

Will the World Formally Recognize the Taliban?

The extremist group back in charge of Afghanistan has been a pariah to much of the world for its legacy of brutality, and the prospects for greater acceptance remain unclear.



By Steven Erlanger

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BRUSSELS — The Americans have left 20 years after invading, the Afghan government has dissolved and the Taliban are newly in charge of some 40 million people in one of the poorest countries, ravaged by decades of violence and upheaval. Foreign powers must now decide how to deal with an organization that remains on terrorist watch lists around the world.

What happens now?



Taliban fighters near the airport in Kabul last week. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

Why are other countries so interested in Afghanistan's future?

Three main reasons: counterterrorism, a trove of natural resources and humanitarian aid.

It is in much of the world's interest to ensure a stable Afghanistan that doesn't become a haven for terrorists, as it was when the Taliban were in power from 1996 to 2001. They shielded Al Qaeda and its leader, Osama Bin Laden, before and after the 9/11 attacks, leading to the American-led offensive in Afghanistan. Though the Taliban are presenting a more moderate face this time around, they never broke with Al Qaeda.

Another terrorist group, Islamic State Khorasan or ISIS-K, an Afghan branch of Islamic State, established itself during the American occupation, fought with the Taliban and attacked U.S. forces. Whether the Taliban can control this group is a matter of widespread concern.

The country's neighbors will be watching closely how a Taliban-led government performs. China, Afghanistan's richest and most powerful neighbor, shares a short, remote border with Afghanistan, which under the Taliban in the 1990s served as a haven for Uyghur militants from Xinjiang, the far western Chinese region. China, like Russia, has kept its embassy in Kabul open.

Pakistan, which sees Afghanistan as a strategic bulwark against India, also enjoys close ties with the Taliban, partly as a way to isolate the group's Pakistani branch, which wants to overthrow the Pakistani state.

Foreign powers are also grappling with the humanitarian catastrophe they left behind, raising the prospect of a new refugee crisis. The swift Taliban conquest of the country has driven thousands of people to flee.

The departure of foreign troops left behind many thousands — possibly hundreds of thousands — of people affiliated with the American presence in the country, many of whom fear reprisals and want to leave. Hundreds of thousands of people are internally displaced and thousands more are stuck at land borders hoping to escape.

The United Nations says that more than 18 million people — nearly half the population — require aid and half of all Afghan children under 5 suffer acute malnutrition amid the second drought in four years. And then there is Covid.

And, of course, several countries have commercial interests in the estimated \$3 trillion in mineral reserves in Afghanistan including gold, copper and lithium.

What must the Taliban do to achieve international recognition?

Much of the world is watching to see what kind of government the Taliban forms and how it behaves. The United States and European Union have urged the Taliban to form a more inclusive leadership representing women and the country's ethnic and religious minorities.

During the last period of Taliban rule, only a handful of countries recognized their government. But their control is more widespread now, and foreign officials have been dealing with Taliban representatives for some time.

"The Taliban will be judged on their actions — how they respect the international commitments made by the country, how they respect basic rules of democracy and rule of law," said Peter Stano, a spokesman for the European Union. "The biggest red line is respect for human rights and the rights of women, especially."

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The United States has said that the Taliban will be judged on whether they allow freedom of travel for Afghans and foreigners with valid documents, women's and minority rights and, probably more important for Washington, whether the Taliban prevent international terrorist groups from using Afghanistan as a base.

"Every step we take will be based not on what a Taliban-led government says, but what it does to live up to its commitments," said Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken.

Diplomatic recognition would help open direct channels for development aid and sizable loans from countries and institutions like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund.



Waiting outside a bank in Kabul last week. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

How much leverage do the United States and its allies have over the Taliban?

Most of the leverage can be measured in dollars.

The Afghan economy, so dependent on foreign aid and spending, is grinding to a halt, with cash running out, government salaries stopped and prices rising fast. Given the need for imports of food, medicine and energy, with fears of widespread hunger and disease, the West hopes the Taliban will be more receptive toward demands for moderation.

For now, the United States, European Union and Britain have suspended their considerable aid programs, and Afghanistan's central bank reserves, nearly all held abroad, have been frozen. The I.M.F. has withheld \$400 million that it was scheduled to deliver to the old government this month.

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.

U.S. and allied officials say they want to continue providing humanitarian aid, no matter what political system emerges in Afghanistan. Most of the aid could be channeled through United Nations agencies or through a possible new trust fund from the World Bank, so countries would not give directly to the Taliban.

The most powerful leverage that the United States and the rest of the world have against the Taliban are terrorism sanctions, which prohibit contributions of money, goods and services. Some of those sanctions have complicated aid efforts even by charitable groups that try to keep their political neutrality and simply aid those in need.

Given the Taliban's history of human rights abuses and reliance on illicit finance, sanctions are likely to remain in place for now.

Will the Taliban claim Afghanistan's U.N. seat?

The once-unthinkable prospect of a Taliban envoy representing Afghanistan at the United Nations, a powerful symbol of international legitimacy, appears to be one step closer. But big hurdles remain.

An official application has yet to be submitted and must undergo review by a rotating nine-member group of countries that currently includes the United States. For now, the toppled Afghan government's U.N. ambassador holds the seat.

Diplomats say any Taliban request for the seat would be premature. "We are not in a place yet where we are prepared to recognize the Taliban," said the American ambassador to the United Nations, Linda Thomas-Greenfield.



Afghans waiting by an entrance to the airport in Kabul as U.S. Marines secured the perimeter this month. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

Will the world take responsibility for those left behind?

No one is sure.

The United States and 97 other countries said they would continue to take in people fleeing Afghanistan and had secured an agreement with the Taliban to allow safe passage. The Taliban's chief negotiator announced in late August that the group would not stop those with foreign passports and Afghans with valid visas from departing, but that remains to be seen.

There have been numerous reports of Taliban fighters searching for people who have held major posts in the old government or who have aided NATO forces. Some have been killed; others are in fear of their lives. The main international airport in Kabul is not functioning and prospects for reopening remain unclear.

The main land crossings are also mostly shut. The United Nations estimates that 500,000 Afghans could flee the country by the end of the year, especially into Pakistan and Iran.



A girls' school in Sheberghan, Afghanistan, in May. Kiana Hayeri for The New York Times