

BROOKINGS

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Afghanistan Victory Crucial for President Obama

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[Bruce Riedel](#), Senior Fellow, [Foreign Policy](#), [Saban Center for Middle East Policy](#)

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Bruce Riedel is a senior fellow at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy and a former CIA officer who has advised four Presidents on the Middle East. He spoke this week at the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv, about President Barack Obama's policy towards Al Qaeda, Afghanistan and Pakistan, and its implications for the entire Middle East. He joins us now from our Tel Aviv studio.

IBA NEWS: Welcome.

BRUCE RIEDEL: Thank you.

IBA: Mr. Riedel, President Obama characterized Al Qaeda as the number one threat facing the United States. Would you agree?

RIEDEL: Absolutely. Seven and a half years after we went to war with Al Qaeda, Al Qaeda remains a deadly threat to the United States. It has developed a sanctuary of safe haven on the badlands of the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, and from there, it continues to plot attacks against America, its allies around the world, and against the American homeland. The threat is both direct, of an attack like 9/11, and indirect- the inspiration that Al Qaeda provides to extremists throughout the Islamic world.

IBA: As a former CIA officer, I want to ask you- It's been eight years since 9/11. America's got the largest army in the world, along with the CIA and other intelligence services in the pursuit of Osama bin Laden, and yet, time and again, he has proven elusive. How is it possible that a single man has been able to dupe the security

systems of the entire Western world?

RIEDEL: It's a remarkable accomplishment. This man has been able to outfox not only the U.S. intelligence community, but that of the entire Western world and beyond. A big part of the reason is we took our eye off the ball. We had Al Qaeda and the Taliban cornered at the end of 2001 and early 2002, and instead we went off on a war in Iraq. Now, I'm not here to debate the decisions of the war in Iraq, but one of the consequences was that we took our eye off the ball, and Al Qaeda was able to recover, rebuild, and that's why we face the problem we face today.

IBA: Let's talk about the war in Afghanistan. Now, it's been proven, time and again, that Afghanistan seems to be, at least, an unwinnable conflict, even for the superpowers, like Russia and the U.S. Is President Obama the man who can turn that around? And if he doesn't, what are the implications for the Middle East?

RIEDEL: I think the President understands that the war in Afghanistan is the single most important foreign policy challenge he faces in his administration. And what he does in Afghanistan will define his first term, at least, and may decide whether he gets a second term. He is now pondering, deciding, whether to send additional forces. He has already doubled the size of the American forces in Afghanistan. If we fail- if we are unable to defeat the Taliban and Al Qaeda in Afghanistan- the ripple effects will be enormous, most importantly, on Pakistan next door. Pakistan is the world's second largest Muslim country, it has the fastest-growing nuclear arsenal in the world today, and it has more terrorists per square kilometer than any other country in the world. But the ripple effects would go broader than that. [They] would go throughout the Islamic world. Failure of the United States and its NATO allies in Afghanistan would be a game changer. It would send the signal that Jihadist Islam has prevailed over a superpower.

IBA: OK. Bruce Riedel from the Saban Center. Thanks very much for joining us and IBA News today.

RIEDEL: My pleasure.
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