

## Afghanistan Collapse Accelerates as the Taliban Capture 3 Vital Cities

Kandahar, Lashkar Gah and Herat have now fallen to the insurgents, who are racing to seize control of the entire country.

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KABUL, Afghanistan — Three major cities in western and southern Afghanistan were confirmed on Friday to have fallen to the Taliban, as the insurgency's race to seize control of the country accelerated.

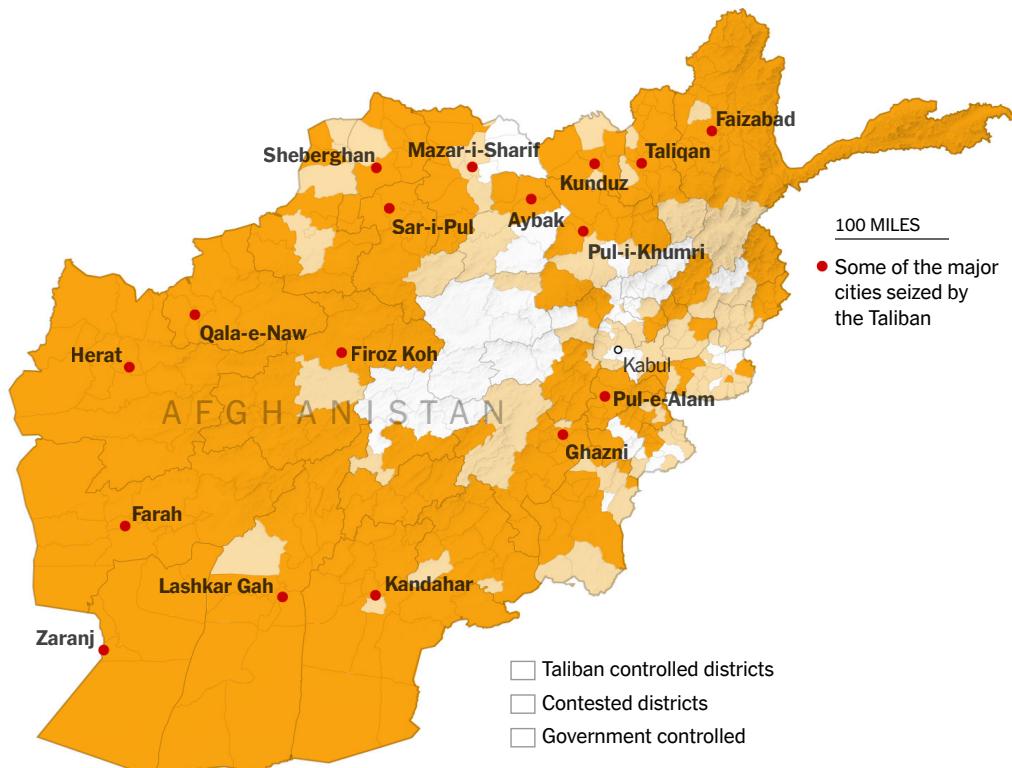
In seizing Kandahar and Lashkar Gah in the country's southern Pashtun heartland, as well as Herat, a vital cultural and economic hub, the insurgents appear to be nearing a complete military takeover. Only three major cities — including the capital, Kabul — remain under government control, and one is under siege by the Taliban.

With both Kandahar and Lashkar Gah, the capital of Helmand Province, in their hands, the Taliban now effectively control southern Afghanistan.

Over the past week, the insurgents have toppled city after city in a stunning advance that has well positioned them to attack Kabul. It has also laid bare the Afghan security forces' near complete collapse less than three weeks before the United States is set to completely withdraw. Some American officials fear the Afghan government will implode within 30 days, and are preparing for an evacuation of the U.S. Embassy in Kabul.

The insurgents now control well over half of the country's 400-odd districts. And they hold more than a dozen provincial capitals, including another capital south of Kabul, Ghazni, and one in the northwest, Qala-e-Naw.

The sieges in multiple cities have been devastating. Kandahar, Lashkar Gah and Herat had been heavily defended, with battles raging for weeks. But increasingly, the Afghan security forces were overrun, with many soldiers and policemen reported to be deserting, or even changing sides in some places.



Source: FDD's Long War Journal (control areas as of Aug. 14) • By Scott Reinhard

Kandahar, in particular, is a huge prize for the Taliban. It is the economic hub of southern Afghanistan, and it was the birthplace of the insurgency in the 1990s, serving as the militants' capital for part of their five-year rule. By seizing the city, the Taliban can effectively proclaim a return to power, if not complete control.

For weeks, a mix of Afghan army, commando and special police units desperately tried to hold Kandahar city as it came under Taliban siege. Then on Wednesday, the insurgents overran Kandahar's central prison, freeing hundreds of inmates and in the process swelling their ranks — a tactic practiced for well over a decade.

By the following evening, Taliban fighters had broken through nearly every frontline surrounding the city, according to members of the security forces.

Many Afghan forces retreated to the governor's compound, which came under attack. The road to Kandahar's airport also came under heavy fire from Taliban fighters. Within hours, nearly all commando and special police units had fled the city, effectively handing it over to the Taliban, according to officials and witnesses.

At the same time, to the northwest, the Taliban effectively seized control of most of Herat after security forces retreated.

For weeks, Afghan forces and militias loyal to Ismail Khan, a former warlord, struggled to fend off the insurgents as they advanced deeper into the city. But even with the added support of Afghan and American air campaigns that have tried to slow the Taliban's advance, security forces could not hold back the insurgents, officials said.



Afghan security forces along a road in Herat on Thursday, as the Taliban took over the police headquarters. Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

On Thursday, the Taliban broke through the front lines on the outskirts of the city and gained control of most government buildings, including the police headquarters, as officers fled in civilian clothes, according to a spokesman for the Herat police. The Taliban also seized Mr. Khan's house — a symbolic prize that signaled the defeat of his militia forces. By Thursday evening, only the army corps compound remained under government control.

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“Most compounds collapsed without fighting,” said Sami Nusrat, a spokesman for the Herat police. “Some compounds and houses were burned down by the Taliban. The Taliban are opening fire into the air to celebrate.”

Ehsan Shafiq, a resident of Herat city, sheltered in his home Wednesday night after hearing the fighting outside intensify. By the following morning, an eerie quiet had fallen over the city as Taliban fighters flooded into the streets without resistance from government or militia forces.

“When they entered the police headquarters, it was empty, and when they entered the governor’s office, it was empty,” he said. “Wherever they went, the forces had already left the area. Now they stand at every square and are placed in government offices.”

On Thursday afternoon, the Taliban seized Ghazni, a provincial capital and strategic city about 90 miles south of Kabul. Hours later, they captured Qala-e-Naw, the capital of Badghis Province, which neighbors Herat, after security forces retreated to an airport on the outskirts of the city, officials said.

The Taliban seized Lashkar Gah on Friday morning, following a weekslong battle. They had overrun the city’s police headquarters and a prison on Thursday.

With the fall of Kandahar, Lashkar Gah and Herat, the Taliban have gained control of more than a dozen provincial capitals in just one week.



Kunduz, a strategic regional hub, last month, before being taken over by the Taliban. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

The Taliban now effectively control southern Afghanistan and the country’s entire western border with Iran. The insurgents have also captured nearly all of northern Afghanistan, once the heart of resistance to the Taliban. The fall of the north has sent morale plunging in the government and the security forces, and poses a serious strategic setback.

One of the three major cities that remain under government control, Mazar-i-Sharif in the north, is already under Taliban attack, as the insurgents push for total military victory.

That outcome appears increasingly likely.

This week, the Pentagon began moving thousands of U.S. Marines into position for a possible evacuation of the American Embassy and American citizens in Kabul. American negotiators are also seeking assurances from the Taliban that they will not attack the embassy if the insurgents overrun the capital, two American officials said.

### **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.

Afghan security forces, exhausted and overstretched by the Taliban's advance, are giving up across the country. On Wednesday, an entire Afghan army corps in the northern city of Kunduz surrendered to Taliban fighters, who had seized control of the city a few days before. They handed over their weapons and vehicles to the insurgents and ceded control of the city's airport, officials said.

As the Taliban have pressed on their brutal offensive, thousands of displaced people have flocked to Kabul, one of the last islands of government control not yet under siege. Hundreds of thousands of others have been trapped between fighting in city streets and airstrikes from the sky.

"Every second here I am concerned, I am crying," said Humaira Jahion, 47, who fled to Kabul from Kunduz hours before it fell to the Taliban on Sunday.

For two nights, she sheltered in her home with her seven children, afraid to leave after a mortar landed half a block from her house. Now, thinking about her family's future as she crowded in with hundreds of others in a makeshift shelter, a look of anguish washed over her face.

"There is no future here," she said. "There is no future for me, and there is no future for my children."



A police outpost in Kandahar was destroyed by the Taliban last week. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

Asadullah Timory, Najim Rahim, Jim Huylebroek and Thomas Gibbons-Neff contributed reporting.