

The Crucial Questions for Afghanistan

What will happen to women and minorities? Can the Afghan president hold on to power? These and other pressing questions face a fearful country as the United States military withdraws.



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The reality of an imminent American withdrawal from Afghanistan differs from its long-anticipated likelihood. Already the anxiety engendered by this new certainty in the capital, Kabul, and other urban centers is making itself felt.

Afghans' fear is multifaceted, evoked by the Taliban's grim record, bitter and vivid memories of civil war and the widely acknowledged weakness of the current government. These conditions in turn push Afghan thinking in one direction: The country's government and armed forces won't survive without American support. Many American policymakers, security officials and diplomats concur with this gloomy view. Just this week, the U.S. intelligence assessment, presented to Congress, suggested as much: "The Afghan government will struggle to hold the Taliban at bay if the coalition withdraws support."

During their five years in power, 1996 to 2001, the Taliban operated one of the world's most oppressive and theocratic regimes, and there is little in their public posture and behavior during the group's years of insurgency to suggest that much has changed, at least ideologically.

In Afghanistan's cities, the new middle-class society that emerged under the American security umbrella over the last 20 years dread a return to that era of rule.

Still, it is unlikely that the Taliban will be able to roll into Kabul as they did in September 1996 and simply reimpose their Islamic Emirate. Too much has changed in Afghanistan's capital and other urban hubs since then. The Taliban also seem to recognize that they will need to rely on international recognition and aid in order to effectively govern. To that end, some analysts say, there is some imperative to find political solutions to achieving their desired return to power.

And, most important, there are too many potential centers of armed resistance that will not go down quietly. That in turn would lead to an intensification of the civil war that is already consuming much of the country.

With the Biden's administration's announcement on Wednesday of a complete withdrawal of American forces by Sept. 11, there are still several questions that will need to be answered between now and then.

Will terrorists groups like the Islamic State and Al Qaeda be able to pose a threat again?



Health workers and security forces at the scene of an attack claimed by the Islamic State group in 2018 in Kabul. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

The United States invaded Afghanistan in October 2001, just weeks after Al Qaeda carried out the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks on American soil. The initial mission was to oust Al Qaeda and prevent it from using Afghanistan as a haven to launch another attack on the United States — an objective that was largely accomplished.

American agencies have said they do not believe that Al Qaeda or other terrorist groups pose an immediate threat to the United States from Afghanistan — although the congressionally mandated Afghan Study Group said this year that withdrawal “could lead to a reconstitution of the terrorist threat to the U.S. homeland within 18 months to three years.”

Separately, the Islamic State affiliate in Afghanistan was militarily defeated in its eastern stronghold in late 2019. But smaller and more amorphous elements continue to operate with low intensity in the region, including in Kabul, waiting to take advantage of whatever might happen in the coming months.

What does an American withdrawal mean for women and minorities in Afghanistan?



Students at Mawoud Academy in Kabul, Afghanistan, last month. Two and a half years ago, a suicide bomber detonated an explosive vest during an algebra class at the center. Kiana Hayeri for The New York Times

The contemporary Taliban have made a series of unambiguous statements about the role of women that cannot be regarded as reassuring. Taliban negotiators have at times said they support women's rights, but only under strict Islamic law. The group's deputy chief, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, said in a speech late last year: "The only work done under the shadow of occupation, in the name of women's rights, is the promotion of immorality and anti-Islamic culture."

This statement and others are consistent with Taliban practices in areas they now control in Afghanistan, according to Human Rights Watch, which reports that contemporary Taliban officials, including "morality" officials, have reinforced already tight strictures on women. Taliban courts have imposed "lashings" on women — men also — for "moral crimes," according to the rights group.

Today, girls make up some 40 percent of Afghanistan's students. This is highly unlikely to continue under a Taliban regime. In practice, Taliban officials are opposed to education for girls, although there are exceptions, particularly in the north. But in some districts in southern Afghanistan, there are no schools for girls, period. Where the Taliban have already made a deal with the government on schools, they often forbid subjects like social sciences or English for girls, substituting religious subjects.

As the Afghan government tries to negotiate the terms of a permanent cease-fire with the Taliban, just four of its 21 representatives are women. And there have been no specific conditions put forward around their protections under any kind of peace deal.

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During the Taliban era, there was widespread persecution, and even massacres, of minority communities like the Hazara, an ethnic group that is mostly Shiite in a country where Sunnis predominate. Today's Taliban, overwhelmingly Pashtun as before, single out the Hazara for mistreatment when they capture them at roadblocks, persecute them in their makeshift prisons, and have given no indication that they will protect minority rights in a government under their control.

What happens to the February 2020 agreement between the United States and the Taliban?

The February 2020 deal between the United States and the Taliban laid out the conditions and timeline under which the United States would withdraw from Afghanistan. But what was asked in return, such as taking counterterrorism measures and starting talks with the Afghan government, in some cases has been difficult to enforce.

The United States is now fulfilling its pledge, though later than the original May 1 deadline agreed to in the February deal.

"We are not agreeing with delay after May 1," Zabihullah Mujahid, a Taliban spokesman, said on local television on Tuesday. "Any delay after May 1 is not acceptable for us."

Whether the Taliban will view this delayed withdrawal as a breach of the agreement and resume large-scale attacks against Afghan and American forces is not clear.

Will the Taliban honor their commitment to negotiate power-sharing with the Afghan government, or will they pursue a military victory?



Members of the Taliban in Laghman Province last year. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

The Taliban commitment to negotiations with any entity other than the Americans has always been ambiguous. Now it is even more so. Their spokesmen are now saying they will not even attend a proposed conference with the Americans that is scheduled to begin in Turkey on April 24 as long as there are foreign troops in Afghanistan.

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 Taliban regard the government in Kabul as a puppet of the Americans and barely hide their contempt for it. They have never committed to a power-sharing arrangement with the government, much less elections.

For its part, the Kabul government has repeatedly expressed its belief that the Taliban's true intention is to seize power by force once the Americans leave, and that they will reinstate the harsh Islamic Emirate of the 1990s. The Kabul government is expecting a bloody endgame, and is likely to get it.

What does this mean for President Ashraf Ghani and his administration?



Security forces on a road in Kabul in January. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

The survival of the current administration in Kabul is entirely dependent on the performance of the Afghan armed forces. Right now, the picture is relatively bleak. The Taliban believe they have already militarily won the war with Afghan forces, and they may be right.

Afghan soldiers and police officers have abandoned dozens of checkpoints, while others have been taken by force, and the attrition rate among security forces is considered unsustainable by Western and Afghan security officials.

Still, as long as Afghanistan's president, Ashraf Ghani, can continue to maintain his elite special force of 20,000 to 30,000 people and pay them, thanks to the Americans, he may be able to maintain his hold on power, for a time. The Americans fund the Afghan military to the tune of \$4 billion a year; if those funds are cut by a Congress unwilling to pay for somebody else's war, Mr. Ghani is in trouble.

Also likely to be emboldened by the American withdrawal, and constituting a further threat to the Ghani government, are the forces controlled by the country's numerous and potent regional leaders. These power brokers may now be tempted to cut deals with the side that clearly has the upper hand, the Taliban, or buckle down and try to secure their small portions of the country and again take up the mantle of warlords.

Can the Afghan security forces protect cities after the Americans are gone?

The American and Afghan security officials have repeatedly expressed skepticism about the ability of Afghan forces to hold out for long once the Americans leave.

The Taliban have spent the past months capturing bases and outposts and installing checkpoints near capital cities around the country. So far, they have deliberately stopped short of directly attacking these hubs as they negotiate their return to power with both the United States and with the Afghan government.

If the Taliban decide to begin military operations in the coming months against these hubs, the Afghan security forces' low morale, uncertain pay, high casualty rates and fear that the sudden absence of crucial U.S. air support will doom them could mean that the military and police may crumble sooner rather than later. U.S. military and intelligence officials have suggested a limited timeline — a handful years at best.