

VISUAL INVESTIGATIONS

## Covert Evacuations and Planned Demolitions: How the C.I.A. Left Its Last Base in Afghanistan

A compound outside Kabul was one of the most secretive — and notorious — in Afghanistan. Our visual analysis shows how the spy agency shut down its operations there — and how the Taliban then entered the site.

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Published Sept. 1, 2021 Updated Oct. 5, 2021

In the weeks leading up to President Biden's Aug. 31 deadline to withdraw U.S. troops from Afghanistan, a secretive and highly secure compound used by the Central Intelligence Agency became a hub for clandestine evacuations before parts of it were deliberately destroyed, an investigation by The New York Times found.

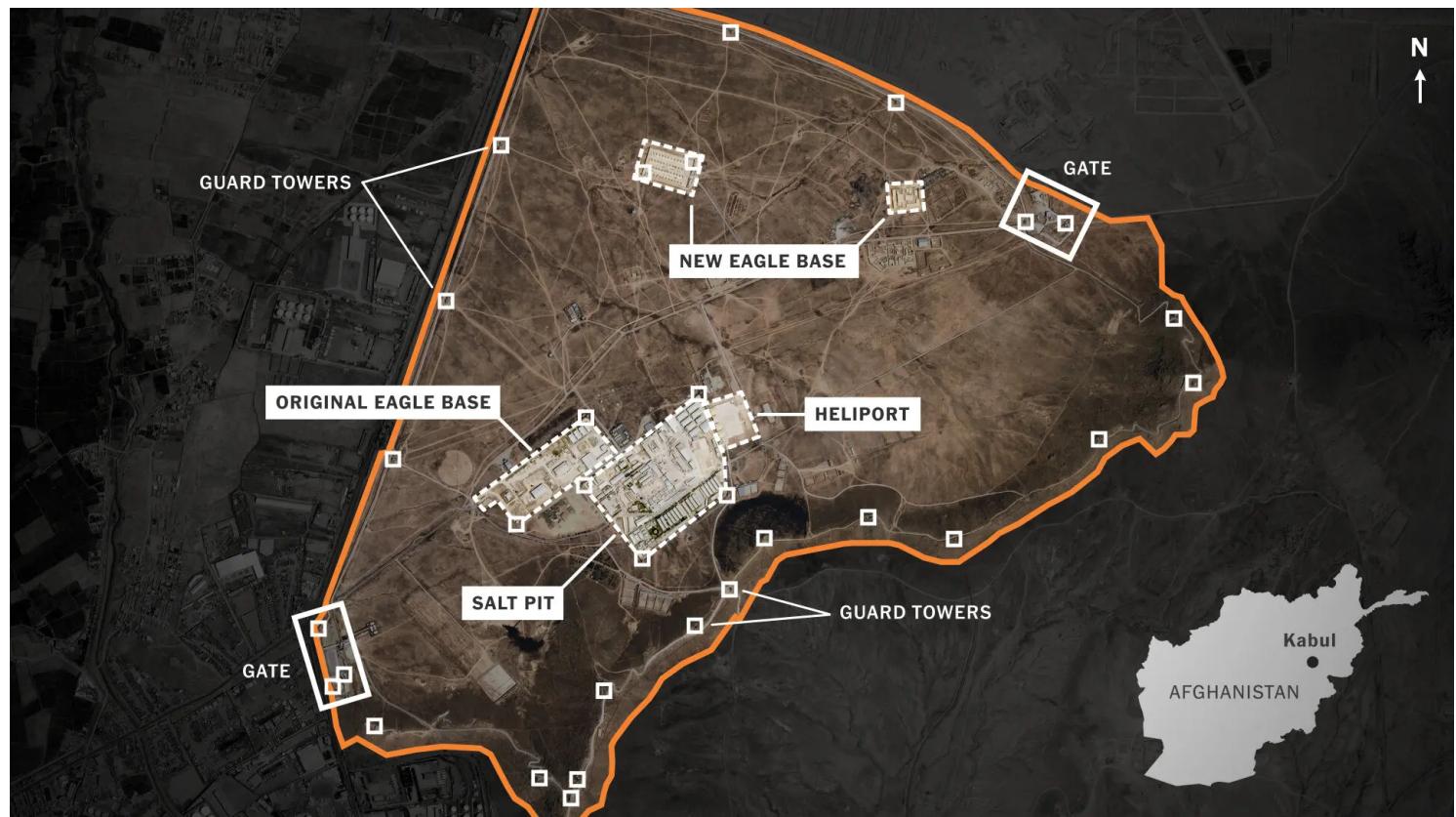
The C.I.A. had used part of the compound called Eagle Base to train Afghan counterterrorism units. Another section — the C.I.A.'s first detention center in Afghanistan, known as the Salt Pit — was where a U.S. government report found that the agency had carried out torture on detainees. Structures in both Eagle Base and the Salt Pit were demolished to prevent the Taliban from seizing sensitive materials.

Even as several of these planned detonations were happening, the heliport at the compound was still used to conduct covert evacuations, according to visual analysis and a former agency contractor.

The Times analyzed satellite imagery, corporate records, active fire data and flight paths to assess how the evacuations and planned demolitions played out — and how the Taliban eventually easily gained access to the compound.

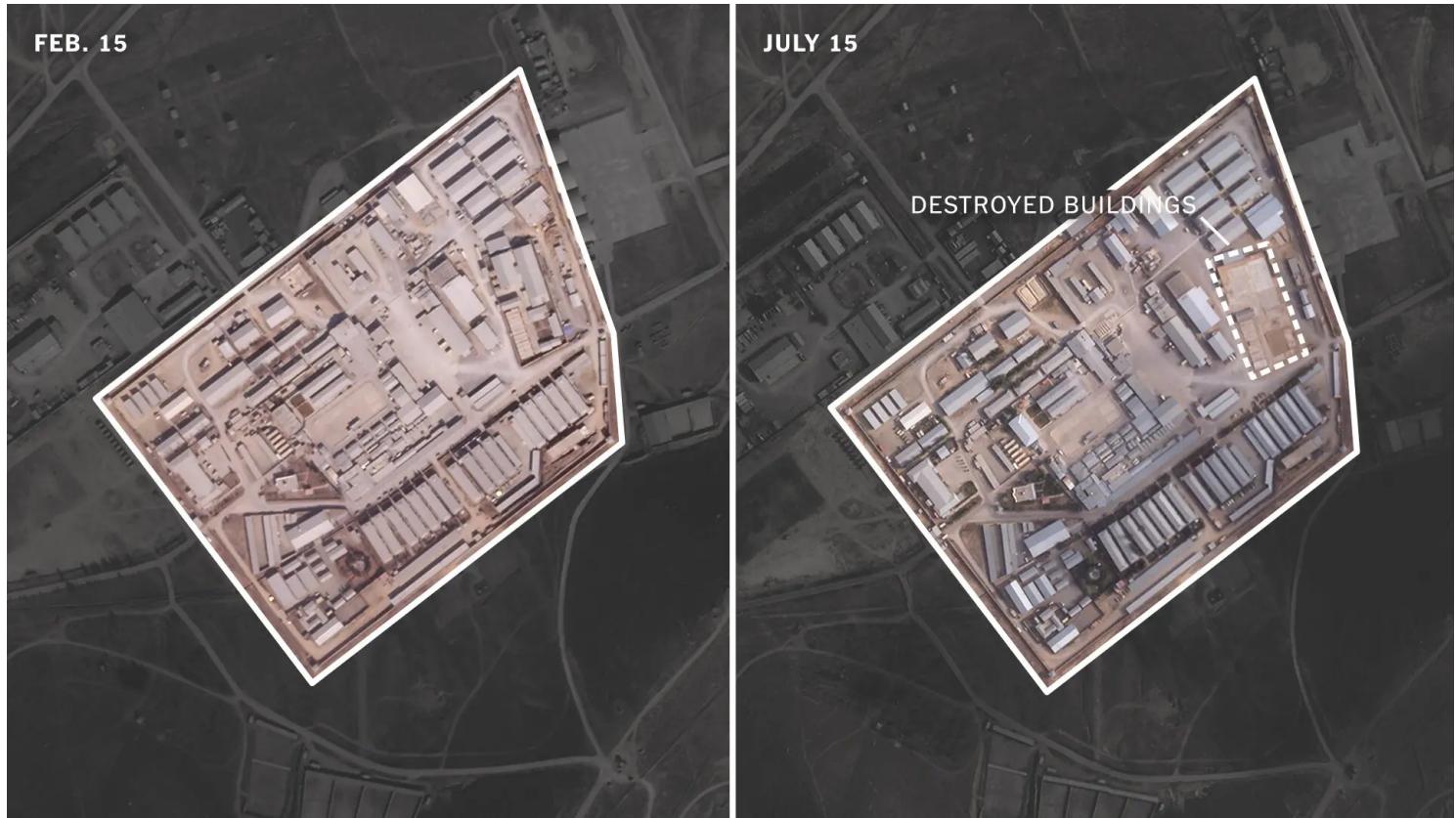
### The Compound

Situated between Kabul's industrial outskirts and a mountain range, the compound is less than three miles from Hamid Karzai International Airport. It spans about two square miles and can be seen in satellite imagery, but there are virtually no on-the-ground photographs showing the inside of the site.



## The Salt Pit

The C.I.A. first appeared to begin destroying buildings at the Salt Pit throughout April and May, after Mr. Biden's announcement that U.S. forces would leave the country by September.



Satellite imagery from earlier this year shows that several buildings at the Salt Pit were completely razed to the ground. Planet Labs

Construction on these demolished buildings began between 2002 and 2004 — the years that U.S. lawmakers say the C.I.A. engaged in “enhanced interrogation techniques” at the site.

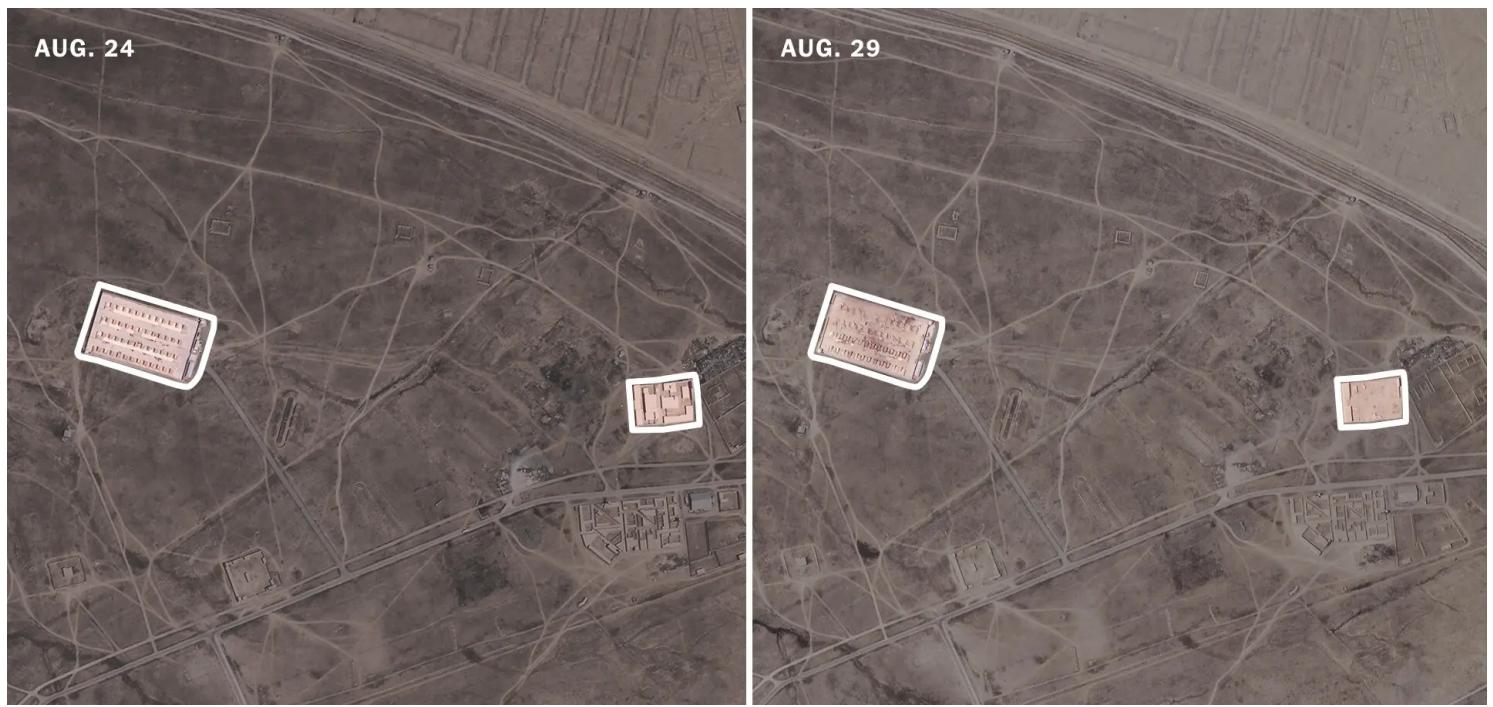
More destruction appears to have occurred on Aug. 27, the day the Pentagon said U.S. forces carried out controlled demolitions of their own equipment. Publicly available data from NASA sensors shows heat signatures at the site possibly caused by active fires and explosions. Satellite imagery taken the next day also shows two warehouses with apparent fire damage.

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## Eagle Base

Eagle Base, where the C.I.A. trained Afghan forces, was originally established in a former brick factory. It was later expanded into a larger complex of newly constructed buildings, current and former U.S. officials told The Times.

These new structures, which a former government intelligence analyst says appear to include an ammunition depot and elaborate training site, were largely destroyed on Aug. 27.



Eagle Base structures before and after demolition. Planet Labs

The buildings very likely contained documents, hard drives and other sensitive information, according to a former agency contractor. Officials have confirmed Eagle Base was destroyed.

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## Evacuations

Over several weeks in August, as the United States was rushing to close its diplomatic missions in Afghanistan, American citizens and Afghans who were likely to be targeted by the Taliban were evacuated from the compound.

A satellite image taken for The Times by Planet Labs on Aug. 24 shows dozens of vehicles lined up inside the compound — well beyond the usual number typically seen at the site. Many of the vehicles appear to have later been deliberately set on fire.



A satellite image from Aug. 24 captured dozens of vehicles at the compound, showing the scale of people who flocked there to be evacuated. Planet Labs

Evacuees were flown by helicopter to Hamid Karzai International Airport to avoid Taliban checkpoints. Flight data reveals that three Mi-17 helicopters made at least 35 flights to or from the compound since the Taliban took control of Kabul on Aug. 15. Hundreds were evacuated from the site since that day, according to people briefed on the operations.

### Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan

**Who are the Taliban?** The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here's more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

In the graphic below, we picked three flights from Aug. 15 that show the routes these aircraft typically took over the past few weeks between the site, the airport and sometimes the U.S. embassy compound.

The types of aircraft used — and their opaque ownership structures — provide clues that these flights were most likely designed to be covert and be involved in sensitive missions.

The helicopters are Russian-made Mi-17s, which are commonly flown by the Afghan military, and normally wouldn't attract unwanted attention in the skies over Kabul. And the specific aircraft flying into the compound are registered to a private U.S. company whose manager has ties to U.S. defense agencies. For security reasons, The Times is not identifying the firm or tail numbers.

We found that one of the flights was inadvertently captured in an Associated Press livestream broadcast by MarcaTV, a Spanish news outlet, as it flew toward the compound on Aug. 20.

The C.I.A. has previously acknowledged that it has flown Mi-17s — and even used one to enter into Afghanistan back in September 2001 to kick-start the war.

According to flight tracking data, the helicopters mostly operate out of Apron 7, a secluded part of the airport in Kabul. Other aircraft based out of this same spot include those linked to Tepper Aviation, a company previously tied to the C.I.A.

## The Taliban Arrive

The evacuations and building demolitions at the C.I.A. compound appeared complete by Aug. 28. Videos that were shared online on Aug. 30 show that Taliban fighters had already made their way onto the site.

Even with some of the compound in ruins, it seemed clear that the fighters knew what they had stumbled upon.

"This was a very important place," said one member of the Taliban, as his camera panned across the wreckage.

Additional production by Drew Jordan, Dmitriy Khavin and Phil Robibero. Reporting was contributed by Julian Barnes, Farnaz Fassihi, Adam Goldman, Brenna Smith, Evan Hill and Kitty Bennett. Translations by Masood Farzan.