

Afghans With Ties to U.S. Who Could Not Get Out Now Live in Fear

Thousands did not make it onto U.S. military evacuation flights. Many of them are now in hiding, worried for their safety and their future.



By Adam Nossiter

Sept. 3, 2021

Armed Taliban militants were looking for Shah. They knew he worked as an interpreter for the United States government, and came to his provincial home at night. “Someone inside worked for the U.S. Army!” they shouted, threatening to shoot down the door.

Shah had already left for Kabul, where he is now in hiding. But he believes he is a hunted man. “I’m not feeling safe here anymore,” said Shah, whose application for a special immigrant visa to the United States is still in the works.

“The Taliban say they are not taking revenge, and they are forgiving everybody,” he said. “But I can’t believe them. Why did they come to my house looking for me?”

There are thousands like Shah, stuck in Afghanistan under a capricious and unpredictable Taliban rule, who did not make it onto U.S. military evacuation flights — those who worked for the U.S. Army or the government, and their families, and who were eligible for U.S. humanitarian visas. They know they are potential targets as the Taliban tighten their grip since taking over Kabul fully this week.

Taliban leaders have pledged to allow those with visas to leave once they reopen the main airport, which remained closed to commercial flights on Friday.

But those like Shah doubt the pledges of a group that they feel they cannot trust and that has ruled Afghanistan ruthlessly before. Trying to leave — or showing a special immigrant visa — could itself expose them to danger if the Taliban renege on their promises.



Taliban fighters at the airport in Kabul on Tuesday. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

So with the Taliban firmly in control on the street, they have gone into hiding. One U.S. government contractor and humanitarian visa applicant said he had gone underground — literally — with his pregnant wife and 1-year-old daughter in a system of tunnels. He said he didn't believe Taliban promises and didn't plan to risk leaving his hiding place.

There are also potentially hundreds of thousands of other Afghans — aid agency workers, officials from the defunct government, media employees, prominent women — who are fearful and laying low.

They are also eager to leave. This week, after evacuation flights from Kabul ended, there were reports of hundreds of people massing at border crossings with Iran and Pakistan.

"It's because the country is collapsing," said Astrid Sletten, a foreign aid worker who has remained in Kabul. "And everybody has a sister or daughter, and wondering what it is going to be like to be living under a Taliban regime."

She added: "I think some people are literally saying I'd rather die than live in a Taliban regime."

Despite Taliban pledges that no punishment would be exacted on anyone, many Afghans question the ability of the Taliban leadership to control their battle-hardened fighters.

Former government officials, aid workers and diplomats say Taliban leaders have barely managed to keep their well-armed rank-and-file in check. And there is deep uncertainty about when even that relative restraint will end.

On Friday, an uneasy calm settled on Kabul, four days after the Taliban took over and the last American forces left. Afghans waited for the Taliban to announce its new government.

In Kabul, the few women venturing out have been able to wear head scarves, rather than the face-covering burqa the Taliban imposed during its previous rule, and several dozen protested outside the palace, demanding the inclusion of women in a new government.

The Taliban's leaders are still talking about showing inclusiveness. But they have made clear in filling lower-ranking positions so far that they are choosing from among their own.

Kabul residents interviewed by phone described a pervasive fear as Taliban rule steadily changed life around them.



Afghans arriving in Pakistan through the border crossing point in Chaman last month. -/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

And as the economy spiraled deeper into crisis — with sharply rising prices and dwindling hard currency — many say they are eager to leave, particularly those eligible for the U.S. Special Immigration Visa, an emergency humanitarian visa that has been granted to interpreters and others who worked for the U.S. Army.

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.](#)

Their numbers remain unclear. Nobody — neither the U.S. government nor human rights groups — has an exact figure for these Afghans who have a direct connection with official America, but who did not make it out.

The Association of Wartime Allies, an advocacy group, estimates that there are 118,000 Afghans, including their families, who are still in Afghanistan and eligible for the visa.

The group wrote in a report at the end of August that “it is reasonable that nearly 1 percent of the Afghan population has in some way worked for, or are family members of those who worked for, the United States.” Afghanistan’s population is estimated at about 40 million.

“There are hundreds of thousands who remain trapped,” Adam Bates, a lawyer with the International Refugee Assistance Project, said Tuesday during a video news conference in the United States. “The majority of our clients were not able to leave Afghanistan on the evacuation flights.”



Taliban fighters guarding the money exchange in Kabul last month. Victor J. Blue for The New York Times

How real their danger is remains unclear. There have been scattered reports of the Taliban carrying out executions as they swept the country, particularly at Spin Boldak on the Pakistan border — where 40 people associated with the government were killed, according to the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission.

Since taking Kabul on Aug. 15, the Taliban have conducted house-to-house searches and made arrests. Their methods rely heavily on intimidation. They have announced to family members of media workers, for instance, that they are looking for them, according to Human Rights Watch.

“The fact that they are looking for them is also a threat,” said Patricia Gossman of Human Rights Watch. “It’s the way a police state functions,” she added.

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.

“They have unleashed a lot of people who are interested in revenge,” she said. “People are eager to flee because it is not going to be survivable.”

For working Afghans attempting to adapt to Taliban rule, preliminary contacts have been dismaying. The new order means exclusion or segregation of women, a brutality of manner, and, always, the presence of weapons.

In the provinces, where new administrative appointments have been made, the Taliban appear to have relied only on themselves.



A market in Kabul last week. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

“Caretaker appointments at various levels — provincial, district, department and ministerial — have so far been drawn (almost) exclusively from the Taliban’s own ranks, with no sign of non-Taliban appointments,” the Afghanistan Analysts Network wrote on Wednesday.

An aide to a high-ranking official of the former government, who had been meeting with the Taliban, said by telephone from Kabul that his boss’s meetings with the new authorities had stopped.

Meanwhile, Afghans like Shah, the former interpreter, said that in some places the situation was terrifying. “One Talib will kill 10 people, and there is no court,” Shah said. “This is not a prepared government.”

An aid worker still in Kabul was similarly fearful.

“I get the sense that those they are putting in charge are trying to stop” random acts of brutality, the aid worker said. “But I also get the sense that they have little control.”



A line of people waiting outside Azizi Bank in Kabul on Aug. 29, the first day banks reopened in the capital. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

Some aid agency employees who have continued to work were disturbed by their encounters with the new authorities, and plan to leave Afghanistan as soon as possible.

The Taliban have encouraged them to continue working, these officials said, but there is always an air of menace.

“They always come to our compound with their guns and armed guards,” an aid worker in a northern province said by phone.

They were pressuring his agency to hire Taliban members, and to concentrate their aid work on long-held Taliban areas, he said, and would not allow women staff members to work.

“There are many women who don’t have hope,” said a female aid worker in Kabul who is attempting to leave. “If you want to live, you have to work. We don’t have bread at home to feed our children.”

“How are we going to survive in this country?” she asked.



Men and burqa-clad women riding on motorbikes in Kabul. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times