



# A REASSESSMENT OF AMERICAN POLICY TOWARD TALIBAN AFGHANISTAN

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## Key Points

- More than a year and a half on from its seizure of power, it is clear the Taliban regime rejects the idea of a pluralist political order and seems determined to impose the same restrictive social policies as were implemented in 1996-2001.
- As actions intended to isolate and punish the Taliban, the international community's sanctions have been a conspicuous failure, even at times counterproductive.
- The Taliban's intractability, rendering normal diplomacy so ineffectual, is not so much situational as it is ideological.
- The U.S. finds itself drawn into five key policy areas in Afghanistan: 1) Completing the evacuation of at-risk former U.S.-employed individuals and their families; 2) contributing to the revival and stabilization of the economy; 3) supporting humanitarian assistance programs critical for the survival of more than half of the Afghan population; 4) reacting to reported Taliban violations of human rights; and 5) undertaking counterterrorism operations designed to prevent future attacks against the American homeland.
- In all these policy areas, the only limited success of the U.S. in realizing its objectives suggests the need for a reassessment of its current approach to the Taliban regime.
- Despite Washington's limited leverage, American interests would be better served by being able to have a regular dialogue with Taliban officials within Afghanistan.



## Introduction

It has been long enough since the Taliban seized power in Afghanistan in August 2021 for us to reach some conclusions about how the regime intends to govern and the policy options this presents. Plainly, the Kabul regime rejects the idea of a pluralist political order meant to give representation to a broad spectrum of Afghan political interests. The Islamic Emirate also seems determined to impose the same restrictive social policies as were implemented during the Taliban's earlier incarnation in 1996-2001. The regime stands firm as well in its willingness to host terrorist organizations dedicated to spreading insurgency to regional states and that aspire to launch global attacks. And an official ban notwithstanding, the current government is expected to continue its toleration of the production and trafficking of most of the global supply of heroin.

These same policies constitute the core criticisms of the Taliban regime by the United States and the international community. In their efforts to influence its behavior, nations have imposed various sanctions and bans, of which the denial of political recognition to the regime is the most prominent. Their success has rested on the presumption

that the Taliban government could be swayed with the right combination of threats and incentives. But as actions intended to isolate and punish the Taliban, sanctions have been a conspicuous failure, even at times counterproductive. They have been inconsistently implemented, sidestepped, or ignored. Still, in the Taliban's eagerness for international recognition and given its desire for financial, developmental, and humanitarian assistance, the regime was believed likely to reconsider its policies. As Taliban leaders transitioned from thinking of themselves as commanding an insurgent movement to accepting the responsibilities of governing a country as impoverished as Afghanistan, they were expected to yield to international pressures.

Perhaps in time this may prove true. But the Taliban's intractability, rendering normal diplomacy so ineffectual, is not so much situational as it is ideological. The U.S. and other countries have consistently underestimated the role of theocratic thinking in hardening the Taliban's domestic policies and shaping their international behavior. The Taliban's leaders are largely constrained by their interpretation of Islamic doctrine from yielding on issues that they believe involve ordained principles. While many among the Taliban's leadership ranks have had exposure to outside influences and have become sophisticated in messaging their policies, the movement's inner circle is more parochial and deeply hostile to Western thought. It is notably defiant in its views regarding women's rights, judicial practices, media freedoms, and political inclusiveness.

Presumably, this should not greatly matter to Washington. After all, it had been decided by two American administrations that with the withdrawal of U.S. military forces, Afghans could sort out their own differences and with cooperating regional states hope to secure their country politically and economically. In distancing itself from Afghanistan, the U.S. would be free after two decades to address those global geostrategic interests of presumed greater concern as well as meet the wishes of an American public grown tired of Afghanistan. But while the country now holds little of the priority it once had for American policymakers, it is difficult to imagine the U.S. easily detaching itself from the strategic space that Afghanistan occupies, sandwiched as it is between India, Iran, and China as well as three Central Asia states, and in a larger neighborhood that includes Russia, Turkey, and the Arab states.

Several other more concrete reasons help to explain why American policymakers have found it difficult to make the clean break from Afghanistan that many had envisioned as both possible and desirable. It is hard for the U.S. to entirely ignore a society whose aspirations it has done so much to shape or the fate of an economy in which the U.S. had so heavily invested. Thanks to the U.S. media and [members of Congress](#), there is an awareness of how the Afghan people have been left to live under the yoke of an increasingly socially and politically repressive regime. It has also been hard to take our eyes off Afghanistan with the knowledge that global terrorist organizations might once again — as they did during the 1990s — find in Afghanistan rich soil in which to flourish and [launch future attacks](#). It is for these reasons that the U.S. finds itself drawn into several areas of policy in Afghanistan and trying to decide what form and degree of engagement with the Taliban government can best advance American interests.

## Key Policy Areas

The first of these policy areas has involved completing the evacuation of at-risk former U.S.-employed individuals and their families. The unexpectedly rapid [collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces \(ANDSF\)](#) and with it the civilian government left behind tens of thousands of Afghans eligible for resettlement in the U.S. Although 120,000 were extracted in the waning days of the Islamic Republic, another [124,000 of those qualified](#) were unable to leave. An unknown number of these individuals who once belonged to the Islamic Republic's security forces have been incarcerated, executed, or are in hiding. Thousands of former government workers and others employed by foreign organizations have also been fired from their jobs. Meanwhile, the Taliban regime has [continued to allow](#) the periodic departure of U.S. chartered flights carrying to third countries Afghans eligible for eventual resettlement in the U.S. under the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program. By not impeding their leaving, the Taliban have a useful means of quietly ridding the country of likely dissidents. Presumably, were the U.S. to have a consular office in Kabul, deserving individuals might be processed more carefully and expeditiously.

A second policy area finds the U.S. willing to contribute to the revival and stabilization of the Afghan economy. With the withdrawal of U.S. and other international donor funding that had [previously covered three-quarters](#) of the Afghan republic's budget, the Taliban regime was left with an economy



Photo above: Afghans walks through Mandawi market in Kabul, Afghanistan, Sept. 8, 2022. [Photo by Marcus Yam/Los Angeles Times via Getty Images.](#)

in danger of collapse and incapable of providing basic food and health services to millions of Afghans. A rebooting of the Afghan banking system that increases liquidity and ensures currency stability is instrumental to sustaining the country's trade and expanding employment. In the belief that the Taliban government can be kept from being directly enriched by any largesse, the U.S. has demonstrated its willingness to inject into the financial system \$3.5 billion in frozen Afghan assets deposited by the previous Kabul government in American banks. Toward this end, the U.S. created last September [a Swiss-based Afghan Trust Fund](#) whose trustees are delegated to distribute the windfall, which is supposed to strengthen Afghan central bank reserves to the benefit of the Afghan people. Excluded from the process, the Taliban government has denounced the Fund, and extended negotiations may be necessary to keep the regime from undermining its programs.

A third and most impactful area of U.S. involvement is its current contribution to humanitarian assistance programs critical for the [survival of more than half](#) of the Afghan

population. Long reliant on foreign assistance, Afghanistan's basic nutritional and medical needs soared in the wake of the Taliban takeover. Years of conflict and population dislocations, combined with more recent drought, harsh winters, and economic contraction, have left the possibility of mass starvation and a new surge of refugees. If this scenario has thus far been averted, it is only because of the timely intervention of international relief agencies and foreign non-governmental organizations. The U.S. has channeled nearly \$1.5 billion in humanitarian aid to support that effort — [far more than any other donor country](#). While American personnel are not directly engaged in relief operations, an official presence in the country could improve the ability to monitor aid deliveries and measure their effectiveness. It could also potentially assist in coordinating activities among aid groups and with Afghan authorities.

A fourth area drawing U.S. attention to Afghanistan comes in reaction to widely and vividly reported Taliban violations of human rights. Although their promotion is often touted as

having a central role in American foreign policy, it is noteworthy that the February 2020 Doha agreement negotiated with the Taliban for U.S. withdrawal failed to address the issue of human rights. But the U.S. government and large elements of civil society are now among the leading critics of Taliban policies severely restricting women's education, employment, travel, and dress. Broad international appeals to the Kabul regime to be more respectful of women's rights as well as those of Afghan political, ethnic, and religious minorities have been regularly rejected by the Taliban leaders as interference in their country's domestic affairs and an attack on their Islamic beliefs. While an official U.S. presence in Kabul making the case for social and political moderation may seem unlikely to change many attitudes, it can provide an opportunity to measure the public's acceptance of policies. In light of [reported differences of opinion](#) within the Taliban senior leadership over such issues as women's education, it may be possible to strengthen the hand of those arguing for more nuanced government policies.

A fifth and for many Americans the most easily understood justification for a continuing U.S. interest in Afghanistan is to undertake counterterrorism operations designed to prevent future attacks against the American homeland. Concern has steadily risen about the strengthening of global terrorist groups like al-Qaeda and especially Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP). Where previously these groups had been prime targets of U.S. counterterrorism activities, American actions are now greatly circumscribed, mainly limited to occasional "over-the-horizon" operations. In negotiating the Doha agreement, the Taliban stubbornly refused to allow the U.S. to maintain even a small residual force in the country, despite their seeming common desire to see ISKP crushed. By having American officials on the ground, it may increase opportunities to build the trust necessary to undertake intelligence sharing and even coordinated operations.

## Washington Needs a New Approach

In all these policy areas, the only limited success of the U.S. in realizing its objectives suggests the need for a reassessment of its current approach to the Taliban regime. Overall, the U.S. needs a more realistic, flexible policy for Afghanistan. Although within each of the policy areas there are undoubtedly unbridgeable differences, there also exist overlapping and parallel interests that, with expanded opportunities for dialogue, may lead to at least small agreements. Withholding political recognition has been a high-minded exercise that has

made it more difficult to [hold direct, candid talks](#) with Taliban leaders. While most regional states and others, including the [European community](#), have established a presence in the country, no American diplomat has set foot in Afghanistan since mid-August 2021. Ad hoc meetings by the U.S. with Taliban delegates in Doha and elsewhere have proven a weak substitute for more normalized opportunities for diplomatic engagement. Even conceding that with few means of leverage, the possibility of swaying the regime's attitudes on several key disputed issues is not promising, American interests would be better served by being able to have a regular dialogue with Taliban officials within Afghanistan.

Reestablishing a diplomatic presence if not a full-fledged embassy in Kabul could improve our understanding of the Taliban regime. As stated in a [RAND report](#), more normal contact would enable the U.S. "to clearly convey its expectations and gauge any evolution in Taliban receptivity to accommodating U.S. interests." Admittedly, to establish a physical presence in Kabul, the U.S. would need to waive some of the normal security provisions governing missions abroad. American diplomats in Kabul would also have to overcome another kind of difficulty. As with other countries' emissaries, they would be dealing mainly with the authorities in Kabul, knowing that in many respects the real seat of power lies in Kandahar with a top Taliban leadership that resists contact with foreigners.

In any widening and deepening engagement with the Taliban there will remain the need for cautious, well-calibrated, and patient diplomacy. The U.S. need not rule out conditionality in any understandings, nor flinch from initiating unilateral actions when warranted. Many will argue that the loosening or dropping of sanctions will reward the Taliban and contribute to strengthening the regime. But much as we might prefer to see regime change in Afghanistan, for the foreseeable future a reasonably stable and sufficiently capable Taliban government is needed to help facilitate humanitarian programs, neutralize ISKP, and avert state collapse and civil war. A course correction that breaks new ground in U.S.-Afghan relations by shaking off much of the established thinking about engaging the Taliban is best designed to further American security and strategic interests as well as the wellbeing of the Afghan people.

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