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

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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 with a speed 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 U.S. military and diplomatic withdrawal and evacuation operation concluded on August 30, 2021, with the departure of U.S. forces from Afghanistan.

The fall of the elected Afghan government, which had been 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 for understanding the current situation in Afghanistan;
- The Taliban takeover and former 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;
- Evacuation of U.S. citizens and some Afghans; 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.

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## Background

### What are the origins of the Taliban and what was U.S. policy toward the Taliban before 9/11?<sup>1</sup>

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*.<sup>2</sup> 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.'" <sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

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 Zalmay Khalilzad, who later served as U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, wrote in his 2016 memoir, "I, like many, was optimistic about the Taliban" at the outset.<sup>5</sup> 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 Bamiyan 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*

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<sup>1</sup> This section was prepared by Clayton Thomas, Analyst in Middle Eastern Affairs.

<sup>2</sup> See Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (Yale University Press, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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.”<sup>7</sup> 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;<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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.”<sup>10</sup>

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.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>7</sup> Coll, *Ghost Wars*, p. 338.

<sup>8</sup> The 9/11 Commission Report, p. 64.

<sup>9</sup> The 9/11 Commission Report, pp. 66-67.

<sup>10</sup> The 9/11 Commission Report, p. 111.

<sup>11</sup> The 9/11 Commission Report, p. 125.

## Why did the United States initially deploy military forces to Afghanistan?<sup>12</sup>

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.”<sup>13</sup> Taliban leaders refused, citing bin Laden’s status as their guest.<sup>14</sup>

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.<sup>15</sup> 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?<sup>16</sup>

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.<sup>17</sup> 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.”<sup>18</sup> Congress supported the Bush Administration in this approach, authorizing and

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<sup>12</sup> This section was prepared by Clayton Thomas, Analyst in Middle Eastern Affairs.

<sup>13</sup> “Text: President Bush Addresses the Nation,” *Washington Post*, September 20, 2001.

<sup>14</sup> Steve Coll, *Directorate S: The CIA and America’s Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (Penguin Press, 2018), pp. 69.

<sup>15</sup> 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.

<sup>16</sup> This section was prepared by Clayton Thomas, Analyst in Middle Eastern Affairs.

<sup>17</sup> Khalilzad later wrote, “I am skeptical that the international community could have lured the Taliban to the table at Bonn.” Khalilzad, p. 121.

<sup>18</sup> “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.”<sup>19</sup>

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.<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup>

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. 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.”<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup> 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—four of them hold positions in the Taliban government announced on September 7, 2021.<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup> Preliminary U.S.-Taliban negotiations were constrained by U.S. policy to require the inclusion of the Afghan

<sup>19</sup> “Rumsfeld: Major combat over in Afghanistan,” CNN, May 1, 2003.

<sup>20</sup> 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.

<sup>21</sup> 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.

<sup>22</sup> Hillary Clinton, *Hard Choices* (Simon and Schuster, 2014), p. 152.

<sup>23</sup> See Coll, *Directorate S*, pp. 503-508, 578-585, 636-641.

<sup>24</sup> 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.

<sup>25</sup> 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).<sup>26</sup> 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?<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>) and reconstruction activities in Afghanistan.<sup>29</sup> (An obligation is a commitment for the payment of goods and services.)<sup>30</sup> 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.<sup>31</sup>

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.<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>33</sup>

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.<sup>34</sup> In addition to funding

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<sup>26</sup> Evan MacAskill and Simon Tisdall, “White House shifts Afghanistan strategy towards talks with Taliban,” *The Guardian* (UK), July 19, 2010.

<sup>27</sup> This section was prepared by Brendan McGarry, Analyst in U.S. Defense Budget.

<sup>28</sup> 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](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_113694.htm).

<sup>29</sup> DOD, *FY 2021 Quarter 2 Cost of War Update as of March 31, 2021*, on file with author.

<sup>30</sup> 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.”

<sup>31</sup> DOD, *FY 2021 Quarter 2 Cost of War Update as of March 31, 2021*, on file with author.

<sup>32</sup> Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, July 30, 2021.

<sup>33</sup> 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](https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2022/FY2022_Budget_Request_Overview_Book.pdf).

<sup>34</sup> 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.<sup>35</sup>

## When and why did the U.S. military withdrawal begin?<sup>36</sup>

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.<sup>37</sup> In June 2017, President Trump delegated to 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.<sup>38</sup> 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.<sup>39</sup>

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.”<sup>40</sup> U.S. force levels began to contract 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.<sup>41</sup>

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 non-diplomatic 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

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> This section was prepared by Clayton Thomas, Analyst in Middle Eastern Affairs, and Kathleen McInnis, Specialist in International Security.

<sup>37</sup> 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.

<sup>38</sup> Tara Copp, “Mattis signs orders to send about 3,500 more US troops to Afghanistan,” *Military Times*, September 11, 2017.

<sup>39</sup> 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.

<sup>40</sup> 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.

<sup>41</sup> 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.

The agreement also stated that up to 5,000 Taliban prisoners held by the Afghan government (which was not a party to the agreement) and up to 1,000 Afghan personnel captured by the Taliban “will be released” in March 2020. Per the agreement, intra-Afghan negotiations were also to begin that month, but talks remained unscheduled for months amid political gridlock in Kabul and disagreements over the prisoner release. The parties to the conflict completed the prisoner release in early September 2020, removing the main obstacle to intra-Afghan talks, which began in Doha on September 12, 2020.

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.<sup>42</sup> 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!”<sup>43</sup>

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.”<sup>44</sup> On January 15, 2021, Acting Secretary Miller confirmed that the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan had reached 2,500.<sup>45</sup>

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.<sup>46</sup> 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.”<sup>47</sup> 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.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> 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.

<sup>43</sup> “U.S. troops in Afghanistan should be ‘home by Christmas’: Trump,” *Reuters*, October 7, 2020.

<sup>44</sup> “Acting Secretary Miller Announces Troop Levels in Afghanistan and Iraq,” Department of Defense, November 17, 2020.

<sup>45</sup> “Statement by Acting Defense Secretary Christopher Miller on Force Levels in Afghanistan,” Department of Defense January 15, 2021.

<sup>46</sup> Coll, *Directorate S*, op. cit., pp. 353-354, 367; “Transcript: Joe Biden on Face the Nation,” *CBS News*, February 23, 2020.

<sup>47</sup> “TRANSCRIPT: ABC News’ George Stephanopoulos interviews President Joe Biden,” ABC News, March 17, 2021.

<sup>48</sup> “President Biden Holds News Conference,” C-SPAN, March 25, 2021.

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.<sup>49</sup> 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.”<sup>50</sup> A senior Administration official said after the withdrawal announcement, “We 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.”<sup>51</sup> On August 26, 2021, U.S. forces and Afghan nationals were killed in an attack in Kabul claimed by the Islamic State affiliate in Afghanistan, which has been in conflict with the Taliban. Still, the attack may raise questions about the Taliban’s compliance with the February 2020 U.S.-Taliban agreement, in which the Taliban commit “to prevent any group or individual ... from using the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States.

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.<sup>52</sup> 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.<sup>53</sup> 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.<sup>54</sup>

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.<sup>55</sup> Most NATO allies and other U.S. partners withdrew their forces by July.<sup>56</sup> On July 8, President Biden announced that “our military mission in Afghanistan will conclude on August 31<sup>st</sup>.” 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

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<sup>49</sup> White House, “Remarks by President Biden on the Way Forward in Afghanistan,” April 14, 2021.

<sup>50</sup> “Statement of Islamic Emirate regarding recent announcement by US President Joe Biden,” *Voice of Jihad*, April 15, 2021.

<sup>51</sup> White House, “Background Press Call by a Senior Administration Official on Afghanistan,” April 13, 2021.

<sup>52</sup> United States Institute of Peace, *Afghanistan Study Group: Final Report*, February 2021.

<sup>53</sup> The White House, *Remarks by President Biden on the Drawdown of U.S. Forces in Afghanistan*, July 8, 2021.

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

<sup>55</sup> “Update on withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan May 31, 2021,” CENTCOM, June 1, 2021.

<sup>56</sup> Geir Moulson and Kathy Gannon, “Most European troops exit Afghanistan quietly after 20 years,” *Associated Press*, June 30, 2021.

country’s civil conflict was not acceptable to me.”<sup>57</sup> He reiterated that position in an August 16, 2021, address, saying, “there never was a good time to withdraw U.S. forces.”<sup>58</sup>

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.<sup>59</sup> At an operational level, some observers question the robustness of the plan to withdraw U.S. troops and key Afghan partners from Afghanistan.<sup>60</sup> Such questions are also related to intelligence estimates of ANDSF abilities to resist the Taliban advance. Congress may scrutinize whether, and how, military campaign planning could have managed these perceived strategic and operational flaws.<sup>61</sup>

## Taliban Takeover and Afghan Government Collapse

### When and how did the Taliban overcome Afghan government forces?<sup>62</sup>

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.<sup>63</sup> 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.<sup>64</sup> 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.”<sup>65</sup>

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.<sup>66</sup> 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

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<sup>57</sup> The White House, “Statement by President Joe Biden on Afghanistan,” August 14, 2021.

<sup>58</sup> The White House, “Remarks by President Biden on Afghanistan,” August 16, 2021.

<sup>59</sup> Christopher D. Kolenda, *Zero Sum Victory: What We’re Getting Wrong about War* (University Press of Kentucky, Forthcoming).

<sup>60</sup> 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>

<sup>61</sup> 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.

<sup>62</sup> This section was prepared by Clayton Thomas, Analyst in Middle Eastern Affairs, and Kathleen McInnis, Specialist in International Security.

<sup>63</sup> Zahra Rahimi, “ANDSF Showcases Air Force as Country Braces for US Pullout,” *TOLOnews*, April 26, 2021.

<sup>64</sup> Transcript: Secretary of Defense Austin and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Milley Press Briefing, Department of Defense, May 6, 2021.

<sup>65</sup> Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community, Office of the Director of National Intelligence, April 19, 2021.

<sup>66</sup> Jonathan Schroden, “Afghanistan Security Forces Versus the Taliban: A Net Assessment,” *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 14, Issue 1, January 2021.



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.<sup>67</sup> 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.<sup>68</sup> In July, the Taliban began seizing border crossings with Tajikistan, Iran, and Pakistan, 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.<sup>69</sup>

On August 6, 2021, the Taliban captured their first provincial capital, a notable achievement given that U.S. commanders and others had often pointed to the Taliban's inability to take and control a provincial capital in recent years as evidence of the Afghan government's relative strength. The Taliban's capture of half of Afghanistan's provincial capitals in the following week surprised many observers and, reportedly, U.S. officials.<sup>70</sup> 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 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 began entering Kabul, completing their effective takeover of the country. The central and historically significant province of Panjshir, where some former Afghan leaders attempted to establish an armed resistance to the Taliban, was reportedly captured by Taliban forces in September 2021 amid reports of Taliban killings of civilians.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Kate Clark and Obaid Ali, "A Quarter of Afghanistan's Districts Fall to the Taliban amid Calls for a 'Second Resistance,'" *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, July 2, 2021.

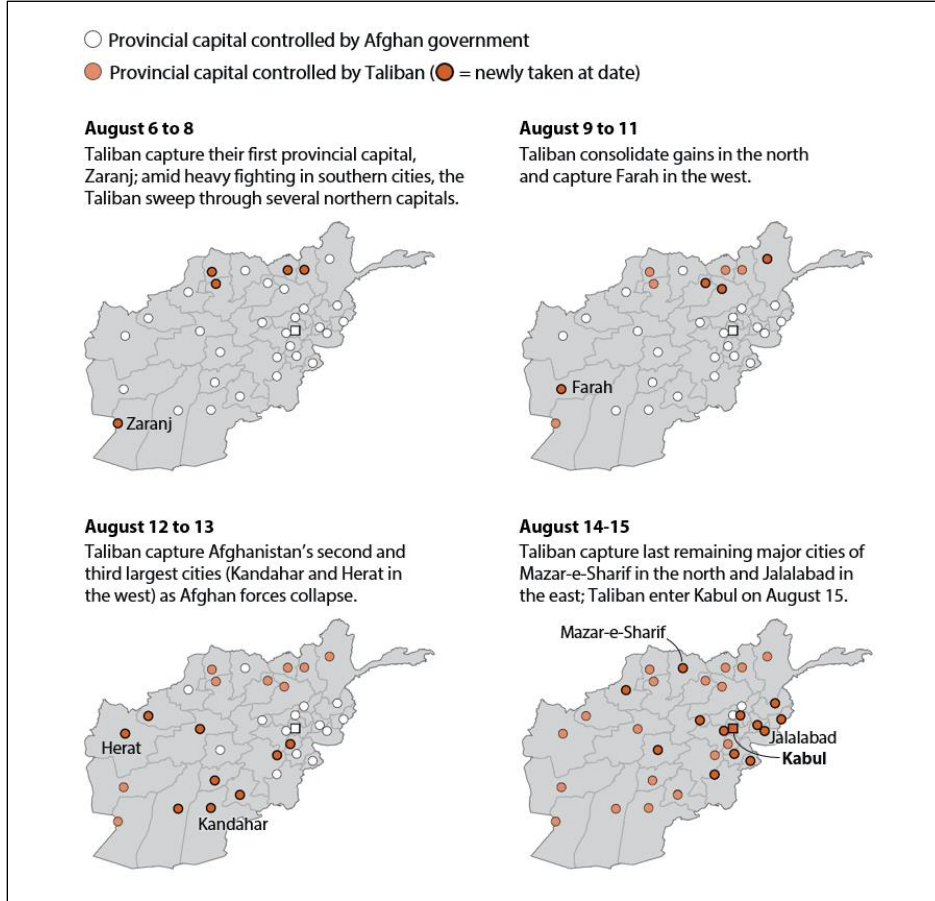
<sup>68</sup> Dan De Luce, Mushtaq Yusufzai, and Saphora Smith, "Even the Taliban are surprised at how fast they're advancing in Afghanistan," *NBC News*, June 25, 2021.

<sup>69</sup> Secretary of Defense Austin and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Milley Press Briefing, U.S. Department of Defense, July 21, 2021.

<sup>70</sup> Zeke Miller et al., "Biden team surprised by rapid Taliban gains in Afghanistan," *Associated Press*, August 15, 2021.

<sup>71</sup> "Afghanistan crisis: Taliban kill civilians in resistance stronghold," *BBC*, September 13, 2021.

**Figure I. Taliban Control of Provincial Capitals, August 6-15, 2021**



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

While the Taliban faced stiff, if ultimately unsuccessful, resistance from government forces in some areas,<sup>72</sup> 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.<sup>73</sup>

Experts have offered a number of explanations for why the ANDSF did not stem the Taliban advance.<sup>74</sup>

- Reportedly high casualty and attrition rates in the ANDSF in recent years.<sup>75</sup> While the ANDSF's official force level was reported to be just under 300,000, most observers assess its actual strength was lower.

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

<sup>73</sup> Susannah George, "Afghanistan's military collapse: Illicit deals and mass desertions," *Washington Post*, August 15, 2021.

<sup>74</sup> See also CRS Insight IN11728, *The Collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: Implications for U.S. Security Assistance and Cooperation*, by Christina L. Arabia.

<sup>75</sup> Once-public statistics on ANDSF metrics were withheld by the U.S. military starting in October 2017. Shawn Snow,



- 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.<sup>76</sup>
- 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.<sup>77</sup>
- 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.<sup>78</sup>
- 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.<sup>79</sup> 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.<sup>80</sup>
- 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.<sup>81</sup>
- 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.<sup>82</sup>
- 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.<sup>83</sup>

## What is the status of the former Afghan government?<sup>84</sup>

President Ashraf Ghani, whose seven-year tenure was characterized by electoral crises, factional infighting, and the gradual deterioration of Afghan forces, fled the country on the morning of

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“Report: US officials classify crucial metrics on Afghan casualties, readiness,” *Military Times*, October 30, 2017.

<sup>76</sup> Chas Danner, “Why Afghanistan’s Security Forces Suddenly Collapsed,” *New York Magazine*, August 17, 2021; Thomas Gibbons-Neft and Taimoor Shah, “The Taliban Close in on Afghan Cities, Pushing the Country to the Brink,” *New York Times*, July 9, 2021.

<sup>77</sup> Amy Kazmin, et. al., “Low morale, no support and bad politics: why the Afghan army folded,” *Financial Times*, August 15, 2021.

<sup>78</sup> Benjamin Jensen, “How the Taliban did it: Inside the ‘operational art’ of its military victory,” Atlantic Council, August 15, 2021.

<sup>79</sup> George, “Afghanistan’s military collapse.”

<sup>80</sup> Yaroslav Trofimov, “How the Taliban Overran the Afghan Army, Built by the U.S. Over 20 Years,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 14, 2021.

<sup>81</sup> Jack Detsch, “Departure of Private Contractors Was a Turning Point in Afghan Military’s Collapse,” *Foreign Policy*, August 16, 2021.

<sup>82</sup> Tara Copp, “The US Spent \$83 Billion Training Afghan Forces. Why Did They Collapse So Quickly?” *Defense One*, August 14, 2021.

<sup>83</sup> For a previous discussion of this point, see Rebecca Zimmerman, “Training Foreign Military Forces: Quantity versus Quality,” *War on the Rocks*, July 15, 2015.

<sup>84</sup> This section was prepared by Clayton Thomas, Analyst in Middle Eastern Affairs.

August 15, 2021. 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.”<sup>85</sup> 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.”<sup>86</sup> As of September 17, 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 or been sidelined by the takeover. Militia commander and former Herat governor Ismail Khan was captured by the Taliban in fighting in Herat before being allowed to relocate to Iran; Marshal Abdulrashid Dostum and Atta Mohammad Noor, another former governor, convened their forces in the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif and subsequently fled to Uzbekistan. Another group of Afghan political leaders, including High Council for National Reconciliation Chairman Abdullah Abdullah, former President Hamid Karzai, and former Islamist insurgent leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, met with Taliban officials after the group’s takeover, but are not playing a role in the Taliban government. One August 26 media account described Karzai and Abdullah as “effectively under house arrest.”<sup>87</sup>

Former 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.”<sup>88</sup> Saleh had previously vowed to never submit to Taliban rule and called on Afghans to join him in resisting the group. He 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 was joined by the son of the late Northern Alliance commander Ahmad Shah Massoud. They stated that they have formed an armed resistance to the Taliban and appealed for U.S. and international support.<sup>89</sup> The Taliban claim to have taken control of the province as of September 6, amid reports of continued sporadic fighting and Taliban killings of civilians.<sup>90</sup>

With the taking of Panjshir, the Taliban appear to effectively control the entire country, unlike the 1990s when the former Northern Alliance represented significant armed opposition and held around 10% of the country’s territory. The Taliban also have stronger ties with regional powers (including some that once supported the Northern Alliance against the Taliban). Still, the

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<sup>85</sup> 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>

<sup>86</sup> UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Statement on President Ashraf Ghani, August 18 2021.

<sup>87</sup> Nic Robertson, “Taliban removes security from ex-Afghan President Hamid Karzai and Abdullah Abdullah, source says,” CNN, August 26, 2021.

<sup>88</sup> 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.

<sup>89</sup> Ahmad Massoud, “Opinion: The mujahideen resistance to the Taliban begins now. But we need help,” *Washington Post*, August 18, 2021.

<sup>90</sup> Natasha Turak, “Fighting continues in Afghanistan’s Panjshir Valley as anti-Taliban resistance vows to hold out,” *CNBC*, September 7, 2021.

existence of resistance factions, in Panjshir or elsewhere, 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?<sup>91</sup>**

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 will govern in 2021 is different in economic, political, and social terms from the country the group ruled two decades ago. As the Taliban consolidated power, observers also speculated on how much they had changed and how they might govern.<sup>92</sup> The hardline “caretaker” government announced by the Taliban on September 7, 2021, does not indicate a more inclusive approach to governing.

On September 7, 2021, longtime Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid (making his first appearance in public) announced the names of 33 individuals who were described as “acting” ministers that fill a “caretaker cabinet” to administer the country; the Taliban refer to this government, as they have for decades referred to themselves, as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. It is unclear by whom and why these individuals might be replaced going forward or in what sense these “caretaker” positions differ from permanent positions. The Taliban’s government in the 1990s reportedly was also “nominally interim.”<sup>93</sup>

Taliban leader Haibatullah Akhundzada (of whom one verified photograph exists and who has never made a public appearance) is to hold supreme power as the group’s emir; former Taliban Foreign Minister Mohammad Hassan Akhund is the Acting Prime Minister. One analyst describes Akhund as “relatively weak,” an “uncontroversial” figure whose selection forestalls competition among more powerful figures and factions within the Taliban.<sup>94</sup> Abdul Ghani Baradar, who led negotiations with the United States, is the Acting Deputy Prime Minister. Baradar released an audio recording on September 13, 2021, denying rumors of his death or injury in a brawl with other Taliban figures; the BBC reported on September 15, 2021, that Baradar had gone to Kandahar after a heated disagreement with Haqqani figures (see below) over whether the Taliban’s political or military wings deserve credit for the group’s takeover.<sup>95</sup> Other key figures include Acting Director of Intelligence Abdul Haq Wasiq (detained at the U.S. naval station at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, from 2001 until his release in a 2014 prisoner exchange) and Acting Defense Minister Mohammad Yaqoob (son of founding Taliban leader Mohammad Omar).

Nearly all members of the “caretaker cabinet” are former Taliban officials or longtime loyalists. All members of the “caretaker cabinet” are male, and the vast majority are ethnic Pashtuns, mostly from southern Afghanistan. Over half were previously designated for U.S. and/or U.N. sanctions, including the Acting Interior Minister, Sirajuddin Haqqani. The U.S. Department of State has for years offered a reward of up to \$10 million for information leading to the arrest of Haqqani, who is the head of the Haqqani Network, a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO). Some argue the Haqqanis’ role in the Taliban caretaker government is a

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<sup>91</sup> This section was prepared by Clayton Thomas, Analyst in Middle Eastern Affairs.

<sup>92</sup> “Taliban Rule Begins in Afghanistan,” International Crisis Group, August 24, 2021.

<sup>93</sup> “Who Will Run the Taliban Government?” International Crisis Group, September 9, 2021.

<sup>94</sup> Martine van Bijlert, “The Focus of the Taleban’s New Government: Internal cohesion, external dominance,” Afghanistan Analysts Network, September 12, 2021.

<sup>95</sup> Khudai Noor Nasar, “Afghanistan: Taliban leaders in bust-up at presidential palace, sources say,” *BBC*, September 15, 2021.

reflection of their outsized military import, and could make U.S. cooperation with the Taliban more difficult.<sup>96</sup> A State Department spokesman said the government “certainly does not reflect what the international community and what, as part of that, the United States hoped to see.”<sup>97</sup> Some had speculated that the Taliban might reach out to former Afghan government officials (such as former President Hamid Karzai) or to others from outside the movement as part of their promise to establish an “inclusive government.”

It remains to be seen how this Taliban government will address the many challenges Afghanistan faces, including a burgeoning economic crisis. The Taliban appear to lack many technical and administrative capabilities and may struggle to execute the functions of government and security nationwide, especially without the participation of individuals who had previously supported the former Afghan government. It is possible that the Taliban may induce or coerce such individuals to obtain their participation. At an August 17, 2021, 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.<sup>98</sup>

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.<sup>99</sup>

Protests against the group have taken place in several cities across the country, including by hundreds of women in Kabul. The Taliban-led Interior Ministry issued a decree on September 8, 2021, banning unapproved demonstrations. U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet said on September 13 that Taliban forces had used “increasing violence against protesters and journalists.”<sup>100</sup>

## **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?<sup>101</sup>**

No country has recognized the government established by the Taliban in the wake of their takeover of Afghanistan. The United States has not stated whether it will recognize an Afghan government led by the Taliban,<sup>102</sup> and observers say no decision for such recognition is expected

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<sup>96</sup> Stephanie Findlay, “Haqqani network’s clever game culminates with Afghan government roles,” *Financial Times*, September 10, 2021.

<sup>97</sup> Department of State, Department Press Briefing – September 9, 2021.

<sup>98</sup> “Transcript of Taliban’s first news conference in Kabul,” *Al Jazeera*, August 17, 2021.

<sup>99</sup> Graeme Wood, “This Is Not the Taliban 2.0,” *The Atlantic*, August 18, 2021.

<sup>100</sup> “Oral update on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan” 48<sup>th</sup> Session of the Human Rights Council, September 13, 2021.

<sup>101</sup> This section was prepared by Matthew C. Weed, Specialist in Foreign Policy Legislation, and Jennifer K. Elsea, Legislative Attorney.

<sup>102</sup> When asked, “Do you consider the Taliban the de facto ruler of Afghanistan right now?” at an August 23 press conference, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said, “it’s been a fluid situation. There has not been any sort of formal transfer of power.” In an August 25 press conference, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby referred to the Taliban as “the titular heads of government.”

from the U.S. government in the near term.<sup>103</sup> 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 recognition of a foreign government acknowledges that a government has the right to control a state’s territory and exercise sovereign state power,<sup>104</sup> 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.<sup>105</sup> 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.<sup>106</sup>

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.<sup>107</sup> A U.N. Security Council resolution required states to close official Taliban diplomatic offices on their territory.<sup>108</sup> 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....”<sup>109</sup>

The Afghan Permanent Representative (as appointed by the Ghani government) spoke on behalf of Afghanistan before the Security Council on August 16, 2021, and has continued to be treated as the official Afghan representative at the United Nations. A new Credentials Committee is to be chosen during the opening of the 2021-22 U.N. General Assembly during September 2021; the United States, as well as other permanent members of the U.N. Security Council,<sup>110</sup> often sit as members of the Committee. The Committee may not make an immediate decision on Afghan representation in the United Nations, leaving the current Afghan Permanent Representative in place. As it did the previous time the Taliban was in power, the Committee could delay any decision on Afghan credentials indefinitely. Despite the fact that the former Afghan government

<sup>103</sup> See Nahal Toosi, “Biden unlikely to formally recognize Taliban government,” *Politico*, September 11, 2021.

<sup>104</sup> Restatement (Third) of Foreign Relations Law of the United States § 203, Comment *a*, p. 84 (1986).

<sup>105</sup> I. Brownlie, *Principles of Public International Law*, p. 93 (7<sup>th</sup> ed., 2008).

<sup>106</sup> *Zivotofsky ex rel. Zivotofsky v. Kerry*, 576 U.S. 1, 11 (2015).

<sup>107</sup> 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>.

<sup>108</sup> Para. 8(a) of S/RES/1333.

<sup>109</sup> S/RES/2513.

<sup>110</sup> China, France, Russian Federation, and United Kingdom.



does not seem to be asserting that it remains in power,<sup>111</sup> leaving only the Taliban claiming a seat in the United Nations, the Taliban could be prevented from representing Afghanistan even if no competing representatives challenged its authority to do so, according to at least one observer.<sup>112</sup>

Whether or not a government is democratically elected can sometimes be an issue in the recognition practice of many states, including in some cases the United States.<sup>113</sup> 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 (though they did not do so in the caretaker government announced on September 7, 2021). Such a step could be seen as a counterweight to any illegitimacy problems the Taliban may face by having taken power from a democratically elected Afghan government.<sup>114</sup> The Taliban have long sought recognition as a legitimate governing entity, and some observers maintain the group has improved its foreign policy apparatus since first governing Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001.<sup>115</sup>

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.<sup>116</sup> 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, 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."<sup>117</sup> 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.<sup>118</sup> As of September 2021, 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 a Taliban government, instead pledging their continued support for the Afghan people, their human rights, and humanitarian assistance.<sup>119</sup>

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 or engagement with such a government?

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<sup>111</sup> See Federica Paddeu and Niko Pavlopoulos, "Between Legitimacy and Control: The Taliban's Pursuit of Governmental Status," *Just Security*, September 7, 2021.

<sup>112</sup> Larry D. Johnson, "How Can The Taliban Be Prevented From Representing Afghanistan In The United Nations?," *Just Security*, August 18, 2021. It is possible that a Taliban representative could participate in Security Council meetings concerning the situation in Afghanistan even without formal recognition as the legitimate government of the country. The rules of the Security Council permit the Council to invite other "competent" parties to meetings if such parties can provide information important to Council deliberations.

<sup>113</sup> See Restatement (Third) of Foreign Relations Law of the United States § 203, Reporter's Note 1.

<sup>114</sup> Tess Bridgeman and Ryan Goodman, "Recognition and the Taliban," *Just Security*, August 17, 2021.

<sup>115</sup> See Barnett R. Rubin, *Leveraging the Taliban's Quest for International Recognition*, Afghan Peace Process Issues Paper, United States Institute of Peace, March 2021.

<sup>116</sup> See Bridgeman and Goodman, *op. cit.*

<sup>117</sup> See CNN, *State of the Union*, August 15, 2021 (transcript).

<sup>118</sup> Andrew Osborne, "Russia says Kabul seems safer under Taliban than it was under Ghani," *Reuters*, August 16, 2021.

<sup>119</sup> 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.

## U.S. Policy Implications of the Taliban Takeover

### How is the Taliban’s takeover affecting the U.S. diplomatic presence in Afghanistan?<sup>120</sup>

On August 15, 2021, the State Department confirmed that it had evacuated the U.S. diplomatic compound in Kabul and that all remaining embassy personnel were located on the premises of Kabul International Airport. Following the completion of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, Secretary Blinken announced that the State Department had suspended its diplomatic presence in the country and transferred operations to Doha, Qatar.<sup>121</sup> Ian McCary, a career State Department official, leads the U.S. diplomatic mission to Afghanistan in Doha.<sup>122</sup>

Some additional questions that Congress may consider or ask the executive branch include

- What kind of diplomatic presence, if any, should the United States maintain in Afghanistan? How will the United States perform consular or other functions from Doha?

### What is the situation regarding evacuations from Afghanistan?

On August 30, 2021, U.S. officials announced the completion of the withdrawal of its military and diplomatic personnel from Afghanistan and largely concluded its efforts to airlift U.S. citizens, lawful permanent residents (LPRs), and certain Afghans out of the country.<sup>123</sup> The State Department and the Pentagon say they directly evacuated or facilitated the evacuations of around 124,000 individuals, including about 6,000 American citizens.<sup>124</sup> President Biden has described the mission as an “extraordinary success,” although U.S. officials acknowledge that around 100 American citizens and thousands of eligible Afghans remain in Afghanistan, many of whom seek to leave.<sup>125</sup> Some Members of Congress and rescue groups have questioned this figure, arguing that the number of U.S. citizens in Afghanistan could total as many as several hundred more than the Administration’s estimate.<sup>126</sup>

President Biden has said that the United States remains committed to assisting American citizens and other eligible persons who wish to leave Afghanistan, adding that he will hold the Taliban to its commitment to provide safe passage.<sup>127</sup> U.S. officials are providing limited information regarding such evacuations, citing “an ongoing terrorist threat to operations of this nature.”<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> This section was prepared by Cory Gill, Analyst in Foreign Affairs.

<sup>121</sup> U.S. Department of State, “Secretary Antony J. Blinken’s Remarks on Afghanistan, August 30, 2021.

<sup>122</sup> U.S. Department of State, “Secretary Antony J. Blinken Remarks to Embassy Doha and Mission Afghanistan,” September 7, 2021.

<sup>123</sup> To review the parameters under which Afghans may be eligible for resettlement in the United States, see the “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?” section of this report.

<sup>124</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, “Secretary of Defense Austin and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Milley Press Briefing,” September 1, 2021.

<sup>125</sup> The White House, “Remarks by President Biden on the End of the War in Afghanistan,” August 31, 2021; U.S. Department of State, “Department Press Briefing – September 10, 2021,” September 10, 2021.

<sup>126</sup> Julie Watson and Bernard Condon, “Rescue groups: US tally misses hundreds left in Afghanistan,” *Associated Press*, September 4, 2021.

<sup>127</sup> The White House, “Remarks by President Biden on the End of the War in Afghanistan,” August 31, 2021.

<sup>128</sup> The White House, National Security Council, “Statement by NSC Spokesperson Emily Horne on Further U.S.



Following the reopening of the Kabul International Airport on September 9, 2021, the State Department began facilitating the evacuations of American citizens and LPRs on commercial flights. The State Department is also helping evacuate American citizens and LPRs via overland routes to an undisclosed neighboring country.<sup>129</sup> On September 17, a State Department spokesperson said that since August 31, the State Department had assisted 36 U.S. citizens and 24 LPRs in departing Afghanistan via charter flights and overland routes.<sup>130</sup>

Some Members of Congress and other observers have criticized what they characterize as poorly planned U.S. evacuation efforts, asserting that the United States failed to deliver on assurances made to American citizens and eligible Afghans that it would help them leave the country prior to the U.S. withdrawal.<sup>131</sup> Press reports indicate that some personnel involved in evacuation efforts during the withdrawal process were concerned that eligibility criteria for Afghans were “ever-changing,” which may have led to instances where U.S. personnel prohibited eligible Afghans, including the family members of U.S. citizens, from accessing the airport.<sup>132</sup> Some Members have expressed concern that many Afghans who were evacuated may not actually qualify for resettlement in the United States.<sup>133</sup> Following the withdrawal, additional reports suggest that the State Department has faced difficulties facilitating the evacuations of LPRs and eligible Afghans. For example, U.S. efforts to evacuate hundreds of U.S. Agency for Global Media Afghan national employees, contractors, and their families have thus far not succeeded, although Secretary Blinken affirmed on September 14 that the State Department was still prioritizing their evacuation.<sup>134</sup>

Additionally, some Members have accused the Taliban of refusing to allow American citizens to leave Afghanistan, with one asserting that the Taliban “is holding them hostage for demands,” including diplomatic recognition from the United States for the Taliban.<sup>135</sup> Secretary Blinken has said that he is not aware of any such hostage-like cases.<sup>136</sup> On September 9, a National Security Council spokesperson stated that the Taliban has been “cooperative” in facilitating the departures of American citizens and LPRs.<sup>137</sup>

In addition to the matters discussed above, Members of Congress may consider the following issues as evacuations continue.

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Citizen Departures from Afghanistan,” September 10, 2021.

<sup>129</sup> U.S. Department of State, “Department Press Briefing – September 10, 2021.”

<sup>130</sup> U.S. Department of State, “Department Press Briefing – September 17, 2021,” September 17, 2021.

<sup>131</sup> House Foreign Affairs Committee (Republicans), “McCaul: ‘Disgraceful’ State Dept. Left Hundreds of USAGM Journalists in Afghanistan,” press release, August 31, 2021.

<sup>132</sup> Patsy Widakuswara and Carla Babb, “‘Hunger Games’ Evacuations as US Left Afghanistan,” *Voice of America*, September 2, 2021.

<sup>133</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *Examining the U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan*, 117<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., September 14, 2021.

<sup>134</sup> Testimony of Secretary of State Antony Blinken at Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *Examining the U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan*, September 14, 2021.

<sup>135</sup> House Foreign Affairs Committee Ranking Member Michael McCaul, interview by Chris Wallace, *Fox News Sunday*, September 5, 2021.

<sup>136</sup> U.S. Department of State, “Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin, Qatari Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani, and Qatari Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Dr. Khalid bin Mohammed Al Attiyah at a Joint Press Availability,” September 7, 2021.

<sup>137</sup> The White House, “Statement by NSC Spokesperson Emily Horne on Qatar Airways Charter Flight from Kabul,” September 9, 2020.

- Press reports indicate that U.S. officials are examining possible cases in which older evacuated Afghan men were admitted into the United States with girls who are under 18 years old whom they claim as wives, raising potential human trafficking concerns.<sup>138</sup> The State Department has not provided a precise number of such cases, although one press report refers to “numerous incidents” where “Afghan girls have been presented to authorities as the ‘wives’ of much older men.”<sup>139</sup> One report further notes that U.S. officials in the United Arab Emirates transmitted a cable to Washington, DC, stating that some young Afghan girls were forced into marriages to escape Afghanistan after the Taliban seized control of the country.<sup>140</sup>
- What evacuation plans, if any, did the Biden Administration inherit from the Trump Administration? What were the evacuation plans that the Biden Administration prepared for Afghanistan and for what possible scenarios did it plan?

## **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?<sup>141</sup>**

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)<sup>142</sup> status based largely on the assistance they provided to the United States: special immigrant visa (SIV) programs and the U.S. refugee program. In addition, Afghans may be paroled into the United States by the Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). A person granted parole (parolee) is permitted to enter and remain in the United States for the duration of the parole grant. Parolees do not have a set pathway to LPR status.

### ***Special Immigrant Visas***

Congress has enacted provisions to enable certain Afghans to obtain 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.<sup>143</sup> As of August 28, 2021, an approximate total of 82,000 Afghans (23,000 principal applicants and 59,000 dependent spouses and children) had been granted special immigrant status under these provisions. In FY2021 only, as of August 28, 2021, approximately 9,000 Afghans (2,000 principal applicants and 7,000 dependent spouses and children) had been granted special immigrant status under these provisions.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Margaret Brennan and Bo Erickson, “U.S. investigates ‘child bride’ cases among Afghan evacuees,” *CBS News*, September 7, 2021.

<sup>139</sup> Matthew Lee, “Afghan evacuation raises concerns about child trafficking,” *Associated Press*, September 3, 2021.

<sup>140</sup> Matthew Lee, “Afghan evacuation raises concerns about child trafficking,” *Associated Press*, September 3, 2021.

<sup>141</sup> This section prepared by Andorra Bruno, Specialist in Immigration Policy.

<sup>142</sup> LPRs (also known as green card holders) can live permanently in the United States. Typically after five years, they can apply for U.S. citizenship, subject to applicable requirements.

<sup>143</sup> For additional information on Afghan SIVs, see CRS Report R43725, *Iraqi and Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Programs*.

<sup>144</sup> Links to Special Immigrant Visa Statistics as of June 30, 2021, are available from the U.S. Department of State,

The SIV provisions established two programs that include Afghans. One program, which is permanent, applies to Afghans who worked directly with U.S. Armed Forces, or under Chief of Mission (COM) authority, 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.<sup>145</sup>

President Biden's announcement that the United States would begin the final withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan in May 2021<sup>146</sup> 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,<sup>147</sup> the State Department announced the arrival of "our first group of Afghan special immigrant applicants to the United States under Operation Allies Refuge."<sup>148</sup> 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."<sup>149</sup>

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.<sup>150</sup> Future relocations were also discussed at a Pentagon press 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."<sup>151</sup>

In more recent statements, U.S. officials have not indicated how many Afghan evacuees are SIV holders or SIV applicants. On September 3, 2021, Secretary of State Blinken referenced Afghan

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Bureau of Consular Affairs at <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/legal/visa-law0/visa-statistics/immigrant-visa-statistics.html>. Updated FY2021 data (through August 28, 2021) were provided to CRS by the Bureau of Consular Affairs. FY2021 data are preliminary.

<sup>145</sup> For further information, see CRS Report R43725, *Iraqi and Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Programs*.

<sup>146</sup> 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/>.

<sup>147</sup> 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/>.

<sup>148</sup> 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/>.

<sup>149</sup> 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/>.

<sup>150</sup> 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/>.

<sup>151</sup> 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."

special immigrants as a proportion of the overall evacuee population, but said he could not provide specific numbers:

Of the roughly 124,000 people who've been evacuated, the vast majority—the vast majority, 75, 80 percent—are Afghans at risk. And of those, some significant number will be SIVs, either people who already hold an SIV visa or those who are actually in the pipeline.<sup>152</sup>

At a September 1, 2021, press briefing, the State Department spokesperson provided data on Afghan arrivals to the United States:

Since August 17<sup>th</sup> and through August 31<sup>st</sup> at midnight Eastern time, 31,107 people have arrived ... to the U.S. as part of this operation. So of that subset—which, of course, is just a small subset of the 124,000—we understand that about 14 percent are U.S. citizens, or 4,446; about 9 percent are LPRs, 2,785; and the remaining 77 percent —23,876 individuals—are Afghans at risk. And, of course, falling into that category are SIVs, other visa holders ...<sup>153</sup>

Press reports published on or after September 8, 2021, cite DHS data on Afghan evacuees who have arrived in the United States. For example, a *Washington Post* article stated:

Of the 60,000 evacuees who have arrived so far, 11 percent are U.S. citizens and 6 percent are legal permanent residents, according to DHS. The remaining 83 percent are considered "at-risk Afghans" who either qualify for special immigrant visas as a result of their work for the U.S. government, or are part of a much larger number who will arrive with a provisional immigration status known as "humanitarian parole."<sup>154</sup>

## 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.<sup>155</sup> 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 1 (P-1) covers individual cases referred to the U.S. refugee program by designated entities based on their circumstances and apparent need for resettlement. 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 DHS and

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<sup>152</sup> U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, *Secretary Antony J. Blinken Remarks on Afghanistan at a Press Availability*, September 3, 2021.

<sup>153</sup> U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, *Department Press Briefing – September 1, 2021*, <https://www.state.gov/briefings/department-press-briefing-september-1-2021/>.

<sup>154</sup> Nick Miroff, "44 Afghan evacuees flagged as potential security risks," *The Washington Post*, September 11, 2021, p. A16. DHS does not seem to have otherwise made these data publicly available.

<sup>155</sup> 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*.

others. Of particular relevance to Afghans who have assisted the United States is a new P-2 group that was established in August 2021.<sup>156</sup>

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.” Among those 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.” 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.<sup>157</sup>

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.<sup>158</sup> 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.”<sup>159</sup>

More recent statements from the State Department suggest that some P-2-eligible and P-1-eligible Afghans may have been relocated. In his September 3, 2021, comments on the “vast majority” of Afghan evacuees that are “Afghans at risk,” Secretary Blinken indicated that “some number will be potential P-1 or P-2 refugees.” At the press briefing on September 1, 2021, the State Department spokesperson also suggested that Afghans with P-1 or P-2 referrals may have entered the United States.<sup>160</sup>

### *Immigration Parole*

The parole provision in the INA gives the DHS Secretary discretionary authority to “parole into the United States temporarily under such conditions as he may prescribe only on a case-by-case

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<sup>156</sup> 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 also describes the other processing priorities.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>158</sup> See U.S. Department of State, *Information for Afghan Nationals Regarding Priority 2 (P-2) Designation*, [https://www.wrapsnet.org/documents/Information%20for%20Afghan%20Nationals%20Regarding%20Priority%20\(P-2\)%20Designation.pdf](https://www.wrapsnet.org/documents/Information%20for%20Afghan%20Nationals%20Regarding%20Priority%20(P-2)%20Designation.pdf).

<sup>159</sup> 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/>.

<sup>160</sup> Persons cannot pursue U.S. refugee applications within the United States. They can, however, apply for asylum. For information about asylum, see CRS Report R45539, *Immigration: U.S. Asylum Policy*.



basis for urgent humanitarian reasons or significant public benefit any alien applying for admission to the United States.”<sup>161</sup> Parolees can apply for work authorization.

A DHS fact sheet on Operation Allies Welcome, which is described within as “ongoing efforts across the federal government to support vulnerable Afghans ... as they safely resettle in the United States,” discusses the use of parole for Afghans, as follows:

[Parole] permits certain Afghan nationals to come into the United States, on a case-by-case basis, for a period of two years and subsequent to appropriate screening and vetting, provided their movement to the United States is being carried out pursuant to the current operation. Once paroled by CBP [DHS’s U.S. Customs and Border Protection], Afghan nationals may be eligible to apply for immigration status through USCIS. Afghan nationals paroled by CBP will also have conditions placed on their parole, to include medical screening and vaccination requirements, and other reporting requirements.<sup>162</sup>

Presumably, these parolees would be among the “Afghans at risk” mentioned in the above section on “Special Immigrant Visas.” DHS has not published data on the number of Afghans granted parole.

Some additional questions that Congress may ask the executive branch include

- How many Afghans have pending special immigrant applications? How many of these individuals are in the United States? How many of these individuals remain in Afghanistan, and what plans, if any, are in place to help them leave the country? How many Afghans who have not submitted SIV applications do you estimate may be eligible? Where will Afghan SIV processing take place overseas?
- How many Afghan P-2 referrals has the State Department received? Where are these referred individuals currently located? What plans, if any, are in place to help referred individuals leave Afghanistan? The P-2 program announcement indicated that these cases would take 12-14 months to process. Is this still the expected time frame? What is the status of pending Afghan P-2 cases?
- How many Afghans have been paroled into the United States? How does the security clearance process for Afghan parole applicants compare to that for Afghan refugee and SIV applicants? What types of services are being provided to Afghan parolees? How many parolees have pending applications to obtain a more permanent immigration status, and what statuses are they pursuing?

## How might the reestablishment of Taliban rule affect terrorist groups in Afghanistan?<sup>163</sup>

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 a previous 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

<sup>161</sup> INA §212(d)(5), 8 U.S.C. §1182(d)(5). For additional information, see CRS Report R46570, *Immigration Parole*.

<sup>162</sup> U.S. Department of Homeland Security, *Operation Allies Welcome*, [https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwjSm9PKtfzyAhXeKVkFHWJ-C\\_4QFnoECAQQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.dhs.gov%2Fpublication%2Ffact-sheet-operation-allies-welcome&usg=AOvVaw3wRvqxh\\_fSWBJx0NJ9fJqz](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwjSm9PKtfzyAhXeKVkFHWJ-C_4QFnoECAQQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.dhs.gov%2Fpublication%2Ffact-sheet-operation-allies-welcome&usg=AOvVaw3wRvqxh_fSWBJx0NJ9fJqz).

<sup>163</sup> This section was prepared by Clayton Thomas, Analyst in Middle Eastern Affairs.

Islamic State affiliate (Islamic State-Khorasan Province, ISKP, also known as ISIS-K) 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.<sup>164</sup> 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 (AQ) 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.<sup>165</sup> 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."<sup>166</sup> 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."<sup>167</sup> In a semiannual report released in April 2021, the Department of Defense stated, "The Taliban have maintained mutually beneficial relations with AQ-related organizations and are unlikely to take substantive action against these groups."<sup>168</sup> 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-Afghans 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."<sup>169</sup>

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

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<sup>164</sup> See H.Con.Res. 13, introduced in February 2015.

<sup>165</sup> Jeff Seldin, "US Calls Death of al-Qaida Official a Major Setback for Terror Group," *Voice of America*, October 26, 2020.

<sup>166</sup> *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.

<sup>167</sup> *Operation Freedom's Sentinel: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, October 1, 2020 - December 31, 2020*, released February 17, 2021.

<sup>168</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan*, December 2020, released April 23, 2021.

<sup>169</sup> Ayaz Gul, "Afghan Taliban Ask Fighters Not To Harbor 'Foreign' Militants as US Reviews Peace Deal," *Voice of America*, February 2, 2021.



stewardship of global jihad,” as evidenced by the allegiance successive AQ leaders have pledged to successive Taliban leaders.<sup>170</sup> In an August 2021 interview, a Taliban spokesman said “there was no proof [bin Laden] was involved” in the September 11, 2001, attacks.<sup>171</sup> AQ figures were reportedly among the thousands of prisoners released from Parwan Detention Facility by the Taliban in August 2021.<sup>172</sup>

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.<sup>173</sup> U.S. intelligence officials also reportedly said in September 2021 that their “current assessment” is that Al Qaeda could “build some capability to at least threaten the homeland” in one to two years.<sup>174</sup> They additionally said there are “indications of some potential movement of al Qaeda to Afghanistan,” but that the United States faces greater terrorism threats from Yemen, Somalia, Syria, and Iraq.<sup>175</sup> Others argue that Al Qaeda is unlikely to resurge in Afghanistan given two decades of U.S. counterterrorism pressure, the existence of other safe havens around the world, and the potential for Taliban pressure.<sup>176</sup> The power dynamic between Al Qaeda and the Taliban has changed over the past 20 years: AQ financial and military support was critical in bolstering the Taliban before 2001, but AQ seems to have played little if any direct role in the Taliban’s 2021 return to power.

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.<sup>177</sup> Taliban compromises on certain issues as the group begins governing could prompt hardliners to defect to ISKP; some Taliban fighters have associated themselves with ISKP in the past. The United States previously supported Taliban offensives against ISKP, a rare area of prior U.S.-Taliban cooperation.<sup>178</sup> At a September 1, 2021, press conference, when asked about the possibility of future U.S. coordination with the Taliban against ISKP, General Milley said, “It’s possible.”<sup>179</sup>

On August 26, 2021, the Islamic State claimed responsibility for an attack (comprising a suicide bomber and additional fighters with firearms) at Kabul International Airport that left 13 U.S. service members and more than 150 Afghans dead. The attack raises questions about the

<sup>170</sup> 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.

<sup>171</sup> Rachel Pannett, “Taliban spokesman says ‘no proof’ bin Laden was responsible for 9/11 attacks,” *Washington Post*, August 26, 2021.

<sup>172</sup> 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.

<sup>173</sup> Michael Balsamo et al., “Concerns over US terror threat rising as Taliban hold grows,” *Associated Press*, August 15, 2021.

<sup>174</sup> Julian Barnes, “Al Qaeda Could Rebuilt in Afghanistan in a Year or Two, U.S. Officials Say,” *New York Times*, September 14, 2021.

<sup>175</sup> Barnes, op. cit., Courtney McBride and Warren Strobel, “U.S. Spies See Signs of Al Qaeda Fighters Returning to Afghanistan,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 14, 2021.

<sup>176</sup> Ahmad Siddiqi, “The West is getting Afghanistan wrong – again,” *Al Jazeera*, September 12, 2021; Daniel Byman, “Will Afghanistan Become a Terrorist Safe Haven Again?” *Foreign Affairs*, August 18, 2021.

<sup>177</sup> Yaroslav Trifimov et al., “Taliban Consolidate Control in Afghanistan’s Capital as Thousands Remain Stranded,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 17, 2021.

<sup>178</sup> Wesley Morgan, “Our secret Taliban air force,” *Washington Post*, October 22, 2020.

<sup>179</sup> Secretary of Defense Austin and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Milley Press Briefing on the End of the U.S. War in Afghanistan, Department of Defense, September 1, 2021.

Taliban’s ability (or perhaps willingness) to combat ISKP and the threat ISKP represents to the Taliban’s effort to demonstrate its ability to govern and secure the country.<sup>180</sup>

Beyond Afghanistan, some argue the Taliban’s takeover in Afghanistan could boost Islamist extremist terrorist groups worldwide; AQ supporters reportedly greeted the Taliban takeover as a victory for the cause of global jihadism.<sup>181</sup> One analyst has argued, in contrast, that the Taliban takeover showed the utility of diplomacy and negotiation to the achievement of jihad aims.<sup>182</sup>

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.<sup>183</sup> The lack of a U.S. military presence or partner force on the ground may also restrict intelligence gathering capabilities. An August 29, 2021, U.S. drone strike in Kabul that killed civilians demonstrated the challenges and limitations of these restrictions.<sup>184</sup> Some Members of Congress have argued that the Administration has not been sufficiently forthcoming with regard to U.S. plans to counter terrorism in Afghanistan going forward.<sup>185</sup>

## What are the prospects for continued U.S. civilian assistance to Afghanistan?<sup>186</sup>

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.<sup>187</sup> 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.<sup>188</sup> Successive Administrations have, pursuant to these laws, certified Afghan

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<sup>180</sup> Sudarsan Raghavan, “The U.S. branded the Haqqanis terrorists and issued \$5 million bounties. Now they’re in power in the Taliban government,” *Washington Post*, September 11, 2021.

<sup>181</sup> Warren Strobel and Dustin Volz, “Extremists Celebrate Taliban Takeover of Afghanistan on Social Media,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 17, 2021.

<sup>182</sup> Hassan Hassan, “What the Global War on Terror Really Accomplished,” *Newlines*, September 9, 2021.

<sup>183</sup> Missy Ryan and Souad Mekhennet, “After Taliban triumph, Biden faces even greater test in preventing extremist resurgence in Afghanistan,” *Washington Post*, August 16, 2021.

<sup>184</sup> Eric Schmitt and Helene Cooper, “Pentagon acknowledges Aug. 29 drone strike in Afghanistan was a tragic mistake that killed 10 civilians,” *New York Times*, September 17, 2021.

<sup>185</sup> Jonathan Swan and Zachary Basu, “Red flags for Biden’s ‘over-the-horizon’ strategy,” *Axios*, September 12, 2021.

<sup>186</sup> This section was prepared by Emily Morgenstern, Analyst in Foreign Assistance and Foreign Policy.

<sup>187</sup> SIGAR, *June 30, 2021 Quarterly Report*, p. 25. According to SIGAR, other reconstruction assistance includes security assistance, humanitarian aid, and agency operations.

<sup>188</sup> 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

compliance with these conditions and no U.S. funds have been withheld.<sup>189</sup> 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 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.<sup>190</sup>

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.

The Biden Administration has not signaled whether or not it will seek to provide civilian assistance to a Taliban-governed Afghanistan. Administration requests for funding related to Afghanistan have primarily focused on humanitarian assistance to aid Afghans in need, including those remaining in the country as well as those who have fled, as well as the processing of Afghan refugees.<sup>191</sup> Some Members of Congress have stated that they would not support bilateral U.S. assistance to Afghanistan under any conditions, while others may support some aid subject to certain criteria.<sup>192</sup> 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

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and prosecuting individuals alleged to be involved in illegal activities ...”, among others.

<sup>189</sup> For more, see “Aid Conditionality and Oversight” in CRS Report R45818, *Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy*, by Clayton Thomas.

<sup>190</sup> 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.

<sup>191</sup> “FY 2022 Continuing Resolution (CR) Appropriations Issues (anomalies required for a short-term CR),” at [https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/CR\\_Package\\_9-7-21.pdf](https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/CR_Package_9-7-21.pdf).

<sup>192</sup> Arshad Mohammed, Patricia Zengerle, and Jonathan Landay, “U.S. seen funding humanitarian aid for Afghanistan, but not its government,” *Reuters*, September 4, 2021.

- Are there concerns that civilian assistance to the country could be at risk of diversion by the Taliban or other, nonstate malign actors?

## What U.S. policy options are available to promote human rights in Afghanistan and respond to human rights abuses?<sup>193</sup>

Various U.S. policy options exist that may allow the United States to pressure the Taliban to protect human rights in Afghanistan, although the ability of the United States to induce genuine, robust, or sustained human rights commitments or actions is arguable.<sup>194</sup> The United States may consider whether and, if so, how to condition U.S. recognition of the Taliban as the official government of Afghanistan—or diplomatic relations with the government following such formal recognition—on criteria that includes respect for human rights.<sup>195</sup> The United States may also consider whether to maintain, increase, or reduce U.S. sanctions depending on actions taken by the Taliban with regard to human rights.<sup>196</sup> Biden Administration officials have indicated that sanctions will not be lifted if the Taliban is not protecting the basic rights of the Afghan people, and that the United States will condition recognition of the Taliban in part on human rights matters.<sup>197</sup>

To date, the United States has reportedly been working to coordinate policy on these matters with allies and partners, which could increase the likelihood of inducing actions or commitments by the Taliban.<sup>198</sup> An August 24, 2021 statement by G7 leaders stated that the Taliban “will be held accountable for their actions” on human rights and connected the “legitimacy of any future government” in Afghanistan with the Taliban’s upholding of international obligations and commitments.<sup>199</sup> On August 30, 2021, a U.N. Security Council resolution reaffirmed “the importance of upholding human rights including those of women, children, and minorities,” and encouraged an “inclusive, negotiated political settlement, with the full, equal and meaningful participation of women, that responds to the desire of Afghans to sustain and build on Afghanistan’s gains over the last twenty years in adherence to the rule of law.”<sup>200</sup> Secretary of State Blinken, while co-hosting a September 8, 2021 ministerial on Afghanistan with allies and partners, stated that the Taliban’s desired legitimacy and support “has to be earned ... through a sustained pattern of action that demonstrates a genuine commitment to core expectations that are

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<sup>193</sup> This section was prepared by Michael Weber, Analyst in Foreign Affairs.

<sup>194</sup> For an analysis of possible leverage that the United States has over the Taliban, see Desha Girod, “Can the West Make the Taliban Moderate?” *Foreign Policy*, August 31, 2021.

<sup>195</sup> See Tess Bridgeman and Ryan Goodman, “Recognition and the Taliban,” *Just Security*, August 17, 2021; and “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?” above.

<sup>196</sup> For a discussion of the possible implications of existing sanctions on the Taliban as a result of its control of Afghanistan, see Adam M. Smith, “The Humanitarian and Policy Challenges of U.S. Sanctions on the Taliban,” *Just Security*, August 23, 2021.

<sup>197</sup> U.S. Department of State, “Secretary Antony J. Blinken With Jake Tapper of State of the Union on CNN,” interview, August 15, 2021; U.S. Department of State, “Department Press Briefing, September 1, 2021.

<sup>198</sup> Ryan Heath, “Western nations coordinating to block Taliban recognition”; Andrea Shalal, “G7 leaders plan to pledge unity on Taliban recognition, sanctions,” *Reuters*, August 23, 2021; Patrick Wintour, “US-led meeting to set out framework for Taliban cooperation,” *The Guardian*, September 8, 2021.

<sup>199</sup> United Kingdom Prime Minister’s Office, “G7 Leaders Statement on Afghanistan,” August 24, 2021.

<sup>200</sup> U.N. Security Council, U.N. Document S/RES/2593 (2021), August 30, 2021.

enshrined” in the Security Council resolution. Blinken noted that “the names in the caretaker government do not inspire confidence” that the Taliban will form an inclusive government.<sup>201</sup>

As noted above, reports of human rights violations in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan may raise the prospect of targeted U.S. sanctions against individual perpetrators.<sup>202</sup> Congress has provided the executive branch with global authorities to target foreign persons for sanctions based on human rights, which can aim to “name and shame” individuals, disrupt human rights violations or abuses and/or deter future such acts, and promote accountability, among other goals. Most prominently, the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act (Title XII, Subtitle F of P.L. 114-328) provides the executive branch standing discretionary capacity to impose economic and visa sanctions on individuals or entities based on human rights.<sup>203</sup> Executive Order 13818, which implements and builds on the act, also provides broad scope to sanction associated networks of individuals and entities.<sup>204</sup> Separately, a recurring provision in SFOPS, Section 7031(c), provides for public visa sanctions designations against foreign officials as well as their immediate family members for gross violations of human rights.<sup>205</sup> Aside from utilizing these or other relevant authorities, the executive branch could also potentially choose to draw on Presidential emergency powers to establish an Afghanistan-specific sanctions regime that targets human rights abuses there.<sup>206</sup>

Foreign assistance is another possible tool to promote human rights in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. As discussed elsewhere in this report, human rights and other conditions may lead the United States to reduce or eliminate assistance to Afghanistan in the wake of the Afghan government’s collapse.<sup>207</sup> Various standing provisions of U.S. law also require or allow assistance restrictions based on human rights that could have relevance in the event of the Taliban’s continued control of the country. Provisions in the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, as amended, restrict security and development assistance to any country the government of which “engages in a consistent pattern of gross violations of internationally recognized human rights.”<sup>208</sup> Other provisions of law provide the capacity to more narrowly restrict certain types of assistance based on human rights-related matters.<sup>209</sup> The extent to which democracy assistance—which Congress

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<sup>201</sup> U.S. Department of State, “Secretary Antony J. Blinken Opening Remarks at Ministerial on Afghanistan,” September 8, 2021.

<sup>202</sup> According to the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, there are “credible reports of serious violations of international humanitarian law, and human rights abuses, taking place in many areas under effective Taliban control. They include, among others, summary executions of civilians and hors de combat members of the Afghan national security forces; restrictions on the rights of women – including their right to move around freely and girls’ right to attend schools; recruitment of child soldiers; and repression of peaceful protest and expression of dissent.” See U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, “Statement by Michelle Bachelet, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights,” August 24, 2021.

<sup>203</sup> For additional background see CRS In Focus IF10576, *The Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act*, by Michael A. Weber and Edward J. Collins-Chase.

<sup>204</sup> E.O. 13818, “Blocking the Property of Persons Involved in Serious Human Rights Abuse or Corruption,” 82 *Federal Register* 60839, December 20, 2017.

<sup>205</sup> For additional background see CRS In Focus IF10905, *FY2020 Foreign Operations Appropriations: Targeting Foreign Corruption and Human Rights Violations*, by Liana W. Rosen and Michael A. Weber

<sup>206</sup> See CRS Report R45618, *The International Emergency Economic Powers Act: Origins, Evolution, and Use*, coordinated by Christopher A. Casey.

<sup>207</sup> See “What are the prospects for continued U.S. civilian assistance to Afghanistan” and “What will happen to U.S. funding provided for Afghanistan security forces?”

<sup>208</sup> See Section 116 (22 U.S.C. §2151n) and Section 502B (22 U.S.C. §2304).

<sup>209</sup> For instance, human trafficking and the recruitment or use of child soldiers, which the United States has previously identified in Afghanistan in association with pursuant to relevant laws. See CRS Report R44953, *The State Department’s*



makes available “notwithstanding any other provision of law”—will continue in Afghanistan and in what form is arguably uncertain given the current security situation and possible curtailments on the activities of civil society organizations, human rights defenders, and independent media under Taliban rule. Notably, Congress has appropriated some assistance globally for purposes of supporting and protecting civil society activists and journalists who have been “threatened, harassed, or attacked.”<sup>210</sup>

Some additional questions that Congress may ask the executive branch include

- What specific human rights actions or commitments are sought from the Taliban, and how will the United States assess the credibility of any commitments? What actions will the United States take in response?
- To what extent, if at all, could U.S. attempts to exercise leverage over the Taliban be undermined by the actions of other actors such as China and Russia?
- What, if any, possible unintended humanitarian or other consequences could result if the United States maintains or increases sanctions due to concerns over human rights, and how, if at all, can these consequences be mitigated?
- What plans exist, if any, for U.S. democracy and human rights foreign assistance to continue in the context of a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan?

## What might the Taliban takeover mean for security cooperation as a national security tool?<sup>211</sup>

A central aspect of the U.S. and coalition campaign in Afghanistan was training and equipping the ANDSF.<sup>212</sup> 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.<sup>213</sup> 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 cooperation endeavors.<sup>214</sup> A 2014 Rand Corporation study of the relationship between security cooperation and fragility found that U.S. security cooperation efforts did correlate with a

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*Trafficking in Persons Report: Scope, Aid Restrictions, and Methodology*, by Michael A. Weber, Katarina C. O'Regan, and Liana W. Rosen; and CRS In Focus IF10901, *Child Soldiers Prevention Act: Security Assistance Restrictions*, by Michael A. Weber.

<sup>210</sup> See Section 7032(h) of P.L. 116-260.

<sup>211</sup> This section was prepared by Kathleen J. McInnis, Specialist in International Security.

<sup>212</sup> Craig Whitlock, “Afghan security forces’ wholesale collapse was years in the making,” *The Washington Post*, August 16, 2021.

<sup>213</sup> 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.

<sup>214</sup> 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.



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.<sup>215</sup> In 2020, the Fund for Peace, a nongovernmental organization, ranked Afghanistan among the ten most fragile states in the world.<sup>216</sup> 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?<sup>217</sup>

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.<sup>218</sup> 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 granted by Islam—from the right to education to the right to work—are protected.”<sup>219</sup> 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.

<sup>215</sup> Michael J. McNerney et al., “Assessing Security Cooperation as a Preventive Tool,” Rand Corporation, 2014.

<sup>216</sup> Fund for Peace, Fragile States Index, 2020, <https://fragilestatesindex.org/>.

<sup>217</sup> 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.

<sup>218</sup> U.S. Department of State, *Report on the Taliban’s War Against Women*, November 17, 2001.

<sup>219</sup> Sirajuddin Haqqani, “What We, the Taliban, Want,” *The New York Times*, February 20, 2020.

Since taking power in August 2021, Taliban officials have reiterated their commitment to protecting women’s rights “within the framework of Sharia.”<sup>220</sup> 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.<sup>221</sup> In the immediate aftermath of the takeover, Taliban leaders called on women government employees to return to their posts, as long as they were wearing the *hijab* (headscarf), and granted “amnesty” to all who worked with foreign powers.<sup>222</sup> Taliban leaders have subsequently called for women to stay home temporarily, until the military situation becomes more clear and “until we have a new procedure,” citing concerns over new Taliban forces who “have not yet been trained very well” and who may mistreat, harm, or harass women.<sup>223</sup>

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, before the full takeover in August, when a local community advocated for girls’ education, the Taliban allowed it until sixth grade; when it did not, the Taliban closed girls’ schools. A 2018 study could not identify a single girls’ secondary school open in areas of heavy Taliban influence or control.<sup>224</sup> On September 12, 2021, Acting Minister for Higher Education Abdul Baqi Haqqani announced that women would be allowed to continue attending university; however classrooms would be gender-segregated and Islamic dress would be compulsory for women. Haqqani also noted that a curriculum review would be undertaken, and that female students would only be allowed to be taught by women or by male teachers if they are hidden behind a curtain or via video conferencing.<sup>225</sup>

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.”<sup>226</sup>

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

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<sup>220</sup> “Transcript of Taliban’s first news conference in Kabul,” Al Jazeera, August 17, 2021.

<sup>221</sup> Lynne O’Donnell, “As Taliban Expand Control, Concerns About Forced Marriage and Sex Slavery Rise,” Foreign Policy, July 23, 2021.

<sup>222</sup> “Taliban urges government staff to return to work,” *Ariana News*, August 16, 2021. Other restrictions imposed in some areas of the country since May 2021 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.

<sup>223</sup> Maggie Astor, Sharif Hassan, and Norimitsu Onishi, “A Taliban spokesman urges women to stay home because fighters haven’t been trained to respect them,” *The New York Times*, August 24, 2021.

<sup>224</sup> Ashley Jackson, “Life Under the Taliban Shadow Government,” Overseas Development Institute, June 2018.

<sup>225</sup> Ezzatullah Mehrdad, Gerry Shih and Miriam Berger, “Taliban minister says women can attend university, but not alongside men,” *Washington Post*, September 12, 2021.

<sup>226</sup> John R. Allen and Vanda Felbab-Brown, “The fate of women’s rights in Afghanistan,” Brookings Institution, September 2020.

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 trauma, and the social stigma and discrimination that accompany permanent disability and widowhood.<sup>227</sup>

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.”<sup>228</sup> 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.<sup>229</sup>

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.<sup>230</sup> A number of women have publicly protested in Kabul and other cities to demand protection for human rights and inclusion in the Taliban government. Reports indicate some women have been beaten by Taliban fighters while protesting, and some journalists have been detained while covering the protests.<sup>231</sup> The caretaker cabinet announced on September 7, 2021, reinstates the Ministry of Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, which enforced the Taliban’s interpretation of Islam in the 1990s. It did not include the Ministry of Women’s Affairs, which was not present in the prior Taliban government but had been created during the most recent Afghan government.<sup>232</sup>

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 actors can induce the Taliban to institute policies respecting women’s rights.

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<sup>227</sup> SIGAR, *Support for Gender Equality: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, February 2021, pp. 11-12.

<sup>228</sup> 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.

<sup>229</sup> Aisha Ahmad, “Afghan Women: The State of Legal Rights and Security,” *Policy Perspectives*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (January - June 2006), pp. 25-41.

<sup>230</sup> 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.

<sup>231</sup> Yaroslav Trofimov, “Afghan Women Protest Hard-Line Taliban Government, Face Violent Crackdown,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 8, 2021.

<sup>232</sup> Rachel Pannett, “Who leads Afghanistan’s new government? Here’s what we know about the Taliban’s top officials,” *Washington Post*, September 8, 2021.

## How has the Taliban advance affected the humanitarian situation on the ground in Afghanistan?<sup>233</sup>

The humanitarian situation since the Taliban takeover is fragile and subject to change. Humanitarian needs are expected to rise significantly, and many humanitarian organizations are assessing the status of their activities based on the security situation. Current conditions could further hinder assistance delivery and risk the safety of humanitarian personnel. The United Nations confirmed its commitment to stay, deliver assistance, and support the humanitarian response in Afghanistan<sup>234</sup>; however, these efforts could shift depending on security considerations.<sup>235</sup> While the U.N. Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) has historically engaged with the Taliban, the level and extent, if any, of current communications are not publicly available. The International Committee of the Red Cross, which has been in Afghanistan since 1987 and has provided assistance across the country (including in Taliban-controlled areas), plans to continue its efforts along with the Afghan Red Crescent Society.<sup>236</sup> As of early 2021, roughly half of Afghanistan's population (18.4 million people, out of a population of 35 to 40 million) faced a severe humanitarian crisis<sup>237</sup>, with approximately one-third of the population struggling with emergency-level food insecurity.<sup>238</sup> The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, conflict, and natural disasters (most recently drought conditions) have exacerbated the humanitarian situation, resulting in chronic vulnerability among the general population. Escalating conflict in recent months has resulted in increasing numbers of trauma injuries among Afghans as well as increased overall protection concerns, particularly for women.<sup>239</sup>

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<sup>233</sup> This section was prepared by Rhoda Margesson, Specialist in International Humanitarian Policy.

<sup>234</sup> Humanitarian assistance is provided according to principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence.

<sup>235</sup> U.N. Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), "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. Specific U.N. entities have issued similar statements. On September 13, 2021, U.N. Secretary-General Guterres convened a high-level ministerial meeting in Geneva, Switzerland on the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan. See <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/secretary-generals-remarks-high-level-ministerial-meeting-humanitarian-situation>. Member States pledged more than \$1.2 billion for the people of Afghanistan at the ministerial meeting.

<sup>236</sup> ICRC, "Afghanistan: A Statement from Robert Mardini, the Director-General of the ICRC," August 17, 2021.

<sup>237</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the humanitarian situation; immediate and secondary impacts contributed to a near doubling of the number of people requiring assistance, from 9.4 million in January 2020 to 18.4 million in January 2021. U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (UNOCHA), "Afghanistan: Humanitarian Response Plan (2018-2021) - Year-End Monitoring Report (Jan - Dec 2020)," January 2020, and UNOCHA, "Afghanistan: Humanitarian Response Plan Summary 2021," May 9, 2021. 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. The urgent need to shift programming and resources toward the COVID-19 response also came at the expense of some other humanitarian priorities.

<sup>238</sup> "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.

<sup>239</sup> In Afghanistan, many protection concerns exist for vulnerable populations as well as the local staff aiming to assist them. According to the United Nations, for humanitarian organizations, protection is typically about advocating for and supporting ways to reduce and prevent people's exposure to risks and to ensure respect for the rights of individuals in accordance with international humanitarian, human rights and refugee law. UNOCHA, "Protection." See <https://www.unocha.org/es/themes/protection>. 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. Office of the Special

**U.N. Funding Appeals.** Prior to the Taliban takeover, humanitarian needs were not fully met, in part due to limited resources, government capacity shortcomings, and security constraints on humanitarian operations. The 2021 U.N. Afghanistan Humanitarian Response Plan totaled \$1.3 billion to meet basic needs such as food, water, shelter, protection, and medical services (including those related to COVID-19).<sup>240</sup> The August 27, 2021, U.N. Regional Refugee Preparedness and Response Plan sought \$299 million in anticipation of half a million Afghan refugee arrivals in neighboring countries through the end of 2021.<sup>241</sup> On September 5, 2021, the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs issued a flash appeal for \$606 million to meet immediate humanitarian response gaps through the end of the year.<sup>242</sup> For years, the U.S. government has been the largest donor of humanitarian assistance for the Afghan population, including those displaced internally or as refugees.<sup>243</sup>

## What is the status of Afghan Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and refugees?<sup>244</sup>

The United Nations and other humanitarian organizations continue to assess the rapidly evolving displacement situation in Afghanistan.<sup>245</sup> The status and number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Afghanistan are not known due to the rapidly evolving security and political situation on the ground. Prior to the Taliban takeover, the United Nations estimated there were more than 3.4 million IDPs, a number which is anticipated to increase.<sup>246</sup> Most Afghans are reportedly staying inside the country, with some returning home as areas stabilize and others fleeing rural areas for Kabul province and other major cities.<sup>247</sup> Humanitarian organizations are providing assistance to IDPs where access is possible.

The United Nations is preparing refugee-receiving countries (specifically Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) for potential new Afghan refugee arrivals.<sup>248</sup> The

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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.

<sup>240</sup> UNOCHA, *Global Humanitarian Overview 2021, May Update*, June 8, 2021. As of September 8, 2021, the appeal was 40.3% funded.

<sup>241</sup> UNHCR, *Afghanistan Situation Regional Refugee Preparedness and Response Plan: Summary & Inter-agency Funding Requirements July-December 2021*, August 27, 2021.

<sup>242</sup> UNOCHA, “Afghanistan Flash Appeal: Immediate Humanitarian Response Needs (Sept - Dec 2021),” September 5, 2021.

<sup>243</sup> USAID, *Afghanistan – Complex Emergency*, Fact Sheet #5, Fiscal Year (FY) 2021, September 3, 2021.

<sup>244</sup> This section was prepared by Rhoda Margesson, Specialist in International Humanitarian Policy.

<sup>245</sup> **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.

<sup>246</sup> UNOCHA, “Humanitarians seek \$1.3 billion to help millions in war-weary Afghanistan,” January 12, 2021 and “Afghanistan: Weekly Humanitarian Update (30 August – 5 September 2021); UNHCR, “UNHCR warns Afghanistan’s conflict taking the heaviest toll on displaced women and children,” August 13, 2021. UNHCR, “UNHCR Position on Returns to Afghanistan,” August 2021.

<sup>247</sup> UNHCR Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific, “Flash External Update: Afghanistan Situation #4,” September 1, 2021. UNHCR, *Afghanistan Situation: Supplementary Appeal: July-December 2021*, August 2021.

<sup>248</sup> UNHCR, *Afghanistan Situation Regional Refugee Preparedness and Response Plan: Summary & Inter-agency*



willingness and capacity of neighboring countries to host Afghan refugees in the short- and long-term remains unclear. (Iran and Pakistan already host over 2.2 million registered Afghan refugees—roughly 85% of all Afghan refugees—from previous waves of displacement.)<sup>249</sup> Border closures with neighboring countries continue to fluctuate, although most land border-crossing points have reportedly been closed except in limited instances. The United Nations has consistently reported Afghans moving toward Pakistan border posts, but no large-scale international displacement from Afghanistan has so far been observed.<sup>250</sup> Reports of recent Afghan arrivals in other countries, such as Turkey, are also beginning to emerge.<sup>251</sup> Citing the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol as well as customary international law, the United Nations 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).<sup>252</sup>

## What are the implications of the Taliban’s takeover for counternarcotics?<sup>253</sup>

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.<sup>254</sup> 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.<sup>255</sup> 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.<sup>256</sup>

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.<sup>257</sup> A Taliban

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*Funding Requirements July-December 2021*, August 27, 2021.

<sup>249</sup> Afghans have been displaced as refugees due to different conflicts over the past four decades, creating 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.

<sup>250</sup> UNHCR, *Afghanistan Situation Regional Refugee Preparedness and Response Plan: Summary & Inter-agency Funding Requirements July-December 2021*, August 27, 2021.

<sup>251</sup> The New Humanitarian, “The Afghan refugee crisis brewing on Turkey’s eastern border,” August 3, 2021.

<sup>252</sup> UNHCR, “UNHCR Position on Returns to Afghanistan,” August 2021.

<sup>253</sup> This section was prepared by Liana Rosen, Specialist in International Crime and Narcotics.

<sup>254</sup> 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.

<sup>255</sup> 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.

<sup>256</sup> 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.

<sup>257</sup> U.S. Department of State, “The Taliban And The Afghan Drug Trade,” Fact Sheet, December 20, 2000; United



spokesperson stated on August 17, 2021, that the Taliban envision an elimination of drug production and smuggling in the country—and are seeking international assistance to achieve this goal.<sup>258</sup> 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.<sup>259</sup> 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.<sup>260</sup>

Under Afghan 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 issues that Congress may consider as events continue to unfold 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.<sup>261</sup>

## How might the Taliban takeover affect Afghanistan’s relationships with the International Financial Institutions (IFIs)?<sup>262</sup>

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.<sup>263</sup> The World Bank is the largest single source of funding for Afghanistan’s development, financing up to 30% of the country’s civilian budget and supporting

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Nations International Drug Control Programme, *Afghanistan: Annual Opium Poppy Survey 2001*, October 2001, p. 11.

<sup>258</sup> Joanna Taylor, “Afghanistan ‘will not be a country of cultivation of opium anymore’, Taliban insists,” *Independent* (UK), August 18, 2021.

<sup>259</sup> Jonathan Landay, “Profits and poppy: Afghanistan’s illegal drug trade a boon for Taliban,” *Reuters*, August 16, 2021.

<sup>260</sup> 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>.

<sup>261</sup> 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.

<sup>262</sup> This section was prepared by Martin Weiss, Specialist in International Trade and Finance.

<sup>263</sup> The World Bank in Afghanistan, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/afghanistan/overview>.

core functions of the government.<sup>264</sup> As of December 2020, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) had extended around \$500 million in loans and grants to Afghanistan.<sup>265</sup> Multilateral development bank (MDB) financing supports a wide range of endeavors. World Bank financing is largely 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.<sup>266</sup> 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.<sup>267</sup> At the IMF, IMF Press Secretary Gerry Rice released a statement on August 18 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."<sup>268</sup> The United States was also reportedly negotiating to pause the SDR allocation to Afghanistan.<sup>269</sup> Some Members of Congress have expressed their concern about Afghanistan's SDR allocation. On August 17, 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.<sup>270</sup>

The World Bank suspended funding for dozens of projects in Afghanistan on August 24, citing questions over the legitimacy of Taliban rule. Under World Bank policies, the organization cannot disburse funds when there is no agreement by its 189 member countries on whether a country has a legitimate government. The World Bank completed evacuation of its Kabul-based staff to Islamabad the previous week.

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<sup>264</sup> Josh Zumbrun, "World Bank Freezes Aid to Afghanistan," *Wall Street Journal*, August 24, 2021.

<sup>265</sup> Asian Development Bank Member Fact Sheet, June 2021, <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/27747/afg-2020.pdf>.

<sup>266</sup> CRS In Focus IF11835, *International Monetary Fund: Special Drawing Rights Allocation*, by Martin A. Weiss and Rebecca M. Nelson

<sup>267</sup> Alison Duxbury, *The Participation of States in International Organisations* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 20.

<sup>268</sup> Gerry Rice (@IMFSpokesperson), Twitter, August 18, 2018, available at <https://twitter.com/IMFSpokesperson/status/1428096013374410752>

<sup>269</sup> Chris Giles et al., "Afghanistan faces 'dire' financial outlook, warns former central bank chief," *Financial Times*, August 18, 2021.

<sup>270</sup> The letter is available at <https://hill.house.gov/uploadedfiles/20210817ltrtosecyellenresdrstoafghanistan.pdf>.

## What Afghan central bank assets did the Biden Administration put on hold, and what are the potential implications?<sup>271</sup>

Afghanistan's central bank (Da Afghanistan Bank) held about \$9.5 billion in international reserves, according to a June 2021 IMF assessment.<sup>272</sup> 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 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.<sup>273</sup> 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.<sup>274</sup> 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.<sup>275</sup> Taliban members reportedly attempted to inspect the foreign reserves only to be told by central bank officials that they could not access them because they were being stored by the Federal Reserve Bank of New York.<sup>276</sup>

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. The Taliban named a new acting governor of Afghanistan's central bank, Haji Mohammad Idris, who has no formal economic training. He reportedly headed the Taliban's economic commission, whose activities included collecting illegal taxes from businesses and farmers to fund the militant group's insurgency.<sup>277</sup>

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?
- 70%-80% of the Afghanistan government's budget has been funded historically by international donors.<sup>278</sup> Without donor funding, how do the Taliban intend to finance the government, including paying government salaries and providing basic services?

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<sup>271</sup> This section was prepared by Rebecca Nelson, Specialist in International Trade and Finance.

<sup>272</sup> International reserves are gold and assets (such as cash, bank deposits, and government securities) denominated in major foreign currencies, such as dollars and euros.

<sup>273</sup> Jeff Stein, "Biden Administration Freezes Billions of Dollars in Afghan Reserves, Depriving Taliban of Cash," *Washington Post*, August 17, 2021.

<sup>274</sup> JP Koning, "What Happens to the Afghanistan Central Bank's Assets?," *Moneynews Blog*, August 17, 2021.

<sup>275</sup> Ajmal Ahmady, *Twitter*, August 18, 2021.

<sup>276</sup> Natalie Musumeci, "The Taliban Tried to Get its Hands on the Afghanistan Central Bank's Nearly \$10 Billion in Reserves, but Most of the Money Is in New York," *Business Insider*, August 25, 2021.

<sup>277</sup> Eltaf Najafizada, "Taliban Name Obscure Official as Central Bank Chief with Crisis Looming," *Bloomberg*, August 23, 2021.

<sup>278</sup> David Lawder, "Taliban Rule Presents Aid Agencies with Moral, Fiscal Dilemma," *Reuters*, August 24, 2021.

- 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?<sup>279</sup>

As of September 13, 2021, Afghanistan has reported more than 155,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 7,000 deaths from the disease.<sup>280</sup> Public health responders in the country believe the actual figures are likely higher due to low testing rates and lack of a national death registration system.<sup>281</sup> On September 2, 2021, WHO officials reported that 18% of COVID-19 diagnostic tests were positive; transmission of the highly contagious Delta variant is reportedly contributing to a fourth wave of the pandemic in the country.<sup>282</sup> Instability and interruption to aid flows have also forced temporary suspension of some COVID-19 responses, particularly plans to establish new diagnostic laboratories, install oxygen plants in hospitals, and expand isolation centers and intensive care unit beds for COVID-19.<sup>283</sup> According to WHO, after September 5, 2021, 3% of the country's isolation beds and 8% of its intensive care unit (ICU) beds will remain operational.<sup>284</sup>

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.<sup>285</sup> WHO reported that its work builds on routine health care activities in the country, such as polio immunization campaigns and health systems capacity strengthening.<sup>286</sup> As of September 13, 2021, approximately 1.9 million COVID-19 vaccines had been administered in Afghanistan, covering roughly 5% of the country's population.<sup>287</sup> According to the most recently available

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<sup>279</sup> This section was prepared by Sara Tharakan, Analyst in Global Health and International Development, and Tiaji Salaam-Blyther, Specialist in Global Health.

<sup>280</sup> WHO, *COVID-19 Dashboard: Afghanistan*, accessed on September 13, 2021.

<sup>281</sup> Emma Farge, "Hundreds of health centres at risk of closure in Afghanistan – WHO," Reuters, September 6, 2021. Daa Hadid, "A Crippling 3rd Wave Of COVID Adds To Afghanistan's Woes," NPR, July 2, 2021.

<sup>282</sup> WHO, "Afghanistan Emergency Situation Report Issue 5," September 2, 2021, accessed on September 13, 2021.

<sup>283</sup> WHO, "Statement by the WHO Representative in Afghanistan," August 24, 2021.

<sup>284</sup> WHO, Afghanistan Emergency Situation Report Issue 5, September 2, 2021, accessed on September 13, 2021.

<sup>285</sup> Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, "Resourceful Optimism: Fighting COVID-19 in Afghanistan," April 20, 2021.

<sup>286</sup> WHO, "WHO continues fight against pandemic amid worsening global public health emergency and uneven vaccine rollout," July 20, 2021.

<sup>287</sup> WHO, "Statement by the WHO Representative in Afghanistan," August 24, 2021; and WHO, *COVID-19 Dashboard: Afghanistan*, accessed on September 13, 2021. Johns Hopkins University Coronavirus Resource Center, *Afghanistan: Country Profile*, accessed September 13, 2021.

reports, prior to the Taliban takeover, Afghanistan was in phase one of its vaccination campaign, and was vaccinating front-line health care workers, media personnel, teachers, and its security and defense forces.<sup>288</sup> In the longer term, it is unclear how supply chain disruptions associated with earlier Kabul International Airport (formerly Hamid Karzai International Airport) closures will affect the COVID-19 vaccine supply, as well as other necessary health and hospital supplies.

The implications of the Taliban's takeover, in terms of prospects for COVID-19 control, remain to be seen. Though WHO and UN agencies have committed to long-term operations in the country, including delivering COVID-19 and polio immunizations (Afghanistan is one of the last countries where polio is endemic), the World Bank and WHO warn that the interruption of aid flows may leave millions of Afghans without access to health services and jeopardize the progress on health indicators of the past 20 years (such as reductions in maternal and infant mortality and increases in immunization rates).<sup>289</sup>

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), in early September 2021, 90% of health facilities in Afghanistan closed due to restrictions on aid financing to the Taliban; WHO is funding 500 clinics as a stopgap measure, though 75% of clinics remain closed.<sup>290</sup> Health facilities continue to experience critical shortages in medical supplies due to earlier uncertainty at the Kabul international airport, which has created a backlog of deliveries.<sup>291</sup> The airport's reopening and resumption of some flights is expected to increase aid flows eventually.<sup>292</sup> Overcrowding among displaced people has reportedly limited infection prevention measures and increased the risk of transmission of different types of infections, including COVID-19.

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.<sup>293</sup> Some observers dismissed the Taliban's earlier response and charged that the Taliban's escalation of violence since 2019 was the main factor impeding the country's response to the pandemic.<sup>294</sup> WHO officials have warned that Taliban attacks on health care workers remain a challenge, and have said large numbers of internally displaced persons are fostering conditions for increased COVID-19 transmission.<sup>295</sup>

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<sup>288</sup> WHO, "WHO continues fight against pandemic amid worsening global public health emergency and uneven vaccine rollout," July 20, 2021.

<sup>289</sup> WHO, "Afghanistan Emergency Situation Report Issue 5," September 2, 2021, accessed on September 13, 2021. Karl Blanchet, Ahmed Shah Salahi, and Sayed Saeezai, et al., "Afghanistan needs international support. But what kind?," *The New Humanitarian*, September 13, 2021. Irwin Roy, "Afghan healthcare under threat from international aid freeze," *The New Humanitarian*, September 6, 2021. WHO, *Statement on Afghanistan by Dr Ahmed Al-Mandhari, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean*, August 18, 2021.

<sup>290</sup> WHO, "Afghanistan Emergency Situation Report Issue 5," September 2, 2021, accessed on September 13, 2021; Irwin Loy, "Afghan healthcare under threat from international aid freeze," *The New Humanitarian*, September 6, 2021.

<sup>291</sup> Apoorva Mandivilli, "Health care in Afghanistan is crumbling, aid groups warn," *The New York Times*, September 13, 2021.

<sup>292</sup> "Kabul airport reopens to receive aid, domestic flights restart," *Reuters*, September 4, 2021.

<sup>293</sup> 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.

<sup>294</sup> Ashley Jackson, "For the Taliban, the Pandemic is a Ladder," *Foreign Policy*, May 6, 2020.

<sup>295</sup> WHO, *Afghanistan Emergency Situation Report Issue 5*, September 2, 2021, accessed on September 13, 2021. WHO, *Statement on Afghanistan by Dr Ahmed Al-Mandhari, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean*, August 18, 2021.



Given these factors, it is unclear whether to, and what extent, the new government formed by the Taliban will assist in COVID-19 control and vaccination campaigns.

## How have other countries reacted to the Taliban's takeover?

### How have NATO allies responded to the U.S. withdrawal?<sup>296</sup>

Following the February 2020 U.S.-Taliban agreement and subsequent U.S. consultations with NATO allies, NATO announced in April 2021 that it would begin withdrawing from Afghanistan on May 1, 2021, and complete the withdrawal “within a few months.”<sup>297</sup> Some European allies expressed unease that the mission—which they viewed as a symbol of European solidarity with the United States following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001—was ending on terms determined largely by the United States and with what they viewed as limited European involvement.<sup>298</sup> Criticism increased during the Taliban takeover in August, driven by a belief that Europeans in Afghanistan and their Afghan partners were put at heightened risk due to actions taken by the United States.<sup>299</sup> European allies also have expressed concern about the longer-term implications for Europe of the withdrawal, particularly with respect to potential refugee flows and terrorist threats. More broadly, the withdrawal has reportedly raised questions in Europe about European allies' dependence on the United States and about U.S. reliability as an ally.<sup>300</sup>

NATO's almost 20-year engagement in Afghanistan was by far the most expansive military operation in the alliance's history. Close to one-third of the fatalities suffered by coalition forces in Afghanistan were from non-U.S. NATO member and partner countries.<sup>301</sup> In 2011, the high point of the NATO mission in Afghanistan in terms of troop numbers, about 40,000 of the 130,000 troops deployed to the mission were from non-U.S. NATO countries and partners.<sup>302</sup> Given their level of engagement, European allies were critical of the Trump Administration's lack of consultation with them prior to its February 2020 agreement with the Taliban.<sup>303</sup> Although they welcomed President Biden's pledge of more substantive consultations before finalizing decisions on the U.S. withdrawal, many European allies subsequently asserted that “the timing and nature of the withdrawal were set in Washington” and that they were not adequately consulted during the planning process.<sup>304</sup> Such criticism continued into late August, as several allied governments,

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<sup>296</sup> This section was prepared by Paul Belkin, Analyst in European Affairs.

<sup>297</sup> NATO, “NATO and Afghanistan,” updated regularly at [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_8189.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_8189.htm).

<sup>298</sup> See, for example, Jacopo Barigazzi, “Biden's Afghan pullout triggers unease among NATO allies,” *Politico*, April 15, 2021.

<sup>299</sup> Matthew Karnitsching, “Disbelief and betrayal: Europe reacts to Biden's Afghanistan ‘miscalculation,’” *Politico*, August 17, 2021.

<sup>300</sup> Josep Borrell Fontelles, “Europe, Afghanistan is Your Wake-Up Call,” *New York Times*, September 1, 2021; Gilles Gressani, “Elements for a Doctrine: A Conversation with Charles Michel,” Groupe d'Etudes Geopolitiques, September 8, 2021.

<sup>301</sup> “Afghanistan Coalition Military Fatalities by Year,” [icasualties.org](https://icasualties.org). Figures are updated regularly.

<sup>302</sup> NATO, *ISAF: Key Facts and Figures*, June 6, 2011, at [https://www.nato.int/isaf/placemats\\_archive/2011-06-06-ISAF-Placemat.pdf](https://www.nato.int/isaf/placemats_archive/2011-06-06-ISAF-Placemat.pdf).

<sup>303</sup> “Germany Worried at Possible U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan,” *DeutscheWelle*, December 28, 2018; Ben Farmer, “Britain Left in Dark over U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan,” *The Telegraph*, December 21, 2018.

<sup>304</sup> Josep Borrell Fontelles, “Europe, Afghanistan is Your Wake-Up Call,” *New York Times*, September 1, 2021



including France, Germany, and the United Kingdom (UK), unsuccessfully requested that the Biden Administration extend the August 31 deadline for withdrawal from Afghanistan.<sup>305</sup>

As European allies were withdrawing forces over the summer, they also began to facilitate the removal of small numbers of Afghans. By the end of August, European allies and Canada had evacuated more than 28,000 Afghan citizens, including more than 8,000 by the UK, almost 5,000 by Italy, 4,100 by Germany, 2,600 by France, and 1,900 by Spain.<sup>306</sup> NATO allies Albania and North Macedonia, as well as neighboring Kosovo, reportedly agreed to host several thousand at-risk Afghan evacuees seeking entry into the United States and other third countries (Albania about 4,000, Kosovo about 2,000, and North Macedonia between 800 and 1,800).<sup>307</sup>

The resettlement of Afghans in Europe comes as the European Union (EU) and its member states have struggled to address migration and refugee flows to Europe and are eager to avoid a recurrence of the 2015 crisis in which over a million migrants and refugees reached Europe. Prior to the Taliban takeover, some governments had moved to repatriate Afghan asylum-seekers rejected on the grounds that conditions in Afghanistan, aided by NATO engagement, did not merit refugee status. Afghan repatriation has since halted, but many European governments have expressed concern about the potential for growing numbers of migrants and refugees from Afghanistan.<sup>308</sup> These concerns could be compounded by fears of a potentially heightened terrorist threat to Europe posed by Taliban rule. European allies continue to grapple with the threat posed by ISIS and affiliated groups both in the Middle East and Africa. European citizens who have trained with these terrorist groups and the potential for refugees or migrants to become radicalized after arriving in Europe have been particular concerns.<sup>309</sup>

The U.S. withdrawal also has raised broader questions about European reliance on the United States, particularly militarily, and about potentially shifting U.S. priorities. As noted above, some European allies were critical of their lack of involvement in determining the end of an operation they viewed largely as an example of transatlantic cooperation and unity. For these critics, the withdrawal has compounded existing concerns about U.S. credibility based on policy reversals experienced during the Trump Administration; perceived U.S. political fragmentation; and concerns about longer-term U.S. foreign policy trends, such as a potential embrace of isolationism. Others in Europe have stressed that the Afghanistan mission, and the nature of the withdrawal, exposed critical shortfalls in European military capabilities—in this view, European reliance on U.S. defensive capabilities meant that European troops could not safely remain in Afghanistan without U.S. support.<sup>310</sup>

These considerations have heightened longer-standing calls in Europe for European allies to reduce dependency on the United States and pursue a more autonomous EU foreign and security

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<sup>305</sup> Matthew Lee, Jim Lawless, and Aamer Madhani, “G-7 Leaders Can’t Sway Biden to Delay Afghanistan Withdrawal,” Associated Press, August 25, 2021.

<sup>306</sup> George Bowden, “Afghanistan: Final Flights Arriving as UK’s Campaign Ends,” BBC News, August 29, 2021; “Factbox: Evacuations from Afghanistan by Country,” Reuters, August 30, 2021.

<sup>307</sup> “Albania: First Arrivals of Afghan Refugees,” EuroNews, August 27, 2021; “Afghans Evacuated from Kabul in U.S. Airlift Arrive in Kosovo,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, August 29, 2021; “More than 100 Afghan Citizens Offered Refuge in North Macedonia,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, August 31, 2021.

<sup>308</sup> Katrin Bennhold and Steven Erlanger, “Why Europe’s Leaders Say they Won’t Welcome More Afghan Refugees,” *New York Times*, August 23, 2021; Lili Bayer and Zia Weise, “Migration Fears Complicate Europe’s Response to Afghanistan Crisis,” *Politico.eu*, August 16, 2021.

<sup>309</sup> Atlantic Council. “Experts React: What the Fall of Afghanistan Means for Europe,” August 18, 2021; Laurens Cerulus, “Europe Needs Security ‘Screening’ of Afghan Refugees, Top Official Says,” *Politico.eu*, August 26, 2021.

<sup>310</sup> Steven Erlanger, “Afghan Fiasco Raises Hard Questions for Europe,” *New York Times*, August 31, 2021.

policy. Proponents of increased EU “strategic autonomy,” including French President Macron, have said a more independent and militarily capable Europe would benefit both Europe and the United States by ensuring more equitable burden-sharing.<sup>311</sup> Others in Europe, including Poland and the Baltic States, have been more reluctant to endorse policies that might be viewed as undermining strong U.S. leadership of NATO.<sup>312</sup>

## How have regional countries reacted to the Taliban’s takeover?<sup>313</sup>

**Pakistan.** Pakistan has played an active and, by many accounts, disruptive and destabilizing role in Afghan affairs for decades. Afghanistan’s former leaders, along with many U.S. and Western officials, attribute the Taliban’s existence—as well as its strength and endurance over the past two decades—to either the active or passive support of Pakistan’s military and intelligence services, including allowing the Taliban to maintain safe havens on Pakistani territory.<sup>314</sup> The Trump Administration sought and received Islamabad’s assistance in facilitating U.S. talks with the Taliban after 2018, and U.S. assessments of Pakistan’s role in this process have generally been positive.<sup>315</sup> Islamabad welcomed the February 2020 U.S.-Taliban agreement as a vindication of its “long-held stance that there is no military solution of the Afghan conflict,” and it contended that the agreement would pave the way for intra-Afghan negotiations. U.S. withdrawal appears to many observers to have validated Pakistan’s broader post-2001 strategy.<sup>316</sup>

At present, Pakistan claims to seek the establishment of an inclusive government in Afghanistan and it vows to be “a responsible partner for peace and security in Afghanistan.”<sup>317</sup> The first high-ranking Pakistani official to visit Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover was the chief of Pakistan’s lead intelligence agency, Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), leading to speculation that he had “brokered” a subsequent power-sharing arrangement among Afghan Taliban leaders. Five days later, CIA Director William Burns was in Pakistan to consult on Afghanistan with both Pakistan’s Chief of Army Staff and the ISI chief.<sup>318</sup>

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<sup>311</sup> Sam Fleming et al., “Afghanistan pullout deepens EU concern over lack of military power,” *Financial Times*, September 2, 2021.

<sup>312</sup> Justyna Gotkowska, “Poland and the Baltic States: A Preference for a Renewed West,” Heinrich Boll Stiftung, January 8, 2021.

<sup>313</sup> 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; Alan Kronstadt, Specialist in South Asian Affairs; Maria Blackwood, Analyst in Asian Policy; and Clayton Thomas, Analyst in Middle Eastern Affairs.

<sup>314</sup> See, for example, “Some Afghans Blame Neighboring Pakistan for Taliban Gains,” *Associated Press*, August 12, 2021; White House, *Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia*, August 21, 2017, and the July 8, 2021, remarks by a Pentagon spokesperson at <https://go.usa.gov/xFeAg>.

<sup>315</sup> 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. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin “expressed gratitude” to his Pakistani counterpart in March 2021 for Pakistan’s “continued support for the Afghan peace process” (“Mullah Baradar released by Pakistan at the behest of US: Khalilzad,” *The Hindu*, February 9, 2019; Baqir Sajjad Syed, “Pentagon chief praises Pakistan’s role in Afghan peace process,” *Dawn*, March 23, 2021).

<sup>316</sup> See the February 29, 2020, Foreign Affairs Ministry release at <https://tinyurl.com/tx2ezo7>; Anne Patterson, “What’s Next for Pakistan and the US?,” Middle East Institute, April 15, 2021. According to a major early 2021 assessment, “Pakistan has adopted a policy that can loosely be described as preferring instability in Afghanistan to a stable Afghanistan that is allied to India” (“Afghan Study Group Final Report: A Pathway for Peace in Afghanistan,” U.S. Institute of Peace, February 3, 2021).

<sup>317</sup> Amb. Asad Majeed Khan, “Inclusive Government Needed in Afghanistan” (op-ed), *Washington Times*, September 2, 2021.

<sup>318</sup> ISI Director-General Lt. Gen. Faiz Hameed was in Kabul on September 4 (“DG ISI Meets Taliban Leaders in

Senior Pakistani officials have issued some expressions of enthusiasm over the Taliban's swift victory. In mid-August, as the Taliban entered Kabul, Prime Minister Imran Khan said, "What is happening in Afghanistan now, they have broken the shackles of slavery."<sup>319</sup> Pakistan's security establishment, seeking to prevent establishment of a pro-India government in Kabul, apparently continues to view the Afghan Taliban as a relatively friendly and reliably anti-India element in Afghanistan. Pakistani leaders claim that their influence over the group is limited.<sup>320</sup> Many observers see the Taliban's takeover as a substantive triumph for Pakistan, bolstering its influence in Afghanistan and, correspondingly, advancing its decades-long efforts to limit Indian influence there. These developments provide Pakistan with possible advantages as regional powers attempt to gain influence in South and Central Asian politics.<sup>321</sup>

Despite some implicitly pro-Taliban statements from top Pakistani officials, numerous analysts question whether Pakistan's preferred outcome in Afghanistan was a Taliban-dominated government, in particular one that emerged through military means (which Pakistani leaders continue to deny having sought).<sup>322</sup> In this way, the Taliban takeover appears to be dividing Pakistan's strategic community.<sup>323</sup> Afghanistan-Pakistan relations have been complicated by the presence of at least 1.4 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan (unofficial estimates reach up to 3 million) since the 1990s, as well as an historical, ethnically tinged dispute over their shared 1,600-mile-long border. Pakistan has in recent years fenced 90% of that frontier and operates 800-900 checkpoints there.<sup>324</sup> As of mid-September 2021, the tide of refugees has not been as great as many predicted, but a new influx may present difficulties for Pakistan, including domestic political and ethnic-based resistance.<sup>325</sup> The Taliban (like past Afghan governments) have never accepted the British colonial-era "Durand Line" as a legitimate international frontier separating Afghanistan and Pakistan. Such differences may exacerbate Pashtun nationalism inside Pakistan, creating a potential flashpoint in future relations.<sup>326</sup>

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Kabul," *News International* (Karachi), September 5, 2021; "Endless Warfare Lies Ahead Afghanistan Despite ISI-Brokered Deal to Appoint Name Minister," *First Post* (Delhi), September 6, 2021). See the Pakistan Army's September 9, 2021, release at <https://ispr.gov.pk/press-release-detail.php?id=6273>.

<sup>319</sup> "Taliban Has 'Broken Shackles of Slavery,'" Says Pak PM Imran Khan," NDTV (Delhi), August 16, 2021.

<sup>320</sup> In June 2021, Pakistan's Prime Minister seemed to blame the United States for this development, telling an interviewer, "Given that the United States gave a date of withdrawal, from then onward, our leverage diminished on the Taliban" ("Imran Khan Urges a New Pakistan-U.S. Bond" (interview), *New York Times*, June 25, 2021).

<sup>321</sup> "The Real Winner of the Afghan War? It's Not Who You Think," *New York Times*, August 26, 2021; "Pakistan, China, India Jockey for Position in Afghanistan's New Great Game," *Reuters*, August 23, 2021.

<sup>322</sup> Husain Haqqani, "Pakistan's Pyrrhic Victory in Afghanistan," *Foreign Affairs*, July 2021; "Pakistan, After Rooting for Afghanistan's Taliban, Faces a Blowback," *Wall Street Journal*, July 9, 2021; Hamid Mir, "Pakistanis Aren't Rejoicing Over the Triumph of the Taliban" (op-ed), *Washington Post*, August 16, 2021.

<sup>323</sup> "Pakistan Divided Over Taliban Victories in Afghanistan," *Gandhara* (Prague), July 19, 2021. In the words of one longtime observer, "many Pakistanis are gloating, while others are warning about the future. We are doing a victory dance, but there is dread in our hearts" (Mohammed Hanif, "In Pakistan, We Cultivated the Taliban, Then We Turned on Them" (op-ed), *Guardian* (London), August 24, 2021).

<sup>324</sup> "For Afghanistan Peace and Order, World Leaders Must Learn From Past Mistakes" (interview with Pakistan's Ambassador to the United States), *USA Today*, August 19, 2021.

<sup>325</sup> "Afghans Who Fled the First Taliban Regime Found Precarious Sanctuary in Pakistan," *Time*, August 18, 2021; "Afghans Flee to Pakistan, an Uncertain Future Awaits," *New York Times*, September 8, 2021. Pakistan's government has anticipated as many as 700,000 new Afghan refugees at a potential cost of \$2.2 billion as officials establish camps and ways to track and feed them ("Hosting 700k Afghans Will Cost \$2.2b for 3 years," *Express Tribune* (Karachi), July 18, 2021).

<sup>326</sup> Madiha Afzal, "An Uneasy Limbo for US-Pakistan Relations Amidst the Withdrawal from Afghanistan," Brookings Institution, August 6, 2021.

The Taliban's victory may pose other challenges for Pakistan. Many commentators, including some from Pakistan, express strong concerns about the prospect that the takeover could empower Islamist militant groups that have continued to operate on Pakistani territory.<sup>327</sup> Given Pakistan's own experience with domestic Islamist militancy over the past two decades, some analysts doubt that Islamabad will support a Taliban regime in Kabul in the same manner as it did in the 1990s.<sup>328</sup> The threat of increasing Islamist militancy in Afghanistan could have serious implications for Pakistan's internal security. Terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and its regional affiliate, Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP, also known as ISIS-K and founded mainly by Pakistani militants) have long considered the Pakistani government to be a prime regional adversary and may be further empowered.<sup>329</sup>

The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP or Pakistani Taliban) conducted numerous domestic terrorist attacks in Pakistan that cost thousands of lives from 2007 to 2014. Pakistani Army operations in western Pakistan in 2014 reduced such incidents, but the group appears to be resurging in 2021—in concert with Al Qaeda—with up to 6,000 cadres.<sup>330</sup> The Afghan Taliban have, as part of their takeover, freed thousands of prisoners from Afghan government jails, including some high-ranking TTP figures and a reported 780 fighters.<sup>331</sup> The Pakistani Taliban, which is distinct from but has significant ideological ties to the Afghan Taliban, seemingly have renewed their “allegiance to the Islamic Emirate” in Afghanistan. The two groups reportedly have been described as “two faces of the same coin” by top Pakistani security officials.<sup>332</sup>

**China (People's Republic of China, or 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 may try to foster friendly ties with the Taliban in an attempt to influence the group's activities in ways that protect China's interests.<sup>333</sup> The U.S. withdrawal and Taliban takeover have afforded the PRC an opportunity to criticize the United States and question Washington's credibility with allies and partners.<sup>334</sup>

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<sup>327</sup> “The Fall and Rise of the Taliban,” *Dawn* (Karachi), August 29, 2021; “On Afghanistan, Pakistan Walks Tightrope of Optimism and Caution,” *Al Jazeera* (Doha), August 28, 2021; Abdul Basit, “A Taliban Takeover Will Strengthen Pakistan's Jihadis,” *Foreign Policy*, August 17, 2021.

<sup>328</sup> See, for example, Madiha Afzal and Michael O'Hanlon, “Why Staying in Afghanistan Is the Least Bad Choice for Biden” (op-ed), *Washington Post*, March 8, 2021; “Enough is Enough: Pakistan Not Happy With Afghan Taliban,” *News International* (Karachi), April 28, 2021.

<sup>329</sup> Robin Wright, “Afghanistan, Again, Becomes a Cradle for Jihadism – and Al Qaeda,” *New Yorker*, August 23, 2021; “Zahid Hussein, “Multiple Security Challenges for Pakistan as Afghan War Comes Close to Borders” (op-ed), *Arab News* (Jeddah), July 17, 2021. On IS-K, see “Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K),” Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2018.

<sup>330</sup> Abdul Sayed and Tori Hamming, “The Revival of the Pakistani Taliban,” *CTC Sentinel*, April/May 2021; Colin Clarke, “Twenty Years After 9/11: What is the Future of the Global Jihadi Movement?,” *CTC Sentinel*, September 2021.

<sup>331</sup> “Despite Taliban Assurances, World Frets Again About Afghan Militant Havens,” *Reuters*, August 18, 2021.

<sup>332</sup> “Pakistani Taliban's Emir Renews Allegiance to Afghan Taliban,” *Long War Journal*, August 19, 2021; “Pakistani Army Warns of Blowback in Crackdown on Afghan Taliban,” *Gandhara* (Prague), July 2, 2021.

<sup>333</sup> 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](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).

<sup>334</sup> 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

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, although it has not recognized it as such as of September 17, 2021. Reiterating the PRC's proclaimed foreign policy principle of "non-interference in external affairs," PRC officials repeatedly have called on the Taliban to establish "solidarity" with "all factions and ethnic groups in Afghanistan" and build an "open and inclusive political structure" with which to govern Afghanistan.<sup>335</sup> Spokespeople of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs welcomed multiple 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—most importantly to China's leaders—prevent Afghan territory from being used to engage in terrorist acts against China.<sup>336</sup> For their part, the Taliban has indicated it intends to cooperate closely with China, with a Taliban spokesperson reportedly suggesting in one foreign media interview that China would be the Afghan government's most important partner going forward.<sup>337</sup>

PRC leaders and experts have long been concerned that Afghanistan-based terrorists pose a "direct threat" to China's national security.<sup>338</sup> Afghanistan shares a mountainous 47-mile-long border with China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, which is home to most of China's predominantly Muslim Uyghur ethnic group.<sup>339</sup> 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.<sup>340</sup> Chinese leaders fear terrorist groups operating out of Central Asia and Afghanistan either harbor Uyghur terrorists or

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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](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1900083.shtml).

<sup>335</sup> 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>.

<sup>336</sup> 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/>.

<sup>337</sup> Mattia Sorbi, "Afghanistan, il portavoce dei talebani Zabiullah Mujahid: 'Chiediamo all'Italia di riconosceri. La Cina ci finanzia,'" *La Repubblica*, September 1, 2021.

<sup>338</sup> PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "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](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1895950.shtml).

<sup>339</sup> Uyghurs are a Turkic ethnic group who practice a moderate form of Sunni Islam.

<sup>340</sup> CRS In Focus IF10281, *China Primer: Uyghurs*, by Thomas Lum and Michael A. Weber.



support Uyghur terrorist groups.<sup>341</sup> Chinese officials have asked the Taliban to “make a clean break with” the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), a small group that seeks to establish an independent Islamic state for the Uyghurs.<sup>342</sup> The Taliban has insisted it will not tolerate ETIM’s activities in Afghanistan, suggesting that most ETIM fighters had already left the country at the Taliban’s urging.<sup>343</sup>

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.<sup>344</sup> The hotel bombing was one of three attacks reported to target, injure, or kill PRC nationals in Pakistan since April.<sup>345</sup>

**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.<sup>346</sup> Despite consistent wariness of Taliban intent, Iran appears to be seeking accommodation with the group. Iranian officials met with the Taliban numerous times after 2018, including hosting a senior Taliban delegation in Tehran in February 2021. U.S. officials have also alleged that some Taliban fighters have received arms and other support from Iran.<sup>347</sup> 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).

The Iranian government, whose embassy in Kabul remains open, appears to view positively the departure of U.S. troops from Afghanistan (which President Ebrahim Raisi characterized as a “defeat”) and has called for national unity in Afghanistan.<sup>348</sup> Some have speculated that Iran, as it did during the 1990s, might support Afghans in northern, western, and central Afghanistan against the Taliban, particularly if a Taliban-led government expresses hostility toward Tehran. Iranian officials condemned the Taliban’s September 2021 takeover of Panjshir, the last bastion of armed

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<sup>341</sup> 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.

<sup>342</sup> 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](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.

<sup>343</sup> Xie Wenting and Bai Yunyi, “Exclusive: New Afghan govt eyes exchanging visits with China; ETIM has no place in Afghanistan: Taliban spokesperson,” *Global Times*, September 9, 2021.

<sup>344</sup> Asif Shahzad, “Car bombing at hotel in southwest Pakistan kills 4, wounds 11,” *Reuters*, April 21, 2021.

<sup>345</sup> 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/>.

<sup>346</sup> Barnett Rubin, “A New Look at Iran’s Complicated Relationship with the Taliban,” *War on the Rocks*, September 16, 2020.

<sup>347</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>348</sup> Maziar Motamedi, “US ‘defeat’ in Afghanistan a chance for peace: Iran president,” *Al Jazeera*, August 16, 2021.



resistance.<sup>349</sup> Other analysts argue Iran is unlikely to oppose the Taliban, to avoid further instability, and will continue to seek accommodation with the group.<sup>350</sup>

**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.<sup>351</sup> 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.<sup>352</sup>

Initial Russian statements suggest the Russian government seeks to build constructive relations with the Taliban while encouraging them to avoid rule by terror as they consolidate power. Russian officials said they have no intention of evacuating the Russian embassy in Kabul and that Taliban forces pledged to provide security for Russia's embassy and personnel.<sup>353</sup> The Russian ambassador to Afghanistan remarked in the first days of the Taliban's takeover that the situation in Kabul was "better than it was under Ashraf Ghani."<sup>354</sup> At the same time, Russian authorities have said that for now Russia will continue to consider the Taliban a terrorist organization.<sup>355</sup>

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.<sup>356</sup> 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.<sup>357</sup>

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<sup>349</sup> Farzin Nadimi, "Iran Sets Its Eyes on Afghanistan," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, July 19, 2021; "Iran condemns Taliban for assault on holdout fighters in Panjshir Valley," *Times of Israel*, September 6, 2021.

<sup>350</sup> Murat Sofuoglu, "After a short honeymoon, are Iran-Taliban relations deteriorating?" *TRT World*, September 9, 2021.

<sup>351</sup> 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.

<sup>352</sup> 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.

<sup>353</sup> 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>

<sup>354</sup> Andrew Osborn, "Russia Says Kabul Seems Safer Under Taliban Than It Was Under Ghani," *Reuters*, August 16, 2021.

<sup>355</sup> 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.

<sup>356</sup> 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.

<sup>357</sup> Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "Russia is Sending Weapons to Taliban, Top U.S. General Confirms," *Washington Post*, April 24, 2017; and Mujib Mashal and Michael Schwartz, "How Russia Built a Channel to the Taliban, Once an Enemy," *New York Times*, July 13, 2020.

Prior to the Taliban's takeover, Russia began planning for contingencies by bolstering its military and security posture in neighboring Central Asia.<sup>358</sup> 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.<sup>359</sup> September 2021 visits to India and Tajikistan by Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev and statements by military officials have highlighted Russian concerns about the potential for instability to spread.<sup>360</sup> In the summer of 2021, Russia bolstered its military presence in Central Asia, including by modernizing its forces in Tajikistan (Russia has an estimated 7,000 troops at the 201<sup>st</sup> Military Base in Dushanbe), increasing coordination among CSTO members, bolstering intelligence and border forces, and conducting multiple military exercises.<sup>361</sup>

**Central Asia.** Many analysts assess that Central Asian governments' primary concern following the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan is maintaining stability and ensuring their own countries' security, as well as the potential for large numbers of refugees, and possibly IS-affiliated extremists, to flow into their countries.<sup>362</sup> Taliban leaders have reportedly stated that they will not violate the territorial integrity of Afghanistan's Central Asian neighbors, and that they do not pose a threat to the region.<sup>363</sup> The governments of Central Asia have generally adopted a pragmatic approach toward the Taliban, particularly Afghanistan's immediate neighbors Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.<sup>364</sup> In a statement issued on September 8, Uzbekistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs welcomed the creation of an interim government in Afghanistan, adding, "We hope that this decision will be the first step toward achieving a broad national consensus and lasting peace and stability in that country. We express our readiness to develop a constructive dialogue and practical cooperation with the new state organs of Afghanistan."<sup>365</sup> The government of Tajikistan, which also shares a border with Afghanistan, has by contrast expressed strong opposition to the Taliban government in Afghanistan.<sup>366</sup>

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<sup>358</sup> 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; and Dara Massicot, "Can a Pragmatic Relationship with the Taliban Help Russia Counter Terrorism," *National Interest*, September 3, 2021.

<sup>359</sup> Vusula Abbasova, "Russia Pledges Military Assistance to Central Asian Allies," *Caspian News*, July 31, 2021.

<sup>360</sup> Tass, "Russia-led Bloc Members Must be Ready for Any Scenario in Afghanistan, Top Brass Says," September 9, 2021; and Tass, "Top Russian Security Official to Discuss Afghanistan with Post-Soviet Bloc in Dushanbe," September 14, 2021.

<sup>361</sup> 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 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.

<sup>362</sup> Kate Mallinson, "Afghanistan Creates Tricky New Reality for Central Asia," Chatham House, August 27, 2021; Mansur Mirovalev, "Afghanistan's Central Asian Neighbours Panic, Reject Refugees," *Al Jazeera*, August 19, 2021; Chris Rickleton, "Central Asia and Afghanistan: Enemies at the Gate?" *Eurasianet*, August 13, 2021.

<sup>363</sup> Vladimir Isachenkov, "Russian envoy expects Taliban not to threaten Central Asia," *Associated Press*, July 14, 2021; Vladimir Isachenkov, "Taliban visit Moscow to say their wins don't threaten Russia," *Associated Press*, July 8, 2021; "As Tajikistan Mobilizes 20,000 Troops, Taliban Says It Poses No Threat," *Eurasianet*, July 6, 2021.

<sup>364</sup> Ivan Klyszcz, "Don't Underestimate Tajikistan in the Afghanistan Crisis," *The Diplomat*, September 2, 2021; "Turkmenistan: Taliban of Brothers," *Eurasianet*, August 24, 2021; Gavin Helf and Barmak Pazhwak, "Central Asia Prepares for Taliban Takeover," *United States Institute of Peace*, July 20, 2021.

<sup>365</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan, "O'zbekiston Respublikasi Tashqi ishlar vazirligi rasmiy vakilining bayonoti" [Statement by the official representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan], September 8, 2021.

<sup>366</sup> Bruce Pannier, "Tajikistan: The Taliban's Toughest Critic," *RFE/RL*, September 13, 2021; Ivan Klyszcz, "Don't Underestimate Tajikistan in the Afghanistan Crisis," *The Diplomat*, September 2, 2021.

In the weeks leading up to the U.S. withdrawal, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan bolstered the military presence at their borders with Afghanistan.<sup>367</sup> In August and September, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan participated in bilateral and multilateral military exercises with Russia that focused on potential security threats emanating from Afghanistan.<sup>368</sup> Tajikistan also held an anti-terrorism exercise with China.<sup>369</sup> Further military exercises by the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) are planned in Tajikistan for October and November.<sup>370</sup> Analysts assess that recent events in Afghanistan may lead to an intensified Russian security presence in Central Asia.<sup>371</sup>

International human rights organizations have urged Central Asian countries to take in refugees from Afghanistan, while regional governments have been reluctant to accept large numbers of Afghans.<sup>372</sup> Although officials in Tajikistan initially signaled willingness to take in as many as 100,000 refugees, in September the country's Minister of Internal Affairs stated that Tajikistan lacks the resources to do so without international assistance.<sup>373</sup> Thousands of Afghan troops reportedly fled to Tajikistan and Uzbekistan as the Taliban established control of northern Afghanistan; some have subsequently been sent back.<sup>374</sup> Between August 14 and 15, a reported 46 aircraft from the Afghan Air Force crossed into Uzbekistan carrying some 500 people, including pilots, crew, and their families.<sup>375</sup> The government of Uzbekistan reportedly faced pressure from the Taliban to return the personnel and their aircraft to Afghanistan, and requested that the United States relocate them.<sup>376</sup> On September 12 and 13, the Afghans were transferred from Uzbekistan to a U.S. base in the United Arab Emirates.<sup>377</sup> It remains unclear what will

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<sup>367</sup> "Tajikistan Holds Massive Combat-Readiness Check Amid Rising Instability In Neighboring Afghanistan," *RFE/RL*, July 22, 2021; "Turkmenistan: As Taliban arrives at the gates, diplomats and army scramble," *Eurasianet*, July 13, 2021.

<sup>368</sup> "Russia Wraps Up Drills With Uzbek And Tajik Troops Near Afghan Border," *RFE/RL*, August 11, 2021; "Russia-Led CSTO To Hold Military Drills In Central Asia Due To Situation In Afghanistan," *RFE/RL*, August 27, 2021; "Russia-Led CSTO Starts Military Drills In Kyrgyzstan Due To Situation In Afghanistan," *RFE/RL*, September 7, 2021.

<sup>369</sup> Laura Zhou, "China conducts anti-terror drill with Tajikistan, as Afghan spillover worries grip central Asia," *South China Morning Post*, August 18, 2021.

<sup>370</sup> "Russia-Led CSTO To Hold Military Drills In Central Asia Due To Situation In Afghanistan," *RFE/RL*, August 27, 2021.

<sup>371</sup> Temur Umarov, "Do the Taliban Pose a Threat to Stability in Central Asia?" Carnegie Moscow Center, September 3, 2021; Kate Mallinson, "Afghanistan Creates Tricky New Reality for Central Asia," Chatham House, August 27, 2021; Andrew Kramer and Anton Troianovski, "With Afghan Collapse, Moscow Takes Charge in Central Asia," *New York Times*, August 19, 2021.

<sup>372</sup> Mihra Rittman and Hugh Williamson, "Uzbekistan Should Do More to Help Afghans," *The Diplomat*, September 8, 2021; Mansur Mirovalev, "Afghanistan's Central Asian Neighbours Panic, Reject Refugees," *Al Jazeera*, August 19, 2021; "Central Asia Refuses to Accept Afghan Refugees," Institute for War and Peace Reporting, September 8, 2021.

<sup>373</sup> "Unpacking Eurasia's role in the Afghanistan evacuation," *Eurasianet*, September 3, 2021; "Tajikistan Can't Afford to Take in Afghan Refugees Without Help – Police Chief," Reuters, September 2, 2021.

<sup>374</sup> "Unpacking Eurasia's role in the Afghanistan evacuation," *Eurasianet*, September 3, 2021.

<sup>375</sup> Catherine Putz, "Afghan Forces Flee, Fly to Central Asia," *The Diplomat*, August 17, 2021; Siobhan Hughes and Jessica Donati, "Uzbekistan Warns U.S. That Afghan Pilots and Their Families Can't Stay," *Wall Street Journal*, August 30, 2021; Jessica Donati and Siobhan Hughes, "Afghan Pilots Who Sought Safety in Uzbekistan Begin U.S. Transfer Under New Agreement," *Wall Street Journal*, September 13, 2021.

<sup>376</sup> Phil Stewart, "Afghan Pilots Start Leaving Uzbekistan for UAE, Despite Taliban Pressure—Source," Reuters, September 12, 2021; Siobhan Hughes and Jessica Donati, "Uzbekistan Warns U.S. That Afghan Pilots and Their Families Can't Stay," *Wall Street Journal*, August 30, 2021.

<sup>377</sup> Jessica Donati and Siobhan Hughes, "Afghan Pilots Who Sought Safety in Uzbekistan Begin U.S. Transfer Under New Agreement," *Wall Street Journal*, September 13, 2021.

happen to the aircraft, which are said to include Black Hawk helicopters and PC-12 surveillance aircraft supplied to Afghanistan by the United States.<sup>378</sup> On August 15, a smaller group, reportedly over 140 people and around 18 aircraft, flew from Afghanistan to Tajikistan.<sup>379</sup> A State Department spokesperson was quoted in the press as stating, “the Afghan personnel and aircraft are secure and being housed by the government of Tajikistan.”<sup>380</sup> Some of the Afghan pilots currently in Tajikistan have appealed for asylum in Canada.<sup>381</sup>

Central Asian countries have assisted evacuation efforts out of Afghanistan. The U.N. Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) has temporarily relocated some of its staff to Almaty, Kazakhstan. The UNAMA staff deployed to Almaty, who number about 100, are expected to stay in Kazakhstan for six months, although conditions in Afghanistan may lead to the extension of their stay; depending on the security situation in Afghanistan, U.N. staff may use Almaty as a hub to rotate in and out of the country.<sup>382</sup> Uzbekistan facilitated the transit of Afghans and foreign nationals out of Afghanistan, allowing European military aircraft to fly evacuees from Kabul to airports in Tashkent, Navoi, and Bukhara.<sup>383</sup> From there, evacuees, including some U.S. citizens, were flown to Europe on specially chartered civilian airliners.<sup>384</sup> Tajikistan also facilitated evacuations from Afghanistan, including flights via Dushanbe organized by Turkey and India.<sup>385</sup>

**India.** New Delhi’s Afghanistan policies have been conceived largely through the lens of competition and proxy conflict with Indian rival Pakistan. New Delhi’s interests primarily focus on limiting the activities and reach of the numerous regional Islamist, anti-India terrorist groups that pose an ongoing threat to India, perhaps especially as related to Kashmiri separatism and militancy (which Pakistan is widely believed to support). India also has a keen interest in securing access to and greater connectivity with Central Asia, which Pakistan presently obstructs.<sup>386</sup> Like Iran and Russia, India supported the Northern Alliance against the Taliban in the 1990s and backed the elected post-2001 Afghan government, but reportedly established some backchannel communications with the Taliban in recent months.<sup>387</sup> India had been the leading regional

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<sup>378</sup> Ibid.

<sup>379</sup> Bruce Pannier, “Tajikistan: The Taliban’s Toughest Critic,” *RFE/RL*, September 13, 2021; Catherine Putz, “What’s Next for Afghan Pilots Who Escaped to Central Asia?” *The Diplomat*, September 13, 2021.

<sup>380</sup> Catherine Putz, “What’s Next for Afghan Pilots Who Escaped to Central Asia?” *The Diplomat*, September 13, 2021.

<sup>381</sup> Murray Brewster, “Former Afghan air force pilots renew plea for Canada’s help,” *CBC News*, September 13, 2021.

<sup>382</sup> United Nations Kazakhstan, “UN Statement on Temporary Relocation of the UNAMA Staff to Almaty,” August 20, 2021; United Nations, “Daily Press Briefing by the Office of the Spokesperson for the Secretary-General,” August 18, 2021; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, “On Temporary Deployment of the UN Mission in Almaty,” August 18, 2021.

<sup>383</sup> “Uzbekistan predostavil tretii aeroport dlia evakuatsii iz Afganistana—Bukharu” [Uzbekistan has made a third airport available for evacuation from Afghanistan—Bukhara], *Fergana News*, August 23, 2021.

<sup>384</sup> “‘You have seen the outrageous and achieved incredible things,’ Germany tells troops,” Reuters, August 27, 2021; “AKK spricht mit Bundeswehrosoldaten in Taschkent” [AKK speaks with Bundeswehr soldiers in Tashkent], *Deutsche Welle*, August 27, 2021; Official Website of the Republic of Poland, The Chancellery of the Prime Minister, “Premier: Polska jest tam, gdzie inni tej pomocy od nas potrzebują” [Prime Minister: Poland is there when others need help from us], August 26, 2021, available at <https://www.gov.pl/web/premier/premier-polska-jest-tam-gdzie-inni-tej-pomocy-od-nas-potrzebuj>; “Hungary Ends Afghan Evacuations With 540 Flown Out,” Agence France Presse, August 26, 2021.

<sup>385</sup> “Afghanistan Evacuees Arrive In Tajikistan, Uzbekistan,” *RFE/RL*, August 21, 2021; Manjeet Negi, “IAF Transport Aircraft Return from Tajikistan after Afghanistan Evacuations,” *India Today*, August 30, 2021.

<sup>386</sup> Suhasini Haidar, “Taliban gains complicate India’s options,” *The Hindu*, August 13, 2021.

<sup>387</sup> “In a Huge Shift, India Opens Channels with Afghan Taliban Factions and Leaders,” *Hindustan Times* (Delhi), June

supporter of the former Afghan government, providing more than \$3 billion in development assistance affecting all of Afghanistan's 34 provinces. Any gains accrued through this "soft power" emphasis on infrastructure and social services may be lost with the Taliban takeover.<sup>388</sup> India has evacuated most of its personnel and shuttered its diplomatic operations in Afghanistan.

The Taliban takeover in Kabul sent shockwaves through India's strategic and security communities, where Islamist militant gains are widely predicted to benefit anti-India terrorist groups, especially those oriented toward Kashmir, such as the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), the Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), and the Haqqani Network, all of which have conducted major terrorist attacks in India.<sup>389</sup> The developments also could bolster Beijing's regional influence and present India with "encirclement" by a "consolidated front" comprised of China, Pakistan, and the Taliban.<sup>390</sup> Many Western analyses take a similar view, warning of a broad resurgence of regional Islamist militancy that will target India and its interests.<sup>391</sup> Thousands of LeT and JeM militants, many of them Pakistani nationals, reportedly have fought alongside the Taliban in Afghanistan, and Taliban military chiefs, notably including those from the vehemently anti-India Haqqani Network, are said to be coordinating with their LeT and JeM counterparts. According to at least one assessment citing Afghan sources, "These are individuals who have trained with the Pakistani military..." Pakistan's main intelligence service reportedly has colluded with Taliban elements to attack Indian targets in Afghanistan.<sup>392</sup> In late August, a Taliban official in Qatar reportedly said, "India is very important for this subcontinent. We want to continue our cultural, economic and trade ties with India like in the past."<sup>393</sup>

By some accounts, India "missed the bus" diplomatically and is facing a return to the "worst-case scenario" with Afghanistan.<sup>394</sup> Since mid-August, a debate has been underway in India about the wisdom of recognizing and pursuing engagement with a Taliban-dominated Afghan government. Some analysts counsel against such engagement, arguing that there is no "reformed Taliban 2.0" and that India has little or nothing to gain from negotiating with "a Pakistani proxy."<sup>395</sup> Others favor engagement in order to leverage India's purported popularity and soft power in Afghanistan

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9, 2021; "Indian Delegation Met Taliban in Doha, Says Qatari Official," *Hindu* (Chennai), June 21, 2021.

<sup>388</sup> Aparna Pande, "India in the Eye of the Taliban" (op-ed), *The Hill*, August 23, 2021.

<sup>389</sup> Avinash Paliwal, "A Strategic Shock for the Subcontinent" (op-ed), *Hindustan Times* (Delhi), August 25, 2021; "Taliban Advances in Afghanistan Give Kashmir Militants a Boost," *Der Welte* (Berlin), July 8, 2021.

<sup>390</sup> "With the U.S. Exit From Afghanistan, India Fears an Increasingly Hostile Region," *NPR*, August 27, 2021. In the words of one longtime observer, "What New Delhi fears most is Beijing's ability to expand its political and diplomatic footprint in Afghanistan with the return of a Taliban regime" (Sumit Ganguly, "What the Taliban Takeover Means for India," *Foreign Policy*, August 17, 2021).

<sup>391</sup> "Taliban Takeover Threatens to Raise India-Pakistan Tensions," *Wall Street Journal*, September 1, 2021. See also Kabir Taneja and Mohamed Sinan Siyech, "Terrorism in South Asia After the Fall of Afghanistan," *War on the Rocks*, August 23, 2021.

<sup>392</sup> "Pak's Terror Groups Join Taliban War, India Wary," *Hindustan Times* (Delhi), July 11, 2021; Rudra Chaudhuri, "Will the Taliban Keep Their Promises in Afghanistan?," *Carnegie India* (Delhi), August 17, 2021; "Pakistani Fighters, Taliban Instructed to Target Indian Assets in Afghanistan, Sources Say," *India Today* (Delhi), July 18, 2021.

<sup>393</sup> "India Important, Want to Maintain Ties: Taliban Leadership in Qatar," *Indian Express* (Delhi), August 30, 2021. One senior Taliban/Haqqani Network figure reportedly has stated that his group seeks good relations with India and does not intend to "meddle" in Kashmir ("Won't Meddle in Kashmir: Long-Time Taliban Ally Haqqani Network," *Times of India* (Delhi), September 2, 2021).

<sup>394</sup> Shanthie Mariet D'Souza, "In Afghanistan, How India Missed the Bus" (op-ed), *Hindustan Times* (Delhi), July 21, 2021.

<sup>395</sup> Chetan Rana, "A Taliban Outreach that Needs Correction" (op-ed), *Hindu* (Chennai), August 26, 2021; Gautam Makophadhaya, "With the Taliban Takeover of Kabul, a Thorny Question Confronts India: Should We Recognize the Taliban?" (op-ed), *Times of India* (Delhi), August 27, 2021.



while pressing for democratic values.<sup>396</sup> Still others call for diplomatic patience in a still-fluid situation, contending that India's interests will be advanced by highlighting Pakistan's "symbiotic relationship" with the Taliban.<sup>397</sup>

Several Indian analysts have issued harsh criticisms of the "precipitous" U.S. withdrawal and its implications for India; others have raised new questions about American credibility as a strategic partner for India as it seeks to balance against China.<sup>398</sup> At the same time, some commentators foresee a circumstance in which the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, with its attendant reduced American reliance on Pakistan, may benefit New Delhi's efforts to address Pakistan going forward.<sup>399</sup> For some, the Taliban win marks a major turning point in regional geopolitics; in the words of one senior analyst, it means for India "greater cooperation with Washington, deeper conflicts with Beijing, and wider fissures in the traditional strategic partnership with Moscow."<sup>400</sup>

**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. As of September 17, 2021, no Gulf state government had recognized the new Taliban-led government, and, it remains unclear whether or how any future Gulf state relations with the Taliban may affect U.S. use of Gulf bases to conduct counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan. Qatar, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates temporarily hosted Afghan nationals evacuated in August 2021 by U.S. and coalition operations. Secretary of State Blinken has thanked officials from those countries for their support and has thanked Kuwait for facilitating the transit of U.S. government personnel and U.S. citizens evacuated from Afghanistan.

At the virtual ministerial on Afghanistan on September 8, 2021, Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan bin Abdullah Al Saud expressed the kingdom's "support for the Afghan people and the future choices they make for their country without any external interference" and said "the formation of the caretaker government would be a step in the right direction toward achieving security and stability, rejecting violence and extremism and building a bright future for Afghans."<sup>401</sup> The United Arab Emirates has facilitated the delivery of humanitarian assistance into Kabul International Airport,<sup>402</sup> and separately facilitated the removal of members of the

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<sup>396</sup> Bharat Karnad, "With the Taliban Takeover of Kabul, a Thorny Question Confronts India: Should We Recognize the Taliban?" (op-ed), *Times of India* (Delhi), August 27, 2021; MK Bhadrakumar, "India's Interests Won't Be Served by Demonizing Taliban" (op-ed), *Indian Express* (Delhi), September 11, 2021.

<sup>397</sup> Shyam Saran, "On Kabul, India Need Not Hurry" (op-ed), *The Print* (Delhi), August 25, 2021. See also C. Raja Mohan, "It is Pakistan's Moment of Triumph in Afghanistan, But India Must Bet on Patience" (op-ed), *Indian Express* (Delhi), August 25, 2021; HS Panag, "India Backed the Wrong Horse in Afghanistan and Has Gone Into a Strategic Sulk Now" (op-ed), *The Print* (Delhi), August 26, 2021.

<sup>398</sup> See, for example, Brahma Chellaney, "Biden's Afghan Blunder," *Project Syndicate*, July 13, 2021; Aparna Pande, "India in the Eye of the Taliban" (op-ed), *The Hill*, August 23, 2021; Shekhar Gupta, "Kabul Shows Up Biden as a Sheep in Sheep's Clothing" (op-ed), *The Print* (Delhi), August 28, 2021.

<sup>399</sup> Rajesh Rajagopalan, "A US Not Tied in Afghanistan Only Helps India Deal with Pakistan Problem Better" (op-ed), *The Print* (Delhi), August 23, 2021.

<sup>400</sup> C. Raja Mohan, "Post-American Afghanistan and India's Geopolitics," *Foreign Policy*, August 18, 2021.

<sup>401</sup> Saudi Press Agency, "Foreign Minister Participates in Virtual Ministerial Meeting on Afghanistan," September 9, 2021.

<sup>402</sup> France 24, "UAE operating aid air bridge to Kabul as Pakistan's PIA to resume commercial flights," September 11, 2021.

Afghan Air Force from Uzbekistan, where they had fled with their aircraft and families as the Taliban advanced through Afghanistan in mid-August.<sup>403</sup>

Qatar, in particular, has played an active role in negotiations and in operations related to the winding down of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan; Secretary Blinken said on September 7, 2021, visit to Doha with Secretary of Defense Austin, “Many countries have stepped up to help the evacuation and relocation efforts in Afghanistan, but no country has done more than Qatar.”<sup>404</sup> Qatar hosted U.S.-Taliban talks after 2018 and hosted senior Taliban leaders in Doha until their return to Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover. Qatari Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al Thani said on August 23, “We remain that impartial mediator throughout this process.”<sup>405</sup> Following the evacuation of the U.S. embassy in Kabul in August 2021, operations were transferred to the U.S. Embassy in Doha. Qatari technicians have also been instrumental in undertaking repairs that enabled Kabul International Airport to resume some flights in early September. Several Qatar Airways charter flights have since evacuated additional Americans and other foreign nationals who sought to leave Afghanistan. On September 12, 2021, Qatari Foreign Minister Al Thani met Taliban government Acting Prime Minister Akhund to discuss a range of issues, including Qatar’s continuing efforts to evacuate foreign nationals, and, according to Qatar’s Foreign Ministry, called on the Taliban to “involve all Afghan parties in national reconciliation.”<sup>406</sup>

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.

## U.S. Military Operations: Summary of Evacuation Efforts and Budgetary Implications

### What U.S. military operations were conducted during the withdrawal from Afghanistan?<sup>407</sup>

There were three major operational actions ongoing in Afghanistan as of August 26, 2021. The first was 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).<sup>408</sup> On the ground, USFOR-A had a forward element in Kabul led by Navy Rear Admiral Peter Vasely.<sup>409</sup> Prior to the

<sup>403</sup> “Afghan pilots start leaving Uzbekistan for UAE, despite Taliban pressure-source,” *Reuters*, September 12, 2021.

<sup>404</sup> U.S. Department of State, “Secretary Antony J. Blinken And Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin,” September 7, 2021.

<sup>405</sup> “Qatar is an ‘impartial mediator’ amid Afghanistan evacuations: FM,” *Al Jazeera*, August 23, 2021.

<sup>406</sup> Reuters, “Qatar’s foreign minister visits premier of Taliban-ruled Afghanistan,” September 12, 2021.

<sup>407</sup> This section was prepared by Kathleen McInnis, Specialist in International Security, and Andrew Feickert, Specialist in Military Ground Forces.

<sup>408</sup> Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report: Security*, July 30, 2021, p. 49.

<sup>409</sup> *Ibid.*

August 15, 2021, collapse of the Afghan government, between 650 and 1,000 U.S. troops were on the ground conducting withdrawal operations.<sup>410</sup> 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.<sup>411</sup> Given the collapse of the ANDSF, it is unclear what role DSCMO-A will play, if any.

The second major operational action was 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).<sup>412</sup> 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.<sup>413</sup>

The Department of Defense also announced the commencement of Noncombatant Evacuation Operations (NEO) from Afghanistan.<sup>414</sup> At an August 18 press conference, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley stated that the NEO operation had five core tasks:<sup>415</sup>

- 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 announced that at least the following actions were taken:<sup>416</sup>

- Three infantry battalions—two Marine Corps, one U.S. Army—deployed to Kabul International Airport.<sup>417</sup>
  - The Marine units were from the 24<sup>th</sup> Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) and the Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force-Crisis Response

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<sup>410</sup> 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>.

<sup>411</sup> Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report: Security*, July 30, 2021, p. 49.

<sup>412</sup> U.S. Embassy in Afghanistan, *Operation Allies Refuge*, <https://af.usembassy.gov/operation-allies-refuge/>.

<sup>413</sup> 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.

<sup>414</sup> 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/>.

<sup>415</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>416</sup> Jim Garamone, “DOD Deploys Forces to Protect Kabul Embassy Drawdown,” *DOD News*, August 12, 2021.

<sup>417</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Secretary of Defense Austin and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen Milley Press Briefing*, August 18, 2021.

(SPMAGTF-CR) assigned to U.S. CENTCOM. The Army unit was from the Minnesota National Guard.<sup>418</sup>

- The U.S. Air Force 621<sup>st</sup> Contingency Response Group at Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst deployed to assist in running operations at Kabul International Airport.<sup>419</sup>
- A joint U.S. Army/Air Force support element of around 1,000 personnel was to be sent to Qatar, and possibly to Afghanistan (or to other areas where Afghans will be processed) to facilitate the processing of SIV applicants.<sup>420</sup>
- One battalion of the 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division (U.S. Army) deployed to Kabul to assist with U.S. Embassy security.<sup>421</sup>
- Two battalions of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division (U.S. Army) were to 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.)<sup>422</sup>
- A headquarters element of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division (U.S. Army) was deployed in support of efforts to secure Kabul International Airport (KAIA).<sup>423</sup>

On August 26, 2021, thirteen U.S. service members and more than 100 Afghans were killed in an Islamic State attack at Kabul International Airport.<sup>424</sup> A further U.S. eighteen service members were wounded in the attack.<sup>425</sup>

The U.S. military withdrawal and noncombatant evacuation operation ended on August 30, 2021.

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?

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<sup>418</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Pentagon Press Secretary John F. Kirby Holds an Off-Camera Press Briefing*, August 18, 2021.

<sup>419</sup> Ibid.

<sup>420</sup> Jim Garamone, “DOD Deploys Forces to Protect Kabul Embassy Drawdown,” *DOD News*, August 12, 2021.

<sup>421</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Secretary of Defense Austin and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen Milley Press Briefing*, August 18, 2021.

<sup>422</sup> 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.

<sup>423</sup> 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.

<sup>424</sup> Yaroslav Trofimov, Nancy A. Youssef and Sune Engel Rasmussen, “Kabul Airport Attack Kills 13 U.S. Service Members, at Least 90 Afghans,” *The Wall Street Journal*, August 27, 2021.

<sup>425</sup> Ibid.

- 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?

## How did the United States conduct the aerial evacuation?<sup>426</sup>

On August 15, 2021,<sup>427</sup> the U.S. military began evacuating thousands of persons from Kabul International Airport (formerly Hamid Karzai International Airport).

The U.S. military 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).<sup>428</sup> 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) advised aircraft that Kabul International Airport had extremely limited fuel quantities, and as a result aircraft should not refuel while on the ground.<sup>429</sup> Most U.S. cargo aircraft, however, have the ability to receive fuel while airborne from tanker aircraft, known as aerial refueling.<sup>430</sup> Aerial refueling allows cargo 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 employed KC-135s and KC-10s tankers to establish an *airbridge*—using aerial tankers to refuel aircraft midflight to extend an aircraft's range—to support air evacuations.<sup>431</sup>

The U.S. military utilized 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 were utilized for personnel evacuation as well (**Figure 2**). The C-17 is reportedly able to transport approximately

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<sup>426</sup> This section was prepared by John Hoehn, Analyst in Military Capabilities and Programs. For additional background and context see CRS Insight IN11730, *Afghan Aerial Evacuation in Context*, by John R. Hoehn and Jeremiah Gertler.

<sup>427</sup> Department of Defense, "Secretary of Defense Austin and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Milley Press Briefing," press release, August 18, 2021.

<sup>428</sup> 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.

<sup>429</sup> Defense Internet Notice to Airmen Service, August 17, 2021, <https://www.notams.faa.gov/dinsQueryWeb/queryRetrievalMapAction.do?reportType=Raw&retrieveLocId=oakx&actionType=notamRetrievalbyICAOs>.

<sup>430</sup> This includes the C-5, C-17, and C-130. It is unclear if the Marine Corps' KC-130 can refuel midair.

<sup>431</sup> 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](https://www.doctrine.af.mil/Portals/61/documents/AFDP_3-36/3-36-D25-Mobility-Refuel-Ops.pdf).



102 troops or 170,900 pounds of cargo.<sup>432</sup> One C-17 reportedly carried over 800 passengers to Al Udeid airbase in Qatar.<sup>433</sup>

**Figure 2. 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.

Several constraints affected air operations for the Kabul airlift. First, Kabul Airport had a single runway and a relatively small parking area for aircraft,<sup>434</sup> physically limiting the number of aircraft. Second, a limited amount of fuel was at the airfield, and DOD instructed aircraft not to refuel on the ground. Third, airlift operations were dependent on the number of State Department consular officers processing visas in Qatar,<sup>435</sup> Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates; the Department of Defense announced that a fourth location would start in Germany,<sup>436</sup> Spain,<sup>437</sup> and

<sup>432</sup> 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.

<sup>433</sup> Joseph Trevithick, “Packed C-17 Cargo Jet Out Of Kabul Actually Had 823 People Onboard Setting New Record,” *The Drive*, August 20, 2021.

<sup>434</sup> Republic of Afghanistan, *Aeronautical Information Publication: Aerodrome Part 3*, July 19, 2018, <https://acaa.gov.af/wp-content/uploads/AERODROME.pdf>.

<sup>435</sup> “U.S. pauses Afghanistan evacuation flights as processing facility hits capacity,” *CBS News*, August 20, 2021, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/afghanistan-evacuations-pause-taliban-doha-kabul/>.

<sup>436</sup> Department of Defense, “Ramstein Air Base: Setting Up an Instant City for Afghan Evacuees,” press release, September 12, 2021.

<sup>437</sup> U.S. Embassy in Spain and Andorra, “U.S.-Spain Cooperation to Assist Evacuees from Afghanistan.”

Italy.<sup>438</sup> On August 22, 2021, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin ordered the Department of Defense’s Transportation Command to activate the Civil Reserve Air Fleet (CRAF) to buttress the U.S. military’s evacuation efforts.<sup>439</sup>

## What was the role of U.S. contractors and contract operations in Afghanistan?<sup>440</sup>

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.<sup>441</sup> 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 contractors can also compromise the credibility and effectiveness of the U.S. military and undermine operations.<sup>442</sup>

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.<sup>443</sup> 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.<sup>444</sup> Following the Taliban takeover and withdrawal of U.S. military forces, these activities were not to continue.<sup>445</sup>

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.<sup>446</sup> The personnel counts included in

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<sup>438</sup> U.S. Embassy in Italy, “U.S. Flights Take Afghan Evacuees from Italy to the United States,” press release, August 29, 2021.

<sup>439</sup> See CRS Insight IN11731, *Afghanistan Evacuation: The Civil Reserve Air Fleet (CRAF) and the Defense Production Act (DPA)*, by Michael H. Cecire and Heidi M. Peters.

<sup>440</sup> This section was prepared by Heidi Peters, Analyst in U.S. Defense Acquisition Policy.

<sup>441</sup> 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.

<sup>442</sup> U.S. Government Accountability Office, “Operational Contract Support: Management and Oversight Improvements Needed in Afghanistan,” GAO-12-290, March 29, 2012, p. 1-2.

<sup>443</sup> 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>.

<sup>444</sup> 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/>.

<sup>445</sup> Jack Detsch, “Departure of Private Contractors Was a Turning Point in Afghan Military’s Collapse,” *Foreign Policy*, August 16, 2021.

<sup>446</sup> See CRS Report R44116, *Department of Defense Contractor and Troop Levels in Afghanistan and Iraq: 2007-2020*,

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.”<sup>447</sup>

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.<sup>448</sup> 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 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).<sup>449</sup>

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.<sup>450</sup>

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.<sup>451</sup>

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by Heidi M. Peters.

<sup>447</sup> 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](https://www.acq.osd.mil/log/PS/.CENTCOM_reports.html/FY21_3Q_5A_Jul2021.pdf).

<sup>448</sup> 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.

<sup>449</sup> 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](https://www.acq.osd.mil/log/PS/.CENTCOM_reports.html/FY21_2Q_5A_Apr2021.pdf).

<sup>450</sup> 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.

<sup>451</sup> 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

## What will happen to U.S. funding provided for Afghanistan security forces?<sup>452</sup>

To date, U.S. defense officials have not stated in detail how developments in Afghanistan may change their plans for the use of Afghan Security Forces Funds (ASFF) appropriated for FY2021 and prior years, or requested for FY2022. At an August 24, 2021, press conference, DOD spokesperson Kirby said that “we’re working closely with Congress” on money intended for the ASFF but that “that money is being held now.”<sup>453</sup>

On August 25, 2021, Bloomberg News reported that the DOD was consulting with Congress and the White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB) over “at least \$6 billion in unspent funds for the now-defunct Afghan Security Force,” including “\$600 million in previously approved but unspent fiscal 2020 funds, as well as \$2.3 billion in this fiscal year as of June plus \$3.3 billion requested for fiscal 2022.”<sup>454</sup>

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.<sup>455</sup>

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.”<sup>456</sup>

On August 24, 2021 (as discussed in more detail below),<sup>457</sup> DOD transferred more than \$1 billion from the ASFF to Overseas Humanitarian, Disaster, and Civic Aid, Defense (OHDACA) account

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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.

<sup>452</sup> This section was prepared by Brendan McGarry, Analyst in U.S. Defense Budget.

<sup>453</sup> Pentagon Press Secretary John F. Kirby and Major General Hank Taylor, Deputy Director of the Joint Staff for Regional Operations Press Briefing, Department of Defense, August 24, 2021.

<sup>454</sup> Anthony Capaccio, “Pentagon’s Afghan Exit Leaves Unused \$6 Billion to Fight Over,” *Bloomberg News*, August 25, 2021, at <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-08-25/pentagon-s-afghan-exit-leaves-unused-6-billion-to-fight-over>.

<sup>455</sup> *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 contingency locations) rather than in enduring operations (i.e., in-theater and stateside costs that will remain after combat operations end).

<sup>456</sup> House Committee Print 116-68, p. 389, at <https://www.congress.gov/116/cpr/HPRT42770/CPRT-116HPRT42770.pdf>.

<sup>457</sup> See the question below, “How much has DOD spent on withdrawing U.S. military and civilian personnel from Afghanistan?”

“to relocate Afghan special immigrant visa (SIV) applicants and their families, and other individuals at risk, in conjunction with the withdrawal of military forces from Afghanistan,” according to a department reprogramming action that required the prior approval of congressional defense committees.<sup>458</sup> The funding was available from the ASFF “because the Department has curtailed support to the Afghanistan National Defense and Security Forces in light of current circumstances.”<sup>459</sup>

On September 7, 2021, as part of a short-term continuing resolution for FY2022, the Biden Administration requested language be added to the FY2021 ASFF appropriation to authorize such amounts to be available to cover costs associated with the recovery, repair, storage, and disposal of equipment and supplies acquired for the Afghanistan security forces; termination of previous contracts funded by the ASFF; and temporary support for certain members of the Afghanistan security forces.<sup>460</sup>

On September 8, 2021, DOD’s Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) issued policy guidance to defense agencies related to Building Partner Capacity (BPC) cases funded with ASFF.<sup>461</sup> In the policy, DSCA directed the agencies to “identify any close-out activities for ASFF-related BPC cases and return any unobligated funds not required to support close-out activities.”

In justifying the \$3.3 billion requested for ASFF in FY2022, 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.”<sup>462</sup>

In July, prior to the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, the House Appropriations Committee reported a version of the Department of Defense Appropriations Act, 2022 (H.R. 4432), that would provide \$3.05 billion for ASFF.<sup>463</sup> In July, the Senate Armed Services Committee approved a version of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022 that would authorize “the appropriation of funds for the Afghanistan security forces beyond the transition of U.S. and coalition nations from the country,” according to an executive summary of the document.<sup>464</sup>

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<sup>458</sup> DOD, Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller)/Chief Financial Officer, Budget Execution, Reprogramming Actions, “Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) Program #2,” FY21-16 PA, August 24, 2021, p. 1, at [https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/execution/reprogramming/fy2021/prior1415s/21-16\\_PA\\_Afghan\\_SIV\\_Program\\_2\\_Request.pdf](https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/execution/reprogramming/fy2021/prior1415s/21-16_PA_Afghan_SIV_Program_2_Request.pdf).

<sup>459</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>460</sup> White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB), “Delivering for the American People and Meeting Urgent Needs in the New Fiscal Year,” blog post by Acting OMB Director Shalanda Young, September 7, 2021, at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/briefing-room/2021/09/07/delivering-for-the-american-people-and-meeting-urgent-needs-in-the-new-fiscal-year/>. See link from “technical assistance” in the text to the document, “FY 2022 Continuing Resolution (CR) Appropriations Issues (anomalies required for a short-term CR),” pp. 27-28, at [https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/CR\\_Package\\_9-7-21.pdf](https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/CR_Package_9-7-21.pdf).

<sup>461</sup> DOD, Defense Security Cooperation Agency, “Immediate Return of Unobligated Afghanistan Security Forces Funds, Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA), DSCA Policy 21-67,” September 8, 2021, at <https://samm.dsca.mil/policy-memoranda/dsca-21-67>.

<sup>462</sup> 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](https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2022/FY2022_ASFF_Justification_Book.pdf).

<sup>463</sup> H.R. 4432, p. 10, at <https://www.congress.gov/117/bills/H.R.4432/BILLS-117hr4432rh.pdf>. The Senate Appropriations Committee has not yet approved its version of the Department of Defense Appropriations Act, 2022.

<sup>464</sup> Senate Armed Services Committee, “SASC Completes Markup of Fiscal Year 2022 National Defense Authorization Act,” press release, July 22, 2021, at <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/press-releases/-sasc-completes-markup-of-act>.



In September, following the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, the House Armed Services Committee approved a version of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year FY2022 (H.R. 4350), that would authorize a total of \$325 million for ASFF for “contract close-out and other close-out operations.”<sup>465</sup>

## What has happened to U.S. military equipment and other personal property brought to, or purchased for use by, U.S. Forces in Afghanistan?<sup>466</sup>

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<sup>467</sup>) *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.”<sup>468</sup> 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.”<sup>469</sup> DOD-owned equipment that is no longer needed (called “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

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fiscal-year-2022-national-defense-authorization-act. See link to *Fiscal Year 2022, National Defense Authorization Act, Senate Armed Services Committee, U.S. Senator Jack Reed, Chairman, U.S. Senator Jim Inhofe, Ranking Member [Executive Summary]*, p. 5, at <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/FY22%20NDAA%20Executive%20Summary.pdf>.

<sup>465</sup> H.R. 4350, p. 1265, at <https://www.congress.gov/117/bills/H.R.4350/BILLS-117hr4350rh.pdf>.

<sup>466</sup> This section was prepared by G. James Herrera, Analyst in U.S. Defense Readiness and Infrastructure.

<sup>467</sup> 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](https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodm/416021_vol1.pdf?ver=2019-10-02-080613-750#page=90).

<sup>468</sup> 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>.

<sup>469</sup> 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=2019-10-02-080613-750#page=83](https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodm/416021_vol1.pdf?ver=2019-10-02-080613-750#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).

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.<sup>470</sup>

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.<sup>471</sup> 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.<sup>472</sup> As of September 17, 2021, DOD has not published a complete 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 is likely now to be possessed by the Taliban, but exact quantities are not known.<sup>473</sup>

Following the completion of the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan on August 30, CENTCOM Commander General McKenzie, stated the U.S. military had demilitarized (i.e., destroyed) their Counter-Rocket, Artillery, Mortar (C-RAM) protection systems in place at Kabul International Airport. These systems were destroyed to prevent them from being used against U.S. forces while U.S. operations were ongoing. He also stated that up to 70 Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicles, 27 High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle (HMMWVs), and 73 aircraft were demilitarized.<sup>474</sup> He asserted that “those aircraft will never fly again... they’ll never be able to be operated by anyone. Most of them were non-mission capable to begin with, but certainly they’ll never be able to be flown again.”<sup>475</sup>

During the September 1, 2021, markup of the House committee version of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year (FY) 2022 (H.R. 4350), a provision was included

<sup>470</sup> SIGAR Quarterly Report to Congress, July 30, 2021.

<sup>471</sup> 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>.

<sup>472</sup> 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.

<sup>473</sup> 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; Adam Taylor, “The Taliban is flaunting captured U.S. weapons that may be worth billions. Can it use them?” *Washington Post*, August 20, 2021.

<sup>474</sup> Recorded statement of General Kenneth “Frank” McKenzie, accessible at CBSnews.com; see Caroline Linton and Eleanor Watson, “Pentagon announces last U.S. troops have left Afghanistan,” CBSnews.com, August 31, 2021.

<sup>475</sup> *Ibid.*

under Section 1054 that would require DOD to provide a report and briefing on “covered United States equipment, property, and classified material” that was destroyed, surrendered, or abandoned in Afghanistan during the “covered period.”<sup>476</sup> The covered period would mean the period that began on February 29, 2020, and ends 120 days after the FY2022 NDAA is enacted. Covered equipment, property, and classified material includes all real property, personal property, equipment including all nonexpendable items needed to outfit or equip an individual or organization, and classified information in any form.<sup>477</sup> As of September 17, 2021, an FY2022 NDAA has not been introduced in the Senate.

According to U.S. officials and press and social media reports, the Taliban have also captured equipment procured with U.S. funds for the ANDSF, including aircraft, ground vehicles, small arms, and ammunition. 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.”<sup>478</sup> 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.<sup>479</sup> Additionally, fleeing ANDSF personnel reportedly took some military equipment and arms—including aircraft—to neighboring countries, including Iran, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan.<sup>480</sup>

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?
- To what extent will the Taliban, or other foreign nations or groups, be able to use and sustain U.S.-origin equipment?
- To what extent can demilitarized U.S.-origin military equipment, supplies, and munitions be reverse-engineered, disassembled, or tested for physical and cyber vulnerabilities by foreign actors, including competitor nation states?<sup>481</sup>
- 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?

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<sup>476</sup> H.R. 4350, Section 1054, available at <https://www.congress.gov/117/bills/H.R.4350/BILLS-117hr4350rh.pdf#page=797>.

<sup>477</sup> Ibid.

<sup>478</sup> White House, Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jen Psaki and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, August 17, 2021.

<sup>479</sup> Secretary of Defense Austin and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Milley Press Briefing, August 18, 2021.

<sup>480</sup> 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.

<sup>481</sup> For a public reference of potential vulnerabilities, see DefenseOne article “How Equipment Left In Afghanistan Will Expose US Secrets,” by Patrick Tucker, September 10, 2021.

## How much has DOD spent on withdrawing U.S. military and civilian personnel from Afghanistan?<sup>482</sup>

DOD has not released estimated or actual costs associated with withdrawing U.S. military personnel from Afghanistan.<sup>483</sup> When asked at an August 23 press conference about the cost of evacuation efforts, Pentagon spokesperson Kirby said, “we’re not letting cost drive the operation,” and the Commander of Transportation Command, General Stephen Lyons, said, “we’re cracking costs, but we’re nowhere close to accumulating that data for public dissemination.”<sup>484</sup>

In May 2021, the number of U.S. military personnel in the country reportedly totaled 3,500,<sup>485</sup> down from a high in FY2011 of approximately 100,000.<sup>486</sup> 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.<sup>487</sup> 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.<sup>488</sup> DOD describes direct war costs in part as “combat or combat support costs that are not expected to continue once combat operations end at major contingency locations.”<sup>489</sup> It is unclear how much of this funding, if any, has been used to date for withdrawing military and civilian personnel from Afghanistan.

In August, DOD transferred a total of \$1.462 billion to Overseas Humanitarian, Disaster, and Civic Aid (OHDACA) account to provide temporary housing, sustainment, and other humanitarian assistance to special immigrant visa (SIV) applicants and their families, according to two department reprogramming actions that required the prior approval of congressional defense committees.<sup>490</sup> That figure includes \$396.39 million in a reprogramming action dated August 5, 2021, and \$1.066 billion in a reprogramming action dated August 21, 2021. The latter involved transferring amounts from the Afghanistan Security Forces Fund (ASFF). According to

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<sup>482</sup> This section was prepared by Brendan McGarry, Analyst in U.S. Defense Budget.

<sup>483</sup> Missy Ryan and Karen DeYoung, “Biden will withdraw all U.S. forces from Afghanistan by Sept. 11, 2021,” *The Washington Post*, April 13, 2021.

<sup>484</sup> Gen. Stephen R. Lyons, Commander of U.S. Transportation Command, and Pentagon Press Secretary John F. Kirby Press Briefing, Department of Defense, August 23, 2021.

<sup>485</sup> See, for example, Thomas Gibbons-Neff, Eric Schmitt and Helene Cooper, “Pentagon Accelerates Withdrawal From Afghanistan,” *The New York Times*, updated July 4, 2021.

<sup>486</sup> For more information, see CRS Report R44116, *Department of Defense Contractor and Troop Levels in Afghanistan and Iraq: 2007-2020*, by Heidi M. Peters.

<sup>487</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>488</sup> 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](https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2022/FY2022_Budget_Request_Overview_Book.pdf).

<sup>489</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7-2.

<sup>490</sup> DOD, Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller)/Chief Financial Officer, Budget Execution, Reprogramming Actions, “Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) Program,” FY21-13PA, August 5, 2021, at [https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/execution/reprogramming/fy2021/prior1415s/21-13\\_PA\\_Afghan%20SIV\\_Request\\_Revised\\_Baseline.pdf](https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/execution/reprogramming/fy2021/prior1415s/21-13_PA_Afghan%20SIV_Request_Revised_Baseline.pdf); and “Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) Program #2,” FY21-16PA, August 24, 2021, at [https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/execution/reprogramming/fy2021/prior1415s/21-16\\_PA\\_Afghan\\_SIV\\_Program\\_2\\_Request.pdf](https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/execution/reprogramming/fy2021/prior1415s/21-16_PA_Afghan_SIV_Program_2_Request.pdf).

the department budget execution documentation, “funds from Afghanistan Security Forces Fund (ASFF) are available because the Department has curtailed support to the Afghanistan National Defense and Security Forces in light of current circumstances.”<sup>491</sup>

On September 7, 2021, as part of a short-term continuing resolution for FY2022, the Biden Administration requested \$2.4 billion in supplemental appropriations for DOD to cover costs related to the relocation of individuals from Afghanistan.<sup>492</sup> Of that amount, \$2.2 billion was requested for the OHDACA account, to remain available through September 30, 2023; the rest of the funding was requested for various operation and maintenance (O&M) and military personnel (MILPERS) accounts, to remain available through September 30, 2022.<sup>493</sup>

The Administration also requested that DOD general transfer authority thresholds for FY2020 and FY2021 be increased by a total of \$600 million “to replace the general transfer authority that was used to fund the relocation and support of Afghanistan personnel.”<sup>494</sup> That figure includes increases of \$100 million for FY2020 (bringing the total general transfer authority to \$4.1 billion), and \$500 million for FY2021 (bringing the total general transfer authority to \$4.5 billion).<sup>495</sup>

## How will the withdrawal of U.S. military personnel from Afghanistan impact the budget?<sup>496</sup>

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.”<sup>497</sup> 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.”<sup>498</sup>

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

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<sup>491</sup> Ibid.

<sup>492</sup> White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB), “Delivering for the American People and Meeting Urgent Needs in the New Fiscal Year,” blog post by Acting OMB Director Shalanda Young, September 7, 2021, at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/briefing-room/2021/09/07/delivering-for-the-american-people-and-meeting-urgent-needs-in-the-new-fiscal-year/>. See link from “technical assistance” in the text to the document, “FY 2022 Continuing Resolution (CR) Appropriations Issues (anomalies required for a short-term CR),” p. 29, at [https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/CR\\_Package\\_9-7-21.pdf](https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/CR_Package_9-7-21.pdf).

<sup>493</sup> OMB, “FY 2022 Continuing Resolution (CR) Appropriations Issues (anomalies required for a short-term CR),” p. 29, at [https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/CR\\_Package\\_9-7-21.pdf](https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/CR_Package_9-7-21.pdf).

<sup>494</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>495</sup> Ibid.

<sup>496</sup> This section was prepared by Brendan McGarry, Analyst in U.S. Defense Budget.

<sup>497</sup> 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.

<sup>498</sup> Jim McAleese, as quoted in Bryan Bender, “Biden bucks the brass on Afghanistan,” *Politico Pro* Morning Defense newsletter, April 15, 2021.



in Afghanistan even though it assumed no U.S. military personnel in the country during FY2022.<sup>499</sup> 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.”<sup>500</sup> 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

The U.S. experience in Afghanistan could provide U.S. policymakers and the broader public an opportunity to reflect upon, and learn from, its 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?

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<sup>499</sup> 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](https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2022/FY2022_Budget_Request_Overview_Book.pdf).

<sup>500</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7-2.

- 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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