

BREAKING

Trump Denies Releasing 5,000 Taliban Prisoners — But His Administration Negotiated For Their Release

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TOPLINE Former President Donald Trump on Monday blamed the “inept Afghan government” for releasing 5,000 Taliban prisoners last year, even though the Trump administration called for prisoner swaps in an agreement with the Taliban.



Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo meets with the Taliban's political affairs chief Mullah Abdul ...

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KEY FACTS

- Trump lashed out against the former Afghan government and ex-president Ashraf Ghani for the prisoner releases in a statement issued Monday, at around the same time U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken told the House Foreign Affairs Committee the 5,000 prisoners freed last year “almost certainly” included some known terrorists.
- In reality, a commitment to release up to 5,000 Taliban prisoners and 1,000 prisoners from the U.S.-backed Afghan government’s side was included as a confidence-building move in a February 2020 [peace agreement](#) inked by the Trump administration and the Taliban in Doha.
- At the time, Ghani — whose government wasn’t a party to the U.S.-Taliban deal — told reporters he’d made “no commitment” to release Taliban prisoners, arguing prisoner swaps should be part of a wider peace settlement between the Taliban and the Afghan government instead of a precondition, the [New York Times](#) and [Reuters](#) reported.

- Despite this skepticism, Ghani’s government freed thousands of Taliban members, and government officials [agreed to release](#) a final set of prisoners in August 2020.
- Then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [acknowledged](#) prisoner swaps were controversial but argued they would clear the way for peace talks between the Taliban and Afghan government last summer, and warned “the decisions and conduct of both parties to intra-Afghan negotiations will affect the size and scope of future U.S. assistance.”
- Last September, Zalmay Khalilzad — who served as U.S. special representative for Afghanistan reconciliation under the Biden and Trump administrations — [told the BBC](#) he’s “not happy about” the releases but “sometimes you have to make hard decisions.”
- Trump's office did not respond to a request for comment from *Forbes*.

CRUCIAL QUOTE

“The inept Afghan government, led by corrupt President Ghani, released 5,000 prisoners—not the Trump Administration,” Trump said in a Monday afternoon statement. “Secretary of State Blinken is doing everything in his power to make the most inept withdrawal in history look, at least, acceptable. It never will.”

CHIEF CRITIC

“Trump’s deal forced the Afghan government to release 5,000 prisoners, and offered international legitimacy to the Taliban,” Rep. Gregory Meeks (D-N.Y.), chair of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, [said](#) ahead of testimony from Blinken on Monday.

KEY BACKGROUND

Last year's landmark [U.S.-Taliban deal](#) was designed to wind down the United States' 20-year presence in Afghanistan at a time of bipartisan war-weariness. Trump agreed to pull all U.S. troops from the country by May 2021, and the Taliban promised not to let al-Qaeda use Afghanistan as a base to threaten U.S. security, among other concessions. Trump also [pushed to remove](#) all U.S. troops by late December, several months ahead of schedule. In the spring, Biden [extended](#) the troop withdrawal deadline to Sept. 11 but backed the decision to leave Afghanistan, arguing the conflict is no longer important to U.S. interests. But the Afghan government crumbled at a rapid pace as the United States withdrew, and the Taliban took over the capital city of Kabul last month, forcing the Biden administration to launch a frenetic and often dangerous evacuation mission from Kabul's airport. Biden has faced stiff criticism for his handling of the withdrawal, including from [Trump and his allies](#), but he's [insisted](#) a longer U.S. presence in Afghanistan would put American troops at risk, partly because the Taliban expected him to abide by the 2020 agreement with the Trump administration.

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