

Lesson in the Limits of Power: The Withdrawal of the United States and its Allies from Afghanistan

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The bitter taste left by the chaotic withdrawal of the forces of the United States and its allies from Afghanistan, the collapse of the Afghan government and army, and the seizure of power by the Taliban are evidence of the failure of US nation building efforts along the lines of a Western democracy. Ending the campaign in Afghanistan immediately after achieving its first objective, without trying to reshape the country, would have spared the United States the embarrassment heightened by the complications of the withdrawal and a danger that Afghanistan would once again be an unstable country and the base for the export of terror. In the short term, America's image and credibility have been damaged, and various international actors will seek to use this to promote their own interests. However, it is not yet clear whether the withdrawal will translate into a long term strategic challenge. For Israel, it is important to examine the effect on extremist Islamic organizations and on Iranian motivation to push the United States out of Iraq. In addition, how the United States sees Israel's role in the Middle East in view of the changes in its regional deployment is of major significance.

The planned withdrawal of the forces of the United States and its allies from Afghanistan, which is still underway, is unfolding under grim scenes of the rapid takeover of the country by the Taliban, after the Afghani leadership, and above all its army, which was trained and equipped for many years at a cost of billions of dollars, did not lift a finger to block this development. The rapid and chaotic sequence of events immediately raised questions within and outside the US as to whether these events were inevitable, or if they reflected a failure of leadership, and above all of intelligence. This was particularly relevant in the context of the firm statement by President Joe Biden in early July, whereby the Afghan army would successfully resist the Taliban, thus reducing their chances of seizing power in the country.

Even if this was an intelligence “surprise,” the US administration had enough time to prepare for an orderly withdrawal of all NATO forces by the official and symbolic date of September 11, and to avoid an impression of flight, with timely evacuation of Afghans who cooperated with the Americans and their allies while in the country. As part of the preparations for this evacuation and for the “day after,” the US could have coordinated a regional move with neighboring countries, particularly Pakistan, China, India, Russian, and Turkey, in order to minimize the danger of Afghanistan becoming once again an unstable country and exporter of terror, and to prepare for the humanitarian, political, and economic consequences of the end of the US presence.

Questions abound about the lack of US preparedness for the conduct of the Afghan leadership and the Taliban in the days prior to the withdrawal. An additional critical question concerns the degree to which the US “escapade” in Afghanistan, which lasted 20 years, achieved its objectives. The United States invaded Afghanistan to inflict significant damage on al-Qaeda, with a secondary objective of “nation building” along the lines of Western democracy. While to a large extent the first objective was achieved (including the liquidation of Bin Laden in 2011), the US failed to achieve its second objective, and for the same reasons that it failed in Iraq. These failures illustrate the futile use of force to impose political-institutional-value changes on societies that are not ready for them, particularly in the short term. Ending the campaign as soon as the first objective was achieved, without trying to reshape the country, would have spared the US the embarrassment of the withdrawal.

Whatever the case, even if the images emerging from Afghanistan are not pleasant for the administration, and the developments have shocked the leaders of US foreign policy, President Biden’s decision to withdraw was inevitable, since it not only reflected his understanding of the limits of US power, but also implemented the intentions of his predecessors – Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump. Moreover, the agreement signed by the Trump administration with the Taliban (which the organization did not implement) reflected an understanding that the Taliban are a legitimate partner. The Biden administration, and other countries including China, Russia, and Iran, maintains a dialogue with the organization in an effort to influence its conduct both inside and outside Afghanistan. Even if President Biden will be remembered for underestimating the Taliban and overestimating the Afghan army, the perceptible weariness of the American public with their country’s involvement in international conflicts in general, and military involvement in particular will compensate for the criticism and even exceed it, and it is doubtful whether the President will suffer any long term political damage for this move.

Furthermore, the end of its presence in Afghanistan will make it easier for the United States to direct attention and resources to what the administration defines as its principal challenge – China. In July 2021, as the withdrawal from Afghanistan was

underway, and in the framework of the strategic dialogue with Iraq, President Biden announced that by the end of the year, the US would end its combat missions in Iraq, and the forces remaining in the country would focus on advising and training the local forces. This decision will probably not change, even in view of the images from Afghanistan, although they might influence the preparations for withdrawal. Moreover, unlike in Afghanistan, the reduced American presence in Iraq comes with the full agreement and cooperation of the Iraqi leadership.

It is too early to assess all the implications of the latest events regarding Afghanistan in the context of the international dynamic that has been unfolding since the start of President Biden's term of office, and above all in view of his ambition to restore the United States to a position of primacy. In the short term, the events will certainly damage the image of the US as a superpower and the belief of its allies in its readiness to come to their aid in times of crisis. Even as the Taliban seek to quickly establish their rule throughout Afghanistan, they and al-Qaeda are likely to celebrate their victory over a world power, which they will present in terms of a religious Islamic achievement. Various international actors may try to test the power and determination of the United States and look for opportunities to exploit this blow to its image in order to promote their own interests. However, it is not yet clear how far the current American failure will be translated into a long term strategic challenge that could seriously threaten the position of the US.

Inter alia, there is growing likelihood that Afghanistan's neighbors, above all China, India, and Iran, as well as Russia, whose backyard includes Tajikistan, will be threatened by Afghanistan's instability. The danger that the Taliban may turn its attention toward them will force them to invest greater resources than before in dealing with these threats. On the other hand, developments in this direction would serve American interests in particular, and Western interests in general. Indeed, when explaining the withdrawal, President Biden stressed that China and Russia would like the US to remain in Afghanistan in order to weaken it. Accordingly, a regional conference sponsored by the UN would help all parties, including the US, to strengthen mutual coordination and ensure that the departure of American forces does not undermine stability in the region around Afghanistan, particularly by addressing the humanitarian, security, political, and economic implications of the move. All aid given to Afghanistan will hopefully be subject to conditions that prevent any possible Afghan government from returning the country into a haven for terror organizations.

For Israel, it is important to examine developments at three levels:

- a. *The effect on the motivation of terror organizations:* The rapid seizure of control by the Taliban and the promotion of the narrative that they brought about the American failure could strengthen the motivation of extremist terror organizations to boost their activities in the global arena, including

the Middle East, and against Israeli targets. However, the US plays only a small role in the fight against terrorist groups hostile to Israel, so the retreat from Afghanistan will probably not significantly change how those groups assess the situation and the targets of their activities.

- b. *Iran's regional conduct*: Developments in Afghanistan place Iran in a difficult situation. It sees the US withdrawal as a positive development in terms of Iranian interests as to the end of the American presence in the Middle East; Tehran hopes that the next stage in the process will be a withdrawal from Iraq. This development would significantly improve the security of Iran's backyard and also give it "strategic revenge" for the killing of Qasem Soleimani. This approach will reinforce the Iranian narrative that greater pressure must be exerted on the Americans in order to "persuade" them to implement their intention to leave Iraq. On the other hand, if Iran is called upon to increase its involvement in Afghanistan (which does not seem likely at present), it will need resources (particularly from the Revolutionary Guards) that it probably does not have, and even if they are located, this will necessarily be at the expense of its regional activity.
- c. *Israel's relations with the United States*: Notwithstanding the images that are interpreted as American flight from Afghanistan, the US administration is not expected to change its policy of withdrawal from what it defines as "endless" military conflicts, including the process of reducing its military presence in the Middle East. The main actors in the region believe that the Middle East is losing its importance in the array of American national security considerations, leading to waning American willingness to invest economic and military resources in the region, and this obliges them to update their assessments and conduct. This understanding may perhaps also affect how they assess the degree of support that the US will grant Israel in the face of regional challenges. Moreover, in objective terms, Israel must plan its moves based on an understanding that even if the administration is sincere in its empathy and support for Israel, there is still only a slim chance that it will be prepared in future to invest military resources to deal with challenges in the region, including the Iranian challenge. However, the trend toward pulling out of the Middle East may actually strengthen the administration's assessment of Israel's value as a country that can help it preserve and promote American interests in the region.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Judith Rosen