

Taliban leader was freed from Guantanamo Bay in 2014 swap by Obama

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Khairullah Khaikhwa, a Taliban commander released from Guantanamo Bay in 2014 by the Obama administration. AP Photo/Alexander Zemlianichenko, Pool

When President Barack Obama released five Taliban commanders from the Guantanamo Bay prison in [exchange for an American deserter in 2014](#), he assured a wary public that the dangerous enemy combatants would be transferred to Qatar and kept from causing any trouble in Afghanistan.

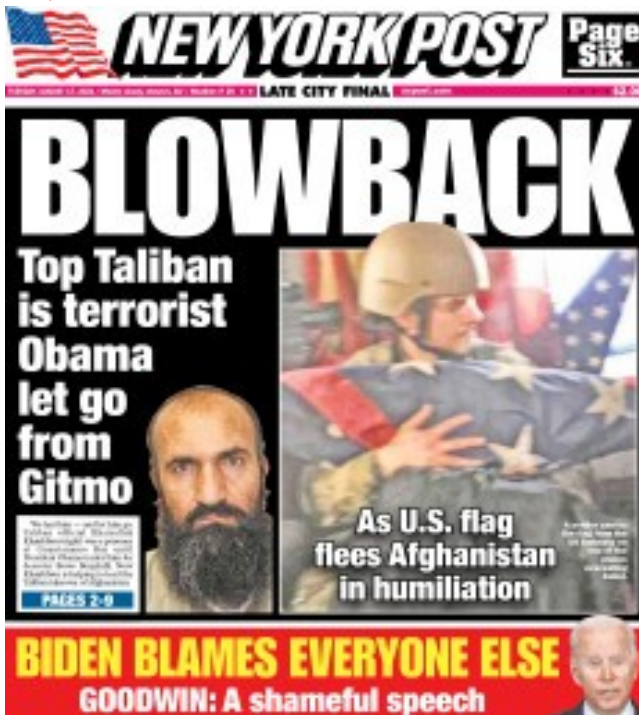
In fact, they were left free to engineer Sunday's sacking of Kabul.

Soon after gaining their freedom, some of the notorious Taliban Five pledged to return to fight Americans in Afghanistan and made contacts with active Taliban militants there. But the Obama-Biden administration turned a blind eye to the disturbing intelligence reports, and it wasn't long before the freed detainees used Qatar as a base to form a regime in exile.

Eventually, they were recognized by Western diplomats as official representatives of the Taliban during recent "peace" talks.



Taliban fighters inside the Presidential Palace in Kabul



Earlier this year, one of them, Khairullah Khairkhwa, actually sat across the table from President Biden's envoy to Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, in Moscow, where Khairkhwa was part of the official Taliban delegation that negotiated the final terms of the US withdrawal. The retreat cleared a path for the Taliban to retake power after 20 years.

"I started jihad to remove foreign forces from my country and establish an Islamic government, and jihad will continue until we reach that goal through a political agreement," Khairkhwa said at the summit.

After raiding the presidential palace in Kabul, a group of armed Taliban fighters told Al Jazeera that they were arranging to bring back their Gitmo-paroled leadership from Qatar upon securing the capital. One unidentified fighter, who blasted America for "oppressing our people for 20 years," claimed he had also been locked up at the Guantanamo Bay facility. It's more evidence that Gitmo catch-and-release policies facilitated the fall of Afghanistan to the enemy that Washington vowed to crush after 9/11.



Taliban fighters patrolling the city of Ghazni as the group continued to take over Afghanistan on August 12, 2021 EPA/NAWID TANHA

The mastermind of the regime change is former detainee Khairkhwa, the Taliban mullah whom Obama released from Gitmo even though the Pentagon classified him as too dangerous to release.

Earlier this year, Khairkhwa assured the administration that the Taliban would not launch a spring military offensive if Biden committed to removing all remaining American troops. He also promised not to retaliate against any Afghans who worked with the US military or the US-backed government in Kabul. But Khairkhwa showed no signs of remorse or rehabilitation inside Gitmo — if anything, he's probably more embittered toward the United States. Why would they believe him?

Reports coming out of Kandahar and Kabul indicate the extremists have already broken their word. Taliban thugs have started a reign of terror against people who cooperated with Westerners. Guided by a “kill list,” they are going door to door to punish their enemies.



Khairullah Khairkhwa and four other leaders of the Taliban were released from prison in Guantanamo Bay in 2014 in exchange for Bowe Bergdahl. Photo by Joe Raedle/Getty Images

Special envoy Khalilzad convinced the White House the US-backed government would not collapse and the Taliban would not take over — even though Khairkhwa made it clear he and his fellow mullahs sought to re-establish strict Islamic rule without outside meddling.

Mullah Khairkhwa previously served as the Taliban’s interior minister in Afghanistan, where he oversaw enforcement of brutal Islamist punishments, including beheadings and stonings. After 9/11, he was arrested in Pakistan and sent to Gitmo in 2002. The Pentagon accused him of closely associating with Osama bin Laden and bin Laden’s al Qaeda henchmen.

Twelve years later, Obama sprang Khairkhwa from jail along with four other top Taliban leaders in exchange for the [Taliban releasing US Army Sgt. Robert “Bowe” Bergdahl](#), who was captured after deserting his post in Afghanistan. Khairkhwa and his fellow parolees, who were immediately flown to Qatar, were the only “forever prisoners” released without being cleared by the Gitmo parole board.



President Barack Obama celebrating the return of the “POW” Bergdahl with his parents at the White House.
AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster

Upon his return, Obama celebrated Bergdahl as a heroic “POW,” a designation the Pentagon never gave him. At the bizarre Rose Garden ceremony, during which Bergdahl’s father praised Allah, Obama asserted: “We’re committed to winding down the war in Afghanistan and closing Gitmo.”

But public opinion [rapidly turned against Bergdahl](#) as the facts of his disappearance and capture became known. He ultimately was court-martialed and pleaded guilty to desertion and misbehavior before the enemy. In 2017, he was [sentenced to a dishonorable discharge](#). Last year, the US military’s top appeals court upheld the conviction against him.

Several of his fellow soldiers were [seriously injured during search-and-rescue missions](#) launched to find him in Afghanistan. During Bergdahl’s five-year Taliban captivity, the Taliban became more accurate and deadly targeting US convoys and troops.

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Bergdahl would eventually plead guilty to desertion. AFP/Getty Images

It's not clear if then-Vice President Biden was fully on board with Obama's controversial prisoner exchange. But in a reversal of Trump administration policy, Biden has restarted Obama's program to release Gitmo detainees as part of a renewed push to close the prison.

Last month, the president released his first prisoner — [accused terrorist Abdul Latif Nasser](#) — leaving the number of remaining detainees at 39. Ten others have been cleared for release, while still others have appealed to Biden through their pro-bono defense lawyers to ensure their release, despite the risk of them returning to militant activities like the Taliban Five.

If Obama and Biden had left the five Taliban thugs to rot in Cuba, Kabul more than likely would not be [back in the clutches of the Taliban right now](#). And maybe Americans wouldn't have sacrificed more than 2,400 troops and \$1 trillion in vain.