

Research Briefing

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Afghanistan: Fall of the Government and the transition of power

Although the Taliban had been steadily gaining territory in rural Afghanistan, the speed at which it has regained control of the country has surprised many observers.

In less than a month, Taliban forces have captured [several strategic supply roads and several border crossings](#) with Iran, Tajikistan, Pakistan and Turkmenistan and taken control of all the country's provincial capitals.

The Taliban offensive was often met with little or no resistance from the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) whose credibility has been under increasing scrutiny. US air strikes supporting the ANSF had little impact.

Despite intelligence assessments in mid-August 2021 suggesting that Kabul could fall within a month to 90 days, on 15 August Taliban forces entered Kabul unopposed. The Afghan President, [Ashraf Ghani, has left the country](#) and his Government has collapsed.

In the face of the Taliban's advance, [thousands of Afghan civilians have fled their homes](#) and [hundreds have been killed](#).

Closure of embassies and the evacuation of foreign nationals

On 12 August 2021, prior to the fall of Kabul and the Afghan Government, the security situation on the ground had prompted the United States and the UK to announce the deployment of military personnel to Afghanistan. This was to

assist in the safe evacuation of diplomatic staff and other country nationals and to help accelerate schemes to relocate former locally employed Afghan civilians to the US and UK respectively.¹

Initially the US Government confirmed that 3,000 military personnel would be temporarily deployed to Kabul to secure the international airport and facilitate the evacuation of US embassy staff. A further 3,500 US military personnel would deploy to Kuwait and be placed on standby should the security situation deteriorate further. All 6,500 of those military personnel will now deploy to Afghanistan.² 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 up to 900 military personnel to help British nationals in Afghanistan to leave, including embassy staff and contractors.³ In a 12 August statement, the Government said that the embassy would remain open, and the UK Ambassador and a core team of diplomatic staff will “relocate within Kabul to a more secure location”.⁴

Several countries, including Denmark, Norway and Finland have announced the closure of their embassies, while others are currently facilitating the departure of diplomatic staff and country nationals. Australia announced the closure of its embassy in Kabul in May 2021.

The international community has called on the Taliban to assure the safe departure of foreign nationals and Afghans who wish to leave the country and asked neighbouring countries to keep their borders open.⁵

US military forces are working to secure Kabul airport. The BBC has reported “chaos”, as thousands of Afghans try to flee the country. A number of civilians are reported to have been killed.⁶

Transition of power

After entering Kabul, Taliban fighters seized the Presidential Palace and declared that the war was over. A coordination council has reportedly been created and talks aimed at a peaceful transfer of power are expected to be

¹ The UK scheme is examined in greater detail in Library Briefing, CBP9286, [Resettlement scheme for locally employed civilians in Afghanistan](#)

² [Joint Statement from the Department of State and the Department of Defense: Update on Afghanistan](#), 15 August 2021 and [Department of Defense Press Briefing](#), 16 August 2021

³ Initially that figure was 600, but events on the ground since 15 August led the MOD to announce the deployment of further troops.

⁴ [Ministry of Defence press release](#), 12 August 2021

⁵ EU External Action Service, [Afghanistan: Joint statement of the international community on the latest developments](#), 16 August 2021

⁶ [“Chaos at Kabul airport as Afghans try to flee Taliban”](#), BBC News, 16 August 2021

held in the next few days.⁷ According to Taliban Spokesman, Suhail Shaheen, this will include the formation of “an open, inclusive Islamic government”.⁸ It is widely expected that the Taliban will move to formally proclaim the establishment of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

The Taliban has issued various statements assuring Afghans that “their properties, their lives are safe” and that “there will be no revenge on anyone”.⁹ The Taliban has previously said it would [respect human rights and the freedoms of women and girls under Sharia law](#) and offered an amnesty to those who have worked for the Afghan Government or for coalition forces, suggesting they had nothing to fear if “they show remorse”.¹⁰

Taliban press conference

The Taliban held its first press conference on 17 August and set out some of its expectations for the Islamic Emirate. Taliban spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahid, said an Islamic government would be formed and the Taliban’s victory was a “proud moment for the whole nation”. He committed to ensuring the security of Afghanistan’s citizens and said that amnesty had been given to former Afghan government workers and former coalition employees such as interpreters.

Zabihullah Mujahid said that Afghanistan would not be used as a base to attack any other country and called on the international community to engage with the new Taliban government and express their concerns directly with them. However, Mujahid reiterated that the international community had to accept and respect the Taliban’s laws and religious rules.

He also stated that the rights of women would be respected. He said they would have an active role in society, be able to work and get an education, within the framework of sharia law. He also said that the media would be able to operate freely if they do so within Islamic and sharia law. He concluded by stating that the media must serve national values.¹¹

Ongoing concerns

Many Afghans remain sceptical of Taliban claims, however. In areas where the Taliban have taken control, there have been [widespread reports of strict](#)

⁷ [“Taliban declares war is over in Afghanistan as foreign powers exit Kabul”](#), The Guardian, 16 August 2021

⁸ [“Taliban sweep into Afghan capital after Government collapses”](#), Associated Press, 16 August 2021

⁹ [“Taliban spokesman says they are awaiting peaceful transfer of power”](#), BBC News, 15 August 2021

¹⁰ [“Taliban demands remorse from fearful Afghan interpreters”](#), Al Arabiya, 7 June 2021

¹¹ [BBC News live reporting](#), 17 August 2021

[Sharia law being imposed](#), particularly affecting 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 worked either for the Afghan Government or coalition forces.¹²

There are increasing reports of war crimes violations, such as arbitrary and extrajudicial civilian killings, the public lashing of women and the destruction of infrastructure.¹³

Will the international community recognise a Taliban government?

During talks held in Doha in mid-August 2021, the US Special Representative for Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, and several of his counterparts said: “the international community will not accept any government that seeks to take control of Afghanistan by force”.¹⁴

That stance was reiterated by the NATO Secretary General on 13 August 2021.¹⁵ Following a meeting of the North Atlantic Council on 17 August, however, the Secretary General expressed the collective view of NATO allies that “There must be a peaceful transfer of power to an inclusive government” and “with no revenge or retribution”. He went on to say: “A government that does not respect the fundamental rights of all Afghans and reinstates the reign of fear, risks international isolation [...] the world will be watching”.¹⁶

The US Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, has also linked recognition to respect for human rights and the prevention of terrorism. On 15 August he said:

A future Afghan government that upholds the basic rights of its people and that doesn't harbor terrorists is a government we can work with and recognize. Conversely, a government that doesn't do that – that doesn't uphold the basic rights of its people, including women and girls; that

¹² 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](#)

¹³ 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

¹⁴ “[Doha talks on Afghanistan end with call for accelerated peace process, halt to attacks](#)”, Reuters, 12 August 2021

¹⁵ [NATO Secretary General Statement on Afghanistan](#), 13 August 2021

¹⁶ NATO, [Press briefing on Afghanistan](#), 17 August 2021

harbors terrorist groups that have designs on the United States or allies and partners – certainly, that’s not going to happen.¹⁷

He also suggested that international aid and support would not be forthcoming if the Taliban failed to meet either of these commitments.

The UK Government has called for countries not to unilaterally recognise a Taliban government, calling instead for a consensual approach within the international community.¹⁸ At a meeting of the UN Security Council on 16 August, the UK’s Ambassador to the UN, James Kariuki, echoed demands for the respect of human rights. He said: “If the Taliban continue to abuse basic human rights, they cannot expect to enjoy any legitimacy in the eyes of the Afghan people, or the international community”.¹⁹

In a [statement issued after that meeting](#), the members of the UN Security Council called for “an immediate cessation of all hostilities and the establishment, through inclusive negotiations, of a new Government that is united, inclusive and representative — including with the full, equal and meaningful participation of women”.²⁰

However, the Taliban is not entirely isolated on the international stage. Pakistan has, in the past, supported the Taliban and in recent weeks Russia, China and [India](#) have all held talks with Taliban representatives. On 16 August 2021, a Chinese Government spokesperson stated that it was “ready to develop friendly and cooperative relations” with the new Taliban government.²¹ The Russian Ambassador to Kabul, Dmitry Zhirnov, has suggested that the Russian Government will decide on recognising the Taliban government, based on its future conduct:

We will carefully see how responsibly they govern the country in the near future. And based on the results, the Russian leadership will draw the necessary conclusions.²²

In the longer term, Russia has, however, expressed concern over the potential for instability in Afghanistan to spill over into the neighbouring Central Asian region. Russia has previously pledged to protect its regional allies.²³

¹⁷ [CNN interview with the US Secretary of State](#), 15 August 2021

¹⁸ [Downing Street Press Release](#), 15 August 2021

¹⁹ [Statement by Ambassador James Kariuki at the Security Council briefing on Afghanistan](#), 16 August 2021

²⁰ United Nations, [Security Council Press Statement on Afghanistan](#), 16 August 2021

²¹ [“China says ready for friendly relations with Taliban after rout”](#), France24, 16 August 2021

²² [“Russia to partially evacuate Kabul embassy staff after Taliban takeover”](#), The Moscow Times, 16 August 2021

²³ [“Tajikistan asks Russia-led bloc for help on Afghan border”](#), Reuters, 7 July 2021

Iran has also welcomed the new Taliban government. Iranian President, Ebrahim Raisi, has called the “US military defeat” in Afghanistan an opportunity to “restore life, security and a durable peace” in the country.²⁴

²⁴ [“Iran says US failure in Afghanistan a chance for durable peace”](#), Reuters, 16 August 2021

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