

## Taliban Promise Peace, but Doubt and Fear Persist

In their first statement since taking control, the Taliban hinted at a rule unlike their brutal regime a generation ago, trying to placate skeptics.



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KABUL, Afghanistan — For the first time since retaking power in Afghanistan, the Taliban's leaders on Tuesday sketched out what their control of the country could look like, promising peace at home and urging the world to look past their history of violence and repression.

"We don't want Afghanistan to be a battlefield anymore — from today onward, war is over," said Zabihullah Mujahid, the Taliban's longtime chief spokesman, in a news conference in Kabul, the capital.

Mr. Mujahid, a high-ranking leader, said the Taliban had declared a blanket amnesty, vowing no reprisals against former enemies. And the group has in some places appealed to civil servants — including women — to continue to go to work.

After days of uncertainty around the world over Afghanistan's swift fall to a group notorious for its brutality, Mr. Mujahid's words, delivered in a restrained tone, were a glimpse into a Taliban desire to portray themselves as ready to join the international mainstream.

But much of the world is wary of their reassurances. After taking over Afghanistan in 1996, the Taliban imposed their harsh interpretation of Islam with punishments like floggings, amputations and mass executions.

On Tuesday, a Biden administration official confirmed that any central bank assets the Afghan government had kept in the United States would not be available to the Taliban.

Many Afghans, too, remain utterly unconvinced by the new face presented by the Taliban, and its promises of political pluralism and women's and minority rights.

On Tuesday, fearful Afghans hunkered down in their homes or attempted to flee, joining the frenzied rush to Kabul's airport, which continued to be a scene of mass desperation and chaos two days after the Taliban entered the city. The group said its fighters were acting to restore order, but in some corners, they were also inflicting fear.



People gathered outside the airport in Kabul on Monday. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

More broadly, the United Nations secretary-general warned of having received “chilling reports of severe restrictions on human rights” across Afghanistan since the Taliban began its takeover.

The Taliban’s vows of moderation unfolded in an extraordinary fashion on Tuesday evening, when Mr. Mujahid, showing his face in public for the first time, held a news conference in the same room where the government had held its press briefings just days earlier.

Around him were dozens of Afghan journalists, including women, a professional class born in the 20 years of Western development in the country, and a particular target of violence by the Taliban and other militants. Despite rampant fear about the Taliban’s intentions, the reporters directly challenged Mr. Mujahid’s promises.

“Do you think the people of Afghanistan will forgive you?” one reporter asked, noting the long campaign of Taliban bombings and attacks that claimed tens of thousands of civilian lives. Another noted that Mr. Mujahid sat in the same spot occupied until last week by a government spokesman who was assassinated by the Taliban.

Mr. Mujahid, responding patiently, allowed that civilian deaths had been “unfortunate,” but said such were the fortunes of war. “Our families also suffered,” he added.



Taliban fighters outside their news conference on Tuesday. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

The return to Afghanistan of Taliban leaders who had been gone for years, including Abdul Gani Baradar — chief of the group's political office, who arrived on Tuesday in the southern city of Kandahar — and Mr. Mujahid, illustrated the head-spinning changes taking place. Mr. Mujahid spoke to reporters in a government media center the United States had spent millions of dollars creating, where the only change in appearance this week was the white Taliban flag replacing the red and green Afghan one.

The Taliban appealed to Afghans not to leave the country, saying they had nothing to fear. But thousands of people have thronged the Kabul airport, hoping to get flights out, just two days after President Ashraf Ghani fled the country and the Taliban entered the city.

In the chaos at the airport, where U.S. troops shot and killed at least two people on Monday and others fell to their deaths trying to cling to a U.S. military transport as it took off, there were reports of several more deaths on Tuesday. Tens of thousands of people have flooded the airport in waves, trying their luck for a flight to anywhere.

While American troops controlled a large part of the airport, the Taliban took control of the approaches to it, and at times beat people with rifle butts and clubs to force back the crowds trying to get in. It was not always clear whether they were attempting to prevent people from reaching the airport, or simply prevent another lethal crush.



Outside the airport in Kabul on Monday. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

The U.S. Embassy released a statement to Americans who want to leave that they should get to the airport, but added that the American government “cannot guarantee your security” on the way there — a vivid illustration of the confusion on the ground.

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President Biden faced mounting criticism in Washington, including from fellow Democrats, over the stunning lack of preparation for the lightning advance of the Taliban and the collapse of government resistance, leading to confused and halting efforts to get Americans and their Afghan allies out of the country. Republicans said Mr. Biden was in too much of a hurry to withdraw U.S. forces, although he had postponed the date set by President Trump, who struck a deal with the Taliban.

“We didn’t need to be in this position; we didn’t need to be seeing these scenes at Kabul airport with our Afghan friends climbing a C-17,” said Representative Jason Crow, a Democrat of Colorado and a former Army Ranger who served in Afghanistan.

The Taliban appear to be in a stronger position now than when they were in power from 1996 to 2001. They struggled then to stamp out dogged opposition factions that held pockets of the country.



Tayab Agha, far right, a spokesman for the central Taliban leadership, in 2001 as they were losing control of the country. Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

This month, after outlasting a superpower, the Taliban walked to control on a road paved with mass surrenders. The question now is how magnanimous they will be in victory, and how eager for international recognition and aid — in other words, how different from the Taliban of a generation ago.

Taliban leaders including Amir Khan Muttaqi, a former information minister, are in talks with one-time adversaries, like the former U.S.-backed president, Hamid Karzai, about the shape of a new government, the Taliban said. Mr. Mujahid offered no hint of what would emerge, saying “give us time.”

But the involvement of Mr. Karzai and Abdullah Abdullah, a former chief executive of the government, who are well known to world leaders, could give some legitimacy to any deal. Mr. Mujahid said the Taliban want friendly relations with the world, including the United States.

“If the Taliban had wanted a one-sided government, they would have already declared an Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan yesterday in the presidential palace,” said Maulvi Qalamuddin, a former Taliban minister who reconciled long ago with what is now the former U.S.-backed Afghan government. “They would have announced their cabinet. But no, in fact, they were waiting for this.”

The mayor of Kabul, Muhammed Daoud Sultanzoy, said in a video message that the Taliban had left him in office — at least for now — and the health minister, Wahid Majroh, also remained in place.

But there has been at least one effort to open a resistance to the Taliban. Amrullah Saleh, the vice president of the toppled government, said he would take up the effort in Panjshir, a northern province that remained a thorn at the Taliban’s side the last time they were in power.

## 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.

It was unclear what kind of support Mr. Saleh might muster, but he used a clause in the Afghan Constitution about the absence of a sitting president to elevate himself.

"I am currently inside my country and am the legitimate caretaker president," Mr. Saleh declared on Twitter.

The Taliban attempted on Tuesday to project an image of being a force for stability, while tapping into the feared reputation their law enforcement and intelligence services acquired before the group was driven from power in 2001 by a U.S.-led invasion. The Taliban intelligence chief for Kabul made a statement telling looters that his group was watching and making arrests.



A Taliban member, right, stopped a pedestrian on a Kabul street in 1996. Robert Nickelsberg/Getty Images

The Taliban's military chief, Muhammad Yaqoub, warned in an audio message released on social media that anyone caught looting "will be dealt with," and that theft of government property is a betrayal of the country.

"There is no permission to take a car or a house from someone or anything else," said Mr. Yaqoub, son of the Taliban founder, Mohammed Omar.

But already there have been reports of abuses, raising questions about whether the leadership's promises are hollow, or, as Mr. Mujahid suggested, are difficult to enforce during a turbulent transition. He said that Taliban fighters had been told not to enter Kabul until an orderly political transition could take place, but that the flight of Mr. Ghani and much of the security structure created a dangerous vacuum that the Taliban needed to fill quickly.

Armed men, apparently Taliban fighters, spread across Kabul on Tuesday on motorbikes and in Humvees seized from the security forces. Some directed traffic and projected a message of control; others visited the homes of government officials, confiscating possessions and vehicles.



Taliban fighters at a checkpoint in Kabul on Monday. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

In areas of the country seized by the Taliban weeks ago, fearful civil servants have been threatened with punishment for not returning to work.

The United Nations has reported instances of local Taliban commanders closing girls' schools and prohibiting women from leaving home alone. But in other places there have been reports of local Taliban officials encouraging women to return to work, and trying to get schools for both sexes operating again.

"We are cautiously optimistic on moving forward," said Mustapha Ben Messaoud, chief of operations in Kabul for UNICEF, the United Nations Children's Fund.

During the first Taliban regime, girls were barred from most schooling and women were prohibited from working. They were allowed in public only wearing burqas and in the company of male relatives, and risked flogging and even execution for violating the group's rules.

The treatment of women and girls under a resurgent Taliban has been one of the most acute concerns raised by their opponents in Afghanistan and by international rights groups.

“There will be no violence against women, no prejudice against woman,” Mr. Mujahid said Tuesday. But his assurances were vague. Women, he said, would be allowed to work and study “within the bounds of Islamic law.”

Similarly, he said the new Taliban needs and wants a free and independent press, which the old Taliban never tolerated — as long as it upholds Islamic and national values.

Mujib Mashal reported from Kabul, and Richard Perez-Peña from New York. Carlotta Gall and Ruhallah Khapalwak contributed reporting.