



## Security Exchange

### Afghanistan: What Next?

#### What does the US withdrawal mean for Afghanistan?

If the US withdraws its remaining 5,800 troops by the 31 August deadline, other allied forces will be forced to also withdraw personnel and military-led evacuation efforts from Kabul airport will be forced to end.

On Tuesday 24 August, US President Joe Biden confirmed the US remains on pace to complete their withdrawal from Afghanistan by the deadline. Biden defended the US administration's position during a G7 leaders' summit, during which he told other world leaders that the completion of the US mission in Afghanistan by 31 August "depends on continued coordination with the Taliban, including continued access for evacuees to the airport". Contingency plans to adjust the timeline are being drawn up for if the situation changes, including if the Taliban refuses to cooperate in facilitating US evacuations over the next six days. Biden also stated that the recommendation from the Pentagon reflected increasing concerns about growing insecurity at the airport - particularly potential suicide bombings by Islamic State (IS) militants.

The announcement from the US came just hours after the Taliban urged all Afghan nationals trying to flee the country not to attempt to go to the airport - effectively rescinding their earlier promise to allow people safe passage to the airport. Recent reports indicate some Afghan nationals who have tried to go to the airport since the Taliban announcement have been stopped at checkpoints as the situation continues to worsen. Some Afghans who were allegedly due to leave on evacuation flights have reportedly since abandoned plans to flee, fearing for their safety on the Taliban-controlled roads leading to the airport.

The decision by the US is a huge blow for other allied forces in Afghanistan, as the UK, France and Germany had all been pressuring the US to push for an extension. After the 5,800 US troops, the UK has the next largest deployment of just over 1,000 British soldiers. Smaller contingents from other NATO members are also present, including France, Germany, and Turkey; however, without the strength of the US forces on the ground, the airport can't be held, and thousands of people face being left stranded as foreign forces begin to withdraw. In response to the US decision to commit to the deadline, France made preparations to end all evacuation flights by Thursday 26 August, while the UK said on Friday morning that it had entered the "final stages" of its evacuation. Multiple countries have now shifted their attention from pressuring the US for an extension to urging the Taliban to allow Afghans to leave beyond the deadline.

#### What will a Taliban government look like?

Domestically, residents of Kabul have been thrown into uncertainty with the Taliban now controlling the streets following 20 years of US-backed rule. The transition came overnight, leaving millions to navigate the sudden power shift. Since the Taliban took over, there have been increased reports of shortages and it's feared that the country's economy - previously



propped up by American and international aid – could now be on the brink of collapse. Banks remain closed and food prices have risen, while medical supplies remain stuck at the border. Contradictory reports of eerie calm vs terrorised communities have surfaced, adding to the general confusion as to what to expect from a new Taliban government.

In a bid to distance themselves from the negative public image associated with Taliban rule, the group have taken steps to portray a more open and transparent approach, with lots of talk mentioning an 'inclusive Taliban government'. The group has adopted this strategy in an attempt to establish legitimacy as a credible alternative to the recently ousted US-backed Afghan government.

International and domestic recognition is something the group has long sought and has strategically adapted how they present themselves over the last few years with the intention of overturning the international view of them as a terrorist organisation. Where national government and international organisations refuse to officially recognise them, the Taliban has made it so they have to engage with them in negotiations – offering them unofficial state-level recognition.

The Taliban leadership has been holding talks and negotiations with former Afghan politicians over the last week-and-a-half, including former President Hamid Karzai. Early indications from these talks indicate the Taliban may appoint a 12-member council – made up of various high-level Taliban members and several former government personnel who have been engaging in talks, such as Karzai, former foreign minister Abdullah Abdullah, and former warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. Sources close to the Taliban leadership also suggest the potential inclusion of anti-Taliban resistance leader Ahmad Massoud – son of famed anti-Taliban commander Ahmad Shah Massoud, who was shot dead by al Qaeda just days before the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Massoud is leading the anti-Taliban resistance from the Panjshir Valley, an area with a long history of resistance against the Taliban, as it was the only area to remain outside of Taliban control between 1996 and 2001. It's thought unlikely that Massoud would join the council, as fighting in the valley continues to escalate – threatening to turn into a full-blown civil war, with sporadic clashes also reported in parts of Baghlan, Kapisa and Takhar.

An 'inclusive' and "legitimate representative" Taliban-led coalition style government is the compromise that the Taliban know will be most acceptable to the international community; however, it's still unlikely it will receive international recognition. Among the most powerful in the Taliban's leadership council would be Taliban co-founder Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, along with Mullah Mohammad Yaqoob and Khalil Haqqani. Yaqoob is the son of Taliban founder Mullah Mohammad Omar and was responsible for coordinating the group's military strategy, including the lightning offensive which swept the Taliban to power earlier this month. Haqqani is a top senior figure in the Taliban-affiliated Haqqani network and is believed to have been responsible for some of the deadliest terrorist attacks over the last two decades. Haqqani is blacklisted by both the UN and the US and his involvement in the Taliban's leadership council is a concerning indicator, especially as the Taliban continues to produce and traffic billions of dollars worth of methamphetamine and heroin each year to fund their activity. Although the creation of the 12-member leadership council avoids the previous position of emir – a title claimed by previous Taliban leaders – the intrinsically criminal and terrorist make-up of the three most powerful positions in the leadership council is equally controversial.

The 12-member council approach to governance also threatens to weaken the Taliban from the inside out, as it opens the leadership up to a heightened risk of a power struggle and factional divide. The make-up of the Taliban today is very different to how it was in 1996, with more subgroups and factions learning to co-exist and co-operate, but also keen to establish themselves as a more dominant faction. The old southern, Pashtun-dominated Kandahar-based Taliban have had to make way for a new generation with more Pakistani, Uzbek and Tajik leaders. Meanwhile, the Haqqani network has established a leading role in Kabul, putting pressure on the Kandahar leadership to consolidate control in the capital. Although the Taliban claims to have changed, the country it has swept to power in has too, and the group may well find that retaking the notoriously fractious country will prove easier than ruling it – a task which will require a pragmatic and genuinely inclusive approach.

In accordance with the Doha agreement, a base-level requirement for any level of international acceptance of the Taliban should be whether they can prove their commitment to reducing violence and not allowing the country to be used for terrorist activity. The Taliban must also demonstrate a more adequate adherence to basic human rights, including not seeking retribution against supporters of the previous government or those who worked alongside foreign forces. This also applies to the group's history of suppressing women's rights and freedom of speech. While the rhetoric surrounding the talks has been purposefully constructed to relay the impression of a 'changed Taliban', many observers have warned people to judge the Taliban by their actions, not their words. It's an age-old tactic: to dangle false promises of peace and rapprochement, guaranteeing a tactical advantage either way. If the offer is accepted on the off chance that it is genuine, the Taliban are given the upper hand and the international community risks getting caught on the backfoot when the group brings in more stringent rule. On the other hand, if the international community refuse the offer, they risk turning



themselves into the villains the Taliban have made the foreign forces out to be, turning more Afghans towards the Taliban and legitimising Taliban retribution. Some anticipate the group's current ambivalence will dissipate once they have secured a more established hold on power, with some highlighting that the early warning signs of a Taliban U-turn on flashpoint issues – such as the group's treatment of women, and the targeting of so-called 'foreign collaborators' - may already be emerging.



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Although reliable news from Afghanistan has become increasingly scarce, reports have emerged of journalists and police chiefs being targeted in Taliban door-to-door searches. An advocate for women's rights was also allegedly taken from her home by Taliban insurgents – her whereabouts now unknown. The group claims to have declared an amnesty and state the door-to-door searches are being conducted to search for guns and ammunition. However, many are taking the increasing number of alleged disappearances as evidence the 'amnesty' is a façade. Although the Taliban has pledged an orderly and peaceful transition, their actions so far have done little to inspire any trust as Afghans brace for retribution. Despite initial indications that women wouldn't be discriminated against, Taliban representatives recently issued a statement, warning women to stay at home until "proper systems are in place".

### **How will the Taliban takeover impact regional and global relations?**

One of the most immediate ways the Taliban takeover looks set to impact neighbouring countries in the Central Asian region is the evolving Afghan refugee crisis. Over the course of the last 10 days, the international focus has been primarily centred on Kabul airport; however, there has been a significant increase in illegal land border crossings as people flee to neighbouring countries through any means necessary in direct response to the threat posed by Taliban rule.

Neighbouring Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have both reported significant increases in the number of Afghan refugees fleeing across the borders. Regional states, including China, Iran, Pakistan, and Russia have been pressing the Taliban to form an inclusive government – one that is representative of all Afghan ethnicities and religious minorities. These countries are understood to have maintained close contact with the Taliban in the days since the takeover and hold important regional bargaining power, warning that any attempt by the Taliban to rule the country exclusively will only prolong a civil war scenario and further threaten regional security.

Pakistan, in particular, has been wielding its influence with the Taliban to promote a broader style of governance in a bid to avoid regional conflict. The country is known to have had a close relationship with the Taliban; however, the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan presents new challenges for Islamabad. Among the most pressing issues for Pakistan is security concerns surrounding cross-border terrorism. The risk of a regional increase in terrorism has prompted Pakistan to play an active behind-the-scenes role in persuading the Taliban to talk with other Afghan groups. Security threats in Afghanistan have long had extensive economic and social consequences in Pakistan. In response to the early stages of the Taliban offensive, Pakistan took measures to close border crossings – including Torkham and Chaman, through which a



considerable amount of trade between the two countries travel. Although some trade vehicles have since been allowed to pass through, the trickle has been slow and many traders have been deterred altogether, resulting in a major drop in trade, which has impacted both countries' economies.

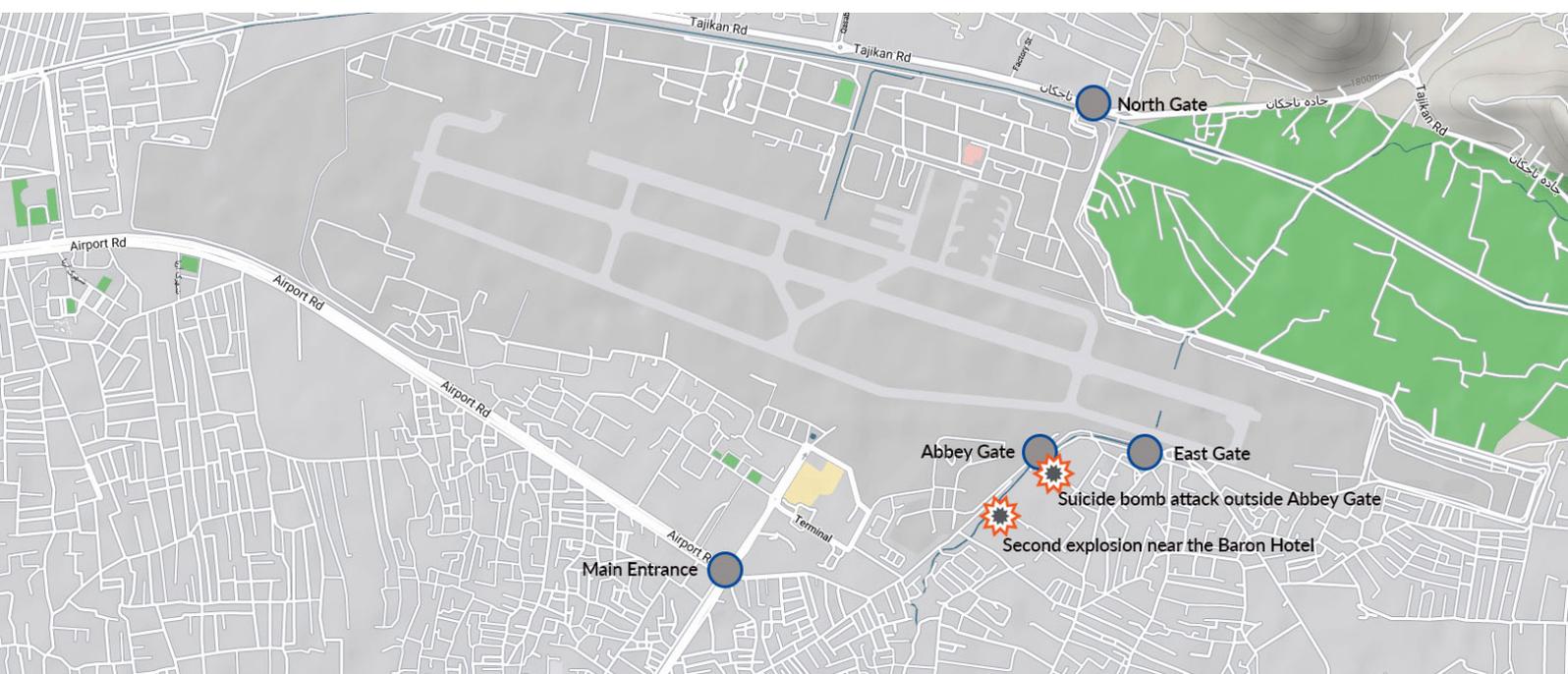
Fearing a worst-case scenario, Pakistan has reportedly taken measures to erect border fences and set up refugee camps. Pakistan arguably has the most to gain from a peaceful transition of power in Afghanistan, and the most to lose if the current uncertainty descends into civil war. Globally, the initial impact has been centralised on international evacuation efforts and resettlement policies. The refugee crisis in Afghanistan is expected to be a long and drawn-out process, which will have a direct effect on both neighbouring countries and Western powers for years to come.

In the short term, many international groups have stepped up to offer aid or assistance to evacuated Afghan refugees. Airbnb has arranged for the provision of temporary lodging for 20,000 refugees at no cost, in a bid to help evacuated families resettle across the world. Both the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have suspended funding to Afghanistan following the Taliban takeover, with the World Bank specifically citing concerns over the Taliban's impact on the country's development prospects, especially for women. This comes after a UN report suggested the Taliban's treatment of women would be a 'red line'. The World Health Organisation (WHO) has also warned that medical teams on the ground have indicated that medical supplies have run worryingly low. It's feared that, nationwide, there may only be enough medical supplies to last another week or so. The supply shortage has developed as a result of failed attempts to deliver supplies, which were blocked due to restrictions at Kabul airport.

In terms of what global recognition will be available to the group in the months to come, it's key to note which foreign embassies have chosen to remain open in Kabul following the Taliban takeover. So far, the embassies of China, Iran, Russia, and Pakistan have remained open and have seemingly indicated a willingness to work with the Taliban, provided it delivers on promises made of governing under softer policies. Unconfirmed sources also claim the Taliban have recently sought assistance from Turkey. When the Taliban were last in power, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE were the only countries to recognise the Taliban government. Experts have warned that the Taliban's near-total control of the country should not be a qualifier for an audience with the international community. Granting the group a seat at the negotiating table is something that should be carefully deliberated, based on the Taliban's course of action over the next three months. The UN has already stated that the group's treatment of women will be a red line, and other international bodies have agreed, adding that elections, human rights, and freedom of speech will also be key areas to monitor.

### Will Afghanistan be used as a base for terrorist activity?

In the last week, multiple Western intelligence agencies have warned of the increasing terrorist threat faced by Kabul airport as thousands continue to crowd entrance gates, desperate for passage out the country. Whilst defending the US administration's decision to stick with the 31 August withdrawal deadline, Biden expressed concern that the longer the US stayed in Afghanistan, the higher the risk is of an attack on the airport by IS militants. In response to the heightened threat, the US, the UK, and Australia have all advised nationals to avoid going to the airport unless explicitly instructed to do so. As foreign military transport has taken off from the airport in recent days, several have been seen launching flares – which are usually used to attract heat-seeking missiles. On Thursday 26 August, two suicide bomb explosions occurred near the airport's Abbey Gate entrance, resulting in at least 90 deaths – including 13 US military personnel – and more than 150 casualties, although it's feared figures are likely to rise.





The IS in Afghanistan (widely known as the IS-Khorasan), originally formed in 2014 from a breakaway group of the Pakistani Taliban, which joined forces with Afghan militants to create a regional chapter, pledging allegiance to former IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The group established roots in north-eastern provinces of Afghanistan – most notably Nangarhar, followed by Nuristan and Kunar. The chapter has been responsible for some of the deadliest attacks in the region in recent years, having targeted crowds at mosques, shrines, schools, hotels, and hospitals – often specifically Shia Muslims. The IS-Khorasan has failed to hold any territory in Afghanistan and suffered significant losses in recent years in clashes with the Taliban and as a result of US drone strikes.

While both the Taliban and the IS-Khorasan are extremist Sunni Islamist militant groups, the two differ on their interpretations of religion and have long fought each other, with the Taliban seemingly emerging victorious following a spate of deadly fighting across Nangarhar in late 2019. As such, what remains of the IS chapter in Afghanistan is unlikely to have responded well to the Taliban takeover, having previously been highly critical of Taliban peace talks and the Doha agreement. While other Islamist groups offered the Taliban congratulations last week, the IS issued a statement accusing the Taliban of betraying jihadists, vowing to continue its fight.

There have been global concerns surrounding other terrorist groups – particularly al-Qaeda and the Haqqani network. UN reports referring to the Taliban's alleged continued links with al-Qaeda and other extremist groups have cast doubt over the group's pledge to prevent Afghan territory from being used for terrorist activity. The Taliban has reiterated that it will not allow any group to use Afghan soil to threaten the security of other countries, nor will it allow such groups to interfere in internal Afghan affairs.

The issue of al-Qaeda is a central one, as the group's links to Afghanistan are what prompted the US forces to enter the country following 9/11. As such, the Taliban's victory has sparked concerns that al-Qaeda could regroup. Western intelligence officials fear the group could exploit the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan, increasing the risk that the country will once again become a magnet for the recruitment and training of Islamist extremists. Although the allied forces dismantled al-Qaeda's infrastructure in Afghanistan, experts have questioned whether the Taliban leadership have the will, or ability, to deter would-be extremists from establishing new footholds in the country. The Taliban have reportedly retained close ties with al-Qaeda, due to their shared history, prompting suspicions the Taliban are unlikely to clamp down hard on preventing al-Qaeda activity. Analysts have argued though, that the heavy threat of certain Western military intervention means it would not be in the Taliban's interests to allow Afghanistan to become a hub for global militancy again.

In June, the UN sanctions monitoring team found that al-Qaeda leaders based in AfPak border areas, along with IS groups, remained "active and dangerous". The report also noted other groups of concern, thought to be active in border regions, including the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The ETIM is a major concern for China, while the IMU represents a threat for most of the Central Asian countries, while the TTP has long been a persistent thorn in Islamabad's side.

### **What next for Afghanistan?**

Several challenges lie ahead for the country, the most imminent being how smoothly the final withdrawal of foreign forces from Kabul airport will be carried out under the continued threat of IS attacks. Following 31 August, evacuations out of Kabul will be dependent on civilian-led efforts – in which NGOs will likely play a significant role, where possible. In the aftermath of international evacuation efforts coming to an end, it will be a tall order for the Taliban to maintain control as anti-Taliban resistance movements continue to gain momentum in the Panjshir Valley and elsewhere. While the Taliban's 75,000 fighters were enough to retake most of the country, much of their territorial advances were due to surrender pacts and stealthy infiltration strategy. On top of that, the insurgents now face the considerable task of having to start new national government institutions from scratch.

What the next few months will look like in Afghanistan will be largely dependent on one thing: is this genuinely a new and improved Taliban? The consensus amongst sceptics is that this is a more self-aware Taliban on the surface, that remains unchanged at its core, while some believe there are some big differences indicative of a legitimately changed Taliban. The Taliban's acquisition of many district centres was negotiated without violence in multiple instances because they engaged politically with others in ways never previously considered. Further evidence of a softer Taliban arguably came last week, when the Taliban reportedly didn't interfere with Afghan Shia Muslims celebrating Ashura. The group's pursuit of talks with former government leaders, resistance leaders, and minority groups is also a stark contrast to when they previously came to power in 1996. Anti-Western rhetoric by the group, which has previously been a rallying cry, has been significantly dialled down in recent years, as the Taliban recognises its success at governing Afghanistan is partially dependent on international opinion. The key question is whether this is all for show. There are many who are reluctant to trust the Taliban and suspect the insurgents are biding their time while they consolidate power.



Without being in those key Taliban leadership meetings, the world simply can't be certain what the Taliban will do next. It will take decisive action from one of the Western powers to significantly shift the advantage out of the Taliban's hands; however, so far, the Western countries with the capability to do so have failed to heed international calls. This means that, as ways out of the country rapidly vanish and international governments continue to stall, millions of Afghan citizens risk becoming stranded in the country at the mercy of the Taliban. As independent journalism out of Afghanistan becomes increasingly hard to come by, it is anticipated Taliban atrocities could likely go largely unreported.

At this stage, the situation would become reliant on domestic pockets of resistance holding Taliban leaders to account. Due to 20-years of widespread war, Afghanistan has suffered a serious proliferation of weaponry and ammunition. When district centres were taken over by the Taliban peacefully earlier this month, it's suspected many government military personnel either joined public uprising forces or took their weaponry and training to help defend against the Taliban at a community level. This is precisely how anti-Taliban resistance groups have managed to hold onto Panjshir Valley. If the Taliban overexert brutal force, it will prompt a major pushback from resistance forces, tribal elders, and minority groups. The Taliban have made it clear that they want to avoid an all-out civil war at all costs. With the group's current distribution of power being spread across various factions, a civil war could split the Taliban down the middle – threatening the group's hold on power. Therefore, it stands to reason the Taliban may not necessarily rule with an iron fist.