

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

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Afghanistan was elevated as a significant U.S. foreign policy concern 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 and supported it. In the intervening 18 years, the United States has suffered around 2,400 military fatalities in Afghanistan (including four in combat in 2020 to date) and Congress has appropriated approximately \$137 billion for reconstruction there. In that time, an elected Afghan government has replaced the Taliban, and most measures of human development have improved, although future prospects of those measures remain mixed. The fundamental objective of U.S. efforts in Afghanistan is “preventing any further attacks on the United States by terrorists enjoying safe haven or support in Afghanistan,” according to the State Department’s Integrated Country Strategy.

As of June 2020, U.S. military engagement in Afghanistan appears closer to an end, in light of the February 29, 2020, signing of a U.S.-Taliban agreement on the issues of counterterrorism and the withdrawal of U.S. and international troops. Still, questions remain. As part of the agreement, the United States committed to withdraw all of its then-12,000 forces within 14 months; troops have since been reduced by over a quarter. In return, the Taliban committed to preventing other groups, including Al Qaeda, from using Afghan soil to recruit, train, or fundraise toward activities that threaten the United States or its allies. The agreement is accompanied by secret annexes, raising concerns among some Members of Congress. U.S. officials describe the prospective U.S. withdrawal as “conditions-based,” but have not specified exactly what conditions would halt, reverse, or otherwise alter the withdrawal timeline laid out in the agreement.

Afghan government representatives were not participants in U.S.-Taliban talks, leading some observers to conclude that the United States would prioritize a military withdrawal over a complex political settlement that preserves some of the social, political, and humanitarian gains made since 2001. The U.S.-Taliban agreement envisioned intra-Afghan talks beginning on March 10, 2020, but talks were held up for months by a number of complications. The most significant obstacles were an extended political crisis among Afghan political leaders over the contested 2019 Afghan presidential election and a disputed prisoner exchange between the Taliban and Afghan government. President Ghani and his 2019 election opponent Abdullah Abdullah signed an agreement ending their dispute in May 2020, and as of June 2020, the number of prisoners released by both sides appears to be reaching the level at which talks might begin, though the Afghan government may resist releasing high-profile prisoners that the Taliban demand as a condition of beginning negotiations.

High levels of Taliban violence and the COVID-19 pandemic further complicate potential talks. Moreover, while the Taliban entering into talks with Kabul is a momentous step, negotiations are not necessarily guaranteed to lead to a settlement to end the war. Observers speculate about what kind of political arrangement, if any, could satisfy both Kabul and the Taliban to the extent that the latter fully abandons armed struggle. In any event, it remains unclear to what extent the U.S. withdrawal is contingent upon the Taliban holding talks with Kabul or the outcome of such talks.

A full-scale U.S. withdrawal and/or aid cutoff could lead to the collapse of the Afghan government and perhaps even the reestablishment of Taliban control. By many measures, the Taliban are in a stronger military position now than at any point since 2001, though many once-public metrics related to the conduct of the war have been classified or are no longer produced. For additional information on Afghanistan and U.S. policy there, see CRS Report R45818, *Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy*, by Clayton Thomas. For background information and analysis on the history of congressional engagement with Afghanistan and U.S. policy there, as well as a summary of recent Afghanistan-related legislative proposals, see CRS Report R45329, *Afghanistan: Issues for Congress and Legislation 2017-2019*, by Clayton Thomas.

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Overview

On February 29, 2020, after more than a year of talks between U.S. and Taliban negotiators, the two sides concluded an agreement laying the groundwork for the withdrawal of U.S. armed forces from Afghanistan.

As part of the agreement, the United States is to draw down its forces from 13,000 to 8,600 within 135 days (with proportionate decreases in allied force levels) and withdraw all of its forces within 14 months. Military officials stated in June 2020 that the withdrawal to 8,600 had been completed, nearly a month ahead of schedule. Other U.S. commitments include working to facilitate a prisoner exchange between the Taliban and the Afghan government and removing U.S. sanctions on Taliban members by August 27, 2020. In exchange, the Taliban committed to not allow Taliban members or other groups, including Al Qaeda, to use Afghan soil to threaten the United States or its allies, including by preventing recruiting, training, and fundraising for such activities. The agreement was preceded by a week-long ceasefire, but violence between the Taliban and Afghan government forces has escalated significantly since February 29.

The agreement also says the Taliban “will start intra-Afghan negotiations” on March 10, 2020; as of June 2020, such talks have not been scheduled or held, despite some tentative progress. The May 2020 resolution of an impasse over the disputed 2019 presidential election results removed one important obstacle to intra-Afghan talks. Perhaps more significantly, in mid-June 2020, Taliban and Afghan government representatives stated that “preliminary” talks could begin as soon as a long-running prisoner exchange is completed, which could occur as soon as the end of the month. Still, that prisoner exchange has not yet been completed, and additional complications remain, including dramatically escalated violence and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government, with which the Taliban have long refused to engage, would be a significant event. Still, intra-Afghan negotiations are likely to be complex and time-consuming, with no guarantee of a comprehensive political settlement that ends the war. It remains unclear to what extent the U.S. withdrawal is contingent upon, or otherwise related to, the Taliban holding talks with Kabul or the outcome of such talks.

The U.S.-Taliban agreement came after a violent year in Afghanistan: the United Nations reports that over 10,000 civilians were killed or injured in fighting in 2019, down slightly from 2018. The conflict also involves an array of other armed groups, including active affiliates of both Al Qaeda (AQ) and the Islamic State (IS, also known as ISIS, ISIL, or *Da'esh*). U.S. operations intensified in 2019, by some measures: the United States dropped more munitions in Afghanistan in 2019 than any other year since at least 2010 and U.S. forces conducted strikes in 27 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces in the first two months of 2020 alone.¹ By some measures, the Taliban are in control of or contesting more territory today than at any point since 2001, though the U.S. military now withholds many once-public conflict metrics.

The United States has appropriated approximately \$137 billion in various forms of reconstruction aid to Afghanistan over the past 18 years, from building up and sustaining the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) to economic development. This assistance has increased Afghan government capacity, but prospects for stability in Afghanistan appear distant. Afghanistan's largely underdeveloped natural resources and/or geographic position at the crossroads of future global trade routes could improve the economic life of the country, and, by extension, its social and political dynamics. Nevertheless, Afghanistan's economic and political

¹ CRS analysis of U.S. Forces-Afghanistan monthly strike summaries.

outlook remains uncertain, if not negative, in light of ongoing hostilities and the prospective decrease in U.S. and international investment and engagement.

U.S.-Taliban Agreement

On February 29, 2020, after more than a year of official negotiations between U.S. and Taliban representatives, the two sides concluded an agreement laying the groundwork for the withdrawal of U.S. armed forces from Afghanistan, and for talks between Kabul and the Taliban. Subsequent developments, including a number of obstacles to potential Taliban-Afghan government talks, have raised questions about the agreement and broader U.S. policy in Afghanistan going forward.

Background: U.S.-Taliban Negotiations

In President Donald Trump's August 2017 speech laying out a revised strategy for Afghanistan, he referred to a "political settlement" as an outcome of an "effective military effort," but did not elaborate on what U.S. goals or conditions might be as part of this putative political process. Less than one year later, the Trump Administration decided to enter into direct negotiations with the Taliban, without the participation of Afghan government representatives. With little to no progress on the battlefield, the Trump Administration reversed the long-standing U.S. position prioritizing an "Afghan-led, Afghan-owned reconciliation process," and the first high-level, direct U.S.-Taliban talks occurred in Doha, Qatar, in July 2018.² The September 2018 appointment of Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, the Afghan-born former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, as Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation added momentum to this effort.

For almost a year, Khalilzad held a near-continuous series of meetings with Taliban officials in Doha, along with consultations with the Afghan, Pakistani, and other regional governments. In March 2019, Khalilzad announced that an agreement "in draft" had been reached on counterterrorism assurances and U.S. troop withdrawal. He stated that after the agreement is finalized, "the Taliban and other Afghans, including the government, will begin intra-Afghan negotiations on a political settlement and comprehensive ceasefire."³ The process appeared to be reaching its conclusion in September 2019, when President Trump called off talks after a Taliban attack killed a U.S. soldier. U.S.-Taliban negotiations resumed about three months later.

On February 14, 2020, a senior U.S. official revealed that U.S. and Taliban negotiators had reached a "very specific" agreement to reduce violence across the country, including attacks against Afghan forces, after which, if U.S. military commanders assessed that the truce held, the United States and Taliban would sign a formal agreement.⁴ The reduction in violence went into effect on February 22, 2020. U.S. commander General Scott Miller said that he was "satisfied that the Taliban made a good-faith effort," describing violence as "sporadic."⁵ According to U.S. and Afghan officials, attacks were down significantly across the country, by as much as 80 percent.⁶

² See, for example, Department of Defense, "Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan," June 2017.

³ U.S. Special Representative Zalmay Khalilzad, Twitter, March 12, 2019.

⁴ Conor Finnegan and Aleem Agha, "US, Taliban reach agreement to reduce violence, opening door to troop withdrawal deal," ABC News, February 14, 2020.

⁵ Dan Lamothe, "Inside the U.S. military's historic week in Afghanistan ahead of a peace deal with the Taliban," *Washington Post*, February 28, 2020.

⁶ Mujib Mashal, "Scarred and Wary, an Afghan Force Wonders: What is Peace?" *New York Times*, February 27, 2020.

U.S.-Taliban Agreement

After the weeklong reduction in violence, Special Representative Khalilzad signed a formal agreement in Doha with Taliban deputy political leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar on February 29, 2020, in front of a number of international observers, including Secretary of State Pompeo. On the same day in Kabul, Secretary of Defense Mark Esper met with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani to issue a joint U.S.-Afghan declaration reaffirming U.S. support for the Afghan government and reiterating the Afghan government's longstanding willingness to negotiate with the Taliban without preconditions.

As part of the U.S.-Taliban agreement, the United States agreed to draw down its forces from 13,000 to 8,600 within 135 days (with proportionate decreases in allied force levels). CENTCOM Commander General Kenneth McKenzie confirmed on June 18 that U.S. forces have been reduced to that level nearly a month ahead of schedule.⁷ The U.S. further committed to withdraw all of its forces within 14 months (April 2021). Other U.S. commitments included working to facilitate a prisoner exchange between the Taliban and the Afghan government (more below) and removing U.S. sanctions on Taliban members by August 27, 2020. The sanctions removal is contingent upon the start of intra-Afghan negotiations. In exchange, the Taliban committed to not allow its members or other groups, including Al Qaeda, to use Afghan soil to threaten the U.S. or its allies, including by preventing recruiting, training, and fundraising.

U.S. officials said that “there are parts of this agreement that aren’t going to be public, but those parts don’t contain any additional commitments by the United States whatsoever,” describing the annexes as “confidential procedures for implementation and verification.”⁸ Secretary Pompeo said “every member of Congress will get a chance to see them,” though some Members raised questions about the necessity of classifying these annexes.⁹

Intra-Afghan Talks: Progress and Complications

The U.S.-Taliban agreement envisions the end of the U.S. military effort in Afghanistan, but it does not represent a comprehensive peace agreement, which most observers assess is only possible through a negotiated political settlement between the Taliban and the Afghan government. The agreement states that the Taliban “will start intra-Afghan negotiations” on March 10, 2020. While no negotiations have been scheduled or held to date, both sides signaled in June 2020 that progress toward preliminary talks has been made, though complications remain.

Progress: Political Impasse Resolved

The first development potentially easing the way to intra-Afghan negotiations is the May 17, 2020, agreement between Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and his electoral rival (and former partner in a 2014-2019 unity government) Abdullah Abdullah.

President Ghani had been declared the victor of the September 2019 presidential election on February 18, 2020, winning just over 50% of the vote and thus avoiding a runoff with Abdullah, who won about 40%. Abdullah and his supporters rejected Ghani's narrow majority count as

⁷ Robert Burns, “US has hit agreed troop-cut target of 8,600 in Afghanistan,” *Associated Press*, June 18, 2020.

⁸ Kim Dozier, “Secret Annexes, Backroom Deals: Can Zalmay Khalilzad Deliver Afghan Peace for Trump?” *Time*, February 15, 2020; Briefing with Senior Administration Officials, *op. cit.*

⁹ Juliegrace Brufke, “House Republicans sound the alarm on Taliban deal,” *The Hill*, March 3, 2020.

fraudulent and sought to establish themselves as a separate government, with Ghani and Abdullah holding separate inauguration ceremonies on March 9, 2020.¹⁰

After weeks of negotiations and mediation by Khalilzad and others, Ghani and Abdullah reached a compromise, signing a political agreement on May 17, 2020. The agreement creates a High Council for National Reconciliation, with Abdullah as its chairman, to lead negotiations with the Taliban. The agreement also stipulates that Abdullah will “introduce” 50% of the cabinet nominees, though it is unclear whether President Ghani can then reject those nominees and appoint his own in their place. Additionally, the agreement calls for long-delayed provincial and district elections, as well as municipal elections (which have never been held). Overall, the agreement ends the immediate political impasse, but one analyst argues that its ambiguities may plant the seeds of future conflict and, more importantly, that “it did not remove the underlying causes of the crisis, notably the polarization caused by the current political system.”¹¹

Questions over U.S. Aid Suspension

On March 23, Secretary Pompeo made an unannounced visit to Kabul, where he met with Ghani and Abdullah both individually and together in an effort to resolve their impasse. However, Pompeo was unable to secure an agreement and, upon his return to the United States, he released a statement criticizing the two Afghan leaders for their inability to reach an agreement:

The United States is disappointed in them and what their conduct means for Afghanistan and our shared interests. Their failure has harmed U.S.-Afghan relations and, sadly, dishonors those Afghan, Americans, and Coalition partners who have sacrificed their lives and treasure in the struggle to build a new future for this country. Because this leadership failure poses a direct threat to U.S. national interests, effective immediately, the U.S. government will initiate a review of the scope of our cooperation with Afghanistan.¹²

Among other measures, the statement announced an “immediate” suspension of \$1 billion in U.S. assistance in 2020, with a further \$1 billion cut for 2021. However, Pompeo added that the United States might “revisit” the announced aid reductions if Afghan leaders were to come to an agreement. Official U.S. reactions to the Ghani-Abdullah agreement, which were overwhelmingly positive, did not reference the aid suspension.

It is unclear which U.S. funds are potentially affected by the announcement. According to an April 2020 Reuters report, cuts likely would come from U.S. assistance to Afghan security forces, which totaled about \$4.2 billion in FY2020, making it by far the largest category of U.S. assistance.¹³ Defense officials say the Secretary of Defense has not issued guidance on whether to implement such a reduction.¹⁴ Subsequent Reuters reporting indicates that the cut has not been made, and that the Pentagon would be concerned about reducing funding for Afghan forces.¹⁵

¹⁰ “Abdullah Rejects Results, Announces Formation of ‘Inclusive Govt,’” *TOLO News*, February 18, 2020.

¹¹ Ali Yawar Adili, “End of the Post-Election Impasse? Ghani and Abdullah’s new power-sharing formula,” *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, May 20, 2020. For more on Afghanistan’s political system, and accusations that it is overcentralized and fuels conflict, see CRS Report R45818, *Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy*, by Clayton Thomas.

¹² Secretary of State Michael Pompeo, “On the Political Impasse in Afghanistan,” State Department, March 23, 2020.

¹³ Jonathan Landay, Arshad Mohammed, and Idrees Ali, “Exclusive: Planned \$1 billion U.S. aid cut would hit Afghan security force funds,” *Reuters*, April 5, 2020.

¹⁴ CRS correspondence with U.S. defense official, May 2020.

¹⁵ Arshad Mohammed, Jonathan Landay, and Idrees Ali, “Exclusive: U.S. has not cut Afghan security funds despite Pompeo vow of immediate slash – sources,” *Reuters*, May 20, 2020.

Progress: Prisoner Exchange Nears Conclusion?

While a dispute over the pace of a prisoner exchange between the Taliban and the Afghan government has delayed the start of intra-Afghan negotiations for months, the exchange appears closer to reaching its conclusion in June 2020 as the Afghan government has released about 3,000 Taliban prisoners. However, Kabul, with some international support, is reportedly resistant to releasing a final tranche of prisoners that includes those accused of high-profile attacks.

Disagreements over the scope of the exchange began almost immediately, and some experts explain the confusion by pointing out that “the United States [used] different language in separate documents it agreed with the Taliban and the Afghan government.”¹⁶ Specifically, the U.S.-Taliban agreement reads that “up to” 5,000 Taliban prisoners and 1,000 Afghan forces held by the Taliban “will be released by March 10, 2020”; a U.S.-Afghan government joint declaration issued the same day states that the Afghan government “will participate in a U.S.-facilitated discussion” with the Taliban on “the feasibility of releasing significant numbers of prisoners on both sides.”

President Ghani signed a March 11, 2020, decree that would have released 1,500 prisoners within 15 days as long as each released prisoner provided a written assurance to remain off the battlefield. Further releases of 500 prisoners would have followed every two weeks as long as the Taliban engaged in talks and reduce violence.¹⁷ A Taliban spokesman rejected any conditions-based prisoner release as “against the peace accord that we signed” and insisted that 5,000 prisoners, specified on a list prepared by the Taliban, be released before any intra-Afghan talks.¹⁸

Despite the Taliban evidently not having met the Afghan government’s conditions, the Afghan government began releasing prisoners, and the Taliban have reciprocated. As of June 2020, the Afghan government has released approximately 3,000 prisoners, and President Ghani said on June 11 that another 2,000 would be released “very soon.”¹⁹ That announcement, coupled with a Taliban’s spokesman’s statement that talks would begin as soon as a week after 5,000 Taliban prisoners were released and that initial intra-Afghan talks would take place in Doha, has created optimism about the prospect of imminent negotiations. Reuters has since reported that the Afghan government, supported by the United States and European countries, has balked at releasing some of the individuals on the list who are allegedly responsible for large-scale attacks; the Taliban dismiss that as an excuse “to create barriers against the peace process.”²⁰ Further disputes over the prisoner exchange could alter either side’s willingness to engage in talks, and each delay provides time for other complications to arise.

Complication: Escalation of Violence

In the midst of the halting prisoner exchange, the Taliban have resumed and dramatically escalated violence across Afghanistan. While the Taliban refrained from attacking Afghan forces during the weeklong reduction in violence preceding the U.S.-Taliban agreement, they restarted

¹⁶ Frud Bezhan, “The Historic U.S.-Taliban Deal May Already Be Unraveling Over These Two Key Issues,” RFE/RL, March 3, 2020.

¹⁷ Hamid Shalizi, “Exclusive: Afghan government to release 1,500 Taliban prisoners from jails-decree,” Reuters, March 10, 2020.

¹⁸ “Afghan government to free 1,500 prisoners; Taliban demands 5,000,” Reuters, March 11, 2020.

¹⁹ Transcript, “Afghanistan’s vision for peace: a conversation with H.E. President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani,” Atlantic Council, June 11, 2020.

²⁰ Hamid Shalizi, Abdul Qadir Sediqi, “Reluctance to free ‘most dangerous’ Taliban prisoners slows Afghan peace talks: sources,” Reuters, June 18, 2020.

operations immediately after the agreement, and violence has now reached levels comparable to prior months.

U.S. military officials have given differing interpretations of Taliban attacks. Secretary of Defense Mark Esper said in a March 2 media availability that “our expectation is that the reduction in violence will continue, it [will] taper off until we get intra-Afghan negotiations.”²¹ It is not clear what the basis for that expectation was; there is no provision in the U.S.-Taliban agreement committing the Taliban to refrain from attacking Afghan forces, a fact that Khalilzad acknowledged in a May 15, 2020 media briefing.²² General McKenzie said on March 10 that “Taliban attacks are higher than we believe are consistent with an idea to actually carry out” the U.S.-Taliban agreement.²³ Since then, U.S. officials continue to maintain that Taliban violence is “unacceptably high,” as violence has increased further: according to Afghan officials, an average of 25 to 40 Afghan security personnel were killed every day in mid-April.²⁴

A series of high-profile attacks in May 2020 drew increased attention to the viability of intra-Afghan talks as envisioned in the U.S.-Taliban agreement in light of such violence.²⁵ The Taliban denied responsibility for bloody May 12 attacks, including one against a maternity ward in Kabul, but Afghan officials refuted that disavowal; Khalilzad stated that the U.S. assessment is that the local Islamic State affiliate (against which the Taliban has fought) carried out the attacks.²⁶ After those attacks, President Ghani announced in a national address that he was ordering Afghan forces “to switch from an active defense mode to an offensive one and to start their operations against the enemies;” Ghani’s National Security Advisor wrote on Twitter that there “seems little point in continuing to engage the Taliban in ‘peace talks.’”²⁷

The Taliban subsequently announced a ceasefire for Eid al Fitr, the three-day Islamic holiday celebrating the end of Ramadan; the truce, which began May 24, was welcomed and reciprocated by the Afghan government. Subsequent attempts by the Afghan government to extend the ceasefire were rejected by the Taliban. The Taliban resumed violence a few days after the ceasefire ended, as they did following a similar ceasefire in 2018. The Afghan government said that 291 military personnel were killed in the third week of June alone, making it one of the deadliest weeks for Afghan forces in the past nineteen years.²⁸

Complication: COVID-19 Pandemic

Overshadowing all of the developments above is the continued spread of COVID-19 in Afghanistan, which reported over 30,000 cases as of June 25, 2020, though that figure likely

²¹ Defense Secretary Esper and Joint Chiefs of Staff Milley Hold Media Availability, March 2, 2020.

²² U.S. Department of State, Briefing with Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad, May 15, 2020.

²³ Morgan Phillips, “US Commander disappointed with Taliban peace efforts: Violence ‘higher’ than agreement allows,” Fox News, March 10, 2020.

²⁴ “Ambassador Kay Bailey Hutchison on NATO’s Statement on Afghanistan,” U.S. Mission to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, April 24, 2020; Mujib Mashal, “Taliban Ramp Up Attacks Even as Coronavirus Spreads in Afghanistan,” *New York Times*, April 24, 2020.

²⁵ See, for example, Vanda Felbab-Brown, “After recent violence, is Afghanistan’s peace process dead?” Brookings Institute, May 14, 2020.

²⁶ U.S. State Department, Khalilzad Briefing, May 15, op. cit.

²⁷ “Ashraf Ghani orders troops to resume offensive against the Taliban,” Al Jazeera, May 13, 2020.

²⁸ “291 Afghan security personnel lost their lives, 550 wounded last week,” *Khaama Press*, June 22, 2020.

understates the scale of the virus in Afghanistan due to extremely limited testing.²⁹ COVID-19 has impacted a number of dynamics related to the U.S.-Taliban agreement and potential intra-Afghan talks. Most notably, the United States announced on March 18 that it was pausing the movement of personnel into and out of theater due to concerns about COVID-19.³⁰ The withdrawal evidently resumed after that announcement, and NBC News reported in April 2020 that President Trump had advocated accelerating the withdrawal of all U.S. troops out of Afghanistan because of the pandemic.³¹ COVID-19 also presents logistical hurdles to convening large groups of negotiating teams.

The further spread of COVID-19 in Afghanistan could cause additional disruptions to the nascent peace process, but might also present opportunities for compromise and intra-Afghan cooperation. For example, Afghan government representatives have expressed support for Taliban efforts to combat the virus in areas they control.³² At the same time, some observers dismiss the Taliban's efforts as a propagandistic attempt to undermine the legitimacy of the Afghan government, and charge that the Taliban's escalation of violence since February 2020 is the main factor impeding the country's response to the pandemic.³³ Afghanistan may be at particularly high risk of a widespread outbreak, due in part to its weak public health infrastructure and its porous border with Iran, a regional epicenter of the pandemic where up to three million Afghan refugees live: nearly 300,000 Afghans returned from Iran between January 1, 2020 and late May, 2020.³⁴

Prospects and U.S. Policy

It remains unclear what kind of political arrangement could satisfy both Kabul and the Taliban to the extent that the latter abandons its armed struggle. Afghan President Ghani has promised that his government will not conclude any agreement that limits Afghans' rights and previously warned that any agreement to withdraw U.S. forces that did not include Kabul's participation could lead to "catastrophe," pointing to the 1990s-era civil strife following the fall of the Soviet-backed government that led to the rise of the Taliban.³⁵ Afghans opposed to the Taliban doubt the group's trustworthiness and express concern that, in the absence of U.S. military pressure, the group will have little incentive to comply with the terms of any agreement reached with Kabul.³⁶

The Taliban have given contradictory signs and generally do not describe in detail their vision for post-settlement Afghan governance beyond referring to it as a subject for intra-Afghan negotiations.³⁷ Many Afghans, especially women, who remember Taliban rule and oppose the

²⁹ Belquis Ahmadi and Palwasha Kakar, "Coronavirus in Afghanistan: An Opportunity to Build Trust with the Taliban?" United States Institute of Peace, April 16, 2020. See also, Jaffer Shah et al., "COVID-19: the current situation in Afghanistan," *The Lancet*, April 2, 2020.

³⁰ Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Julian Barnes, "Coronavirus Disrupts Troop Withdrawal in Afghanistan," *New York Times*, March 18, 2020.

³¹ Carol E. Lee and Courtney Kube, "Trump tells advisors U.S. should pull troops as Afghanistan COVID-19 outbreak looms," NBC News, April 27, 2020.

³² Ruchi Kumar, "Taliban launches campaign to help Afghanistan fight coronavirus," Al Jazeera, April 6, 2020.

³³ See Ashley Jackson, "For the Taliban, the Pandemic is a Ladder," *Foreign Policy*, May 6, 2020, and "The Taliban are joining Afghanistan's fight against covid-19," *Economist*, May 9, 2020.

³⁴ International Organization on Migration, Return of Undocumented Afghans Weekly Situation Report, May 24-30, 2020.

³⁵ "Afghans Worry as US Makes Progress in Taliban Talks," *Voice of America*, January 29, 2019.

³⁶ "Afghans voice fears that the U.S. is undercutting them in deal with the Taliban," *Washington Post*, August 17, 2019.

³⁷ Middle East Media Research Institute, "Afghan Taliban Spokesman Suhail Shaheen On Failed U.S.-Taliban Talks," September 19, 2019. See also Frud Bezhan, "Taliban Constitution Offers Glimpse into Gropu's Vision for Afghanistan,"

group's policies and beliefs, remain wary.³⁸ Still, a December 2019 survey reported that a "significant majority" of Afghans are both aware of (77%) and strongly or somewhat support (89%) efforts to negotiate a peace agreement with the Taliban, while opposing the group itself.³⁹ At least some Afghans support "peace at any cost" given the decades of conflict through which the country has suffered.⁴⁰

U.S. officials have given differing accounts of the extent to which the U.S. military withdrawal is contingent upon, or otherwise related to, the Taliban holding talks with Kabul or the outcome of such talks.⁴¹ Deputy U.S. negotiator Molly Phee said on February 18, "We will not prejudge the outcome of intra-Afghan negotiations, but we are prepared to support whatever consensus the Afghans are able to reach about their future political and governing arrangements."⁴²

Military and Security Situation

As of June 2020, the NATO-led mission in Afghanistan, known as Resolute Support Mission (RSM), reports a total force strength of 16,000, of which 8,000 are U.S. forces. RSM has trained, advised, and assisted the Afghanistan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) since RSM's inception in early 2015, when Afghan forces assumed responsibility for security nationwide. Combat operations by U.S. forces also continue and have increased in number since 2017. These two "complementary missions" comprise Operation Freedom's Sentinel.⁴³ As mentioned above, the total number of U.S. forces in Afghanistan is 8,600, a month ahead of the July 2020 date set in the U.S.-Taliban agreement.⁴⁴

President Trump's determination to withdraw U.S. forces reportedly stems at least in part from frustration with the state of the conflict, which U.S. military officials have assessed as a "strategic stalemate" since at least early 2017.⁴⁵ Arguably complicating that assessment, the U.S. government has withheld many once-public metrics of military progress. Notably, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) reported in April 2019 that the U.S. military is "no longer producing its district-level stability assessments of Afghan government and insurgent control and influence" because it "was of limited decision-making value to the [U.S.] Commander."⁴⁶ The last reported metrics from SIGAR in its January 30, 2019, report, showed

RFE/RL, April 27, 2020

³⁸ Pamela Constable, "The Return of a Taliban Government? Afghanistan Talks Raise Once-Unthinkable Question," *Washington Post*, January 29, 2019.

³⁹ The Asia Foundation, "Afghanistan in 2019: A Survey of the Afghan People," released December 3, 2019.

⁴⁰ Susannah George and Sharif Hassan, "Faced with the prospect of formal peace talks, Afghans consider what they're willing to concede," *Washington Post*, June 7, 2020.

⁴¹ In a February 27 briefing ahead of the agreement signing, one unnamed senior U.S. official said, "If the political settlement fails, if the talks fail, there is nothing that obliges the United States to withdraw troops," while another said, "The withdrawal timeline is related to counterterrorism, not political outcomes." Briefing with Senior Administration Officials on Next Steps Toward an Agreement on Bringing Peace to Afghanistan, February 29, 2020.

⁴² Molly Phee, remarks at "Ending Our Endless War in Afghanistan," United States Institute of Peace, February 18, 2020.

⁴³ Lead Inspector General for Overseas Contingency Operations, *Operation Freedom's Sentinel, Quarterly Report to Congress, July 1 to September 30, 2018*, November 19, 2018.

⁴⁴ Burns, op. cit.

⁴⁵ Department of Defense Press Briefing by Secretary Esper and General Milley in the Pentagon Briefing Room, December 20, 2019.

⁴⁶ SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, April 30, 2019. This information, which was in every previous Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) quarterly report going back to January 2016, estimated the extent of Taliban control and influence in terms of both territory and population.

that the share of districts under government control or influence fell to 53.8%, as of October 2018. This figure was the lowest recorded by SIGAR since tracking began in November 2015; 12% of districts were under insurgent control or influence, with the remaining 34% contested.

ANDSF Development and Deployment

The effectiveness of the ANDSF is key to the security of Afghanistan, and U.S. and international support is critical to supporting the ANDSF. President Ghani has said, “[W]e will not be able to support our army for six months without U.S. [financial] support.”⁴⁷ Congress appropriated at least \$86.4 billion for Afghan security assistance between FY2002 and FY2019, according to SIGAR.⁴⁸ Since 2014, the United States generally has provided around 75% of the estimated \$5 billion to \$6 billion a year required to fund the ANDSF, with the balance coming from U.S. partners (\$1 billion annually) and the Afghan government (\$500 million). Concerns about the ANDSF raised by SIGAR, the Department of Defense, and others include absenteeism; the fact that about 35% of the force does not reenlist each year; the potential for rapid recruitment to dilute the force’s quality; widespread illiteracy within the force; credible allegations of child sexual abuse and other potential human rights abuses;⁴⁹ and casualty rates often described as unsustainable.

Total ANDSF strength was reported at 281,000 as of January 2020, up about 9,000 from the previous quarter. The U.S. military attributed the increase to changes in enrollment verification processes.⁵⁰ Other metrics related to ANDSF performance, including casualty and attrition rates, have been classified by U.S. Forces-Afghanistan (USFOR-A) starting with the October 2017 SIGAR quarterly report, citing a request from the Afghan government, although SIGAR had previously published those metrics as part of its quarterly reports.⁵¹ In both legislation and public statements, some Members of Congress have expressed concern over the decline in the types and amount of information made public by the executive branch.

U.S. air operations have escalated considerably under the Trump Administration: the U.S. dropped more munitions in Afghanistan in 2019 than any other year since at least 2010 (see **Figure 1**). These operations contributed to a sharp rise in civilian casualties; the U.N. reported that the third quarter of 2019 saw the highest quarterly civilian casualty toll since tracking began in 2009, with over 4,300 civilians killed or injured from July 1 to September 30, though 2019 overall saw a slight decrease in civilian casualties.⁵² In the first two months of 2020 alone, U.S. forces conducted 1,010 strikes in 27 of Afghanistan’s 34 provinces (see **Appendix**).⁵³ In May 2020, U.S. Air Forces Central Command stated it would no longer release monthly reports on the number of airstrikes and munitions released, citing “how the report could adversely impact ongoing discussions with the Taliban regarding Afghanistan peace talks.”⁵⁴

⁴⁷ Anwar Iqbal, “Afghan Army to Collapse in Six Months Without US Help: Ghani,” *Dawn*, January 18, 2018.

⁴⁸ SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, April 30, 2020.

⁴⁹ See SIGAR Report 17-47, *Child Sexual Assault in Afghanistan: Implementation of the Leahy Laws and Reports of Assault by Afghan Security Forces*, June 2017 (released on January 23, 2018).

⁵⁰ SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, April 30, 2020.

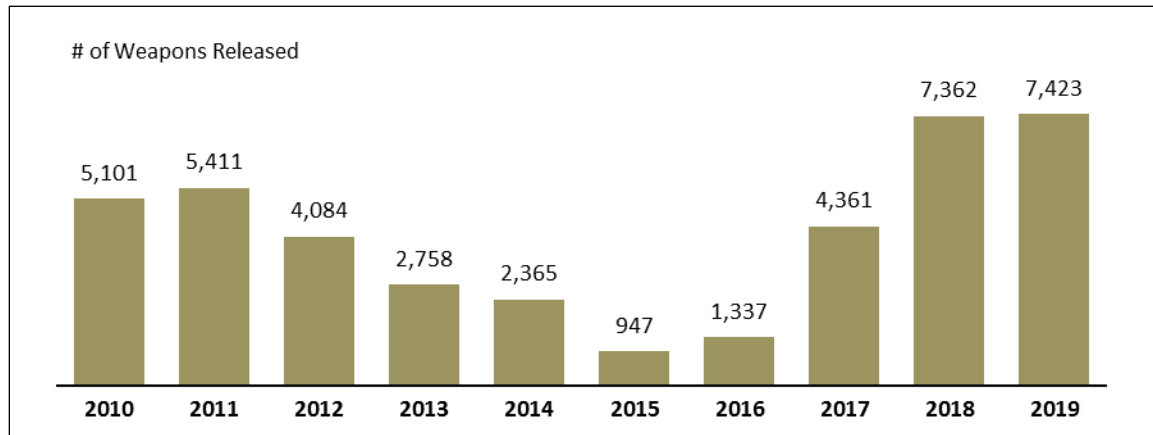
⁵¹ “Report: US Officials Classify Crucial Metrics on Afghan Casualties, Readiness,” *Military Times*, October 30, 2017.

⁵² United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), *Annual Report on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict: 2019*, February 2020. Though the majority of civilian casualties are attributed to anti-government forces, the U.N. reported in October that civilian casualties from air operations (885 killed or injured) set a record in the first nine months of 2019, with 74% of those casualties resulting from operations by international forces. The Department of Defense reports that civilian casualties as a result of U.S. operations in Afghanistan rose from 134 in 2018 to 183 in 2019.

⁵³ U.S. Forces-Afghanistan, *September 2019 Strike Summary*, October 27, 2019. No monthly strike summaries have been released since March 2020.

⁵⁴ Brian Everstine, “AFCENT stops releasing airstrike information as Taliban talks continue,” *Air Force Magazine*, May 4, 2020.

Figure I. Number of Weapons Released (Manned and Remotely Piloted Aircraft strike assets) by year



Source: Combined Forces Air Component Commander 2013-2019 Airpower Statistics.

U.S. Adversaries: The Taliban, the Islamic State, and Al Qaeda⁵⁵

The leader of the Taliban is Haibatullah Akhundzada, who is known as *emir al-mu'minin*, or commander of the faithful; the Taliban style themselves as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Haibatullah succeeded Mullah Mansoor, who was killed in a 2016 U.S. airstrike in Pakistan; Mansoor had succeeded Taliban founder Mullah Omar, who died of natural causes in April 2013. Formerly a figure in Taliban religious courts, Haibatullah has been regarded as “more of an Islamic scholar than a military tactician.”⁵⁶ Still, under his consensus-oriented leadership the Taliban have achieved some notable military successes and the group is seen as more cohesive and less susceptible to fragmentation than in the past.⁵⁷

The Taliban, whose strength is estimated at 60,000 full-time fighters, retain the ability to conduct high-profile urban attacks while also demonstrating considerable tactical capabilities. U.S. officials generally say that the Taliban do not pose an existential threat to the Afghan government, given the current military balance. That dynamic could change if the United States alters the level or nature of its troop deployments in Afghanistan (per the U.S.-Taliban agreement) or reduces funding for the ANDSF. SIGAR reported in April 2020 that U.S. forces are now withholding from public release data on enemy-initiated attacks, which SIGAR called “one of the last remaining metrics SIGAR was able to use to report publicly on the security situation in Afghanistan.”⁵⁸

Beyond the Taliban, a significant share of U.S. operations have been aimed at the local Islamic State affiliate, known as Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP, also known as ISIS-K). Estimates of ISKP strength generally ranged from 2,000 to 4,000 fighters until ISKP “collapsed” in late 2019 due to offensives by U.S. and Afghan forces and, separately, the Taliban.⁵⁹ ISKP and Taliban forces have sometimes fought over control of territory or because of political or other

⁵⁵ For more, see CRS In Focus IF10604, *Al Qaeda and Islamic State Affiliates in Afghanistan*, by Clayton Thomas.

⁵⁶ “Red on Red: Analyzing Afghanistan’s Intra-Insurgency Violence,” *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 11, iss. 1, January 2018.

⁵⁷ Andrew Watkins, “Taliban Fragmentation: Fact, Fiction, and Future,” U.S. Institute of Peace, March 2020.

⁵⁸ SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, April 30, 2020. SIGAR reports that the U.S. military “explained its decision by saying ‘EIA are now a critical part of deliberative interagency discussions regarding ongoing political negotiations between the U.S. and the Taliban.’”

⁵⁹ “ISIS Is Losing Afghan Territory. That Means Little for Its Victims,” *New York Times*, December 2, 2019.

differences.⁶⁰ A number of ISKP leaders have been killed in U.S. strikes since 2016, and Afghan forces arrested and captured two successive ISKP leaders in the spring of 2020. However, U.S. officials caution that ISKP remains a threat, and that recent attacks attributed to the group (including a May 2020 assault on a maternity ward in Kabul) indicate the same operational resilience it has demonstrated when pressured in the past.

Senior Al Qaeda (AQ) leaders, along with fighters of the regional AQ affiliate Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, are also assessed to operate in Afghanistan. In May 2020, the United Nations reported that senior Taliban leaders “regularly consulted” with their AQ counterparts during negotiations with the United States. Al Qaeda has welcomed the U.S.-Taliban agreement, “celebrating it as a victory for the Taliban’s cause and thus for global militancy.”⁶¹ It is unclear what verification mechanisms are in place to ensure Taliban compliance with the commitment to prevent Al Qaeda from operating in Afghanistan, and to what extent the U.S. withdrawal might be paused or reversed based on Taliban action with regard to Al Qaeda.

Regional Dynamics: Pakistan and Other Neighbors

Regional dynamics, and the involvement of outside powers, are central to the conflict in Afghanistan. The neighboring state widely considered most important in this regard is Pakistan, which has played an active, and by many accounts negative, role in Afghan affairs for decades. Pakistan’s security services maintain ties to Afghan insurgent groups, most notably the Haqqani Network.⁶² Afghan leaders, along with U.S. military commanders, attribute much of the insurgency’s power and longevity either directly or indirectly to Pakistani support; President Trump has accused Pakistan of “housing the very terrorists that we are fighting.”⁶³ Since late 2018, the Trump Administration has sought Islamabad’s assistance in U.S. talks with the Taliban, and Khalilzad thanked Pakistan for releasing Baradar from custody in October 2018 and for facilitating the travel of Taliban figures to talks in Doha.⁶⁴ A biannual Department of Defense report on Afghanistan released in January 2020 asserted that “Pakistan is supporting the Afghan reconciliation,” describing Pakistan’s role as “constructive but limited.”⁶⁵

Pakistan may view a weak and destabilized Afghanistan as preferable to a strong, unified Afghan state (particularly one led by an ethnic Pashtun-dominated government in Kabul; Pakistan has a large and restive Pashtun minority).⁶⁶ Afghanistan-Pakistan relations are further complicated by

⁶⁰ See, for example, “Heavy fighting flares between Taliban, Islamic State in Afghanistan,” Reuters, April 24, 2019; Shawn Snow, “ISIS loses more than half its fighters from US airstrikes and Taliban ground operations,” *Military Times*, February 27, 2020.

⁶¹ Eleventh report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2501 (2019) concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace, stability and security of Afghanistan, S/2020/415, released May 27, 2020.

⁶² For more, see CRS In Focus IF10604, *Al Qaeda and Islamic State Affiliates in Afghanistan*, by Clayton Thomas.

⁶³ White House, *Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia*, August 21, 2017. Some Pakistani officials disputed that charge and noted the Taliban’s increased territorial control within Afghanistan itself. Author interviews with Pakistani military officials, Rawalpindi, Pakistan, February 21, 2018.

⁶⁴ “Mullah Baradar released by Pakistan at the behest of US: Khalilzad,” *The Hindu*, February 9, 2019. Baradar had been imprisoned in Pakistan since his capture in Karachi in a joint U.S.-Pakistani operation in 2010.

⁶⁵ DOD, *Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan*, December 2019 (released January 23, 2020).

⁶⁶ Pashtuns are an ethnic group that makes up about 40% of Afghanistan’s 35 million people and 15% of Pakistan’s 215 million; they thus represent a plurality in Afghanistan but are a relatively small minority in Pakistan, though Pakistan’s Pashtun population is considerably larger than Afghanistan’s. Pakistan has condemned as interference statements by President Ashraf Ghani (who is Pashtun) and other Afghan leaders about a protest campaign by Pakistani Pashtuns for

the presence of over a million Afghan refugees in Pakistan, as well as a long-running and ethnically tinged dispute over their shared 1,600-mile border.⁶⁷ Pakistan's security establishment, fearful of strategic encirclement by India, apparently continues to view the Afghan Taliban as a relatively friendly and reliably anti-India element in Afghanistan. India's diplomatic and commercial presence in Afghanistan—and U.S. rhetorical support for it—exacerbates Pakistani fears of encirclement. India has been the largest regional contributor to Afghan reconstruction, but New Delhi has not shown an inclination to pursue a deeper defense relationship with Kabul.

Afghanistan largely maintains cordial ties with its other neighbors, notably the post-Soviet states of Central Asia, whose role in Afghanistan has been relatively limited but could increase.⁶⁸ In the past two years, multiple U.S. commanders have warned of increased levels of assistance, and perhaps even material support, for the Taliban from Russia and Iran, both of which cite IS presence in Afghanistan to justify their activities.⁶⁹ Both nations were opposed to the Taliban government of the late 1990s, but reportedly see the Taliban as a useful point of leverage vis-a-vis the United States. Afghanistan may also represent a growing priority for China in the context of broader Chinese aspirations in Asia and globally.⁷⁰

Economy and U.S. Aid

Economic development is pivotal to Afghanistan's long-term stability, though indicators of future growth are mixed. Decades of war have stunted the development of most domestic industries, including mining.⁷¹ The economy has also been hurt by decreases in aid provided by international donors. Afghanistan's gross domestic product (GDP) has grown an average of 7% per year since 2003, but growth rates averaged between 2% and 3% in recent years and may decline further due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Social conditions in Afghanistan remain equally mixed. On issues ranging from human trafficking to religious freedom to women's rights, Afghanistan has, by some accounts, made significant progress since 2001, but future prospects in these areas are uncertain.

Congress has appropriated nearly \$137 billion in aid for Afghanistan since FY2002, with about 63% for security and 26% for development (with the remainder for civilian operations and

greater civil and political rights. "Pakistan cautions Afghan president against 'interfering' in internal matters," *Express Tribune*, January 27, 2020.

⁶⁷ About 2 million Afghan refugees have returned from Pakistan since the Taliban fell in 2011, but 1.4 million registered refugees remain in Pakistan, according to the United Nations, along with perhaps as many as 1 million unregistered refugees. Many of these refugees are Pashtuns (see Amnesty International, *Afghanistan's Refugees: Forty Years of Dispossession*, June 20, 2019). Pakistan, the United Nations, and others recognize the Durand Line as an international boundary, but Afghanistan does not.

⁶⁸ Humayun Hamidzada and Richard Ponzio, *Central Asia's Growing Role in Building Peace and Regional Connectivity with Afghanistan*, United States Institute of Peace, August 2019.

⁶⁹ In October 2018, the Trump Administration sanctioned several Iranian military officials for providing support to the Taliban. U.S. Department of the Treasury, *Treasury and the Terrorist Financing Targeting Center Partners Sanction Taliban Facilitators and their Iranian Supporters*, October 23, 2018.

⁷⁰ See, for example, Barbara Kelemen, "China's Economic Stabilization Efforts in Afghanistan: A New Party to the Table?" Middle East Institute, January 21, 2020.

⁷¹ Much attention has been paid to Afghanistan's potential mineral and hydrocarbon resources, which by some estimates could be considerable but have yet to be fully explored or developed. Once estimated at nearly \$1 trillion, the value of Afghan mineral deposits has since been revised downward, but those deposits reportedly have attracted interest from the Trump Administration. Mark Landler and James Risen, "Trump Finds Reason for the U.S. to Remain in Afghanistan: Minerals," *New York Times*, July 25, 2017. Additionally, Afghanistan's geographic location could position it as a transit country for others' resources.

humanitarian aid).⁷² The Administration's FY2021 budget requests \$4 billion for the ANDSF, \$250 million in Economic Support Funds, and smaller amounts to help the Afghan government with other tasks like counternarcotics.⁷³ These figures represent a decrease from both the FY2020 request, as well as FY2019 enacted levels. Other than ANDSF funding and other DOD contributions, these figures are not included in the cost of U.S. combat operations (including related regional support activities), which was estimated at a total of \$776 billion since FY2002 as of September 2019, according to the DOD's Cost of War report. In its FY2021 budget request, the Pentagon included \$14 billion in direct war costs in Afghanistan (down from the FY2020 request of \$18.6 billion), as well as \$32.5 billion in "enduring requirements" and \$16 billion in Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) funding for "base requirements;" it is unclear how much of the latter two figures is for Afghanistan versus other theaters.

Outlook and Issues for Congress

The February 29, 2020, signing of the U.S.-Taliban agreement represented a significant moment for Afghanistan and for U.S. policy there. Still, U.S. officials caution that the agreement was "just a first step," and shifts in political and/or security dynamics may change how various parties interpret the agreement and their respective commitments under it.⁷⁴ Furthermore, the unfolding COVID-19 crisis could impact security and political dynamics in Afghanistan, as well as the capacity and/or willingness of the United States and other international partners to maintain their engagement, both military and financial, with Afghanistan.

Core issues for Congress in Afghanistan include Congress's role in authorizing, appropriating funds for, and overseeing U.S. military activities, aid, and regional policy implementation. Additionally, Members of Congress may examine how the United States can leverage its assets, influence, and experience in Afghanistan, as well as those of Afghanistan's neighbors and international organizations, to encourage more equal, inclusive, and effective governance. Congress also could seek to help shape the U.S. approach to talks with the Taliban, or to potential negotiations aimed at altering the Afghan political system, through oversight, legislation, and public statements.

In light of the U.S.-Taliban agreement, Members of Congress and other U.S. policymakers may reassess notions of what success in Afghanistan looks like, examining how potential outcomes might harm or benefit U.S. interests, and the relative levels of U.S. engagement and investment required to attain them.⁷⁵ How Afghanistan fits into broader U.S. strategy is another issue on which Members might engage, especially given competing fiscal priorities in light of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the Administration's focus on strategic competition with other great powers.⁷⁶

⁷² SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, April 30, 2020.

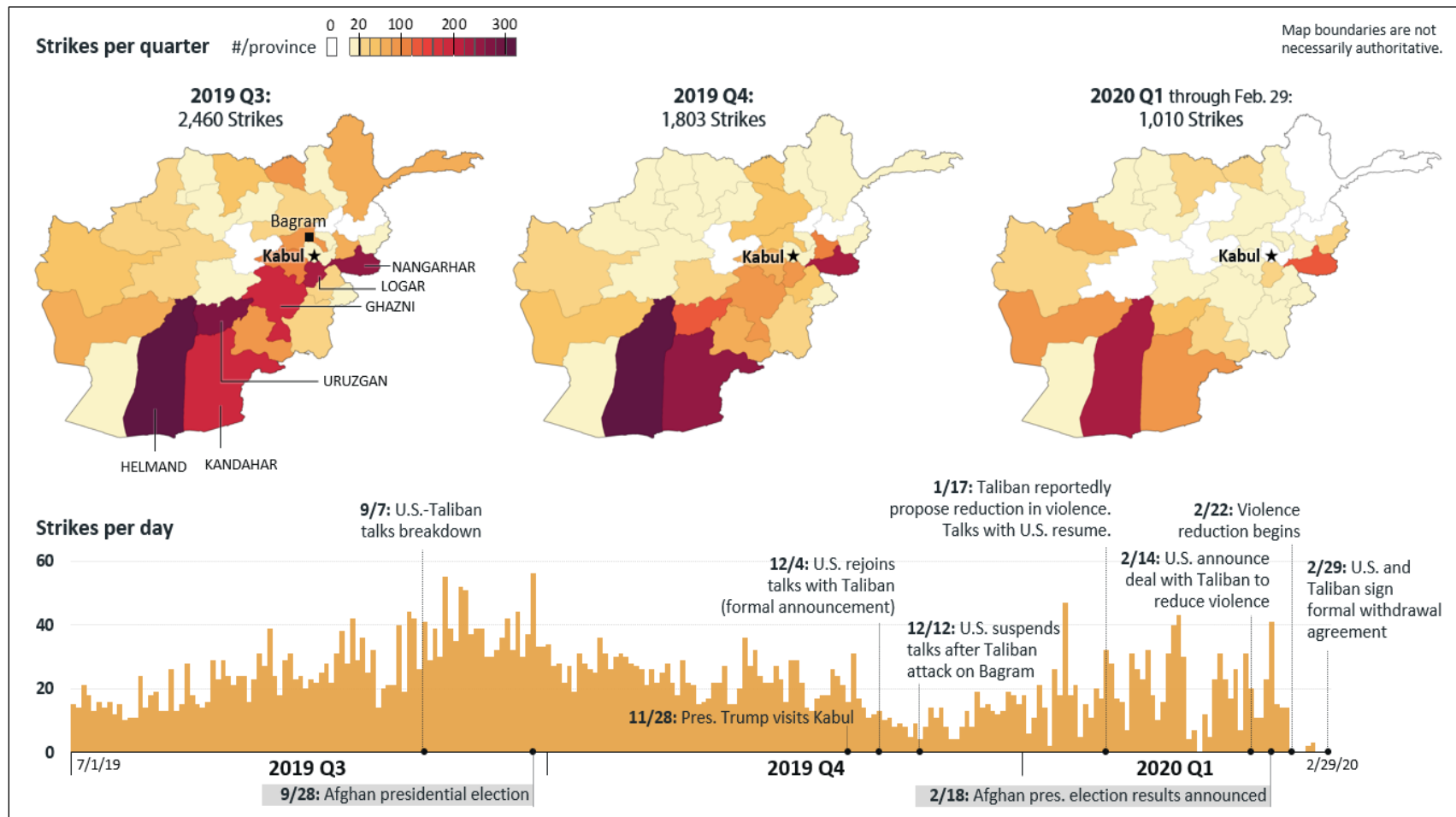
⁷³ For more, see CRS Report R45329, *Afghanistan: Issues for Congress and Legislation 2017-2019*.

⁷⁴ Kathryn Wheelbarger, testimony before House Armed Service Committee, March 10, 2020.

⁷⁵ The *Washington Post's* December 2019 publication of the "Afghanistan Papers" (largely records of SIGAR interviews conducted as part of a lessons learned project) ignited debate, including reactions from some Members of Congress, on these very issues.

⁷⁶ See, for example, CRS In Focus IF11139, *Evaluating DOD Strategy: Key Findings of the National Defense Strategy Commission*, by Kathleen J. McInnis; *The US Role In The Middle East In An Era Of Renewed Great Power Competition*, Hoover Institution, April 2, 2019; and Benjamin Denison, "Confusion in the Pivot: The Muddled Shift from Peripheral War to Great Power Competition," *War on the Rocks*, February 12, 2019.

Appendix. U.S. Strikes, July 2019-February 2020



Source: Created by CRS. Data from NATO Resolute Support Strike Summaries; boundaries from GADM.

Note: Resolute Support defines a strike as “one or more kinetic engagements that occur in roughly the same geographic location to produce a single, sometimes cumulative effect in that location” against the Taliban and other armed groups. Data for March 2020 and subsequent months is unavailable as of June 25, 2020.

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