

Two decades of United States involvement in Afghanistan ends amid Taliban takeover

Person on ground at Kabul airport describes last few days of evacuation

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After 20 years of fighting within Afghanistan, the Pentagon and the Biden Administration released a statement on August 30, 2021, concluding the full withdrawal of the United States Military, officially ending the war.

The evacuation efforts came in earnest weeks after Afghan President Ashraf Ghani fled the city of Kabul from the Taliban, who have since taken governmental control over the country, leaving citizens now unable to exit its borders without valid reason. The international community has been closely watching the events happening in Afghanistan within the last month, and the future of the country now remains uncertain.

“The United States has done the best they could with getting as many people as possible out of Afghanistan,” Noah Heffner, a freshman at Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology said. “They couldn’t prevent this. They’re not fortune tellers.”

Tensions within Afghanistan first escalated in 1979, after the-then Soviet Union’s invasion of the country to propel a communist government, according to Dora Ion, a political science professor at Point Park University. Under the Reagan Administration, the United States supported and funded the resistance against the pro-Soviet regime.

“This ultimately led to the Soviets’ withdrawal from Afghanistan,” Ion said. “Soon after, the country fell into civil war, and from the chaos emerged Taliban, a faction of Islamic militants who took effective control of the country in 1996.”

Soon after, conflict would again emerge within Afghanistan in 2001, weeks after al Qaeda, the militant Islamic fundamentalist group led by Osama bin Laden, attacked the World Trade Center towers in New York City on Sept. 11 of that year. At the time, President George W. Bush said that he deemed that United States involvement was necessary, due to the Taliban’s, an affiliated Islamic group, failure to surrender al Qaeda leaders who were behind the 9/11 attacks.

Although these events led to the death of al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden under the presidency of Barack Obama in 2011, and a temporary peace treaty agreement signed between the United States and the Taliban under Former President Donald Trump, according to the Washington Post, the ongoing situation in Afghanistan was nearing its end, until now.

Being the fourth president to deal with what the Cato Institution describes as the “longest war in American history,” President Joe Biden and the United States Department of Defense on April

14, 2021, released a statement that would guarantee the withdrawal of American troops and allies, with planning beginning in May 2021.

The goal was to withdraw all U.S. military personnel and U.S. citizens from Afghanistan before Sept. 11, 2021, which is the 20th anniversary of 9/11 and the deaths of thousands of Americans.

However, according to the New York Times, the Taliban's rapid takeover of the entire country and the city of Kabul would alter these evacuation efforts, pushing the Biden Administration's deadline to evacuate from Sept. 11 to Aug. 31.

The takeover by the Taliban comes after U.S. military intelligence failures and the Taliban's acquisition of over 50% of the country's rural areas over the last few years of fighting, according to CNBC News.

In August, the world was shocked at the scene that unfolded in the country and at Kabul's international airport, considering there was little resistance from both the Afghan government and the Afghan National Army.

A source familiar with U.S. military operations in Afghanistan was on ground for the evacuation efforts at Kabul airport. They spoke with The Globe on the condition of anonymity, which will be respected in this story due to the potential risk to their safety and reputation.

While they said that they believed the efforts to exit U.S. troops out of the country went smoothly, the evacuation of vulnerable Afghan citizens, allies and others "was a complete and total mess" in their eyes.

"You had people working at the gates out there. And outside those gates, there were massive crowds of people everywhere. A lot of people—because obviously it's very hot in Afghanistan—were having heat stroke," they said. "And the overall scene was just desperation to get out of there. A lot of women and children. Near some of the gates, there were literal canals and rivers there full of human waste."

Three weeks ago, many international outlets reported deaths of Afghan citizens trying to climb onto airplanes leaving the country, with overcrowding continuing on board the flights. The flights to and from Afghanistan at that time were described to be part of "one of the largest airlift operations in history" by the Air Force Reserve Command.

Just days before the last round of evacuations, ISIS-K, a regional affiliate of the Islamic State and enemy of the Taliban, claimed responsibility for the bombing that took place outside of the Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul, killing 13 U.S. service members and around 170 Afghan citizens on Aug. 26.

The person involved in the evacuation efforts was there for the deadly attack on Kabul airport.

"The attack that did happen up there falls on the leadership because they had a good idea of what the attack was going to be, when it was going to happen, and what they were going to do for the attack," they said. "But the leadership failed to pass that down to anybody. And so when the attack happened, obviously people were killed."

Despite the explosion, Biden defended his decision to end the war in Afghanistan in comments to the Associated Press and other media outlets.

“I was not going to extend a forever war,” Biden said. “And I was not going to extend a forever exit.”

With the evacuation of more than 120,000 United States military personnel and Afghan allies, Biden has faced mixed reactions regarding his handling of the situation in Afghanistan. On Sunday, the White House Chief of Staff stated on CNN’s ‘State of the Union’ that “around 100” American citizens were still in the country.

“I would say that no matter what, with the deadline that we had and the time that we were given, there was just no chance that we could save everybody,” the source who was in Afghanistan said.

With the full withdrawal of the United States Military, Afghanistan faces the beginning stages of a grave humanitarian crisis.

“Afghanistan will most likely stay a dictatorship under the Taliban rule for a long time. The situation is complicated by the rise of ISIS-K, with whom the Taliban are no friends,” Ion said. “Governments, including the United States, might partner with the current Taliban regime to defeat ISIS-K. The Pentagon just announced that cooperation is possible.”

It is currently unclear at this point if the United States will fully cooperate with the Taliban regime in aiding citizens against ISIS-K within Kabul.