The Taliban

Their history and their resurgence

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| ap of Afghanistan[Infoplease Atlas: Afghanistan](https://www.factmonster.com/atlas/afghanistan)fghan Ambassador to Pakistan Abdul Salam Zaeef seated in front ofTaliban ambassador to Pakistan Abdul Salam Zaeef seated in front of Taliban militia members. Source/AP Photos**If a man fears death, he will accept fever.***—Afghan proverb*Related Links* [Timeline: The Taliban](https://www.factmonster.com/taliban-timeline-3)
* [Who's Who In Afghanistan](https://www.factmonster.com/afghanistan-whos-who)
* [Afghanistan Primer](https://www.factmonster.com/afghanistan)
* [Profile: Afghanistan](https://www.factmonster.com/encyclopedia/places/asia/afghanistan-political-geography/afghanistan)
* [Afghan War](https://www.factmonster.com/encyclopedia/history/asia-and-africa/central-asian-history/afghanistan-war)
* [September 11: People in the News](https://www.factmonster.com/september-11-people-news)
* [Remembering September 11](https://www.factmonster.com/sept-11-2001-terrorist-attacks-against-us)
* [Osama bin Laden](https://www.factmonster.com/osama-bin-laden)
* [Al-Qaeda](https://www.factmonster.com/al-qaeda)
* [International Terrorism](https://www.factmonster.com/terrorism-worldwide-1)
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***For more on the Taliban see***[***Timeline: The Taliban***](https://www.factmonster.com/taliban-timeline-3)***.***

The Taliban ("Students of Islamic Knowledge Movement") ruled Afghanistan from 1996 until 2001. They came to power during Afghanistan's long civil war. Although they managed to hold 90% of the country's territory, their policies—including their treatment of women and support of terrorists—ostracized them from the world community. The Taliban was ousted from power in December 2001 by the U.S. military and Afghani opposition forces in response to the [September 11, 2001](https://www.factmonster.com/encyclopedia/medicine/diseases-and-conditions/pathology/heart-attack), terrorist attack on the U.S.

The Taliban's rise to power

The Taliban are one of the *mujahideen* ("holy warriors" or "freedom fighters") groups that formed during the war against the [Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (1979-89)](https://www.factmonster.com/encyclopedia/history/asia-and-africa/central-asian-history/afghanistan-war). After the withdrawal of Soviet forces, the Soviet-backed government lost ground to the *mujahideen*. In 1992, Kabul was captured and an alliance of *mujahideen* set up a new government with [Burhanuddin Rabbani](https://www.factmonster.com/afghanistan-whos-who#brabbani) as interim president. However, the various factions were unable to cooperate and fell to fighting each other. Afghanistan was reduced to a collection of territories held by competing warlords.

Groups of *taliban* ("religious students") were loosely organized on a regional basis during the occupation and civil war. Although they represented a potentially huge force, they didn't emerge as a united entity until the *taliban* of [Kandahar](https://www.factmonster.com/encyclopedia/places/asia/afghanistan-political-geography/kandahar) made their move in 1994. In late 1994, a group of well-trained *taliban* were chosen by Pakistan to protect a convoy trying to open a trade route from Pakistan to Central Asia. They proved an able force, fighting off rival *mujahideen* and warlords. The *taliban* then went on to take the city of Kandahar, beginning a surprising advance that ended with their capture of Kabul in September 1996.

Afghanistan under the Taliban

The Taliban's popularity with the Afghan people surprised the country's other warring factions. Many Afghans, weary of conflict and anarchy, were relieved to see corrupt and often brutal warlords replaced by the devout Taliban, who had some success in eliminating corruption, restoring peace, and allowing commerce to resume.

The Taliban, under the direction of [Mullah Muhammad Omar](https://www.factmonster.com/afghanistan-whos-who#omar), brought about this order through the institution of a very strict interpretation of [*Sharia*](https://www.factmonster.com/encyclopedia/philosophy-and-religion/islam/islam/sharia), or Islamic law. Public executions and punishments (such as floggings) became regular events at Afghan soccer stadiums. Frivolous activities, like kite-flying, were outlawed. In order to root out "non-Islamic" influence, television, music, and the Internet were banned. Men were required to wear beards, and subjected to beatings if they didn't.

Most shocking to the West was the Taliban's treatment of women. When the Taliban took Kabul, they immediately forbade girls to go to school. Moreover, women were barred from working outside the home, precipitating a crisis in healthcare and education. Women were also prohibited from leaving their home without a male relative—those that did so risked being beaten, even shot, by officers of the "ministry for the protection of virtue and prevention of vice." A woman caught wearing fingernail polish may have had her fingertips chopped off. All this, according to the Taliban, was to safeguard women and their honor.

In contrast to their strict beliefs, the Taliban profited from smuggling operations (primarily electronics) and opium cultivation. Eventually they bowed to international pressure and cracked down on cultivation and by July 2000 were able to claim that they had cut world opium production by two-thirds. Unfortunately, the crackdown on opium also abruptly deprived thousands of Afghans of their only source of income.

Although the Taliban managed to re-unite most of Afghanistan, they were unable to end the civil war. Nor did they improve the conditions in cities, where access to food, clean water, and employment actually declined during their rule. A continuing drought and a very harsh winter (2000–2001) brought famine and increased the flow of refugees to Pakistan.

Cultural and religious basis for the Taliban

In the context of Afghan history, the rise of the Taliban—though not their extremism—is unsurprising.

Afghanistan is a devoutly Muslim nation—90% of its population are [Sunni](https://www.factmonster.com/encyclopedia/philosophy-and-religion/islam/islam/sharia) Muslims (other Afghan Muslims are [Sufis](https://www.factmonster.com/encyclopedia/philosophy-and-religion/islam/islam/sufism) or [Shiites](https://www.factmonster.com/encyclopedia/philosophy-and-religion/islam/islam/shiites)). Religious schools were established in Afghanistan after Islam arrived in the seventh century and *taliban* became an important part of the social fabric: running schools, mosques, shrines, and various religious and social services, and serving as *mujahideen* when necessary.

Most of the Taliban's leaders were educated in Pakistan, in refugee camps where they had fled with millions of other Afghans after the Soviet invasion. Pakistan's *Jami'at-e 'Ulema-e Islam* (JUI) political party provided welfare services, education, and military training for refugees in many of these camps. They also established religious schools in the Deobandi tradition.

The Deobandi tradition originated as a reform movement in British India with the aim of rejuvenating Islamic society in a colonial state, and remained prevalent in Pakistan after the [partition from India](https://www.factmonster.com/encyclopedia/places/asia/pakistan-and-bangladesh-political-geography/pakistan). The Deobandi schools in Afghan refugee camps, however, are often run by inexperienced and semi-literate [mullahs](https://www.factmonster.com/islam-glossary). In addition, funds and scholarships provided by Saudi Arabia during the occupation brought the schools' curricula closer to the conservative [Wahhabi](https://www.factmonster.com/encyclopedia/philosophy-and-religion/islam/islam/wahhabi) tradition. Ties between the Taliban and these schools remain strong: when the Taliban were defeated in the city of [Mazar-i-Sharif](https://www.factmonster.com/encyclopedia/places/asia/afghanistan-political-geography/mazarisharif) one of Pakistan's largest religious schools shut down for a month and sent thousands of students to Afghanistan as reinforcements.

While the Taliban present themselves as a reform movement, they have been criticized by Islamic scholars as being poorly educated in Islamic law and history—even in Islamic radicalism, which has a long history of scholarly writing and debate. Their implementation of Islamic law seems to be a combination of Wahhabi orthodoxy (i.e., banning of musical instruments) and tribal custom (i.e., the all-covering *birka* made mandatory for all Afghan women).

The opposition

Afghanistan's civil war continued until the end of 2001. The Taliban's strongest opposition came from the Northern Alliance, which held the Northeast corner of the country (about 10% of Afghanistan). The Northern Alliance comprises numerous anti-Taliban factions and is nominally led by exiled president Burhanuddin Rabbani.

Generally, the factions break down according to [religion and ethnicity](https://www.factmonster.com/encyclopedia/places/asia/afghanistan-political-geography/afghanistan). While the Taliban is made up mostly Sunni Muslim Pashtuns (also referred to as [Pathans](https://www.factmonster.com/encyclopedia/social-sciences-and-the-law/anthropology-and-archaeology/peoples-except-new-world/pathans)), the Northern Alliance includes Tajiks, Hazara, Uzbeks, and Turkmen. The Hazara, and some other smaller ethnic groups, are Shiites. The [Ismaili](https://www.factmonster.com/encyclopedia/philosophy-and-religion/islam/islam/ismailis) community, which suffered in Taliban-occupied areas, also supports the Northern Alliance.

Although the Taliban called for a negotiated end to the civil war, they continued to mount new offensives. In September 2001, the leader of the Northern Alliance, Commander [Ahmad Shah Massoud](https://www.factmonster.com/afghanistan-whos-who#massoud), died from wounds suffered in a suicide bombing, allegedly carried out by [al-Qaeda](https://www.factmonster.com/al-qaeda), a terrorist organization with close ties to the Taliban.

The Taliban against the world

The Taliban regime faced international scrutiny and condemnation for its policies. Only [Saudi Arabia](https://www.factmonster.com/encyclopedia/places/asia/arabian-peninsula-political-geography/saudi-arabia), [Pakistan](https://www.factmonster.com/encyclopedia/places/asia/pakistan-and-bangladesh-political-geography/pakistan), and the [United Arab Emirates](https://www.factmonster.com/encyclopedia/places/asia/arabian-peninsula-political-geography/united-arab-emirates) recognized the Taliban as Afghanistan's legitimate government. After the [September 11](https://www.factmonster.com/encyclopedia/medicine/diseases-and-conditions/pathology/heart-attack), 2001, terrorist attack on the U.S., Saudi Arabia and the UAE cut diplomatic ties with the Taliban.

The Taliban allowed terrorist organizations to run training camps in their territory and, from 1994 to at least 2001, provided refuge for [Osama bin Laden](https://www.factmonster.com/osama-bin-laden) and his al-Qaeda organization. The relationship between the Taliban and bin Laden was close, even familial—bin Laden fought with the *mujahideen*, has financed the Taliban, and one of his daughters is reportedly married to Mullah Muhammad Omar. The United Nations Security Council passed two resolutions, UNSCR 1267 (1999) and 1333 (2000), demanding that the Taliban cease their support for terrorism and hand over bin Laden for trial.

The Taliban recognized the need for international ties but wavered between cooperation—they claimed to have drastically cut opium production in July 2000—and defiance—they pointedly ignored international pleas not to destroy the 2000-year-old Buddhist statues of [Bamian](https://www.factmonster.com/encyclopedia/places/asia/afghanistan-political-geography/bamian). However, they made no effort to curb terrorist activity within Afghanistan, a policy that ultimately led to their undoing.

Even after their ouster, the Taliban's brand of Islamist radicalism threatens to destabilize other countries in the region including Iran, China, Uzbekistan, and Pakistan. The Taliban's relationship with Pakistan is especially problematic. A high percentage of the Taliban are ethnic Pashtuns; Pashtuns are a sizable minority in Pakistan and dominate the Pakistani military. Public support for the Taliban runs very high in the Pashtun [North-West Frontier province](https://www.factmonster.com/encyclopedia/places/asia/pakistan-and-bangladesh-political-geography/peshawar) where pro-Taliban groups have held uprisings and sought to emulate Taliban practices by performing public executions and oppressing women.

The end of the Taliban?

In September, 2001, the U.S. placed significant pressure on the Taliban to turn over bin Laden and al-Qaeda in response to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. On October 7, after the Taliban refused to give up bin Laden, the U.S. began bombing Taliban military sites and aiding the Northern Alliance. By November 21, the Taliban had lost Kabul and by December 9 had been completely routed.

An interim government was agreed upon by representatives of Afghanistan's various factions during talks held in Bonn, Germany. On December 22, 2001, [Hamid Karzai](https://www.factmonster.com/afghanistan-whos-who#Karzai), an Afghan tribal leader, was sworn in as interim chairman of the government. Karzai initially supported the Taliban and is respected by many former Taliban leaders. In January 2002, the Taliban recognized the interim government.

The Taliban's Resurgence

While many of the Taliban's most radical leaders and supporters were killed, taken prisoner, or fled the country, many former Taliban returned to their homes and continue to work for the Taliban's goals. The Taliban leader, [Mullah Omar](https://www.factmonster.com/afghanistan-whos-who#omar), has continued to elude capture.

In 2003, after the United States shifted its military efforts to fighting the war in Iraq, attacks on American-led forces intensified as the Taliban and al-Qaeda began to regroup. President Hamid Karzai's hold on power remained tenuous, as entrenched warlords continued to exert regional control. Remarkably, however, Afghanistan's first democratic presidential elections in Oct. 2004 were a success. Ten million Afghans, more than a third of the country, registered to vote, including more than 40% of eligible women. Despite the Taliban's threats to kill anyone who participated, the polls were reasonably peaceful and the elections deemed fair by international observers.

In 2005 and 2006, the Taliban continued its resurgence, and 2006 became the deadliest year of fighting since the 2001 war. Throughout the spring, Taliban militants infiltrated southern Afghanistan, terrorizing villagers and attacking Afghan and U.S. troops. In May and June, Operation Mount Thrust was launched, deploying more than 10,000 Afghan and coalition forces to the south. In Aug. 2006, NATO troops took over military operations in southern Afghanistan from the U.S.-led coalition, which put a total of 21,000 American troops and 19,000 NATO troops on the ground. In September NATO launched the largest attack in its 57-year history. About 2,000—the vast majority Taliban fighters—were killed in military operations during the year.

In September 2006, Pakistan's president Pervez Musharraf signed a controversial peace agreement with seven militant groups, who call themselves the "Pakistan Taliban." Pakistan's army agreed to withdraw from the area and allow the Taliban to govern themselves, as long as they promise no incursions into Afghanistan or against Pakistani troops. Critics say the deal handed terrorists a secure base of operations; supporters counter that a military solution against the Taliban is futile and will only spawn more militants, contending that containment is the only practical policy.

The Taliban rescinded the cease-fire in July 2007 after clashes between government troops and radical Islamist clerics and students at Islamabad's Red Mosque. After the initial violence, the military laid seige to the mosque, which held nearly 2,000 students. Several students escaped or surrendered to officials. The mosque's senior cleric, Maulana Abdul Aziz was caught by officials when attempting to escape. After negotiations between government officials and mosque leaders failed, troops stormed the compound and killed Abdul Rashid Ghazi, who took over as chief of the mosque after the capture of Aziz, his brother. More than 80 people died in the violence. Fighting in remote tribal areas intensified after the raid.

In 2008, after more than five years as Afghanistan's leader, President Hamid Karzai still has only marginal control over large swaths of his country, which is rife with warlords, militants, and drug smugglers. The Taliban now funds its insurgency through the drug trade. An August 2007 report by the United Nations found that Afghanistan's opium production doubled in two years and that the country supplies 93% of the world's heroin.

In February 2008, U.S. Secretary of State Robert Gates warned NATO members that the threat of an al-Qaeda attack on their soil is real and that they must commit more troops to stabilize Afghanistan and counter the growing power of both al-Qaeda and the Taliban.

In August 2008, the Pakistani military launched a three-week-long cross-border air assault into Afghanistan's Bajaur region, which resulted in more than 400 Taliban casualties. The continuous airstrikes forced many al-Qaeda and Taliban militants to retreat from towns formally under their control. However, the Pakistani government declared a cease-fire in the Bajaur region for the month of September in observance of [Ramadan](https://www.factmonster.com/ramadan-and-eid-al-fitr), raising fears that the Taliban will use the opportunity to regroup.

Baitullah Mehsud, the leader of the Taliban in Pakistan, was killed by a C.I.A. drone strike in August 2009 in South Waziristan, a remote region of the country. He was blamed for the assassination of Benazir Bhutto, the terrorist attack on the Marriott Hotel in Islamabad, and dozens of other suicide bombings. Despite his death, the Taliban continued its resurgence in both Afghanistan and Pakistan in 2009. In fact, the Taliban was blamed for the violence that led up to August's presidential election in Afghanistan, an apparent attempt to disrupt the elections and further destabilize the country.

The Taliban continued its attacks on government targets and U.S. and NATO troops into 2013. As the U.S. was preparing to withdraw all combat troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2014, the Pentagon released a report in late 2012 that said, "The Taliban-led insurgency remains adaptive and determined, and retains the capability to emplace substantial numbers of I.E.D.s and to conduct isolated high-profile attacks."

In June 2013, The Taliban opened an office in Doha, Qatar, and its representatives held a press conference with an international media contingent. The U.S. said it would begin long-delayed peace talks with the group. Afghanistan was expected to do the same, but instead said it would not engage in any dialogue with the Taliban, saying such discussions lent the militants credibility.

The U.S. achieved an important victory over the Taliban with the November 2013 assassination of Hakimullah Mehsud, the leader of the Taliban in Pakistan. He died in a CIA drone strike in Danday Darpa Khel, a militant stronghold in North Waziristan. While the Pakistani government expressed outrage that the U.S. overstepped its boundaries, many citizens indicated they were relieved about the death of a man whose group has destabilized and terrorized the country. The Pakistani Taliban launched a brazen overnight attack at Karachi's Jinnah International Airport, the largest and busiest airport in the country, in early June 2014. Ten militants infiltrated the airport and engaged in a gun battle with airport security and police. Twenty-nine people were killed, including all ten gunmen. Taliban spokesman Shahidullah Shahid said the attack was "a response to the recent attacks by the government" and that such assaults would continue. Observers also questioned if the attack was retribution for Mehsud's death. The assault likely dealt a fatal blow to any hopes of peace negotiations between the government and the Taliban.

U.S. Soldier Released in Prisoner Exchange

After several years of negotiations, the U.S. and Taliban completed a prisoner swap on May 31, 2014. The Taliban surrendered Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl, who had been held prisoner for five years, and the U.S. released five top members of the Taliban leadership from the Guantánamo Bay prison. The detainees were handed over to Qatar officials and must remain in that country for one year. Afghan president Hamid Karzai was not made aware of the deal until after the prisoners were released.

Taliban Founder Reportedly Dead

In July 2015, Afghanistan's intelligence agency announced that it believed that Taliban leader and founder, [Mullah Omar](https://www.factmonster.com/afghanistan-whos-who#omar), died in 2013 in Pakistan. Rumors of his death have been frequent, and he had not been seen for several years. The Taliban confirmed Omar's death and on July 31 announced that Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansour had taken over as the group's supreme leader.