

FOREIGN POLICY

As Taliban erases women's rights, Biden encounters limits of U.S. sway

The administration is struggling to exert U.S. influence over the Taliban more than a year after America's chaotic exit from Afghanistan

By [Missy Ryan](#)

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The Biden administration is contemplating actions to punish the Taliban for its treatment of women and girls, potentially including cuts to American aid, even as officials acknowledge that the U.S. withdrawal has left them with little power to stop the group's leaders from imposing their harsh vision on Afghan society.

Officials are scrambling to respond to restrictive announcements from the Taliban-led government in Kabul, which last month prohibited women from attending university — meaning women cannot attend school after age 12 — and from working for aid groups, a consequential move in a nation that remains highly dependent on outside assistance.

The decisions elicited international outcry, including among some Muslim leaders, and prompted prominent aid groups to suspend their work in Afghanistan. The Taliban previously took steps to exclude female students from secondary education, require women to wear head-to-toe coverings in public and impose other severe constraints on the lives of women and girls.

But U.S. officials are struggling to find ways to exert influence over the Taliban's top decision-makers more than a year after America's chaotic exit from Afghanistan, which triggered the collapse of the U.S.-backed government and handed the militant group a stunning victory following a two-decade war.

Officials and experts now expect the effort to help Afghan women and girls regain their rights will be a long-term endeavor, one that in the meantime may leave millions severely marginalized.

“The U.S. government's leverage is extremely limited,” said Scott Worden, an Afghanistan expert at the U.S. Institute for Peace. “This needs to be approached both multilaterally and with a strategy looking at the Taliban's interests and what can impact them over time.”

After its August 2021 departure, the United States has had scant sway in Kabul despite being the largest

humanitarian donor to Afghanistan — humanitarian aid exceeded \$1 billion during that period — and the custodian of frozen Afghan reserves, some of which have been placed in an internationally administered fund. Washington also wields influence over other countries' decisions about whether to eventually grant the Taliban government official recognition, something the group continues to crave.

But thus far, officials have been reluctant to alter or restrict U.S. assistance as part of their attempt to defend rights for women and other groups, arguing that such cuts could exacerbate the suffering of Afghans. And as recently as late December, a top American official said U.S. humanitarian aid would remain unconditional.

That approach may be changing as Taliban leaders show willingness to flout global condemnation and make the delivery of needed medical, food and other assistance more difficult by excluding female aid workers. An administration official, who like others spoke on the condition of anonymity to address internal deliberations, said that while U.S. options and leverage may be limited, there was consensus that the Taliban's actions were unacceptable.

“Among the many options that are on the table includes looking at the type and amount of aid being sent via international partners,” the official said, declining to elaborate.

The United States could also voice support for the United Nations to maintain travel bans against Taliban leaders, or potentially impose new sanctions or other measures to restrict their finances and movements.

Deliberations over Afghanistan occur as the Biden administration touts its leadership of the coalition opposing Russia's war in Ukraine, what officials contend is proof of President Biden's foreign policy credentials. The broad international praise his position has garnered stands in contrast to the criticism he faced after the Afghanistan withdrawal, which plunged the country into economic crisis and left millions of Afghans, including many U.S. allies during the war, stranded in a country governed by a repressive enemy regime.

The Taliban has defied U.S. hopes in other ways, excluding broad sections of Afghan society from its government and harboring the leader of al-Qaeda in Kabul before he was killed in an American drone strike last summer. The group's record to date suggests that Western officials misjudged the influence of Taliban moderates who for years had promised foreign interlocutors that the organization had abandoned the practices seen as most problematic during its earlier reign in the 1990s.

The Biden administration has already taken some punitive steps in response, temporarily halting engagement with the group after its decision to bar girls from secondary school and imposing visa restrictions on Taliban figures believed to be responsible for gender repression.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken, speaking after the Taliban's announcement on higher education, promised that the group would face “consequences” for its treatment of women and girls. “There are going to be costs if this is not reversed,” he said.

This week, State Department spokesman Ned Price said officials were discussing options.

The Taliban “cannot expect to take these draconian, barbaric steps that prevent opportunity for women and girls but more recently inflict such tremendous suffering on all of the people of Afghanistan and still expect to find a path to

more recently impact such tremendous suffering on all of the people of Afghanistan and still expect to find a path to improved relations with the rest of the world,” he told reporters. “It is our goal with the response that we are developing internally and with our allies and partners to prove to them that will not be the case.”

Halima Kazem, who is part of advocacy coalition Together Stronger, said some Afghan women she has spoken to are urging the United States to use reductions in assistance as pressure on the Taliban to change its policies. Many of them say they don’t receive much of that aid in any case, Kazem said. Others disagree, she added.

In a recent letter to Blinken, Together Stronger urged the U.S. government to take several steps including limiting its engagement with the Taliban; establishing a liaison office to help coordinate aid and advocacy work within Afghanistan; and helping persecuted Afghans resettle in the United States.

For now, Kazem said, the best hope may be influencing Taliban moderates and hoping they eventually gain more sway within the organization relative to hard-liners such as Haibatullah Akhunzada, the ultraconservative cleric who is the group’s supreme leader.

In a speech in November 2021, Akhunzada said God, rather than the Taliban, would provide food for the people of Afghanistan.

“There’s a very ideological hard line that wants to make a modern caliphate, that wants at any costs to prove that that kind of society has a place in the modern world,” Kazem said. “That group doesn’t care about these pressures.”

Even as the Biden administration seeks ways to help Afghan women in their worsening plight, senior officials are reinforcing their support for the president’s decision to depart the country. National security adviser Jake Sullivan recently described Biden’s withdrawal decision as an important part of the administration’s approach to foreign affairs, suggesting it had allowed the United States to focus on the future rather than the legacy of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

Now, the administration is hoping to strike a balance between preserving its role as a major provider of assistance and “also doing what we can to prevent the humanitarian situation from deteriorating further as a result of the difficult operating environment the Taliban have created,” a State Department spokesperson said.

“These things take time,” the official said. “They are serious.”

James Dobbins, who served as a top U.S. diplomat for Afghanistan issues over several decades, noted that the U.S. government may not know enough about the Taliban’s internal dynamics to effectively prejudge the effect of punitive actions and whether they might strengthen or weaken the hand of militant hard-liners.

Dobbins recommended continuing to talk with the group and looking for ways to influence it where possible. He described the current situation as a foreseeable outcome of the American exit, which exposed the weaknesses of the Afghan state and left millions at the mercy of a group that waged a 20-year insurgency to establish its extremist state.

“It’s very disappointing,” he said. “But it was a predictable fact of leaving.”