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

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Afghanistan emerged as a significant U.S. foreign policy concern in 2001, when the United States, in response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, led a military campaign against Al Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban government that harbored and supported it. In the intervening 19 years, the United States has suffered over 22,000 military casualties (including around 2,400 fatalities) in Afghanistan and Congress has appropriated approximately \$144 billion for reconstruction and security forces there. In that time, an elected Afghan government has replaced the Taliban; improvement in most measures of human development is limited; and future prospects of gains remain mixed.

The United States and its international partners are removing their military forces from Afghanistan as part of a withdrawal announced by President Biden on April 14, 2021, heralding a possible end to the nearly two-decade U.S. military presence in the country. In a February 2020 agreement with the Taliban, the Trump Administration had committed to withdrawing military forces by May 2021, in return for which the Taliban committed to preventing other groups, including Al Qaeda, from using Afghan soil to recruit, train, or fundraise toward activities that threaten the United States or its allies. U.S. officials contend that the Taliban have not fulfilled their commitments, as violence between the Taliban and Afghan government has increased and Taliban links with Al Qaeda remain in place, according to United Nations sanctions monitors.

Afghan government representatives were not participants in U.S.-Taliban talks, leading some observers to conclude that the United States would prioritize a military withdrawal over securing a political settlement that preserves some of the social, political, and humanitarian gains made since 2001. After months of delays, on September 12, 2020, Afghan government and Taliban representatives officially met in Doha, Qatar, to begin their first direct peace negotiations toward such a settlement, a significant moment with potentially dramatic implications for the course of the ongoing Afghan conflict. Talks between the two sides continue but have not made substantial progress and remain complicated by a number of factors.

In light of the stalling of intra-Afghan talks, the United States appears to have intensified its efforts to broker an intra-Afghan agreement. The United States reportedly produced a draft peace agreement to “jumpstart” negotiations that includes a variety of options, including the establishment of an interim “transitional” government, which Afghan President Ashraf Ghani has rejected. The culmination of these efforts was to be a senior-level Afghan conference in Turkey planned for April 2021, but the Taliban refused to attend and continue to reject participating in such a meeting. Observers speculate about what kind of political arrangement, if any, could satisfy both the elected Afghan government and the Taliban, who have not specified in detail their vision for Afghanistan’s future beyond creating an “Islamic government.”

Afghan officials have sought to downplay the impact of the U.S. military withdrawal on their own forces’ capabilities, but some official U.S. assessments indicate that the withdrawal could lead to Taliban gains on the battlefield. By many measures, the Taliban are in a stronger position now than at any point since 2001, controlling as much as half of the country, though many once-public U.S. government metrics related to the conflict have been classified or are no longer produced. Future changes in political arrangements and/or in the security environment may in turn influence U.S. policymakers’ consideration of future levels and conditions of development assistance. It is unclear to what extent, if at all, the prospect of continued U.S. assistance to Afghanistan (which remains one of the world’s poorest countries) represents leverage over the Taliban.

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Introduction

This report provides background information and analysis on U.S. policy in Afghanistan, with a focus on the ongoing U.S. military withdrawal and its implications for a number of factors, including

- security dynamics and the ongoing conflict between the Afghan government and the Taliban;
- the social and political gains made in Afghanistan since 2001; and
- intra-Afghan negotiations, which began in Doha, Qatar, in September 2020, but appear to have since stalled.

The report also provides information on questions about the future of U.S. development and security aid to Afghanistan (which has totaled approximately \$144 billion since 2001).

Background: U.S.-Taliban Agreement

After more than a year of negotiations, U.S. and Taliban representatives signed a bilateral agreement on February 29, 2020, agreeing to two “interconnected” guarantees: the withdrawal of all U.S. and international forces by May 2021, and unspecified Taliban action to prevent other groups (including Al Qaeda) from using Afghan soil to threaten the United States and its allies.¹

In the months after the agreement, several U.S. officials asserted that the Taliban were not fulfilling their commitments under the accord, especially with regard to Al Qaeda (see text box below).² U.S. officials also described increased Taliban violence as “not consistent” with the agreement.³ Although no provisions in the publicly available agreement address Taliban attacks on U.S. or Afghan forces, the Taliban reportedly committed not to attack U.S. forces in nonpublic annexes accompanying the accord.⁴ Some lawmakers have raised questions about the executive branch’s decision to classify these annexes.⁵ In Section 1217 of the FY2021 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA, P.L. 116-283), Congress directed the Administration to, among other requirements, submit within 90 days after enactment and not less than every 120 days thereafter, a report verifying that the Taliban is upholding its commitments under the February 2020 accord.

Al Qaeda and the Taliban

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 May 2021, U.N. sanctions monitors reported that Al Qaeda “has minimized over communications with Taliban leadership in an effort to ‘lay low’ and not jeopardize the Taliban’s

¹ The text of the agreement is available at <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf>. Nonpublic annexes accompanied the agreement.

² “Taliban not living up to its commitments, U.S. Defense Secretary says,” Reuters, May 5, 2020.

³ “Violence ‘Not Consistent’ with US-Taliban Deal: US Envoy,” *TOLOnews*, October 13, 2020.

⁴ In March 2020 testimony, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley told a Senate Armed Services Committee panel that committee members “have all the documents associated with this agreement” and that, in them, the Taliban pledged not to attack U.S. or international forces, as well as Afghan provincial capitals and other high profile targets. “Senate Armed Services Committee Holds Hearing on the Defense Budget Posture,” *CQ Congressional Transcripts*, March 4, 2020.

⁵ Josh Rogin, “Pompeo under pressure to release Taliban deal ‘secret annexes’” (opinion), *Washington Post*, March 4, 2020.

diplomatic position.”⁶ 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, further underscoring questions about AQ-Taliban links and Taliban intentions with regard to Al Qaeda.⁷

In general, U.S. government assessments indicate that the Taliban are not fulfilling their counterterrorism commitments concerning Al Qaeda. For example, in its report on the final quarter of 2020, the Office of the Inspector General for the Department of Defense relayed an assessment from the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) that the Taliban maintain ties to Al Qaeda and that some AQ members are “integrated into the Taliban’s forces and command structure.”⁸ 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.”⁹ The U.S.-Taliban accord is silent on what verification mechanisms might be in place to ensure Taliban compliance, and to what extent (if at all) the U.S. withdrawal might be paused or reversed based on Taliban action (or inaction) with regard to Al Qaeda.

U.S. Military Drawdown¹⁰

The United States began withdrawing forces before the February 2020 agreement was reached and continued to do so afterwards, despite U.S. assertions that Taliban violence and other actions were inconsistent with the agreement.¹¹ On January 15, 2021, then-Acting Secretary of Defense Christopher Miller announced that the number of U.S. forces had reached 2,500, the lowest level since 2001, completing a drawdown ordered by President Donald Trump in November 2020.

On April 14, 2021, President Joe Biden announced that the United States would begin a “final withdrawal” on May 1, to be completed by September 11, 2021.¹² 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.”¹³ 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.”¹⁴ Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump also expressed an intention to withdraw U.S. forces from Afghanistan, sometimes by specified dates, but did not do so during their terms in office. Alongside the U.S. withdrawal, NATO and

⁶ *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.

⁷ Jeff Seldin, “US Calls Death of al-Qaida Official a Major Setback for Terror Group,” *Voice of America*, October 26, 2020.

⁸ *Operation Freedom’s Sentinel: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, October 1, 2020 - December 31, 2020*, released February 17, 2021.

⁹ U.S. Department of Defense, *Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan*, December 2020, released April 23, 2021.

¹⁰ See CRS Report R46670, *U.S. Military Drawdown in Afghanistan: Frequently Asked Questions*, coordinated by Clayton Thomas.

¹¹ Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Mujib Mashal, “U.S. Is Quietly Reducing Its Troop Force in Afghanistan,” *New York Times*, October 21, 2019; Kylie Atwood and Ryan Browne, “US troop drawdown in Afghanistan running ahead of schedule,” *CNN*, April 30, 2020.

¹² White House, “Remarks by President Biden on the Way Forward in Afghanistan,” April 14, 2021.

¹³ “Statement of Islamic Emirate regarding recent announcement by US President Joe Biden,” *Voice of Jihad*, April 15, 2021.

¹⁴ White House, “Background Press Call by a Senior Administration Official on Afghanistan,” April 13, 2021.

other partner countries (whose forces outnumber those of the United States in Afghanistan) also are executing a full withdrawal.

Impact of U.S. Military Drawdown: Afghan Forces and Security Dynamics

In general, Trump Administration officials maintained that the troop reduction would not result in any major changes to the two complementary U.S. missions in Afghanistan: counterterrorism and training, advising, and assisting Afghan forces. However, some military officials implied at the time that the reduced troop level ordered by President Trump might result in some adjustments to U.S. operations and limits to U.S. capabilities. Many outside observers, including the congressionally mandated Afghanistan Study Group, questioned the extent to which the United States could perform both the training and counterterrorism missions at acceptable risk levels with 2,500 forces.¹⁵

The Afghanistan National Defense and Security Forces

The effectiveness of the ANDSF is considered key to the security of Afghanistan, and U.S. and international support has been widely viewed as critical to supporting the ANDSF. President Ghani has said, “[W]e will not be able to support our army for six months without U.S. [financial] support.”¹⁶ Since 2014, the United States generally has provided around 75% of the estimated \$5 billion to \$6 billion a year required to fund the ANDSF, with the balance coming from U.S. partners and the Afghan government. For FY2021, Congress appropriated just over \$3 billion for the ANDSF, the lowest annual appropriation since FY2008.¹⁷

It remains unclear how the U.S. military withdrawal might impact congressional willingness to continue providing this assistance, which some may view as insufficient, in and of itself, to maintain the viability of Afghan forces. In a reported letter to President Ghani (more below), Secretary Blinken stated, “Even with the continuation of financial assistance from the United States to your forces after an American military withdrawal, I am concerned that the security situation will worsen and the Taliban could make rapid territorial gains.” In any case, continued international assistance will likely be necessary for the foreseeable future: the Pentagon reported in June 2020 that “full [financial] self-sufficiency by 2024 does not appear realistic, even if levels of violence and, with it, the ANDSF force structure, reduce significantly.”¹⁸

Total ANDSF strength was reported at more than 307,000 as of January 2021. Other metrics related to ANDSF strength and performance, including casualty and attrition rates, have been classified by U.S. Forces-Afghanistan (USFOR-A) starting with the October 2017 SIGAR quarterly report, citing a request from the Afghan government, although SIGAR had previously published those metrics as part of its quarterly reports.¹⁹

Under the Biden Administration, U.S. officials have expressed an intention to continue “over-the-horizon” counterterrorism efforts after U.S. troops depart Afghanistan. In his April 14 address, President Biden said, “We’ll reorganize our counterterrorism capabilities and the substantial assets in the region to prevent reemergence of terrorists” in Afghanistan.²⁰ Questions remain as to what such an effort might look like in practice, and what the potential logistical, political, financial challenges might be, including establishing new arrangements with Afghan partners and new basing options outside of Afghanistan.

¹⁵ *Afghanistan Study Group Final Report*, United States Institute of Peace, February 2021.

¹⁶ Anwar Iqbal, “Afghan Army to Collapse in Six Months Without US Help: Ghani,” *Dawn*, January 18, 2018.

¹⁷ Congress also rescinded \$1.1 billion in FY2020 ASFF funding. For more, see CRS Report R45329, *Afghanistan: Issues for Congress and Legislation 2017-2020*.

¹⁸ Department of Defense, “Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan,” June 2020.

¹⁹ “Report: US Officials Classify Crucial Metrics on Afghan Casualties, Readiness,” *Military Times*, October 30, 2017.

²⁰ White House, “Remarks by President Biden,” op. cit.

Afghan officials have sought to downplay the detrimental impact of the U.S. troop withdrawal while emphasizing the need for continued U.S. financial assistance to Afghan forces.²¹ In a May 2021 press conference, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley said “bad outcomes” are not “inevitable,” given what he characterized as the strengths of the Afghan government and military.²² Some other U.S. government assessments are less positive: 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.”²³ U.S. military officials have said various options, including remote training (which has largely been in place since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic) or training Afghan personnel in third countries, are under consideration to continue supporting Afghan forces.²⁴ The departure of U.S. contractors may also pose short term threats to Afghan capabilities, given Afghan forces’ reliance on contractor support for most maintenance work. For example, in a February 2021 report, the U.S. military assessed that without DOD-funded contractor support, no Afghan airframes “can be sustained as combat effective for more than a few months.”²⁵ U.S. military officials are reportedly considering seeking authorization for airstrikes (likely launched from U.S. bases in the Persian Gulf) against the Taliban in the event that Kabul or other major cities are at risk.²⁶

Beyond the immediate effects on Afghan forces and their capabilities, a full U.S. military withdrawal may have second- or third-order effects on the fragile Afghan state, especially when it comes to local perceptions of U.S. intentions and of the impact of U.S. withdrawal on Afghan forces. Some Afghans, recalling the complex, multi-sided civil war of the 1990s, have suggested that their communities (and, often, their associated militias) may pursue more independent courses of action if the Afghan government is unable to provide security in the context of the U.S.

Figure I. Taliban Controlled and Contested Districts in Afghanistan

As of October 2020



Source: The Economist (using data and analysis from *Long War Journal*).

²¹ Zahra Rahimi, “ANDSF Showcases Air Force as Country Braces for US Pullout,” *TOLOnews*, April 26, 2021.

²² Transcript: Secretary of Defense Austin and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Milley Press Briefing, Department of Defense, May 6, 2021.

²³ Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community, Office of the Director of National Intelligence, April 19, 2021.

²⁴ Transcript: Secretary of Defense Austin and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Milley Press Briefing, Department of Defense, May 6, 2021.

²⁵ *Operation Freedom’s Sentinel*, op. cit.

²⁶ Helene Cooper et al., “U.S. Weighs Possibility of Airstrikes if Afghan Forces Face Crisis,” *New York Times*, June 9, 2021.

withdrawal.²⁷ Some Afghan leaders have suggested that continued infighting among Afghan elites may pose as much of a threat to the Afghan political system as the Taliban.²⁸

Operations by the Taliban, whose strength has been estimated at 60,000 full-time fighters, against Afghan government forces continue, including numerous attacks nationwide after the U.S. withdrawal began on May 1. A major offensive by the Taliban in May 2021 prompted the United States to launch airstrikes in support of Afghan government forces in southern Afghanistan's Helmand Province. The group controls or contexts more territory in 2021 than at any point since 2001 by many measures (see **Figure 1**).²⁹

The United Nations mission in Afghanistan reported that while the number of civilian casualties in 2020 fell below 10,000 for the first time since 2013, violence against civilians increased in the months following the start of intra-Afghan negotiations in September 2020.³⁰ Targeted attacks have risen in recent months. The Taliban denied involvement in the January 2021 assassination of female Supreme Court judges in Kabul and other attacks, but the United States and other countries released a joint statement on January 31, 2021, charging that “the Taliban bears responsibility for the majority of this targeted violence.”³¹ The Taliban also denied responsibility for a May 8, 2021, attack targeting schoolgirls in a Kabul neighborhood populated mostly by Hazaras (an ethnoreligious Shia minority); the attack killed more than 80 and wounded nearly 150. That attack was not claimed by the regional Islamic State affiliate, though that group has often targeted Afghan Hazaras (see textbox).

Islamic State-Khorasan Province

Beyond the Taliban, a significant share of U.S. operations have been aimed at the local Islamic State affiliate, known as Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP, also known as ISIS-K). Estimates of ISKP strength generally ranged from 2,000 to 4,000 fighters until ISKP “collapsed” in late 2019 due to offensives by U.S. and Afghan forces and, separately, the Taliban.³² ISKP and Taliban forces have sometimes fought over control of territory or because of political or other differences.³³ A number of ISKP leaders have been killed in U.S. strikes since 2016, and Afghan forces arrested and captured two successive ISKP leaders in the spring of 2020. U.S. officials caution that ISKP remains a threat, pointing to several high profile attacks attributed to the group in 2020. The United Nations reports that casualties from ISKP attacks in 2020 decreased 45% from 2019.³⁴ Some suggest that the Taliban's

²⁷ Sune Engel Rasmussen and Ehsanullah Amiri, “Afghanistan Braces for the Worst as U.S. Troop Withdrawal Accelerates,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 19, 2020; “Atta Noor threatens to ‘take action’ against security situation,” *Ariana News*, December 24, 2020.

²⁸ Anisa Shaneed, “Abdullah: Political Division Will Cause Collapse,” *TOLONews*, June 3, 2021.

²⁹ See also *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 and stability of Afghanistan*, United Nations Security Council, (S/2021/486), released June 1, 2021, which relays an assessment from unspecified Member States that the Taliban “contest or control an estimated 50 to 70 per cent of Afghan territory outside of urban centers, while also exerting direct control over 57 per cent of district administrative centers.”

³⁰ United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), *Afghanistan: Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict*, Annual Report 2020, February 2021.

³¹ U.S. Embassy in Afghanistan, “Statement on Continuation of Assassinations, Kidnapping, and Destruction of Vital Infrastructure,” January 31, 2021.

³² “ISIS Is Losing Afghan Territory. That Means Little for Its Victims,” *New York Times*, December 2, 2019.

³³ See, for example, Shawn Snow, “ISIS loses more than half its fighters from US airstrikes and Taliban ground operations,” *Military Times*, February 27, 2020.

³⁴ UNAMA, *Afghanistan: Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict*, op. cit.

participation in peace talks or a putative political settlement could prompt disaffected (or newly unemployed) fighters to join ISKP.³⁵

The Afghan government has prioritized a permanent ceasefire, which the Taliban have rejected, though they have in recent years conducted three limited truces during religious holidays (including in mid-May 2021). Many observers doubt the Taliban would agree to abandon violence, arguably their main source of leverage, before an intra-Afghan political settlement, though targeted reductions in violence could pave the way for a more comprehensive ceasefire.³⁶

Impact of U.S. Military Drawdown: Democracy and Human Rights in Afghanistan

By all accounts, Afghanistan has made progress on recognizing and protecting Afghans' rights since Taliban rule ended in 2001. The scale of that progress is disputed, however, and government-aligned entities are alleged to participate in a range of human rights abuses. Experts differ over the extent to which the Taliban have changed since 2001, if at all. The Taliban have not described in detail their plans for Afghan governance, but many expect social and political gains to be reversed if the Taliban come back into power in some fashion following a U.S. military withdrawal.

The 2004 Afghan constitution establishes a democratic political system in which basic freedoms, including of religion, expression, assembly, and association, are guaranteed. In practice, elections have regularly been fraught with accusations of fraud, and governing institutions are often weak and ineffective. The constitution arguably creates an overly powerful executive branch, disincentivizing compromise as various factions vie for the all-important presidency in a zero-sum game. Endemic corruption in particular has long been identified as a potent threat that undermines Afghan state institutions, delegitimizes the Afghan government in the eyes of many of its citizens, and discourages private sector investment and development.³⁷

Successive State Department annual reports on human rights practices indicate widespread human rights abuses in government-held areas.³⁸ Respect for human rights, including for the equal rights of women, appears even more limited in areas outside of the government's control. The State Department reports that the Taliban conduct public executions, forced confessions, and other abuses under their parallel justice system; that the group strictly polices expression and routinely attacks journalists; and that it restricts girls' access to education.³⁹

There appear to be some changes to the Taliban's rhetoric and actions since 2001, though experts disagree about the extent and significance of such changes.⁴⁰ One Afghan journalist's April 2021 report from Taliban-controlled areas of Helmand Province indicates that, at least in some areas,

³⁵ Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Zabihullah Ghazi, "Foes in Afghan War See Common Threat of Islamic State's Return," *New York Times*, March 22, 2021.

³⁶ Abdul Qadir Sediqi, "Fight and talk: Facing negotiations, Taliban almost took key Afghan city," Reuters, September 14, 2020.

³⁷ See "The State of Corruption in Afghanistan and the Role of Independent Institutions," Prepared remarks of John Sopko, Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, Integrity Watch Afghanistan Webinar Event, June 24, 2020.

³⁸ U.S. Department of State, *2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices*, March 30, 2021.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Thomas Ruttig, "Have the Taliban Changed?" *CTC Sentinel*, March 2021.

the group does not have either the inclination, willingness, and/or ability to enforce the kinds of societal controls that it attempted to implement until 2001.⁴¹ Politically, some analysts posit the Taliban are likely to push for clerical oversight of executive and legislative decision-making as a “hybrid” of their 1996-2001 emirate and a more Western-style state.⁴²

The Taliban, who have focused on securing the withdrawal of foreign forces, have not detailed their proposals on governance issues. In remarks at the opening of intra-Afghan talks in September 2020, Taliban deputy political leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar said, “We seek an Afghanistan that is independent, sovereign, united, developed and free—an Afghanistan with an Islamic system in which all people of the nation can participate without discrimination.”⁴³ In February 2021, Baradar wrote that the group is committed to protecting certain rights with conditions, such as “all rights of women afforded to them by Islamic law” and “freedom of speech within the framework of Islamic principles and national interests.”⁴⁴ In a June 2021 interview, a Taliban spokesman referred to establishing an “Islamic government” as the group’s “second goal” (after the departure of foreign forces from Afghanistan), adding that “if this second goal is not reached, we will be compelled to continue our war to achieve our goal.”⁴⁵

Afghan leaders express a determination to preserve Afghanistan’s democratic institutions and its constitution, which establishes Islam as the state religion but does not necessarily tie legislation and national policymaking to religious jurisprudence. In a September 2020 interview, High Council for National Reconciliation Chairman Abdullah Abdullah said, “For me, one person, one vote—I don’t call anything a red line—but that’s critical ... and compromises on these things will not get us to peace.”⁴⁶ President Ashraf Ghani has stated that his government will not conclude any agreement that limits Afghans’ rights, adding that any agreement to withdraw U.S. forces that did not include Kabul’s participation could lead to “catastrophe,” pointing to the 1990s-era civil strife following the fall of the Soviet-backed government that led to the rise of the Taliban.⁴⁷

Some Afghans and other international observers have proposed the formation of an interim government, arguing that the Taliban’s continued refusal to recognize the Afghan government might make such a step necessary.⁴⁸ President Ghani and other Afghan officials have rejected such proposals, including from the United States (see below).⁴⁹

Press reports suggest that Afghans who have benefitted from the socio-political reforms of the past two decades view the U.S. troop drawdown warily.⁵⁰ In remarks announcing the withdrawal

⁴¹ Fazelnallah Qazizai, “After America: Inside the Taliban’s New Emirate,” *Newlines*, April 14, 2021.

⁴² Frud Bezhan, “Are the Taliban Seeking A ‘Sunni Afghan Version’ of Iran?” *RFE/RL*, October 2, 2020.

⁴³ Ayaz Gul, “Afghan Rivals Begin Historic Peace Talks; US Cautiously Optimistic,” *Voice of America*, September 12, 2020.

⁴⁴ *Open letter to the people of the United States of America*, February 16, 2021. Available at <http://alemarahenglish.net/?p=42767>.

⁴⁵ Lynne O’Donnell, “Taliban Map Out Future Vision for Afghanistan,” *Foreign Policy*, June 8, 2021.

⁴⁶ Susannah George, “The Taliban and the Afghan government are finally talking peace: What they’re negotiating and what to expect,” *Washington Post*, September 12, 2020.

⁴⁷ Philip Walter Wellman, “Ghani tells Afghan peace deal with Taliban will not compromise basic rights,” *Stars and Stripes*, January 28, 2019; “Afghans Worry as US Makes Progress in Taliban Talks,” *Voice of America*, January 29, 2019.

⁴⁸ Frud Bezhan, “Would an Afghan Interim Government Help or Hinder Peace Efforts?” *Gandhara*, January 14, 2021.

⁴⁹ Pamela Constable, “Peace talks are faltering, violence has surged, and U.S. troops are pulling out. Can the Afghan government withstand the pressure?” *Washington Post*, January 13, 2021.

⁵⁰ Thomas Gibbons-Neff, “Afghans wonder ‘What about us?’ as U.S. troops prepare to withdraw,” *New York Times*, April 14, 2021.

plan, President Biden said that “we’ll continue to support the rights of Afghan women and girls by maintaining significant humanitarian and development assistance.”⁵¹ It is unclear to what extent, if at all, U.S. assistance might be able to shape the trajectory of respect for human rights in Afghanistan if the broader political and governance context becomes less hospitable, or whether such assistance might represent a strong enough incentive to shape Taliban approaches to human rights or democracy (see “Outlook and Issues for Congress,” below).

Intra-Afghan Talks and Efforts to Achieve a Settlement

Intra-Afghan talks aimed at reaching a comprehensive peace settlement began in Doha, Qatar, in September 2020, representing a major step toward resolving the conflict. The two sides have met sporadically in recent months, but appear to remain far apart on the two key issues that appear to be central to talks—reducing violence and determining the future structure and orientation of the Afghan state.⁵²

The U.S.-Taliban agreement committed the Taliban to entering talks with the Afghan government by March, but negotiations remained unscheduled for months amid complications including gridlock in Kabul due to the disputed September 2019 presidential election, delays to a prisoner exchange between Taliban and the Afghan government, and ongoing violence. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, Ghani’s electoral opponent and former partner in a unity government, agreed in May 2020 to end their political impasse and appoint Abdullah as chairman of the newly-created High Council for National Reconciliation (HCNR) to oversee talks with the Taliban.⁵³ The prisoner exchange was completed in early September 2020, removing the main obstacle to intra-Afghan talks, which began in Doha that month. The two sides have met intermittently in recent months, with some describing the talks as stalled.⁵⁴

Some doubt the Taliban’s trustworthiness and express concern that, in the absence of U.S. military pressure, the group will have little incentive to comply with the terms of any agreement reached with Kabul.⁵⁵ Some Afghan officials reportedly suspect the Taliban of trying to “run out the clock on the withdrawal of American troops,” remaining in negotiations long enough to secure a full U.S. withdrawal, after which they will capitalize on their advantage on the battlefield to seize control of the country by force.⁵⁶ Still, at least some Afghans reportedly support “peace at any cost” given the decades of conflict through which the country has suffered.⁵⁷

⁵¹ “President Biden Delivers Remarks on Afghanistan Strategy,” C-SPAN, April 14, 2021.

⁵² Kathy Gannon, “Afghan Peace Talks Resume, but Path is Anything but Certain,” Associated Press, February 23, 2021.

⁵³ Ali Yawar Adili, “End of the Post-Election Impasse? Ghani and Abdullah’s new power-sharing formula,” *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, May 20, 2020. For more on Afghanistan’s political system, and accusations that it is overcentralized and fuels conflict, see CRS Report R45818, *Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy*, by Clayton Thomas.

⁵⁴ Alexander Cornwell, “Afghan peace talks should rotate among countries, envoy says amid stall,” Reuters, March 15, 2021.

⁵⁵ Deb Riechmann, “Critics of US-Taliban Deal Say Militants Can’t Be Trusted,” Associated Press, July 4, 2020.

⁵⁶ Mujib Mashal, “Violent attacks plague Afghanistan as peace talks in Doha slow,” *New York Times*, Sept. 19, 2020.

⁵⁷ Susannah George and Sharif Hassan, “Faced with the prospect of formal peace talks, Afghans consider what they’re willing to concede,” *Washington Post*, June 7, 2020.

Accelerated U.S. Diplomatic Efforts

In spring 2021, with talks in Doha having made no evident progress, the Biden Administration launched an intensified U.S. diplomatic push to broker an intra-Afghan agreement. On March 7, 2021, the Afghan media outlet *TOLONews* published an undated letter reportedly from U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken to President Ghani.⁵⁸ In the letter, Secretary Blinken reportedly asked President Ghani to exercise “urgent leadership” in forming a “united front” with other Afghan political leaders.⁵⁹

The United States also reportedly prepared a draft peace proposal for consideration by Afghan negotiators (the text of which was also published by *TOLONews*). The document, which is described as “intended to jumpstart” talks by providing concrete power-sharing alternatives, proposes the formation of a “transitional peace government,” including the selection of a new president “acceptable to both sides.”⁶⁰ The document also proposes possible changes to the Afghan parliament and provincial councils (in both cases by either adding Taliban members to the current bodies or suspending them during the transitional government); the creation of a new High Council for Islamic Jurisprudence to “review” legislation “to ensure compliance” with Islam; and the writing of a new Constitution by a 21-member commission.

The culmination of these U.S. efforts was to be a “senior-level meeting” in Istanbul, Turkey in late April “to finalize an agreement,” per Secretary Blinken’s letter. On April 13, shortly after the publication of reports about President Biden’s decision to maintain U.S. troops in Afghanistan beyond May 1, a Taliban spokesman wrote on Twitter that “[u]ntil all foreign forces completely withdraw from our homeland ... [the Taliban] will not participate in any conference that shall make decisions about Afghanistan.”⁶¹ Turkey has postponed the meeting indefinitely, and the Taliban reportedly have refused to attend unless the meeting is short and comprised of low-level delegations who will not make decisions on critical issues.⁶²

For his part, President Ghani has proposed a presidential election within six months in which he would not run, per a top advisor; in response to those reports, the Taliban rejected such a plan, arguing that previous elections had “pushed the country to the verge of crisis.”⁶³ President Ghani is widely viewed as severely weakened and isolated, and U.S. officials have reportedly “lost patience” with him and his refusal to consider stepping down.⁶⁴

⁵⁸ When asked about the accuracy of reports about the letter and draft peace proposal on March 8, 2021, State Department Spokesman Ned Price said, “I’m not going to be able to comment on any reported private correspondence.” U.S. Department of State, Department Press Briefing, March 8, 2021.

⁵⁹ Thomas Gibbons-Neff, David Zucchino, and Lara Jakes, “U.S. Pushes U.N.-led Conference in Letter to Afghan Leader,” *New York Times*, March 7, 2021. Text of the letter available at <https://tolonews.com/pdf/02.pdf>.

⁶⁰ “Exclusive: Details of Proposed Draft for Afghan Peace,” *TOLONews*, March 7, 2021.

⁶¹ Muhammad Naeem (@IeaOffice), Twitter, April 13, 2021, 3:59PM.

⁶² Tahir Khan, “VOA Exclusive: Taliban Attach Conditions to Istanbul Conference Participation,” *VOA*, May 25, 2021.

⁶³ Hamid Shalizi, “Exclusive: Afghan president, rejecting US peace plan, to offer election in six months, officials say,” Reuters, March 23, 2021; “Taliban slam Afghan president’s proposal for new election,” *France24*, March 24, 2021; “Ghani will not run in any eventual election,” *Afghanistan Times*, April 3, 2021.

⁶⁴ Adam Nossiter, “Afghan President in ‘Desperate Situation’ as His Power Is Undermined,” *New York Times*, April 10, 2021.

Regional Dynamics: Pakistan and Other Neighbors

Regional dynamics, and the involvement of outside powers, directly affect the conflict in Afghanistan. The neighboring state widely considered most important in this regard is Pakistan, which has played an active, and by many accounts negative, role in Afghan affairs for decades. Pakistan's security services maintain ties to Afghan insurgent groups, most notably the Haqqani Network.⁶⁵ Afghan leaders, along with U.S. military commanders, have attributed much of the insurgency's power and longevity either directly or indirectly to Pakistani support.⁶⁶ The Trump Administration sought Islamabad's assistance in U.S. talks with the Taliban after 2018, and U.S. assessments of Taliban's role have generally been more positive since. For example, Khalilzad thanked Pakistan for releasing Baradar from custody in October 2018 and for facilitating the travel of Taliban figures to talks in Doha, and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin "expressed gratitude" to his Pakistani counterpart in March 2021 for Pakistan's "continued support for the Afghan peace process."⁶⁷ Pakistani leaders assert, however, that their country will not host U.S. bases after the military withdrawal from Afghanistan.⁶⁸

Despite official Pakistani leadership's statements to the contrary, Islamabad may view a weak and destabilized Afghanistan as preferable to a strong, unified Afghan state (particularly one led by an ethnic Pashtun-dominated government in Kabul; Pakistan has a large and restive Pashtun minority).⁶⁹ Afghanistan-Pakistan relations are further complicated by the presence of over one million Afghan refugees in Pakistan, as well as a long-running and ethnically tinged dispute over their shared 1,600-mile border.⁷⁰ Pakistan's security establishment, fearful of strategic encirclement by India, apparently continues to view the Afghan Taliban as a relatively friendly and reliably anti-India element in Afghanistan. India's diplomatic and commercial presence in Afghanistan—and U.S. rhetorical support for it—exacerbates Pakistani fears of encirclement. India has been the largest regional contributor to Afghan reconstruction, but New Delhi has not shown an inclination to pursue a deeper defense relationship with Kabul and, according to one June 2021 media report, has "opened channels of communication" with Taliban leaders.⁷¹

Afghanistan maintains mostly cordial ties with its other neighbors, notably the post-Soviet states of Central Asia, whose role in Afghanistan has been relatively limited but could increase.⁷² In the past two years, multiple U.S. commanders have warned of increased levels of support for the

⁶⁵ For more, see CRS In Focus IF10604, *Al Qaeda and Islamic State Affiliates in Afghanistan*, by Clayton Thomas.

⁶⁶ White House, *Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia*, August 21, 2017. Some Pakistani officials disputed that charge and noted the Taliban's increased territorial control within Afghanistan itself. Author interviews with Pakistani military officials, Rawalpindi, Pakistan, February 21, 2018.

⁶⁷ "Mullah Baradar released by Pakistan at the behest of US: Khalilzad," *The Hindu*, February 9, 2019. Baradar had been imprisoned in Pakistan since his capture in Karachi in a joint U.S.-Pakistani operation in 2010. Baqir Sajjad Syed, "Pentagon chief praises Pakistan's role in Afghan peace process," *Dawn*, March 23, 2021.

⁶⁸ "Pakistan refused to give military bases to US: FM," *Pakistan Today*, June 8, 2021.

⁶⁹ Pashtuns are an ethnic group that makes up about 40% of Afghanistan's 35 million people and 15% of Pakistan's 215 million; they thus represent a plurality in Afghanistan but are a relatively small minority in Pakistan, though Pakistan's Pashtun population is considerably larger than Afghanistan's.

⁷⁰ Pakistan, the United Nations, and others recognize the 1893 Durand Line as an international boundary, but Afghanistan does not. See Vinay Kaura, "The Durand Line: A British Legacy Plaguing Afghan-Pakistani Relations," *Middle East Institute*, June 27, 2017.

⁷¹ Rezaul Laskar, "In a huge shift, India opens channels with Afghan Taliban factions and leaders," *Hindustan Times*, June 9, 2021.

⁷² Humayun Hamidzada and Richard Ponzio, *Central Asia's Growing Role in Building Peace and Regional Connectivity with Afghanistan*, United States Institute of Peace, August 2019.

Taliban from Russia and Iran, both of which have cited the Islamic State affiliate presence in Afghanistan to justify their activities. Both were reported in 2020 to have been more directly involved, including possibly supporting Taliban attacks against U.S. forces.⁷³ Both nations were opposed to the Taliban government of the late 1990s, but reportedly see the Taliban as a useful point of leverage vis-à-vis the United States. Afghanistan may also represent a growing priority for China in the context of broader Chinese aspirations in Asia and globally.⁷⁴

Economy and U.S. Aid

In addition to its long-standing military presence, the United States has provided considerable development assistance to Afghanistan. Since FY2002, Congress has appropriated approximately \$144 billion in overall aid for Afghanistan, with about 61% for security and 25% for governance and development (with the remaining 14% for civilian operations and humanitarian aid).⁷⁵ DOD's quarterly Cost of War report estimated the cost of U.S. combat operations (including related regional support activities and support for Afghan forces) as of December 2020 at \$824.9 billion since FY2002.

The U.S. military withdrawal could affect the level and types of assistance the United States may provide to Afghanistan. Some Members have raised concerns that a withdrawal might impair the United States' ability to monitor the distribution and effectiveness of U.S. aid, a long-standing U.S. concern.⁷⁶ Additionally, the number of personnel present in Afghanistan under Chief of Mission authority (mostly State Department or USAID personnel) declined steadily during the Trump Administration and significantly after the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic began.

Furthermore, U.S. assistance may affect, and in turn be affected by, intra-Afghan talks and a potential settlement. Special Representative Khalilzad said in September 2020 congressional testimony that "we are committed for the long term in terms of providing assistance to Afghanistan," but that U.S. decisions would depend on the outcome of Afghan negotiations, as other U.S. officials have emphasized.⁷⁷ The appropriation of assistance funding remains a congressional prerogative. It is unclear to what extent (if at all) the prospect of changes to U.S. and international financial assistance might put pressure on or create U.S. leverage over the behavior and policies of the Taliban or the Afghan government.⁷⁸

U.S. and international development assistance could become more critical if a U.S. and allied military withdrawal further weakens Afghanistan's economy, already among the world's smallest.

⁷³ Charlie Savage, Eric Schmitt and Michael Schwartz, "Russia Secretly Offered Afghan Militants Bounties to Kill U.S. Troops, Intelligence Says," *New York Times*, June 26, 2020. Additionally, in October 2018, the Trump Administration sanctioned several Iranian military officials for providing support to the Taliban. U.S. Department of the Treasury, *Treasury and the Terrorist Financing Targeting Center Partners Sanction Taliban Facilitators and their Iranian Supporters*, October 23, 2018.

⁷⁴ See, for example, Barbara Kelemen, "China's Economic Stabilization Efforts in Afghanistan: A New Party to the Table?" Middle East Institute, January 21, 2020.

⁷⁵ SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, April 30, 2020.

⁷⁶ See Senator Reed's remarks at Senate Armed Service Committee Hearing on U.S. Central Command, February 5, 2019.

⁷⁷ House Oversight and Reform Subcommittee on National Security Holds Hearing on Afghanistan Strategy, September 22, 2020. For example, Secretary Pompeo told intra-Afghan negotiators in Doha that their "choices and conduct will affect both the size and scope of United States future assistance."

⁷⁸ For more, see Live Event: What Does the Taliban Want?, Wilson Center, October 6, 2020.

Afghanistan's gross domestic product (GDP) has grown an average of 7% per year since 2003, but growth rates averaged between 2% and 3% in recent years and decades of war have stunted the development of most domestic industries. President Ghani said in July 2020 that 90% of Afghans live below the government-determined poverty level of two dollars a day.⁷⁹ The withdrawal of a U.S. force much smaller than that of a decade ago would seem to have less dramatic second-order economic effects for Afghanistan than did the post-2012 drawdown, which helped spur a "drastic economic decline."⁸⁰ Still, the proposed withdrawal could pose risks for an Afghan economy suffering the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has infected tens of thousands of Afghans (a figure likely understates the scale of the virus in Afghanistan due to extremely limited testing).⁸¹

Afghanistan's largely underdeveloped natural resources and/or geographic position at the crossroads of future global trade routes could improve the economic life of the country, and, by extension, its social and political dynamics. Nevertheless, Afghanistan's economic outlook remains uncertain, if not negative, in light of the prospective decrease in U.S. and international investment and engagement.

Outlook and Issues for Congress

President Biden's April 2021 announcement of his intention to fully withdraw U.S. forces by September 11, 2021, drew praise and criticism from some Members of Congress, who have long debated the relative costs and benefits of the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan. Some welcomed the announcement, citing what they characterize as U.S. counterterrorism successes or a need to reprioritize U.S. global interests.⁸² Other Members urged President Biden to reconsider in favor of a conditions-based approach.⁸³ Longstanding competing desires among some in Congress to both end "forever wars" and preserve the gains in Afghanistan achieved in part by considerable U.S. sacrifice could shape congressional oversight of Biden Administration policy as the Administration plans to end the nearly two-decade-long U.S. military presence later in 2021.

Going forward, congressional attention on Afghanistan may center on U.S. assistance, specifically what levels and conditions can best achieve U.S. policy priorities. In the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021 (P.L. 116-260), Congress makes certain funds available for a range of activities in Afghanistan, including programs that combat corruption, support higher education, and protect the rights of Afghan women and girls. It also prohibits the use of funds pursuant to limits first imposed in the FY2019 appropriations act, including limits on funding for projects that the Afghan government cannot sustain or that are inaccessible for effective oversight. These conditions may become more challenging if security conditions deteriorate after a U.S. withdrawal. Congress has also appropriated considerable funds for Afghan security forces.

More broadly, it is unclear to what extent, if at all, U.S. foreign assistance might encourage the Taliban to accept key elements of Afghanistan's constitution and post-2001 governance; many U.S. policymakers view Afghanistan's democratic system, even with its considerable flaws, as a

⁷⁹ Anisa Shaheed, "Ghani's Afghan Poverty Estimate 'Catastrophic': Analysts," *TOLOnews*, July 20, 2020.

⁸⁰ "The Economic Disaster Behind Afghanistan's Mounting Human Crisis," International Crisis Group, October 3, 2016.

⁸¹ World Health Organization, "WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard," June 9, 2021.

⁸² Representative Andy Kim, "Congressman Kim Statement on Announcement of U.S. Troop Withdrawal from Afghanistan," April 13, 2021; Senator Ed Markey (@SenMarkey), Twitter, April 13, 2021, 1:29PM.

⁸³ Senator Jim Inhofe (@JimInhofe), Twitter, April 13, 2021, 1:26PM.

success of U.S. and international efforts. Official views of the Taliban's stance vary. Some Administration officials assert the Taliban say that they want international assistance.⁸⁴ In contrast, a recently declassified National Intelligence Council (NIC) assessment stated that while the "Taliban's desires for foreign aid and legitimacy might marginally moderate its conduct over time," at least initially "the Taliban probably would focus on extending control on its own terms."⁸⁵ The NIC assessed that Taliban control would "roll back much of the two decades' of progress" given the Taliban's "restrictive approach to women's rights." Some Members of Congress have expressed an intention not to support assistance for Afghanistan if the Taliban re-enter power and roll back women's rights.⁸⁶ Conversely, Congress might also consider sanctions as possible leverage, given the potential for U.S. sanctions to deny needed foreign investment to a potential future Afghan government that includes or is dominated by the Taliban. How Afghanistan fits into broader U.S. strategy is another issue on which Members might engage, especially given competing fiscal priorities in light of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as competing U.S. policy priorities.⁸⁷

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⁸⁴ Secretary Antony J. Blinken At a Press Availability, Department of State, April 15, 2021.

⁸⁵ NIC, *Afghanistan: Women's Economic, Political, Social Status Driven by Cultural Norms*, April 2, 2021.

⁸⁶ Rachel Oswald, "U.S. foreign aid will be cut off if Taliban take power, senators say," *Roll Call*, April 27, 2021.

⁸⁷ See, for example, CRS Report R43838, *Renewed Great Power Competition: Implications for Defense—Issues for Congress*, by Ronald O'Rourke.