

The background of the entire page is a photograph of several hands raised in the air, each making a peace sign (V-sign). The image is slightly blurred and has a blueish tint. The text is overlaid on this background in white boxes.

Peace in Afghanistan

Ending the War Responsibly



Friends Committee
on National Legislation
Lobbying with Quakers

Teaching children about
numbers using toys.

Herat, Afghanistan.
Photo: Ghulam Abbas
Farzami / World Bank



Peace in Afghanistan

ENDING THE WAR RESPONSIBLY

WRITTEN BY

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WITH ASSISTANCE FROM

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INTRODUCTION » PEACE IN AFGHANISTAN

Ending the Afghanistan War Responsibly

On February 29, 2020, the United States and the Taliban signed an agreement paving a path for the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO troops from Afghanistan. A full military withdrawal is necessary and should proceed without delay. To end the war responsibly, however, the exit of troops must be paired with steps to minimize any further harm to the people of Afghanistan.

After nearly twenty years of war and numerous lost opportunities for peacemaking, the U.S.-Taliban deal is now the only viable option before us. It comes at a time when the novel coronavirus is sweeping the world, with uncertain implications for regional security and a high potential for a humanitarian nightmare. Moving forward, we must commit to making this deal successful by combining it with diplomatic efforts and assistance packages that will improve the prospects for real peace and security. At the same time, we must recognize that there are limits to U.S. ability to control the outcomes, with or without the application of military power.

The Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL) is a national nonpartisan Quaker organization that lobbies Congress for peace, justice, and environmental stewardship. We seek a world free of war and the threat of war, conducting research, analysis, education, and advocacy to address the root causes of violence and injustice. In this spirit, FCNL has developed a series of recommendations and accompanying issue briefs informed by expert interviews with individuals who have worked in Afghanistan as diplomats, members of the armed services, civil society representatives, and aid workers. While developments on the ground continue to shift rapidly—perhaps even by the hour—we recommend four core steps to steer U.S. policy on the path to peace:

Issue Brief #1: Support full military withdrawal from Afghanistan

There is no military solution to the problems in Afghanistan. Members of Congress must oppose any legislation that would impede full military withdrawal and should reject the false premises that led us to invade and occupy Afghanistan in the first place.

Issue Brief #2: Ramp up bilateral and multilateral diplomatic efforts

The United States still has an outsize role to play in supporting intra-Afghan talks and engaging other regional actors diplomatically in order to improve the chances for a stable peace.

Read the Issue Briefs

*Support Full Military
Withdrawal from
Afghanistan*

*Ramp Up Bilateral
and Multilateral
Diplomatic Efforts*

*Support Long-term
Afghan-led Solutions*

*Oppose Continued
 Militarized
Counterterrorism in
Afghanistan*

Issue Brief #3: Support long-term Afghan-led solutions

Military withdrawal need not mean abandonment of the people of Afghanistan. On the contrary, the United States should continue to provide carefully calibrated economic, development, peacebuilding, and humanitarian aid to Afghanistan that includes oversight and accountability.

Issue Brief #4: Oppose continued militarized counterterrorism in Afghanistan

We must acknowledge that military counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan and around the world have only exacerbated the root causes of terrorism. Instead, Congress should put the challenge of terrorism in its proper perspective, reject calls to maintain a residual counterterrorism military force in Afghanistan, and invest and properly resource crucial non-military tools to reduce the power and reach of terror networks.

Frequently Asked Questions

FCNL has provided our responses to commonly raised questions regarding military withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Acknowledgments

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Organizational affiliations are shown for identification purposes only. The views and opinions expressed in this report, including all issue briefs and recommendations, are those of the Friends Committee on National Legislation. They do not necessarily represent the views of the interviewees or any other organization or individual.

We must commit to making this deal successful by combining it with diplomatic efforts and assistance packages that will improve the prospects for real peace and security.

For more information, please contact Heather Brandon-Smith, legislative director on militarism and human rights at HBrandon-Smith@fcnl.org.

U.S. Air Force photo by
Staff Sgt. Joshua T. Jasper

A photograph of several young boys playing soccer on a field of light-colored gravel. In the foreground, a boy in a white long-sleeved shirt and a white cap is seen from the back, reaching out towards a soccer ball. To his right, another boy in a light-colored shirt is also reaching out. In the background, two other boys are visible, one in a white shirt and another in a light-colored shirt. A soccer ball is on the ground in the lower right. The scene is captured in a cinematic style with warm, golden-hour lighting.

**Support Full Military
Withdrawal from Afghanistan**



ISSUE BRIEF #1 » PEACE IN AFGHANISTAN

Support Full Military Withdrawal from Afghanistan

The United States-Taliban deal—parts of which remain secret—envisions the withdrawal of all U.S. and NATO troops from Afghanistan, in exchange for assurances that the Taliban will not allow Afghanistan to harbor terrorist groups that threaten the United States. Because the deal was negotiated without any participation by the Afghan government or Afghan civil society, it sets the terms for a U.S. military exit without setting the stage for peace.

While the text of the U.S.-Taliban exit deal calls for an initial reduction of troops to a total of 8,600 followed by full withdrawal within 14 months, U.S. officials continue to insist that these are “aspirational” goals.¹ Public reporting further indicates that the Pentagon may be poised to maintain a network of Special Operations forces in the country,² and many elected officials have urged maintaining residual counterterrorism forces or continuing targeted drone strikes.

It is likely that there will be severe challenges in the withdrawal process. Coronavirus may limit the movement of troops by all parties, as well as their ability to carry out operations, and could weaken Taliban command and control systems. Political infighting and disarray could reduce the Afghan government’s ability or desire to host intra-Afghan talks and comply with its obligations and commitments under any agreement. Warlords and armed groups not under Taliban control may seek to use the withdrawal as an opportunity to advance their own power and position. Acts of terrorism and violence could provoke either an acceleration or a suspension of troop reductions. Already the Taliban has ramped up its attacks against Afghan forces.

In this environment of uncertainty and risk, Congress must avoid trying to micromanage the withdrawal. Instead, it should accept the following realities:

The United States does not have the power to control outcomes in Afghanistan.

Much of the discussion about U.S. objectives in Afghanistan rests on the illusion that we can impose or ensure a particular outcome by using our military, political, and economic power in the right way. But nearly two decades of occupation have proven the opposite. The United States can help or harm Afghan-led solutions, but it cannot impose its own agenda.

Read the Issue Briefs

■ [Support Full Military
Withdrawal from
Afghanistan](#)

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The Taliban is here to stay.

U.S. military operations in Afghanistan have moved far beyond the original premise of counterterrorism operations conducted in response to the attacks of 9/11. The United States has now inserted itself into what is fundamentally an insurgency conflict between the Afghan central government and the Taliban, with no hope of a military solution. The Taliban, while not monolithic, are Afghans, with local aspirations, and have demonstrated a resilience against military force that has caused the United States to lose leverage with every year it continues to fight.³ One of the consequences of this willful blindness is that the Taliban are now in a stronger position than at any time since the 2001 invasion.⁴ Therefore, while a durable peace cannot be created without involving the Taliban, it also cannot be created by the Taliban alone.

The Taliban are now in a stronger position than at any time since the 2001 invasion.

The challenge of terrorism does not justify a continued military presence in Afghanistan.

The U.S. occupation of Afghanistan is a relic of the failed, fear-based immediate response to the attacks of 9/11, not a tactic that is responsive to realities on the ground. While al-Qaeda certainly exists in Afghanistan, it is estimated to have only 400–600 members.⁵ Even the attacks of 9/11—the stated justification for invading Afghanistan—had little to do with Afghanistan. The Taliban was not involved in the 9/11 attacks, most of the hijackers and planners were from Saudi Arabia,⁶ and most of the planning was done in Europe and the United States.⁷ There is simply no evidence to suggest that the U.S. invasion and occupation of Afghanistan have enhanced or will enhance American security.⁸ Nor will retention of Special Operations forces in Afghanistan, private contractors, targeted assassinations, or partnerships with warlords, kill teams, and militias end the threat of terrorism.⁹

There is simply no evidence to suggest that U.S. invasion and occupation of Afghanistan have enhanced or will enhance American security.

In truth, proposals for a continued militarized approach to Afghanistan are fueled more by fear and misinformation than by realities on the ground. The result is that Afghan civilians pay the heaviest price.¹⁰

What Congress can do:

- Reject any legislation that mandates a continued military presence in Afghanistan or demands unrealistic conditions before withdrawal is completed. Such restrictions stem from the false premise that U.S. military power can secure a better future for the people of Afghanistan, and they lay the groundwork for an indefinite military presence.
- Endorse a complete winding down of all U.S. military operations in Afghanistan, including not only combat troops but also Special Forces, private contractors, targeted assassinations, and partnerships with kill teams, militias, and warlords.
- Review, discuss, and publicize the findings of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) regarding the scope, costs, and results of U.S. military operations in Afghanistan.
- Support continued long-term diplomatic, development, and peacebuilding engagement in Afghanistan to enhance the chances for a sustainable peace.

Further reading

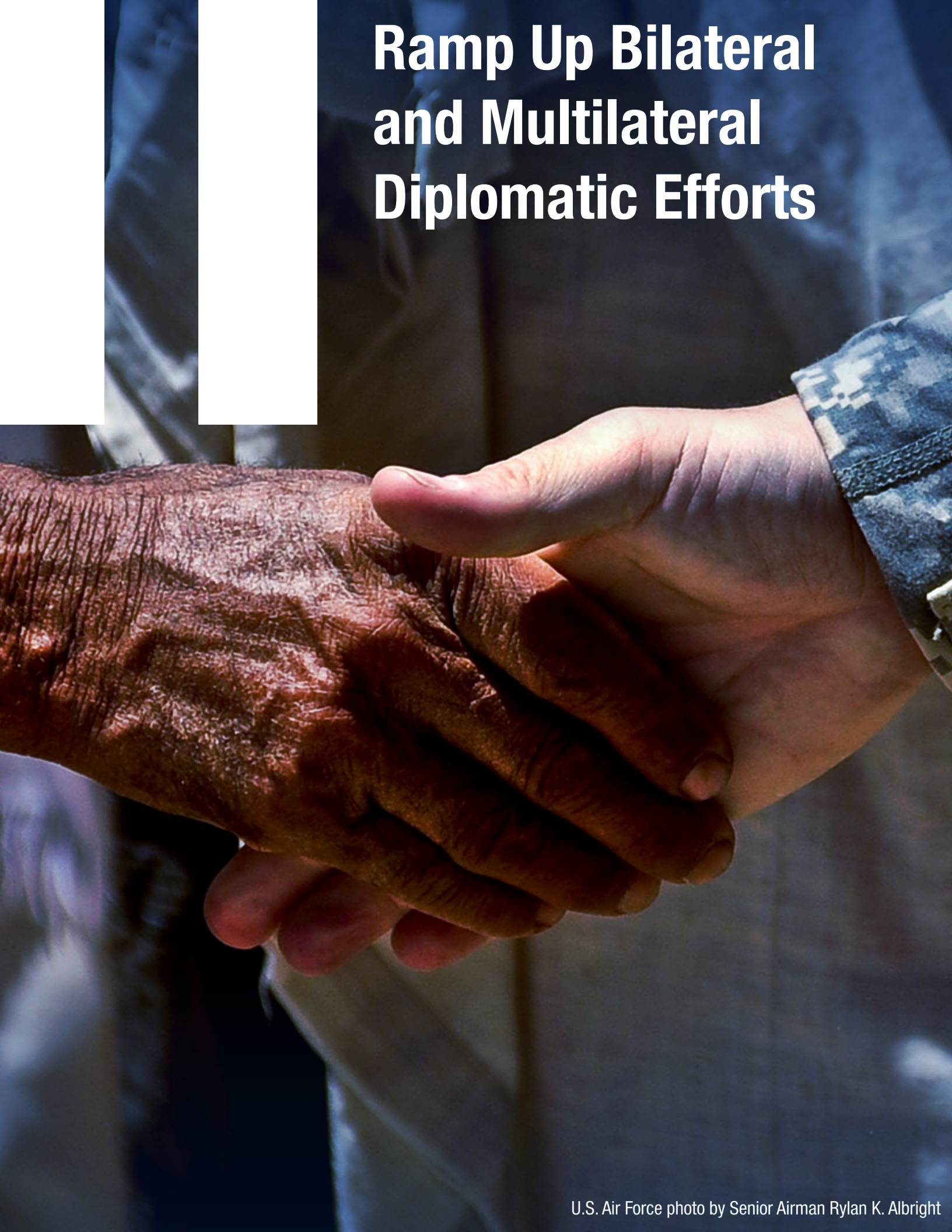
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9. CIA support for paramilitary forces in Afghanistan is an under-the-radar but highly consequential aspect of U.S. engagement. These forces, with U.S. backing, frequently engage in extrajudicial executions, enforced disappearances, other human rights abuses and violations of the laws of war. For more on the harm done by U.S. reliance on kill teams, militias, and warlords that commit human rights abuses with impunity, see Deedee Derksen, “In Afghanistan, Today’s Pro-Government Militias Could Be Tomorrow’s Insurgents,” *War on the Rocks*, December 11, 2017; Patricia Gossman, “They’ve Shot Many Like This”: *Abusive Night Raids by CIA-Backed Afghan Strike Forces* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2019); Astri Suhrke and Antonio De Lauri, “The CIA’s ‘Army’: A Threat to Human Rights and an Obstacle to Peace in Afghanistan,” *Brown University Watson Institute Costs of War Project*, August 21, 2019. For more on how such efforts almost always fail to achieve objectives, see Mark Mazzetti, “C.I.A. Study of Covert Aid Fueled Skepticism About Helping Syrian Rebels,” *New York Times*, October 14, 2014.
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Ramp Up Bilateral and Multilateral Diplomatic Efforts



U.S. Air Force photo by Senior Airman Rylan K. Albright



ISSUE BRIEF #2 » PEACE IN AFGHANISTAN

Ramp Up Bilateral and Multilateral Diplomatic Efforts

Before the most recent talks, the United States had other key opportunities across its nearly twenty-year war in Afghanistan to facilitate a negotiated settlement but squandered each of them, prolonging the violence and losing more leverage along the way.¹

The agreement reached between the United States and the Taliban in February 2020 is a vague exit deal and not the comprehensive peace agreement that will be required to responsibly end the Afghanistan war. Nonetheless, the answer is not to revert once again to more militarism, but instead to keep talking and pushing for an inclusive peace agreement.

The only way out of the intractable conflict in Afghanistan is an inclusive, Afghan-led, negotiated peace agreement.

The fact that U.S. troops are leaving does not mean that the United States has no role left to play in Afghanistan. The U.S. government continues to hold diplomatic and economic leverage that can be used to influence intra-Afghan talks and press for key components that are crucial for success. These include

A comprehensive ceasefire

Intra-Afghan talks cannot succeed amidst continual, deadly violence. The United States and the international community should press for a ceasefire that reduces incentives to use violence as leverage and enables all parties to come to the table safely.

Inclusivity

The inclusion of women, youth and minorities is imperative to the success of any peace agreement. Indeed, women in Afghanistan have been mobilizing and they must be part of the solution if it is to succeed.² This approach is reflected in stated U.S. policy, including the Women, Peace, and Security Act signed into law by President Trump in 2017.³ Further, meaningful inclusion of youth sets a precedent for their participation in the country's affairs and empowers them as a proactive voice of opposition to violence.⁴

Read the Issue Briefs

Support Full Military Withdrawal from Afghanistan

Ramp Up Bilateral and Multilateral Diplomatic Efforts

Support Long-term Afghan-led Solutions

Oppose Continued Militarized Counterterrorism in Afghanistan

Women in Afghanistan have been mobilizing and they must be part of the solution if it is to succeed.

Third-party monitoring and enforcement

The United States is not the only country with interest or leverage in Afghanistan. Other countries, as well as international bodies, can play a role in facilitating or mediating talks, as well as monitoring and enforcing implementation of any deal.

Protection of human rights as enshrined in the Afghan Constitution

The Afghan Constitution contains important human rights provisions, including protections for women and girls. The best way to ensure these rights are respected is to back the demands of Afghan women to have a seat at the table and allow them to lead the way in determining their own, better future.

Disarmament, demobilization, rehabilitation, and reintegration (DDRR) of former fighters

The prisoner exchanges required under the withdrawal agreement are necessary to wind down the conflict, but if former fighters are not provided with opportunities for rehabilitation and reintegration, they could likely again revert to violence. Though it will take time to build the trust necessary for implementation, DDRR will be a necessary component for sustainable peace in Afghanistan.⁵

An inclusive and negotiated good-faith peace agreement is the only way to actually address the root causes of the insurgency conflict, improve security for the people of Afghanistan, and prevent a return to widespread cyclical violence. This is something U.S. military leaders have acknowledged, including former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Dunford, who stated that though Afghanistan currently depends on U.S. support to deal with levels of violence, a negotiated agreement could change that reality.⁶

Encourage regional actors to play a constructive role in supporting peace in Afghanistan.

The Afghanistan conflict reflects long-standing rivalries among the different ethnic and tribal groups within the country, but it has long been exacerbated by outside powers seeking to protect or advance their own interests by supporting and resourcing fighting factions. Many of these countries maintain close trading relationships with Afghanistan and contribute economic and development assistance.⁷ Many of them also have supported and continue to support various warring factions within Afghanistan.⁸

Pakistan is perhaps the main potential spoiler of peace in Afghanistan, having directly supported the Taliban and other groups in the name of countering India.⁹ India has also built a footprint within Afghanistan in an effort to resist Pakistan's influence, and the recent clash between the two powers over contested territory

An inclusive and negotiated good-faith peace agreement is the only way to actually address the root causes of the insurgency conflict.

The United States should ramp up its diplomatic efforts to seek a multilateral commitment among regional actors to stop fueling violence in Afghanistan.

in Kashmir threatens to heighten the stakes for all involved.¹⁰ Similarly, both Russia and China have agendas in Afghanistan, from advancement of China's Belt and Road Initiative for global development to Russia's desire to rebuild influence in the region.¹¹

Complicating matters further, Iran shares a border with Afghanistan, hosts a sizeable Afghan population, and has a complex history of facilitating support for both the Afghan government and the insurgent Taliban.¹²

The United States should thus up its diplomatic efforts to seek a multilateral commitment among regional actors to stop fueling violence in Afghanistan. While a negotiated and inclusive intra-Afghan peace agreement is the only solution to the ongoing insurgency, its chances for success will be hampered as long as external actors fuel fighting factions through resources, intelligence, training, and other support. Afghanistan's violence will remain intractable so long as regional players view it as an arena upon which to fight their proxy battles.¹³

Further, the United States should use diplomatic pressure to secure agreements from other governments that also provide assistance to Afghanistan to condition and leverage their aid to encourage outcomes such as protections for women and girls, security sector reform, DDRR, reduced corruption, and other objectives that not only serve the people of Afghanistan, but also help stabilize the region.

Afghanistan's violence will remain intractable so long as regional players view it as an arena upon which to fight their proxy battles.

What Members of Congress can do:

- Support locally led and international efforts to establish an inclusive peace process in Afghanistan.
- Encourage the administration to pursue ramped-up bilateral and multilateral diplomacy alongside U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan.
- Provide additional resources for the State Department and multilateral institutions to backstop and facilitate the peace process.

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Endnotes

1. On at least three separate occasions, the United States has had the opportunity to work diplomatically to avoid further bloodshed in Afghanistan, but has squandered every opportunity. This includes a 2001 offer from the Taliban to hand over Osama bin Laden, another occasion very soon after the initial U.S. invasion in which the Taliban and Afghan government were on the precipice of negotiating an agreement but the U.S. stifled it, and yet another opportunity during the Obama administration's 2010-2011 "surge." See: Spencer Ackerman, "[The Taliban Peace Deal Might Have Been Had Many Years and Thousands of Lives Ago](#)," *Daily Beast*, February 29, 2020; Kathy Gannon, "[Bush Rejects Taliban Bin Laden Offer](#)," *Washington Post*, October 14, 2001.
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Photo by UN/Eskinder Debebe



**Support Long-term
Afghan-led Solutions**



ISSUE BRIEF #3 » PEACE IN AFGHANISTAN

Support Long-term Afghan-led Solutions

Afghanistan still depends upon foreign assistance for its survival.¹ Even Taliban leadership has acknowledged that Afghanistan will require international development aid moving forward.² Interestingly, it was not the withdrawal of Soviet troops but the cessation of Soviet aid that led to the dissolution of then-President Mohammed Najibullah's regime.³

Thus, U.S. economic and development assistance remains a key avenue for supporting lasting peace in Afghanistan even after troops are fully withdrawn. This support is especially critical as the novel coronavirus pandemic spreads across the globe, exacerbating the suffering of the Afghan people.

However, it is important to acknowledge that development assistance can also cause harm. As the Washington Post's *Afghanistan Papers* tell us, prior U.S. development efforts in Afghanistan have entailed

"flood[ing] the fragile country with far more aid than it could possibly absorb. During the peak of the fighting, from 2009 to 2012, U.S. lawmakers and military commanders believed the more they spent on schools, bridges, canals and other civil-works projects, the faster security would improve. Aid workers told government interviewers it was a colossal misjudgment, akin to pumping kerosene on a dying campfire just to keep the flame alive."⁴

A human rights worker in Afghanistan said the country "is in many ways a perfect case study of how not to give aid."⁵

The United States should make a long-term development commitment to Afghanistan that reflects local priorities, strengthens local ownership, and promotes oversight and accountability by

Going small

Pouring too much aid too quickly into Afghanistan has heightened corruption and violence. This has weakened the Afghan government and strengthened the Taliban's hand. Studies demonstrate that a large-scale approach in conflict zones results in minimal, if any, economic or political progress.⁶

Smaller, more tailored programs that reflect local priorities, are focused on local needs, and are implemented by local partners have a much better record of success.⁷

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Putting development professionals in the lead

In Afghanistan, USAID has been directed by the State Department and the Pentagon—often against the better judgment of development professionals—to focus its efforts on big, flashy projects that Afghans are unable to sustain or do not need.⁸

Moreover, much of the spending has been administered by military officials and units with little knowledge and understanding of development principles and best practices.⁹ U.S. assistance to Afghanistan should be designed to achieve meaningful development objectives, overseen and managed by development professionals, and evaluated according to its development impact.

Avoiding waste and inefficiency

Too much of U.S. assistance to Afghanistan has been lost to waste, fraud, and abuse.¹⁰ Moreover, because aid has been routed through U.S.-based companies and organizations, a large portion of it has been eaten up by security costs, reducing amounts that directly benefit the Afghan people. Small cash transfers directly to households have proven quite successful in stimulating economic growth and protecting vulnerable populations in many countries around the world.¹¹

To ensure that funds are reaching those who need it and are achieving their intended goals, the administration should make aid flows fully transparent not only to Congress and the American people but also to the Afghan government and intended beneficiaries, and ensure they are subject to rigorous monitoring and evaluation standards.

Taking corruption seriously

For too long, the United States has allowed its economic and military assistance to fuel corruption in the name of shoring up the war effort and supporting the Afghan government. There has been tremendous pressure on U.S. agencies to spend large amounts of money in order not to lose their future budgets, which has resulted in poor oversight over who was receiving the money and what they were doing with it.¹²

Instead of mapping out the kleptocratic networks and taking care to avoid bolstering them, successive U.S. administrations have turned a blind eye to the funds flowing to the Taliban, terror groups, and corrupt officials.¹³ This has built resentment among the Afghan people toward both the Afghan government and the United States, undermining the prospects for achieving a stable peace.¹⁴

Placing clear conditions on assistance

Economic assistance is a key point of leverage, as Afghanistan requires external support to survive. Yet the United States has thus far been hesitant to condition aid on certain outcomes or to push for accountability through its assistance. Any

Economic and development assistance remains a key avenue for supporting lasting peace in Afghanistan even after troops are fully withdrawn.

Smaller, more tailored programs that reflect local priorities, are focused on local needs, and are implemented by local partners have a much better record of success.

direct support to the Afghan government should be conditioned on progress toward outcomes such as protections for women and girls in the spirit of the Afghan constitution; security sector reform; disarmament, demobilization, rehabilitation, and reintegration (DDRR) for former fighters; good governance; and the rule of law.

Conducting robust oversight

Congress should use the full extent of its oversight authorities to consistently examine the efficacy and impact of assistance programs, investigate fraud, and adjust accordingly.¹⁵ At the same time, Congress should remove the incentives for USAID and other agencies to spend money too quickly and to fabricate success stories in order to preserve their future budgets and justify their continued work.

Without aggressive oversight to ensure that American dollars are actually getting to the right places, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) warns that our “programs will at best continue to be subverted and at worst will fail.”¹⁶

Working multilaterally

More than 60 nations have contributed to post-9/11 development efforts in Afghanistan.¹⁷ Thus, an aim of U.S. diplomacy should be working multilaterally with other donor nations to leverage aid to Afghanistan in support of outcomes furthering peace and stability. With so many regional actors playing a role in Afghanistan’s economy and society, not to mention their influence upon one another (such as China’s leverage over Pakistan), the U.S. must recognize that unilateral efforts to tailor and condition aid are much less likely to succeed than multilateral agreements on shared goals.

Make aid flows fully transparent not only to Congress and the American people but also to the Afghan government and intended beneficiaries.

What Members of Congress can do:

- Support a long-term development commitment to Afghanistan, working multilaterally when possible.
- Exercise robust oversight, including through hearings, legislative reporting requirements, and information requests, to continually assess whether assistance is tailored to local needs and meeting realistic development metrics.
- Authorize and appropriate multi-year funding to avoid programmatic uncertainty and remove incentives to push funds out the door too quickly.
- Properly resource and empower development professionals to do development work and get the U.S. military out of the business of providing foreign assistance.

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Oppose Continued Militarized Counterterrorism in Afghanistan

V



ISSUE BRIEF #4 » PEACE IN AFGHANISTAN

Oppose Continued Militarized Counterterrorism in Afghanistan

The idea that it is necessary to maintain residual forces in Afghanistan to conduct counterterrorism operations is based on the flawed premise that “terrorism” must be fought and can be defeated militarily.

To be sure, military force—whether via ground troops, proxy forces, or air strikes—can and does kill members of terror groups.¹ The United States has in fact been quite successful in racking up a sizable body count in an effort to decimate these groups. Yet their strength continues to grow. The fact is that the number of acts of terror worldwide per year has increased fivefold since 9/11.² In 2018, about half of the victims of global terror attacks were Afghans.³

It is now obvious that the militarized approach to countering terrorism has the unintended effect of radicalizing local populations and helping terror groups’ recruitment efforts.⁴ U.S. bombings and occupation forces not only create new grievances and perpetuate cycles of retribution, violence, and trauma, but also turn American soldiers and bases into convenient, high-visibility, and high-value targets. The 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, for example, directly set in motion conditions that led to the powerful rise of ISIS.⁵ Additionally, al-Qaeda explicitly named U.S. occupation and sanctions as a reason for its violence.⁶

Common sense and a growing body of evidence tell us that militarized counterterrorism not only fails to address the root causes of terrorism, it often makes it worse. In order to significantly reduce the level of recruitment to and violence conducted by terror groups, Congress should embrace these principles:

Put the challenge of terrorism in its proper context.

It is important to remember that not all terror groups have the capacity or even the desire to harm the U.S. homeland⁷ and that Americans are not the primary victims of transnational terrorism. Research indicates that the likelihood of foreign individuals conducting acts of terror within the United States is vanishingly low,⁸ and even the Department of Defense’s own 2018 National Defense Strategy dismisses terrorism as a primary threat to U.S. security.⁹

Acts of terror occurring in the United States are generally characterized as mass shootings, fueled by white nationalism,¹⁰ and enabled by lax gun laws, rather than being facilitated, organized, or inspired by a transnational terror group

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such as ISIS.¹¹ Americans are statistically more likely to be struck by lightning than to suffer a foreign terror attack.¹²

Acknowledge that it is not possible to eliminate terror groups or deny them safe haven.

As the last couple of decades have shown us, terror groups are still able to rebuild, even after their fighters and top leaders die, as long as their sources of power—funding and recruits—are intact. Most terror networks dissolve not through military clashes but through politically mediated processes.¹³

Further, the premise that the United States must not “allow safe haven” to terror groups falls apart under scrutiny. While the United States can and should do what it can to support strengthened governance and justice systems in order to address community grievances and reduce the spaces where terror groups can gather and operate freely, it simply is not possible to eliminate their ability to meet or communicate.

Paul Pillar, a former chief analyst for the U.S. intelligence community, warned more than a decade ago against the fallacy of “merely invoking Sept. 11 and taking for granted that a haven in Afghanistan would mean the difference between repeating and not repeating that horror.”¹⁴ After all, he noted, the planning for the 9/11 attacks themselves “took place not in training camps in Afghanistan but, rather, in apartments in Germany, hotel rooms in Spain and flight schools in the United States.”¹⁵

Develop a non-military peacebuilding strategy to marginalize and weaken terror groups.

Terrorism is not an ideology, it is a tactic: the use of violence against civilians to achieve political aims. Evidence shows us that people often join terror groups for personal reasons such as a lack of financial resources, a sense of injustice, isolation, and exclusion from political processes.¹⁶

Thus, the United States can better confront the challenge of terrorism through peaceful, civilian tactics that starve groups of resources, recruitment, and impunity. These include stemming illicit financial flows; cracking down on trafficking in persons, arms, conflict minerals, and other sources of income for terror groups; strengthening the rule of law; expanding economic opportunity; improving governance; and opening peaceful avenues for social and political change.

In Afghanistan, this means ending militaristic tactics that only assist terror recruitment, working multilaterally to pressure other regional actors to cease their support for terror groups in Afghanistan, using diplomacy to press for fair and inclusive political solutions, and providing assistance for the establishment of reliable, accountable systems of justice.

Militarized counterterrorism not only fails to address the root causes of terrorism, it often makes it worse.

Terrorism is not an ideology, it is a tactic: the use of violence against civilians to achieve political aims.

All these efforts require international cooperation and a significant investment of time and patience, since long-term structural change happens at a generational pace. However, such approaches are far less costly in human and financial terms and far more sustainable over the long term than the current hyper-militarized approach.

End military counterterrorism operations.

To effect a responsible withdrawal from Afghanistan, the United States should cease its military counterterrorism operations. This should include repealing the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF), which undergirds those operations. Some mistakenly believe that such actions would “tie the hands” of the president and render the executive incapable of using force to defend the United States.

As a Quaker organization, the Friends Committee on National Legislation opposes all wars and the threat of war. However, the truth is that the United States Constitution and international law alike are clear that the president may take necessary and proportionate lethal action without prior authorization in order to repel an armed attack. Without the 2001 AUMF in place, Congress would simply be required take affirmative and specific action to approve foreign military operations, as is its constitutional duty, rather than allowing unlimited and endless war.

These efforts require international cooperation and a significant investment of time and patience, since long-term structural change happens at a generational pace.

What Members of Congress can do:

- Mandate a comprehensive non-military peacebuilding strategy to marginalize and weaken terror groups and provide adequate long-term funding for the administration to carry it out.
- Conduct robust oversight over existing counterterrorism operations and make public the names of all the countries where U.S. military forces are engaged and all the groups against which they are fighting.
- Repeal the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF).
- Oppose maintaining a residual counterterrorism force in Afghanistan, which would only serve to perpetuate cycles of violence and bolster recruitment for terror groups.

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Photo of lake at Kajaki in Helmand Province
by Afghanistan Matters, Gareth of England

Frequently Asked Questions





FAQ » PEACE IN AFGHANISTAN

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: Even if we remove combat troops, shouldn't we maintain a small contingent and/or continue drone strikes for counterterrorism purposes?

The objective should be to abandon a failed strategy, not to simply continue it on a smaller and even less transparent scale. Evidence is clear that U.S. military operations—including not just traditional combat troops, but also targeted strikes and partnerships with abusive militias—only fuel recruitment for terror groups and help them grow.¹

Ending militarized counterterrorism practices in Afghanistan would not only remove a continuing source of grievances, but also a high-profile target of opportunity. Instead, ramped-up bilateral and multilateral diplomacy paired with effective development assistance would address some of the root causes of violence and strengthen systems for peaceful conflict prevention and resolution.² Americans and Afghans alike would be much safer with such a shift in approach.

Q: What will happen to women and girls in Afghanistan after we leave?

Although U.S. diplomacy and assistance have helped women achieve important gains in Afghanistan, U.S. bombs and violence have not. In fact, the ongoing war creates rampant insecurity, making Afghanistan one of the worst countries in the world to be a woman.³

As a leading Afghan woman peacebuilder wrote

“We have been fighting for our rights long before the American military arrived and will continue long after it has withdrawn. We kept struggling and educating our young ones in underground schools before America came to help us, and we kept our struggle going when American money went to empower warlords who were more interested in personal enrichment than advancing peace. Afghan women have sacrificed greatly for a war they never asked for.”⁴

Indeed, evidence demonstrates that Afghans want to see continued advances in women's rights.⁵ This is something that simply cannot be secured by external actors. The best way for women in Afghanistan to be protected is for them to have a seat at the table and to be meaningfully included in a political solution.

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The best thing the United States can do to help Afghan women is to use our diplomatic, development, and peacebuilding tools to support them in ending the violence and determining their own future.

Q: What if terror groups or the Taliban take over after we leave? What if there's a civil war?

The reality is that—even after nearly two decades of U.S. military engagement (which has included a troop presence as high as 100,000)—the Taliban still controls or contests more territory than at any point since 2001, a violent insurgency rages on, and the challenge of terrorism has only proliferated.⁶

Quite simply, all evidence tells us that U.S. military force cannot protect against an Afghan civil war or the growth of armed terror groups. Staying in militarily seems only to make those problems worse.

There very well may be an uptick in violence after U.S. troop withdrawal. But keeping troops in cannot force the parties to reach a political solution and may even make it easier for them to avoid serious negotiations. Only through an inclusive and verifiable peace agreement can the violence truly be reduced, and only by addressing root causes like poverty and corruption can Afghanistan achieve stability and successfully confront the challenges of terrorism and insurgency.

Q: What if there is a new terror attack against the United States? Won't those who supported a withdrawal from Afghanistan be blamed for it?

Regardless of the status of U.S. troops in Afghanistan, it is almost certain that supporters of military aggression and occupation will exploit any violence inspired or facilitated by transnational terror groups to blame those who advocate peaceful, diplomatic solutions. But the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan has not made Americans safer; in fact, it has only contributed to the dispersion and growth of terror groups.

However, the challenge of terrorism does not pose an existential threat to the U.S. homeland and should not be over-inflated to score political points. The reality is that about half of all victims of international terror are Afghans.⁷ It is also important to remember that there is no evidence to suggest that the attacks of 9/11 could have been prevented by an occupation of Afghanistan.

After all, 15 of the 19 hijackers were citizens of Saudi Arabia and none were Afghans.⁸ And although the Taliban allowed al-Qaeda to operate within its controlled territory, most of the planning for the attack took place in Germany and Spain.⁹

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