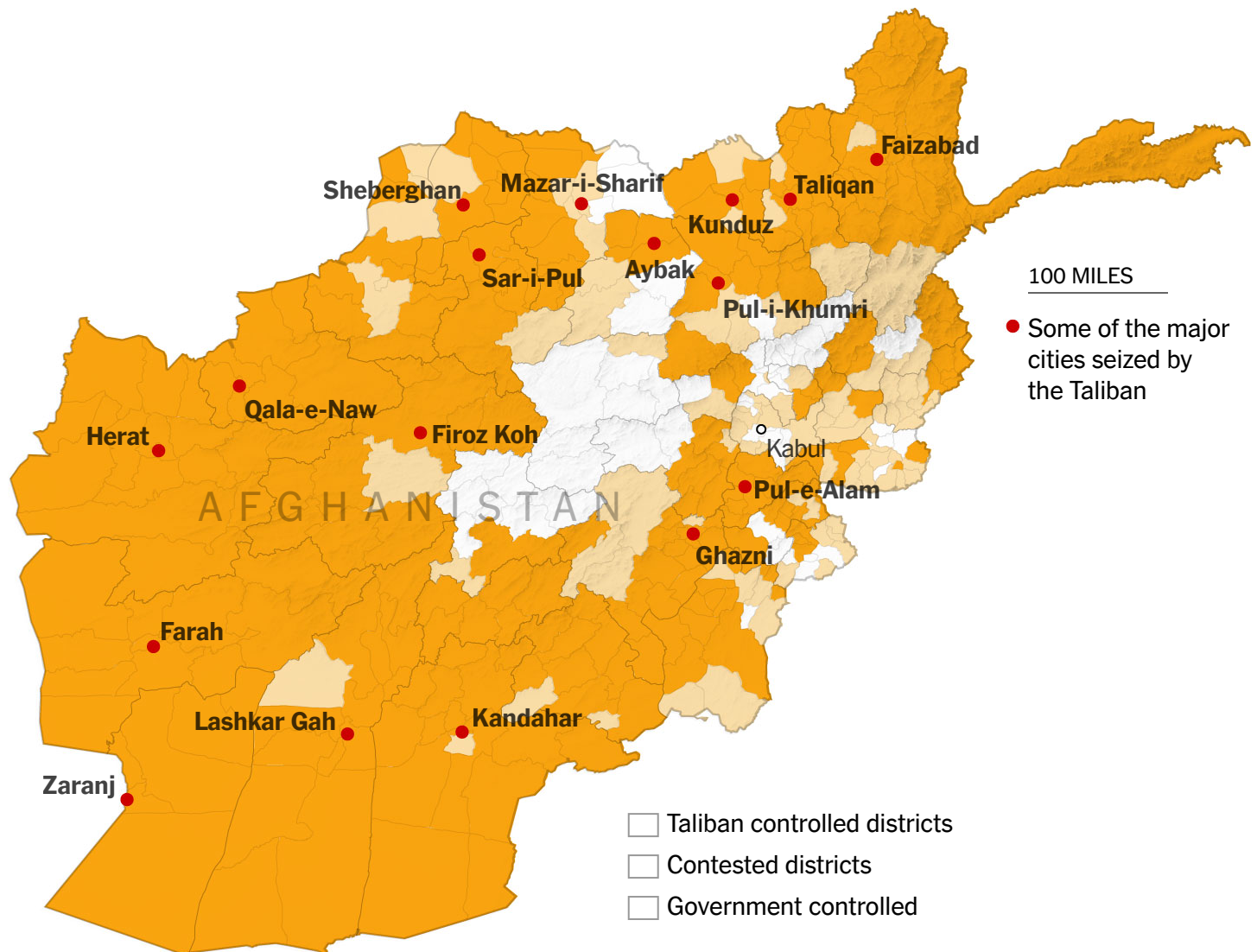


Three more major cities are under Taliban control, as the government's forces near collapse.



Source: FDD's Long War Journal (control areas as of Aug. 14) • By Scott Reinhard



By Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Christina Goldbaum

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KABUL, Afghanistan — Three major cities in western and southern Afghanistan were confirmed on Friday to have fallen to the Taliban, as the insurgents' race to take control of the country accelerated.

The Taliban seized Lashkar Gah, the capital of Helmand Province, on Friday morning after a weekslong battle that left parts of the city in ruins, hospitals filled with the wounded and dying, and residents asking what would come next under their new rulers. Hours earlier, the insurgents had captured Herat, a cultural hub in the west, and Kandahar, the country's second-largest city, where the Taliban first proclaimed their so-called emirate in the 1990s.

The speed of the cities' collapse, combined with American officials' announcement Thursday that they would evacuate most of the United States Embassy, has deepened the sense of panic across the country as thousands try to flee from the Taliban advance.

Only three major Afghan cities — the capital, Kabul, Jalalabad and Mazar-i-Sharif — remain under government control, and one is under siege by the Taliban. With the collapse of both Lashkar Gah and Kandahar, the Taliban now effectively control southern Afghanistan, a powerful symbol of their resurgence, just weeks before the United States is set to completely withdraw from the country.

Over the past week, the Taliban have taken one Afghan city after another in a rapid offensive that has left them well positioned to attack Kabul. The government's forces appear close to a complete collapse. Some American officials fear that the Afghan government will not last another month.

On Friday, the Taliban also seized Pul-e-Alam, the provincial capital of Logar Province, south of Kabul, and Firoz Koh, the provincial capital of Ghor Province, in central Afghanistan.

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“Sporadic clashes happened last night, but no serious resistance was reported,” said Gul Zaman Naeb, a member of Parliament representing Ghor Province. “When the people woke up this morning, they saw Taliban fighters in the streets and government offices.”

Helmand Province is a volatile swath of territory, much of which the Taliban have controlled since 2015. In recent months, the Afghan government has struggled to hold ground there, and recent airstrikes in the region by the United States and Afghan air forces failed to stop the Taliban offensive.

Lashkar Gah, Helmand's capital, has been on the brink of disaster for more than a decade. Helmand has long been home to the Taliban, who spread to the province after the group's rise in neighboring Kandahar in 1994 and proceeded to make millions there off the illicit sale of opium poppies.

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.

The fall of Lashkar Gah is a sad coda for the American and British military missions in Helmand that, combined, lasted over a decade. Both countries focused much of their efforts on securing the province, losing hundreds of troops to roadside bombs and brutal gunfights there.

Kandahar, in particular, is a huge prize for the Taliban. It is the economic hub of southern Afghanistan, and it was the birthplace of the insurgency in the 1990s, serving as the militants' capital for part of their five-year rule. By seizing the city, the Taliban can effectively proclaim a return to power, if not complete control.

On Friday, officials from Uruzgan and Zabul, two provinces long considered part of the Taliban's heartland, said that local elders in both were negotiating a complete handover of the territory to the insurgent group.

Taimoor Shah contributed reporting from Kandahar, and Sharif Hassan from Kabul.