

U.S. diplomats are unlikely to stay in Afghanistan after troops leave.



By Lara Jakes

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The United States is unlikely to keep diplomats in Afghanistan after the U.S. military departs on Tuesday, Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken said on Sunday, ending a 20-year mission of one of the largest American embassies in the world.

Officials said it was expected that the U.S. mission to Afghanistan would open a diplomatic mission in a country elsewhere in the region, in part to continue helping the surge of expected refugees obtain necessary departure documents. That effort could be based in Pakistan or the United Arab Emirates, an official said, given the large Afghan diaspora in both countries. American diplomats have also for years held peace talks with the Taliban in Qatar, where there is a large U.S. military base that is being used now as a way station for tens of thousands of Afghans who have been evacuated.

After saying last week that the Biden administration was reviewing options for the future of the embassy in Kabul, Mr. Blinken told NBC's "Meet the Press" on Sunday that "in terms of having an on-the-ground diplomatic presence on Sept. 1, that's not likely to happen."

"But what is going to happen is that our commitment to continue to help people leave Afghanistan who want to leave and who are not out by Sept. 1, that endures," Mr. Blinken said. "There's no deadline on that effort. And we have ways, we have mechanisms to help facilitate the ongoing departure of people from Afghanistan if they choose to leave."

The Taliban had wanted the United States and other foreign diplomats to remain in Kabul as acknowledgment of the Taliban's legitimacy as Afghanistan's rulers.

Ending the American diplomatic presence in the country will be a blow to the U.S. diplomatic corps. Hundreds of American diplomats served in Afghanistan after the embassy was reclaimed by Marines in December 2001 during the U.S.-led invasion. It had been closed since 1989, when the Soviet military withdrew from Afghanistan after a 10-year war.

The diplomatic mission's staffing levels ballooned during a so-called civilian surge that coincided with an increase in military troops that began in 2010. The embassy compound in Kabul later expanded, with hundreds of millions of dollars in additional office space, employee apartments, fortified gates and blast walls over 15 acres, about the size of Liberty Island in New York Harbor.

Just weeks before the embassy closed on Aug. 15, as the Taliban took over the capital, its staff stood at about 4,000 employees, around 1,400 of whom were American diplomats, contractors and officials from other U.S. agencies.

Nonessential employees had been flown out months before, and by the time the American flag was lowered two weeks ago, only a small core of diplomats remained to be evacuated to a secure compound at the international airport where they could be protected by the military. Now, with the military departing — as part of an agreement with the Taliban — the State Department saw little choice but to also withdraw its diplomats.

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