

Taliban Takeover of Afghanistan Updates >

# The Taliban take over the presidential palace.

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The sight of gun-toting Taliban fighters behind President Ashraf Ghani’s ornate wooden desk, deep inside the Afghan presidential palace now under their control, served as visual confirmation that power in the country had fully shifted hands.

Few people imagined two decades ago — or even two weeks ago — that the heavily defended palace in a heavily defended capital would fall so swiftly. Just several days ago, Mr. Ghani addressed the nation from behind the same desk, in front of the same painting.

But hours after Mr. Ghani fled the country on Sunday, Taliban leaders were addressing the news media there, saying that they would use the palace to announce the restoration of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

Their takeover of the palace, known as the Arg, was made peacefully. The head of the Presidential Protection Service, which has guarded it for most of the last two decades, shook hands with a Taliban commander and announced the handover.

The government official, Muhammadullah Amin, said he had been asked to meet and escort the Taliban commander, whom he addressed by the religious title Maulvi, into the palace by the government’s longtime chief negotiator with the Taliban.

“After a few contacts with Maulvi Saheb, I came here together and currently we are in the Gulkhana palace,” he said, referring to one of the palace buildings.

The Taliban commander stood and shook his hand. “I said, ‘We will take a selfie, and now we have taken it together,’” Mr. Amin said.

The encounter, filmed and aired by Al Jazeera on Sunday night, was widely shared on social media.

Mr. Amin said that Mr. Ghani had left from the palace via helicopter for Kabul's international airport on Sunday afternoon and then boarded a flight out of the country. He did not say where the president had gone, but Mr. Ghani is thought to be in Tajikistan.

“In the beginning here, during the day, the situation was not good,” Mr. Amin said. “Everybody was frightened that, God forbid, something would happen here. Most of the officials left. I myself left.”

The peaceful seizing of the palace stood in contrast to past exchanges of power in Afghanistan, when the palace was the scene of violence and vandalism.

In 1978, rebel troops killed President Mohammad Daud inside the palace, which suffered severe damage during a daylong siege. The next year, President Noor Mohammad Taraki was mortally wounded in a gun battle inside the palace. His successor, Hafizullah Amin, was executed when Soviet troops invaded Afghanistan and stormed the palace in December 1979.

When the Taliban took control in 1996, fighters damaged parts of the buildings and much of the artwork, according to the government, but successive governments preserved artifacts and gold stored in underground vaults in the palace.

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