

# **Exhibit 25**

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*Backgrounder*

## The Taliban in Afghanistan

The Taliban have returned to power in Afghanistan twenty years after their ouster by U.S. troops, sparking concerns that they will impose harsh rule, neglect to provide basic services, and abuse human rights.

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UPDATED  
*Last updated September 15, 2021 11:30 am (EST)*

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### Summary

The Islamic fundamentalist group ruled Afghanistan from 1996 until the U.S.-led invasion in 2001.

The Taliban returned to power in 2021 after regrouping in Pakistan and waging an insurgency against the U.S.-backed government in Kabul.

The group faces the challenges of forming a functioning government and providing health services and economic opportunities to Afghans.

### Introduction

The Taliban are a predominantly Pashtun, Islamic fundamentalist group that returned to power in Afghanistan in 2021 after waging a twenty-year insurgency.

Following the U.S.-led invasion that toppled the original regime in 2001, the Taliban regrouped across the border in Pakistan and began taking back territory less than ten years after their ouster. By August 2021, the Taliban had seized most major cities,

including the capital of Kabul. The group’s swift offensive came as the United States withdrew its remaining troops from Afghanistan as outlined in a 2020 peace agreement [PDF] with the Taliban.

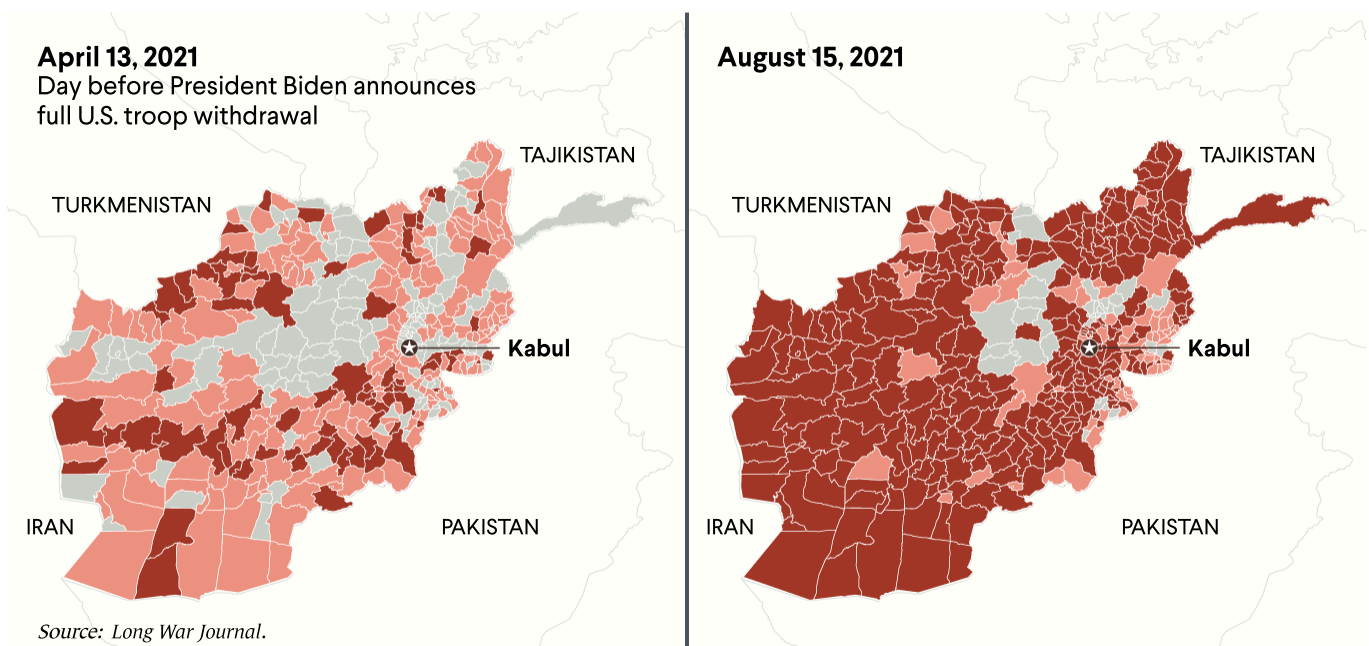
The Taliban are likely to impose harsh rule, experts say, despite their pledges to respect the rights of women and minority communities and provide amnesty for people who supported U.S. efforts. Meanwhile, the group faces immense challenges in providing Afghans with security, health services, and economic opportunities.

### Do the Taliban pose a threat?

Experts say that the Taliban pose immediate threats to Afghans’ civil and political rights enshrined in the constitution created by the U.S.-backed government. Foreign governments have warned that, if the Taliban do not protect Afghans’ rights, they could stop providing aid, which could lead to a dire humanitarian crisis. Observers also fear that the Taliban could allow terrorists to operate within Afghanistan, threatening regional and global security.

### Taliban Took Over as U.S. Pulled Troops

Control by district: ● Taliban ● Contested ● Government



Since regaining control, the Taliban have taken actions reminiscent of their brutal rule in the late 1990s. They have cracked down on protesters, reportedly detained and beaten journalists, and reestablished their Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, which under previous Taliban rule enforced prohibitions on behavior deemed un-Islamic. The group's acting higher education minister said women will be permitted to study at universities in gender-segregated classrooms and wearing Islamic attire.

The Taliban also threaten gains made in Afghans' standards of living since the U.S. invasion. UN officials have warned that Afghanistan is facing collapse, as the poverty rate climbs, hunger soars, and the economy tanks. Hundreds of thousands of people could flee their homes, joining the millions of Afghans who are already displaced. Exacerbating the crisis is a pause in aid by some countries and international organizations, which had been the lifeline of the economy and public health sector. The country is also in the midst of a drought and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Moreover, international observers remain concerned that the Taliban support terrorist organizations, particularly al-Qaeda, posing a threat to regional and international security. The United States invaded Afghanistan after it refused to hand over Osama bin Laden, the mastermind of the 9/11 attacks. Under the Taliban's rule, Afghanistan could become a safe haven for terrorists capable of launching attacks against the United States and its allies, experts say, despite Taliban statements that "Afghanistan's soil will not be used against the security of any other country."

In its 2021 report, the UN team that monitors the Taliban said the group still has strong ties with al-Qaeda. Yet, the UN experts reported, the Taliban have started to "tighten [their] control over al-Qaeda by gathering information on foreign terrorist fighters and registering and restricting them." The Taliban continue to provide al-Qaeda with protection in exchange for resources and training. Between two hundred and five hundred al-Qaeda fighters are believed to be in Afghanistan, and its leaders are believed

to be based in regions along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. Many members of the Taliban's interim cabinet previously worked with al-Qaeda; some are believed to maintain ties to this day.

At the same time, the Taliban have been fighting against their rival, the Islamic State in Khorasan, a terrorist group with up to 2,200 members in Afghanistan. Experts expect that the terrorist group will continue to launch attacks in the country even as the Taliban work to eradicate it. Amid the U.S. troop withdrawal, the Islamic State in Khorasan claimed responsibility for an attack near the Kabul airport that killed 13 U.S. service members and at least 170 Afghan civilians.

## **What will the Taliban government look like?**

In September 2021, the Taliban announced an interim government made up of hard-line leaders. The regime will be known as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, and the Taliban previously said the government will be led by a religious leader and draw its legitimacy from clerics. They have not mentioned holding elections. (Under the U.S.-backed government, Afghanistan was an Islamic republic that was led by a president and drew legitimacy from universal suffrage in accordance with international laws and norms.) No women or officials from the preceding government and only a few representatives from ethnic minority communities were included in the Taliban's cabinet. Experts say it is unlikely that the Taliban will meaningfully share power with any former government officials.

The Taliban have sought to boost diplomacy with countries in the region, such as China, Pakistan, and Russia. They have encouraged countries to keep their embassies open and foreign businesses to continue work in Afghanistan. However, the United States and other Western countries have not yet recognized the Taliban as Afghanistan's government nor have they defined what kind of relationship they will have with the Taliban. U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said the United States will "judge [the Taliban's cabinet] by its actions." Chinese officials have said that China's support for Afghanistan will partly depend on the Taliban preventing terrorist activities in the region.

## Who leads the Taliban?

The Taliban's leadership council is called the Rahbari Shura and is better known as the Quetta Shura, named for the city in Pakistan where Mullah Mohammed Omar, the Taliban's first leader, and his top aides are believed to have taken refuge after the U.S. invasion. (Omar died in 2013 and was succeeded by Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour, who was killed in a 2016 U.S. air strike in Pakistan.) The council makes decisions for all "political and military affairs of the Emirate," according to the UN monitor. It is currently led by Mawlawi Hibatullah Akhundzada, who has not been seen publicly in years.

The leadership council oversees various commissions, similar to the ministries in place prior to the Taliban's overthrow, and administrative organs through which the Taliban operate a shadow government. The commissions focus on areas including economics, education, health, and outreach. The military commission appoints shadow governors and battlefield commanders for each of Afghanistan's thirty-four provinces. The political commission led peace negotiations with the United States and has been based in Doha, Qatar.

The Taliban's new thirty-three-member caretaker cabinet includes men who are considered terrorists by the United States and who are sanctioned by the United Nations. Mohammad Hassan Akhund, who was close with Omar and held several senior roles over the past two decades, is acting prime minister. Taliban cofounder Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, who headed the Taliban's political commission, is Akhund's deputy. Sirajuddin Haqqani—who is acting head of the Haqqani Network, a militant group in Afghanistan's southeast and Pakistan's northwest with close ties to the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and Pakistan's intelligence services—is the acting interior minister. Mullah Muhammad Yaqoub, Omar's son, is acting defense minister.

## How were the Taliban formed?

The group was formed in the early 1990s by Afghan mujahideen, or Islamic guerilla fighters, who had resisted the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (1979–89) with the covert backing of the CIA and its Pakistani counterpart, the Inter-Services Intelligence directorate (ISI). They were joined by younger Pashtun tribesmen who studied in Pakistani madrassas, or seminaries; taliban is Pashto for “students.” Pashtuns comprise a plurality in Afghanistan and are the predominant ethnic group in much of the country’s south and east. They are also a major ethnic group in Pakistan’s north and west.

The movement attracted popular support in the initial post-Soviet era by promising to impose stability and rule of law after four years of conflict (1992–96) among rival mujahideen groups. The Taliban entered Kandahar in November 1994 to pacify the crime-ridden southern city, and by September 1996 seized the capital, Kabul, from President Burhanuddin Rabbani, an ethnic Tajik whom they viewed as anti-Pashtun and corrupt. That year, the Taliban declared Afghanistan an Islamic emirate, with Mullah Mohammed Omar, a cleric and veteran of the anti-Soviet resistance, leading as *amir al-mu’minin*, or “commander of the faithful.” The regime controlled some 90 percent of the country before its 2001 overthrow.

The Taliban imposed a harsh brand of justice as they consolidated territorial control. Taliban jurisprudence was drawn from the Pashtuns’ pre-Islamic tribal code and interpretations of sharia colored by the austere Wahhabi doctrines of the madrassas’ Saudi benefactors. The regime neglected social services and other basic state functions even as the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice required women to wear the head-to-toe burqa, or *chadri*; banned music and television; and jailed men whose beards it deemed too short.

## **How has the world responded to the Taliban?**

Over the past two decades, governments and international bodies joined U.S.-led efforts to oust the Taliban and bolster Afghanistan’s government, democratic institutions, and civil society in the following ways:

*Military force.* U.S. troops quickly overthrew the Taliban after they invaded Afghanistan in October 2001. The Taliban then waged an insurgency against the U.S.-backed Afghan government. The group withstood counterinsurgency operations from the world's most powerful security alliance, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and three U.S. administrations over the course of a war that killed more than 6,000 U.S. troops and contractors [PDF] and over 1,100 NATO troops. Some 47,000 civilians died, and an estimated 73,000 Afghan troops and police officers were killed between 2007 and 2021. Tens of thousands of Taliban fighters are also believed to have died. The number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan peaked at around 100,000 in 2011. NATO assumed leadership of foreign forces in 2003, marking its first operational commitment outside of Europe. At its height, NATO had more than 130,000 troops from fifty nations stationed in Afghanistan. In the 2020 U.S.-Taliban agreement, the United States committed to withdrawing all U.S. and NATO troops from Afghanistan if the Taliban carried out commitments that included cutting ties with terrorist groups. The United States completed its troop withdrawal in August 2021.

*Sanctions.* The UN Security Council first imposed sanctions on the regime for harboring al-Qaeda in 1999 and expanded the sanctions after 9/11. They target Taliban leaders' financial assets and ban them from most travel. The Security Council also imposed an arms embargo on the Taliban. The United States and the European Union maintain additional sanctions.

*Democratic reforms and aid.* Dozens of countries have provided assistance to Afghanistan, with 75 percent of the government's public expenditures covered by grants from international partners, according to a 2019 World Bank report. However, many Western countries have suspended aid and the World Bank has blocked the Taliban from accessing millions of dollars in the aftermath of the group's takeover, risking further economic turmoil.

*Investigation.* The Taliban are now under investigation by the International Criminal Court for alleged abuses of Afghan civilians, including crimes against humanity, carried out since 2003. U.S. and Afghan forces are also being investigated for alleged war



crimes.

## **What is the state of the Taliban's finances and international support?**

Until their takeover, the Taliban primarily earned revenue through criminal activities, including opium poppy cultivation, drug trafficking, extortion of local businesses, and kidnapping, according to the UN monitoring group. Estimates of their annual income range from \$300 million to \$1.6 billion. According to one estimate, they earned around \$460 million from opium poppy cultivation in 2020. They have also supplemented their income with illicit mining and donations from abroad, despite strict UN sanctions. It remains unclear how the Taliban's revenue sources will change under the new regime.

Many experts say the Pakistani security establishment continues to give financial and logistical support to the Taliban, including providing sanctuary to Taliban militants, in an effort to counter India's influence in Afghanistan. Islamabad dismisses these charges. (At the same time, Pakistan has battled its own insurgency group, Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, which is sometimes referred to as the Pakistani Taliban and is distinct from the Afghan group.)

## **Do Afghans support the Taliban?**

For years after their fall from power, the Taliban enjoyed support. The Asia Foundation, a U.S.-based nonprofit organization, found in 2009 [PDF] that half of Afghans—mostly Pashtuns and rural Afghans—had sympathy for armed opposition groups, primarily the Taliban. Afghan support for the Taliban and allied groups stemmed in part from grievances against public institutions.

But in 2019, a response to the same survey found that only 13.4 percent of Afghans had sympathy for the Taliban [PDF]. As intra-Afghan peace talks stalled in early 2021, an overwhelming majority surveyed said it was important to protect [PDF] women's rights, freedom of speech, and the current constitution. Around 44 percent of Afghans surveyed said they believed that Afghanistan could achieve peace in the next two years.

Following the 2021 takeover, tens of thousands of Afghans tried to escape Afghanistan, and the UN refugee agency said more than half a million Afghans could flee by the end of the year. In addition, a resistance movement of former officials, local militia members, and Afghan security forces who call themselves the National Resistance Front formed in the remote and mountainous Panjshir Province. The Taliban took control of the province after more than a week of fighting, but the resistance group has vowed to continue opposing the Taliban.

## **Recommended Resources**

Explore *Foreign Affairs'* coverage of the Taliban.

The *Long War Journal* profiles the members of the Taliban's interim cabinet.

CFR's Think Global Health site examines how the Taliban threaten Afghanistan's public health gains.

CFR's Ian Johnson unpacks China's attitudes toward the Taliban.

CFR's Manjari Chatterjee Miller explains Pakistan's support for the Taliban.

The International Crisis Group lays out issues to watch under the Taliban's rule.

At this Middle East Institute event, experts discuss what to expect from Afghanistan's new rulers.

Zachary Laub contributed to this Backgrounder. Will Merrow created the graphic.

**For media inquiries on this topic, please reach out to [communications@cfp.org](mailto:communications@cfp.org).**