

## Who are the Taliban's top leaders?

Questions remain over whether the group has cast off an extremist ideology that carried them through two decades of war.



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The Taliban's top leaders have spent years on the run, in hiding, in jail and dodging American drones. They are now emerging from obscurity after a 20-year battle, but little is known about them or how they plan to govern.

As they take charge of Afghanistan's government and a nation of 38 million people, the Taliban's leaders have tried to signal that they are more worldly and tolerant than their predecessors in the 1990s, willing to work with women and urging people to get back to their jobs without fear of reprisals.

But the question remains: Have they really cast off an extremist ideology that carried them through two decades of war, or is this all a ruse designed to win global approval? What is known about the movement's leaders yields some clues.

### Mawlawi Haibatullah Akhundzada, supreme leader



Sheikh Haibatullah Akhundzada in an undated picture released by the Taliban in May 2016.  
Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

An Islamic legal scholar, he is described as a spiritual guide for the movement and has long been a proponent of suicide bombing. His son trained to be a suicide bomber, and at 23 blew himself up in an attack in Helmand Province. That raised Mr. Akhundzada's profile in the movement, said Carter Malkasian, the author of "The American War in Afghanistan."

When the previous Taliban supreme leader, Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansour, was killed in a U.S. drone strike in 2016, Mr. Akhundzada emerged as a compromise candidate. "They needed somebody more consensual, somebody more able to keep the different factions together," said a leading scholar of the Taliban, Antonio Giustozzi.

Known as a pragmatist, Mr. Akhundzada overruled the group's political leaders and allowed the military wing to step up attacks on Afghan cities, Mr. Giustozzi said.

### Sirajuddin Haqqani, deputy leader

Sirajuddin Haqqani.  
FBI



The son of a celebrated mujahedeen figure who oversees a sprawling web of fighters and religious schools from a base in Pakistan, Mr. Haqqani, 48, has led much of the Taliban's recent military efforts.

His Haqqani network, known for its close ties to the Pakistani intelligence service, was the most dogged opponent of the U.S. presence in Afghanistan. It was responsible for hostage-taking of Americans, complex suicide attacks and targeted assassinations.

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Mr. Haqqani and his network also have some of the strongest and longest-running ties to Al Qaeda, including helping Osama bin Laden escape from his headquarters in Tora Bora after the U.S. invasion in 2001.

In a guest essay in The New York Times last year, Mr. Haqqani tried to show a more moderate face, saying that the Taliban would work with other groups to create "a new, inclusive political system in which the voice of every Afghan is reflected and where no Afghan feels excluded."

His younger brother, Anas Haqqani, has been part of peace negotiations in Doha and was in Kabul on Wednesday for meetings with former President Hamid Karzai and Abdullah Abdullah, the chairman of the Afghan delegation to peace talks. He was accompanied by the speaker of Afghanistan's upper house of Parliament.

### 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.

### Abdul Gani Baradar, political deputy

Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar at the peace talks in Qatar in July.  
Karim Jaafar/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images



One of the movement's early joiners, Mr. Baradar served as principal deputy to the Taliban's founder, Mullah Muhammad Omar.

Mr. Baradar led the movement's military operations until his arrest by Pakistan, under U.S. pressure, in 2010. Under his leadership, the units were notable for their skillful use of guerrilla tactics against British and U.S. forces.

After three years in a Pakistani prison and several more under house arrest, he was released in 2019, under more U.S. pressure, to help negotiate the peace deal reached with the Trump administration in 2020.

In the course of the negotiations, he developed a "warm" relationship with Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. envoy to the talks, according to Mr. Malkasian.

#### **Mullah Muhammad Yaqoub, military leader**

The son of Mullah Omar, Mr. Yaqoub has gained importance for his work with the Taliban's military forces, though he is not expected to challenge Mr. Haqqani for the No. 2 spot in the hierarchy.

He is considered less dogmatic than his father, and overcame a challenge from a rival for leadership of the Taliban's military wing.