

## ***Shifting to Governing, Taliban Will Name Supreme Afghan Leader***

Facing immense challenges in a devastated country, and a hard transition from war to administration, the Islamist movement is preparing to name a new, theocratic government.

By David Zucchino

Published Sept. 1, 2021 Updated Sept. 21, 2021

On the second full day with no U.S. troops on Afghan soil, the Taliban moved Wednesday to form a new Islamic government, preparing to appoint the movement's leading religious figure, Sheikh Haibatullah Akhundzada, as the nation's supreme authority, Taliban officials said.

The Taliban face a daunting challenge, pivoting from insurgency to governance after two decades as insurgents who battled international and Afghan forces, planted roadside bombs and plotted mass casualty bombings in densely packed urban centers.

Now, with the Taliban's rule fully restored 20 years after it was toppled by the U.S.-led invasion in 2001, the group is confronted with the responsibility of running a country of some 40 million people devastated by more than 40 years of war.

There are hundreds of thousands of displaced people in the country and much of the population lives in crushing poverty, all amid a punishing drought and a Covid-19 pandemic. Food stocks distributed by the United Nations will likely run out for much of Afghanistan by the end of September, said Ramiz Alakbarov, the U.N.'s humanitarian coordinator for Afghanistan.

The economy is in free fall following the freezing of \$9.4 billion in Afghan currency reserves in the United States, part of a cash pipeline that had long sustained a fragile U.S.-backed government dependent on foreign aid. Funds have also been cut off by international lenders, including the International Monetary Fund, sending inflation soaring and undermining the weak national currency, the afghani.

Electricity service, spotty and unreliable in the best of times, is failing, residents say. Fear is keeping many people at home instead of out working and shopping. Shortages of food and other daily necessities have been reported in a country that imports much of its food, fuel and electrical power. A third of Afghans were already coping with what the United Nations has called crisis levels of food insecurity.



Internally displaced Afghans fleeing the fighting in the north still live at a camp in the Sarawi Shomali park in Kabul. Victor J. Blue for The New York Times

Taliban officials did not specify when the new government leadership would be announced. But the group was under intense pressure to fill a political vacuum created by the swift collapse of the American-backed government of former President Ashraf Ghani, who like many other officials fled the country as Taliban forces closed in on Aug. 15.

Sheikh Haibatullah, a pragmatic but fiercely devout religious scholar from Kandahar, officials say, is expected to take up a theocratic role similar to that of Iran's supreme leader. His son trained to be a suicide bomber, and at age 23 blew himself up in an attack in Helmand Province, the Taliban say.

The Taliban's leadership, including Sheikh Haibatullah, has been meeting in Kandahar, according to Taliban officials. Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, a respected co-founder of the Taliban and one of its current deputies, was expected to be placed in charge of day-to-day affairs as head of government, officials said.

Mr. Baradar filled a similar role during the Taliban's first years in exile, directing the movement's operations until his arrest by Pakistan in 2010.

After three years in a Pakistani prison and several more under house arrest, Mr. Baradar was released in 2019, and then led the Taliban delegation negotiating the troop withdrawal deal reached with the Trump administration in February 2020.

Other key positions in the government are expected to go to Sirajuddin Haqqani, another deputy and an influential operations leader within the movement, and Mawlawi Muhammad Yaqoub, who is the son of the Taliban's founder, Mullah Muhammad Omar, who led the group until his death in 2013.



A vendor selling Taliban flags in Kabul on Friday near posters of the senior Taliban officials Amir Khan Muttaqi, left, and Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar. Aamir Qureshi/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Mr. Haqqani, 48, who helped direct Taliban military operations, is also a leader of the brutal Haqqani Network, a mafia-like wing of the Taliban largely based in Pakistan's lawless tribal areas along the Afghanistan border. The network was responsible for hostage-taking, attacks on U.S. forces, complex suicide attacks and targeted assassinations.

The political developments Wednesday injected a jolt of reality into the Taliban, whose members celebrated with gunfire and fireworks after the final planeload of U.S. troops and equipment soared away from the Kabul airport just before midnight Monday. On Tuesday, top Taliban leaders led journalists on a triumphant tour of the ransacked airport just hours after it had been occupied by U.S. troops.

**Updates on Afghanistan** Sign up for a daily email with the latest news on the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan. [Get it sent to your inbox.](#)

Now the Taliban are struggling to secure international aid and diplomatic recognition. The U.S. relationship with the former insurgents is moving into a tense new phase, in which each side depends on crucial decisions made by its longtime adversary.

The Taliban cooperated with U.S. military evacuation efforts, but that does not mean more cooperation is coming, Defense Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III told reporters at the Pentagon on Tuesday. "I would not make any leaps of logic to broader issues," he said. "It's hard to predict where this will go."

Gen. Mark A. Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said the Taliban remain "a ruthless group," but when asked if the two sides might work together against a common enemy, Islamic State Khorasan, he said, "It's possible."

A paramount question is how much, if any, economic assistance the United States will offer and how it will insure aid goes to Afghans in need rather than to the Taliban government.

The Taliban are also fighting stubborn opposition forces led by National Resistance Front leaders in Panjshir Province and other regions in northern Afghanistan, where fierce anti-Taliban sentiment has always been strong. There were competing claims Wednesday, with Taliban supporters saying their fighters had made advances and resistance leaders saying they had beaten back a Taliban assault.

Panjshir, a stronghold of former Northern Alliance commanders, was one of the few areas in Afghanistan not under Taliban control when the group governed the country from 1996 to 2001.

The Taliban shift to governance is built on years of patiently building a so-called shadow government at the provincial, district and even village level. In areas controlled by the Taliban, many Afghans learned to rely on that shadow government for basic services, such as solving legal disputes, rather than turning to a deeply corrupt national government that was unable or unwilling to serve outlying areas.



Afghan resistance movement and anti-Taliban uprising forces on Wednesday in Panjshir Province. Ahmad Sahel Arman/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

After a military evacuation that flew more than 123,000 people out of Afghanistan in 18 days, most of them Afghans, 100 to 200 Americans remain in the country, President Biden said Tuesday. Some have stayed by choice. Others were unable to reach the Kabul airport.

#### 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.

Tens of thousands of Afghans who assisted the United States or its international partners also remain stranded, according to estimates by U.S. officials. Many are permanent United States residents who were traveling in Afghanistan when the government and military collapsed with stunning speed and the Taliban seized control on Aug. 15.

Taliban officials have made repeated public assurances that Afghans with proper passports and visas would be permitted to leave the country, regardless of their role during the 20-year American mission in Afghanistan.

About 6,000 Americans, the vast majority of them dual U.S.-Afghan citizens, were evacuated after Aug. 14, Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken said Tuesday. Early this spring, the American Embassy in Kabul began issuing warnings to Americans to leave Afghanistan as soon as possible, citing a rapidly deteriorating security situation.

Mr. Blinken described “extraordinary efforts to give Americans every opportunity to depart the country.” He said diplomats made 55,000 calls and sent 33,000 emails to U.S. citizens in Afghanistan, and in some cases, walked them into the Kabul airport.

Mr. Biden said Tuesday that the U.S. government had alerted Americans 19 times since March to leave Afghanistan.

The president and his national security team have pledged to continue to work to help move out Americans and at-risk Afghans who seek to leave Afghanistan.

The Taliban spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahid, said on Tuesday that the Kabul airport would reopen for air traffic within days. But with the airport’s future uncertain, some Afghans are scrambling for neighboring borders. Hundreds gather each day at Torkham, a major border crossing with Pakistan, hopeful that Pakistani officials will let them pass.



Taliban fighters guard the Afghanistan side of the Torkham crossing into Pakistan last month. Danial Shah/Getty Images

The United Nations refugee agency recently warned that as many as half a million Afghans could flee by the end of the year, and urged countries in the region to keep their borders open for those seeking refuge.

Filippo Grandi, the U.N. High Commissioner for refugees, has estimated that about 3.5 million people have been displaced by violence within Afghanistan — half a million just since May. The majority of them are women and children.

On the Afghanistan side of the Pakistan border at Torkham, about 140 miles east of Kabul, some families in recent days have been huddling with their belongings, determined to flee the Taliban's rule. There are also laborers from neighboring Afghan provinces who want to cross to earn a livelihood amid spiraling cash and food shortages.

Pakistan has said that it will not accept any more refugees from Afghanistan. Border officials are reportedly only allowing crossing by Pakistani citizens and the few Afghans who have visas.

While Afghan refugees living in Pakistan shuttled back and forth for decades without being asked questions, in recent years, Pakistan has made access more difficult, and built up a border fence 1,600 miles long.