

Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy

Updated February 28, 2023

Congressional Research Service

<https://crsreports.congress.gov>

R45122



R45122

February 28, 2023

Clayton Thomas
Specialist in Middle
Eastern Affairs

Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy

In 2021, U.S. and international forces withdrew from Afghanistan after nearly two decades of operations, and the Taliban, a Sunni Islamist extremist group that formerly ruled the country from 1996 to 2001, retook power. 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. The Taliban's position appears secure, though its rule appears to have had negative effects for most Afghans, as well as a number of U.S. policy interests.

The Taliban government is dominated by former officials from the Taliban's prior rule or longtime loyalists. Signs of dissension in the group's ranks along various lines have emerged, though the Taliban have a history of effectively managing internal disputes. Some Afghans have sought to advocate for their rights and express opposition to the Taliban in nonviolent demonstrations, which the Taliban have sometimes violently dispersed, but the Taliban do not appear to face effective political opposition. Other Afghans have taken up arms against the Taliban, claiming guerilla-style attacks against Taliban forces and calling for international assistance. The regional Islamic State affiliate has conducted attacks against Taliban forces, Afghan civilians, and international targets alike.

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

- **Counterterrorism.** The Taliban takeover has had different impacts on the Islamic State and Al Qaeda, historic Taliban adversaries and partners, respectively. With no U.S. military forces based in Afghanistan or neighboring states, the United States is pursuing an "over-the-horizon" counterterrorism approach.
- **Women and Girls.** Taliban actions have been detrimental for the status of women and girls in Afghanistan, a longtime U.S. policy concern, with girls prohibited from attending school above the primary level and women's roles drastically curtailed, including a December 2022 decision to ban women from working for non-governmental organizations (NGOs).
- **Relocating U.S. Partners.** Some Members of Congress have closely followed ongoing U.S. efforts to relocate remaining U.S. citizens, as well as the tens of thousands of Afghans who worked for U.S. efforts and seek to leave the country.

Some Members have also expressed concern about dire humanitarian conditions in Afghanistan. Since the Taliban takeover, Afghanistan has faced intersecting and overwhelming humanitarian and economic crises, a result of challenges both preexisting (such as natural disasters and Afghanistan's weak economic base) and new (such as the cut-off of international development assistance, U.S. sanctions on the Taliban, and the U.S. hold on Afghan central bank assets). In response, the Biden Administration has provided over \$1 billion in humanitarian assistance, issued general licenses authorizing various humanitarian and commercial transactions, and established a Switzerland-based "Afghan Fund" to disburse some of Afghanistan's central bank assets to support the Afghan economy.

Congressional oversight of U.S. Afghanistan policy has featured numerous hearings, past and ongoing investigations, and the creation of the Afghanistan War Commission. Congress has also imposed a variety of reporting requirements to monitor dynamics in Afghanistan and their implications for U.S. policy. Going forward, Congress may consider further reporting requirements, resources, or investigative efforts related to various U.S. interests as it evaluates the Biden Administration's budget request and defense authorization measures and examines lessons learned in Afghanistan. Future reports from the congressionally created Afghanistan War Commission and other bodies may offer lessons for legislators.

Congressional action could be influenced or constrained by a lack of reliable information about events in Afghanistan and the historical legacy of U.S. conflict with the Taliban. Perhaps more challengingly, the Biden Administration and many in Congress seek to ameliorate humanitarian and economic conditions in Afghanistan, but without taking any action that boosts the Taliban's position or that may be perceived as doing so. Pursuing these policies in tandem may prove complicated given the Taliban's evident aversion to make compromises in response to international pressure and its apparent willingness to accept considerable humanitarian and economic suffering as the price of that uncompromising stance.

Contents

Introduction	1
Background: Taliban Takeover.....	1
Taliban Government	2
Current and Potential Opposition.....	3
Regional Dynamics: Pakistan and Other Neighbors	4
U.S. Policy Impacts of the Taliban’s Return to Power	6
Counterterrorism	6
Afghan Women and Girls.....	7
Ongoing Relocations of U.S. Citizens and Certain Afghans.....	8
Economic Contraction and Humanitarian Crisis	10
U.S. Policy Responses.....	11
Congressional Action and Outlook.....	12

Contacts

Author Information.....	14
-------------------------	----

Introduction

This report provides background information and analysis on developments in Afghanistan and implications for U.S. policy, including

- the Taliban's government and the impact of their rule on terrorist groups, human rights, and the ability of U.S. Afghan partners to leave the country;
- regional dynamics; and
- the intersecting humanitarian and economic crises facing the country.

The report also provides information on legislation and other congressional action related to Afghanistan. The challenge at the heart of many U.S. policy debates over which Congress has influence (including humanitarian assistance, U.S. sanctions, and the status of U.S.-based central bank assets) is how to prioritize and, if possible, reconcile two U.S. interests: supporting the Afghan people and refraining from bolstering the Taliban's rule.

Background: Taliban Takeover

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

At the outset of 2021, the Afghan government was a partner in U.S. counterterrorism efforts, the result of nearly 20 years of substantial U.S. and international support, including the deployment of hundreds of thousands of troops and the provision of tens of billions of dollars in assistance. President Donald Trump had withdrawn all but 2,500 U.S. troops, the lowest U.S. force level since 2001, in advance of the full military withdrawal to which the United States agreed in the February 2020 U.S.-Taliban agreement.¹ U.S. officials committed to continue to provide financial support to Afghan forces and expressed confidence about their capabilities vis-a-vis the Taliban, while conceding that those forces remained reliant on U.S. support.²

At the same time, the Taliban were arguably at their strongest since 2001, when they were driven from power by U.S., international, and U.S.-backed Afghan forces, having steadily gained territory and improved their tactical capabilities over the course of their resilient two-decade insurgency. The Afghan government against which the Taliban fought was weakened by deep internal divisions, factional infighting, and endemic corruption.

¹ After more than a year of negotiations, U.S. and Taliban representatives signed a bilateral agreement on February 29, 2020, agreeing to two "interconnected" "guarantees": the withdrawal of all U.S. and international forces by May 2021, and unspecified Taliban action to prevent other groups (including Al Qaeda) from using Afghan soil to threaten the United States and its allies. The text of the agreement is available at <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf>. Nonpublic annexes accompanied the agreement.

² See House Oversight and Reform Subcommittee on National Security Holds Hearing on Pathway for Peace in Afghanistan, *CQ Congressional Transcripts*, February 19, 2021.

Several weeks after President Joseph Biden confirmed that international forces would depart Afghanistan by the fall of 2021, Taliban forces began a sweeping advance that captured wide swaths of the country. The Taliban's advance was secured through both combat and negotiation. While the Taliban faced stiff, if ultimately unsuccessful, resistance from government forces in some areas, others were taken with minimal fighting.³ In many of these areas, the Taliban reportedly secured the surrender or departure of government forces (and the handover of their weapons) with payments or through the mediation of local elders seeking to avoid bloodshed.⁴ The Taliban captured their first provincial capital on August 6, after which the collapse of the Afghan government and its security forces accelerated. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, whose seven-year tenure was characterized by electoral crises, pervasive corruption, and the gradual deterioration of Afghan military forces, fled the country on August 15 and reportedly remains, as of February 2023, in the United Arab Emirates.⁵ Taliban fighters began entering Kabul that same day, taking effective control of the country.

Taliban Government

On September 7, 2021, the Taliban announced a “caretaker government” to rule Afghanistan. The Taliban refer to their government, as they have for decades referred to themselves, as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.⁶ The Taliban, who did not enact a formal constitution during their 1996-2001 rule, have said they intend to govern according to Islamic law (*sharia*) but, according to one group of experts, “remain remarkably ambiguous when it comes to the type of Islamic state they want to form in Afghanistan.”⁷

Haibatullah Akhundzada, Taliban leader since the 2016 killing of his predecessor in a U.S. drone strike, holds supreme power as the group's emir. He has made few reported public appearances and only one photograph of him is known to be publicly available.⁸ Nearly all members of the government are former officials from the Taliban's prior rule or longtime loyalists. All are male, the vast majority are ethnic Pashtuns (Afghanistan's largest ethnic group, which represents a plurality of the population), and most are from southern Afghanistan. Over half were, and remain, designated for terrorism-related U.S. and/or U.N. sanctions, including the Acting Interior Minister, Sirajuddin Haqqani. The U.S. Department of State has for years offered a reward of up to \$10 million for information leading to the arrest of Haqqani, who is the head of the Haqqani Network, a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) that conducted numerous attacks against U.S. and other international targets in Afghanistan.

In the initial days of the transition, some observers had speculated that the Taliban might reach out to former Afghan government officials or to others from outside the movement as part of the

³ “Afghanistan: Taliban continue attacks on three major cities,” *BBC*, August 1, 2021.

⁴ Susannah George, “Afghanistan's military collapse: Illicit deals and mass desertions,” *Washington Post*, August 15, 2021; David Zucchino, “Collapse and Conquest: The Taliban Strategy That Seized Afghanistan,” *New York Times*, August 18, 2021.

⁵ Charles Davis, “Afghanistan's last president, Ashraf Ghani, rejects comparison to Ukraine's Zelenskyy, says he's ‘lived an honorable life,’” *Yahoo News*, August 23, 2022.

⁶ It remains unclear as of February 2023 how or in what sense these “caretaker” positions differ from permanent positions. One analyst has described the Taliban's government during the 1990s as “nominally interim.” “Who Will Run the Taliban Government?” International Crisis Group, September 9, 2021.

⁷ M. Bashir Mobasher et al., *The Constitution and Laws of the Taliban, 1994-2001: Hints from the Past and Options for the Future*, Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, December 14, 2022.

⁸ “Taliban supreme leader addresses major gathering in Kabul,” *Al Jazeera*, July 1, 2022.

Taliban's promise to establish an "inclusive government." The Taliban have not, however, reached beyond their own ranks to fill government positions and are reportedly staffing ministries with military and/or religious figures with little relevant experience, exacerbating the group's administrative challenges and some internal tensions.⁹

Some reports since the Taliban takeover have indicated dissension in the group's ranks along various lines. While the Taliban have a history of effectively managing internal disputes, governing Afghanistan presents new and unique challenges to the group's consensus-based decision-making.¹⁰ Points of tension reportedly exist between members of the group's political wing (such as Baradar) and its military leaders (such as the Haqqanis) over who deserves the most credit for the group's victory;¹¹ between a leadership that seeks stability and rank and file fighters who are struggling to adjust to post-conflict life;¹² and between those with different ideological perspectives and ethnic identities.¹³ In a February 2023 speech, Haqqani criticized "power monopolization" within the Taliban, prompting other Taliban figures to state that criticisms should be voiced privately.¹⁴

Current and Potential Opposition

While the Taliban's August 2021 takeover was swift, its triumph, according to many analysts, did not reflect massive popular support for the movement so much as a lack of support for the former government.¹⁵ 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 demonstrated nonviolently to advocate for their rights and express opposition to the Taliban.¹⁶ The Taliban have often violently dispersed these protests, and have stifled open non-violent dissent.¹⁷ According to the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Afghanistan, "There is no significant visible political opposition to the Taliban inside Afghanistan," and exiled officials associated with the former government "are fragmented and their statements have decreasing resonance for the population inside Afghanistan."¹⁸

The Taliban face armed opposition from two very different quarters. The first is the National Resistance Front (NRF), made up of figures aligned with the former Afghan state. NRF leaders

⁹ Zia ur-Rehman and Emily Schmall, "The Taliban have staffing issues. They are looking for help in Pakistan," *New York Times*, January 13, 2022; *Thirteenth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2611 (2021) concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace stability and security of Afghanistan*, S/2022/419, May 26, 2022.

¹⁰ Andrew Watkins, "The Taliban one year on," *CTC Sentinel*, August 2022.

¹¹ "Cracks emerge within Taliban as Baradar-led group raises concern over Sirajuddin's pro-Pashtun stance," *ANI*, February 15, 2022.

¹² Sabawoon Samim, "New lives in the city: How Taleban have experienced life in Kabul," *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, February 2, 2023.

¹³ Andrew Watkins, "One year later: Taliban reprise repressive rule, but struggle to build a state," *United States Institute of Peace*, August 17, 2022.

¹⁴ Ayaz Gul, "Top Taliban official's public criticism reignite internal rift speculation," *Voice of America*, February 13, 2023.

¹⁵ "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.

¹⁶ Barnett Rubin, "Afghanistan under the Taliban: findings on the current situation," *Stimson Center*, October 20, 2022.

¹⁷ "Taliban disperses Afghan women's march for 'work and freedom,'" *Al Jazeera*, August 13, 2022.

¹⁸ UNAMA, "Briefing to the United Nations Security Council by the Secretary-General's Special Representative for Afghanistan Roza Otunbayeva," December 20, 2022.

have appealed for U.S. and international support and have retained Washington, DC-based representation.¹⁹ They have not won explicit public backing from any foreign countries, perhaps due to the Taliban's relatively stronger military position and closer Taliban ties with regional powers, including some that formerly supported Taliban opponents in the 1990s, such as Russia and Iran. The NRF has claimed numerous attacks against Taliban fighters, mostly in and around the central province of Panjshir, but it is difficult to assess the veracity of such claims, which the Taliban dismiss as "propaganda."²⁰ Still, the NRF does not appear to have either the military capabilities or the broad-based public support that would likely be necessary to seriously threaten the Taliban's position.²¹

An arguably more potent armed threat to the Taliban is the local Islamic State affiliate (Islamic State-Khorasan Province, ISKP, also known as ISIS-K), a longtime Taliban adversary. ISKP has opposed the Taliban since its 2015 establishment, viewing the Taliban's Afghanistan-focused nationalist political project as counter to the Islamic State's universalist vision of a global caliphate. Since the Taliban takeover, ISKP's ranks have swelled to as many as 6,000 fighters despite a concerted Taliban offensive.²² In addition to attacks against Afghan civilians (mostly targeting Afghanistan's Shia minority, the Hazaras) and Taliban fighters, ISKP has claimed a number of externally-oriented operations, including cross border rocket attacks against Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, attacks against the Russian and Pakistani embassies in Kabul, and an assault on a Kabul hotel frequented by Chinese nationals.²³ UN sanctions monitors assess the group's attacks are intended "to portray the Taliban as incapable of providing security" and "to undermine the relationship between the Taliban and neighboring countries."²⁴

Regional Dynamics: Pakistan and Other Neighbors

Regional dynamics directly affect developments in Afghanistan, which is landlocked and has throughout its history been the object of intervention by its neighbors and other foreign powers. Events in Afghanistan also have consequences for those neighbors.

Pakistan. The neighboring state widely considered most important in this regard is Pakistan, which has played an active, and by many accounts destabilizing, role in Afghan affairs for decades, including by actively supporting the Taliban during its 1990s rule and much of its subsequent insurgency. Many analysts regarded the Taliban takeover at least initially as a triumph for Pakistan's regional policy, pointing to statements of evident support for the takeover from

¹⁹ Ali Maisam Nazary, "What the Taliban really fear," *Foreign Affairs*, August 19, 2022.

²⁰ Zia Ur Rehman, "Afghanistan's resistance alliance aims to pry Taliban's grip loose," *Nikkei Asia*, June 13, 2022.

²¹ Rubin, op. cit.; Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Afghanistan in 2023; Taliban internal power struggles and militancy," Brookings, February 3, 2023.

²² *Thirty-first report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2610 (2021) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida, and associated individuals and entities*, S/2023/95, December 30, 2022.

²³ Hazaras comprise 10%-15% of Afghanistan's population. Since their August 2021 takeover, the Taliban have demonstrated a more accepting official stance toward the Hazaras than was the case during their former rule, particularly in urban areas, despite some reports of killings and forced displacement in the Hazaras' historic homelands in central Afghanistan in fall 2021. While the Taliban government has not persecuted Hazaras, many Hazaras fault the Taliban for not establishing an inclusive government and not stopping the ISKP attacks that have repeatedly targeted Hazaras. Nilly Kohzad, "'It doesn't matter if we get killed,' Afghanistan's Hazaras speak out," *Diplomat*, May 27, 2022. Sudha Ramachandran, "ISKP attacks in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, August 31, 2022.

²⁴ *Thirty-first report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2610 (2021) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida, and associated individuals and entities*, S/2023/95, December 30, 2022.

Pakistani leaders.²⁵ Senior Pakistani officials have held numerous meetings with the new Taliban government, both in Kabul and Islamabad, since August 2021.

However, there are some indications that the Taliban's return to power may pose challenges for Pakistan. The Taliban's victory may provide a morale and perhaps material boost to Pakistan-based Islamist terrorist groups, including the so-called Pakistani Taliban (Tehreek-i Taliban-i Pakistan, or TTP, a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization). TTP attacks against Pakistani security forces increased after August 2021, reportedly prompting the Pakistani government to seek the Afghan Taliban's mediation of several ceasefires.²⁶ The TTP has resumed attacks against Pakistani targets, including a January 2023 attack (claimed by a TTP faction) that targeted police officers and killed over 100. Afghanistan-Pakistan relations are further complicated by the presence of over 1 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan, as well as a long-running and ethnically tinged dispute over their shared 1,600-mile border, at which Taliban and Pakistani government forces intermittently clashed in 2022.²⁷

Iran. Iran, with which Afghanistan shares its western border, opposed the Taliban's 1990s rule but has maintained relations with the group while emphasizing the need for representation for Afghanistan's ethnic and religious groups with which Iran has close ties (namely Tajiks, who speak a variant of Persian, and Hazaras, who are mostly Shia Muslims). Disputes over water rights and refugees persist, along with sporadic border clashes.²⁸

Central Asia. Afghanistan's Central Asian neighbors (Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) have responded in varying ways to the Taliban's takeover. The Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan governments appear to be prioritizing stability and economic ties, including the planned Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) natural gas pipeline, and have had official engagements with the Taliban. Tajikistan, on the other hand, has opposed the Taliban and offered shelter to the anti-Taliban National Resistance Front, a 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.²⁹

China. The prospect of greater Chinese influence and activity in Afghanistan has attracted some congressional attention since the Taliban takeover.³⁰ China, which played a relatively limited role in Afghanistan under the former government, made some economic investments in Afghanistan (particularly in the development of Afghan minerals and other resources) prior to the Taliban takeover, but major projects have not come to fruition due to instability, lack of infrastructure, and other limitations.³¹ Despite concerns about Afghanistan-based Islamist terrorist groups, China has signaled tacit acceptance of the Taliban's rule, with its foreign minister emphasizing in a May 2022 visit to Kabul that China "respects the independent choices made by the Afghan people."³²

²⁵ 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.

²⁶ "Islamist militants present fresh challenge to Pakistan," *Reuters*, January 31, 2023.

²⁷ Rubin, op. cit. 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.

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

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

³⁰ See, for example,.

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

³² 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

Renewed Taliban rule in Afghanistan has implications for a number of U.S. policy interests. It has created opportunities and challenges for the various terrorist groups that have a presence in Afghanistan, and has rendered obsolete former U.S. plans to partner with Afghan authorities to counter terrorist threats “over-the-horizon.” Advancing protection of women’s and other human rights has been another major U.S. policy goal in Afghanistan since 2001; the Taliban have taken numerous actions to roll back those rights since retaking power. U.S. policymakers, including many Members of Congress, have also focused on securing the relocation of remaining U.S. citizens and Afghans who previously worked for the U.S. government, a halting effort that remains ongoing as of February 2023.

Counterterrorism

A number of Islamist extremist terrorist groups have for decades operated in Afghanistan, and the Taliban have related to them in varying ways. ISKP and Al Qaeda (AQ) are two of the most significant of these terrorist groups, and the Taliban’s takeover has affected them differently.

Long a significant U.S. counterterrorism concern, ISKP has clashed with the Taliban, as mentioned above. Under the former U.S.-backed Afghan government, the United States launched airstrikes in support of Taliban offensives against ISKP, a rare area of prior U.S.-Taliban cooperation.³³ In February 2022, the U.S. State Department announced rewards of up to \$10 million each for information related to ISKP leader Sanaullah Ghafari as well as those responsible for the August 26, 2021, ISKP attack at Kabul airport that killed and injured hundreds of people, including over 30 U.S. service members.³⁴

While ISKP is seen as more operationally ambitious and capable in Afghanistan than Al Qaeda, the July 2022 killing of Al Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahiri in Kabul attracted considerable attention to the issue of AQ-Taliban ties.³⁵ Despite (or perhaps because of) U.S. counterterrorism pressure, those ties have persisted for decades.³⁶ The circumstances of Zawahiri’s residence in Kabul and what they might reveal about internal Taliban dynamics beyond continued AQ ties remain unclear; neither the Taliban nor Al Qaeda officially acknowledged Zawahiri’s death.³⁷ In any case, per a February 2023 Department of Defense Inspector General report, Al Qaeda and its regional affiliate “probably do not have the intent or capability to conduct directed attacks in the U.S. homeland during the next year, and al-Qaeda almost certainly does not have the capability to conduct attacks against U.S. interests in the region.”³⁸

³³ Wesley Morgan, “Our secret Taliban Air Force,” Washington Post, October 22, 2020.

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

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

³⁶ *Thirtieth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2610 (2021) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities*, U.N. Document S/2022/547, released July 15, 2022.

³⁷ National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan suggested that some elements of the Taliban might not have supported or even been aware of Zawahiri’s presence in Kabul, possibly leading to tensions within the Taliban. “The National Security Advisor’s very busy week,” *NPR*, August 4, 2022.

³⁸ *Operation Enduring Sentinel: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, October 1, 2022–December 31, 2022*, February 14, 2023. In December 2022, the State Department designated three Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) leaders as Specially Designated Global Terrorists pursuant to Executive Order 13224.

From the outset of the U.S. withdrawal, U.S. officials said that the United States would maintain the ability to combat terrorist threats in Afghanistan such as ISKP and Al Qaeda without a military presence on the ground there by utilizing assets based outside of Afghanistan, in what U.S. officials describe as an “over-the-horizon” approach.³⁹ With the Taliban in control of Afghanistan, the United States has had to alter any plans that had been predicated on the continued existence of the former Afghan government and its security forces. U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) Commander General Michael Kurilla described over-the-horizon capabilities as “extremely difficult but not impossible” in February 2022 testimony.⁴⁰ The Biden Administration has cited the Zawahiri strike as a demonstration of U.S. over-the-horizon capabilities.⁴¹

Afghan Women and Girls⁴²

The Afghanistan in which the Taliban came to power in August 2021 was in many ways a different country than the one they last ruled in 2001. After 2001, women became active participants in many parts of Afghan society; protections for them were enshrined in the country’s 2004 constitution. Though the Taliban takeover has reduced high levels of violence that characterized the conflict, a development particularly welcomed by women in rural areas, the Taliban’s return to power has been said to have had a significantly negative impact on Afghan women and girls overall.⁴³ In a September 2022 report, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan said “In no other country have women and girls so rapidly disappeared from all spheres of public life, nor are they as disadvantaged in every aspect of their lives.”⁴⁴

Upon taking power, 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 has issued guidance that seeks to impose new restrictions on Afghan women. Those restrictions 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 a *hijab* that fully covers their bodies, and a November 2022 decision to ban women from public parks and bath houses.⁴⁵

Of particular concern to many U.S. policymakers are Taliban policies toward education for Afghan girls. Taliban spokespersons said in early 2022 that girls’ secondary schools, effectively shuttered in most of the country since the August 2021 takeover, would reopen with the start of the new school year in late March 2022.⁴⁶ However, on March 23, with some girls already present in schools, the Taliban abruptly reversed course and announced that secondary schools for girls

³⁹ See, for example, Remarks by President Biden on the Way Forward in Afghanistan, White House, April 14, 2021.

⁴⁰ See transcript at <http://www.cq.com/doc/congressionaltranscripts-6450846?3&search=8TnqSQnx>.

⁴¹ The White House, *National Security Strategy*, October 2022.

⁴² See CRS In Focus IF11646, *Afghan Women and Girls: Status and Congressional Action*, by Clayton Thomas.

⁴³ Anand Gopal, “The Other Afghan Women,” *The New Yorker*, September 6, 2021; Susannah George, “A year of peace in one of Afghanistan’s deadliest provinces,” *Washington Post*, August 12, 2022.

⁴⁴ United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, “High Commissioner updates the Human Rights Council on Afghanistan,” June 15, 2022.

⁴⁵ Belquis Ahmadi, “Taliban escalate new abuses against Afghan women, girls,” USIP, October 27, 2022.

⁴⁶ Kathy Gannon, “The AP interview: Taliban pledge all girls in schools soon,” Associated Press, January 15, 2022.

would remain closed, shocking many observers.⁴⁷ The United States and many other countries condemned the decision, and in October 2022, the State Department announced visa restrictions on several Taliban figures responsible for the repression of women and girls in Afghanistan.⁴⁸ One analysis attributes the change to the advocacy of hardline clerics within the group and Akhundzada.⁴⁹ Other Taliban figures, including both Baradar and the Haqqanis, reportedly support secondary education for girls (and some educate their own daughters abroad).⁵⁰ The evidently greater influence of the group's traditionally conservative leaders, and the unwillingness or inability of more pragmatic figures to assert themselves, suggests that external actors may have limited leverage over Taliban decisions. Some Afghan women have reportedly continued to provide informal education to girls in private "secret schools," and secondary schools for girls have remained open in some areas.⁵¹ In December 2022, the Taliban suspended women from attending university.

That same month, the Taliban also banned women from working for national and international NGOs, threatening NGOs that do not comply with the suspension of their licenses. In response, an estimated 94% of Afghan NGOs fully or partially ceased operations, and 11 U.S. implementing partners (such as the International Rescue Committee and the Norwegian Refugee Council) suspended operations in Afghanistan.⁵² The ban, which drew unanimous condemnation from the U.N. Security Council and many other quarters, is likely to exacerbate the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan (see below), which disproportionately affects women and girls.⁵³

Ongoing Relocations of U.S. Citizens and Certain Afghans

The Taliban's entry into Kabul on August 15, 2021, triggered the mass evacuation of tens of thousands of U.S. citizens (including all diplomatic personnel), partner country citizens, and Afghans who worked for international efforts and/or the former Afghan government. U.S. officials say that U.S. military forces facilitated the evacuation of 124,000 individuals, including 5,300 U.S. citizens, as part of Operation Allies Refuge, "the largest air evacuation in US history."⁵⁴ Since that operation ended on August 30, 2021, the State Department has said that it has assisted in the departure of 13,000 Afghans from the country, in addition to 800 U.S. citizens and 600 lawful permanent residents as of August 2022.⁵⁵

⁴⁷ Kathy Gannon, "Many baffled by Taliban reneging pledge on girls' education," Associated Press, March 24, 2022.

⁴⁸ Announcement of Visa Restriction in Response to the Repression of Women and Girls in Afghanistan, U.S. Department of State, October 11, 2022.

⁴⁹ Ashley Jackson, "The ban on older girls' education: Taleban conservatives ascendant and a leadership in disarray," *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, March 29, 2022.

⁵⁰ Stephanie Glinski and Ruchi Kumar, "Taliban u-turn over Afghan girls' education reveals deep leadership divisions," *Guardian*, March 25, 2022; Sabawoon Samim, "Who gets to go to school? (3): Are Taleban attitudes starting to change from within?" *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, February 7, 2022.

⁵¹ Sudarsan Raghavan, "Where learning is against the law: A secret school for Afghan girls," *Washington Post*, November 9, 2022; "Afghanistan: Six provinces keep schools open for girls despite nationwide ban," *Amu TV*, January 1, 2023.

⁵² "Gender alert no. 3: Out of jobs, into poverty – the impact of the ban on Afghan women working in NGOs," UN Women, January 13, 2023; SIGAR January 30, 2023 Quarterly Report, pp. 60.

⁵³ "Afghanistan Inter-Agency Rapid Gender Analysis, November 2022," Gender in Humanitarian Action, December 22, 2022.

⁵⁴ Statement available at <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Printed%2028%20Sep%20SASC%20CJCS%20Written%20Statement.pdf>.

⁵⁵ Some of those evacuated U.S. citizens reportedly traveled to Afghanistan after August 2021. Department Press Briefing—August 15, 2022, U.S. Department of State; Andrew Desiderio et al., "800 Americans evacuated from

U.S. officials have characterized their efforts to secure the relocation of remaining U.S. citizens and eligible Afghan partners who seek to leave the country as an “enduring mission.”⁵⁶ According to the State Department, the number of U.S. citizens it has identified in Afghanistan has fluctuated in the midst of continued relocations and because of cases in which additional U.S. citizens come forward to ask for assistance to leave.⁵⁷ On April 28, 2022, Secretary Antony Blinken said, “There are at present 126, as of a few days ago, American citizens remaining of whom 37 seek to leave and that we are assisting.”⁵⁸ The number of Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) applicants, or those potentially eligible for an SIV or other forms of relief, who remain in Afghanistan is unclear. In a February 2022 report, an advocacy group for SIV-eligible persons stated that 78,000 of the estimated 81,000 SIV applicants in Afghanistan with visa applications pending as of August 15, 2021 remain in Afghanistan.⁵⁹ The State Department has disputed the accuracy of this report.⁶⁰ In May 2022, the State Department reportedly estimated that between 70,000 and 160,000 Afghans were eligible for SIVs.⁶¹

Some Afghans who seek to relocate reportedly remain in hiding, fearing Taliban retribution. The Taliban issued a general amnesty after coming to power, but, according to various accounts, the Taliban have carried out reprisals against figures aligned with the former government, including hundreds of killings.⁶²

The Taliban have reportedly interfered with departure flights, including by demanding seats for Taliban-selected individuals to work abroad and remit money.⁶³ Secretary Blinken said in late April 2022 that the Taliban had allowed freedom of movement to some degree but cautioned that there were still limited means of transportation to enable individuals to leave Afghanistan.⁶⁴ The United States has reportedly paid, through Qatar, for tickets on some Afghan airlines that fly to Qatar for individuals to leave Afghanistan.⁶⁵ Other impediments to relocations from Afghanistan include logistical issues at Kabul’s international airport (see textbox) and issues with Afghans obtaining travel documentation; the Taliban reportedly suspended issuing passports in October 2022.⁶⁶

Afghanistan since Taliban takeover,” *Politico*, August 14, 2022.

⁵⁶ Secretary Antony J. Blinken Remarks to the Press, U.S. Department of State, November 11, 2022.

⁵⁷ Department Press Briefing—April 12, 2022, U.S. Department of State.

⁵⁸ Testimony of Secretary of State Antony Blinken, in U.S. Congress, House Committee on Appropriations Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs, *Fiscal Year 2023 Budget Request for the Department of State*, hearings, 117th Cong., 2nd sess., April 28, 2022.

⁵⁹ Association of Wartime Allies, “On The Ground Report—Feb 2022.”

⁶⁰ Dan De Luce, “U.S. ‘left behind’ 78,000 Afghan allies in chaotic withdrawal: NGO report,” *NBC News*, March 1, 2022.

⁶¹ Alex Thompson and Allie Bice, “Biden’s broken promise to SIV holders,” *Politico*, May 16, 2022.

⁶² Barbara Marcolini et al., “The Taliban promised them amnesty. Then they executed them,” *New York Times*, April 12, 2022; Abubakar Siddique, “‘Afghanistan is hell’: Supporters of late Afghan general claim Taliban killings, persecution,” *Gandhara*, November 2, 2022.

⁶³ Courtney Kube, Dan De Luce and Josh Lederman, “The Taliban have halted all evacuee flights out of Afghanistan for the past two weeks,” *NBC News*, December 23, 2021.

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

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

⁶⁶ “Kabul residents concerned over pause in issuance of passports,” *TOLONews*, January 2, 2023.

Status of Kabul Airport

Relocation efforts have been complicated by the status of Kabul's international airport. After the final departure of U.S. forces, Qatar and Turkey worked to make the airport—which sustained damage to its runways, radar system, and other components during the U.S. evacuation effort and withdrawal—operational. As of February 2023, some domestic and regional airlines are carrying out flights from Kabul airport, but major foreign carriers have yet to resume operations. Despite a preliminary December 2021 deal with Qatar and Turkey to operate several airports in Afghanistan, the Taliban in September 2022 announced that they had reached a seemingly similar deal with the United Arab Emirates to operate three airports, including Kabul's.⁶⁷

Economic Contraction and Humanitarian Crisis

The Taliban's return to power has exacerbated one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world in Afghanistan, long one of the world's poorest and most aid-dependent countries. A number of U.S. policy actions, including the cut-off of international development assistance, U.S. and international sanctions on the Taliban, and the U.S. hold on Afghanistan's central bank assets, appear relevant to the economic breakdown that underlies the humanitarian crisis.

The United States and other international donors provided billions of dollars a year to support the former Afghan government, financing over half of its \$6 billion annual budget and as much as 80% of total public expenditures.⁶⁸ Much of that development assistance halted with the Taliban's August 2021 takeover, leading the country's economy to contract by as much as 35% in 2021 and 2022.⁶⁹ The United Nations Secretary-General's Special Representative for Afghanistan said in December 2022 that "the Taliban's economic management has been more effective than expected," citing lower levels of corruption, higher revenue collection, and the relative stability of Afghanistan's currency over the past year. Still, the economy remains reliant on international donors to inject liquidity into the economy, including the United Nations, which has delivered \$1.8 billion in cash between December 2021 and January 2023 for humanitarian operations and salary payments.⁷⁰

The economic contraction has exacerbated what was already a severe humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan prior to August 2021, due primarily to conflict, drought, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Indicators suggest that conditions have worsened further since August 2021: the World Food Programme asserted in January 2023 that "Afghanistan continues to face the highest prevalence of insufficient food consumption globally," with 90% of Afghans reporting not having enough to eat.⁷¹ The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reports that humanitarian partners provided 26.1 million Afghans with at least one form of assistance in 2022, and that "the outlook remains grim" given projected droughts and higher commodity prices.⁷²

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

⁶⁸ SIGAR January 2023 Quarterly Report, pp. 69-71.

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

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ "Afghanistan Situation Report, January 18, 2023" World Food Program, January 2023.

⁷² UN OCHA, "Humanitarian Response Plan 2022," February 6, 2023.

U.S. Policy Responses

The United States has provided over \$1.1 billion in humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan and neighboring countries since the Taliban takeover.⁷³ While such assistance plays a crucial role in averting further humanitarian suffering, it is different in many ways from former U.S. security, development, and stabilization assistance, which averaged over \$5 billion annually between FY2019 and FY2021. In addition to providing some humanitarian assistance, those funds paid the salaries of Afghan soldiers and civil servants, supported key government services, and ultimately made up a large portion of Afghanistan's economy. The Biden Administration's FY2023 budget request proposes \$345 million for health, education, and other forms of assistance in Afghanistan; the lack of a U.S. diplomatic presence in Afghanistan may complicate or constrain the implementation and/or oversight of U.S. funding.

Beyond assistance, the two U.S. policy areas that appear to have the greatest relevance to the economic and humanitarian situation are sanctions and the ongoing U.S. hold on Afghanistan's central bank reserves. U.S. sanctions on the Taliban (in place in various forms since 1999) remain, but it is unclear to what extent they are affecting humanitarian conditions in Afghanistan.⁷⁴ 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.⁷⁵ Still, the continued existence of sanctions might lead financial institutions or other actors to "de-risk" Afghanistan by refusing to engage in the country rather than risk violation of U.S. sanctions. For more on U.S. sanctions on the Taliban, see CRS In Focus IF12039, *Afghanistan: Humanitarian Crisis, Economic Collapse, and U.S. Sanctions*.

The Biden Administration's hold on the U.S.-based assets of the Afghan central bank (DAB) has also drawn scrutiny. Imposed days after the Taliban entered Kabul to prevent the Taliban from accessing the funds, the Taliban and some foreign leaders have urged the United States to release the hold on those assets, which total around \$7 billion.⁷⁶ 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.⁷⁷ 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."⁷⁸ The fund's four member Board of Trustees met for the first time in November 2022.⁷⁹ It has not, as of February 2023, made any disbursements. In December 2022, the DAB approved a USAID-funded third party assessment of the central bank's anti-money laundering/countering the financing of terrorism controls.⁸⁰

⁷³ See SIGAR January 2023 Quarterly Report

⁷⁴ "Economic causes of Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis," Human Rights Watch, August 4, 2022.

⁷⁵ See Treasury Department Fact Sheet, December 22, 2021, at https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/126/afg_factsheet_20211222_nu.pdf.

⁷⁶ CRS In Focus IF12052, *Afghanistan Central Bank Reserves*.

⁷⁷ See Executive Order at https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/126/afghanistan_bank_eo.pdf.

⁷⁸ The United States and Partners Announce Establishment of Fund for the People of Afghanistan, U.S. Department of State, September 14, 2022. See also SIGAR Quarterly Report, October 30, 2022, pp. 112-115.

⁷⁹ Readout of Fund for the Afghan People Board Meeting, U.S. Department of the Treasury, November 21, 2022.

⁸⁰ SIGAR January 2023 Quarterly Report.

Congressional Action and Outlook

The Taliban's takeover attracted intense congressional and public scrutiny. U.S. public attention appears to have since decreased, but Afghanistan remains the subject of congressional engagement as some Members seek to account for the evident failure of U.S. efforts and grapple with the reality of the Taliban's renewed rule.⁸¹

Congressional oversight of Afghanistan has been robust. Congressional committees held at least ten hearings specifically on Afghanistan in the weeks after the Taliban's takeover.⁸² Senate Foreign Relations minority staff released an assessment of the August 2021 evacuation in February 2022, and the House Foreign Affairs Committee then-ranking member produced an interim report on the withdrawal in August 2022.⁸³ 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. Per its website, the Commission "plans to formally convene in early 2023."⁸⁴

In the 118th Congress, two House committees have requested further information from the Administration related to the U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan and related contingency plans.⁸⁵ One of them, the House Foreign Affairs Committee, said in its February 2023 Authorization and Oversight Plan that it will "comprehensively review policy, decision-making, planning, and execution related to the August 2021 withdrawal from Afghanistan," as well as "examine U.S. policy toward Afghanistan."⁸⁶

In shaping U.S. policy toward Afghanistan, Congress may consider a number of options.

- Congress may examine how U.S. assistance, and conditions thereon, may affect Taliban actions, including with regard to women's rights more broadly and the ability of Afghan girls to attend school in particular, to inform congressional consideration of the Administration's budget request and action on FY2023 appropriations;

⁸¹ Google Trends, "Afghanistan," "8/31/2021–2/24/2023," accessed February 24, 2023.

⁸² Hearings on Afghanistan include those held by House Foreign Affairs Committee (September 13, 2021, with Secretary Blinken); Senate Foreign Relations Committee (September 14, 2021, with Secretary Blinken); Senate Armed Services Committee (September 28, 2021, with Secretary Austin, General Milley, and General McKenzie); House Armed Services Committee (September 29, 2021, with Secretary Austin, General Milley, and General McKenzie); Senate Armed Services Committee (September 30, 2021, with outside witnesses); House Foreign Affairs Committee (October 5, 2021, with former U.S. officials); Senate Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs Committee (October 5, 2021, with outside witnesses); House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on International Development, International Organizations, and Global Corporate Impact (October 6, 2021, with SIGAR); Senate Armed Service Committee (October 26, 2021, with DOD witnesses); and Senate Foreign Relations Committee (November 17, 2021, with former U.S. officials).

⁸³ *Left Behind: A Brief Assessment of the Biden Administration's Strategic Failures during the Afghanistan Evacuation*, United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations Minority Report, February 2022; *House Republican Interim Report: A "Strategic Failure:" Assessing the Administration's Afghanistan Withdrawal*, Congressman Michael McCaul, August 14, 2022.

⁸⁴ Afghanistan War Commission.

⁸⁵ "Chairman McCaul fires back at Biden Admin, renews oversight request on Afghanistan withdrawal," House Foreign Affairs Committee, January 12, 2023; February 17, 2023 letters from Chairman James Comer et al. to White House National Security Affairs Director Jake Sullivan, Secretary of State Blinken, Secretary of Homeland Security Mayorkas, USAID Administrator Power, Secretary of Defense Austin and Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Milley.

⁸⁶ House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Authorization and Oversight Plan, 118th Congress, adopted February 8, 2023.

- Congress may request or mandate additional information from the Administration about the number and status of U.S. citizens and Afghan partners who remain in Afghanistan and about the status of U.S. efforts to secure their relocation, including resources devoted to those efforts, obstacles to further relocations, and Administration plans to overcome those obstacles;
- Congress may examine the impact of U.S. sanctions on the designated entities/individuals, the Afghan economy, and Afghan society more broadly, including by requiring reporting thereon from the Administration and/or the Government Accountability Office, to assess whether they are achieving their intended objectives; and
- Congress may examine the impact and efficacy of oversight of previous U.S. efforts in Afghanistan to shape future U.S. policy efforts, congressional authorizing and appropriations measures, and oversight mechanisms (including those intended to oversee U.S. assistance to other foreign partners, such as Ukraine). Relevant reports from the AWC and the Department of Defense (and the federally funded research and development center with whom the Department contracts, as directed by Section 1323 of P.L. 117-81) are due to be submitted within approximately one and two years, respectively.

Going forward, U.S. policy, including congressional action, 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 cooperation with the group, even to advance U.S. policy priorities, politically difficult.

Perhaps more fundamental is the challenge of how to pursue U.S. policy priorities that may be difficult to reconcile: stabilizing Afghanistan and providing support to Afghans while avoiding actions that might benefit the Taliban. While providing humanitarian aid may be sufficient to stave off mass casualties, it is unlikely to sustainably improve economic conditions. Financial assistance could improve the Afghan economy, ameliorating the humanitarian situation, but comes with the risk of diversion of some funds or broader benefits to the Taliban. In considering Administration budget requests, Members of Congress may weigh these and other options, including conditions on U.S. assistance.

The Taliban have called for international recognition, assistance, and sanctions relief, but since returning to power they have not shown a willingness to make compromises on important issues to obtain them. Nearly every country, U.S. partners and adversaries alike, has urged the Taliban to form a more inclusive government, and many countries have joined the United States in calling for the group to lift restrictions on women and girls and break ties with terrorist groups. In response, the Taliban have stalled, equivocated, and ultimately either ignored or rejected outright these calls. Foreign policy tools that the United States has traditionally used as leverage may not be as effective in Afghanistan as in some other contexts.⁸⁷

⁸⁷ See, for example, Daniella Cheslow, “Frozen Afghan funds have done little to sway Taliban,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 8, 2023; Marvin Weinbaum, “America can’t change the Taliban,” *National Interest*, August 15, 2022; Kate Bateman, “A year after the Taliban takeover: what’s next for the U.S. in Afghanistan?” U.S. Institute of Peace, August 11, 2022.

Author Information

Clayton Thomas
Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.