

The US Withdrawal from Afghanistan Portends a Vacuum and Uncertain Future

Yoram Schweitzer and Oded Eran | No. 1497 | July 21, 2021

The impending United States withdrawal from Afghanistan fulfills the goals of the three administrations prior to the Biden administration to end the US role as liberator, policeman, and funder of this divided and riven country, which it entered following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. The American offensive in Afghanistan achieved its initial objectives, attacking al-Qaeda and toppling the Taliban regime, but subsequently the US failed to prevent the Taliban's regaining power. The United States has vowed to respond harshly if it is attacked on its territory again, but Afghanistan's neighbors are looking toward the future with concern given the vacuum left by the withdrawal. Furthermore, the narrative that will be disseminated by the Taliban and al-Qaeda alike about the victory of the fundamentalist Islamic *muqawama* (resistance) over a superpower could be a source of inspiration to other organizations in various regions, including in the Middle East. Israel and its allies in the West should prepare for the possibility that Afghanistan will return to being a base for global terrorism and a model for emulation.

On July 8, 2021, President Joe Biden announced that United States forces would leave Afghanistan by the end of August, after 20 years in the country. The immediate motive for the military intervention in Afghanistan was the September 11, 2001 attacks by al-Qaeda, which caused human casualties and damage to the symbols of American government and economy on an unprecedented scale and level of sophistication.

The United States invasion of Afghanistan aimed to achieve several immediate objectives: removing al-Qaeda from the country and dealing it a fatal blow; uprooting the radical-fundamentalist Taliban regime from Afghanistan, under whose auspices al-Qaeda operated; and aiding the establishment of an alternative democratic and liberal regime. All of these achievements were meant to deter terrorist organizations and their supporters from additional mass-

casualty attacks in the United States. And indeed, these objectives were achieved in the short term. Al-Qaeda suffered a severe blow, was removed, and was forced into exile in Pakistan and Iran. The Taliban was forced out of its strongholds in the central cities and ceased ruling in Afghanistan, a new administration headed by Hamid Karzai was elected, and for the first time free elections for the legislative assembly were held. The United States proved its might and its determination to punish those daring to attack it on its soil with full severity.

However, when in 2003, a year and a half after the September 11 events, the United States invaded Iraq in order to remove the regime of Saddam Hussein, it diverted the attention away from fighting against the Taliban and al-Qaeda and thus lost a significant degree of the practical and moral support of the local population in Afghanistan and some of its allies. In effect, the United States allowed the Taliban and al-Qaeda to recover and reestablish themselves in Afghanistan. The Afghan regime itself, which suffered from severe corruption and did not gain public confidence, did not rule effectively throughout the country. Thus, contrary to its initial achievements and plans, the United States was forced to reinforce its military forces continuously, as well as increase its investment in building the Afghan army so that it would be able to cope with the Taliban. Against this backdrop, the effort to prevent the Taliban's return as a significant force in Afghanistan failed, and the organization regained control of extensive areas of the country. It is estimated that the Taliban currently rules over 13 million residents in 212 of the country's districts, while the government of President Ashraf Ghani rules about 10 million residents in about 70 districts and in the capital, Kabul; in 116 districts, home to some 9 million residents, there is still no clear ruling party.

Following the decision by former President Donald Trump, peace talks were held between the United States and the Taliban in Doha, ending in a signed agreement that the United States would withdraw from Afghanistan by February 2021, on condition that the Taliban would hold talks with the Afghan administration in Kabul on cooperation in managing the country's. The agreement also stated that the Taliban would prevent an al-Qaeda presence in the country, and in any case would ensure that it does not operate out of its territory against the United States and would prevent the organization called the Islamic State in Khorasan, which operates in Afghanistan, from doing so as well. President Biden, despite delaying the withdrawal by half a year, announced his

commitment to the agreement and avowed that by the end of August the withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan would be completed, leaving behind a force of 650 personnel who would protect the embassy in Kabul. So far, 95 percent of the American bases and forces in Afghanistan have been evacuated.

The United States goals in Afghanistan after the withdrawal, as President Biden defined them, are: maintaining intelligence superiority in the region; assisting the Afghan government and preventing its collapse in face of the strengthened Taliban; achieving an agreement between the Taliban and the Afghan government; preventing al-Qaeda from reestablishing itself in Afghanistan; and preventing Islamic State activity in Khorasan against the United States.

Critics of the withdrawal decision claim that withdrawing all of the forces from Afghanistan and forfeiting an intelligence and military presence in the country could lead to the Taliban quickly taking over Afghanistan and the re-establishment of a radical fundamentalist government in the country. It would return to being a base for terrorist organizations and the United States would lose the ability to respond effectively if it is again attacked on its soil by these forces, which is an objective defined by President Biden.

Biden's firm answer to the question of whether he trusts the Taliban was negative. The decision to withdraw, despite the doubts and concerns, reflects the strategic orientation adopted by the first Obama administration (2009-2012) – focusing global interests on the main United States adversaries, especially China, and hence also concentrating the political, economic, and military effort in the Pacific Ocean-East Asia arena. The imperative of the United States presence in Central Asia and the Middle East, which exacted a heavy toll in blood and treasure in recent decades, decreased accordingly. During the 20 years of its presence in Afghanistan, the United States invested about a trillion dollars there (civilian and military aid and the price of the military presence and the combat), and President Biden admitted hesitantly that like empires that sank in the Afghan mire in the past, the United States did not receive a return on its investment.

Furthermore, the Taliban and al-Qaeda themselves, while they paid a heavy price for their involvement in the attack on the United States 20 years ago, have scored an achievement in the very decision by the United States to withdraw.

The Taliban, which in recent weeks has held talks with Russian, Iranian, Turkish, and Chinese representatives, currently enjoys recognition and legitimacy as a political force – advantages that it unsuccessfully strove to achieve after it rose to power in 1996. Following the American withdrawal, the Taliban and al-Qaeda will likely declare their success in coping with another foreign empire and their ability to remove it from Afghanistan, known as the "graveyard of empires," and the victory of jihad in the struggle against an "infidel" force.

Assuming that the Taliban recaptures all of the territory of Afghanistan after the US withdrawal and imposes extremist *sharia* law throughout the country, the question arises whether it will abide by its commitment to prevent the growth of a global terrorist base within Afghanistan. Furthermore, assuming that the Taliban will not remove al-Qaeda from Afghanistan, it is not clear whether it will prevent it from embarking on operations in the West and whether al-Qaeda will uphold the policy of striking the "distant enemy," meaning the United States and the West, as the preferred strategy of struggle, or whether it will focus on its consolidation in the peripheral countries and manage terror networks in regions where it and its allies are present – Yemen, the Sahel, African countries, and Southeast Asia. Another question is whether and how the Taliban will succeed in restraining the terrorist activity of the Islamic State in Khorasan, which is a bitter ideological adversary.

The vacuum that will be left by the withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan will pose a political and military challenge for countries in the region surrounding Afghanistan and Pakistan. The possibility of the immediate internal struggle between the Taliban and the current government in Kabul seeping outside the borders of Afghanistan, which would be reflected in regional and global terrorist activity, is a likely threat that demands preparations by neighboring countries and beyond.

The Biden administration itself will be tested as to its willingness to assist the existing regime in Afghanistan to maintain its stability and the rights of the country's citizens, and of women in particular, by granting humanitarian and political aid, and in extreme situations by the operations of military forces conducted from outside Afghanistan to defend against another terrorist strike. It is likely that the withdrawal will be perceived and presented as a defeat of the Western superpower, which could encourage Islamic organizations seeking *muqawama* to challenge the United States and its allies. However, it is possible

that an informed examination of the results of the September 11 attacks, especially the aftermath of the first few years, as well as an understanding of the reasons for the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and concern about responses by the United States and its allies, will deter them from flagrant adventurism.

In contrast, countries in the Middle East that are identified with the United States have internalized the clear message of previous administrations, which Biden brings to a closure – decreased investment of efforts in the region and an expectation that these countries will take on (against their will) most of the military and financial burden that the United States is forgoing. In this context too, the agreements signed in the past year between Israel and several Arab countries and the chance of improved relations with others create potential frameworks for intelligence and other modes of cooperation, which is part of the preparations for the day after the end of the military presence in Afghanistan, and after which similar steps may be taken in other areas. The involvement of the region's countries in the fight against ISIS created a basis for future cooperation, and even if the United States removes its soldiers from Afghanistan it can and should help them organize as necessary, both vis-à-vis Iran and vis-à-vis the possibility of renewed terrorism originating from Afghanistan.

Prime Minister Naftali Bennett should raise this issue in his forthcoming conversation with President Biden and the heads of the foreign and defense branches of his administration as part of discussing the region's issues, on the assumption that the administration is looking for concrete ideas in response to the vacuum created by the withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan.

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