

By ,
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13 August 2021

The withdrawal of military forces from Afghanistan and its implications for peace



Summary

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- 2 The US/Taliban peace deal and the US commitment to withdrawal
- 3 What does this mean for Coalition forces in Afghanistan?
- 4 Implications for the peace process

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Summary

This briefing is correct as of 13 August 2021 and will not be updated.

Recent events in Afghanistan, including the fall of the Afghan government and the transfer of power to the Taliban, are covered in the following paper:

- CBP9299, [Afghanistan: Fall of the Afghan Government and the transition of power](#)

In January 2021, the new President of the United States, Joe Biden, confirmed that his administration would review US-Afghanistan policy and the parameters of the deal agreed with the Taliban in February 2020.

While an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned peace process remained the goal, a lack of progress in negotiations and increasing violence in the country has raised concerns over the timetable for the withdrawal of US forces and the potential for civil war.

A new timetable for withdrawal

On 14 April 2021, President Biden confirmed that it was “time for American troops to come home” and that the US would honour its commitments under the February 2020 deal. However, the process of withdrawal would be delayed. The US military presence in Afghanistan will end on 31 August 2021.

However, the US will retain a counterterrorism presence in the region. US diplomatic, humanitarian and development assistance to the Afghan Government, and “over the horizon” support to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) from US assets based elsewhere in the region will also continue beyond withdrawal.

Approximately 650 military personnel had been expected to stay in Kabul to protect the US embassy and international airport. However, the footprint of US military personnel in the country after 31 August is now unclear after the US State Department ordered the immediate withdrawal of the majority of its embassy staff on 12 August.

What does this mean for coalition forces?

US and coalition forces in Afghanistan have always taken the approach of [“in together, out together”](#) and the US announcement was accompanied by a NATO commitment to withdraw its forces in the country, including those of the UK.

On 8 July 2021, the British Prime Minister confirmed that nearly all UK forces had left the country. The nature of any future NATO support to the ANSF is currently under discussion.

The US and its allies believe that the [original objectives of the campaign in Afghanistan](#) have been achieved and that a military presence is no longer appropriate. President Biden has been unequivocal in his view that maintaining the “conditions based” approach to withdrawal, that has been the mantra for the last two decades, would mean coalition forces staying in Afghanistan indefinitely.

Implications for the peace process

Instead of a military presence, the US and its allies have committed to building a new relationship with Afghanistan, which is based on support for the Afghan Government, the peace process and the ANSF.

However, the peace talks have made no progress and international attempts to bring the Taliban and Afghan Government together have failed. Talks due to be held in Istanbul at the end of April 2021, were postponed after the Taliban said it would not participate in any conference making decisions on the future of Afghanistan until all foreign forces had completely withdrawn.

On 8 July 2021, and as coalition forces moved towards withdrawal, the Iranian Foreign Ministry announced that an Afghan government delegation had met with Taliban representatives in Tehran, attempting to move discussions beyond the current diplomatic impasse. Both sides [reportedly committed to further discussion](#), although no timeframe for doing so was set out.

Between 10-12 August 2021, US Special Representative for Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, met with counterparts from Russia, China, India, Pakistan, the EU and UN and other regional neighbours, to discuss support for intra-Afghan talks, ahead of further meetings with Taliban and Afghan government representatives. The aim of the talks was to [“to press for a reduction of violence and a ceasefire and a commitment on the part of all those in attendance”](#).

A power sharing deal was reportedly offered to the Taliban, although details have not been made public. That deal has been rejected by the Taliban who

said that they would only accept a peace deal in exchange for the creation of a new Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan.

Taliban offensive

The withdrawal of international military forces is also being conducted while violence escalates in the country. There has been a spate of targeted killings of prominent figures in civil society, the media, judiciary and civil administration, most notably among women. The Taliban has also begun a major offensive against the ANSF.

Dozens of districts have fallen to the Taliban across the country, particularly in northern Afghanistan, [with several districts reportedly abandoned by the Afghan National Security Forces without resistance](#). In early July, hundreds of Afghan military personnel [fled across Afghanistan's borders into Tajikistan, Pakistan and Uzbekistan](#).

At the time of writing, in less than a month Taliban forces have taken a number of [strategic supply roads and several border crossings](#) with Iran, Tajikistan, Pakistan and Turkmenistan. Several major provincial towns and cities, including the strategic cities of Kunduz and Pul-e-Khumri in the north, Herat in the west, and Kandahar and Lashkar Gah in the south have been captured by the Taliban in a matter of days. Other provincial capitals are under siege.

The US military has been supporting the ANSF with air strikes against Taliban targets. However, the speed at which the Taliban has taken ground has placed the capabilities and morale of the ANSF under increasing scrutiny. Thousands of government troops are reported to have surrendered after the fall of Pul-e-Khumri, and an increasing number of Afghan air force pilots have quit after [the murder of several pilots by the Taliban](#) in the last few weeks.

Estimates in mid-August 2021 suggest that the Taliban is now [in control of approximately 65 per cent of the country](#). Given the rapid loss of territory and questions over the capabilities of the ANSF, US intelligence estimates have reportedly been revised and are now suggesting that [Kabul could fall to the Taliban within a month to 90 days](#).

Thousands of Afghan civilians have fled their homes, and [hundreds have been killed](#).

Evacuation of US and British Nationals

The evolving security situation in Afghanistan has prompted both the US State Department and the UK Government to announce that additional military personnel will be deployed to Afghanistan to assist in the evacuation of diplomatic staff and other country nationals. They will also support acceleration of the schemes to relocate former locally employed Afghan civilians. 600 British military personnel will be deployed.

Prospects for peace?

The resumption of talks has been welcomed, but doubts remain over the chances of the Afghan Government and the Taliban agreeing a political settlement, and permanent ceasefire, in the near term.

A resurgent Taliban is making significant gains and showing little interest in ending its military offensive in favour of any peace deal. In contrast, the Afghan Government has made steps to court Afghanistan's warlords and local militia leaders in an effort to bring together an anti-Taliban coalition of its own.

If the Taliban is successful in taking over the country, there are fears for what the future holds. As the Taliban have advanced there have been [widespread reports of strict Sharia law being imposed](#) in areas under its control, in particular with respect to women and children. Religious scholars, tribal elders, female journalists and human rights activists have reportedly been killed in [targeted attacks](#), while [house to house searches have been conducted](#) for Afghans who have worked for the Afghan Government or coalition forces. There are [increasing reports of war crimes violations](#). Questions also remain over whether the Taliban will cut ties with al-Qaeda and other international terrorist networks.

Several commentators argue, however, that the chances of Afghanistan sliding into civil war are far more likely. Local militia groups and former warlords in Afghanistan are rising to prominence and Islamic State, which the Taliban regards as a strategic rival, has a continuing presence in the east of the country. Neighbouring countries may also intensify their struggle for influence in Afghanistan after US forces withdraw by backing proxies, and therefore exacerbating longstanding ethnic divisions.

In response to criticism over the unfolding security situation, the US has pointed to the significant military capabilities of the Afghan National Security Forces and the "over the horizon" support that coalition forces still intend to provide from elsewhere in the region. President Biden has said that he does not regret the decision to withdraw US troops from Afghanistan and that it is time for Afghanistan's leaders to come together and ["fight for themselves, fight for their nation"](#).

1

Background

11 September 2021 will mark the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States and the end of a military presence in Afghanistan that has spanned two decades.

US and coalition countries have almost completed the drawdown of their forces, but questions remain over Afghanistan's long-term future. At the time of writing, the speed at which Taliban forces have taken ground and captured key supply routes, border crossings and provincial capitals has increased fears that the Taliban will regain control of the country, or that there will be a return to civil war.

This paper is an update to a briefing first published in May 2021.

Intervention in Afghanistan

Since October 2001 US and coalition forces have been conducting military operations in Afghanistan.

Initially, military action, considered self-defence under the UN Charter, was conducted by a US-led coalition of the willing (Operation Enduring Freedom). NATO had already invoked its [Article V](#) collective defence clause on 12 September 2001.

In December 2001 the UN authorised the deployment of a 5,000-strong International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to deploy to the region in, and immediately around, Kabul, to provide security and to assist in the reconstruction of the country.

While UN mandated, ISAF continued as a coalition of the willing. US counter terrorism operations under Operation Enduring Freedom remained a distinct operation in parallel.

In August 2003 NATO assumed command of ISAF. Over the next decade, and bolstered by a renewed and expanded UN mandate,¹ ISAF operations expanded into the whole country and evolved from security and stabilisation, into combat and counterinsurgency operations, and then to transition.

¹ UN Security Council Resolution 1510 (2003)

1 Timeline of major force decisions

- October 2001 – Operation Enduring Freedom begins.
- December 2001: UN authorises the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).
- August 2003 – NATO assumes ISAF command.
- June 2006 – ISAF mandate expanded.
- 2009 – counterinsurgency operations begin.
- 2011-2014 – Three-year transition to Afghan-led security operations.
- October 2014- end of UK combat operations.
- December 2014 – end of combat operations, withdrawal of ISAF.
- 1 January 2015 – Afghan forces assume security responsibility. NATO establishes Resolute Support Mission.
- February 2020 – peace agreement reached between the US and the Taliban
- April 2021, US and NATO announce revised withdrawal plan.
- 1 May 2021- Coalition forces begin withdrawing, to be complete by 11 September 2021.

At its height, in 2011, ISAF was approximately 132,000 strong with troops from 50 NATO and partner nations.² Troop numbers fluctuated according to the security situation on the ground.

On 31 December 2014 coalition combat operations, including the US Operation Enduring Freedom, ended. On 1 January 2015 the Afghan National Security Forces assumed responsibility for security in Afghanistan and NATO transitioned to a new, non-combat, mission called Resolute Support. The core mission of Resolute Support has been to support the Afghan National Security Forces.

Operation Enduring Freedom was replaced by the US' Operation Freedom's Sentinel, which contributed to Resolute Support but also independently continued US counter terrorism operations in Afghanistan (approximately 2,000 personnel).

2 Relevant Library briefing papers

- [Afghanistan: July 2020 update](#), 30 July 2020

² [NATO - Archive ISAF Placemats](#)

- [Troops in Afghanistan – July 2018 update](#), 18 July 2018
- [Troops in Afghanistan](#), July 2017
- [Afghanistan: back on the agenda?](#), 27 October 2015
- [In Brief: UK withdrawal from Afghanistan](#), 24 May 2013
- [Afghanistan: the timetable for security transition](#), 9 July 2012
- [Afghanistan: Towards a handover of security responsibility?](#), 19 August 2010
- [Military campaign in Afghanistan](#), 14 July 2010
- [The International Security Assistance Force](#), last updated 9 February 2009
- [Afghanistan: the culmination of the Bonn process](#), 26 October 2005
- [The campaign against international terrorism: prospects after the fall of the Taliban](#), 11 December 2001
- [Operation Enduring Freedom and the conflict in Afghanistan](#), 31 October 2001

2

The US/Taliban peace deal and the US commitment to withdrawal

In February 2019 then US President Donald Trump indicated that he would extricate the US from “[endless wars](#)”, but the Administration’s first attempt at a peace deal with the Taliban [fell apart at the last moment](#) in September 2019.

The Administration soon re-started talks, however, and in February 2020 announced that a [deal had been signed](#). As part of that deal the US agreed to drawdown its military forces in the country from 13,000 to 8,600 and withdraw from five military bases within 135 days (with proportionate decreases in allied force levels) and withdraw all its forces by 1 May 2021.

As part of that agreement, the Taliban committed to not allowing members of the Taliban or other groups, including al-Qaeda, to use Afghan soil to threaten the US or its allies, including by preventing recruiting, training, and fundraising for such activities. It also committed to starting intra-Afghan peace negotiations by March 2020.

The deal was accompanied by a [US-Afghanistan Joint Declaration](#) which noted:

The U.S-Taliban agreement paves the way for intra-Afghan negotiations on a political settlement and a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire. The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan reaffirms its readiness to participate in such negotiations and its readiness to conclude a ceasefire with the Taliban.

By the end of President Trump’s term in office in January 2021, US force levels in Afghanistan had been drawn down to approximately 2,500 personnel. However, little substantive progress had been made on peace negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan Government.³ An agreement had been reached in December 2020 on the basis for which more substantive negotiations could proceed, but no further progress was made before President Trump left office.

Going forward the Pentagon confirmed that any future drawdowns would be “conditions based” with all sides demonstrating their commitment to advancing the peace process.⁴

³ An Afghan Government was finally assembled in May 2020, after disputed Presidential elections in 2019. Peace negotiations subsequently commenced in Doha in September 2020.

⁴ US Department of Defense, [Statement by Acting Defense Secretary Christopher Miller on force levels in Afghanistan](#), 15 January 2021

2.1

A new approach under the Biden administration?

When President-elect, Joe Biden had pledged to bring the war in Afghanistan “to a responsible end”.

In January 2021 the new US administration confirmed its intention to conduct an interagency review of US-Afghanistan policy and the parameters of the deal agreed with the Taliban. While an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned peace process remained the goal, the lack of progress in negotiations and concerns over continued violence in the country, albeit not against US and coalition forces, raised specific questions over the timetable for the withdrawal of US forces.

On 14 April 2021 President Biden [set out the approach](#) that the US would take in Afghanistan going forward.

Acknowledging that the terror threat is now present in many places globally and that it makes little sense to concentrate any response to just one country, President Biden expressed the view that it was “time for American troops to come home” and confirmed that the US would honour its commitments under the February 2020 deal. However, the process of withdrawal would start by 1 May 2021, as opposed to completion by this date:

When I came to office, I inherited a diplomatic agreement, duly negotiated between the government of the United States and the Taliban, that all U.S. forces would be out of Afghanistan by May 1, 2021, just three months after my inauguration. That’s what we inherited — that commitment.

It is perhaps not what I would have negotiated myself, but it was an agreement made by the United States government, and that means something. So, in keeping with that agreement and with our national interests, the United States will begin our final withdrawal — begin it on May 1 of this year.

We will not conduct a hasty rush to the exit. We’ll do it — we’ll do it responsibly, deliberately, and safely. And we will do it in full coordination with our allies and partners, who now have more forces in Afghanistan than we do.

He confirmed that forces would be fully withdrawn by 11 September 2021, the 20th anniversary of 9/11.

However, President Biden also confirmed that the US would reorganise its counter terrorism presence in the region in order to “prevent the re-emergence of terrorists” and to “track and disrupt terrorist networks and operations that spread far beyond Afghanistan since 9/11”. He stressed that

the US would also hold “the Taliban accountable for its commitment not to allow any terrorists to threaten the United States or its allies from Afghan soil”.

US diplomatic, humanitarian and development assistance to the Afghan Government will continue beyond withdrawal along with “assistance to the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces”.

President Biden also called on other countries in the region to do more to support Afghanistan, suggesting that they all “have a significant stake in the stable future for Afghanistan”. He concluded:

War in Afghanistan was never meant to be a multi-generational undertaking. We were attacked. We went to war with clear goals. We achieved those objectives. Bin Laden is dead, and al Qaeda is degraded in Iraq — in Afghanistan. And it’s time to end the forever war.

Those remarks were echoed by Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, at a [joint press briefing](#) with the NATO Secretary General and US Defense Secretary the same day.

2.2

How is withdrawal progressing?

[US Central Command](#) has been providing regular briefings on the progress of withdrawal. In its [latest assessment](#) published 10 August 2021, it confirmed that the US withdrawal of forces was more than 95 per cent complete and that seven facilities have been handed over to the Afghan Ministry of Defence.⁵

This includes [Bagram airbase](#), which US and NATO forces left on 2 July 2021. The base was central to the US’s operation in Afghanistan and the announcement prompted speculation that US withdrawal could be complete in a matter of days.

The US military mission in Afghanistan will conclude on 31 August 2021.

Speaking at the White House on 8 July 2021, however, President Biden confirmed “Our military mission in Afghanistan will conclude on August 31”.⁶

After the 1 May deadline passed, the Taliban had warned they were no longer bound by an agreement not to target international troops. There have, however, been no confirmed instances of the Taliban targeting coalition

⁵ The US had temporarily deployed additional assets to the region to protect withdrawing forces and civilian contractors, including six B-52 bombers and 12 F-18 fighter aircraft. The Eisenhower carrier strike group also had its deployment to the Arabian Gulf extended. That [group was replaced](#) in the North Arabian Sea by the Reagan carrier strike group at the end of June 2021.

⁶ [Remarks by President Biden on the drawdown of US forces in Afghanistan](#), White House, 8 July 2021

forces. US and NATO officials have confirmed that any attack on withdrawing troops would be met with “all the tools at our disposal”.⁷

Protection of US diplomats

Approximately 650 US military personnel had been expected to remain in Afghanistan after withdrawal, to protect the US embassy in Kabul and the Kabul International Airport.

Turkey has also been [in talks](#) with the US and Afghan government about staying to operate, and protect, Kabul International Airport, although a deal has not yet been agreed.⁸ Turkish forces have been running military and logistics operations at the airport, as part of NATO’s Resolute Support mission, since 2015.

However, the footprint of US military personnel in the country after 31 August is now unclear after the US State Department ordered the immediate withdrawal of the majority of its embassy staff (see below). At a Pentagon Press briefing on 12 August, spokesman John Kirby said:

I won't speculate beyond August 31st as to what the footprint's going to look like or how many troops are going to be there and what they're going to be doing.⁹

The Taliban have stated that no foreign forces, including military contractors, should remain in Kabul after the withdrawal deadline. A Taliban spokesman suggested that any foreign troops left in the country will “be at risk as occupiers”.¹⁰

Support for the Afghan National Security Forces

The Afghan National Security Forces total approximately 300,000 personnel.

While support for the ANSF on the ground in Afghanistan will cease after 11 September 2021, the US has clearly outlined its commitment to maintaining support through other means.

At a [Pentagon press briefing](#) on 18 May 2021, officials stated that “support will eventually migrate to one of over the horizon support”, primarily in logistics and financial assistance.

Through the Afghanistan Security Forces Fund the US has provided funds to “support the continued development of the ANDSF as an effective and sustainable force”, specifically in respect to “the ability to sustain high-tempo combat operations against a resilient insurgency and be a reliable counterterrorism partner with the United States”.¹¹ In FY2021 that funding is

⁷ President Biden, Remarks on the way forward in Afghanistan, 14 April 2021

⁸ US Department of Defense, [Press Briefing](#), 11 August 2021

⁹ US Department of Defense, [Press Briefing](#), 12 August 2021

¹⁰ “Afghanistan: all foreign troops must leave by deadline – Taliban”, BBC News, 5 July 2021

¹¹ Department of Defense, [Justification for FY2021 Overseas Contingency Operations Afghanistan Security Forces Fund](#), February 2020

\$3.1 billion.¹² Between 2005 and 2018 the US has provided the ANSF with more than \$69 billion through the Afghanistan Security Forces Fund.¹³

In testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee on 12 May 2021, administration officials confirmed that the US will continue to “fund key capabilities such as the Afghan Air Force and Special Mission Wing; and will continue paying salaries for Afghan Security Forces and continue the delivery of certain military supplies”.¹⁴

NATO also provides funding to the ANSF through the Afghan National Army Trust Fund (see below).

The specifics of future assistance are not entirely clear, which has led to considerable speculation as to what over the horizon logistical support may entail, where it will be based, and where the line will be drawn between supporting the ANSF and conducting counterterrorism operations.

The use of contractors to provide maintenance support, in particular to the Afghan Air Force, is considered highly likely. In a press briefing on 25 July 2021 Commander of US Central Command, General McKenzie, suggested that, going forward:

We continue to provide maintenance, advising them from over-the-horizon, and we're prepared to execute over-the-horizon aircraft maintenance and refurbishment with aircraft that will be flown to a third country, repaired, and returned to service in Afghanistan with the Afghan Air Force.¹⁵

Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley, has also said that training Afghan forces “in other locations” remained a possibility.¹⁶

The reorganisation of counterterrorism assets

In order to maintain a cohesive counter-terrorism presence in the region, negotiating basing and overflight rights with neighbouring countries will be key.

President Biden has already called on neighbouring countries to take greater responsibility for the stability of Afghanistan. However, little progress appears to have been made in securing the support of regional allies and partners for the basing of US forces in their country. While basing in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan or Kyrgyzstan, are considered the most suitable

¹² US Department of Defense, [Quarterly Report to Congress](#), 30 January 2021

¹³ *ibid*

¹⁴ Senate Armed Services Committee, [DoD witness statement](#), 20 May 2021

¹⁵ [General McKenzie Press Availability](#), US Central Command, 25 July 2021

¹⁶ [Joint press conference of Defense Secretary Austin and Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley](#), 6 May 2021

strategically,¹⁷ Russia retains a significant presence in the region. Pakistan has already refused to host US forces.¹⁸

The Pentagon has, however, sought to reiterate that it already has “a pretty robust over-the-horizon capability already in the region”,¹⁹ although it has previously acknowledged that it is “difficult but it's doable”.²⁰

Although geographically further away, the US maintains a number of air bases in the Persian Gulf region, including its forward operational headquarters of U.S. Air Forces Central Command at Al Udeid in Qatar. The US Navy also has a carrier strike group in the region which provides for forward basing of assets offshore. There are questions, however, over whether a permanent naval presence would be sustainable long term. As the US Naval Institute recently observed:

Supporting operations in the Middle East has been a major draw on carrier readiness for the last 20 years and pulled focus away from operations in the Pacific. Part of the ongoing global force posture review is an evaluation of how and where to deploy the strained U.S. carrier force.²¹

¹⁷ US forces were also based, during the early years of Operation Enduring Freedom at Manas in Kyrgyzstan and Karshi-Khanabad in Uzbekistan. During OEF Tajikistan offered its airspace and military bases for humanitarian purposes.

¹⁸ [“Pakistan not to host US forces for Afghan mission”](#), Voice of America, 12 May 2021

¹⁹ [US Department of Defense Press Briefing](#), 9 August 2021

²⁰ [US Department of Defense Press Briefing](#), 6 July 2021

²¹ [“Carrier USS Dwight D. Eisenhower in the Med after 3 months in the Middle East”](#), US Naval Institute News, 6 July 2021

3 What does this mean for Coalition forces in Afghanistan?

US and Coalition forces in Afghanistan have always taken the approach of “in together, out together”.²²

3.1 NATO’s Resolute Support Mission

The US announcement of the withdrawal of its forces was, therefore, accompanied by a NATO commitment to withdraw its Resolute Support mission forces, and those of its partner nations, in parallel.

A statement from the North Atlantic Council on 14 April 2021 said:

In 2001, Allies invoked Article 5 of the Washington Treaty for the only time in NATO’s history and went to Afghanistan together with clear objectives: to confront al-Qaeda and those who attacked the United States on September 11, and to prevent terrorists from using Afghanistan as a safe haven to attack us. In the ensuing decades through the investment of blood and treasure, and in partnership with the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and its security forces, we have worked together to achieve these goals.

In light of this and recognising that there is no military solution to the challenges Afghanistan faces, Allies have determined that we will start the withdrawal of Resolute Support Mission forces by May 1 [...]

NATO assembled one of the largest coalitions in history to serve in Afghanistan. Our troops went into Afghanistan together, we have adjusted together, and now we are leaving together.²³

Like the US, NATO allies went on to confirm that “withdrawing our troops does not mean ending our relationship with Afghanistan. Rather, this will be the start of a new chapter”.²⁴

The NATO Secretary General has acknowledged that the plan was “not an easy decision, and it entails risks”. The alternative, he argued, was to “be

²² Statement of the North Atlantic Council, December 2020

²³ [North Atlantic Council Ministerial Statement on Afghanistan](#), 14 April 2021

²⁴ *ibid*

prepared for a long-term, open-ended military commitment with potentially more NATO troops”.²⁵

At its height, in June 2019, the Resolute Support mission comprised 17,148 personnel from 39 countries.²⁶ In mid-April 2021 when NATO’s commitment to withdrawal was announced, the Resolute Support mission comprised 10,000 personnel from 36 NATO allies and partner countries.²⁷

Coalition forces have been steadily withdrawing from Afghanistan over the last few months. Of the largest contributors to NATO’s Resolute Support Mission, in addition to the US and UK:

- [Germany](#) (1,300 troops) withdrew the last of its forces from Afghanistan on 29 June 2021.
- [Italy](#) (895 troops) completed its withdrawal on 30 June 2021.
- [Georgian troops](#) (860) returned home on 28 June 2021.
- [Romania](#) (619 troops) completed its withdrawal on 26 June 2021.

Turkey, which has approximately 600 personnel in Afghanistan has not yet withdrawn amid ongoing discussions about assuming security responsibility for Kabul International Airport (see above).

Future NATO support?

Speaking at a press conference with the US Secretary of State and US Defense Secretary on 14 April 2021, the NATO Secretary General would not be drawn on the nature of any future NATO support to the Afghan National Security Forces but said plans were currently being discussed:

It’s about continuing to provide support to the Afghan Security Forces, and we will also have to look into how can we make sure that we not jeopardize the gains that have been made in the fight against international terrorism. Exactly how we will do that, exactly what role NATO will have is not yet decided, but all of these issues have – are on the table and are now discussed among NATO Allies and also with Afghanistan.²⁸

At a Heads of State and Government summit in June 2021, NATO leaders committed to “continue to provide training and financial support to the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces, including through the Afghan National Army Trust Fund” (see below). NATO will retain a Senior Civilian Representative's Office in Kabul to “continue diplomatic engagement and enhance our partnership with Afghanistan” and will provide funding “to

²⁵ [Joint Press Conference](#) of NATO Secretary General and US Secretary of State and US Defense Secretary, 14 April 2021

²⁶ Contributing forces to Resolute Support are set out at: [NATO - Archive ISAF Placemats](#)

²⁷ [NATO and Afghanistan](#), 15 April 2021

²⁸ [Joint Press Conference](#) of NATO Secretary General and US Secretary of State and US Defense Secretary, 14 April 2021

ensure continued functioning of Hamid Karzai International Airport”. Although not specified in the Summit Communiqué, NATO has confirmed that it will “continue out-of-country training for the Afghan security forces, with a special focus on the Afghan Special Operations Forces”.²⁹

NATO officials are [reported to have approached Qatar](#) over the potential establishment of a training base in the country, although it is unclear which NATO countries may participate.

The Afghan National Army Trust Fund

“A traditional partnership with Afghanistan remains NATO’s long-term goal”.

[NATO and Afghanistan](#)

Ongoing financial support to the ANSF will continue through the NATO-run [Afghan National Army Trust Fund](#), in concert with the US Afghanistan Security Forces Fund.

The Trust Fund was set up in 2007 to provide a mechanism for NATO allies, partner nations and the international community, to support the ANSF through the gifting of military equipment, and to support training. The Fund has expanded over the years to include professional military education, capacity building and to enhance the role and participation of women within the relevant ministries of the Afghan government and other security institutions.

In July 2018 NATO allies and partners committed to extending that financial support until 2024.

As of May 2021, total contributions made to the Trust Fund since its creation amount to over \$3.4 billion.³⁰

In the longer-term NATO has reiterated its commitment to strengthening its political partnership with Afghanistan through its [Enduring Partnership](#) initiative.

3.2

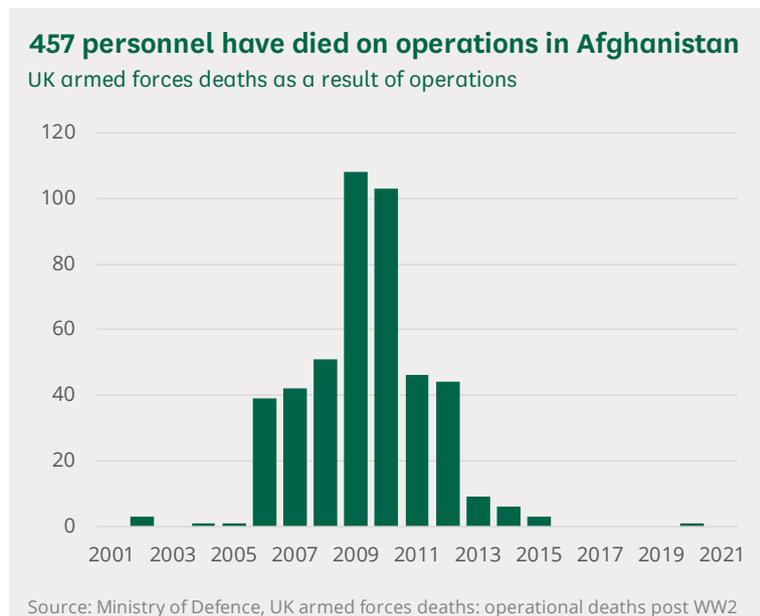
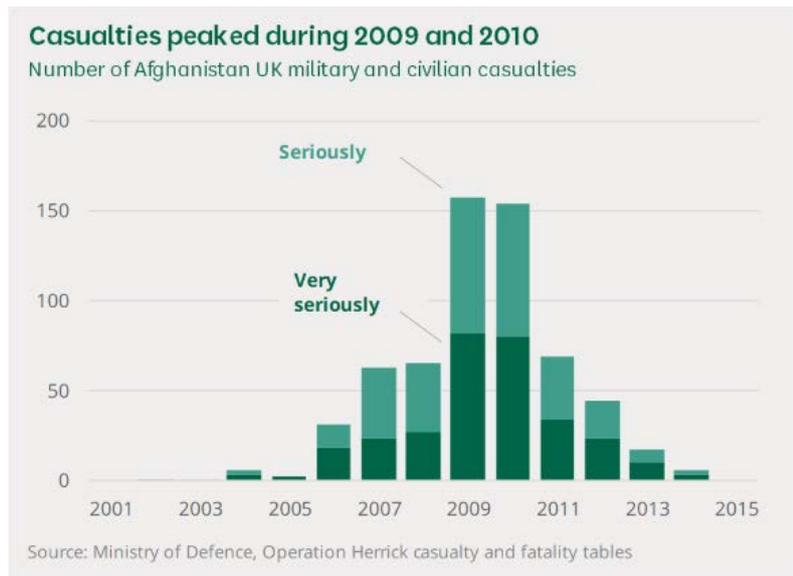
What does this mean for UK troops?

The UK has been deployed in Afghanistan ([Operation Herrick/Toral](#)) since 2001. Over the last 20 years, 150,610 Service personnel have served in Afghanistan.³¹ Over 600 personnel have suffered life changing injuries, and 457 personnel have been killed.

²⁹ NATO, [Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan](#), 6 July 2021

³⁰ [NATO and Afghanistan](#), accessed 8 July 2021

³¹ [HC Deb 20 April 2021](#), c851



The UK's combat mission in Afghanistan formally ended in October 2014 and since January 2015 UK forces have been deployed purely as part of NATO's training mission in the country. At the beginning of 2021 the UK's contingent in Afghanistan stood at approximately 1,100 personnel.

Following the US and NATO announcements on troop withdrawal, the Defence Secretary, Ben Wallace, confirmed that British troops would withdraw in line with coalition plans.³² Chief of the Defence Staff, General Sir Nick Carter said that the US decision was "not a decision we'd hoped for, but we obviously

³² [Ministry of Defence press release](#), 14 April 2021

respect it".³³ Appearing before the liaison committee on 7 July 2021, the Prime Minister said:

If you are asking whether I feel happy about the current situation in Afghanistan, of course I don't. I am apprehensive. The situation is fraught with risks. We must hope that the parties in Kabul can come together to reach an agreement. Somehow or other we must hope that an accommodation must be found eventually with the Taliban. We have to be absolutely realistic about the situation that we are in.

We have to hope that the blood and treasure spent by this country over decades in protecting the people of Afghanistan has not been in vain and that the legacy of their efforts is protected. That is what this Government will try to do as far as we possibly can, with our American friends. The situation is difficult.³⁴

In a statement on Afghanistan on 8 July 2021 the Prime Minister said:

all British troops assigned to NATO's mission in Afghanistan are now returning home. For obvious reasons, I will not disclose the timetable of our departure, but I can tell the House that most of our personnel have already left.³⁵

A future role for the UK?

Following the April 2021 announcement on withdrawal, the Minister for the Armed Forces, James Heappey, suggested that the UK could have a role in the broader counterterrorism mission that was being discussed with the US and NATO allies.³⁶ He also said that some military equipment would be gifted to the ANSF and suggested that training and mentoring of Afghan military personnel could continue, either remotely, or on existing military courses within the UK:

Clearly the military presence within Afghanistan itself will come to an end, but our ability to remain connected to the Afghan military academy remotely is undiminished, and likewise our ability to host Afghan officers and NCOs on military courses in the UK. All of that will I think, first, help to strengthen the connections between the Afghan and UK armed forces, but secondly, help to continue their capacity so that they sustain their own operations and ensure that there is a lasting peace within Afghanistan.³⁷

³³ [BBC Radio Four, Today](#), 16 April 2021

³⁴ Liaison Committee, [Oral evidence from the Prime Minister](#), HC491, 7 July 2021, Q.2

³⁵ HC Deb 8 July 2021, c1104

³⁶ *ibid*

³⁷ [HC Deb 20 April 2021](#), c857

The Minister also confirmed that allies reserved the right to go back into Afghanistan “if the security situation deteriorates to such an extent that our national security is threatened”.³⁸

On 8 July the Prime Minister confirmed that the UK would continue to financially support the Afghan National Security Forces but made no further commitment regarding the UK’s future military footprint in the region, except to say that the UK propose to “continue to work with our friends to look at an outside-in approach to counterterrorism”.³⁹ It has been suggested that several Special Forces personnel could stay in Afghanistan in an advisory capacity.

The Prime Minister committed to supporting Afghanistan going forward, in what he described as a “generational undertaking” but now with “different tools in our hands”.⁴⁰

He concluded by expressing his belief that “the legacy of UK involvement in Afghanistan is a proud one and will be a lasting one”. Specifically:

millions of children educated who would not otherwise have been educated; millions of girls in school who would not otherwise have been in school; the reduction in the terrorist threat for that country for decades; and still the chance, I think, of a political, negotiated settlement involving the Taliban, which is really the only realistic prospect for that country.⁴¹

3 Suggested reading

- British Army, [Afghanistan twenty years on](#)

³⁸ [HC Deb 20 April 2021](#), c858

³⁹ HC Deb 8 July 2021, c1114

⁴⁰ HC Deb 8 July 2021, c1104-5 and c1108

⁴¹ *Ibid*, c1118

4 Implications for the peace process

The US and its allies are of the belief that the [original objectives of the campaign in Afghanistan](#) have been achieved and that a military presence is no longer appropriate. President Biden has been unequivocal in his view that maintaining the “conditions based” approach to withdrawal, that has been the mantra for the last two decades, would mean coalition forces staying in Afghanistan indefinitely.

The US and its allies have instead committed to building a new relationship with Afghanistan, which is premised on support for the Afghan Government, the peace process and the Afghan National Security Forces.

However, the withdrawal of international military forces, in the absence of a negotiated peace settlement and ceasefire, has been met with increasing concern.

4.1 Status of the peace talks

The peace talks have made no progress since agreement was reached in December 2020 on the basis for negotiations to proceed.

Several international attempts to bring the Taliban and Afghan Government together have ended in failure. US proposals for an interim transitional government appointed on the principle of equity, were rejected by President Ashraf Ghani, who himself presented a three-point plan for governance that envisaged building a government within the framework of the current constitution, culminating in presidential elections. That approach has been equally dismissed by the Taliban.⁴²

Talks due to be held in Istanbul at the end of April 2021, were postponed after the Taliban said it would not participate in any conference making decisions on the future of Afghanistan until “all foreign forces completely withdraw from our homeland”.⁴³

In a Communique at the beginning of May 2021, the Special Envoys and Special Representatives of the EU, France, Germany, Italy, NATO, Norway, the UK and US called for:

⁴² “Afghan President offers three-step peace plan”, Voice of America, 30 March 2021

⁴³ [Mohammed Naeem](#), Spokesman for the Taliban office in Qatar, 13 April 2021

The immediate resumption, without preconditions, of substantive negotiations on the future of Afghanistan with the aim to develop and negotiate realistic compromise positions on power sharing that can lead to an inclusive and legitimate government and a just and durable settlement.⁴⁴

They also reiterated that “the process of troop withdrawal must not serve as an excuse for the Taliban to suspend the peace process and that good faith political negotiations must proceed in earnest”.

As coalition forces move towards withdrawal, on 8 July 2021 the Iranian Foreign Ministry announced that an Afghan government delegation had met with Taliban representatives in Tehran, in efforts to move beyond the current diplomatic impasse.

In a joint statement released after talks, the Afghan government and the Taliban stated that “war is not the solution to the Afghanistan problem” and that “all efforts must be directed towards achieving a peaceful political solution”.⁴⁵

Both sides also reportedly agreed to continue talks, although a timeframe for doing so was not set out.

Between 10-12 August 2021, US Special Representative for Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, met with counterparts from Russia, China, India, Pakistan, the EU and UN and other regional neighbours, to discuss support for intra-Afghan talks, ahead of further meetings with Taliban and Afghan government representatives. The aim of the talks was to “to press for a reduction of violence and a ceasefire and a commitment on the part of all those in attendance”.⁴⁶

A power sharing deal was reportedly offered to the Taliban, although details have not been made public. That deal has been rejected by the Taliban who said that they would only accept a peace deal in exchange for the creation of a new Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan.

Taliban Spokesman, Zabiullah Mujahid said:

The Taliban will not accept the Kabul power-sharing offer and a ceasefire. Our target is to end foreign intervention and an Islamic government will be formed in this country. If they accept this offer, we are ready for a ceasefire. If Kabul is not ready to accept our demands then it is not difficult for us to fight and continue our jihad [holy war].⁴⁷

⁴⁴ European External Action Service press release, 7 May 2021

⁴⁵ [“Afghan government delegation meets Taliban in Iran”](#), Aljazeera, 8 July 2021

⁴⁶ [US State Department press briefing](#), 11 August 2021

⁴⁷ “Taliban fight on after rejecting Afghanistan power-sharing deal”, The Times, 13 August 2021

The countries and organisations involved in the talks made clear that “the international community will not accept any government that seeks to take control of Afghanistan by force”.⁴⁸

4.2 Escalating violence in the country

The withdrawal of international military forces is being conducted, not only in the absence of peace deal, but also against a backdrop of escalating violence in the country.

Over the last year, the US estimates that Taliban attacks against Government forces have numbered between 80 and 120 per day.⁴⁹ There has been a spate of targeted killings of prominent figures in civil society, the media, judiciary and civil administration, most notably among women. In an [April 2021 report](#), the UN estimated that in the first three months of this year, the number of civilians killed and injured (1,783) was 29 per cent higher than for the same period in 2020. That same report attributed 61 per cent of casualties to the Taliban and other anti-government forces.⁵⁰ In early May 2021 an attack on a school in Kabul left 55 people, predominantly girls, dead and hundreds injured. Afghan government officials blamed the Taliban for the attack, although the group denied any involvement.

A number of analysts have pointed the finger at the Islamic State (IS) group, which continues to be active in Afghanistan, in particular in Kabul and Jalalabad in the east of the country. On 14 May 2021 the group claimed responsibility for an attack on a mosque in Kabul that killed 12 people, including the cleric leading prayers. The Taliban view Islamic State as a strategic rival.

The Taliban was estimated to have approximately 60,000 fighters,⁵¹ making it stronger than at any point since 2001. It has also been steadily gaining territory across Afghanistan over the course of the last year. At the beginning of 2021 more than half of the country was assessed to be under the direct control of, or contested by, the Taliban. At the time, most of the areas under direct Taliban control were remote and rural and generally among the poorest parts of the country.⁵²

In April 2021 the [US National Intelligence Council](#) considered that, going forward, the “Taliban is likely to make gains on the battlefield” and “is

⁴⁸ [“Doha talks on Afghanistan end with call for accelerated peace process, halt to attacks”](#), Reuters, 12 August 2021

⁴⁹ Joint press conference of Defense Secretary Austin and Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley, 6 May 2021

⁵⁰ UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, [2021 Quarterly Report](#), April 2021

⁵¹ [Afghanistan: background and US policy](#), Congressional Research Service, 21 March 2021

⁵² House of Lords Select Committee on International Relations and Defence, [The UK and Afghanistan](#), HL208, January 2021. See also “The Americans may leave Afghanistan, but the Forever War will grind on”, RUSI Commentary, 16 April 2021

confident it can achieve military victory” within two to three years. An updated US intelligence assessment at the end of June 2021 suggested, however, that the Afghan government could collapse in six months.⁵³

Major Taliban offensive⁵⁴

In tandem with the withdrawal of coalition forces, the Taliban has been conducting a major offensive against Afghan government forces to coincide with the summer fighting season. Dozens of districts have fallen to the Taliban across the country, in particular in northern Afghanistan, with several districts reportedly abandoned by the Afghan National Security Forces without resistance.⁵⁵ In early July 2021 hundreds of Afghan military personnel [fled across Afghanistan’s borders into Tajikistan](#),⁵⁶ [Pakistan and Uzbekistan](#).

The Afghan National Security Adviser, Hamdullah Mohib, defended the Afghan forces at the time, suggesting that a lack of supplies and ammunition had forced many personnel to abandon their posts. He denied widespread reports that personnel had defected to the Taliban.⁵⁷

At the time of writing, in less than a month Taliban forces have taken a number of [strategic supply roads and several border crossings](#) with Iran, Tajikistan, Pakistan and Turkmenistan. Several major provincial towns and cities, including the strategic cities of Kunduz and Pul-e-Khumri in the north, Herat in the west, and Kandahar and Lashkar Gah in the south have been captured by the Taliban in a matter of days. Other provincial capitals are under siege. The US military has been supporting Afghan national forces with air strikes against Taliban targets.

However, the speed at which the Taliban has taken ground has placed the capabilities and morale of the ANSF under increasing scrutiny. Thousands of troops are reported to have surrendered after the fall of Pul-e-Khumri,⁵⁸ and an increasing number of Afghan air force pilots have quit after the murder of several pilots by the Taliban in the last few weeks.⁵⁹ Taliban forces have been pictured with US supplied weapons, including a Black Hawk helicopter, seized from abandoned Afghan military compounds.

On 10 August 2021 an EU official suggested that the Taliban is now in control of approximately 65 per cent of the country.⁶⁰ An assessment by Security Council Report in August 2021 stated that the Taliban had “captured more

⁵³ [“Afghan government could collapse six months after US withdrawal, new intelligence assessment says”](#), Wall Street Journal,

⁵⁴ Information is correct at the time of writing. Given the fluidity of events on the ground further territorial gains may have subsequently been achieved.

⁵⁵ [“Afghanistan: Taliban captures territory as NATO withdrawal continues”](#), Euronews, 5 July 2021

⁵⁶ In total, nearly 1,600 soldiers are thought to have crossed the border with Tajikistan ([BBC News](#), 6 July 2021)

⁵⁷ [“Afghanistan vows to overcome Taliban advances amid US withdrawal”](#), Global Security, 6 July 2021

⁵⁸ “US fears Afghanistan could fall to Taliban within weeks”, The Times, 12 August 2021

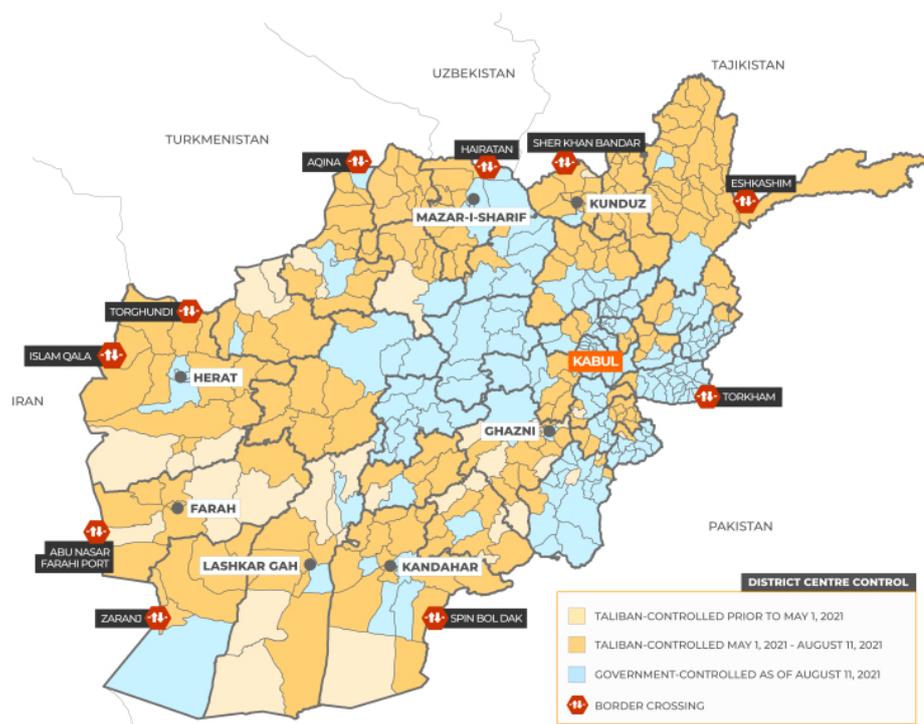
⁵⁹ [“Special report: Afghan pilots assassinated by Taliban as US withdraws”](#), Reuters, 9 July 2021 and [“Afghan air force pilot killed in Kabul bombing, attack claimed by Taliban”](#), Reuters, 8 August 2021

⁶⁰ [“Taliban control 65 percent of Afghanistan: EU official”](#), The Hill, 10 August 2021

territory in the last two months than during any other period since the US invasion in 2001”.⁶¹

Given the rapid loss of territory and questions over the capabilities of the ANSF, US intelligence estimates are reported to have been revised. As of 10 August 2021, US intelligence officials have stated that Kabul could fall to the Taliban within a month to 90 days.⁶²

AFGHANISTAN Who controls what



Source: Roger Helms/Afghanistan Analysts Network | Updated: August 11, 2021



Thousands of Afghan civilians have fled their homes, and [hundreds have been killed](#). In July 2021 the UN Refugee Agency warned that Afghanistan was “on the brink” of a humanitarian crisis, estimating that increased violence has led to 270,000 Afghans being displaced since January 2021.⁶³

On 10 August 2021 UN Human Rights Chief, Michelle Bachelet, issued a statement condemning the continued violence and urged all parties to “stop fighting to prevent more bloodshed” and return to the negotiating table. She

⁶¹ [Afghanistan: briefing and closed consultations](#), Security Council Report, 5 August 2021

⁶² [“US officials warn collapse of Afghan capital could come sooner than expected”](#), The Washington Post, 11 August 2021

⁶³ UNHCR, [“UNHCR warns of imminent humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan”](#), 13 July 2021

also noted reports of alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity being committed by Taliban forces.⁶⁴

Evacuation of US and British nationals

Although not directly linked to the failure of peace talks in Doha (see above), the evolving security situation in Afghanistan prompted the US State Department and the UK Government to announce on 12 August that additional military personnel will be deployed to Afghanistan to assist in the departure of some diplomatic staff and other nationals, and to assist in the acceleration of the schemes to relocate former locally employed Afghan civilians to the US and UK respectively.⁶⁵

The US Government confirmed that 3,000 military personnel will be temporarily deployed to Kabul to facilitate the evacuation of US embassy staff, leaving in place “a core diplomatic presence”. The US State Department has made clear that:

The embassy remains open and we plan to continue our diplomatic work in Afghanistan. The United States will continue to support consular services, and that includes the processing and operations of the Special Immigrant Visa program, and will continue to engage in diplomacy with the Afghan Government and the Afghan people. Additionally, we will continue our focus on counterterrorism.⁶⁶

A further 3,500 military personnel will deploy to Kuwait and be placed on standby should the security situation deteriorate further; while 1,000 personnel will deploy to Qatar to assist with the relocation of former Afghan employees.⁶⁷ US military officials have made clear that any attack on US forces “[will be met with a forceful and an appropriate response](#)”.

The UK Government has also announced the short-term deployment of 600 military personnel to assist in the departure of British nationals in Afghanistan, including embassy staff and contractors. In parallel, the Government confirmed that:

the number of staff working at the British Embassy in Kabul has been reduced to a core team focused on providing consular and visa services for those applying for the UK’s relocation scheme.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Office of the UN Human Rights Commissioner, [Press Release](#), 10 August 2021

⁶⁵ The UK scheme is examined in greater detail in Library Briefing, CBP9286, [Resettlement scheme for locally employed civilians in Afghanistan](#)

⁶⁶ [US State Department press briefing](#), 12 August 2021. See also [US Department of Defense press briefing](#), 12 August 2021

⁶⁷ [US Department of Defense press briefing](#), 12 August 2021

⁶⁸ [Ministry of Defence press release](#), 12 August 2021

The Government also confirmed that the UK Ambassador and core team of diplomatic staff will “relocate within Kabul to a more secure location”.⁶⁹

4.3 Re-emergence of Afghanistan’s warlords

For several months, [local militia groups and former warlords in Afghanistan](#), many organised along ethnic lines, have been regrouping and remobilising. This has been particularly evident in the northern region where Taliban advances have been the greatest. Fearing the failure of the ANSF, the collapse of the Afghan Government and a possible Taliban takeover after coalition forces leave, many former warlords “have vowed to protect their communities”.⁷⁰ As Ali Adili of the Afghanistan Analysts Network observes “certain communities will rely on these figures for protection in a scenario in which the peace process falls apart and the state apparatus breaks down”.

Despite President Ghani’s initial refusal to do so, in recent weeks the Afghan government has been proactively courting the Afghan warlords in an effort to shore up the ANSF and quell the advance of the Taliban. In Herat former Mujahedeen commander and a previous governor of the city, Ismail Khan, had reportedly been leading 3,000 men alongside the ANSF in attempts to defend the city, albeit without success. The Taliban captured Herat on 12 August. On 11 August 2021 President Ghani also held a meeting in Mazar-e-Sharif with former warlord and once Vice President of Afghanistan General Abdul Rashid Dostum and local strongman Atta Mohammad Noor to discuss defending the city from the Taliban.

Ghani’s approach to the warlords and efforts to arm pro-Government militia groups has been widely viewed as an acknowledgement that the peace process is “dead”, and that the Government’s only option is to try and rally anti-Taliban groups and local leaders under one cause.⁷¹

However, many former warlords have a reputation for shifting allegiances and being largely motivated by the protection of their local interests, and not in defending the Afghan Government.

Ali Adili also argues that ethnic communities in Afghanistan may want to maximise their leverage with the Taliban, either in negotiations over a peace settlement, or in the event that the Taliban take over the country.⁷² The Taliban has reportedly been reaching out to several of the old mujahedeen groups of the Soviet era, in order to seek some common ground and undercut support for the Afghan Government.⁷³ The most notable is Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a former mujahedeen leader and now head of the Hezb-e-Islami

⁶⁹ *ibid*

⁷⁰ “Afghanistan sees resurgence of warlords, in familiar echo of civil war”, Gandhara, 22 April 2021

⁷¹ [“Afghan leader sees peace talks as dead, braces for civil war”](#), Bloomberg, 9 August 2021

⁷² “Afghanistan sees resurgence of warlords, in familiar echo of civil war”, Gandhara, 22 April 2021

⁷³ Afghanistan: the Taliban seek a negotiated path to power. Will it work?, RUSI Commentary, 26 April 2021 and “Taliban sets up divide and conquer strategy in Afghanistan”, Global Security, 5 May 2021

party. In April 2021 Hekmatyar held a rally in which he proclaimed victory defending Baharak district against the Taliban.⁷⁴ Six months earlier, however, Hekmatyar had said that his party was ready for “direct talks with the Taliban, as well as for partnership and cooperation”, expressing the belief that “if these two groups join hands, the crisis in Afghanistan will end soon and no force will be able to stand against it”.⁷⁵

As Waleed Mir, writing in *The Diplomat* in May 2021 observed:

Kabul will...have to turn a blind eye to their history of human rights abuses. More pressingly, Ghani will certainly not forget the rampant side-switching carried out by the same outfits – all of which sided with the Taliban at least once – during the civil war.

Whatever happens, the history of warlordism within and outside of Afghanistan tells us that they are inherently volatile actors. Nonetheless, they will be playing a crucial role in the future if the government in Kabul has no better options.⁷⁶

4.4 Prospects for peace?

The resumption of talks has been welcomed, but doubts remain over the chances of the Afghan government and the Taliban agreeing a political settlement, and permanent ceasefire, in the near term. A resurgent Taliban is making significant gains and showing little interest in ending their military offensive in favour of any peace deal. In contrast, the Afghan government has made steps to court Afghanistan’s warlords and local militia leaders in efforts to bring together an anti-Taliban coalition of its own.

If the Taliban are successful in taking over the country, there are fears for what the future holds. Nick Reynolds, writing for RUSI, suggests “A victorious Taliban regime would be similar in outlook and in its approach to governance as it was before in 2001: a conservative theocracy uninterested in either development or human rights”.⁷⁷ Indeed, as the Taliban have advanced there have been [widespread reports of strict Sharia law being imposed](#) in areas under their control, in particular with respect to women and children. Religious scholars, tribal elders, female journalists and human rights activists have reportedly been killed in targeted attacks, while house to house searches have

⁷⁴ Waleed Mir, “[Afghanistan’s wildcard warlords](#)”, *The Diplomat*, 7 May 2021

⁷⁵ “[Afghanistan: Hekmatyar ready to join hands with Taliban](#)”, Anadolu Agency, 19 September 2020

⁷⁶ Waleed Mir, “[Afghanistan’s wildcard warlords](#)”, *The Diplomat*, 7 May 2021

⁷⁷ Nick Reynolds, [The Americans may leave Afghanistan, but the Forever War will grind on](#), RUSI Commentary, 16 April 2021

been conducted for Afghans who worked either for the Afghan government or coalition forces.⁷⁸ There are increasing reports of war crimes violations.⁷⁹

There are also lingering questions over whether the Taliban will cut ties with al-Qaeda and other international terrorist networks such as Lashkar e-Taiba and Jaish Muhammad. Reynolds concludes that the continuing threat of terrorism that will emanate from Afghanistan, makes it “unlikely that NATO will be able to fully disengage” and that “the US, UK and NATO may even end up seriously escalating combat operations in Afghanistan in some form in the future”, either to ensure the survival of the Afghan Government or to address Taliban support of terrorist networks, if they assume power.⁸⁰

Several commentators argue, however, that the chances of Afghanistan sliding into civil war are far more likely. The increasing prominence of the warlords, the presence of Islamic State in the country and the diverging interests of neighbouring countries in Afghanistan does not, they argue, make a Taliban rise to power inevitable. In contrast to the view that the remaining provincial capitals, and Kabul, could fall to the Taliban within three months, there is the view that the presence of all of these competing groups will precipitate what Ryan Crocker, a former US Ambassador to Afghanistan, has described as “a long and grinding war”.⁸¹

Afghanistan has always been the stage for the rivalry of larger neighbouring countries, and that remains the case. Afghanistan’s neighbours may intensify their struggle for influence after US forces withdraw, exacerbating longstanding ethnic divisions by backing proxies. Iran is close to the Tajiks and the Shia Islam Hazaras. Turkey tends to back the Uzbeks. Russia, India, and other Central Asian countries could support Northern Alliance parties again, although Russia has more recently had a reconciliation with the Taliban.⁸² [India is also reported to have held talks with the Taliban](#) in Doha. Pakistan also supports the Taliban as it seeks to achieve ‘strategic depth’ in the country. [China has also signalled its willingness to work with the Taliban](#) to avoid chaos across its border. In response to concern that any potential civil war could spillover into Afghanistan’s neighbours to the north, Russia has pledged to protect its regional allies.⁸³

In response to criticism over the unfolding security situation, the US has pointed to the significant military capabilities of the Afghan National Security Forces and the “over the horizon” support that coalition forces still intend to

⁷⁸ The UK’s policies on the resettlement of locally employed civilians who worked for British forces is examined in Library Briefing, CBP9286, [Resettlement scheme for locally employed civilians in Afghanistan](#)

⁷⁹ See “Afghanistan: threats of Taliban atrocities in Kandahar”, Human Rights Watch, 23 July 2021 and European Union External Action Service, [Joint statement by High Representative Borrell and Commissioner Lenarčič](#), 5 August 2021

⁸⁰ Nick Reynolds, [The Americans may leave Afghanistan, but the Forever War will grind on](#), RUSI Commentary, 16 April 2021

⁸¹ [“Afghanistan likely headed for civil war”](#), Bloomberg, 8 August 2021

⁸² “Russia welcomes the Taliban as a lesser evil in Afghanistan”, The Times, 9 August 2021

⁸³ [“Tajikistan asks Russia-led bloc for help on Afghan border”](#), Reuters, 7 July 2021

provide from elsewhere in the region. At a Pentagon press briefing on 11 August 2021, Press Secretary John Kirby stated:

no potential outcome has to be inevitable, including the fall of Kabul, which everybody seems to be reporting about. It doesn't have to be that way [...]

They have... the advantage in numbers, in operational structure, in air forces and in modern weaponry and it's really about having the will and the leadership to use those advantages to their own benefit.⁸⁴

President Biden has already made clear his view that the military objectives of the campaign in Afghanistan had been achieved, commenting:

We did not go to Afghanistan to nation-build. And it's the right and the responsibility of the Afghan people alone to decide their future and how they want to run their country.

Speaking to reporters on 8 August 2021 President Biden said that he did not regret the decision to withdraw US troops from Afghanistan and that "Afghan leaders have to come together [...] they've got to fight for themselves, fight for their nation".⁸⁵

⁸⁴ US Department of Defense, [Press Briefing](#), 11 August 2021

⁸⁵ [Video supplied by France24](#), 11 August 2021

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