



**Congressional  
Research Service**

Informing the legislative debate since 1914

---

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

Updated March 10, 2026

**Congressional Research Service**

<https://crsreports.congress.gov>

R45122



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

R45122

March 10, 2026

**Clayton Thomas**  
Specialist in Middle  
Eastern Affairs

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. U.S. policy under the second Administration of President Donald Trump has been characterized by reversals of post-2021 U.S. efforts to provide assistance to the people of Afghanistan and to secure the removal and resettlement of Afghans who worked for the United States and former U.S.-backed government.

The Taliban's post-2021 rule has nearly exceeded their previous 1996-2001 rule in length, and has arguably far surpassed it in terms of internal control and de facto international acceptance. 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 have emerged along various lines, although the Taliban have a history of effectively managing internal disputes. Russia is the sole country to officially recognize the Taliban as Afghanistan's government, although dozens of others 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.

Aspects of Taliban rule in Afghanistan include the following:

- A severely degraded *human rights* situation. The Taliban have placed extreme restrictions on women and girls, including bans on general education above the primary level and on formal employment in nearly any capacity.
- The continued presence of *terrorist groups*, including the Islamic State (a historic Taliban adversary) and Al Qaeda (a historic partner).
- A slowly stabilizing *economy* amidst ongoing humanitarian needs by nearly half of Afghans.

The second Trump Administration has reversed the Biden Administration's foreign assistance and immigration policies toward Afghanistan.

- **U.S. assistance.** The United States disbursed over \$3.8 billion for humanitarian and development assistance in Afghanistan after October 2021. As of mid-2025, the Trump Administration "has terminated all foreign assistance awards with activities in Afghanistan," per the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), which itself terminated in January 2026.
- **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, resettling over 190,000 Afghans in the United States between August 2021 and mid-2025. The Trump Administration has ended these relocation efforts and has shuttered the State Department's Office of the Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts (CARE). Citing national security concerns (including in the wake of the November 2025 shooting in Washington, DC, of two National Guard members by an Afghan national), the Administration has also suspended the processing of all visas to Afghans, including Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs).

Afghanistan appears to have since receded as a subject of public attention and as a foreign policy priority in the aftermath of the Taliban's 2021 takeover; "Afghanistan" does not appear in either the 2025 National Security Strategy or the 2026 National Defense Strategy. A Trump Administration State Department official stated in February 2026 congressional testimony that a review of U.S. policy toward Afghanistan "is an ongoing process" and committed to "letting [Congress] know when we reach some sort of consensus." Proposed legislation in the 119<sup>th</sup> Congress includes measures that would require reports on U.S. efforts to oppose foreign assistance to the Taliban by other countries (agreed to in the House in June 2025) and on Taliban restrictions on Afghan women and girls.

## Contents

Background: Taliban Takeover.....	1
Taliban Government .....	1
Foreign Relations .....	2
Economic Contraction and Humanitarian Crisis.....	4
Terrorist Groups .....	5
Afghan Women and Girls.....	6
U.S. Policy and Congressional Action .....	8
U.S. Ends Efforts to Relocate and Resettle Afghan Allies .....	8
U.S. Ends Foreign Assistance in Afghanistan .....	10
Sanctions and Afghan Central Bank Reserves .....	10
Other Issues.....	11
Outlook.....	12

## Contacts

Author Information.....	13
-------------------------	----

## 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 security, development, economic, and humanitarian assistance. 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 cabinet 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

---

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

<sup>3</sup> “Only two confirmed pictures” of Haibatullah are reported to exist. “Rift at top of the Taliban: BBC reveals clash of wills behind internet shutdown,” BBC, January 16, 2026.

<sup>4</sup> “What's next for the Taliban's leadership amid rising dissent?” U.S. Institute of Peace, 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> Some also identify a divide between Haibatullah's inner circle (which, along with the emir, is based in Kandahar) and more pragmatic leaders in Kabul.<sup>8</sup> According to one media report, Haibatullah ordered a nationwide internet and telecommunications shutdown in late September 2025; it ended days later, reportedly due to advocacy and action of Kabul-based figures.<sup>9</sup> Still, UN sanctions monitors describe the group as "largely unified and obedient to" Haibatullah.<sup>10</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>11</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 peacefully demonstrated in the years after the Taliban takeover to express opposition to the group.<sup>12</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>13</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 it did while in power in the 1990s. In July 2025, Russia became the first country to formally recognize the Taliban government (three countries did in the 1990s). UN sanctions monitors relay that the Taliban operate 42 "representative offices" abroad and that there are 28 "foreign missions and international organizations represented in Kabul."<sup>14</sup>

**Pakistan.**<sup>15</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

---

<sup>5</sup> "Cracks emerge within Taliban as Baradar-led group raises concern over Sirajuddin's pro-Pashtun stance," Asian News International, 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> "Rift at top of the Taliban: BBC reveals clash of wills behind internet shutdown"; UN Security Council, *Sixteenth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2763 (2024) concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace, stability and security of Afghanistan*, S/2025/796, released December 2025.

<sup>9</sup> "Rift at top of the Taliban: BBC reveals clash of wills behind internet shutdown."

<sup>10</sup> *Sixteenth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team*.

<sup>11</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>12</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>13</sup> 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>14</sup> *Sixteenth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team*.

<sup>15</sup> For more, see CRS Report R47565, *Pakistan and U.S.-Pakistan Relations*, by K. Alan Kronstadt.

much of its subsequent insurgency.<sup>16</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>17</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 Pakistan, or TTP, a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization).<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup>

Sporadic cross-border clashes between Taliban and Pakistani forces over the past two years (including Pakistani airstrikes inside Afghanistan in 2024 and 2025) escalated in February 2026 into "open war," per Pakistan's defense minister, ending a shaky October 2025 ceasefire. February 2026 terrorist attacks in Pakistan led to Pakistani airstrikes throughout Afghanistan, a subsequent "retaliatory operation" along the border by Taliban forces, and fighting that remains ongoing as of early March. The conflict reportedly has left hundreds dead (per mutually denied claims from each side) and closed the countries' border crossings, disrupting hundreds of millions of dollars in trade.<sup>20</sup>

Afghanistan-Pakistan relations are further complicated by Pakistan's expulsion of Afghans since 2023, including nearly 900,000 in 2025 alone, and by the Taliban's diplomatic outreach to India.<sup>21</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). Nearly 1.9 million Afghans returned from Iran in 2025 as a result of "Iran's intensified deportations of undocumented migrants."<sup>22</sup> It is unclear what impact, if any, U.S.-Iran conflict since February 2026 and potential changes to the Iranian government's capabilities and composition might have on Iran-Afghanistan relations.

**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 long-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 (Afghanistan's second-largest ethnic group), some of whom oppose the Taliban's rule. Clashes at

<sup>16</sup> Steve Coll, *Directorate S: The CIA and America's Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (Penguin Press, 2018).

<sup>17</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>18</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).

<sup>19</sup> "Islamist militants present fresh challenge to Pakistan," Reuters, January 31, 2023.

<sup>20</sup> Betsy Joles, "Pakistan-Afghanistan border closures paralyze trade along a key route," NPR, February 10, 2026; "Taliban claims dozens of cross-border attacks in Pakistan," *Afghanistan International*, March 6, 2025; "583 Afghan Taliban killed as Pakistan continues strikes under Operation Ghazab lil-Haq," *Express Tribune*, March 8, 2026.

<sup>21</sup> "Afghanistan: Returnees Overview," UNAMA, January 15, 2026; Chietigi Bajpae, "India is seeking to reset relations with the Taliban. But can this rapprochement last?" Chatham House, October 15, 2025.

<sup>22</sup> "Afghanistan: Returnees Overview."

the Tajikistan-Afghanistan border escalated in 2025, and the Taliban's construction of a canal to divert water from the Amu Darya River could spark tensions with its other Central Asian neighbors.<sup>23</sup>

**The People's Republic of China (PRC, or China).** The prospect of greater PRC influence and activity in Afghanistan has attracted some congressional attention since the Taliban takeover. China played a relatively limited role in Afghanistan under the former government. Although PRC-based firms made some economic investments in Afghanistan prior to the Taliban takeover, major projects did not come to fruition due to instability, the lack of infrastructure, and other limitations.<sup>24</sup> Despite concerns about Afghanistan-based Islamist terrorist groups, China has embraced Taliban rule, accepting the credentials of a Taliban ambassador in Beijing in June 2024 (the first in the world) and sending its foreign minister to Kabul in August 2025.

## **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. 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>25</sup> The World Bank assessed in November 2025 that "Afghanistan's economy is expanding modestly, supported by low inflation and stronger revenues," and estimated that while the economy grew by 4.3% in FY2025, rapid population growth driven by refugee returns decreased per capita GDP by 4%.<sup>26</sup> As contributions from international donors decrease, the World Bank projects an increase in domestic revenue collection, "signaling a gradual shift toward self-reliance."<sup>27</sup>

The economic contraction exacerbated what was already, prior to August 2021, a severe humanitarian crisis driven primarily by conflict, natural disasters, 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>28</sup> UN agencies project that nearly 22 million Afghans—almost half the population—will require humanitarian assistance in 2026.<sup>29</sup> The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) projects that nearly 4 million Afghan children and over 1 million pregnant or breastfeeding women will experience acute malnutrition in the first half of 2026.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Temur Umarov, "Afghanistan-Tajikistan border clashes pose a dilemma for Moscow," *Carnegie Politika*, December 19, 2025; Galiya Ibragimova, "Afghanistan's Qosh Tepa Canal could trigger a Central Asian water crisis," *Carnegie Politika*, September 3, 2025.

<sup>24</sup> Abubakar Siddique, "The limits of China's budding relationship with Afghanistan's Taliban," *RFE/RL*, June 4, 2023.

<sup>25</sup> World Bank, "Afghanistan: Overview," updated April 18, 2024; UNAMA, "Briefing by Special Representative Roza Otunbayeva to the Security Council," December 20, 2022.

<sup>26</sup> "Afghanistan Development Update," World Bank, November 2025.

<sup>27</sup> "Afghanistan Development Update," World Bank, November 2025.

<sup>28</sup> World Food Program (WFP), "Afghanistan Country Brief," July 2024.

<sup>29</sup> "Afghanistan: Humanitarian needs and response plan 2024," UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, March 4, 2025.

<sup>30</sup> IPC, "Afghanistan: IPC acute malnutrition analysis," December 16, 2025.

The UN's 2026 Afghanistan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan (HNRP) seeks \$1.7 billion to assist 17.5 million people; the 2025 HNRP of \$2.4 billion was 38% funded, at \$913 million, as of December 2025.<sup>31</sup> In addition to the United States' termination of all assistance in Afghanistan in 2025 (see below), other international donors "have also reduced their official development assistance and humanitarian budgets"; UN agencies in 2025 described assisting fewer people in Afghanistan and reprioritizing programming to focus on areas of most severe needs.<sup>32</sup>

## Terrorist Groups

Violent Islamist extremist groups, including Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP) and Al Qaeda (AQ), have for decades operated in Afghanistan, and the Taliban have interacted with them in varying ways.

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>33</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 a 2026 attack that killed a Chinese national in Kabul.<sup>34</sup> ISKP was also responsible for the August 26, 2021, suicide bombing at Kabul's international airport that killed 13 U.S. servicemembers during the U.S. evacuation operation.

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>35</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 February 2026 that while "security operations of regional States and military actions by the Taliban" led to "fewer attacks" by ISKP, the group "retained significant operational and combat capability and the ability to rapidly replace fighters, including through online recruitment."<sup>36</sup>

Despite (or perhaps because of) U.S. counterterrorism pressure, Taliban-Al Qaeda ties have persisted for decades. UN sanctions monitors reported in December 2025 that while the "Afghan theater remains the symbolic homeland for" Al Qaeda, the Taliban "maintain tight control" over Al Qaeda and its activities, given the "risks associated with [AQ's] presence in Afghanistan" to

---

<sup>31</sup> "Afghanistan: Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2025, Response Overview (1 January – 31 December 2025)."

<sup>32</sup> UN OCHA, "Afghanistan: Overview of funding shortfall and impact on humanitarian operations," August 14, 2025.

<sup>33</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>34</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 Shekhawar and Anjali 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>35</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>36</sup> UN Security Council, *Thirty-seventh 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/2026/44, released February 2026.

the Taliban.<sup>37</sup> U.S. official assessments in 2025 largely aligned with that view, concluding that Taliban-controlled Afghanistan is a “safe haven” for Al Qaeda but that AQ leaders “probably continue to comply with Taliban restrictions against external attack planning and other operations.”<sup>38</sup>

## Afghan Women and Girls

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. The Taliban have fully reversed those dynamics, making Afghanistan “the most repressive country in the world regarding women’s rights,” according to a 2023 assessment from the head of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA).<sup>39</sup>

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>40</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>41</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>42</sup> In July 2025, the International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants for the Taliban’s leader and chief justice for “the crime against humanity of persecution ... on gender grounds.”<sup>43</sup>

**Education.** In March 2022, the Taliban announced that secondary schools for girls would remain closed, shocking many observers.<sup>44</sup> In December 2022, the Taliban broadened prohibitions by suspending women from attending university.<sup>45</sup> As of 2026, the country’s rapidly increasing number of madrasas, or religious schools, are the only form of public education available to girls above the primary level. Some Afghan women have reportedly continued to provide informal education to girls in private “secret schools” or online, though those efforts are impeded by technological and infrastructure challenges.<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> *Sixteenth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team.*

<sup>38</sup> *Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, Operation Enduring Sentinel and other U.S. Government Activities Related to Afghanistan*, August 26, 2025.

<sup>39</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>40</sup> UNAMA, “*De facto* authorities’ moral oversight in Afghanistan: Impacts on human rights,” July 2024.

<sup>41</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>42</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.

<sup>43</sup> International Criminal Court, “Situation in Afghanistan: ICC Pre-Trial Chamber II issues arrest warrants for Haibatullah Akhundzada and Abdul Hakim Haqqani,” July 8, 2025.

<sup>44</sup> Kathy Gannon, “Many baffled by Taliban renegeing pledge on girls’ education,” Associated Press, March 24, 2022.

<sup>45</sup> Daa Hadid, “‘The Taliban took our last hope’: College education is banned for women in Afghanistan,” *NPR*, December 20, 2022.

<sup>46</sup> Neggeen Sadid, “Why I opened a secret school for Afghan girls,” *Economist*, February 26, 2024; Andrew Jack and (continued...)

**Employment.** The Taliban have also placed restrictions on women’s ability to work, contributing to a decrease in the female labor force participation rate from around 15% in 2021 to 5% since 2022.<sup>47</sup> In the private sector, cumbersome requirements on businesses to maintain gender-segregated offices, and Taliban monitoring and interference, have reportedly inhibited women’s employment. One late 2025 analysis posits that women ownership of and employment in small-scale, largely home-based enterprises (which the Taliban have in some ways facilitated) offers opportunities for international support.<sup>48</sup>

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, a restriction the Taliban tightened in September 2025 by forbidding Afghan women from entering UN compounds. Many foreign aid implementing partners halted their work after the announcement of the NGO restriction, but some reportedly resumed some operations after reaching “acceptable workarounds” with local authorities.<sup>49</sup> The late 2025 analysis mentioned above described a “patchwork of restrictions” and “major bureaucratic hassles,” with opportunities for women varying by NGOs’ geographic area of operation and activities.<sup>50</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>51</sup> Other Taliban figures reportedly oppose some of the restrictions, particularly on girls’ education (and some have educated their own daughters abroad).<sup>52</sup> One senior Taliban official explicitly criticized the girls’ education ban in January 2025, after which he left Afghanistan under disputed circumstances.<sup>53</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.

A 2025 UN study found that 92% of Afghans surveyed supported girls’ education at the secondary level.<sup>54</sup> Some Afghan women reportedly have supported the Taliban or welcomed its assumption of power because of their own beliefs, social or economic pressures, or the reduction of violence that has followed the group’s takeover.<sup>55</sup>

---

Benjamin Parkin, “Afghan women and girls flock online to evade Taliban curbs on female education,” *Financial Times*, January 2, 2024; “‘They do not teach us what we need’: Inside the expansion of religious schools for girls across Afghanistan,” CNN, August 4, 2025.

<sup>47</sup> World Bank Gender Data Portal, “Afghanistan.”

<sup>48</sup> “A precarious lifeline? Women-led business in Afghanistan,” International Crisis Group, December 17, 2025.

<sup>49</sup> “UN drops stay-home orders for Afghan staff over Taliban women ban,” *New Humanitarian*, May 10, 2023.

<sup>50</sup> “A precarious lifeline? Women-led business in Afghanistan,” International Crisis Group, December 17, 2025.

<sup>51</sup> Ashley Jackson, “The ban on older girls’ education: Taleban conservatives ascendant and a leadership in disarray,” *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, March 29, 2022.

<sup>52</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 Taleban attitudes starting to change from within?,” *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, February 7, 2022.

<sup>53</sup> Tom Levitt and Zahra Joya, “Taliban minister ‘forced to flee Afghanistan’ after speech in support of girls’ education,” *Guardian*, February 3, 2025.

<sup>54</sup> “Four years of Taliban rule: Afghan women resist as restrictions tighten,” UN Women, August 2025.

<sup>55</sup> Lucy van der Kroft et al., *The Role of Gender in Taliban and IS-K Recruitment: Evolving Trends*, RUSI, October (continued...)

## U.S. Policy and Congressional Action

### U.S. Ends Efforts to Relocate and Resettle 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 had worked for the United States and/or the former Afghan government (sometimes referred to as Afghan allies). U.S. military forces facilitated the evacuation of "over 120,000" people, including 6,000 U.S. citizens and 3,000 third country nationals, with "the remainder ... Afghans designated by the Department of State."<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. Afghan relocation and resettlement efforts were overseen by the Office of the Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts (CARE), created by the State Department in October 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).<sup>57</sup> According to the State Department's May 2025 budget request for FY2026, "Since August 2021, over 190,000 Afghans have settled in the United States through the [Enduring Welcome] program and its predecessor, Operation Allies Welcome."<sup>58</sup>

According to a February 2025 media report, the Trump Administration directed CARE to develop plans to close by April.<sup>59</sup> In a May 2025 congressional notification about a broader departmental reorganization, the State Department notified Congress of its intent to eliminate the CARE office and realign its functions to the Afghanistan Affairs Office. In July 2025, as the State Department worked to implement the reorganization, "all leadership team members" in the CARE office reportedly received reduction-in-force notices.<sup>60</sup> The State Department stated in its FY2026 budget request that it had "discontinued Afghan relocation activities," requested no funds for Enduring Welcome (previously funded at an estimated \$2 billion in FY2024 and \$1.3 billion in FY2025), and said it would "shut down" Enduring Welcome by the end of FY2025.<sup>61</sup>

Beyond the end of Enduring Welcome and closure of the CARE office, the second Trump Administration has taken steps that have eliminated, suspended, or restricted the primary means via which Afghans had previously entered the United States after 2021, including the following:

---

2023; Christina Goldbaum, "Loss piles on loss for Afghan women," *New York Times*, March 8, 2023. 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. Khorshied 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> Alexandria Haidara, "Office of the Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts," *State Magazine*, August 2024. Section 7810 includes a sunset provision providing that the section will terminate on December 23, 2027.

<sup>58</sup> *Congressional Budget Justification: Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs, Fiscal Year 2026*, p. 86.

<sup>59</sup> Jonathan Landay, "Exclusive: Office overseeing Afghan resettlement in US told to start planning closure," Reuters, February 18, 2025.

<sup>60</sup> Sophia Barkoff et al., "State Department enacts widespread layoffs, cutting 1,353 staff as part of reorganization," CBS News, July 12, 2025.

<sup>61</sup> *Congressional Budget Justification*.

- The January 2025 suspension of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) due to the asserted inability of the United States “to absorb large number of migrants, and in particular, refugees, into its communities in a manner that does not compromise the availability of resources for Americans, that protects their safety and security, and that ensures the appropriate assimilation of refugees,” pursuant to Executive Order 14163.
- June and December 2025 presidential proclamations suspending the entry of nationals from certain countries, including Afghanistan (“travel bans”), that “cannot meet basic criteria for identifying their nationals and residents who pose national security and public safety threats and for sharing information with the United States.”<sup>62</sup>
- The July 2025 termination of Afghanistan’s Temporary Protected Status (TPS) designation, on the basis that “there are notable improvements in the security and economic situation such that requiring the return of Afghan nationals to Afghanistan does not pose a threat to their safety.”<sup>63</sup>
- The State Department’s announcement, after an Afghan national who had received asylum in April 2025 was arrested and charged with the shooting of two members of the West Virginia National Guard in Washington, DC, that it was no longer issuing visas for Afghans.<sup>64</sup>

One advocate estimated in 2025 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>65</sup>

In January 2026, House Foreign Affairs Committee Ranking Member Representative Gregory Meeks stated that the Administration had notified the committee of its intent to end relocation operations at Camp As Sayliyah (CAS) in Qatar by the end of FY2026; both Meeks and Senate Foreign Relations Committee Ranking Member Senator Jeanne Shaheen voiced opposition to the decision and urged the Administration to relocate Afghans remaining at the site and not, as Shaheen wrote, “pressure any Afghan ally to return to life under the Taliban.”<sup>66</sup> According to one media report, a State Department spokesperson said all occupants would be relocated (without specifying where) by March 31, 2026, and would not be returned to Afghanistan.<sup>67</sup> A late January 2026 media report indicates there are “around 800” evacuees at CAS, with some having been at the site since 2021.<sup>68</sup>

---

<sup>62</sup> CRS Insight IN12631, *Expanded “Travel Ban” to Take Effect January 1, 2026*, by Jill H. Wilson.

<sup>63</sup> CRS Report RS20844, *Temporary Protected Status and Deferred Enforced Departure*, by Jill H. Wilson.

<sup>64</sup> Secretary Marco Rubio, post on X, November 28, 2025, 6:33pm.

<sup>65</sup> Landay, “Exclusive: Office overseeing Afghan resettlement in US told to start planning closure.”

<sup>66</sup> “Meeks slams Trump Administration plan to shutter Camp As Sayliyah,” House Foreign Affairs Committee, January 14, 2026; “Ranking Member Shaheen statement on Trump Administration decision to shut down Afghan relocation operations in Qatar,” Senate Foreign Relations Committee, January 15, 2026.

<sup>67</sup> Lara Korte, “Closure in works at Qatar camp whose Afghan evacuees include dozens of US forces’ kin,” *Stars and Stripes*, January 20, 2026.

<sup>68</sup> “As airstrikes loom, hundreds of Afghan refugees still stranded at U.S. base in Qatar,” *Drop Site News*, January 28, 2026.

## U.S. Ends Foreign Assistance in Afghanistan

According to the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), the United States disbursed over \$3.8 billion in humanitarian and development assistance for Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover, making it the largest international donor for the country during that period.<sup>69</sup>

On January 20, 2025, President Trump signed Executive Order 14169, pausing foreign assistance obligations and payments for 90 days to conduct a review of the “programmatic efficiency and consistency with United States foreign policy” of assistance programs.<sup>70</sup> According to SIGAR, the State Department subsequently deemed “all active awards with activities in Afghanistan” as “not aligned with the Administration’s foreign policy priorities” and terminated them in spring 2025.<sup>71</sup> USAID relayed to SIGAR that the “termination of all awards in Afghanistan heightened the risk of seizure of assets by the [Taliban] because of the large quantity of assets requiring disposition within a short period and the lack of active USAID or USG-funded implementing partners to transfer or donate items to.”<sup>72</sup> SIGAR reported that three programs related to Afghanistan remained operational as of July 2025: two programs to support Afghan students earning university degrees online or at the Doha campus of the American University of Afghanistan, and support for the UN Office of Drugs and Crime’s Afghanistan Opium Survey.

According to media reports, the cutoff of U.S. assistance has led to the closure of “nearly 450 health centers” across Afghanistan, as well as a reduction in food assistance and rise in malnutrition.<sup>73</sup>

In June 2025, the House agreed without objection to H.R. 260, which would direct the submission of a report on post-August 2021 “direct cash assistance” programs in Afghanistan, as well as a strategy to “discourage foreign countries and nongovernmental organizations from providing foreign assistance to the Taliban.”

## Sanctions and Afghan Central Bank Reserves

U.S. sanctions on the Taliban (in place in various forms since 1999) remain; it is unclear to what extent they may be affecting humanitarian conditions in Afghanistan.<sup>74</sup> After the Taliban’s takeover, the U.S. Department of the Treasury 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>75</sup> The second Trump Administration does not appear to have taken any public actions specifically related to those sanctions or exceptions.

---

<sup>69</sup> See SIGAR, “Final Report: Seventeen Years of Reconstruction,” December 2025. At Congress’s direction, SIGAR terminated at the end of January 2026. Section 7809 of P.L. 118-159.

<sup>70</sup> EO 14169: Reevaluating and Realigning United States Foreign Aid, January 20, 2025, 90 *Federal Register* 8619. The pause was reportedly extended several times, with certain exceptions. Elissa Miolene, “Trump administration extends foreign aid review for another 30 days,” *Devex*, April 17, 2025.

<sup>71</sup> SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, July 30, 2025.

<sup>72</sup> SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, July 30, 2025.

<sup>73</sup> Elian Peltier et al., “In Afghanistan, a trail of hunger and death behind U.S. aid cuts,” *New York Times*, February 4, 2026; Elise Blanchard, “‘I’m afraid’: What U.S. aid cuts mean for the women of Afghanistan,” *Time*, August 21, 2025.

<sup>74</sup> “Economic causes of Afghanistan’s humanitarian crisis,” Human Rights Watch, August 4, 2022.

<sup>75</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.

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>76</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>77</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>78</sup> As of March 2025 (per a congressionally mandated State Department report), the fund had reached nearly \$4 billion and had not made any disbursements.<sup>79</sup> The most recent publicly notified meeting of the Board, which is made up of two representatives from the U.S. and Swiss governments and two U.S.-based Afghan economists, appears to have taken place in June 2025.

## Other Issues

**U.S. Detainees in Afghanistan.** Several Americans have been identified as detained by the Taliban in Afghanistan, including Dennis Coyle and Mahmood Shah Habibi.<sup>80</sup> Five U.S. citizens were released in 2025, including one freed after September 2025 talks in Kabul between U.S. and Taliban officials.<sup>81</sup> A U.S. official in February 2026 condemned the Taliban’s “insurgent tactic of hostage diplomacy,” stating that the Taliban, “in exchange for Americans currently detained, have openly sought the release of an al-Qaida operative detained in Guantanamo Bay.”<sup>82</sup> The State Department warns that “U.S. citizens should not travel to Afghanistan for any reason” as they “are targets of kidnapping and hostage-taking.”<sup>83</sup> In March 2025, Secretary of State Marco Rubio announced Afghanistan’s designation as a State Sponsor of Wrongful Detention.<sup>84</sup>

**Bagram Air Base.** President Trump has at times spoken of his desire for the United States to reestablish a presence at Bagram Air Base, saying in September 2025, “We want that base back,” citing what he characterized as its strategic importance vis-a-vis China.<sup>85</sup> It is unclear under what conditions, if any, the Taliban might allow U.S. forces to reoccupy the sprawling site or, if they were not to allow it, to what extent the United States would be willing or able to do so coercively.

---

<sup>76</sup> CRS In Focus IF12052, *Afghanistan Central Bank Reserves*.

<sup>77</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>78</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>79</sup> “Report to Congress on Proposed Uses of the Afghan Fund,” at <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/Report-to-Congress-on-Proposed-Uses-of-the-Afghan-Fund-Accessible-11.20.2025.pdf>.

<sup>80</sup> “American Dennis Coyle marks 1 year of detention in Afghanistan,” CBS News, January 26, 2026.

<sup>81</sup> “Afghan’s Taliban rulers release US citizen from custody after Trump envoy’s visit,” RFE/RL, September 28, 2025.

<sup>82</sup> United States Mission to the United Nations, Remarks at a UN Security Council renewal of the 1988 mandate, February 12, 2026.

<sup>83</sup> U.S. Department of State, Afghanistan Travel Advisory, January 13, 2025.

<sup>84</sup> U.S. Department of State, “Afghanistan designated as a State Sponsor of Wrongful Detention,” March 9, 2025.

<sup>85</sup> “Why Trump wants the U.S. to ‘get back’ Bagram Airfield from the Taliban,” NBC News, September 19, 2025.

## Outlook

The Taliban's 2021 takeover attracted intense congressional and public scrutiny in the United States, but Afghanistan appears to have since receded as a subject of public attention and as a foreign policy priority.<sup>86</sup> "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>87</sup> "Afghanistan" does not appear in either the 2025 National Security Strategy or the 2026 National Defense Strategy.

In June 2025, one U.S. official stated that "our focus in Afghanistan has narrowed" and that the top U.S. priority with respect to Afghanistan is "protecting U.S. citizens, including mitigating terrorist threats and securing the release of all detained Americans," arguing that "it is time for change to come from within Afghanistan."<sup>88</sup> In a February 2026 hearing, House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on South and Central Asia Chairman Bill Huizenga stated that there was an "ongoing review of strategy and policies toward Afghanistan" within the Administration; argued that "there are many outstanding questions in Congress about the nature of U.S. policy towards Afghanistan and where it is going"; and asked Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Paul Kapur, "when can we expect information on the State Department's Afghan policy." Kapur responded that the review "is an ongoing process" and committed to "remaining in touch" and "letting you know when we reach some sort of consensus."<sup>89</sup>

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>90</sup> One analysis concludes that increased engagement with Afghanistan "may require too much concerted diplomatic effort in a world distracted by other crises" and projects that "Afghanistan will remain near the bottom of international priorities unless the country once again exports terrorism or surges of migrants."<sup>91</sup>

<sup>86</sup> Google Trends, "Afghanistan," "Past 5 years," accessed February 13, 2026.

<sup>87</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>.

<sup>88</sup> United States Mission to the United Nations, Remarks at a UN Security Council Briefing on Afghanistan, June 23, 2025.

<sup>89</sup> "House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on South and Central Asia Holds Hearing on US Foreign Policy in South Asia," *CQ Congressional Transcripts*, February 11, 2026.

<sup>90</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.

<sup>91</sup> "After the Aid Axe: Charting a Path to Self-Reliance in Afghanistan," International Crisis Group, October 2, 2025.

## **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.