHCR warns Afghanistan's conflict taking the heaviest toll on displaced women and children," August 13, 2021.

[169] ICRC, "Afghanistan: A Statement from Robert Mardini, the Director-General of the ICRC," August 17, 2021.

[170] U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (UNOCHA), "Humanitarians seek $1.3 billion to help millions in war-weary Afghanistan," January 12, 2021 and "Afghanistan: Weekly Humanitarian Update (2—8 August 2021): Field Report," August 8, 2021; U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), "UNHCR warns Afghanistan's conflict taking the heaviest toll on displaced women and children," August 13, 2021.

[171] Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, "Afghanistan," June 2021. See also: Report of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed conflict (A/75/873–S/2021/437) issued on 21 June 2021, pp. 3-5.

[172] U.N. World Food Program (WFP), "WFP Afghanistan: Situation Report," August 16 2021. See also, Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, "Afghanistan: IPC Acute Food Insecurity Analysis: March - November 2021," April 2021. High food insecurity is due to a complex mix of factors, such as food prices, reduced income and poverty, conflict, COVID-19 impacts, and natural disasters.

[173] UNOCHA, "Afghanistan: Humanitarian Response Plan (2018-2021) - Year-End Monitoring Report (Jan - Dec 2020)," January 2020. The immediate response to COVID-19 focuses largely on the health and hygiene impacts of the pandemic, while the longer term response to the secondary impacts focuses on protection, food security and livelihoods, nutrition, and education.

[174] U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), *Global Humanitarian Overview 2021, May Update*, June 8, 2021. See https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/humanitarian_crisis_in_afghanistan_2021.pdf.

Some additional questions that Congress may ask the executive branch include

- How prepared are the U.S. government and the international community to respond to deterioration in humanitarian conditions in and around Afghanistan?
- What resources are available to support related contingency operations for the remainder of 2021 and into 2022?
- How might outflows of Afghans into Pakistan, Central Asia, Iran, and toward the Arab world and Europe affect political and social conditions in those countries and regions? What factors would indicate such outflows are likely or imminent?
- How can the international community including the United States help hold a Taliban government accountable to uphold the rights of women, minorities, and other vulnerable populations?

What is that status of Afghan refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and how might the Taliban takeover affect the situation for displaced Afghans?[175]

The United Nations and other humanitarian organizations are continually assessing the rapidly evolving displacement situation in Afghanistan.[176] Prior to the Taliban takeover, the United Nations estimated there were more than 3.4 million IDPs in Afghanistan.[177] (In the first half of 2021 alone, more than 390,000 Afghans were displaced by conflict inside the country.) A further 126,000 new IDPs were reported between July 7, 2021 and August 9, 2021.[178] Since then, an unknown number of Afghans have been displaced by conflict, most reportedly staying inside the country, as close to their homes as fighting will allow.[179] Reports also indicated that up to 120,000 IDPs had arrived in Kabul province since the beginning of the year as people fled rural areas.[180] These IDPs were being hosted by friends and family, in public buildings and mosques, or rented accommodation. A growing number were also staying out in the open in areas of the city. The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations are providing assistance to IDPs where access is possible.

UNHCR is preparing refugee-receiving countries (specifically Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) for potential new Afghan refugee arrivals.[181] The status of border

[175] This section was prepared by Rhoda Margesson, Specialist in International Humanitarian Policy.

[176] **Refugees** have fled their country of origin because of a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons based on race, religion, nationality, or membership in a particular social or political group. Refugees are unwilling or unable to avail themselves of the protection of their home government due to fears of persecution. Once granted refugee status, a person has certain rights and protections under international law. **Asylum-seekers**, who flee their home country, seek sanctuary in another state where they apply for asylum (i.e., the right to be recognized as a refugee). They may receive legal protection and assistance while their formal status is determined. **IDPs** have been forced from their homes, often for many of the same reasons as refugees, but have not crossed an international border.

[177] UNOCHA,"Humanitarians seek $1.3 billion to help millions in war-weary Afghanistan," January 12, 2021 and "Afghanistan: Weekly Humanitarian Update (2—8 August 2021): Field Report," August 8, 2021; UNHCR, "UNHCR warns Afghanistan's conflict taking the heaviest toll on displaced women and children," August 13, 2021.

[178] UNHCR, "UNHCR Position on Returns to Afghanistan," August 2021.

[179] UNHCR, *Afghanistan Situation: Supplementary Appeal: July-December 2021*, August 2021.

[180] UNHCR, UNHCR Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific, "External Update: Afghanistan Situation #2," August 16, 2021.

[181] UNHCR, *Afghanistan Situation: Supplementary Appeal: July-December 2021*, August 2021. UNHCR, UNHCR

closures with neighboring countries continues to fluctuate. According to UNHCR, as of August 16, 2021, Iran and Pakistan had closed their borders, but the Pakistan border was reportedly open in at least one location as of August 17. The Taliban control exit points on the Afghanistan side of the borders. Although some sources indicate that tens of thousands of Afghans may have crossed international borders in recent weeks, no large-scale international displacement from Afghanistan has been observed.[182] Citing the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol as well as customary international law, UNHCR has called on all countries to allow civilians fleeing Afghanistan access to their territories, to support the right to seek asylum, and to ensure respect for the principle of non-refoulement (not to forcibly return refugees).[183] Iran and Pakistan already host over 2.6 million registered Afghan refugees (roughly 85% of all Afghan refugees.)[184]

What are the implications of the Taliban's takeover for counternarcotics?[185]

Afghanistan is among the world's most significant sources of illicit drugs, particularly opiates. According to U.S. and U.N. estimates, more than 80% of the world's heroin supply originates in Afghanistan.[186] In 2020, an estimated 215,000 hectares of opium poppy was cultivated in Afghanistan—most of which was harvested in areas under Taliban influence or control.[187] Afghanistan is also a major source of methamphetamine and cannabis products (e.g., hashish or cannabis resin). The illicit drug trade, just one component of a broader—and thriving—informal economy in which the Taliban have long operated, is a major source of revenue for the Taliban; it is also vital as a driver of employment for agricultural workers in opium poppy cultivation regions of Afghanistan. Opiates have taken a public health toll on the Afghan population, as the country has reported some of the world's highest substance abuse rates in recent years.[188]

Uncertainty surrounds the question of what type of counternarcotics posture the Taliban intend to adopt. In 2000, following unsuccessful efforts in 1997 and 1999, the Taliban imposed a short-lived ban that dramatically decreased recorded opium poppy cultivation in 2001.[189] A Taliban spokesperson stated on August 17, 2021, that the Taliban envision an elimination of drug

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Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific, "External Update: Afghanistan Situation #2," August 16, 2021.

[182] UNHCR, "UNHCR Position on Returns to Afghanistan," August 2021. UNHCR, UNHCR Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific, "External Update: Afghanistan Situation #2," August 16, 2021.

[183] UNHCR, "UNHCR Position on Returns to Afghanistan," August 2021.

[184] Afghans have been displaced as refugees at different points of conflict over the past four decades. Their situation is one of the largest protracted refugee situations in the world. Since 2002, nearly 5.3 million Afghan refugees returned to Afghanistan under UNHCR's facilitated Voluntary Repatriation Program.

[185] This section was prepared by Liana Rosen, Specialist in International Crime and Narcotics.

[186] White House, Office of National Drug Control Policy, "The Office of National Drug Control Policy Releases Data on Afghanistan Poppy Cultivation and Potential Heroin Production," press release, July 16, 2021; U.S. Department of State, *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report*, Vol. 1: Drug and Chemical Control, March 2021, p. 86; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *World Drug Report*, Booklet 2: Global Overview, June 2021, p. 51; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *World Drug Report*, Booklet 3: Drug Market Trends, June 2021, pp. 68, 87.

[187] White House, Office of National Drug Control Policy, "The Office of National Drug Control Policy Releases Data on Afghanistan Poppy Cultivation and Potential Heroin Production," press release, July 16, 2021.

[188] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *World Drug Report*, Booklet 3: Drug Market Trends, June 2021, p. 108; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "UNODC Reports Major, and Growing, Drug Abuse in Afghanistan," press release, June 21, 2010.

[189] U.S. Department of State, "The Taliban And The Afghan Drug Trade," Fact Sheet, December 20, 2000; United Nations International Drug Control Programme, *Afghanistan: Annual Opium Poppy Survey 2001*, October 2001, p. 11.

production and smuggling in the country—and are seeking international assistance to achieve this goal.[190] Some question the credibility of such a posture, and anticipate the prospect of continued Taliban involvement in and reliance on the opium trade as a revenue source, particularly given its importance as a generator of labor-intensive employment and cash liquidity.[191] This may include profiting from the taxation of the movement of illicit drug-related products, such as the import of precursor chemicals required in the processing and production of heroin and methamphetamine. Even if the Taliban were to impose an effective ban on the illicit drug trade, revenue opportunities in the informal or grey-zone economy—through a wide range of taxation and extortion schemes—may likely persist or expand.[192]

Under former Presidents Ashraf Ghani and Hamid Karzai, the U.S. government spent billions of dollars supporting a wide range of capacity-building assistance, training, and mentoring projects for counternarcotics-related ministries, task forces, and law-enforcement units in Afghanistan; U.S. programs also sought to promote alternative licit livelihood options and address drug treatment and rehabilitation services, particularly for women and children.

Some additional questions that Congress may ask the executive branch include

- Whether to continue to support any, some, or all counternarcotics programming in Afghanistan;
- What consequences for human and economic security may result if counternarcotics donor funding to Afghanistan declines; and
- How the counternarcotics policy postures of regional actors, including China, Iran, and Russia, may evolve under the current circumstances.[193]

How might the Taliban takeover affect Afghanistan's relationships with the International Financial Institutions (IFIs)?[194]

Since rejoining the international community in 2002, Afghanistan has been an active member of IFIs. The World Bank committed $784 million to development projects in Afghanistan in 2021, and $5.3 billion to date.[195] As of December 2020, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) had extended around $500 million in loans and grants to Afghanistan.[196] Multilateral development bank (MDB) financing supports a wide range of endeavors. World Bank financing is largely

[190] Joanna Taylor, "Afghanistan 'will not be a country of cultivation of opium anymore', Taliban insists," *Independent* (UK), August 18, 2021.

[191] Jonathan Landay, "Profits and poppy: Afghanistan's illegal drug trade a boon for Taliban," Reuters, August 16, 2021.

[192] Graeme Smith and David Mansfield, "The Taliban Have Claimed Afghanistan's Real Economic Prize," *New York Times*, guest essay, August 18, 2021; United Nations Security Council, *Twelfth Report Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team*, S/2021/486, June 1, 2021, pp. 14-16; Graeme Smith, *Resource Flows and Political Power in Afghanistan, Overseas Development Institute*, November 2020. See also World Bank, *The Long Shadow of Informality: Challenges and Policies*, Franziska Ohnsorge and Shu Yu, eds., 2021, https://www.worldbank.org/en/research/publication/informal-economy.

[193] For past criticism, see Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Counternarcotics: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, SIGAR-18-52-LL, June 14, 2018; see also Tia Sewell, "Where's the U.S. Strategy for Counternarcotics in Afghanistan?," Lawfare, November 18, 2020.

[194] This section was prepared by Martin Weiss, Specialist in International Trade and Finance.

[195] The World Bank in Afghanistan, https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/afghanistan/overview.

[196] Asian Development Bank Member Fact Sheet, June 2021, https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/27747/afg-2020.pdf.

focused on governance efforts, including macro-fiscal policy and management; finance, private investment, and job creation; public sector governance and anti-corruption; human capital development and service delivery; citizen engagement and social inclusion; urban development and infrastructure; connectivity; and sustainability. ADB financing is focused primarily on large infrastructure projects. Both development banks are also providing Afghanistan COVID-19-related support, such as financing to construct hospitals and train staff.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) agreed to a $370 million COVID-19 relief program for Afghanistan in November 2020. Afghanistan also benefitted from the IMF's disbursement of about $220 million under the Fund's Rapid Credit Facility and debt-service relief of about $10 million under a special trust fund. Additionally, Afghanistan is eligible to receive a proportionate share of the recently agreed $650 million Special Drawing Rights (SDR) allocation that is designed to bolster the foreign exchange reserves of member countries.[197] The allocation is scheduled to be distributed to member states on August 23, 2021. Under the allocation, Afghanistan would receive around $434 million of SDRs, based on its 0.07% quota in the IMF, bringing its total SDR allocation up to about $653 million.

A key issue is whether the IMF and the MDBs recognize the Taliban as the official government of Afghanistan. While IFI charters are explicit about the requirements for a country's membership, they are largely silent on the issue of representation, leaving the decision to its member countries.[198] On August 18, IMF Press Secretary Gerry Rice released a statement that, "[t]here is currently a lack of clarity within the int'l community regarding recognition of a government in Afghanistan, as a consequence of which the country cannot access SDRs or other IMF resources."[199] The United States was also reportedly negotiating to pause the SDR allocation to Afghanistan.[200] Some Members of Congress have expressed their concern about Afghanistan's SDR allocation. On August 17, 2021, Representative French Hill and 17 other lawmakers wrote to Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen urging the United States to intervene and help prevent Afghanistan from accessing any IMF resources.[201]

What Afghan central bank assets did the Biden Administration put on hold, and what are the potential implications?[202]

Afghanistan's central bank (Da Afghanistan Bank) held about $9.5 billion in international reserves, according to a June 2021 IMF assessment.[203] Most of the central bank's reserves are held outside of Afghanistan. According to the end-2020 central bank balance sheet, $1.3 billion in gold was held at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York; $3.2 billion was deposited in foreign banks; and $4.2 billion in investments (mostly U.S. government securities) was managed by the

[197] CRS In Focus IF11835, *International Monetary Fund: Special Drawing Rights Allocation*, by Martin A. Weiss and Rebecca M. Nelson

[198] Alison Duxbury, *The Participation of States in International Organisations* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 20.

[199] Gerry Rice (@IMFSpokesperson), Twitter, August 18, 2018, available at https://twitter.com/IMFSpokesperson/status/1428096013374410752

[200] Chris Giles, Jonathan Wheatley, and Colby Smith, et al., "Afghanistan faces 'dire' financial outlook, warns former central bank chief," *Financial Times*, August 18, 2021.

[201] The letter is available at https://hill.house.gov/uploadedfiles/20210817ltrtosecyellenresdrstoafghanistan.pdf.

[202] This section was prepared by Rebecca Nelson, Specialist in International Trade and Finance.

[203] International reserves are gold and assets (such as cash, bank deposits, and government securities) denominated in major foreign currencies, such as dollars and euros.

Federal Reserve Bank of New York, the World Bank, and the Bank for International Settlements. On August 15, 2021 the Biden Administration put a hold on Afghan government reserves held in U.S. bank accounts.[204] The status of the central bank's holdings of physical foreign-currency banknotes—about $400 million held primarily at the presidential palace and the central bank's head office—is unclear.[205] The central bank's former Acting Governor, Ajmal Ahmady, who fled Kabul, estimated on social media that the funds accessible to the Taliban are 0.1%-0.2% of Afghanistan's total international reserves.[206]

Inability to access international reserves will likely complicate the Taliban's ability to manage the economy. Afghanistan's currency, the afghani, is trading at record lows, and the currency depreciation is expected to fuel inflation. To tame inflation, the Taliban may restrict money leaving the country (impose capital controls). A mix of capital controls and inflation creates a bleak economic outlook for the Afghan people. Further, the Taliban's capacity to manage the economy is questionable: according to the former acting central bank governor, the Taliban are asking central bank staff about the location of the reserves, suggesting weak economic expertise.[207]

Some additional questions that Congress may ask the executive branch include

- How do U.S. government officials and outside experts assess Afghanistan's short- to medium-term economic prospects?
- How prepared are the Taliban to administer key economic institutions and maintain critical infrastructure?
- How might economic collapse affect the security and stability of the country and the potential for mass displacement? How might these considerations shape U.S. decisions about sanctions and U.S.-imposed controls on Afghan state assets?
- Arguable points of possible U.S. leverage over the Taliban include development assistance; sanctions (either new ones or relief from existing sanctions); holds on Afghan central bank reserves; and extension of formal recognition. Which of these are the most and least effective?

What is the status of the COVID-19 pandemic in Afghanistan and what are the implications of the Taliban takeover for COVID-19 control and vaccine distribution?[208]

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), Afghanistan has weak health systems and significant disparities in access to health care, worsened by protracted conflict in the country, and this adversely affects the government's ability to respond to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.[209]

[204] Jeff Stein, "Biden Administration Freezes Billions of Dollars in Afghan Reserves, Depriving Taliban of Cash," Washington Post, August 17, 2021.

[205] JP Koning, "What Happens to the Afghanistan Central Bank's Assets?," Moneyness Blog, August 17, 2021.

[206] Ajmal Ahmady, Twitter, August 18, 2021, https://twitter.com/aahmady/status/1427883023123558400.F

[207] Angela Cullen, "Afghanistan's Central Bank Chief Explains Why Capital Controls Are Coming," *Bloomberg*, August 18, 2021.

[208] This section was prepared by Sara Tharakan, Analyst in Global Health and International Development.

[209] WHO: Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, *Afghanistan: Health Systems Profile*, 2015. From Afghanistan to South Sudan: how WHO and partners continue to fight COVID-19 around the world, *WHO*, February 5, 2021.

In July 2021, Afghanistan faced a third wave of COVID-19 cases, likely caused by the Delta variant.[210] As of August 16, 2021, Afghanistan reported roughly 150,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 7,000 deaths from the disease.[211] Public health responders in the country believe the true figures are likely several times higher due to low testing rates and lack of a national death registration system.[212] The country's COVID-19 response earlier in the pandemic was reportedly hampered by vaccine hesitancy and misinformation, mistrust of the government, and stigma around the disease.[213]

As of August 17, 2021, approximately 1.8 million COVID-19 vaccines had been administered in Afghanistan, covering roughly 2.4% of the country's population.[214] As COVID-19 deaths have increased, front-line health workers have reported an increase in vaccinations. As of mid-August 2021, Afghanistan was in phase one of its vaccination campaign, and was vaccinating front-line healthcare workers, media personnel, teachers, and its security and defense forces.[215]

Since the beginning of the pandemic, WHO, UN agencies, and Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, have worked with the country's Ministry of Health on the COVID-19 response, including by helping to strengthen laboratory capacity and training vaccinators to deploy the COVID-19 vaccine.[216] WHO reports that its work builds on routine health care activities in the country, such as polio immunization campaigns and health systems capacity strengthening.[217]

Recent fighting has reportedly further weakened health systems in the country, and hindered COVID-19 response.[218] According to press reports, the events at the Kabul airport that followed the Taliban takeover hampered delivery of medical supplies and contributed to shortages of personal protective equipment (PPE) and COVID-19 vaccinations, among other things.[219] WHO has warned that insecurity could harm COVID-19 control and vaccination campaigns. In August, WHO spokesperson Tarik Jasarevic stated, "As the situation in Afghanistan continues to deteriorate rapidly, WHO is extremely concerned over the unfolding safety and humanitarian needs in the country, including risk of disease outbreaks and rise in COVID-19 transmission."[220] COVID-19 rapid response teams in Kabul ceased operations on August 16-17 due to the ongoing insecurity.[221]

The implications of the Taliban's takeover, for both Afghan health systems and prospects for COVID-19 control, remain to be seen. WHO and UN agencies have committed to long-term operations in the country, including delivering polio and COVID-19 immunizations (Afghanistan

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[210] Diaa Hadid, "A Crippling 3rd Wave Of COVID Adds To Afghanistan's Woes," *NPR*, July 3, 2021.

[211] WHO, *COVID-19 Dashboard*, August 17, 2021.

[212] Diaa Hadid, op. cit.,

[213] Ibid.

[214] WHO, *COVID-19 Dashboard*, August 17, 2021. "COVID-19 Tracker: Afghanistan," *Reuters*, August 17, 2021.

[215] Ibid.

[216] Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, *Resourceful Optimism: Fighting COVID-19 in Afghanistan*, April 20, 2021.

[217] WHO, *WHO continues fight against pandemic amid worsening global public health emergency and uneven vaccine rollout*, July 20, 2021.

[218] UN News, *Afghanistan: UN agencies urge Taliban to make good on promises to protect vulnerable*, August 17, 2021.

[219] "WHO concerned about COVID-19 in Afghanistan as jabs slow," Reuters, August 17, 2021.

[220] UN News, *Afghanistan: UN agencies urge Taliban to make good on promises to protect vulnerable*, August 17, 2021. Emma Farge and Emma Thomasson, "WHO concerned about COVID-19 in Afghanistan as jabs slow," *Reuters*, August 17, 2021.

[221] Ibid.

is one of the last countries where polio is endemic).[222] Historically, the Taliban has opposed vaccines, including reportedly committing attacks on health workers providing polio vaccines. In earlier waves of the pandemic, they reportedly assisted domestic and international efforts to combat COVID-19.[223] Some observers dismissed the Taliban's response to earlier waves of the pandemic as not representative and charged that the Taliban's escalation of violence since 2019 was the main factor impeding the country's response to the pandemic.[224] WHO officials have warned that Taliban attacks on health care workers remain a challenge, and have cautioned that going forward, large numbers of internally displaced persons will foster conditions for increased COVID-19 transmission.[225] Given these factors, it is unclear whether to, and what extent, any new government formed by the Taliban would assist in COVID-19 control and vaccination campaigns.

How have regional countries reacted to the Taliban's takeover?[226]

Russia. Russia's response to the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan has included expressions of both satisfaction and concern. On the one hand, Russian officials and commentators have expressed some satisfaction at the rapid collapse of Afghanistan's government and military after twenty years of U.S. support. Some have framed the outcome as "America's failure" and contrast it to what they characterize as Russia's prudent outreach to the Taliban in recent years.[227] At the same time, Russian authorities have long been concerned about instability in Afghanistan and the potential spread of radical Islam, drugs, and refugees throughout the neighboring Central Asia region and into Russia.[228]

Initial Russian statements suggest the Russian government seeks to build constructive relations with the Taliban while encouraging them to avoid rule by terror and other human rights abuses as they consolidate power. Russian officials have said they have no intention of evacuating the

[222] WHO, *Statement on Afghanistan by Dr Ahmed Al-Mandhari, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean*, August 18, 2021.

[223] See Ashley Jackson, "For the Taliban, the Pandemic is a Ladder," *Foreign Policy*, May 6, 2020, and "The Taliban are joining Afghanistan's fight against covid-19," *Economist*, May 9, 2020. Abdul Qadir Sediqi and Orooj Hakimi, "Coronavirus makes Taliban realise they need health workers alive not dead," Reuters, March 18, 2020. Ruchi Kumar, "Taliban launches campaign to help Afghanistan fight coronavirus," Al Jazeera, April 6, 2020.

[224] Ashley Jackson, "For the Taliban, the Pandemic is a Ladder," *Foreign Policy*, May 6, 2020.

[225] WHO, *Statement on Afghanistan by Dr Ahmed Al-Mandhari, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean*, August 18, 2021.

[226] This section was prepared by Cory Welt, Specialist in Russian and European Affairs; Andrew Bowen, Analyst in Russian and European Affairs; Caitlin Campbell, Analyst in Asian Affairs; Chris Blanchard, Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs; Ken Katzman, Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs; and Clayton Thomas, Analyst in Middle Eastern Affairs.

[227] Mark Galeotti, "Moscow Watches Kabul's Fall with Some Satisfaction, Much Concern," *Moscow Times*, August 16, 2021; Felix Light and Pjotr Sauer, "Chaos Engulfs Kabul, Russia Says It's Ready to Work with the Taliban," *Moscow Times*, August 16, 2021; and Julia Davis, "Russia Is 'Enjoying' America's Failure—and Cozying Up to the Taliban," *Daily Beast*, August 16, 2021.

[228] Nurlan Aliyev, "How Russia Views Afghanistan Today," *War on the Rocks*, October 19, 2020; Tom Balmforth and Gabrielle Tetrault-Farber, "For Russia, U.S. Afghan Exit Creates Security Threat on Southern Flank," Reuters, July 8, 2021; Robyn Dixon, "Why Afghanistan's Growing Chaos Alarms Leaders from Tajikistan to Russia," *Washington Post*, July 9, 2021; and Kathy Gannon, Vladimir Isachenkov, and Mstyslav Chernov, "Russia: Afghan Instability Heightens with Hasty U.S. Retreat," Associated Press, July 16, 2021.

Russian embassy in Kabul and that Taliban forces have pledged to provide security for Russia's embassy and personnel.[229] The Russian ambassador to Afghanistan remarked that the current situation in Kabul "is better than it was under Ashraf Ghani."[230] At the same time, Russian authorities say that Russia will continue to consider the Taliban a terrorist organization, until all members of the United Nations Security Council conclude otherwise.[231]

In recent years, Russian authorities have increased their political and intelligence connections to the Taliban, as well as to other local power brokers in Afghanistan.[232] Russia has been party to numerous peace talks and consultations involving a variety of actors, including the Taliban, aimed at securing a negotiated political settlement to Afghanistan's civil conflict. Reports indicate Russia's outreach to the Taliban began years ago, including clandestine political and intelligence contacts and, potentially, military assistance.[233]

In 2020, media reports stated that U.S. intelligence had uncovered information that Russia's military intelligence agency (the GRU) had offered payments, or "bounties," to Taliban-linked militants to attack U.S. and other international forces in Afghanistan.[234] U.S. intelligence agencies reportedly differed in their level of confidence concerning the accuracy of the intelligence and the direct role of the Kremlin in authorizing bounties, but they reportedly shared "high confidence" in the existence of "strong ties ... between Russian operatives and the Afghan network where the bounty claims arose."[235]

Prior to the Taliban's takeover, Russia began planning for contingencies by bolstering its military and security posture in neighboring Central Asia.[236] With regional military bases and its leadership of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Russia acts as the primary security guarantor in Central Asia against spillover from Afghanistan.[237] In recent months, Russia has bolstered its military presence in Central Asia, including by modernizing its forces in Tajikistan (Russia has an estimated 7,000 troops at the 201st Military Base in Dushanbe), increasing coordination among CSTO members, and conducting multiple military exercises.[238]

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[229] Yana Pashaeva, "Will Russia and the Taliban Become Friends?" *Slate,* August 19, 2021. https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2021/08/taliban-afghanistan-russia.html

[230] Andrew Osborn, "Russia Says Kabul Seems Safer Under Taliban Than It Was Under Ghani," Reuters, August 16, 2021.

[231] Nastassia Astrasheuskaya and Stephanie Findlay, "Russia Seeks to Forge Ties with Taliban as US Troops Leave Afghanistan," *FT,* July 27, 2021; and Anton Troianovski, "Russian Officials Are Staying in Kabul, Saying They Have Nothing to Fear as Others Race to Leave," *New York Times,* August 16, 2021.

[232] TASS Russian News Agency, "Taliban Delegation Is Currently in Moscow, Representative Says," July 8, 2021; TASS Russian News Agency, "Talks with the Kremlin Are Necessary, Says Kremlin," July 9, 2021; and Maxim Suchkov, "Russia's 'Troubleshooting Tactics' with the Taliban," Middle East Institute, July 14, 2021.

[233] Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "Russia is Sending Weapons to Taliban, Top U.S. General Confirms," *Washington Post,* April 24, 2017; and Mujib Mashal and Michael Schwirtz, "How Russia Built a Channel to the Taliban, Once an Enemy," *New York Times,* July 13, 2020.

[234] Information was gained through captured Afghan militants and financial records which indicated connections between the GRU and Taliban-linked networks. Charlie Savage, Eric Schmitt, and Michael Schwirtz, "Russia Secretly Offered Afghan Militants to Kill U.S. Troops, Intelligence Says," *New York Times,* June 26, 2020.

[235] Charlie Savage, Eric Schmitt, and Michael Schwirtz, "Russian Spy Team Left Traces that Bolstered CIA's Bounty Judgement," *New York Times,* May 7, 2021.

[236] Dan De Luce, "Bounties or Not, Russia Has Worked to Expand its Clout in Afghanistan as the U.S. Eyes an Exit," *NBC News,* June 30, 2020.

[237] Vusula Abbasova, "Russia Pledges Military Assistance to Central Asian Allies," *Caspian News,* July 31, 2021;

[238] Reuters, "Russia to Reinforce Military Base in Tajikistan," July 21, 2021; *Moscow Times*, "Russia to Boost Tajikistan Army Amid Afghanistan 'Deterioration,'" July 28, 2021; Vladimir Isachenkov, "Russia, Central Asian

China (People's Republic of China; PRC). China's leaders likely fear unmoderated Taliban control of Afghanistan will enable the spread of terrorism in the region and harm China's security interests. China nevertheless likely will try to foster friendly ties with the Taliban in an attempt to influence the group's activities in ways that protect China's interests.[239] The Taliban's takeover has afforded the People's Republic of China an opportunity to criticize the United States and question Washington's credibility with allies and partners.[240]

After the Taliban proclaimed victory, China's government sent a strong signal that it intends to treat the organization as the legitimate government of Afghanistan. Stopping short of formally recognizing it as such and reiterating the PRC's proclaimed foreign policy principle of "non-interference in external affairs," on August 16, 2021, a PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson remarked, "We hope the Afghan Taliban can form solidarity with all factions and ethnic groups in Afghanistan, and build a broad-based and inclusive political structure."[241] The spokesperson cited and welcomed multiple recent Taliban statements relevant to China's interests. These included statements that it would protect foreign missions in the country, support positive relations with China (including China's participation in reconstruction and development in the country), and—perhaps most importantly to China's leaders—prevent Afghan territory from being used to engage in terrorist acts against China.[242]

PRC leaders and experts have long been concerned that Afghanistan-based terrorists pose a "direct threat" to China's national security.[243] Afghanistan shares a mountainous 47-mile-long

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Allies Hold Drills Near Afghanistan," Associated Press, August 10, 2021; and *RFE/RL*, "Russia Wraps Up Drills With Uzbek and Tajik Troops Near Afghan Border," August 11, 2021.

[239] In recent years, and especially since 2019, Beijing has increased engagement with the Taliban as it became apparent that the group would remain a major political and military force in Afghanistan and as China sought to establish a facilitator role for itself in the Afghan reconciliation process. Jason Li, "China's Conflict Mediation in Afghanistan," Stimson Center, August 16, 2021, at https://www.stimson.org/2021/chinas-conflict-mediation-in-afghanistan/?utm_source=Stimson+Center&utm_campaign=9d5166cab8-RA%2FComms%2FAsia+Digest+August&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_15c3e20f70-9d5166cab8-403780106.

[240] Yue Xiaoyong, China's special envoy for Afghan affairs, called the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan "hasty and irresponsible" and other PRC officials and media have offered scathing critiques of the United States. A spokesperson for China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs remarked on August 17, 2021: "The U.S launched the Afghan War in the name of counterterrorism. But has the U.S. won? After 20 years, the number of terrorist organizations in Afghanistan has grown to more than 20 from a single digit. Has the U.S. brought peace to the Afghan people? For 20 years, more than 100,000 Afghan civilians have been killed or wounded in the gunfire of U.S. troops and its ally forces, and more than 10 million people have been displaced.... Wherever the U.S. sets foot, be it Iraq, Syria or Afghanistan, we see turbulence, division, broken families, deaths and other scars in the mess it has left. The U.S. power and role is destructive rather than constructive." CGTN, "Chinese diplomat: U.S. bears 'inescapable responsibility' for Afghanistan's situation," August 14, 2021, at https://news.cgtn.com/news/2021-08-14/U-S-bears-inescapable-responsibility-for-Afghanistan-s-situation-12IphvoB6Mg/index.html; PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on August 17, 2021," August 17, 2021, at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1900083.shtml.

[241] The spokesperson further noted, "China respects the Afghan people's right to decide on their own future independently. We are ready to continue to develop good-neighborliness and friendly cooperation with Afghanistan and play a constructive role in Afghanistan's peace and reconstruction." PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on August 16, 2021," August 16, 2021, at http://www.china-un.ch/eng/zgyw/t1899785.htm.

[242] China has maintained contacts with the Afghan Taliban to varying degrees over the decades with the goal of securing commitments from the organization that it would not engage in or otherwise support terrorist acts against China. The PRC engaged more closely with the Taliban starting in the mid-2010s amid reconciliation efforts between the Afghan government and the Taliban. Andrew Small, *The China-Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics*, Oxford University Press, 2015, p. 128; Andrew Small, "Why Is China Talking to the Taliban?" *Foreign Policy*, June 21, 2013, at https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/06/21/why-is-china-talking-to-the-taliban/.

[243] PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Wang Yi Meets with Head of the Afghan Taliban Political Commission Mullah

border with China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, which is home to most of China's predominantly Muslim Uyghur ethnic group.[244] Since 2009, Xinjiang has been the site of intensive security measures—including arbitrary mass internment—by the PRC to combat "terrorism, separatism and religious extremism" in response to Uyghur demonstrations, ethnic unrest, and scattered violent incidents purportedly carried out by Uyghurs.[245] Chinese leaders fear terrorist groups operating out of Central Asia and Afghanistan either harbor Uyghur terrorists or support Uyghur terrorist groups.[246] Chinese officials have asked the Taliban to "make a clean break with" the East Turkistan Islamic Movement, a small group that seeks to establish an independent Islamic state for the Uyghurs.[247] Chinese leaders also fear a resurgent Afghan Taliban may empower and embolden regional terrorist groups—including the Pakistani Taliban, which claimed responsibility for an April 2021 car bombing of a Pakistan hotel minutes before the PRC ambassador to the country was scheduled to arrive.[248] The hotel bombing was one of three attacks reported to target, injure, or kill PRC nationals in Pakistan since April.[249]

Iran. Iran opposed the Taliban while the group was formerly in power, with the two sides nearly coming into direct conflict in 1998 when the Taliban killed ten Iranian diplomats in northern Afghanistan. Iran later helped U.S. officials establish the post-Taliban Afghan government in 2001,[250] but, despite its consistent wariness of Taliban intent, Iran has had diplomatic contacts with the Taliban for nearly a decade and appears to be seeking accommodation with the group. Iranian officials have met with the Taliban numerous times since 2018, including hosting a senior Taliban delegation in Tehran in February 2021. U.S. officials have also alleged that the Taliban have received arms and other support from Iran.[251] Iran's interests in Afghanistan include preserving its historic influence in western Afghanistan, protecting Afghanistan's Shia minority (the Hazaras), and reducing the flow of refugees into Iran (Iran hosts millions of documented and undocumented Afghans).

Iran has reduced its diplomatic presence in Kabul in response to the Taliban takeover, and may still be wary of the Taliban's aims. The Iranian government appears to view positively the

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Abdul Ghani Baradar," July 28, 2021, at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1895950.shtml.

[244] Uyghurs are a Turkic ethnic group who practice a moderate form of Sunni Islam.

[245] CRS In Focus IF10281, *China Primer: Uyghurs*, by Thomas Lum and Michael A. Weber.

[246] William Yang, "China Ready for 'Friendly Relations' with the Taliban," *Independent*, August 17, 2021; *Janka* Oertel and Andrew Small, "After the withdrawal: China's interests in Afghanistan," European Council on Foreign Relations, August 5, 2021.

[247] PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Wang Yi Meets with Head of the Afghan Taliban Political Commission Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar Wang Yi Meets with Head of the Afghan Taliban Political Commission Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar," July 28, 2021, at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1895950.shtml. The U.S. government designated the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) as a terrorist organization under Executive Order 13224 in 2002 (to block terrorist financing) and in 2004 placed ETIM on the Terrorist Exclusion List, which bars members of terrorist groups from entering the United States. In November 2020, the Trump Administration removed ETIM from the Terrorist Exclusion List, stating that "for more than a decade, there has been no credible evidence that ETIM continues to exist." In June 2021, however, United Nations sanctions monitors reported that ETIM has hundreds of fighters in Northeast Afghanistan and a larger presence in Idlib, Syria, and moves fighters between the two areas. CRS In Focus IF10281, *China Primer: Uyghurs*, by Thomas Lum and Michael A. Weber.

[248] Asif Shahzad, "Car bombing at hotel in southwest Pakistan kills 4, wounds 11," Reuters, April 21, 2021.

[249] Lucas Niewenhuis, "'Not the outcome China wanted': Why a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan makes Beijing anxious," SupChina, August 16, 2021, at https://supchina.com/2021/08/16/not-the-outcome-china-wanted-why-a-taliban-controlled-afghanistan-makes-beijing-anxious/.

[250] Barnett Rubin, "A New Look at Iran's Complicated Relationship with the Taliban," *War on the Rocks*, September 16, 2020.

[251] Ibid.

departure of U.S. troops from Afghanistan (which President Ebrahim Raisi characterized as a "defeat") and has called for national unity in Afghanistan.[252] Some have speculated that Iran, as it did during the 1990s, might again support Afghans in northern, western, and central Afghanistan against the Taliban, particularly if a Taliban-led government expresses hostility toward Tehran, but there are no indications of such Iranian support to anti-Taliban elements to date.[253]

Pakistan. Pakistan has played an active, and by many accounts negative, role in Afghan affairs for decades. Afghan leaders, along with some U.S. officials, have attributed some of the Taliban's power and longevity either directly or indirectly to Pakistani support, including Taliban safe havens within Pakistan.[254] Pakistan's security establishment, fearful of strategic encirclement by India, apparently continues to view the Afghan Taliban as a relatively friendly and reliably anti-India element in Afghanistan, though Pakistani officials say they lack leverage over the group. 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.[255]

The Trump Administration sought Islamabad's assistance in U.S. talks with the Taliban after 2018, and U.S. assessments of Pakistan's role have generally been more positive since. For example, Special Representative Khalilzad thanked Pakistan for releasing Baradar from custody in October 2018 and for facilitating the travel of Taliban figures to talks in Doha, and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin "expressed gratitude" to his Pakistani counterpart in March 2021 for Pakistan's "continued support for the Afghan peace process."[256]

Some see the Taliban's takeover as an unalloyed triumph for Pakistan: Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan said on August 16, 2021, that, "What is happening in Afghanistan now, they have broken the shackles of slavery."[257] Despite these and some other statements of apparent support from Pakistani figures, some question whether Pakistan's preferred outcome in Afghanistan is a Taliban-dominated government.[258] The Taliban (like past Afghan governments) have not accepted the Durand Line as Afghanistan's border with Pakistan, a potential flashpoint in future relations.

Though the influx of Afghan refugees that some Pakistanis feared would result from a Taliban takeover has yet to materialize, as of August 19, some express concern about the prospect that the takeover could empower the Tehreek-e Taliban e Pakistan (TTP) or Pakistani Taliban. TTP attacks, relatively few after Pakistani Army operations in 2014, resurged in 2021. The Afghan Taliban have, as part of their takeover, freed thousands of prisoners from Afghan government jails

[252] Maziar Motamedi, "US 'defeat' in Afghanistan a chance for peace: Iran president," *Al Jazeera*, August 16, 2021.

[253] Farzin Nadimi, "Iran Sets Its Eyes on Afghanistan," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, July 19, 2021.

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

[255] Pakistan, the United Nations, and others recognize the 1893 Durand Line as an international boundary, but Afghanistan does not. See Vinay Kaura, "The Durand Line: A British Legacy Plaguing Afghan-Pakistani Relations," Middle East Institute, June 27, 2017.

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

[257] Kadambini Sharma, "Taliban Has 'Broken Shackles of Slavery," Says Pak PM Imran Khan," NDTV, August 16, 2021.

[258] Michael Hirsh, "How Pakistan Could Become Biden's Worst Enemy," *Foreign Policy*, August 6, 2021; "China, Pakistan and Russia set to increase Afghanistan influence," *Guardian*, August 16, 2021.

including some high ranking TTP figures. The TTP, which is distinct from but has ties to the Afghan Taliban, praised the Afghan Taliban takeover as a "blessed victory."[259]

India. India's interests in Afghanistan are, chiefly, ensuring limits on the activity of Islamist terrorist groups that might threaten India (particularly in Kashmir) and, secondarily, securing connectivity with and access to Central Asia.[260] Like Iran and Russia, India supported the Northern Alliance against the Taliban in the 1990s and backed the elected post-2001 Afghan government (with significant development assistance), but reportedly established some backchannel communications with the Taliban in the past year.[261] India has now evacuated most of its personnel and closed most of its diplomatic operations in Afghanistan. The Taliban takeover is viewed from an Indian perspective largely through the prism of relations with Pakistan: some view the takeover as a boon for Pakistan and associated anti-India militants, while some forecast difficulties between Pakistan and a Taliban-led Afghanistan that could ease pressure on India.[262]

Gulf States. The Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf are longtime security partners of the United States and host U.S. forces at military bases on their territory, many of which have been used for U.S. operations in Afghanistan since 2001. The United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia were the two states that, along with Pakistan, recognized the pre-2001 Taliban government. It is unclear whether they or any other Gulf state would recognize a new Taliban-led government, and, if so, whether or how any future Gulf state relations with a Taliban government may affect U.S. use of Gulf bases to conduct counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan.

Gulf state officials are likely to consider how Taliban governance and security conditions in Afghanistan affect the threats posed by transnational terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda and the Islamic State. Humanitarian conditions in Afghanistan, the effects of the situation there on the government of Pakistan, and Taliban-Iran relations are other relevant considerations for Gulf policymakers. The UAE announced on August 18 that it had "welcomed" Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and his wife on "humanitarian grounds," possibly attracting Taliban ire. Qatar hosted U.S.-Taliban talks after 2018, continues to host senior Taliban leaders in Doha, and has supported U.S. and other international evacuation operations by allowing use of its military facilities and airspace. Saudi Arabia's Foreign Ministry released a statement on August 17 calling for all parties in Afghanistan to preserve life and property and declaring that "the kingdom stands with the choices that the Afghan people make without interference."

[259] Hannah Ellis-Petersen and Shah Meer Baloch, "Pakistan divided over success of Taliban in Afghanistan," *Guardian*, August 17, 2021.

[260] Suhasini Haidar, "Taliban gains complicate India's options," *The Hindu*, August 13, 2021.

[261] Abdul Basit, "Why ddi India open a backchannel to the Taliban?" *Al Jazeera*, July 7, 2021.

[262] Rahul Bedi, "Taliban and Pak delusions," *Tribune (India)*, August 18, 2021.

U.S. Military Operations: Status and Evacuation Efforts

What U.S. military operations are now being conducted in Afghanistan?[263]

There are three major operational actions ongoing in Afghanistan as of August 19, 2021. The first is the redeployment or repositioning of U.S. troops and capabilities that were once part of the NATO-led Resolute Support Mission (RSM) or Operation Freedom's Sentinel (OFS). On July 12, 2021, command of U.S. Forces-Afghanistan (USFOR-A) was transferred from General Scott Miller (USA) to CENTCOM Commander General Frank McKenzie (USMC).[264] On the ground, USFOR-A has a forward element in Kabul led by Navy Rear Admiral Peter Vasely.[265] Prior to the August 15, 2021, collapse of the Afghan government, between 650 and 1,000 U.S. troops were on the ground conducting withdrawal operations.[266] As part of the transition, U.S. security cooperation activities in support of the ANDSF were transferred from Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan (CSTC-A) to the Qatar-based Defense Security Cooperation Management Office- Afghanistan (DSCMO-A), led by Army Brigadier General Curtis Buzzard.[267] Given the recent collapse of the ANDSF, it is unclear what role DSCMO-A will play, if any.

The second major operational action is Operation Allies Refuge (OAR), which was initiated on July 17, 2021, to support relocation flights for Afghan nationals and their families eligible for Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs).[268] On August 12, 2021, in light of the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and Secretary of State Antony Blinken informed President Ghani that the United States would begin reducing its civilian footprint in Kabul, and would accelerate flights of SIV applicants.[269] The rapid collapse of the Afghan government and Taliban takeover of Kabul has, to many observers, underscored that plans to evacuate U.S. personnel and Afghan partners needed to be accelerated.

The Department of Defense also announced the commencement of Noncombatant Evacuation Operations (NEO) from Afghanistan. It is currently unclear whether NEO activities fall under OAR or whether they will instead be given a different operational designation.[270] At an August 18

[263] This section was prepared by Kathleen McInnis, Specialist in International Security, and Andrew Feickert, Specialist in Military Ground Forces.

[264] Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report: Security*, July 30, 2021, p. 49.

[265] Ibid.

[266] Deirdre Shesgreen, "US troops leave Bagram Airfield, suggesting full US withdrawal from Afghanistan is near, *USA Today*, July 2, 2021; John R. Kirby (@PentagonPressSec), Twitter, August 14, 2021, https://twitter.com/PentagonPresSec/status/1426655650499727367?s=20

[267] Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report: Security*, July 30, 2021, p. 49.

[268] U.S. Embassy in Afghanistan, *Operation Allies Refuge*, https://af.usembassy.gov/operation-allies-refuge/.

[269] U.S. Department of Defense, *Readout of Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III's Call With President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Ashraf Ghani*, August 12, 2021.

[270] U.S. Department of Defense, Secretary of Defense Austin and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Milley Press Briefing, August 18, 2021. https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2738086/secretary-of-defense-austin-and-chairman-of-the-joint-chiefs-of-staff-gen-mille/

press conference, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley stated that the NEO operation has five core tasks:[271]

- Establish and maintain security at the Kabul International Airport;
- Defend the airport from attack. Evacuate all American citizens from Afghanistan who desire to leave this country;
- Evacuate any third country national, or allies and partners as designated by the Secretary of State;
- Evacuate personnel with State Department-designated Special Immigrant Visas; and
- Evacuate any other evacuees that the State Department designates.

In support of OAR and U.S. withdrawal operations, DOD has announced that at least the following actions will, or have been, taken:[272]

- Three infantry battalions—two Marine Corps, one U.S. Army—would deploy to Hamid Karzai International Airport.[273]
    - The Marine units are from the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) and the Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force-Crisis Response (SPMAGTF-CR) assigned to U.S. CENTCOM. The Army unit is from the Minnesota National Guard.[274]
- The U.S. Air Force 621st Contingency Response Group at Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst deployed assist in running operations at Hamid Karzai International Airport.[275]
- A joint U.S. Army/Air Force support element of around 1,000 personnel would be sent to Qatar, and possibly to Afghanistan (or to other areas where Afghans will be processed) to facilitate the processing of SIV applicants.[276]
- One battalion of the 10th Mountain Division (U.S. Army) deployed to Kabul to assist with U.S. Embassy security.[277]
- Two battalions of the 82nd Airborne Division (U.S. Army) would be deployed to Afghanistan (it was previously announced that one of these battalions would be sent to Kuwait as a quick reaction force. The deployment of a second battalion was announced on August 16, 2021.)[278]

[271] Ibid.

[272] Jim Garamone, "DOD Deploys Forces to Protect Kabul Embassy Drawdown," *DOD News*, August 12, 2021.

[273] U.S. Department of Defense, *Secretary of Defense Austin and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen Milley Press Briefing*, August 18, 2021.

[274] U.S. Department of Defense, *Pentagon Press Secretary John F. Kirby Holds an Off-Camera Press Briefing*, August 18, 2021.

[275] Ibid.

[276] Jim Garamone, "DOD Deploys Forces to Protect Kabul Embassy Drawdown," *DOD News*, August 12, 2021.

[277] U.S. Department of Defense, *Secretary of Defense Austin and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen Milley Press Briefing*, August 18, 2021.

[278] Ibid; Robert Burns, Matthew Lee and Ellen Knickmeyer, "US sending 3K troops for partial Afghan embassy evacuation," *AP News*, August 12, 2021; U.S. Department of Defense, Pentagon Press Secretary John F. Kirby Holds an Off-Camera Press Briefing, August 16, 2021.

- A headquarters element of the 82nd Airborne Division (U.S. Army) is being deployed in support of efforts to secure Kabul International Airport (KAIA).[279]
- As of August 17, 2021, approximately 4,000 troops had arrived in Kabul as part of the surge of support for OAR and withdrawal operations.[280]

As in all cases, U.S. servicemembers have the right to self-defense if attacked. DOD still plans to complete the ongoing troop drawdown in Afghanistan by the end of August 2021.[281] It is unclear whether President Biden will shift that timeline given his statements regarding retaining U.S. forces in Afghanistan until all American citizens who choose to leave Afghanistan have been evacuated.[282]

Some additional questions that Congress may ask the executive branch include

- What kinds of contingency plans were developed for the collapse of the Afghan government and the need to evacuate U.S. personnel from Afghanistan? If such plans were developed, when did planning start and were plans approved by the Secretary of Defense?
- How will Congress and the executive branch review U.S. military and intelligence assessments and actions with regard to the events of August 2021? How if at all might the results of related findings be shared with the public?
- Does the U.S. Department of Defense intend to investigate the circumstances related to the U.S. military and intelligence assessments and actions associated with the events of August 2021?
- How does the current security situation in Afghanistan impact DOD's ability to conduct "over the horizon" counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan? What, precisely, does DOD mean by the term "over the horizon" counterterrorism operations, and what kinds of equipment, personnel, and capabilities are required to perform such missions? How might the conduct of those missions differ from U.S. counterterrorism missions under Operation Freedom's Sentinel?

What is the status of U.S. efforts to provide immigration relief to Afghans who assisted the U.S. government in the fight against the Taliban and other forces?[283]

As of the date of this report, there are two main ways that Afghan nationals can gain U.S. admission and obtain lawful permanent resident (LPR)[284] status based largely on the assistance they provided to the United States.

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[279] U.S. Department of Defense, *Pentagon Press Secretary John F. Kirby Holds a Press Briefing, Pentagon Press Secretary John F. Kirby; Major General Hank Taylor, Deputy Director of the Joint Staff For Regional Operations, J-35,* August 17, 2021.

[280] U.S. Department of Defense, *Pentagon Press Secretary John F. Kirby Holds a Press Briefing, Pentagon Press Secretary John F. Kirby; Major General Hank Taylor, Deputy Director of the Joint Staff For Regional Operations, J-35,* August 17, 2021.

[281] Ibid.

[282] Rachel Pannett, Erin Cunningham, Jennifer Hassan and Claire Parker, "U.S. troops will remain in Afghanistan until all American citizens are evacuated, Biden tells ABC News," *The Washington Post*, August 18, 2021.

[283] This section prepared by Andorra Bruno, Specialist in Immigration Policy.

[284] LPRs (also known as green card holders) can live permanently in the United States. Typically after five years, they

Special Immigrant Visas

Congress has enacted provisions to enable certain Afghans to obtain special immigrant visas (SIVs). Afghans apply for these SIVs on their own behalf and must provide required documentation. Individuals whose applications are approved and enter the United States on SIVs are granted LPR status upon admission.[285] As of June 30, 2021, a total of 75,000 Afghans (principal applicants and dependent spouses and children) had been granted special immigrant status under these provisions.[286]

The SIV provisions established two programs that include Afghans. One program, which is permanent, applies to Afghans who worked as translators or interpreters and meet other requirements. The other program, which is temporary, applies to Afghans who were employed by or on behalf of the U.S. government, or by the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), in Afghanistan and satisfy other requirements. The latter program is subject to a 14-step application process, which has been widely criticized for being bureaucratic, inefficient, and slow.[287]

President Biden's announcement that the United States would begin the final withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan in May 2021[288] heightened long-standing concerns of, and for, Afghan nationals who had assisted the U.S. government. In July 2021, after initially rejecting calls for an evacuation of these Afghans,[289] the State Department announced the arrival of "our first group of Afghan special immigrant applicants to the United States under Operation Allies Refuge."[290] In a joint statement on August 15, 2021, the Department of State and the Department of Defense said, "We will accelerate the evacuation of thousands of Afghans eligible for U.S. Special Immigrant Visas, nearly 2,000 of whom have already arrived in the United States over the past two weeks." The statement further noted: "For all categories, Afghans who have cleared security screening will continue to be transferred directly to the United States. And we will find additional locations for those yet to be screened."[291]

At an August 16, 2021, press briefing, the State Department spokesperson was asked how many Afghan SIV applicants would be relocated to the United States. He declined to provide a number, citing the fluidity of the situation.[292] Future relocations were also discussed at a Pentagon press

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can apply for U.S. citizenship, subject to applicable requirements.

[285] For additional information on Afghan SIVs, see CRS Report R43725, *Iraqi and Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Programs*.

[286] Links to Special Immigrant Visa Statistics as of June 30, 2021, are available from the U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs at https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/legal/visa-law0/visa-statistics/immigrant-visa-statistics.html.

[287] For further information, see CRS Report R43725, *Iraqi and Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Programs*.

[288] White House, *Remarks by President Biden on the Way Forward in Afghanistan*, April 14, 2021, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/04/14/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-way-forward-in-afghanistan/.

[289] U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, *Secretary Antony J. Blinken On CNN's State of the Union with Dana Bash*, press release, June 13, 2021, https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-on-cnns-state-of-the-union-with-dana-bash/.

[290] U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, *Arrival of First Flight of Operation Allies Refuge*, July 30, 2021, https://www.state.gov/arrival-of-first-flight-of-operation-allies-refuge/.

[291] U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, *Joint Statement from the Department of State and Department of Defense: Update on Afghanistan*, August 15, 2021, https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-from-the-department-of-state-and-department-of-defense-update-on-afghanistan/.

[292] See U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, *Department Press Briefing—August 16, 2021*, https://www.state.gov/briefings/department-press-briefing-august-16-2021/.

briefing that same day. After stating that 2,000 Afghan SIV applicants had already arrived in the United States, Garry Reid, director of the Department of Defense's Afghanistan Crisis Action Group, said that "USNORTHCOM [U.S. Northern Command] and the U.S. Army are working to create additional capacity." According to Reid, "At this point we're looking to establish 20—22,000 spaces. We can expand if we need to."[293]

U.S. Refugee Program

Individuals of any nationality can be considered for refugee admission to the United States. Among the applicable requirements, an individual must meet the definition of a refugee in the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA). The INA generally defines a refugee as a person who is outside his or her country and who is unable or unwilling to return because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.[294] Individuals who are admitted to the United States as refugees are granted refugee status. After one year in the United States in refugee status, individuals are required to apply to become LPRs.

To be considered for refugee resettlement in the United States, a foreign national must fall under a "processing priority." For example, Priority 2 (P-2) covers groups of special humanitarian concern to the United States. It includes specific groups that may be defined by their nationalities, clans, ethnicities, or other characteristics. P-2 groups are identified by the State Department in consultation with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and others. Of particular relevance to Afghans who have assisted the United States is a new P-2 group that was established in August 2021.[295]

The new P-2 group is for certain Afghan nationals and their family members (spouses and sons and daughters of any age). A State Department fact sheet describes this new P-2 program as providing a resettlement opportunity for "many thousands of Afghans and their immediate family members who may be at risk due to their U.S. affiliation but who are not eligible for a Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) because they did not have qualifying employment, or because they have not met the time-in-service requirement to become eligible." Also eligible for this P-2 program are "Afghans who work or worked for a U.S. government-funded program or project in Afghanistan supported through a U.S. government grant or cooperative agreement," and "Afghans who are or were employed in Afghanistan by a U.S.-based media organization or non-governmental organization."[296] Eligible Afghans must be referred to this program by a U.S. government agency or, in the case of a media organization or NGO, by the most senior U.S. citizen employee of that organization.[297]

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[293] U.S. Department of Defense, *Pentagon Press Secretary John F. Kirby Holds a Press Briefing*, August 16, 2021, https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2733523/pentagon-press-secretary-john-f-kirby-holds-a-press-briefing/. Although Reid referenced "refugee relocation" in his remarks, he seemed to be referring to capacity for Afghan SIV applicants. For example, he noted that the arrivals "will have been prescreened by the Department of Homeland Security to enter on a condition of full immigration processing once they arrive."

[294] INA §101(a)(42), 8 U.S.C. §1101(a)(42). For additional information on the U.S. refugee program, see CRS Report RL31269, *Refugee Admissions and Resettlement Policy*.

[295] U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, *U.S. Refugee Admissions Program Priority 2 Designation for Afghan Nationals*, August 2, 2021, https://www.state.gov/u-s-refugee-admissions-program-priority-2-designation-for-afghan-nationals/. This fact sheet describes the different processing priorities.

[296] Ibid.

[297] See U.S. Department of State, *Information for Afghan Nationals Regarding Priority 2 (P-2) Designation*, https://www.wrapsnet.org/documents/

A supplementary information sheet on this P-2 program highlights relevant issues for prospective applicants to consider. Among these considerations is that there is no U.S. refugee processing in Afghanistan or certain neighboring countries. Individuals who want to pursue refugee applications must travel to third countries and must do so at their own expense. This need to process refugee cases in third countries was discussed at an August 2, 2021 briefing with State Department officials. In response to a question about whether refugee applicants would be relocated like SIV applicants, an unnamed official said: "At this time, we do not anticipate relocating P-2 applicants prior to or during the application process. However, we continue to review the situation on the ground."[298]

Some additional questions that Congress may ask the executive branch include[299]

- How many Afghans qualify for SIVs and how many individuals and eligible family members have been able to leave Afghanistan and what plans are in place to allow other eligible Afghans to do so? What means were in place for persons who are not in Kabul? What plans were in place for the SIV program and how many visas had been processed prior to August 2021?
- What is the status of U.S. Refugee Admissions Program Priority-2 (P-2) designation for Afghan nationals and eligible family members? How many individuals have been able to leave Afghanistan under this program?
- What countries are accepting refugees from Afghanistan? What U.S. or international efforts are underway to allow civil society actors, women, journalists, educators, or many others whose work or identity may put them at risk under a Taliban government to leave the country?

How has the United States conducted the aerial evacuation?[300]

The U.S. military has utilized a number of cargo aircraft for the aerial evacuation of U.S. government personnel, U.S. civilian personnel and U.S. citizens, and certain other individuals departing Kabul. When performing airlift operations, aircraft are limited by the amount of weight they can carry for take offs and landings (called maximum takeoff weight and maximum landing weight).[301] These weight limits are intended to prevent structural damage to an aircraft. Based on these limitations, aircrews must balance the amount of cargo—or people—with the weight of the fuel. In addition, Air Forces Central Command (AFCENT) has advised aircraft that Hamid Karzai International Airport has extremely limited fuel quantities, and as a result aircraft should not refuel while on the ground.[302] Most U.S. cargo aircraft, however, have the ability to receive fuel while airborne from tanker aircraft, known as aerial refueling.[303] Aerial refueling allows cargo

Information%20for%20Afghan%20Nationals%20Regarding%20Priority%202%20(P-2)%20Designation.pdf.

[298] U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, *Briefing with Senior State Department Officials On the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program Priority 2 (P-2) Designation for Afghan Nationals*, August 2, 2021, https://www.state.gov/briefing-with-senior-state-department-officials-on-the-u-s-refugee-admissions-program-priority-2-p-2-designation-for-afghan-nationals/.

[299] Questions prepared by the CRS Foreign Affairs, Defense and Trade Division.

[300] This section was prepared by John Hoehn, Analyst in Military Capabilities and Programs.

[301] Typically maximum takeoff weight is equal to or greater than maximum landing weight because an aircraft will reduce its weight in transit by burning fuel.

[302] Defense Internet Notice to Airmen Service, August 17, 2021, https://www.notams.faa.gov/dinsQueryWeb/queryRetrievalMapAction.do?reportType=Raw&retrieveLocId=oakx&actionType=notamRetrievalbyICAOs.

[303] This includes the C-5, C-17, and C-130. It is unclear if the Marine Corps' KC-130 can refuel midair.

aircraft to load more cargo on the ground, trading off fuel against the maximum takeoff weight, ensuring the aircraft is able to get off the ground. In this approach, the cargo aircraft would then rendezvous with a tanker aircraft to receive additional fuel before proceeding on to its destination. The U.S. military is employing KC-135s and KC-10s tankers (**Figure 2**) to establish an *airbridge*—using aerial tankers to refuel aircraft midflight to extend an aircraft's range—to support air evacuations.[304]

Figure 2. KC-135 and KC-10 Aircraft Refueling Mid-Flight

Source: Joseph Trevithick, "Air Force Isn't Happy With Boeing's Plans To Fix The KC-46 Tanker's Troubled Vision System," TheDrive.com, January 31, 2020.

The U.S. military is primarily utilizing C-17 aircraft to transport personnel; other cargo aircraft such as the Marine Corps' KC-130, the Air Force's C-5, and the Air Force's C-130 have been utilized for personnel evacuation as well (**Figure 3**). The C-17 is reportedly able to transport approximately 102 troops or 170,900 pounds of cargo.[305] One C-17 reportedly carried over 600 passengers to Al Udeid airbase in Qatar.[306] DOD stated it intends to "ramp up to one flight out of Kabul per hour, a pace that could evacuate up to 5,000 to 9,000 people per day" at an August 17, 2021 press conference.[307] According to open source reporting tracking military aircraft flying to and from Kabul Airport, as of 5:45 a.m. August 17, 2021, the Air Force has utilized at least 40 C-17 aircraft (18% of the entire fleet), 19 C-130s, 2 C-5s, and other cargo platforms.[308] On August

[304] For a definition of an airbridge see Air Force Doctrine Publication 3-36, *Air Mobility Operations*, June 28, 2019, https://www.doctrine.af.mil/Portals/61/documents/AFDP_3-36/3-36-D25-Mobility-Refuel-Ops.pdf.

[305] Troop capacity is based on paratrooper operations, which implies the aircraft reaches space constraints instead of weight constraints. AFCENT, however, has stated that aircraft shall not refuel on the ground, implying if an aircraft is at maximum weight, it will need to refuel midair. U.S. Air Force, "C-17 Globemaster III Fact Sheet," press release, May 14, 2018.

[306] Tara Copp and Marcus Weisberber, "Inside Reach 871, A US C-17 Packed With 640 Afghans Trying to Escape the Taliban," *DefenseOne*, August 16, 2021.

[307] Based on these estimates of a flight per hour this would approximate to between 208 and 375 passengers per flight. Rebecca Kheel, "Pentagon aims to ramp up evacuation flights after Kabul airport chaos," *The Hill*, August 17, 2021.

[308] DefenceGeek. Twitter post. August 17, 2021, https://twitter.com/DefenceGeek/status/1427567174143692801.

18, 2021, General Mark Milley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, stated that the U.S. military was averaging 20 C-17 sorties every 24 hours with the ability to expand capacity if needed.[309]

Figure 3. C-130, C-5 and C-17 Comparison

Source: https://defense-arab.com/vb/threads/166318/.

Note: Two C-130 are pictured at the top, a C-5 in the middle, and a C-17 is pictured at the bottom.

What is the status of U.S. contractors and contract operations in Afghanistan?[310]

Overseas contingency operations in recent decades have highlighted the role that contractors play in supporting the U.S. military, both in terms of the number of contractor personnel and the work performed by these individuals.[311] Analysts have highlighted the benefits of using contractors to support the military. Some of these benefits include freeing up uniformed personnel to focus on military-specific activities; providing supplemental expertise in specialized fields, such as linguistics or weapon systems maintenance; and, providing a surge capability to quickly deliver critical support tailored to specific military needs. Just as the effective use of contractors can augment military capabilities, the ineffective use of contractors can prevent troops from receiving what they need when they need it and can potentially lead to wasteful spending. Some argue that

[309] Department of Defense, "Austin, Milley Say DOD Laser-Focused on Kabul Evacuation Mission," press release, August 18, 2021, https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/2737183/austin-milley-say-dod-laser-focused-on-kabul-evacuation-mission/.

[310] This section was prepared by Heidi Peters, Analyst in U.S. Defense Acquisition Policy.

[311] For past CRS analysis, see CRS Report R43074, *Department of Defense's Use of Contractors to Support Military Operations: Background, Analysis, and Issues for Congress*, by Heidi M. Peters.

contractors can also compromise the credibility and effectiveness of the U.S. military and undermine operations.[312]

In the February 2020 U.S.-Taliban agreement, the United States committed to withdrawing the "private security contractors" of the United States, its allies, and Coalition partners as part of the military withdrawal.[313] Although it is unclear if individual contractors in other mission categories were also subject to the same withdrawal commitment, an August 11, 2021, DOD press briefing indicated that at that time, DOD planned to continue to carry out some types of contract-based activities in Afghanistan, reportedly to include contract maintenance support for Afghan Air Force airframes.[314] The status of such plans in light of the Taliban takeover is unclear.

Since 2008, CENTCOM has published quarterly contractor census reports, which provide aggregated data–including figures on mission category and nationality–regarding contractors employed through DOD-funded contracts who are physically located within the CENTCOM area of responsibility (AOR), which includes Afghanistan.[315] The personnel counts included in quarterly contractor census reports should be used cautiously as they do not necessarily reflect the actual on-the-ground situation. In particular, in the report for the third quarter of FY2021, DOD indicated that the reported personnel counts for Afghanistan were derived from DOD information systems as of early June 2021, with the number of contract personnel in country subsequently "decreas[ing] due to ongoing redeployment and related drawdown activities in accordance with the President's direction."[316]

During the third quarter of FY2021, CENTCOM reported a total of 7,795 contractor personnel working for DOD in Afghanistan, down nearly 54% from the second quarter of FY2021.[317] In Afghanistan, as of the third quarter of FY2021, U.S. citizens accounted for about 34% of DOD's 7,795 reported individual contractors. Third-country nationals represented approximately 32% and local/host-country nationals (i.e., from Afghanistan) made up roughly 34%. After the collapse of the Afghan government, the number of third-country national and U.S. citizen contractor personnel remaining in country, if any, is unclear.

In Afghanistan, DOD has used armed and unarmed private security contractors to provide services such as protecting fixed locations; guarding traveling convoys; providing security escorts; and training police and military personnel. The number of private security contractor employees under contract with DOD in Afghanistan fluctuated significantly over time, depending on various factors. As of the third quarter of FY2021, DOD reported 1,356 security contractors in

[312] U.S. Government Accountability Office, "Operational Contract Support: Management and Oversight Improvements Needed in Afghanistan," GAO-12-290, March 29, 2012, p. 1-2.

[313] See Department of State, "Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America," February 29, 2020, at https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf.

[314] See Department of Defense, "Pentagon Press Secretary John F. Kirby Holds a Press Briefing," transcript, August 11, 2021, at https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2728440/pentagon-press-secretary-john-f-kirby-holds-a-press-briefing/.

[315] See CRS Report R44116, *Department of Defense Contractor and Troop Levels in Afghanistan and Iraq: 2007-2020*, by Heidi M. Peters.

[316] See Department of Defense, "Contractor Support of U.S. Operations in the USCENTCOM Area of Responsibility," July 2021, at https://www.acq.osd.mil/log/PS/.CENTCOM_reports.html/FY21_3Q_5A_Jul2021.pdf.

[317] See Department of Defense, "Contractor Support of U.S. Operations in the USCENTCOM Area of Responsibility," July 2021. Comparable historical or current data from the Department of State and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), or other executive branch agencies, are not routinely released to the public.

Afghanistan (down from 2,856 in the previous quarter), with 466 specifically categorized as armed private security contractors (compared to 1,520 in the previous quarter).[318]

At the time of the Taliban's takeover on August 15, 2021, obligations for all DOD-funded contracts performed within the Afghanistan area of operation between FY2011 and FY2020 totaled approximately $100.4 billion in FY2022 dollars, with an estimated additional $1.2 billion in FY2022 dollars obligated year-to-date in FY2021 for DOD-funded contracts performed within the Afghanistan area of operations.[319]

Standard federal procurement contract provisions offer options for modifying, changing, or terminating contracts. These provisions include, but are not limited to, clauses that allow contracting officers to modify or terminate an existing contract in response to changing circumstances.[320]

U.S. Military Withdrawal: Budgetary Implications

What will happen to U.S. funding provided for Afghanistan security forces?[321]

To date, U.S. defense officials have not stated how developments in Afghanistan may change their plans for the use of appropriated FY2021 or requested FY2022 Afghan Security Forces Funds (ASFF).

As part of the Department of Defense Appropriations Act, 2021 (Division C of P.L. 116-260), Congress provided $3.05 billion for the ASFF, to remain available until September 30, 2022. In May 2021, then-Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs David Helvey testified before the House Armed Services Committee that the department expected to continue supporting the ASFF after U.S. military personnel withdrew from the country, particularly salaries of the Afghan security forces, supplies and equipment for the ANDSF, and operations and functions of the Afghan Air Force and Afghan Special Mission Wing.[322]

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[318] See Department of Defense, "Contractor Support of U.S. Operations in the USCENTCOM Area of Responsibility," July 2021, and Department of Defense, "Contractor Support of U.S. Operations in the US CENTCOM Area of Responsibility, April 2021, at https://www.acq.osd.mil/log/PS/.CENTCOM_reports.html/FY21_2Q_5A_Apr2021.pdf.

[319] FY2021 figures include obligations during the period of October 1, 2020 through July 31, 2021. CRS adjustments for inflation using deflators for converting into FY2022 dollars derived from Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller), Department of Defense, *National Defense Budget Estimates for FY2022*, "Department of Defense Deflators–TOA By Category 'Total Non-Pay,'" Table 5-5, pp. 64-65, August 2021. See also the overview of "Analytical Methodology" for CRS Report R44116, *Department of Defense Contractor and Troop Levels in Afghanistan and Iraq: 2007-2020*, by Heidi M. Peters for a discussion of how CRS determines annual obligations associated with the Afghanistan area of operations.

[320] Federal procurement contracts generally must include some variation of a changes clause that allows contracting officers to modify existing contracts based on a change in government requirements (see Federal Acquisition Regulation [FAR] Subpart 43.2). In other instances, contracting officers can exercise the right to terminate a contract in whole or in part for the government's convenience if the U.S. government no longer requires the contracted goods or services (see FAR Part 49). See CRS Legal Sidebar LSB10428, *COVID-19 and Federal Procurement Contracts*, by David H. Carpenter for a discussion of legal options associated with the inability of a federal contractor to perform government procurement contracts as originally contemplated.

[321] This section was prepared by Brendan McGarry, Analyst in U.S. Defense Budget.

[322] *Congressional Quarterly*, "House Armed Services Committee Holds Hearing on Afghanistan," transcript, May 12, 2021. Given this testimony, the FY2022 DOD budget documentation does not explain why funding requested for ASFF was included in direct war costs (i.e., those that are not expected to continue once combat operations end at major

In the ASFF appropriation for fiscal year FY2021, Congress limited the obligation of such funds until the Secretary of Defense, in consultation with the Secretary of State, certifies in writing to the congressional defense committees "that such forces are controlled by a civilian, representative government that is committed to protecting human rights and women's rights and preventing terrorists and terrorist groups from using the territory of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States and United States allies."[323]

In justifying the $3.3 billion requested for ASFF in FY2022, the Department of Defense (DOD) stated that, given the planned withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan, the assistance was "even more important than previously to maintain the viability of the Afghan forces and strengthening the Afghan government leverage in negotiations to end the war on terms that preserve a democratic form of government."[324]

What has happened to U.S. military equipment and other personal property brought to, or purchased for use by, U.S. Forces in Afghanistan?[325]

In general, during an organized withdrawal of U.S. forces from an area of operations, there are two ordered processes by which DOD and the Military Services (hereinafter "Services") are to manage military equipment and other materiel (i.e., personal property[326]) *not organically assigned to a military unit*. These two processes are explained below.

- **Retrograde:** "The process for the movement of non-unit equipment and materiel from a forward location to a reset (replenishment, repair, or recapitalization) program or to another directed area of operations to replenish unit stocks, or to satisfy stock requirements."[327] Essentially, DOD-owned equipment that is still required to meet current and future military needs is returned to the United States or to an alternate location determined by the Services.
- **Disposition:** "The process of reusing, recycling, converting, redistributing, transferring, donating, selling, demilitarizing, treating, destroying, or fulfilling other end of life tasks or actions for DOD property. Does not include real (real estate) property."[328] DOD-owned equipment that is no longer needed (called

contingency locations) rather than in enduring operations (i.e., in-theater and stateside costs that will remain after combat operations end).

[323] House Committee Print 116-68, p. 389, at https://www.congress.gov/116/cprt/HPRT42770/CPRT-116HPRT42770.pdf.

[324] DOD, *Office of the Secretary of Defense, Department of Defense Budget Fiscal Year (FY) 2022, May 2021, Justification for the FY 2022 Afghanistan Security Forces Fund (ASFF)*, p. 7, at https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2022/FY2022_ASFF_Justification_Book.pdf.

[325] This section was prepared by G. James Herrera, Analyst in U.S. Defense Readiness and Infrastructure.

[326] DOD defines *personal property* as "property except real property. [This definition] excludes records of the Federal Government, battleships, cruisers, aircraft carriers, destroyers, and submarines." See DOD Manual 4160.21-V1, October 22, 2015 (Change 3, 10/02/2019), p. 90, available at https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodm/416021_vol1.pdf?ver=2019-10-02-080613-750#page=90.

[327] DOD, *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, Joint Chiefs of Staff, As of January 2020, p. 187, available at https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/dictionary.pdf#page=193.

[328] DOD, *DOD Manual (DODM) 4160.21 Defense Materiel Disposition: Disposal Guidance and Procedures*, Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment (USD(A&S)), Incorporating Change 3, October 2, 2019, p. 83, available at https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodm/416021_vol1.pdf?ver=2019-10-02-

> "excess" property), or is cost-prohibitive to transport (i.e., the transportation cost exceeds replacement value) is either demilitarized, destroyed and/or sold, or can be made available under various statutory authorities to certain foreign governments.

According to the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction Quarterly Report of July 30, 2021

> CENTCOM estimated it had completed more than half of the retrograde process by June 14, and more than 90% by July 5. This process included 984 C-17 transport aircraft loads out of Afghanistan, more than 17,000 pieces of equipment turned over to DLA [the Defense Logistics Agency] for disposition, and 10 facilities, including Bagram Airfield, handed over to Afghanistan's Ministry of Defense. Included in the retrograde are thousands of vehicles and other equipment, including over 400 pieces of rolling stock and more than 6,600 pieces of non-rolling stock. The two most expensive retrograded items were 14 air-defense artillery pieces valued at more than $144 million, and five "Enhanced Sentinel FMTVs (Family of Medium Tactical Vehicles)" valued at more than $16 million.[329]

Dispositioning of DOD-owned personal property in Afghanistan—largely through transfers to the Afghan government—is not the same process as procuring equipment with U.S. funds specifically for the ANDSF.[330] In the case of Afghanistan, the Afghan government and other partner nations have received dispositioned U.S. military equipment and materials to advance U.S. national security and foreign policy interests.[331] As of August 19, 2021, DOD has not published a public estimate of how much DOD-owned personal property has been destroyed or abandoned in Afghanistan or the amount of DOD-owned personal property remaining in Afghanistan. Much of this this equipment and material may now be in the hands of the Taliban, but exact quantities are not known.[332]

On August 17, U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said, "We don't have a complete picture, obviously, of where every article of defense materials has gone, but certainly a fair amount of it has fallen into the hands of the Taliban. And obviously, we don't have a sense that

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080613-750#page=83. DOD disposition activities are executed according to multiple statutory requirements and authorities, some broadly applicable, and others specific to Afghanistan for a specified period of time. For example, "defense articles" determined to be "non-excess" to DOD needs were available for transfer to the Afghan government pursuant to the authority and requirements in Section 1222 of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year (FY) 13 (P.L. 112-239). The term ''defense articles'' has the meaning given the term in Section 644(d) of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 (22 U.S.C. 2403(d)). See Section 1222 of P.L. 112-239. Other examples are the statutory requirements set forth under Title 40 United States Code (U.S.C.), Chapter 7—*Foreign Excess Property*, which provide the conditions by which foreign excess personal property, or FEPP, can be disposed of by federal executive agencies (see 40 U.S.C. §704).

[329] SIGAR Quarterly Report to Congress, July 30, 2021.

[330] For more information on U.S.-funded equipment and materiel for the ANDSF—which includes the Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP)—see Government Accountability Office (GAO) report GAO-17-667R *Afghanistan Security* (August 10, 2017), available at https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-17-667r.pdf.

[331] See *Military Equipment Transferred to the Afghan Government: DOD Did Not Conduct Required Monitoring to Account for Sensitive Articles*, Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), December 2020; Also, see DOD, "Pentagon Press Secretary John F. Kirby Holds an Off-Camera Press Briefing," Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby, August 18, 2021, available at https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2737434/pentagon-press-secretary-john-f-kirby-holds-an-off-camera-press-briefing/.

[332] Idrees Ali and Patricia Zengerle, Jonathan Landay, "Planes, guns, night-vision goggles: The Taliban's new U.S.-made war chest," Reuters Aerospace & Defense, August 19, 2021, available at https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/planes-guns-night-vision-goggles-talibans-new-us-made-war-chest-2021-08-19/.

they are going to readily hand it over to us at the airport."[333] On August 18, General Mark Milley stated that the U.S. government had unspecified "capabilities" relevant to U.S.-origin equipment seized by the Taliban.[334]

According to U.S. officials and press and social media reports, the Taliban have captured some equipment procured with U.S. funds for the ANDSF, including aircraft, ground vehicles, small arms, and ammunition. Fleeing ANDSF personnel reportedly took other equipment and arms to neighboring countries, including Iran, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan.[335]

Some additional questions that Congress may ask the executive branch include

- How will the fall of U.S. military equipment, supplies, munitions, and explosives into the hands of the Taliban affect U.S. security interests in and around Afghanistan?
- Is there potential for these items to be transferred to transnationally active terrorist groups? To U.S. adversaries and competitors?
- How might unemployed U.S.-trained personnel improve the capabilities of Taliban forces or other groups active in Afghanistan?

How much has DOD spent on withdrawing U.S. military and civilian personnel from Afghanistan?[336]

DOD has not released estimated or actual costs associated with withdrawing U.S. military personnel from Afghanistan.[337] In May 2021, the number of U.S. military personnel in the country reportedly totaled 3,500,[338] down from a high in FY2011 of approximately 100,000.[339] In 2017, the department stopped publicly reporting the number of U.S. military personnel deployed in support of operations in Afghanistan and certain other countries.[340] For FY2021, which ends September 30, 2021, DOD planned to spend $12.9 billion on *direct war costs* in Afghanistan and assumed an average annual troop strength of 8,600 U.S. military personnel in the country, according to the department's FY2022 budget documentation.[341] DOD describes direct war costs in part as "combat or combat support costs that are not expected to continue once combat

[333] White House, Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jen Psaki and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, August 17, 2021.

[334] Secretary of Defense Austin and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Milley Press Briefing, August 18, 2021.

[335] Haley Willis, Christiaan Triebert, Evan Hill, Brenna Smith and Dmitriy Khavin, "What Scenes From the Taliban's Victory in Afghanistan Reveal," *New York Times*, August 16, 2021; and, Alan Cullison and Gordon Lubold, "Some Afghan Military Members Fled Taliban Takeover in U.S.-Supplied Aircraft, *Wall Street Journal*, August 18, 2021.

[336] This section was prepared by Brendan McGarry, Analyst in U.S. Defense Budget.

[337] Missy Ryan and Karen DeYoung, "Biden will withdraw all U.S. forces from Afghanistan by Sept. 11, 2021," *The Washington Post*, April 13, 2021.

[338] See, for example, Thomas Gibbons-Neff, Eric Schmitt and Helene Cooper, "Pentagon Accelerates Withdrawal From Afghanistan," *The New York Times*, updated July 4, 2021.

[339] For more information, see CRS Report R44116, *Department of Defense Contractor and Troop Levels in Afghanistan and Iraq: 2007-2020*, by Heidi M. Peters.

[340] Ibid.

[341] DOD, *Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller)/Chief Financial Officer, May 2021, Defense Budget Overview, United States Department of Defense, Fiscal Year 2022 Budget Request*, p. 7-3, at https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2022/FY2022_Budget_Request_Overview_Book.pdf.

operations end at major contingency locations."[342] It is unclear how much of this funding, if any, has been used to date for withdrawing military and civilian personnel from Afghanistan.

How will the withdrawal of U.S. military personnel from Afghanistan impact the budget?[343]

Some Members of Congress and nongovernmental officials have discussed the possibility of not expending or redirecting funding after withdrawing U.S. military personnel from Afghanistan. The Chair of the House Armed Services Committee has said avoiding the expense of direct war costs in Afghanistan "on a year in and year out basis ... is going to give us greater flexibility—certainly over a five-year period.... If, come October 1, we're not in Afghanistan anymore that is going to save some amount of money."[344] Jim McAleese, a defense consultant, has reportedly said withdrawing U.S. military personnel from Afghanistan could potentially provide up to $21 billion of DOD funding for "currently under-resourced missions."[345]

How much funding might be unobligated or redirected is unclear, in part because DOD planned to fund activities in Afghanistan after withdrawing U.S. military personnel. Of the $42.1 billion requested for contingency operations in FY2022, DOD requested $8.9 billion for direct war costs in Afghanistan even though it assumed no U.S. military personnel in the country during FY2022.[346] The department's FY2022 budget documentation states in part, "Although the United States plans withdrawal from Afghanistan by September 11, 2021, there are residual costs in the FY 2022 budget, which include equipment reset and readiness, in-theater support, and operations/force protection."[347] The department includes in funds requested for direct war costs $3.3 billion for the ASFF. For the $5.6 billion in remaining funds requested for direct war costs in Afghanistan for FY2022, the department did not identify functional or mission categories for activities in or specifically related to Afghanistan. Similarly, of the $24.1 billion requested for "enduring theater requirements and related missions" in FY2022, DOD did not identify how much would be for activities in or specifically related to Afghanistan. It is unclear how the Taliban takeover might impact U.S. spending.

Possible Strategic-level Congressional Questions and Considerations

As of August 20, 2021, much of the national conversation on Afghanistan is focused on U.S. evacuation operations, debates over the U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan, and immediate and long-term concern for women and other at-risk communities. Yet the Afghanistan experience could provide the United States an opportunity to reflect upon, and learn from, its

[342] Ibid., p. 7-2.

[343] This section was prepared by Brendan McGarry, Analyst in U.S. Defense Budget.

[344] Representative Adam Smith, remarks during American Enterprise Institute webinar hosted by Mackenzie Eaglen, *A conversation with House Armed Services Committee Chairman Adam Smith: Priorities for the fiscal year 2022 defense budget*, April 22, 2021.

[345] Jim McAleese, as quoted in Bryan Bender, "Biden bucks the brass on Afghanistan," *Politico Pro* Morning Defense newsletter, April 15, 2021.

[346] DOD, *Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller)/Chief Financial Officer, May 2021, Defense Budget Overview, United States Department of Defense, Fiscal Year 2022 Budget Request*, p. 7-3, at https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2022/FY2022_Budget_Request_Overview_Book.pdf.

[347] Ibid., p. 7-2.

successes and failures in order to inform both policies elsewhere as well as the future of U.S. policy in Afghanistan. Such questions might include, but are not limited to

- To what extent was there a shared national consensus about the purposes and importance of U.S. military operations and foreign assistance in Afghanistan? How did that consensus, or the lack thereof, impact U.S. policy in Afghanistan?
- How did successive Administrations and Members of Congress inform the public about the goals, means, and outcomes of U.S. efforts? To what extent did these efforts result in the development of an informed national conversation about U.S. policy and consensus about the future of U.S. policy?
- To what extent were U.S. policies and strategies incongruent with on the ground realities? To what extent did such mismatches contribute to campaign disconnects and failures?
- What mechanisms did successive Congresses and Administrations use to review U.S. strategy, policy, and resources toward Afghanistan, assess progress, measure risks, and renew authorizations and appropriations? Were those mechanisms sufficient?
- How might U.S. government efforts be better coordinated and integrated across the elements of the interagency to greater effect on the ground?
- How did oversight mechanisms, including hearings, briefings, reporting requirements, and inspectors general, inform the development and implementation of U.S. policy toward Afghanistan? What indications did these mechanisms provide with regard to the strengths and weaknesses of the Afghan government and the effectiveness of U.S. military and civilian operations in Afghanistan?
- What do U.S. train and equip efforts in Afghanistan suggest about security cooperation enterprise more broadly? Where else might similar circumstances—corruption, dependence on the United States for critical enablers, and political factors—threaten the success of U.S. security cooperation efforts? How similar or dissimilar is the situation in Afghanistan to other large-scale security U.S. cooperation efforts in the Middle East and Africa?
- How have U.S. allies, partners, and adversaries perceived and responded to the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and the U.S. response to the August 2021 collapse of the Afghan government? What implications might these responses have for U.S. national security policy in the future?

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