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08.19.21

Qatari pay to Gaza families resumes through a World Food Program card

08.19.21

Israel announces resumption of Qatari payments to Gaza

According to agreement between Doha and UN, \$100 allotments will be sent to 100,000 impoverished families in the strip, who will receive it by the international organization's World Food Program; Hamas salaries not included in deal

Elior Levy, Yoav Zitun | Published: 08.19.21, 20:16

Israel on Thursday agreed to resume the transfer of Qatari aid money to the Gaza Strip following an agreement between Doha and the UN over the transfer mechanism.

Qatar has provided hundreds of millions of dollars to Gaza's poorest families in recent years. The funds have been a key source of stability for the impoverished territory, where unemployment is hovering at around 50%.

But since the May war, Israel has blocked the payments, insisting on safeguards that none of the money will reach Hamas. Under the system before the war, some \$30 million in cash was delivered in suitcases to Gaza each month through an Israeli-controlled crossing.

According to the deal between Qatari envoy to the enclave Mohammed al-Emadi and UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Tor Wennesland, the Gulf kingdom will send \$100 allotments to 100,000 impoverished families in the strip, who will receive it by the international organization's World Food Program.

The families will be given a special rechargeable card with which they can withdraw the money from banks in Gaza.

The grant will also include funding for the purchase of fuels from Israel to maintain the enclave's sole power station operating.

However, the agreement did not include salaries to Hamas clerks, estimated to be at millions of dollars a month.

Although Israel is not involved in the mechanism, security officials have been working behind the scenes for the past several months to finalize the outline, among them the IDF Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories Maj.-Gen. Ghassan Alyan and approved the list of candidate families.

Since the end of the latest Israeli-Palestinian conflict in May, Hamas has threatened to reignite violence on the southern frontier if the money is withheld.

It is yet unclear whether the Islamist terror group will approve of the outline without payment to its activists. Earlier this week, Palestinian militants fired a rocket into Israel for the first time since May. Israel did not respond to the rocket attack, indicating that diplomatic efforts were making progress.

Defense Minister Benny Gantz said the outline will ensure the money reaches "those who truly need it."

He added that he had been in contact with Qatari officials, who "understood the Israeli need" to make sure the funds do not end up in the hands of Hamas.

Gantz also said that Israel will continue to be in contact with the Palestinian Authority, which it sees as the only legitimate representative for the Palestinian people, in order to see whether an additional mechanism could be reached.

Palestinian banks in the West Bank feared potential legal action against them over funding and supporting terrorism for facilitating the transfer of money to Hamas operatives.

08.19.21

Hezbollah warns Israel & US it prepared shipment of Iranian fuel oil for Lebanon

08.19.21

Hezbollah warns Israel, U.S. as it prepares to receive Iranian oil

Leader of the Iran-backed terror group says more shipments expected follow to help Lebanon following financial meltdown; 'I say to Americans and Israelis, boat that will sail from Iran is Lebanese territory,' says Hassan Nasrallah

Reuters| Published: 08.19.21, 11:11

A shipment of Iranian fuel oil for Lebanon will set sail on Thursday organized by the Lebanese Shi'ite group Hezbollah, the group said, warning its U.S. and Israeli adversaries the ship would be considered Lebanese territory as soon as it sailed.

Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah said further ships would follow to help the people of Lebanon, who are enduring crippling fuel shortages as a result of the country's two-year-long financial meltdown.

"We don't want to get into a challenge with anyone, we don't want to get into a problem with anyone. We want to help our people," Nasrallah said. "I say to the Americans and the Israelis that the boat that will sail within hours from Iran is Lebanese territory."

"God willing, this ship and others will arrive safely," Nasrallah said, in a televised address commemorating Ashura, when Shi'ites mark the death of the Prophet Mohammed's grandson Hussein in battle in 680.

Nasrallah, whose heavily armed group was founded by Iran's Revolutionary Guards in 1982, did not say where or when the ship would arrive, saying this would be discussed when it reached the Mediterranean.

In April, Reuters reported that Hezbollah was preparing fuel storage space in Syria as part of its efforts to deal with the financial crisis in Lebanon, citing senior officials familiar with the efforts.

The group has fighters and influence in neighboring Syria, where Hezbollah has fought in support of President Bashar al-Assad in the civil war.

08.19.21

Satellite shows Jerusalem fires started in three distinct points, all at the same time

08.19.21

Satellite images show arsonists likely behind mass Jerusalem fires

Images provided to Ynet by NASA reveal the blazes were started in three distinct focal points, all at the same time, confirming previous assumptions that one of the biggest fires in recent years was due to man-made causes

Gilad Cohen | Published: 08.19.21, 09:42

Massive wildfire that raged in Jerusalem for over two days, becoming one of the biggest blazes recorded in recent years, was apparently the result of arson, new satellite images reveal.

According to the satellite imagery provided to Ynet by the United States space agency NASA, the fire started on Sunday at 3pm, at three, unconnected and far away locations, all at the same time.

According to Amitai Dan, an information security researcher and intelligence analyst, the distance between each of the focal points is about four kilometers (2.4 miles). They are located near the local authorities of Beit Meir, Shoeva, Ramat Raziell and Givat Ye'arim - all of which were heavily affected by the fires.

Even before receiving the satellite images, Fire and Rescue Authority and the Jerusalem police set up a special joint team to investigate the source of the fire.

The two bodies have suspected from the start that causes for the blaze were man made, although it was unclear if it was negligence or deliberate arson.

According to the investigative team, one of the focal points, located near Beit Meir, is a place full of brushes and thorns and regular tourists are unlikely to pass through it. The police hopes to use triangulation technology to locate any smartphones that were in the area during the onset of the fire.

On Tuesday, Fire and Rescue Authority Commissioner Dedy Simhi announced that the Jerusalem-area wildfire was finally contained after an unremitting 52-hour battle, consisting of no less than 1,500 firefighters and 20 water bombers.

The fire forced the evacuation of no less than ten communities in the area around the capital, as well as a school and a hospital.

According to the Nature and Parks Authority, the fire had consumed over 6,000 acres of land, and killed over ten thousand animals who were unable to flee the massive blaze.

Jerusalem District fire chief Nisim Twito assessed nature would take decades to recover from the extensive damage caused to the area's ecological system.

"These sights are hard to watch. I've seen how Jerusalem District's green lung turns black within the flames," Twito said. "One does not have to be a great botanist to understand that it will take decades to restore what has been lost."

08.18.21

Bennett to meet Biden at White House Aug 26 to discuss critical security issues

08.18.21

Bennett to meet Biden at White House next week

PM says main agenda of his first official visit to U.S. will be Iran and its efforts to destabilize the region; Biden's spokeswoman says the visit will take place on Aug. 26 and the two would discuss critical issues related to security'

Ynet, Reuters | Published: 08.18.21, 21:48

Prime Minister Naftali Bennett said on Wednesday, that he expected to travel to Washington to meet with U.S. President Joe Biden late next week, if the coronavirus pandemic allows.

"This is an important meeting that will deal mainly with Iran," Bennett said in a press conference.

Biden's spokeswoman confirmed Bennett's first official visit to Washington is set to take place on August 26. Bennett is set to return to Israel a day later.

"Prime Minister Bennett's visit will strengthen the enduring partnership between the United States and Israel, reflect the deep ties between our governments and our people, and underscore the United States' unwavering commitment to Israel's security," Press Secretary Jen Psaki said.

"The visit will also be an opportunity for the two leaders to discuss efforts to advance peace, security, and prosperity for Israelis and Palestinians and the importance of working towards a more peaceful and secure future for the region," Psaki said.

Psaki added the two leaders would also "discuss critical issues related to regional and global security, including Iran."

Talks between Tehran and six world powers to revive the nuclear pact ditched three years ago by then U.S. President Donald Trump have stalled since they began in April.

Israel is wary of the deal being revived. It views a nuclear-armed Iran as an existential threat. Teheran denies it was seeking a nuclear bomb.

"Iran is at the its most advanced point ever, in uranium enrichment," Bennett said. "We have a plan to deal with the crisis and ensure the safety of Israelis."

"The trip to Washington is dependent on the status of the pandemic," he said but added that his cabinet formulated Israeli policy on Iran after careful consideration, and that he

will be arriving at the meeting with Biden "prepared and focused and with the aim to partner with the United States in combating Iran's growing belligerence."

"Iran is working to destabilize the region, violates human rights, promotes terrorism and advances its nuclear ambitions," Bennett said.

08.18.21

Egyptian president invites Bennett for official visit in the next few weeks

08.18.21

Egyptian president invites Bennett for official visit

PM's office says the invitation was conveyed by Egypt's intelligence chief - on behalf of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi - who is currently visiting Israel to solidify the ceasefire between Israel and Hamas following Gaza war in May
Reuters, Associated Press | Published: 08.18.21, 16:44

Egypt's president invited Prime Minister Naftali Bennett on Wednesday for an official visit in the next few weeks, a statement issued by Bennett's office said.

"The invitation from President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi was conveyed by Egypt's intelligence minister during a meeting with Bennett in Jerusalem," the statement said.

Bennett's office gave few details about Wednesday's talks, saying they focused on mutual security and economic issues as well as "Egyptian media in the Gaza security situation."
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Bennett said Kamel extended an invitation on behalf of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. He gave no further details.

Bennett's predecessor, Benjamin Netanyahu, was the last Israeli prime minister to make an official visit to Egypt, in 2011, when the late Hosni Mubarak was in power there.

Israeli media reports said Netanyahu secretly met Sisi in Egypt in 2018.

In 1979, Egypt became the first Arab country to sign a peace treaty with Israel. Relations have been cool over the years, but Egypt has played a key role in mediating ceasefires between Israel and Palestinian militants in Gaza in various rounds of fighting.

08.18.21

Israel renews 1,800 Gazan laborers & construction materials into Gaza

08.18.21

Israel renews import of construction materials, goods into Gaza Strip

Restrictions on enclave's commercial activity eased despite renewed rocket fire; Egyptian intel chief meets with Gantz, Bennett on mediation efforts; Palestinian factions to meet on whether to renew hostilities or move forward with settlement
i24NEWS ,Ynet| Published: 08.18.21, 13:57

Israel on Wednesday approved the import of construction materials and other goods into the Gaza Strip through the Kerem Shalom border crossing.

The decision to ease commercial activity came just two days after rockets were fired into Israel from the seaside territory in a first since an 11-day conflict between the sides wrapped up in late May. The IDF has uncharacteristically yet to respond.

In addition, around 1,800 Gazan laborers and traders entered Israel for the first time since the start of the coronavirus pandemic.

The softening of restrictions comes as tensions soared due to Israel withholding Qatari aid money to the Hamas-controlled enclave.

Israeli security officials confirmed that there has been progress in indirect talks between Israel and the Islamist terror group mediated by the United Nations over the transfer of funds from Doha.

Also on Wednesday, the head of Egyptian General Intelligence Abbas Kamel arrived in Israel to meet with Prime Minister Naftali Bennett and Defense Minister Benny Gantz to discuss the progress of mediation efforts with Hamas.

Gaza's various Palestinian groups were also set to meet later in the day after the UN and Qatar reportedly reached an agreement on an outline for the transfer of the money, with the international organization serving as the main facilitator.

The factions will decide on whether to renew riots along the border with Israel and expand the launching of the incendiary balloons into southern Israel communities and farmlands, or agree on a settlement.

08.17.21

Israeli, Moroccan Universities share climate change project, agriculture, water, energy

08.17.21

Israeli, Moroccan universities join forces for collaboration on sustainability

The shared project, one of the first announced between the two countries, will focus on agriculture, water, energy and ecological restoration; could have a major impact on people at a local and regional level, Mohammed VI Polytechnic University chief says
TPS| Updated: 08.17.21, 11:39

Ben-Gurion University of the Negev (BGU) in Israel and Mohammed VI Polytechnic University (UM6P) in Morocco have initiated discussions to collaborate on scientific research projects, in addition to students and faculty exchange programs.

This collaboration, expected to be one of the first formal ones between universities from Morocco and Israel, will focus on sustainability issues, including agriculture, water, energy and ecological restoration.

This partnership will be supported by both global companies ICL (Israel) and OCP (Morocco). The related Memorandum of Understanding is expected to be signed by mid-October.

Ben-Gurion University President Prof. Daniel Chamovitz said in a statement that both academic institutions have much in common, including their desert locations and are well suited to "collaborate on projects in sustainability and climate change. Both universities are committed to thriving in the desert in a 'Green' environment, and both look outward – focused on helping our regions, countries and the world."

Mohammed VI Polytechnic University President Hicham El Habti said that the collaboration "will have a major impact on people at a local and regional level. UM6P and BGU consider scientific research a key component for development, especially on sustainability matters."

BGU recently consolidated 50 years of research into the School of Sustainability and Climate Change, and UM6P has made this subject a top priority of its research and education programs, within its Green Tech Institute launched last year and its School of Agriculture, Fertilizers and Environmental Sciences launched in 2015.

Israel and Morocco announced the normalization of relations in December 2020, as part of the Abraham Accords.

Foreign Minister Yair Lapid visited Morocco last week, the first visit of an Israeli foreign minister in 18 years. During his 2-day stay the minister opened the Israeli mission to Rabat and met with the local Jewish community.

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08.17.21

Jerusalem fires reignite due to winds, under control for now, official says

08.17.21

Jerusalem fires under control for now, official says

With over 5,000 acres of land burned, fire service chief says dozens of crews on the ground and planes assisting from above; unnamed official slams service leadership for failing to foresee blaze would reignite due to winds

Gilad Cohen, Haim Golditch | Updated: 08.17.21, 10:04

Israel's firefighting chief said on Tuesday that the massive wildfire near Jerusalem was for the most part under control.

Speaking to Ynet, Fire and Rescue Services Chief Dedi Simchi said there were **still some local hotspots**, but with dozens of teams deployed on the ground and aircraft assisting the efforts above, he expected the "remaining flames to be extinguished."

Simchi warned however that flames could reignite later in the day due to strong dry winds.

At least 20,000 dunams (nearly 5,000 acres) of land went up in smoke since the fires broke out on Sunday, **damaging homes, farms, and other property** and **forcing** thousands of local **residents to evacuate**.

Most locals have since been allowed to return home, but residents of Kibbutz Tzova and Moshav Giv'at Ye'arim were told to stay away for the time being due to poor air quality in the area.

An unnamed firefighting source said that the service was **unprepared for the scope of fires that resumed Monday**. "The fire was not out," he said. "We did not rotate crews and our command seemed to have buckled. I don't understand how anyone was surprised when the flames reignited because of the wind," he said.

Foreign Minister Yair Lapid spoke with his Greek counterpart on Monday, who said he would do everything possible to help. The Foreign Ministry has also **appealed to the neighboring island nation of Cyprus** — which has agreed to help in firefighting efforts — as well as Italy, France and Croatia. Kan Public Radio reported on Tuesday that **discussions were also underway with Jordan**.

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08.19.21

France, Germany, UK very worried about Iran's uranium enrichment up to 20%

08.19.21

France, Germany, UK very worried about Iran's uranium enrichment

Report by UN nuclear watchdog confirms **Tehran has produced uranium** metal-enriched up to **20% fissile purity** for the first time and lifted production capacity of uranium enriched to 60%, both **key steps in weapon development**

Reuters| Published: **08.19.21**, 18:10

France, Germany and Britain voiced **grave concern** on Thursday about a report that Iran had accelerated its enrichment of **uranium to near weapons-grade**, saying this was a **serious violation** of its commitments.

At a time when the West and Iran are looking to resume talks on reviving a nuclear deal, the UN atomic energy watchdog said in a report seen by Reuters that Iran had accelerated its enrichment of uranium.

In a joint statement, the three countries said they were worried about IAEA reports confirming that Iran has produced uranium metal-enriched up to 20% fissile purity for the first time and lifted production capacity of uranium enriched to 60%. Both are key steps in the development of a nuclear weapon, they said. Uranium metal can be used to make the core of a nuclear bomb, but Iran says its aims are peaceful and it is developing reactor fuel.

"Iran must halt activities in violation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) without delay," said the joint statement from the three foreign ministries.

"We urge Iran to return to the negotiations in Vienna as soon as possible with a view to bringing them to a swift, successful conclusion. We have repeatedly stressed that time is on no-one's side," they added.

The accelerated enrichment is the latest move by Iran breaching restrictions imposed by a 2015 nuclear deal, which capped the purity to which Tehran can refine uranium.

The United States and its European allies have said such moves threaten talks on reviving the deal, which is currently suspended.

08.19.21

Kremlin informed Taliban; opposition forces led by Saleh massing in Panjshir Valley

08.19.21

Anti-Taliban forces massing in Panjshir Valley, Russia says

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov says resistance movement forming in country's last holdout — led by vice-president Amrullah Saleh and Ahmad Massoud, son of a famed Northern Alliance commander

AFP| Updated: 08.19.21, 17:42

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Thursday that a Taliban resistance is forming in Afghanistan's Panjshir Valley led by vice president Amrullah Saleh and Ahmad Massoud, the son of a famed anti-Taliban fighter.

"The Taliban doesn't control the whole territory of Afghanistan," Lavrov told reporters at a press conference in Moscow following a meeting with his Libyan counterpart.

"There are reports of the situation in the Panjshir Valley where the resistance of Afghanistan's vice president Mr. Saleh and Ahmad Massoud is concentrated," he said. Lavrov also reiterated his call for an inclusive dialogue involving all political players in Afghanistan for the formation of a "representative government".

The Panjshir Valley, located northeast of Kabul, is Afghanistan's last remaining holdout, known for its natural defenses.

According to images shared on social media, Saleh and Massoud - the son of anti-Taliban fighter and "Lion of Panjshir" Ahmed Shah Massoud - are pulling together a guerrilla movement to take on the Taliban.

Moscow has been cautiously optimistic about the new leadership in Kabul and is seeking contact with the militants in an effort to avoid instability spilling over to neighboring ex-Soviet states.

While the United States and other countries rushed to evacuate their citizens from Kabul, Russia said its embassy will continue to work.

Earlier this week, Russia's ambassador to Afghanistan Dmitry Zhirnov met with the Taliban in Kabul, hailing on state television a "positive and constructive" meeting. The Kremlin has in recent years reached out to the Taliban -- which is banned as an "extremist" group in Russia -- and hosted its representatives in Moscow several times, most recently last month.

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08.19.21

Several killed by gun shots or stampede in flag-waving protests against Taliban

08.19.21

Several killed in flag-waving protests against Taliban in Afghanistan

Video posted on social media shows a crowd of men and some women waving black, red and green national flags in Kabul, while Taliban claims they will not take revenge against old enemies and will respect the rights of women

Reuters| Published: 08.19.21, 14:34

Flag-waving protesters took to the streets of several Afghan cities on Thursday as popular opposition to the Taliban spread, and a witness said several people were killed when the militants fired on a crowd.

"Our flag, our identity," a crowd of men and some women waving black, red and green national flags shouted in the capital, a video clip posted on social media showed, on the day Afghanistan celebrates its 1919 independence from British control.

One woman walked with a flag wrapped around her shoulders. Some of those marching also chanted "God is greatest".

A Taliban spokesman was not immediately available for comment.

The Taliban have presented a moderate face to the world since they marched into Kabul on Sunday, saying they want peace, will not take revenge against old enemies and will respect the rights of women within the framework of Islamic law.

How the Taliban handle the protests, which have included people tearing down white Taliban flags, according to media, could determine whether people put faith in their assurances that they have changed since their 1996-2001 rule, when they severely restricted women, staged public executions and blew up ancient Buddhist statues.

In Asadabad, capital of the eastern province of Kunar, several people were killed during a rally but it was not clear if the casualties resulted from Taliban firing or from a stampede that it triggered, witness Mohammed Salim said.

"Hundreds of people came out on the streets," Salim said. "At first I was scared and didn't want to go but when I saw one of my neighbours joined in, I took out the flag I have at home.

"Several people were killed and injured in the stampede and firing by the Taliban." Protesters also took to the streets of the city of Jalalabad and a district of Paktia province, both also in the east.

On Wednesday, Taliban fighters fired at protesters waving flags in Jalalabad, killing three, witnesses and media reported. Media reported similar scenes in Asadabad and another eastern city, Khost, on Wednesday.

First Vice President Amrullah Saleh, who is trying to rally opposition to the Taliban, expressed support for the protests.

"Salute those who carry the national flag and thus stand for dignity of the nation," he said on Twitter.

Saleh said on Tuesday he was in Afghanistan and the "legitimate caretaker president" after President Ashraf Ghani fled as the Taliban took Kabul on Sunday.

CALL FOR END TO AIRPORT CROWDS

In an op-ed for the Washington Post, Amad Massoud, leader of the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan, based in the old anti-Taliban stronghold of the Panjshir Valley, northeast of Kabul, called for Western support to fight the Taliban.

"I write from the Panjshir Valley today, ready to follow in my father's footsteps, with mujahideen fighters who are prepared to once again take on the Taliban," wrote Massoud, the son of Amhad Shah Massoud, a veteran guerrilla leader assassinated by suspected al Qaeda militants on behalf of the Taliban in 2001.

Other former Afghan leaders including ex-president Hamid Karzai, have been holding talks with the Taliban as they put together a new government.

While Kabul has been generally calm since Taliban forces entered on Sunday, the airport has been in chaos as people rushed for a way out of the country.

Twelve people have been killed in and around the airport since then, a NATO and a Taliban official said. The deaths were caused either by gun shots or by stampedes, the Taliban official said.

He urged people who do not have the legal right to travel to go home. "We don't want to hurt anyone at the airport," said the Taliban official, who declined to be identified.

On Wednesday, witnesses said Taliban gunmen prevented people from getting into the airport compound. A Taliban official said soldiers had fired into the air to disperse the crowd.

Gunmen unleashed sustained fire into the air on Thursday at several entrances to the airport, sending the crowds, including women clutching babies, scattering. It was not clear if the men firing were Taliban or security staff helping U.S. forces inside.

The United States and other Western powers pressed on with the evacuation of their nationals and some of their Afghan staff from the capital's airport, from where about 8,000 people have been flown out since Sunday, a Western security official said.

Under a pact negotiated last year by former President Donald Trump's administration, the United States agreed to withdraw its forces in exchange for a Taliban guarantee they would not let Afghanistan be used to launch terrorist attacks.

The Taliban also agreed not to attack foreign forces as they left.

U.S. President Joe Biden said U.S. forces would remain until the evacuation of Americans was finished, even if that meant staying past an Aug. 31 U.S. deadline for withdrawal.

08.18.21

Taliban takeover emboldens Jihadists worldwide, for the rise ISIS and Al-Qaeda

08.18.21

Taliban takeover risks emboldening Jihadists worldwide, analysts say

Rapid ousting of the Western-backed Afghan government by terrorist group will provide Islamic fundamentalists with an example of how patience and careful strategy can pay off even after previous defeats

AFP | Published: 08.18.21, 14:32

The Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan following two decades of U.S. occupation risks emboldening jihadists worldwide, even if the group may already have a tense relationship with the Islamic State extremist group, analysts said.

The rapid ousting of the Western-backed Afghan government by the Taliban, who lost control of Afghanistan in the U.S.-led invasion two decades ago, will provide jihadists with an example of how patience and careful strategy can pay off even after the defeat of IS in Syria and Iraq.

It is also especially symbolic coming just ahead of the 20th anniversary of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States carried out by Al-Qaeda under Osama bin Laden and planned from Taliban-ruled Afghanistan where he had taken refuge.

"The Taliban's victory will give jihadist groups worldwide a major boost. It makes them believe that they can expel foreign powers, even major military powers like the United States," Colin Clarke, director of research at the New York-based Soufan Center think tank, told AFP.

"I expect to see a major propaganda blitz culminating on the 20-year anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. This will improve morale for jihadis from North Africa to Southeast Asia," he added.

Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, a fellow at George Washington University's Program on Extremism, said that the example of the Taliban's patience would convince jihadists

around the world to keep fighting, despite the existing hostility between the Afghan fundamentalists and IS.

"The Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan is something that actually emboldens jihadists everywhere although the IS is not necessarily happy about it."

"When groups see the Taliban celebrating victory, I think it convinces them that if they just keep fighting, eventually those they are fighting will collapse, whether it's in Somalia or West Africa.

"Eventually, they just hope the powers backing these governments they fight will withdraw."

Al-Qaeda's propaganda arm Al-Thabat has already welcomed the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, saying that "Muslims and Mujahideen in Pakistan, Kashmir, Yemen, Syria, Gaza, Somalia, and Mali are celebrating the liberation of Afghanistan and the implementation of Sharia within it."

The relationship between the Taliban and IS has always been more tricky and the IS branch in Afghanistan and Central Asia — the Islamic State - Khorasan Province (ISKP) — was set up by Taliban defectors.

But analysts say that despite ideological differences with the Taliban, IS will also profit from the collapse of the Afghan state and find Taliban-controlled Afghanistan fertile ground for its operations.

"Dr. Q", a Western expert on IS who publishes the results of research under a pseudonym on Twitter, counted 216 ISKP attacks between January 1 and August 11, compared with 34 in the same period last year.

"This makes Afghanistan one of the most dynamic IS provinces," he told AFP.

"Everything is not directly linked to the American withdrawal, but the victory of the Taliban also galvanizes the ISKP."

He said that, beyond fratricidal hatreds, there was a convergence of objectives between IS and the Taliban.

"IS regularly states that Westerners cannot stay forever" in the region. In this regard, the triumph of the Taliban "legitimizes their way of doing things."

And the chaos that could ensue in the months and years following the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan risks providing a breeding ground for all jihadist groups, who thrive on instability.

"The collapse of the Afghan army is eerily reminiscent of what we saw in Iraq in 2011," when jihadists began an insurgency that would eventually see the capture of cities like Mosul, said Clarke.

"I'm worried the same situation will unfold here in Afghanistan, with the rise of both ISIS and the resuscitation of Al-Qaeda," he said, using another acronym for the Islamic State group.

08.18.21

Taliban promise peace in Afghanistan guided by sharia religious law

08.18.21

Evacuations from Afghanistan gather momentum as Taliban promise peace Group vows no retribution against soldiers, contractors and says will respect rights of women; G7 leaders agree to discuss common strategy and approach to country's new regime next week

Reuters| Published: 08.18.21, 09:05

More than 2,200 diplomats and other civilians have been evacuated from Afghanistan on military flights, a Western security official told Reuters on Wednesday, as efforts gathered pace to get people out after the Taliban seized the capital.

The Taliban have said they want peace, will not take revenge against old enemies and would respect the rights of women within the framework of Islamic law. But thousands of Afghans, many of whom helped U.S.-led foreign forces over two decades, are desperate to leave.

"We are continuing at a very fast momentum, logistics show no glitches as of now and we have been able to remove a little over 2,200 diplomatic staff, foreign security staff and Afghans who worked for embassies," the Western security official said.

It was unclear when civilian flights would resume, he said.

The official did not give a breakdown of how many Afghans were among the more than 2,200 people to leave nor was it clear if that tally included more than 600 Afghan men, women and children who flew out on Sunday, crammed into a U.S. military C-17 cargo aircraft.

The Taliban, fighting since their 2001 ouster to expel foreign forces, seized Kabul on Sunday after a lightning offensive as U.S.-led Western forces withdrew under a deal that included a Taliban promise not to attack them as they leave.

U.S. forces running the airport had to stop flights on Monday after thousands of frightened Afghans swamped the facility looking for a flight out. Flights resumed on Tuesday as the situation came under control.

As they consolidated power, the Taliban said one of their leaders and co-founders, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, had returned to Afghanistan for the first time in more than 10 years. A Taliban official said leaders would show themselves to the world, unlike in the past when they lived in secret.

"Slowly, gradually, the world will see all our leaders, there will be no shadow of secrecy," the senior Taliban official told Reuters.

As Baradar was returning, a Taliban spokesman held the movement's first news briefing since their return to Kabul, suggesting they would impose their laws more softly than during their earlier time in power, between 1996-2001.

"We don't want any internal or external enemies," Zabihullah Mujahid, the Taliban's main spokesman, told reporters.

Women would be allowed to work and study and "will be very active in society but within the framework of Islam", he said.

During their rule, also **guided by sharia religious law**, the Taliban stopped women from working. Girls were not allowed to go to school and women had to wear all-enveloping burqas to go out and then only when accompanied by a male relative.

Ramiz Alakbarov, UN humanitarian coordinator for Afghanistan, told Reuters in an interview the Taliban had assured the United Nations it can pursue humanitarian work in Afghanistan, which is suffering from a severe drought.

The **European Union said** it would only **cooperate with Taliban** authorities **if they respected** fundamental **rights**, including those **of women**.

'Walk the talk'

Within Afghanistan, women expressed skepticism.

Afghan girls' education activist Pashtana Durrani, 23, was wary of Taliban promises.

"They have to walk the talk. Right now they are not doing that," she told Reuters.

Several women were ordered to leave their jobs during the Taliban's rapid advance across Afghanistan.

Mujahid said the Taliban would not seek retribution against former soldiers and government officials, and were granting an amnesty for ex-soldiers as well as contractors and translators who worked for international forces.

"Nobody is going to harm you, nobody is going to knock on your doors," he said, adding that there was a "huge difference" between the Taliban now and 20 years ago.

He also said families trying to flee the country at the airport should return home and nothing would happen to them.

Mujahid's conciliatory tone contrasted with comments by Afghan First Vice President Amrullah Saleh, who declared himself the "legitimate caretaker president" after **President Ashraf Ghani fled the country**, and vowed not to bow to Kabul's new rulers.

Saleh appears to have gone underground, and it is unclear how much support he can muster in a country exhausted by decades of conflict.

U.S. President Joe Biden and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said they had agreed to hold a virtual meeting of Group of Seven leaders next week to discuss a common strategy and approach to Afghanistan.

The decision by Biden, a Democrat, to stick to the withdrawal deal struck last year by his Republican predecessor Donald Trump has stirred widespread criticism at home and among U.S. allies.

Biden said he had to decide between asking U.S. forces to fight endlessly or follow through on Trump's withdrawal deal. He **blamed** the Taliban takeover on Afghan **leaders who fled and** the **army's unwillingness to fight**.