



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

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

Afghanistan under the Taliban, the Sunni Islamist group that retook power in 2021 as the United States ended its 20-year military and development mission in Afghanistan, remains one of the world's poorest countries and a haven for some international terrorist groups. Many of the challenges that U.S. policymakers sought to address after 2021 persist, though Afghanistan appears to have receded as a U.S. priority and it is unclear what considerations, beyond terrorism concerns, might shape Trump Administration policy toward the country.

The Taliban do not currently appear to face political or armed opposition that represent a serious threat to the group or its authoritarian rule. Signs of dissension in the group's ranks along various lines have emerged, although the Taliban have a history of effectively managing internal disputes. No country has officially recognized the Taliban as Afghanistan's government, although several operate embassies in Kabul and/or have allowed the Taliban to staff Afghan diplomatic facilities abroad. The United States does not recognize the Taliban or any other entity as the government of Afghanistan and reports there are no U.S. diplomatic or military personnel in the country.

Members of Congress have focused on several aspects of the Taliban's renewed rule and related implications for U.S. interests, including the following:

- **Counterterrorism.** The Islamic State (a historic Taliban adversary) and Al Qaeda (a historic partner) continue to maintain a presence in Afghanistan. While Al Qaeda has maintained its close relationship with the Taliban, the Afghanistan-based Islamic State affiliate (Islamic State-Khorasan Province, or ISKP) has violently opposed the Taliban. ISKP is presently seen as a much more significant threat within Afghanistan and beyond, having conducted major terrorist attacks in Russia and Iran in 2024.
- **Afghan women and girls.** The Taliban have implemented severe restrictions on women and girls in Afghanistan that may constitute crimes against humanity, according to United Nations experts. These restrictions, including bans on girls attending school above the primary level and on women working in nearly any capacity, reportedly have had hugely detrimental impacts, most immediately on the health and well-being of Afghan women and girls, as well as on Afghanistan's economy and society more broadly.
- **U.S. assistance.** In response to Afghanistan's intersecting humanitarian and economic crises, the United States allocated nearly \$3 billion for humanitarian and development assistance between October 2021 and December 2024. Some Members of Congress have voiced concern over reports that some U.S. aid has been diverted by, or otherwise benefitted, the Taliban. The Trump Administration's moves to freeze aid funds globally and terminate most assistance awards reportedly have led to the closure of dozens of Afghan nongovernmental organizations that received U.S. funding via United Nations (UN) agencies or other entities.
- **Relocation and resettlement of Afghan allies.** For over three years after the U.S. withdrawal, the United States facilitated the relocation of Afghan allies who worked on behalf of former U.S. efforts in Afghanistan. Between August 2021 and August 2024, nearly 150,000 Afghans resettled in the United States; tens of thousands of additional Afghans who remain in Afghanistan or other countries potentially qualify for various forms of immigration relief, including Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs). President Donald Trump's January 2025 suspension of refugee admission reportedly prevented some Afghans from entering the United States, and the Administration has reportedly directed the State Department office that has overseen Afghan resettlement efforts to plan for its closure.

Congressional oversight of U.S. policy on Afghanistan has included numerous hearings, past and ongoing investigations, and the creation of the Afghanistan War Commission. Congress has also imposed a variety of reporting requirements to monitor dynamics in Afghanistan and their implications for U.S. policy, including from the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), which is statutorily mandated to terminate in January 2026.

To date, the Trump Administration does not appear to have undertaken any major actions with regard to Afghanistan specifically, though Administration moves to suspend foreign aid disbursements and refugee processing have had implications for some Afghans as noted above. Potential future U.S. policy issues could relate to President Trump's stated desire for the return of U.S.-origin military materiel from Afghanistan or, more broadly, U.S. approaches toward Afghanistan

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and the Taliban calibrated to align with the Trump Administration's stated foreign policy objectives of making the United States stronger, safer, and more prosperous.

## Contents

Background: Taliban Takeover.....	1
Taliban Government .....	1
Foreign Relations .....	2
U.S. Policy Impacts of the Taliban's Return to Power .....	4
Counterterrorism .....	4
Afghan Women and Girls.....	5
Relocation and Resettlement of Afghan Allies .....	7
Economic Contraction and Humanitarian Crisis .....	8
U.S. and International Assistance.....	9
Foreign Assistance Diversion .....	9
U.S. Policy: Sanctions and Afghan Central Bank Reserves.....	10
Congressional Action and Outlook.....	11

## Contacts

Author Information.....	12
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## Background: Taliban Takeover

The chapter of Afghan history that ended with the Taliban’s 2021 return to power arguably began in 2001, when the United States, in response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, led a military campaign against Al Qaeda and the Taliban government that harbored the group. In the subsequent 20 years, the United States and its allies suffered thousands of military casualties in Afghanistan, mostly at the hands of a resilient Taliban insurgency, and Congress appropriated over \$146 billion for reconstruction efforts. During this same period, an elected Afghan government replaced the Taliban and, with significant U.S. and international support, made modest but uneven improvements in most measures of human development, although Afghanistan remained one of the world’s poorest and most corrupt countries.

By the end of the first Trump Administration, the United States had agreed to a full military withdrawal—in a February 2020 deal with the Taliban<sup>1</sup>—and drawn down overall troop numbers to 2,500. Amidst Taliban territorial gains and continued infighting within the U.S.-backed Afghan government, President Joe Biden confirmed in April 2021 that international forces would depart by autumn 2021. In the ensuing months, Taliban forces began a sweeping advance that captured wide swaths of the country. While the Taliban faced stiff, if ultimately unsuccessful, resistance from government forces in some areas, other areas were taken with minimal fighting as the collapse of the Afghan government and its security forces accelerated.<sup>2</sup> Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, whose seven-year tenure was characterized by electoral crises, pervasive corruption, and the gradual deterioration of Afghan military forces, fled the country on August 15, 2021. Taliban fighters began entering Kabul that same day, taking effective control of the country.

## Taliban Government

On September 7, 2021, the Taliban announced a “caretaker government” to rule Afghanistan. The Taliban refer to their autocratic government, as they have for decades referred to themselves, as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Haibatullah Akhundzada, Taliban leader since the 2016 killing of his predecessor in a U.S. drone strike, holds supreme power as the group’s reclusive *emir*.<sup>3</sup> All members of the government are male, the vast majority are ethnic Pashtuns (Afghanistan’s largest ethnic group, which represents a plurality of the population), and over half were, and remain, designated for terrorism-related U.S. and/or UN sanctions.

Some reports since the Taliban takeover have indicated dissension in the group’s ranks along various lines. While the Taliban have a history of effectively managing internal disputes, governing Afghanistan presents new and unique challenges to the group’s consensus-based decisionmaking.<sup>4</sup> Points of tension reportedly have existed between members of the group’s political wing and its military leaders over which deserves the most credit for the group’s

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> David Zucchino, “Collapse and Conquest: The Taliban Strategy That Seized Afghanistan,” *New York Times*, August 18, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> He has made few reported public appearances, and only one photograph of him is known to be publicly available. “Taliban supreme leader addresses major gathering in Kabul,” *Al Jazeera*, July 1, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Watkins, “What’s next for the Taliban’s leadership amid rising dissent?” U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP), April 11, 2023.

victory,<sup>5</sup> between a leadership that seeks stability and rank and file fighters who may be dissatisfied with post-conflict conditions,<sup>6</sup> and between those with different ideological perspectives (including on education for girls; see below).<sup>7</sup>

The Taliban's 2021 takeover did not reflect massive popular support for the movement so much as an apparent lack of support for the former government, according to many analysts.<sup>8</sup> Many elements of Afghan society, particularly in urban areas, appear to view the Taliban with skepticism, fear, or hostility, and small numbers of Afghans have peacefully demonstrated to advocate for their rights and express opposition to the Taliban.<sup>9</sup> The Taliban have often violently dispersed these protests and have sought to stifle dissenting voices. Despite these apparent deficits in popular backing for the Taliban, no significant organized opposition has emerged.<sup>10</sup>

## Foreign Relations

The Taliban appear eager to develop ties with Afghanistan's neighbors, and the group has maintained a significantly higher level of diplomatic engagement than in the 1990s. Though no country has formally recognized the Taliban government (three did in the 1990s), many reportedly operate diplomatic facilities in Kabul and/or have allowed Taliban officials to operate Afghan diplomatic facilities abroad.

**Pakistan.**<sup>11</sup> Pakistan played an active, and by many accounts destabilizing, role in Afghan affairs for decades, including by actively supporting the Taliban during its 1990s rule and (covertly) for much of its subsequent insurgency.<sup>12</sup> Many analysts regarded the Taliban takeover at least initially as a triumph for Pakistan's regional policy, pointing to statements of evident support for the takeover from Pakistani leaders.<sup>13</sup> Senior Pakistani officials have held numerous meetings with the new Taliban government, both in Kabul and Islamabad, since August 2021.

However, the Taliban's return to power has posed challenges for Pakistan. The Taliban's victory arguably has given a morale and likely material boost to Pakistan-based Islamist terrorist groups, including the so-called Pakistani Taliban (Tehreek-i Taliban-i Pakistan, or TTP, a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization).<sup>14</sup> TTP attacks against Pakistani security forces increased after

<sup>5</sup> "Cracks emerge within Taliban as Baradar-led group raises concern over Sirajuddin's pro-Pashtun stance," ANI, February 15, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Sabawoon Samim, "New lives in the city: How Taleban have experienced life in Kabul," *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, February 2, 2023.

<sup>7</sup> Hassan Abbas, "The internal splits that threaten the Taliban's rule," Chatham House, July 28, 2023.

<sup>8</sup> "How the Taliban engineered 'political collapse' of Afghanistan," Reuters, August 17, 2021; Shadi Hamid, "Americans never understood Afghanistan like the Taliban did," Brookings Institution, August 23, 2021.

<sup>9</sup> "The Taliban use stun guns, fire hoses and gunfire to break up Afghan women protesting beauty salon ban," Associated Press, July 20, 2023; Barnett Rubin, "Afghanistan under the Taliban: findings on the current situation," Stimson Center, October 20, 2022.

<sup>10</sup> Khorshid Nusratty and Julie Ray, "Freedom fades, suffering remains for women in Afghanistan," Gallup, November 10, 2023. Figures aligned with the former Afghan government formed the National Resistance Front (NRF) in 2021 and have appealed for U.S. and international support; the NRF has claimed attacks on Taliban forces but does not appear to have either the military capabilities or the broad-based public support that would likely be necessary to seriously threaten the Taliban's position.

<sup>11</sup> For more, see CRS Report R47565, *Pakistan and U.S.-Pakistan Relations*, by K. Alan Kronstadt.

<sup>12</sup> Steve Coll, *Directorate S: The CIA and America's Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (Penguin Press, 2018).

<sup>13</sup> Ishaan Tharoor, "Pakistan's hand in the Taliban's victory," *Washington Post*, August 18, 2021; Husain Haqqani, "Pakistan's Pyrrhic Victory in Afghanistan," *Foreign Affairs*, July 22, 2021.

<sup>14</sup> Abdul Sayed and Tore Hamming, "The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan after the Taliban's Afghanistan takeover," *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 16, no. 5 (May 2023).

August 2021, reportedly prompting the Pakistani government to seek the Afghan Taliban's mediation of several ceasefires.<sup>15</sup> Pakistani government officials have criticized the Taliban's "failure to control the TTP" and described terrorism as "a major irritant" in the bilateral relationship.<sup>16</sup> Afghanistan-Pakistan relations are further complicated by a long-running and ethnically tinged dispute over their shared 1,600-mile border, at which Taliban and Pakistani government forces have intermittently clashed (including December 2024 Pakistani airstrikes in eastern Afghanistan), as well as by the presence of Afghan refugees in Pakistan.<sup>17</sup> In November 2023, Pakistan's government abruptly ordered unregistered Afghan refugees to leave Pakistan, displacing hundreds of thousands and further escalating tensions between the Taliban and Pakistan.<sup>18</sup>

**Iran.** Iran, with which Afghanistan shares its western border, opposed the Taliban's 1990s rule but has maintained relations with the group while emphasizing the need for representation for Afghanistan's ethnic and religious groups with which Iran has close ties (namely Tajiks, who speak a variant of Persian, and Hazaras, who are mostly Shia Muslims). Disputes over water rights and refugees persist, along with sporadic border clashes.<sup>19</sup>

**Central Asia.** Afghanistan's Central Asian neighbors have taken varied approaches to the Taliban government. The Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan governments appear to be prioritizing stability and economic ties, including the planned Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India natural gas pipeline, and have had official engagements with the Taliban. Tajikistan, on the other hand, has opposed the Taliban and offered shelter to anti-Taliban figures, a consequence both of Tajikistan's own struggles with Islamist militancy as well as ties with Afghan Tajiks (the country's second largest ethnic group), some of whom oppose the Taliban's rule. Tajikistan government officials reportedly engaged the Taliban in 2024, signaling a possible shift toward acceptance of the group's rule.<sup>20</sup>

**The People's Republic of China (PRC).** The prospect of greater PRC influence and activity in Afghanistan has attracted some congressional attention since the Taliban takeover. China, which played a relatively limited role in Afghanistan under the former government, made some economic investments in Afghanistan prior to the Taliban takeover, but major projects have not come to fruition due to instability, the lack of infrastructure, and other limitations.<sup>21</sup> Despite concerns about Afghanistan-based Islamist terrorist groups, China has signaled tacit acceptance of the Taliban's rule, with its foreign minister emphasizing in a 2022 visit to Kabul that China "respects the independent choices made by the Afghan people."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> "Islamist militants present fresh challenge to Pakistan," Reuters, January 31, 2023.

<sup>16</sup> "Dar calls terrorism 'big hurdle' in ties with Afghanistan," *Dawn*, March 3, 2025; "Pakistan urges UNSC to ask Afghan Taliban to cut ties with TTP, eliminate terrorism," *Dawn*, March 7, 2024.

<sup>17</sup> Rubin, "Afghanistan under the Taliban." Pakistan, the United Nations, and others recognize the 1893 Durand Line as an international boundary, but successive Afghan governments, including the Taliban, have not. See Vinay Kaura, "The Durand Line: A British Legacy Plaguing Afghan-Pakistani Relations," Middle East Institute, June 27, 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Asfandyar Mir, "In major rift, Pakistan ramps up pressure on Taliban," USIP, November 16, 2023.

<sup>19</sup> "What caused deadly Afghan-Iran border clashes? What happens next?," *Al Jazeera*, May 30, 2023.

<sup>20</sup> Bruce Pannier, "Tajikistan's Taliban conundrum," FPRI, November 25, 2024.

<sup>21</sup> Abubakar Siddique, "The limits of China's budding relationship with Afghanistan's Taliban," *RFE/RL*, June 4, 2023.

<sup>22</sup> Shannon Tiezzi, "China signals it's back to business as usual with Taliban government," *Diplomat*, March 25, 2022.

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

## Counterterrorism

Violent Islamist extremist groups have for decades operated in Afghanistan, and the Taliban have related to them in varying ways. Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP) and Al Qaeda (AQ) are two of the most significant of these terrorist groups, and the Taliban's takeover has affected them differently.

Long a significant U.S. counterterrorism concern, ISKP has opposed the Taliban since the former's 2015 establishment, viewing the Taliban's Afghanistan-focused nationalist political project as counter to the Islamic State's universalist vision of a global caliphate.<sup>23</sup> ISKP has launched multiple attacks in Afghanistan against the Taliban, killing a prominent Taliban government official in December 2024; against Afghan civilians, mostly targeting Afghanistan's Hazara (Shia) minority; and against externally oriented targets in the country, including attacks on the Russian and Pakistani embassies in Kabul.<sup>24</sup> The Taliban have reportedly conducted dozens of raids against the group since 2022, killing and arresting ISKP operatives.<sup>25</sup>

According to various assessments, ISKP strategy has shifted in light of Taliban pressure. In 2023, outside experts and U.S. officials reportedly assessed that ISKP was seeking to focus on external operations, in part "to evade the Taliban."<sup>26</sup> Those assessments appear to have been borne out in 2024, with large-scale, mass casualty attacks attributed to ISKP in Iran and Russia. UN sanctions monitors reported in July 2024 that ISKP "aspires to control Afghan territory from which to infiltrate neighboring countries" and that counter-ISKP operations in Europe illustrate the group's "renewed willingness, multiplied efforts, and potential capacity to carry out large-scale attacks on European soil."<sup>27</sup>

While ISKP is seen as more operationally ambitious and capable than Al Qaeda, the July 2022 U.S. killing of Al Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahiri in Kabul drew considerable attention to the issue of AQ-Taliban ties.<sup>28</sup> Despite (or perhaps because of) U.S. counterterrorism pressure, those ties have persisted for decades. UN sanctions monitors reported in July 2024 that the Taliban "have significantly constrained" Al Qaeda but relayed that AQ "reorganization and training activities, as well as new travel into Afghanistan, indicate that the group still uses Afghanistan as

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<sup>23</sup> Borhan Osman, "ISKP's battle for minds: What are its main messages and who do they attract?," *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, December 12, 2016.

<sup>24</sup> Hazaras compose 10%-15% of Afghanistan's population. Since their August 2021 takeover, the Taliban have demonstrated a more accepting official stance toward the Hazaras than was the case during their former rule, but Hazaras are still subjected to discrimination and harassment; many Hazaras fault the Taliban for not stopping the ISKP attacks that have repeatedly targeted Hazaras. Shivam Shekhwari and Anjjali Shrivastav, "Between a rock and hard place: The Hazaras in Afghanistan," Observer Research Foundation, March 4, 2024; Gul Hassan Mohammadi, "The plight of the Hazaras under the Taliban government," *Diplomat*, January 24, 2024.

<sup>25</sup> Tricia Bacon, "The Islamic State in Khorasan Province: Exploiting a counterterrorism gap," Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), April 11, 2024.

<sup>26</sup> Aaron Zelin, "ISKP goes global: External operations from Afghanistan," Washington Institute, September 11, 2023; Natasha Bertrand and Katie Bo Lillis, "New US intelligence suggests al Qaeda unlikely to revive in Afghanistan, but officials warn ISIS threat remains," CNN, September 8, 2023.

<sup>27</sup> UN Security Council, *Thirty-fourth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2734 (2024) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities*, S/2024/556, released July 2024.

<sup>28</sup> CRS Insight IN11976, *Al Qaeda Leader Zawahiri Killed in U.S. Drone Strike in Afghanistan*, by Clayton Thomas.

a permissive haven under the Taliban.”<sup>29</sup> U.S. official assessments in 2024 largely aligned with that view, concluding that Al Qaeda was at an “operational nadir” and maintaining a “low profile” in Afghanistan to comply with Taliban “directives against conducting external operations and recruitment.”<sup>30</sup>

From the outset of the 2021 U.S. withdrawal, U.S. officials said that the United States would maintain the ability to combat terrorist threats in Afghanistan such as ISKP and Al Qaeda without a military presence on the ground there by utilizing assets based outside of Afghanistan, in what U.S. officials described as an “over-the-horizon” approach.<sup>31</sup> In March 2024 testimony, Central Command (CENTCOM) Commander General Michael “Erik” Kurilla said with respect to Afghanistan that “we are getting some insights” but that “it is very difficult.”<sup>32</sup> Some Members of Congress have criticized the approach.<sup>33</sup>

## Afghan Women and Girls<sup>34</sup>

Afghanistan under the renewed rule of the Taliban is “the most repressive country in the world regarding women’s rights,” according to the head of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA).<sup>35</sup> Between 2001 and 2021, women played public roles in many aspects of economic, political, and social life in Afghanistan, with protections for women enshrined in the country’s 2004 constitution.

Upon taking power in 2021, the Taliban closed the Ministry of Women’s Affairs, which had been a part of the former Afghan government, and reinstated the Ministry of Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, which enforced the Taliban’s highly oppressive rule in the 1990s. The ministry monitors the implementation of Taliban edicts that impose new restrictions on Afghan women.<sup>36</sup> Those edicts include a December 2021 prohibition on women driving long distances or flying without a male guardian, a May 2022 decree mandating punishments for the male relatives of women who do not wear *hijabs* that fully cover their bodies, and a November 2022 decision to ban women from public parks and bath houses.<sup>37</sup> UN experts warn that Taliban policies toward women may constitute gender persecution, a crime against humanity under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, as well as “gender apartheid.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> UN Security Council, *Fifteenth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2716 (2023) concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace, stability and security of Afghanistan*, S/2024/499, released July 2024.

<sup>30</sup> Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community*, February 5, 2024; *Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, Operation Enduring Sentinel and other U.S. Government Activities Related to Afghanistan*, February 29, 2024.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, White House, Remarks by President Biden on the Way Forward in Afghanistan, April 14, 2021.

<sup>32</sup> “House Armed Services Committee holds hearing on Middle East and North Africa challenges,” CQ Congressional Transcripts, March 21, 2024.

<sup>33</sup> U.S. Congress, House Armed Services Committee, *U.S. Military Posture and National Security Challenges in the Greater Middle East and Africa*, hearing, 118<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., March 2023.

<sup>34</sup> See CRS In Focus IF11646, *Afghan Women and Girls: Status and Congressional Action*, by Clayton Thomas.

<sup>35</sup> UNAMA, “The UN in Afghanistan calls for an immediate end to draconian restrictions on the rights of women and girls by the de facto authorities,” March 8, 2023.

<sup>36</sup> UNAMA, “*De facto* authorities’ moral oversight in Afghanistan: Impacts on human rights,” July 2024.

<sup>37</sup> Belquis Ahmadi, “Taliban escalate new abuses against Afghan women, girls,” United States Institute of Peace (USIP), October 27, 2022; “Tracking the Taliban’s (Mis)Treatment of Women,” USIP, updated September 2023.

<sup>38</sup> United Nations, *Situation of women and girls in Afghanistan; Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan and the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls*, June 15, 2023.

**Education.** In March 2022, the Taliban announced that secondary schools for girls would remain closed, shocking many observers.<sup>39</sup> In December 2022, the Taliban broadened prohibitions by suspending women from attending university.<sup>40</sup> The effects of Taliban restrictions on girls' and women's education have been considerable. UN experts stated in June 2023 that "reports of depression and suicide are widespread, especially among adolescent girls prevented from pursuing education."<sup>41</sup> Some Afghan women have reportedly continued to provide informal education to girls in private "secret schools," and secondary schools for girls have operated in some areas (largely in the north, where less conservative views on girls' education prevail).<sup>42</sup> Some Afghan women and girls have also reportedly attempted to continue their studies online, though those efforts are impeded by technological and infrastructure challenges.<sup>43</sup>

**Employment.** The Taliban have also placed restrictions on women's ability to work, most notably for international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and the United Nations. In December 2022, the Taliban banned women from working for national and international NGOs, threatening to suspend the licenses of NGOs that do not comply; in April 2023, the Taliban further banned women from working for UN entities in Afghanistan. Many foreign aid implementing partners halted their work after the announcement of the NGO restriction, but some have since reportedly resumed some operations after reaching "acceptable workarounds" with local authorities.<sup>44</sup> In April 2024, then-U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Administrator Samantha Power said Taliban enforcement of edicts against women working for NGOs and the United Nations was "uneven" and that "what our partners have done is find ways to maneuver around it, so as to ensure that women continue to be part of the delivery system in some form."<sup>45</sup> Women are sometimes permitted to work in health care (for other women and girls, often as nurses or midwives) and other industries like tailoring and agriculture but face Taliban monitoring and interference.<sup>46</sup> U.S. officials estimated in 2024 that the Taliban's policies toward women cost Afghanistan's economy over \$1 billion per year.<sup>47</sup>

**Debates over Taliban Policy and Societal Views.** Taliban leader Haibatullah Akhundzada has defended Taliban restrictions on women and girls as having "been taken for the betterment of women as half of society in order to provide them with a comfortable and prosperous life according to the Islamic Shariah."<sup>48</sup> Other Taliban figures reportedly oppose some of the

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<sup>39</sup> Kathy Gannon, "Many baffled by Taliban renegeing pledge on girls' education," Associated Press, March 24, 2022.

<sup>40</sup> Diaa Hadid, "'The Taliban took our last hope': College education is banned for women in Afghanistan," *NPR*, December 20, 2022.

<sup>41</sup> United Nations, *Situation of women and girls in Afghanistan*.

<sup>42</sup> Abubakar Siddique, "Secret schools offer 'a ray of hope' for rural Afghan girls," *RFE/RL*, December 20, 2023; Neggeen Sadid, "Why I opened a secret school for Afghan girls," *Economist*, February 26, 2024; "Afghanistan: Six provinces keep schools open for girls despite nationwide ban," *Amu TV*, January 1, 2023.

<sup>43</sup> Andrew Jack and Benjamin Parkin, "Afghan women and girls flock online to evade Taliban curbs on female education," *Financial Times*, January 2, 2024.

<sup>44</sup> Irwin Loy, "UN drops stay-home orders for Afghan staff over Taliban women ban," *New Humanitarian*, May 10, 2023.

<sup>45</sup> "House Foreign Affairs Committee holds hearing on USAID's foreign policy and international development priorities," *CQ Congressional Transcripts*, April 10, 2024.

<sup>46</sup> "Afghan women, banned from working, can't provide for their children," *Wall Street Journal*, March 3, 2023; Riazat Butt, "An Afghan woman wanted to be a doctor. Now she makes pickles as the Taliban restricts women's roles," Associated Press, July 3, 2024.

<sup>47</sup> Mitra Majeedy, "Rina Amiri urges Islamic Emirate to change policies toward women," *Tolo*, March 10, 2024.

<sup>48</sup> Ashley Jackson, "The ban on older girls' education: Taliban conservatives ascendant and a leadership in disarray," *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, March 29, 2022.

restrictions, particularly on girls' education (and some educate their own daughters abroad).<sup>49</sup> One senior Taliban official explicitly criticized the girls' education ban in January 2025, after which he left Afghanistan under disputed circumstances.<sup>50</sup> The evidently greater influence of the group's traditionally conservative leaders, the unwillingness or inability of more pragmatic figures to assert themselves, and the apparent readiness of the Taliban to accept international isolation and opprobrium suggests that external actors may have limited leverage over Taliban decisions.<sup>51</sup>

It is unclear how Afghans in general view Taliban policies, especially given the authoritarian rule imposed by the Taliban. Since August 2021, some Afghan women have sporadically gathered in small numbers to protest Taliban policies; Taliban authorities have often forcibly dispersed these gatherings and have reportedly subjected women's rights activists to arbitrary detention and torture.<sup>52</sup> Some other Afghan women reportedly support the Taliban because of their own beliefs and/or due to social or economic pressures.<sup>53</sup> The Taliban's takeover has reduced the high levels of violence that characterized the conflict fueled by the group's insurgency, a development apparently welcomed particularly by women in rural areas.<sup>54</sup> In general, as noted above, the Taliban do not appear to have ever enjoyed significant popular support, and most Afghans are reportedly dissatisfied with their rule. At the same time, some surveys have suggested that traditional, restrictive views of gender roles and rights, including some views consistent with Taliban practices, remained pervasive, especially in rural areas and among younger men.<sup>55</sup>

## Relocation and Resettlement of Afghan Allies

The Taliban's August 15, 2021, entry into Kabul triggered the mass evacuation of tens of thousands of U.S. citizens (including all diplomatic personnel), partner country citizens, and Afghans who worked for the United States and/or the former Afghan government (sometimes referred to as Afghan allies). U.S. officials say that U.S. military forces facilitated the evacuation of 124,000 individuals, including 5,300 U.S. citizens and around 83,000 Afghans.<sup>56</sup> After that operation ended on August 30, 2021, U.S. officials continued efforts to secure the relocation of remaining U.S. citizens and eligible Afghan allies.<sup>57</sup> The State Department reported that as of March 2023, over 150,000 Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) applicants whose applications were undergoing processing remained in Afghanistan.<sup>58</sup> For more on the SIV and refugee

<sup>49</sup> Stephanie Glinski and Ruchi Kumar, "Taliban u-turn over Afghan girls' education reveals deep leadership divisions," *Guardian*, March 25, 2022; Sabawoon Samim, "Who gets to go to school? (3): Are Taliban attitudes starting to change from within?", *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, February 7, 2022.

<sup>50</sup> Tom Levitt and Zahra Joya, "Taliban minister 'forced to flee Afghanistan' after speech in support of girls' education," *Guardian*, February 3, 2025.

<sup>51</sup> Andrew Watkins, "What's next for the Taliban's leadership amid rising dissent," USIP, April 11, 2023.

<sup>52</sup> "Afghan women stage rare protests, braving Taliban reprisals," *Al Jazeera*, March 8, 2024; "Afghanistan: Stop punishing women protesters," Amnesty International, December 7, 2023.

<sup>53</sup> Lucy van der Kroft, Sonya Merkova, and Horia Mosadiq, *The Role of Gender in Taliban and IS-K Recruitment: Evolving Trends*, RUSI, October 2023.

<sup>54</sup> Christina Goldbaum, "Loss piles on loss for Afghan women," *New York Times*, March 8, 2023.

<sup>55</sup> Khorshid Nusratty and Julie Ray, "Freedom fades, suffering remains for women in Afghanistan," Gallup, November 10, 2023; Sonia Elks, "Afghan men oppose more women's rights; elders less hardline," Reuters, January 29, 2019.

<sup>56</sup> Statement of General Mark A. Milley, U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Armed Services, *To Receive Testimony on the Conclusion of Military Operations in Afghanistan and Plans for Future Counterterrorism Operations*, hearing, 117<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., September 2021.

<sup>57</sup> U.S. Department of State, Secretary Antony J. Blinken Remarks on Afghanistan, August 30, 2021.

<sup>58</sup> U.S. Department of State Office of Inspector General, "Relocation and resettlement outcomes of Afghan Special Immigrant Visa holders," June 2023.

admissions programs (the chief programs through which Afghans have obtained immigration relief), see CRS Report R43725, *Iraqi and Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Programs*, by Andorra Bruno, and CRS Report R47399, *U.S. Refugee Admissions Program*, by Andorra Bruno.

According to one State Department publication, over 150,000 Afghans resettled in the United States between August 2021 and August 2024.<sup>59</sup> Relocation and resettlement efforts were overseen by the Office of the Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts (CARE), created after August 2021 and authorized by Congress in Section 7810 of the Servicemember Quality of Life Improvement and National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2025 (P.L. 118-159).

According to a February 2025 media report, the Trump Administration has directed CARE to develop plans to close by April.<sup>60</sup> One advocate estimated that the end of relocation efforts could leave 200,000 Afghans “without paths to the U.S.,” including 150,000 in Afghanistan and a further 50,000 awaiting processing in third countries.<sup>61</sup> In January 2025, President Trump ordered the suspension of refugee admissions, reportedly affecting some Afghans.<sup>62</sup>

## Economic Contraction and Humanitarian Crisis

The Taliban’s return to power resulted in an economic contraction and deepened the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, long one of the world’s poorest and most aid-dependent countries.

Economic indicators have recovered somewhat since 2022, but the economy remains fragile and weak, leaving over 23 million Afghans—around half the population—considered to be in need of humanitarian assistance, per UN estimates.<sup>63</sup> The Taliban government’s reported ability to divert or misuse some of that humanitarian assistance, and allegations that it has done so, raises difficult questions for policymakers.

Immediately following the U.S. withdrawal and Taliban takeover, Afghanistan’s economy contracted by over 20%, followed by a contraction of 6.2% in 2022, partially as a result of the cutoff of international assistance. The country’s economy reached a “low equilibrium” as some foreign aid resumed over the course of 2022, and a UN official assessed in December 2022 that the Taliban’s economic management was “more effective than expected.”<sup>64</sup> Afghanistan saw “modest growth” in 2023/2024, according to the World Bank, but the country’s “economic outlook remains highly fragile.”<sup>65</sup>

The economic contraction exacerbated what was already, prior to August 2021, a severe humanitarian crisis driven primarily by conflict, drought, and the COVID-19 pandemic. After dramatic increases in food insecurity in 2021 and 2022, the UN World Food Program (WFP) reported in July 2024 that “food security has improved in 2024 largely thanks to food and nutrition assistance that supported up to half the Afghan people.”<sup>66</sup> Still, nearly 15 million

<sup>59</sup> Alexanderia Haidara, “Office of the Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts,” *State Magazine*, August 2024.

<sup>60</sup> Jonathan Landay, “Exclusive: Office overseeing Afghan resettlement in US told to start planning closure,” Reuters, February 18, 2025.

<sup>61</sup> Landay, “Exclusive: Office overseeing Afghan resettlement in US told to start planning closure.”

<sup>62</sup> Duaa Hadid and Juliana Kim, “Afghans who helped the U.S. are in dangerous limbo after Trump’s order on refugees,” *NPR*, January 27, 2025.

<sup>63</sup> “Afghanistan: Humanitarian needs and response plan 2024,” UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, March 4, 2025.

<sup>64</sup> World Bank, “Afghanistan: Overview,” updated April 18, 2024; UNAMA, “Briefing by Special Representative Roza Otunbayeva to the Security Council,” December 20, 2022.

<sup>65</sup> World Bank, Afghanistan: Overview, February 9, 2025.

<sup>66</sup> World Food Program (WFP), “Afghanistan Country Brief,” July 2024.

Afghans are not consuming enough food, according to the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, and the WFP reported in January 2025 that it “is reaching … less than half of those in need” due to funding shortfalls.<sup>67</sup>

## U.S. and International Assistance

According to the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), the United States allocated just over \$3 billion in humanitarian and development assistance for Afghanistan since the Taliban takeover between October 2021 and December 2024, making it the largest international donor for the country.<sup>68</sup>

On January 20, 2025, President Trump signed Executive Order 14169, pausing all foreign assistance for 90 days to conduct a review of the “programmatic efficiency and consistency with United States foreign policy” of assistance programs.<sup>69</sup> On January 28, the U.S. State Department said it had issued an emergency humanitarian waiver for some “life-saving humanitarian assistance” that provided for the temporary continuation of some programs but forbade entering into new contracts.<sup>70</sup> On February 26, the Department filed a statement in federal court saying its foreign assistance review was largely complete and that thousands of unspecified awards and programs were being cancelled.<sup>71</sup> Prior to the announced review completion, recent changes to U.S. policy had reportedly disrupted programs related to health and education in Afghanistan, including “secret schools” for girls and the American University of Afghanistan, and caused the suspension of operations at nearly 200 health facilities.<sup>72</sup> In February 2025, President Trump said that in exchange for U.S. assistance to Afghanistan, “I want [the Taliban] to give us back our military equipment that they have.”<sup>73</sup>

The Biden Administration allocated over \$697 million in FY2024 humanitarian assistance for Afghanistan and almost \$234 million in FY2025; it is unclear how much of that assistance may be affected by the Trump Administration terminations.<sup>74</sup> Most U.S. assistance to Afghanistan has been channeled through UN entities. SIGAR reported in July 2024 that the UN had “purchased and transported at least \$3.8 billion in U.S. currency to fund the humanitarian operations” of dozens of UN entities and nongovernmental organizations since December 2021.<sup>75</sup>

## Foreign Assistance Diversion

Some Members of Congress have expressed concern that U.S. assistance in Afghanistan could be diverted by, or otherwise benefit, the Taliban. Then-SIGAR John Sopko said in July 2023, “it is

<sup>67</sup> WFP, “Afghanistan Situation Report,” January 2025.

<sup>68</sup> See SIGAR, “Quarterly Report to the United States Congress,” January 30, 2025.

<sup>69</sup> EO 14169: Reevaluating and Realigning United States Foreign Aid, January 20, 2025, 90 *Federal Register* 8619.

<sup>70</sup> U.S. Department of State, “Emergency Humanitarian Waiver to Foreign Assistance Pause,” January 28, 2025.

<sup>71</sup> Global Health Council, et al. v. Donald J. Trump, et al., Civil Action No. 25-cv-402 (AHA), Documents 42 and 45, February 26, 2025.

<sup>72</sup> Diaa Hadid, “U.S. aid freeze hits secret girls’ schools, post-flood repair and much more,” *NPR*, February 3, 2025; Kate Clark, “Stop work! Aid and the Afghan economy after the halt to US aid,” Afghanistan Analysts Network, February 10, 2025.

<sup>73</sup> CQ Newsmaker Transcripts, “President Trump delivers remarks at the 2025 CPAC Convention,” February 22, 2025.

<sup>74</sup> USAID, “Afghanistan—Complex Emergency Fact Sheet #4, Fiscal Year 2024,” November 13, 2024, and USAID, “Afghanistan—Complex Emergency Fact Sheet #1, Fiscal Year 2025,” January 17, 2025.

<sup>75</sup> SIGAR, “U.S. currency shipments to Afghanistan: UN shipments stabilized the Afghan economy but benefit the Taliban,” July 2024. For more, see UNAMA, “Cash shipments to the UN in Afghanistan—Info sheet,” January 9, 2023.

no longer a question of whether the Taliban are diverting assistance from our programs to help the Afghan people, but rather *how much* they are diverting.”<sup>76</sup> That description is consistent with a 2023 media account indicating that the Taliban were “attempting to divert aid to their members through bullying, threats of legal action and even violence.”<sup>77</sup> One expert has differentiated between diversion (defined as the theft and redirection of aid to anyone but the intended beneficiaries) from broader corruption and from the indirect benefits that a governing entity like the Taliban inevitably gains from the provision of aid to the populace over which it rules, while describing UN cash shipments as a “recipe for diversion.”<sup>78</sup>

In response to a request from then-House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Michael McCaul, SIGAR in May 2024 published a report estimating that U.S. implementing partners had paid at least \$10.9 million in taxes and fees to Taliban authorities since August 2021.<sup>79</sup> Chairman McCaul welcomed the report and called on the Biden Administration to “take immediate action to prevent U.S. taxpayer dollars from going to the Taliban.”<sup>80</sup> In FY2025, one State Department bureau reportedly began requiring recipients of U.S. funding to submit a semi-annual report on resources paid to or diverted by sanctioned entities, with the first expected in April 2025.<sup>81</sup> Several Members introduced amendments to the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2025 (H.R. 8771), that would have prohibited the use of U.S. funds for Afghanistan; none were considered, but previous appropriations bills have included provisions that prohibit assistance from being made available “to the Taliban.”<sup>82</sup>

## U.S. Policy: Sanctions and Afghan Central Bank Reserves

Two other U.S. policy areas with relevance to Afghanistan’s economic and humanitarian situation are sanctions and the ongoing U.S. hold on Afghanistan’s central bank reserves.

U.S. sanctions on the Taliban (in place in various forms since 1999) remain; it is unclear to what extent they are affecting humanitarian conditions in Afghanistan.<sup>83</sup> Since the Taliban’s takeover, the U.S. Department of the Treasury has issued several general licenses stating that U.S. sanctions on the Taliban do not prohibit the provision of assistance to Afghanistan and authorizing various humanitarian and commercial transactions (including taxes and the other administrative expenses mentioned above).<sup>84</sup> Still, the continued existence of sanctions might lead financial institutions, private sector firms, or other actors to “de-risk” Afghanistan by not engaging in the country, rather than risk violation of U.S. sanctions.<sup>85</sup> Some outside experts have called on the United States to “clarify the parameters” of U.S. sanctions to “help ensure that the Afghan private sector

<sup>76</sup> SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, July 30, 2023.

<sup>77</sup> Ruchi Kumar, “Charities say Taliban intimidation diverts aid to Taliban members and causes,” *NPR*, June 23, 2023.

<sup>78</sup> Ashley Jackson, “Aid diversion in Afghanistan: Is it time for a candid conversation?,” *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, September 2023.

<sup>79</sup> SIGAR, “U.S. funds benefitting the Taliban-controlled government: Implementing partners paid at least \$10.9 million and were pressured to divert assistance,” May 2024.

<sup>80</sup> House Foreign Affairs Committee, “Chairman McCaul Issues Statement on SIGAR Finding U.S. Dollars Funneled to Taliban,” May 21, 2024.

<sup>81</sup> *Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, Operation Enduring Sentinel and other U.S. Government Activities Related to Afghanistan*, February 25, 2025.

<sup>82</sup> See Section 7044(a) of P.L. 118-47 and Section 7044(a) of P.L. 117-328.

<sup>83</sup> “Economic causes of Afghanistan’s humanitarian crisis,” Human Rights Watch, August 4, 2022.

<sup>84</sup> See U.S. Department of the Treasury, “Treasury Issues Additional General Licenses and Guidance in Support of Humanitarian Assistance and Other Support to Afghanistan,” press release, December 22, 2021.

<sup>85</sup> David Ainsworth, “Sanctions and banks make it a struggle to get money into Afghanistan,” *Devex*, January 17, 2022; Zach Theiler, “How vague money-laundering and counter-terror rules slow aid,” *New Humanitarian*, May 23, 2023.

as well as Western and regional firms and banks are aware of the exemptions and safeguards that allow for continued trade and commercial activities.”<sup>86</sup>

The United States also maintains a hold on the U.S.-based assets of the Afghan central bank, imposed days after the Taliban entered Kabul, to prevent the Taliban from accessing the funds. The Taliban and some foreign leaders have urged the United States to release the hold on those assets, which total around \$7 billion.<sup>87</sup> On February 11, 2022, the Biden Administration announced that it would “seek to facilitate access of \$3.5 billion [of the assets] … for the benefit of the Afghan people,” pending ongoing litigation related to the September 11, 2001, attacks.<sup>88</sup> In September 2022, the Administration announced the establishment of an “Afghan Fund” (based in Switzerland) to “make targeted disbursements of that \$3.5 billion to help provide greater stability to the Afghan economy.”<sup>89</sup> The fund has not made any disbursements as of January 2025.

## Congressional Action and Outlook

The Taliban’s 2021 takeover attracted intense congressional and public scrutiny. U.S. public attention appears to have since decreased, but Afghanistan has remained a subject of congressional engagement as some Members have sought to account for the evident failure of prior U.S. policy efforts and grapple with the reality of the Taliban’s renewed rule.<sup>90</sup>

Congressional oversight of Afghanistan was robust in the immediate aftermath of the U.S. withdrawal, with congressional committees holding at least 10 hearings specifically on Afghanistan in the weeks after the Taliban’s takeover. In addition, Congress established the Afghanistan War Commission (AWC, Section 1094 of the FY2022 National Defense Authorization Act, NDAA, P.L. 117-81), charged with examining the war and developing “a series of lessons learned and recommendations for the way forward” in a final report to be issued within three years of the commission’s initial meeting. The commission held its first public hearing in July 2024. Congress has also mandated the regular submission of information about Afghanistan-related topics from various parts of the executive branch, including SIGAR. In Section 7809 of P.L. 118-159, Congress directed that SIGAR terminate on January 31, 2026.

It remains to be seen how the Trump Administration and the 119<sup>th</sup> Congress may approach Afghanistan policy. At the confirmation hearings for the Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, and Director of National Intelligence in January 2025, some Members referenced the 2021 U.S. military withdrawal but did not discuss prospective U.S. policy toward Afghanistan with the nominees. “Afghanistan Withdrawal” and “Afghanistan Policy” were the first two issues listed as “priority oversight matters” in the House Foreign Affairs Committee’s Authorization and Oversight Plan for the 118<sup>th</sup> Congress; for the 119<sup>th</sup> Congress, the first two “priority oversight matters” listed are “China” and “Pacific Region,” with “Afghanistan” coming 10<sup>th</sup>.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Daniel Runde et al., “The future of assistance for Afghanistan: A dilemma,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 13, 2024.

<sup>87</sup> CRS In Focus IF12052, *Afghanistan Central Bank Reserves*.

<sup>88</sup> Executive Order 14064, “Protecting Certain Property of Da Afghanistan Bank for the Benefit of the People of Afghanistan,” 87 *Federal Register* 8391, February 15, 2022.

<sup>89</sup> U.S. Department of State, “The United States and Partners Announce Establishment of Fund for the People of Afghanistan,” September 14, 2022. See also SIGAR Quarterly Report, October 30, 2022, pp. 112-115.

<sup>90</sup> Google Trends, “Afghanistan,” “8/31/2021–8/15/2024,” accessed August 15, 2024.

<sup>91</sup> Available at <https://www.congress.gov/congressional-report/118th-congress/house-report/36/1> and <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA00/20250122/117833/HMTG-119-FA00-20250122-SD002.pdf>.

Going forward, U.S. policy, including congressional action, could be influenced or constrained by a number of factors, including

- a dearth of information about dynamics in Afghanistan, given the lack of U.S. diplomats and other on-the-ground observers and Taliban-imposed limitations on journalists, and
- the historical legacy of U.S. conflict with the Taliban, which may make interaction with the group, even to advance U.S. policy priorities, politically difficult.

Perhaps more fundamental is the challenge of how to simultaneously pursue policies that may be difficult to reconcile: helping stabilize Afghanistan and providing support to Afghans, while avoiding actions that might benefit the Taliban. While providing humanitarian aid—if that continues—may be sufficient to stave off mass casualties, it is unlikely to sustainably improve economic conditions. Financial assistance could improve the Afghan economy and partly ameliorate the humanitarian situation, but it comes with the risk of diversion of some material assistance or broader benefits to the Taliban. Congress could inquire with the State Department and implementing partners to determine what programs in Afghanistan, if any, remain active following Trump Administration decisions related to foreign assistance, and Members may also seek to understand how program cuts could affect U.S. policymakers' ability to understand developments inside the country. Congress could also evaluate the relative benefits and risks to U.S. interests of suspending or continuing those programs, perhaps in connection with possible efforts to return U.S.-origin military equipment to the United States, as proposed by President Trump. Some Members may be interested in the status of programs to support Afghan allies.

The Taliban have called for international recognition, assistance, and sanctions relief, but since returning to power they have not shown a willingness to make compromises on important issues to obtain these benefits. Nearly every country, U.S. partners and adversaries alike, has urged the Taliban to form a more inclusive government, and many countries have joined the United States in calling for the group to lift restrictions on women and girls and break ties with terrorist groups. In response, the Taliban have stalled, equivocated, and ultimately either ignored or rejected outright these calls. Foreign policy tools that the United States has traditionally used as leverage may not be as effective in Afghanistan as in some other contexts.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> See, for example, Vanda Felbab-Brown, "The Taliban's three years in power and what lies ahead," Brookings, August 14, 2024; Marvin Weinbaum, "Time for a more realistic approach to Afghanistan," Middle East Institute, January 22, 2025.

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