

# Taliban Establish Control Over Afghanistan Amid Government Collapse and U.S. Withdrawal

August 16, 2021

On August 15, 2021, Taliban fighters entered Afghanistan's capital, Kabul, effectively reestablishing the group's rule over the country after a nearly two-decade-long insurgency against U.S. and international forces and the former Afghan government. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and many other senior Afghan leaders have fled the country, though as of August 16 Ghani has not resigned. The collapse of the Afghan government comes as the U.S. military withdrawal, started under President Donald Trump, was nearing completion at the direction of President Joseph Biden. The Taliban's victory in Afghanistan, the speed of which has shocked many Afghans and other observers, has political, security, and humanitarian implications. The evacuation of U.S. citizens and Afghan partners is seen as of particular urgency.

## Background: Taliban Advance

The Taliban ruled most of Afghanistan from 1996 until their defeat by U.S., international, and U.S.-backed Afghan forces in 2001 in response to the Taliban's harboring of Al Qaeda, the Islamist terrorist group that carried out the 9/11 attacks. The Taliban later regrouped and began an insurgency that by October 2018 (the [last time](#) the U.S. government made such data publicly available) had come to control or contest as much as 40% of the country. In February 2020, the U.S. government reached an agreement with the Taliban to withdraw U.S. troops by May 2021 (later changed to August) in return for counterterrorism guarantees by the Taliban. Talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban began in September 2020 but made little progress, and the Afghan government was not part of the February agreement.

In early May 2021, the Taliban began a sweeping advance across Afghanistan, quickly capturing vast swaths of rural areas. The group captured its first provincial capital on August 6, 2021, and rapidly began taking control of cities across the country by defeating U.S.-backed Afghan government forces and by compelling (sometimes through negotiations) the surrender or departure of those forces. The Taliban freed prisoners and [seized](#) weapons and other military materiel (much of it U.S.-supplied) during their offensive, which culminated in the takeover of Kabul. The Taliban reportedly faced little resistance in moving into the capital. [Observers](#) and U.S. [officials](#) have offered [numerous explanations](#) for why the

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Afghan military, for which the United States has provided [over \\$80 billion](#) in support, did not stem the Taliban's advance.

## U.S. Military Withdrawal

The U.S. military withdrawal was initiated by the Trump Administration under the February 2020 [U.S.-Taliban agreement](#). On April 14, 2021, President Biden [announced](#) that the United States would begin the final phase of that withdrawal on May 1, 2021 (the date by which the withdrawal was supposed to be completed, per the U.S.-Taliban agreement) and complete it by September 11, 2021 (later [moved up](#) to August 31, 2021). As of [July 2021](#), between 650 and 1,000 U.S. troops reportedly remained to protect the U.S. embassy (of the 2,500 U.S. troops that were in Afghanistan when President Biden took office), and all international forces had been withdrawn as well; thousands of additional U.S. forces were deployed by August 14 to support the evacuation of the U.S. embassy (see below). The United States launched [some air strikes](#) in support of Afghan forces in July and August 2021, [reportedly](#) including some intended to destroy equipment to prevent it from falling into Taliban hands.

On August 14, President Biden released a [statement](#) saying, in part, “One more year, or five more years, of U.S. military presence would not have made a difference if the Afghan military cannot or will not hold its own country. And an endless American presence in the middle of another country’s civil conflict was not acceptable to me.”

## Afghan Government Collapse

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, whose embattled seven-year tenure was characterized by factional infighting and the slow deterioration of Afghan forces, left the country on August 15 (his location remains unclear as of August 16); some other leaders, including northern Afghan figures formerly regarded as influential powerbrokers, also fled Afghanistan.

Deputy Taliban leader Abdul Ghani Baradar, the lead Taliban negotiator based in Doha, said in a video [message](#) that the group’s victory “wasn’t expected” and that they would now focus on securing the nation’s welfare. The Taliban have proclaimed an amnesty for Afghan forces and other government employees, with one spokesman [saying](#) the group “has its door open for all those who have previously worked [with] and helped the invaders.” However, some Afghans report the group has carried out [executions](#) of surrendered Afghan soldiers.

As the Taliban reestablish their rule, [many Afghans fear](#) for their safety and the progress made since 2001. In some areas, the Taliban have reportedly reinstated restrictions on women’s freedom of movement and other aspects of the group’s hardline rule, including [forcing women to marry](#) Taliban fighters; in others, they appear [more permissive](#) (or are trying to create that impression). The Taliban seek to continue the provision of basic services, though they [reportedly](#) face resistance from some civil servants.

## U.S. Embassy Evacuation

On August 12, State Department spokesman Ned Price announced that “we are further reducing our civilian footprint in Kabul in light of the evolving security situation,” drawing down to a “core diplomatic presence,” but that the U.S. embassy would remain open. Later that same day, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby [announced](#) that 3,000 U.S. forces would deploy in the next 24-48 hours to the Kabul airport to “enable” the drawdown of embassy staff, while another 3,500 would deploy to Kuwait to provide additional security in Kabul if needed, and 1,000 would deploy to Qatar to facilitate the processing of Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) applicants. Price also stated that the United States would “increase the pace of ... relocation flights” to remove SIV applicants from Afghanistan.

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On August 13, embassy staff were [reportedly](#) instructed to “destroy sensitive documents and desktop computers before they leave.” A State Department spokesman said on [August 15](#), hours after the Taliban entered Kabul, that all embassy personnel (U.S. and Afghan citizens) had been removed to the airport. Later that day, the State and Defense Departments released a [statement](#) that the United States would remove from Afghanistan “thousands of American citizens who have been resident in Afghanistan, as well as locally employed staff of the U.S. mission in Kabul and their families and other particularly vulnerable Afghan nationals,” including Afghans eligible for SIVs. [Other countries](#) have closed their embassies or reduced them to a small airport-based presence. Many Afghans seeking SIVs or other refuge remain at the airport and elsewhere in Afghanistan.

## Outlook

In the coming days, Members of Congress may focus on a range of possible issues related to U.S. policy, including:

- **The security of Kabul International Airport**, from which U.S. citizens and some Afghans are being evacuated from the country. As of August 16, the security situation at the airport is fluid.
- **Counterterrorism concerns**, in light of the Taliban’s release of hundreds of prisoners [reportedly](#) associated with Al Qaeda.
- The fate of **Afghan women; religious and ethnic minorities; and U.S. and international partners, journalists, and others**, as the Taliban establishes a new government.
- **Humanitarian impact**, including the fate of [hundreds of thousands](#) of Afghans internally displaced by conflict and the potential for new refugee influxes.
- **Oversight** of past U.S. support for the Afghan government and understanding its rapid collapse.

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