

# The Taliban wants to forget the past, a leader tells The Times, but there will be some restrictions.

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KABUL, Afghanistan — In his first sit-down interview with a Western media outlet since the Taliban took full control of Afghanistan, one of the group’s leaders on Wednesday offered a portrait of a group intent on rebuilding a country shattered by decades of war.

“We want to build the future, and forget what happened in the past,” the spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahid, said in an interview with The New York Times. He rejected widespread fears that the Taliban are already exacting vengeance on those who opposed them and want to reimpose the harsh controls on women that made them notorious when they ruled the country 20 years ago.

The interview came just a day after Mr. Mujahid warned the women of Afghanistan that it might be safest for them to remain home until more rank-and-file Taliban fighters have been trained in how not to mistreat them.

It was a notable acknowledgment of the many changes to Afghan society that greeted the Taliban when they re-entered a city they had not controlled for two decades.

Many of those changes involve women. Not only have they been free to leave home unaccompanied — dressed as they see fit — they have also returned to school and jobs, and their images can be seen on everything from billboards to TV screens.

On Wednesday, Mr. Mujahid suggested that longer-term, women would be free to resume their daily routines.

Concerns that the Taliban would once again force them to stay in their homes or cover their faces are baseless, he said. He added that the requirement they be accompanied by a male guardian, known as a mahram, was misunderstood. It applies only to journeys of three days or longer, he said.

“If they go to school, the office, university, or the hospital, they don’t need a mahram,” said Mr. Mujahid, who also serves as the Taliban’s chief spokesman.

He also offered assurances to Afghans trying to leave the country, saying — contrary to news reports based on his news conference on Tuesday, including in The Times — that those with valid travel documents would not be prevented from entering the airport.

“We said that people who don’t have proper documents aren’t allowed to go,” Mr. Mujahid said. “They need passports and visas for the countries they’re going to, and then they can leave by air. If their documents are valid, then we’re not going to ask what they were doing before.”

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He also denied allegations that the Taliban have been searching for former interpreters and others who worked for the American military, and claimed that they would be safe in their own country. And he expressed frustration at the Western evacuation efforts.

“They shouldn’t interfere in our country and take out our human resources: doctors, professors and other people we need here,” Mr. Mujahid said. “In America, they might become dishwashers or cooks. It’s inhuman.”

For the past decade, Mr. Mujahid had been a key link between the militants and the news media, but remained faceless. On Wednesday, he granted the interview at the Ministry of Information and Culture as Taliban leaders and other Afghan power brokers were engaging in protracted discussions about the future shape of the country.

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Mr. Mujahid is seen as likely to be the future minister of information and culture. Fluent in both Pashto and Dari, the country's principal languages, Mr. Mujahid, 43, described himself as a native of Paktia Province and a graduate in Islamic jurisprudence from the well-known Darul Uloom Haqqania madrasa in Pakistan.

Despite the tense situation at the airport on Wednesday, where thousands of people were still crowded around most entrance gates, Mr. Mujahid expressed hope that the Taliban would build good relations with the international community, pointing out areas of cooperation around counterterrorism, opium eradication and the reduction of refugees to the West.

Although he sought to convey a much more tolerant image of the Taliban, Mr. Mujahid did confirm one report: Music will not be allowed in public.

"Music is forbidden in Islam," he said, "but we're hoping that we can persuade people not to do such things, instead of pressuring them."