



Joint Task Force-Crisis Response personnel following the attack at Kabul Airport, August 2021. Photo: Lt. Mark Andries

The United States Withdrawal from Afghanistan after Two Decades of a Global War on Terrorism

Amit Ayalon

Reichman University

Ido Gadi Raz

Bar Ilan University

Baruch Amiel

Reichman University

In the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks, the United States assumed the leading role in the war against terror by attacking al-Qaeda and the Taliban regime, which afforded protection to al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. The expanded commitment by the US and its allies to rebuild Afghanistan, combined with the renewed global terrorist threat, prolonged the war. In the Doha Agreement, signed in February 2020, the US undertook to withdraw its forces in exchange for a promise by the Taliban that it would not help terrorist organizations operate in Afghanistan. On August 30, 2021, following two decades of a global war on terrorism, US forces withdrew from Afghanistan. However, the Taliban's takeover, combined with the terrorist activity by ISIS Khorasan, raises questions about Afghanistan's future. The Taliban's achievements are liable to be shared by extremist and jihad movements. This article reviews the significance of the US withdrawal, while examining US foreign policy in Afghanistan under four American presidents.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Taliban, United States, withdrawal, terrorism, ISIS, al-Qaeda

Introduction

The United States completed its withdrawal from Afghanistan on August 30, 2021, following a war on terrorism waged over two decades. The September 11, 2001 attacks prompted a cognitive change within the US administration and in the foreign policy of the United States and its allies. The pursuit of the terrorist organizations responsible for the deadly attacks, and the countries and regimes that protected them, began during the term of President George W. Bush and continued under the presidents who succeeded him.

An examination of the policies on the war in Afghanistan followed by Presidents Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden reveals prominent differences in their rhetoric, which was aimed at showing that their policy was superior to that of their predecessors. In practice, however, activity surrounding the war in Afghanistan featured mainly continuity. Administrations from the two opposing political camps encountered a dynamic situation and concrete events that demanded a response, and over the years additional approaches emerged in the strategy in the war on terror (Jenkins, 2017; Levitt, 2021).

The decisive change in United States-Taliban relations occurred on February 29, 2020 when the Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan was signed in Doha between the United States, under the Trump administration, and the Taliban leadership. The United States undertook to withdraw its military forces, and the Taliban committed to refrain from helping terrorist organizations, above all al-Qaeda, to operate in Afghanistan. The agreement also provided for the beginning of negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government, led by President Ashraf Ghani. Likewise, the agreement afforded the Western forces a degree of security from attack by the Taliban (Jenkins, 2021; Aspen Security Forum, 2021).

While the war on terrorism achieved its original aims, its ramifications for the countries, peoples, and regions in which the allies operated were extensive. The threat of terrorism from al-

Qaeda within Afghanistan was reduced, but the needs and challenges that arose due to American dominance in this territorial area required the development of new strategies that went beyond the war effort. The commitment by the United States and its allies to Afghanistan grew from a policy of fighting terrorism to an emphasis on nation-building and reconstruction. This joined a renewed and heightened global terrorist threat, which prolonged the war by the United States and its allies in Afghanistan in what became known as the “forever war” (“The U.S. War in Afghanistan,” 2021).

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President George Bush

The September 11, 2001 attacks early in Republican President George Walker Bush’s term in office to a large extent shaped American policy on anti-terrorism warfare during his presidency. The deadliest terrorist attacks ever on American soil killed 2,977 people and wounded thousands. Among those injured were people from 80 different countries. The terrorist organizations’ success in attacking key bastions of the American nation with unprecedented precision struck a cognitive chord within the administration officials and among the American people and sparked many questions. The attacks were perceived as a threat to the American way of life and the values of Western democracy. The world united under American leadership in the first war aimed against terrorism, turning it into the prominent threat in the foreign policy of the United States and its allies in subsequent years (Bush, 2001; Biden, 2021b).

The United States launched a global campaign against terrorism, in which it sought to achieve five main goals:

- a. Defense of the homeland against further terrorist attacks
- b. Overthrow of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan
- c. Defeat of the al-Qaeda organization and neutralization of its ability to carry out terrorist attacks
- d. Deterrence against terrorist groups and countries supporting terrorism from planning or carrying out terrorist attacks against the US and American interests in the future
- e. Vengeance for the loss of life and pursuit of justice for the American people by bringing the responsible parties, headed by al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, to justice (Bush, 2001; Biden, 2021b)

The Taliban organization rose to power in Afghanistan in 1996 following a four-year war between rival mujahideen groups. Bin Laden returned to Afghanistan that year from Sudan, where he resided in the 1990s. The Taliban then provided al-Qaeda with a safe haven in Afghanistan for its activities, including recruitment and training of tens of thousands of operatives. The terrorist attacks by al-Qaeda after 1996 were destructive, killing many Americans. Then-United States President Bill Clinton launched a campaign against the Taliban, which included efforts for Saudi Arabia and Pakistan to pressure the Taliban to extradite bin Laden; the imposition of economic sanctions by the UN Security Council; and an embargo on the Taliban. These efforts were nonetheless unsuccessful in severing the strong link between the Taliban leadership and the al-Qaeda leader (Thomas, 2021).

The September 11 attacks on United States soil were planned and carried out by al-Qaeda, which operated in Afghanistan territory and enjoyed the Taliban's protection. President Bush's demand that the Taliban leadership extradite bin Laden and al-Qaeda operatives to the United States was refused. The Bush administration declared war on terrorism in Afghanistan in 2001, based on the Taliban-al-

Qaeda nexus. Terrorism was categorized as activity emanating from countries sponsoring terrorist organizations, which in turn were defined as the main terrorism actors that must be suppressed. This idea shaped the strategy underlying preemptive action aimed at preventing the consolidation of organizations in those countries, while pursuing both the regimes and the organizations (US Department of State, 2001; Thomas, 2021).

In the first 100 days of the war, the United States pursued a comprehensive foreign policy. Bush led an international coalition working through a number of channels: public expressions of support, sanctions, intelligence cooperation, military aid, and active participation in warfare. Military operations in 2001-2002, among them Operation Enduring Freedom in October 2001 and Operation Anaconda in March 2002, with participation of limited American and Afghan forces, resulted in the defeat and overthrow of the Taliban regime. In parallel, the Bush administration's definition of the enemy expanded to the "axis of evil," which included Iran, Iraq, and North Korea (US Department of State, 2001; Jenkins, 2017).

Notwithstanding the severe blow, both Taliban leader Mullah Omar and al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden escaped. Omar likely fled to Pakistan, while bin Laden remained in hiding in the mountain area of Tora Bora on the eastern border of Afghanistan with Pakistan. The survival of the remaining leaders reinforced the organization's determination, and proved that American military superiority was not absolute and that the Salafi jihadist ideological message could be revived. Indeed, this ideology continued to exert a magnetic attraction for Muslims in the succeeding years (US Department of State, 2001; Katzman & Thomas, 2017; Associated Press, 2019; "U.S. War in Afghanistan," 2021).

From 2002 onward, the rationale underlying American policy in Afghanistan changed from warfare to nation-building. The Bush administration already realized that terrorism

had deep roots, and that large and far-flung efforts were needed to uproot it. While Bush sought to avoid the struggle against terrorism being labeled as a war against Islam, the inherent connection between the agents of terrorism in Afghanistan and the history and narrative of the Afghan people clearly required the formation of civilian frameworks that would create a link between the Afghan people and the democratization process led by the international coalition under United States leadership.

In August 2003, the American army established a civilian framework, headed by NATO, for reconstruction in Afghanistan's provinces, and the Bush administration donated over \$38 billion as part of an assistance program. In January 2004, 502 representatives of the Afghan government formulated a constitution and created a presidential system, while unifying the country's ethnic groups. Elections were held that October, with Hamid Karzai elected Afghanistan's first president. At the same time, bin Laden reappeared in late 2004 in a video clip, claiming responsibility for the terrorist attacks on American soil and ridiculing the American president. The United States extended its commitment to Afghanistan in 2005 in order to guarantee its security and prosperity, while consolidating the country's democratic regime. Karzai and Bush announced the founding of a strategic partnership that gave the United States military access to the Afghan army's facilities (Associated Press, 2019; "U.S. War in Afghanistan," 2021).

The Bush administration likewise approved economic sanctions, led by the Justice Department, as an additional tool in anti-terrorist warfare in general, and against the Taliban regime in particular. A presidential order allowed the Treasury Department to blacklist people and entities from anywhere in the world providing any aid whatsoever to the terrorist elements. In 2002, the Justice Department classified the Taliban as a terrorist organization that provided al-Qaeda with safe haven in its

country (Administration of George Bush, 2002; Bartlett, 2021).

The terrorist organization gained strength in 2006, and the attacks by al-Qaeda in Afghanistan increased significantly. The number of suicide attacks was five-fold the preceding year's number: 27 attacks in 2005 and 139 in 2006. The United States continued transferring responsibility for command of the international military forces (International Security Assistance Force—ISAF) in eastern Afghanistan to the Afghan security forces, but maintained an ongoing military presence, averaging over 21,000 soldiers in 2007. At the same time, the NATO alliance reinforced its forces, which reached over 51,000 soldiers in 2008 (NATO, 2017; Peters, 2021).

The most important contribution of the Bush doctrine was shaping the power structure and operations of the US intelligence community. The situation created by the global war on terror led to the classification of the new wars of the 21st century as intelligence-based wars. Bush described the change in the institution of war caused by the need to adapt it to warfare against a concealed enemy, meaning an agent of terrorism. In a 2006 speech, Bush argued that the national security of the United States and its victory in the war on terror depended on its ability "to detain, question, and, when appropriate, prosecute terrorists captured" (Bush, 2006, p. 410; Brun, 2021).

The call for reform in the intelligence apparatus began before the September 11 attacks, and was bolstered by a report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States in July 2004. In December 2004, the United States Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act took effect; its main purpose was to strengthen and improve the intelligence apparatus by removing the existing bureaucratic barriers. In February 2005, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence was founded to serve as the senior intelligence agent advising the United States president, and to take responsibility for all the efforts of the

17 different intelligence agencies, in order to increase coordination between them in the war on terror. As part of this, intelligence became the spearhead of the war in Afghanistan and a key element in the doctrine dictated by Bush for US foreign policy, and these efforts in the war against terror continued in subsequent decades (Bush, 2006; Brun, 2021; Office of the Director of National Intelligence, n.d.).

Thus in his term in office, President Bush led the global war on terrorism, concluded the initial campaign by achieving the overthrow of the Taliban regime, and launched the democratization and reconstruction of Afghanistan, while channeling most American resources to the war on terror in Iraq, which had much influence on the terrorism of subsequent years. Since then, US intelligence superiority and worldwide intelligence cooperation have remained important achievements. At the same time, the international community did not support the US invasion of Iraq, and disagreements about the conduct of the war had a negative impact on this international cooperation (Bush, 2006; Brun, 2021).

President Barack Obama

Democrat Barack Obama was elected president in 2008. His policy in the war on terror focused on three goals: refraining from the use or reinforcement of American military troops in other countries; sharing the monetary and operational costs through international coalitions; and transferring ownership of the war on terrorism to the local population. Obama's aim was to step back from Bush's uncompromising policy on the use of force, and he shifted from a global war on terrorism to countering violent extremism (CVE). In practice, however, the change was less readily felt (Stern, 2015; Jenkins, 2017; "U.S. War in Afghanistan," 2021).

In January 2009, the United States came to realize that there could be no final victory in a war on terror, and that a solution should be found for a state of recurring campaigns.

The escalation in Afghanistan led to its repositioning as the key front in the war. The new counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy focused on the foreign combatants who streamed into Afghanistan via the Pakistani border to help the Taliban (Rice, 2009). Stanley McChrystal was appointed military commander in Afghanistan, and took an aggressive approach, while requesting massive reinforcements of soldiers. Harsh disputes between the American military commanders and the president were reflected in Obama's initial refusal to grant the request. His refusal was met with critical statements by McChrystal, who was eventually dismissed from his position, despite the president's consent to a reinforcement of 17,000 soldiers. Pakistan was designated as the leading cause of the instability in Afghanistan, the Obama administration took measures to defeat al-Qaeda in the two countries, and the force was increased by an additional 4,000 soldiers (Stern, 2015; Associated Press, 2019).

In December 2009, the Obama administration announced a significant escalation in Afghanistan. Thirty thousand soldiers were added to the 67,000 soldiers already in the country, concomitant with the announcement that the US would withdraw from Iraq by 2011. The United States continued the transfer of responsibility from the coalition that it led to the Afghan forces. For the first time, Obama presented a timetable for the American presence in Afghanistan. July 2011 was set as the date for beginning the withdrawal of United States and NATO forces, and a commitment was made to transfer responsibility to the Afghan forces by the end of 2014 (NATO, 2017; Peters, 2021).

At the same time, and continuing his predecessor's policy, Obama made an effort to attack the Taliban's resources and regular activity by imposing economic sanctions. The Treasury Department set up a unit in 2008 that worked in cooperation with the Department of Defense and the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), with the aim of undermining the Taliban's sources of income (Bartlett, 2021).

On May 1, 2011, al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden was killed in his hideout in Abbottabad, Pakistan. The elimination of the main United States target in the war gave legitimacy to the sought-after withdrawal. In June 2011, Obama announced the reduction of US forces by 30,000 by the end of 2012, while at the same time confirming for the first time the peace talks with the Taliban. The Afghan government disavowed these talks because it feared they would give American legitimacy to the Taliban. In June 2013, the Afghan security forces received the command from NATO. The United States-led coalition focused on transferring authority, providing training to the local forces, and waging counterterrorism operations. In May 2014, Obama announced a revised timetable for the withdrawal. Most forces left the country by the end of 2016, following a two-year delay. NATO completed the withdrawal of its forces in December 2014, and began a new mission of supporting local forces and supplementing the American effort with a force numbering 9,500 soldiers (Peters, 2016; Kurtzleben, 2016; Associated Press, 2019; Peters, 2021).

The targeted killings were an important element of Obama's strategy for waging war against terrorism, together with defense aid for partners and massive electronic surveillance. Two main means were employed: special operations and aerial attacks (Stern, 2015). On November 4, 2002, a targeted killing was carried out in Yemen using an American drone equipped with a Hellfire missile. This unprecedented attack killed Abu Ali al-Harithi, who was suspected of leading the 2000 terrorist attack against the *USS Cole* ("The War in Yemen," n.d.). The drone attack policy included legislation on the use of deadly force against terrorist targets outside the regions in which active conflicts were taking place, including Afghanistan and Iraq. Obama's term saw an increase in targeted killings of terrorist operatives, with the estimated number of drone attacks exceeding 540 (US Department of Justice, 2013; Shamshim, 2021).

President Obama's policy reflected the idea of reducing terrorism in Middle East countries by addressing what he regarded as the roots of the problem: poverty, corruption, and suppression of human rights. Although the integrated policy that he formulated helped reduce al-Qaeda's capabilities significantly, the terrorism threat grew during Obama's term. The Arab Spring events in 2011, the rise of the Islamic State and its expansion in Syria and northern Iraq, and the civil war in Yemen hindered Obama's plans to reduce the American military presence in the Middle East and keep his promise to withdraw all American forces from Afghanistan (Stern, 2015; Jenkins, 2017).

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President Donald Trump

Republican Party candidate Donald Trump was elected president of the United States in the 2016 elections. Trump inherited the war in Afghanistan, the military campaign against ISIS, and the involvement in the civil war in Yemen. As an advocate of America first, Trump considered the fighting in Afghanistan a wasted effort. At the same time, he regarded the changing face of terrorism and the radical Islamic groups around the world as an important threat to United States security. As a leader of a nation at war, Trump sought a decisive victory in the American struggle against international terrorism. The policy that he pursued included delegating authority to military commanders and relaxing the strict rules for opening fire. During his term, the number of air strikes in Afghanistan, Syria, and Yemen increased, and his administration carried out targeted killings of terrorist leaders (White House, 2018; "Principles, Standards, and Procedures," n.d.; Stohl & Dick, 2021).

The Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP) in Afghanistan grew in 2015, mainly in the eastern part of the country. The Taliban gained strength, and there was a sharp rise in suicide attacks in Kabul. The threat of terrorism led to a declaration by Trump of the continued American commitment to the war on terror (CFR, 2021; US Department of Defense, 2017). At the same time, the Trump administration recognized the terrorist threat as dynamic and developing, featuring geographic dispersal. It became necessary to devise a new strategy and shun outdated commitments and attitudes that had already proven unsuccessful. On the one hand, the strategy for the war on terror published by the administration in 2018 set goals that were similar to those of its predecessors: sharing the burden with other countries, promoting cooperation with local governments, taking preemptive action to prevent the strengthening of terrorist organizations, and halting the aid to Pakistan, which Trump linked directly to the Taliban. On the other hand, the strategy did institute changes in the means and methods employed: approval for use of all the means at the disposal of the United States, classification of all the threats as equal, and the use of economic sanctions, combined with aerial attacks, in order to damage the resources and activity of the terrorist organizations (White House, 2018; Bureau of Counterterrorism, 2019; Garver, 2021).

In 2017, the administration jointly founded the Terrorist Financing Targeting Center (TFTC) with the Gulf states. Its activity included compiling a joint list of terrorist entities, and individuals and organizations, among them the Taliban, Islamic State, and al-Qaeda, were added to the list in five rounds. Nevertheless, Trump imposed fewer sanctions on the Taliban than his predecessor, probably because of the negotiations with the organization that were underway behind the scenes toward the peace agreements that were eventually signed by the parties. On the other hand, the administration's policy was notable for the use of force to attack the Taliban's infrastructure

and sources of income. This activity involved the integration of the intelligence arm, which monitored and analyzed the situation, with the tactical offensive capabilities of the United States in the region (Bartlett, 2017; Lamothe, 2021).

Relations between the administration and the Taliban thawed in February 2019 in the framework of peace talks that took place in Doha in 2018. The signs that first appeared during Obama's term in office led to concrete results under the Trump administration. On February 29, 2020, the Taliban signed a peace agreement with the United States, in which it committed to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a haven for terrorist organizations and to cut its ties with al-Qaeda. The Taliban also undertook to open a channel for dialogue with the Ghani-led government in Kabul for the purpose of finding a formula for achieving peace and stability in the divided country; in practice, this did not occur. Following the understandings reached, 5,000 Taliban prisoners were released in September 2020. The Trump administration did not aim to guarantee a ceasefire between the Afghan government and the Taliban, and escalation continued. The Afghan parliament called for a ceasefire, while the Taliban called for establishing a country based on *sharia* law ("U.S. War in Afghanistan," 2021; Cooper et al., 2021).

The United States undertook to withdraw its forces from Afghanistan by May 1, 2021. Trump made the withdrawal contingent on suitable conditions on the ground, and sought to prevent the subsequent emergence of a vacuum that would be filled by terrorist groups and prompt a renewed outbreak of terrorism (US Department of Defense, 2017; "Trump 'to Order Further Troop Withdrawal,'" 2020).

President Joe Biden and the Current Situation

With his electoral victory in November 2020, Democrat Joe Biden became the third president to inherit the war in Afghanistan. The costs of

the war for the United States were estimated at \$1 trillion in direct spending, 2,501 fatalities, and over 20,000 wounded (Biden, 2021b). Like his predecessor, Biden recognized the dynamic worldwide Salafi jihadist terrorist threat: al-Shabaab in Somalia, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, Hayat al-Sham in Syria, ISIS in Syria and Iraq, and the establishment of other branches in African and Asian countries. In Biden's view, the decentralized nature of the terrorist threat renders the deployment of large army forces in one country superfluous. Biden postponed the date for withdrawal from Afghanistan so that the United States would be able to undertake it according to his administration's policy, while adhering to the decision to complete it. As he saw it, the goals of the war had been achieved with the elimination of bin Laden and the reduction of the terrorist threat from Afghanistan to dimensions that did not require an American military presence on the ground. As for the fate of Afghanistan, Biden supported his approach by citing the many years in which the United States and its allies had given aid to the country (Biden, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d; US Department of Defense, 2021). The withdrawal of United States forces from Afghanistan was completed in August 2021. The United States retained the ability to cope with direct threats through the over-the-horizon model—radar-based technology for locating and attacking targets at a range of hundreds of kilometers (Smith, 2020). The military leadership, however, expressed concern about the consequences of the withdrawal for the terrorist threat, which was liable to surge again in Afghanistan (Baldor, 2021).

Denying the confidence expressed by the administration about the ability of the Afghan army to fight the Taliban, the Taliban gained control of the presidential palace in Kabul on August 15, 2021, and announced its takeover of Afghanistan after occupying the country (Kottasova et al., 2021). The Taliban fully controls at least 32 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces, including 345 districts and the

country's important cities and border crossings. On August 16, the organization took over TOLO, Afghanistan's largest news network, in order to cement its control over the country's communications ("Taliban Enter TOLO News Compound," 2021). Panjshir Province remained under the control of the old government and the Taliban's opponents until September 5, when the Taliban occupied it (Roggio & Tobin, 2021). Afghan President Ashraf Ghani resigned and fled to a safe haven in Oman, and from there to a permanent residence in the United Arab Emirates, in order to prevent a bloodbath in the capital. The Taliban focused its international diplomatic efforts on delivering a message that the people in Afghanistan were protected, and that it planned to institute an open Islamic government, not a restrictive one, in response to concern about human rights violations in general and women's rights in particular, as occurred during the Taliban's previous *sharia* government ("Afghan Defense Minister," 2021; Seir et al., 2021; "Afghanistan Conflict," 2021).

The talk about the American presence in Afghanistan dealt mainly with the withdrawal of the military forces. Once completed, it became clear that the more difficult challenge facing the United States was the removal of American citizens from the country and safeguarding the fate of 100,000 Afghans who had worked with the Americans. When the United States handed over the strategic assets that it controlled to the Afghan government and left a force of only a few hundred soldiers in the capital, the Taliban takeover quickly created a new situation in the country. The United States mission in Afghanistan was redefined, leading to the deployment of 6,000 American soldiers and forces from other countries there. Their aim was to help complete the withdrawal and secure and guard the regular operation of the international airport in Kabul, the only area where the United States continued to operate. The restationing of Western forces in Afghanistan and the consolidation of the Taliban's rule led to the setting of a new date for withdrawal—

August 31, 2021 (Lopez, 2021; Price, 2021; Biden, 2021e). The United States worked with senior Taliban leaders in order to secure guarantees that the Taliban would not act against American forces and civilians. The two sides agreed to establish a “deconfliction mechanism,” and the United States was allowed to continue its evacuation mission at the Kabul airport. The parties also worked on intelligence cooperation in dealing with the concrete threat of ISKP, which materialized during the evacuation (Ali, 2021; Burns & Knickmeyer, 2021; Choi, 2021).

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Al-Qaeda: Is the Threat Waxing or Waning?

In the US report assessing the threats, al-Qaeda and ISIS are named as the main threat to American interests in the United States and elsewhere. Al-Qaeda provides inspiration for local groups that employ extreme violence, conduct terrorist actions to achieve their aims, and are motivated by internal influences within countries, such as racial discrimination grievances about the government. The dynamic situation in Afghanistan and the strengthening of the Taliban are expected to benefit al-Qaeda. The connection between the organizations has deepened over the years through marriage ties, and the Haqqani network is the main faction in the Taliban that interacts with al-Qaeda (O'Donnell, 2021; United Nations Security Council, 2021). At the same time, al-Qaeda's chain of command and top leadership has suffered a severe blow, and the question of its leadership succession has not been settled. The organization, which numbers somewhere between a few dozen and 500 men, has undergone structural changes, been decentralized, and spread out all over the world. The organizations affiliated with the umbrella organization rely on it for the legitimacy of their

actions, recruitment of members, and money, and their operations are aimed mainly at local objectives (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2021; Wright, 2021).

ISIS Khorasan

The Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP) organization was founded in 2015, with operatives sent from Pakistan to Nangarhar Province in Afghanistan (US Department of Defense, 2017). The primary goals of the organization, led by Shahab al-Muhajir, are disrupting and attacking the Taliban authorities and waging war against so-called Shiite heretics (“Khorasan Region,” 2021). These goals join the ambition of the Islamic State parent organization, which seeks to establish a global caliphate. Following its retreat in Syria and Iraq and the Taliban's victory, the Khorasan region is a favorable expanse for the Islamic State (Sim, 2021; Soufan Center, 2021).

Centered in Nangarhar Province, the organization is believed to have between 500 and 1500, with up to 3,000 members operating clandestinely. Despite severe losses in territory, leadership, manpower, and finances in 2020, the organization has succeeded in expanding to other provinces where it previously had no influence. The organization has also reinforced its foothold in Kabul and the surrounding area, where it conducts most of its attacks. Since early 2021, the organization has recruited members from Islamic State strongholds and among Taliban deserters. It accuses the Taliban of cooperation with the United States, and brands itself as a jihadist organization loyal to the principles of Islam in general and *sharia* law in particular. Before the American withdrawal was completed, in order to save on manpower, ISKP used mainly explosive charges and carried out few suicide attacks (Gardner, 2021; “ISIL-K Leaders,” 2021). On August 26, however, in the final stages of the American withdrawal, ISKP carried out a dual attack on the airport in Kabul that took the lives of 13 Americans. After the withdrawal was completed, the organization

carried out four more suicide attacks. The first was on October 3, when a terrorist burst into the funeral of the mother of Zabihullah Mujahid (the Taliban spokesman), in Kabul, and killed five people in addition to himself. The second and third attacks took place in Shiite mosques. On October 8, in the Khan Abad district in Kunduz Province, a suicide terrorist blew himself up with an explosive belt, killing at least 46 people and wounding 143. On October 14, two suicide terrorists blew themselves up at the entrance to a Shiite mosque in Kandahar, killing at least 47 people. The fourth attack took place in the Taliban's Sardar Mohammad Daud Khan army hospital in Kabul, killing 25 people and wounding 50 ("Deadly Explosion," 2021; Associated Press, 2021b; George & Francis, 2021; Peshimam, 2021).

The deadly nature of the attacks and the locations selected for them are not random. They provide insights into the organization's system of preparations before each suicide attack, which causes extremely lethal results. ISKP carried out six suicide attacks in Afghanistan in 2020, each by a single terrorist, in which 155 people were killed—an average of 25 people killed per attack. For the sake of comparison, the Taliban carried out nine suicide attacks in 2020, killing a total of 52 people—an average of "only" six killed per attack. ISKP seeks to attain a number of objectives through these attacks, in particular, attacking Shiite "heretics," and serving notice that it has not weakened and is capable of undermining the security of Afghanistan ("Khorasan Region," 2021; "Deadly Explosion," 2021; Popalzai & Tawfeek, 2021; United Nations Security Council, 2021).

The two terrorist organizations, al-Qaeda and ISKP, undermine the Taliban's rule in Afghanistan. On the one hand, al-Qaeda is likely to create splits in the Taliban leadership and prevent cooperation with foreign groups. On the other hand, ISKP disrupts internal security in the country, demanding resources from the Taliban for its struggle, and exerting a negative impact on the Taliban's image as sovereign.

The presence of these two organizations also raises the question whether Afghanistan will again become fertile ground for international terrorist attacks. Indeed, on September 19, 2021, ISKP took responsibility for the first time for an attack outside Afghanistan—in neighboring Pakistan (Israel Intelligence Heritage and Commemoration Center, 2021; Muggah & Rohozinski, 2021; Sayed & Clarke, 2021).

Geopolitical Ramifications of the US Withdrawal

Iran, China, and Russia did not wait for the foreign forces to leave Afghanistan before conducting talks with the Taliban. The three countries are affected by developments in Afghanistan and seek to avoid terrorism penetrating their territory.

Iran and Afghanistan share a 945-kilometer border, and the Taliban has undertaken to secure the Islam Qala border crossing between the two countries. Iran regards itself as responsible for Shiites everywhere in the world, and wants to ensure that the new Salafi-Sunni government will not attack the Hazara Shiite minority in Afghanistan. While the Taliban has stated that it will not do so, following the American withdrawal it was ISKP that attacked Shiites in Afghanistan. Iran condemned these attacks and asserted it would not tolerate attacks against the Shiites. The Taliban has not harmed the minority, but has failed to defend them ("Iran Condemns," 2021; Berger, 2021; Kachiar, 2021).

Although China shares only a 76-kilometer border with Afghanistan (the Wakhan Corridor, Figure 1), it has many interests in the country. China is launching projects and investments throughout Asia in order to enhance its global geostrategic and economic influence, in particular vis-à-vis the United States. Afghanistan is helping to improve China's grip on Southeast Asia in the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (Global Times, 2021). China is taking steps in the political arena to improve stability in Afghanistan in order to prevent a civil war, which is liable to hamper

its expansion efforts (TOLO News, 2021). In the security sphere, China fears that the rise to power of the Taliban, which supports all oppressed Muslims, will contribute to activity against it in response to the oppression of the 12 million Uyghurs living in Xinjiang (Global Times, 2021).



Figure 1. Map of Afghanistan and the Region

The Uyghur population in Afghanistan—the second generation of Chinese immigrants who fled from the Communist regime—number about 2,000. The anti-Chinese East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), also known as the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), is part of the terrorist infrastructure in Afghanistan. This movement, which has ties with the Taliban and al-Qaeda, constitutes one of the worst terrorist threats in the country. The movement has between 160 and 400 fighters, stationed mostly in northern and eastern Afghanistan, primarily in Badakhshan Province and moving between Afghanistan and Syria. Badakhshan is connected to Xinjiang in China via the Wakhan Corridor. China's main concern about Afghanistan is that it will become a target for terrorist attacks by this movement. As part of expanding its cooperation with China, the Taliban has moved Uyghur militants away from the border area between China and Afghanistan, and has sent messages that it does not intend to intervene in China's internal affairs. Development of the Wakhan Corridor, which features mountainous terrain and undeveloped road infrastructure, is likely to help increase trade between the two countries, but is also liable to encourage rapid

movement of terrorists back and forth between Xinjiang and Afghanistan (Wishnick, 2012; Mir, 2021; Standish, 2021).

The main concern of Russia, which has no common border with Afghanistan, is terrorist activity in the region in general, and by ISIS in particular, and Russia is therefore backing the Taliban. At a meeting with the Russians, the Taliban claimed that their rule was secure and did not threaten the neighboring countries (Korybko, 2021; "Russia Calls Taliban," 2021). Furthermore, Russia cooperates with members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)—Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—and conducts joint maneuvers with them in case the conflict reaches their territories. Russia is thereby making preparations to thwart terrorism, rather than relying on the Taliban (Associated Press, 2021a).

India and Pakistan, two rival nuclear powers, are liable to find themselves in a full-scale war against each other. They therefore prefer using Afghanistan as a chessboard over taking direct action against each other.

Pakistan borders Afghanistan on the east, and is crossed by the Hindu Kush mountain range, which makes it easy to cross and enter Pakistan from Afghanistan. In order to maintain its ability to deal with the threat from India, its eastern neighbor, Pakistan founded, funded, and armed the Taliban in 1996, and was the first country to recognize its government. Even though Pakistan does not share the Taliban's ideology, the instability that this organization causes in Afghanistan is useful, because it enhances Pakistan's ability to deal with India. Without Pakistan's support, the Taliban's terrorist government would have ceased to exist (Ayotte et al., 2021). Despite the official denials, there is evidence that the Taliban leaders have residences in Pakistan; Pakistan provides assistance to wounded Taliban soldiers, and donations for the organization are collected in Pakistan. The welfare of the Taliban leaders' families depends on Pakistan, and this gives it leverage over the organization. Following

the American withdrawal from Afghanistan, Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan said that this leverage had weakened, but his forces are still training and funding the Taliban in Pakistan (Noorzai, 2021). The regaining of power by the Taliban can generate instability in Pakistan because it strengthens the Pakistani Taliban (Tehrik-i-Taliban—TTP), which aims to form an extremist Muslim government in Pakistan (similar to the Taliban in Afghanistan). The Pakistani Taliban organization has always focused on activity against the United States in Afghanistan; now that American forces are no longer there, it can turn its forces against the Pakistani government. The United States is therefore trying to persuade Pakistan to take action against the Afghan Taliban, which will put pressure on its branch in Pakistan itself (IntelBrief, 2021).

India, on the other hand, wants a strong and functioning country in Afghanistan. The poverty that pervades Afghanistan enables Pakistan and the terrorist organizations that it supports to create armed terrorist militias consisting of Afghan soldiers, whom Pakistan sends to fight India on its eastern border. Furthermore, a collapse in Afghanistan will encourage the growth of the al-Qaeda branch in the Indian subcontinent (AQIS), which aims initially to found an Islamic state in Kashmir that can later expand eastward. This organization operates in Afghanistan under the Taliban's umbrella, and receives guidance for fighting against India from the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) (Nanda, 2021).

Turkey and Qatar promote the Muslim Brotherhood agenda in the region; Turkey operates in the security sphere and Qatar in the diplomatic sphere. As part of its ambition to become a local and global power, Turkey is expanding into Central Asia and sending agents to Afghanistan. It has offered to leave the approximately 600 Turkish soldiers who went to Afghanistan during the American withdrawal in place in order to secure Hamid Karzai Airport in Kabul for several months, with backing from

American soldiers (Toosi & Seligman, 2021). In return, Erdogan sought American concessions for securing the airport, including the consent of the United States to keep and operate the Russian S-400 air defense system. The United States opposed Turkey's procurement of the Russian system for use in conjunction with NATO weapons, such as the F-35 warplane (Babb, 2021). This offer eventually fell through, because Turkey overestimated its own power and underestimated the force of Afghan opposition. Qatar meanwhile concentrated its efforts on diplomacy. The peace agreements were signed in its capital, and most of the negotiations between the United States and the Taliban were likewise held in Doha (Dalay, 2021).

The Taliban is acting in the political and diplomatic arena to consolidate its rule and portray itself as the legitimate regime in Afghanistan that will institute an Islamic regime according to *sharia* law. The main innovation is its undertaking to prevent the export of terrorism from Afghanistan. Pakistan, Russia, China, Turkey, Malaysia, and Qatar all support the Taliban in one way or another. The Western countries will probably tolerate the Taliban government as long as it does not constitute a direct threat to their security (Frantzman, 2021).

Discussion

The prolonged war by the United States in Afghanistan is a test case of the changing nature of the war on terrorism. A military presence on the ground was an important element in this policy and was considered an essential tool in its success. With the passage of time, two separate schools of thought have emerged representing differing views on the stationing of United States military forces for the purpose of waging war against terrorist entities.

The first doctrine is championed by senior American army figures and the intelligence community. To their way of thinking, the presence of American forces in locations where terrorist organization grow and export attacks to the West thwarts and prevents such

operations. The United States defeated al-Qaeda and ISIS and reduced the magnitude of the threat, while limiting the loss of life among the allied forces and significantly lowering spending on the war on terrorism. The absence of a military presence would have a negative impact on the intelligence effort with less access to fewer sources, thereby limiting the intelligence community's intelligence gathering and monitoring capabilities.

The entry of Russia and China into the Afghan expanse was designed to take advantage of the vacuum created by the American abandonment of the country in order to further their power ambitions.

The second doctrine is popular among the American political elite and elements in the various administrations, who advocated separating militarily from the terrorist countries and leaving warfare to the local population. In their opinion, the military presence encourages terrorist activity against the West, helps the terrorist organizations to recruit members, and justifies the organizations' allegations of an invasion of Islamic land by a foreign enemy, which in turn increases the likelihood of terrorist attacks. Alternative capabilities that the United States retains and cultivates are designed to enable it to respond from a distance in a targeted manner when necessary. Furthermore, the withdrawal of Western forces from Afghanistan is not a new policy; it was led by the three presidents who preceded Biden, all of whom sought to end the decades-long American misfortune in the country. The timetable set for the withdrawal was designed to facilitate the transfer of control to the Afghan defense forces that had been trained, equipped, and supported by the United States and its allies (Jenkins, 2017; Aspen Institute, 2021; Baldor, 2021).

The United States national security strategy points to the channeling of monetary and

human resources to deal with the balance of power between countries, above all Russia's ambitions to regain its great power status and China's growing aggressiveness. These directly affect the war efforts against terrorism and the emerging characteristics of the American strategy. In the economic aspect, the costs of the war on terrorism resulting from the withdrawal are not eliminated; they have changed. The American bases in Afghanistan provided a rapid response to new and growing threats. Abandonment of the region is liable to make operations in the war on terrorism much more expensive, and to obstruct the ability to respond to threats in Afghanistan and elsewhere (Biden, 2021a; Aspen Institute, 2021; Baldor, 2021).

The unfolding situation in Afghanistan, with the Taliban having taken over the government, challenges the commitment of the United States to the country. The desire to institute democratic institutions in Afghanistan received no local assistance, because conditions among the people were not ripe for democracy, governmental corruption was rampant, and the country was divided along tribal and ethnic lines. The defeat of the Afghan army at the hands of the Taliban raised questions about the actions taken over the years to prepare it for such a scenario. At the same time, the Taliban's main goals have not changed: the withdrawal from the country of the foreign forces that overthrew the Taliban government in 2001 and the establishment of a "pure Islamic government" (Aspen Institute, 20021; United Nations Security Council, 2021). The commitment of the United States to its other allies and its ability to deter other actors in the international arena is now subject to doubt. The image of the US as a power largely rests on the defensive umbrella that it provides to its partners (Edel, 2021; Kelly & Samuels, 2021; Harold, 2021).

The geopolitical consequences of the United States withdrawal from Afghanistan are becoming clearer as time passes, especially with respect to the competition between the

great powers. The entry of Russia and China into the Afghan expanse was designed to take advantage of the vacuum created by the American abandonment of the country in order to further their power ambitions. Afghanistan will thus serve as a unique test case for the dynamic between these forces in the coming years, and it is possible that the struggle will be decided by the ability of the powers to consolidate their status in places such as Afghanistan. The US withdrawal and the change in the deployment of its military forces in the region and elsewhere, coupled with statements by the administration and senior army figures, have generated skepticism vis-à-vis the new approaches in American foreign policy. While the United States has declared its intention of halting the encroachments by China and Russia, its military presence in Afghanistan was a restraining factor that interfered with their ambitions, while conversely, its withdrawal has left a vacuum for them to fill (Mills & Davidson, 2021; Hudson, 2021). The decision to abandon a stronghold located in a geographic area in which its two rivals are active has removed a delaying factor and in practice helps them to carry out their expansionist plans. A limited presence in Afghanistan, as proposed by senior American army figures and the intelligence community, could have helped the US achieve two important goals: preserve its ability to wage war on terrorism in the region, including the prevention of a buildup by the terrorist entities under the auspices of the Taliban, and prevent inroads by Russia and China using countries such as Afghanistan.

The international legitimacy that the Taliban is now attaining, although limited in scope, affects the motivation of extremist militant groups and terrorist organizations with military capabilities to garner territorial profits. The profits that the Taliban reaps today will be the profits reaped tomorrow by the Houthis in Yemen, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and extremist groups in Syria. After two decades, the groups responsible for the terrorist attacks on

September 11, 2001, which prompted the West's global war on terrorism, are winning official recognition. The Taliban ensured its rule in Afghanistan while anchoring its legitimacy in the international arena. The al-Qaeda organization is still a Taliban ally and an important factor in the internal balance of power in Afghanistan. The Taliban's capture of the capital and the chaos created at the airport in Kabul by the American evacuation supplied the organization with a victory photo of the greatest superpower fleeing from its land (Frantzman, 2021; McKenzie, 2021).

At the same time, stability in the country is not guaranteed. The biggest challenge facing the Taliban government is the transition from a non-state terrorist organization to a state entity in control of its population. In the international theater, the Taliban strives to gain credibility that will lead to economic support and the development of trade relations. In the internal theater, however, power struggles are likely to arise in the short term. The Taliban's opponents include those who supported the democratization that Afghanistan underwent in the past 20 years and terrorist organizations operating in Afghanistan, particularly ISKP, which stood out as groups opposed to both the Taliban and the United States and its allies (Greenberg et al., 2021; Todd, 2021).

In the long term, the internal struggles inside the Taliban could cause instability. The Taliban is known for its strong control at the district and staff levels, but is very weak at the provincial levels and above. Once the Taliban is established in power and the euphoria over the organization's victory passes, the situation in the field will determine the degree of support that it enjoys. If its resources dwindle, internal power struggles between local rulers may arise, and are liable to culminate in a civil war. Furthermore, the Taliban government's recent appointments provide a glimpse of the regime's future agenda in the country—a regime where leadership of the Haqqani network occupies key positions. The network's standing will continue to improve, given the important mediating

role it holds between parts of the leadership and the soldiers in the field. This development could lead to changes in the demands made by the Taliban network and serve as a bargaining chip in promoting the network's agenda, which is liable to prove more extreme (Greenberg et al., 2021; O'Donnell, 2021; Sayed & Clarke, 2021; TOLO News, 2021; United Nations Security Council, 2021).

The survival of terrorist entities such as al-Qaeda and the Taliban, despite the blow dealt to them by the United States, has posed a developing and dynamic challenge to all four of the administrations in the United States since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001.

That Afghanistan will again become a country sheltering terrorist organizations, or even a country exporting international terrorism, is a source of concern. The close association between the Taliban and al-Qaeda could bring about two possible scenarios in Afghanistan. The first is al-Qaeda becoming an integral part of the Taliban regime's efforts to retain power in the country, or even becoming an important group in the struggle against movements opposed to the government, above all ISIS. The strengthening of al-Qaeda as a result of the strengthening of the Taliban is liable to exert a decisive effect on Afghanistan's role in the changing balance of power in the region. The remaining al-Qaeda leaders will be able to encourage regional, and even global, cooperation between the movement's branches in centers of power. The danger lies in the emerging desire of the organization's branches to replicate the Taliban's victories in their countries, seize power by force, and attain international recognition, while taking advantage of local conflicts in uncontrolled areas to increase their influence over the local population, while posing a threat to foreign forces. It cannot be ruled out that in the future, branches of al-Qaeda will be in a position that

will facilitate cooperation with the United States and its allies on the basis of shared interests (Clarke, 2021; Frantzman, 2021).

The second possible scenario is that the improvement in al-Qaeda's position will lead to a fresh call to attack Western targets throughout the world. The renewed motivation caused by the retreat of the American superpower was furthered by lessons of victory over the West. The Taliban will not necessarily succeed in preventing the recurrence of terrorist events under its newly consolidated government, if only because of the inspiration that it will provide to all terrorist branches and cells, wherever they may be, and to terrorists in Europe and the United States. It is possible that al-Qaeda will act through its revitalized branches in other areas of the world and will try to carry out attacks on a varying scale. The Taliban's considerations in obtaining legitimacy could lead it to restrain such extremism, or even to shut down these groups' operations: both those under its protection, such as al-Qaeda, and those opposed to it, such as ISKP and Shiite groups sponsored by Iran (Clarke, 2021; Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2021; Wright, 2021).

Conclusion

The survival of terrorist entities such as al-Qaeda and the Taliban, despite the blow dealt to them by the United States, has posed a developing and dynamic challenge to all four of the administrations in the United States since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. The expansion of the war's aims and the changes that were made, from overthrowing the Taliban regime to installing democracy to developing the military capabilities of the local forces in Afghanistan, led to the allocation of forces and funding to these efforts. The presence of the United States and its NATO allies in the country was prolonged, and their operations were expanded to the civilian theater, beyond the original war goals. The Taliban's ability to reorganize and consolidate its power in

Afghanistan eventually led to the signing of the peace agreement with the United States, which thereby in effect recognized the legitimacy of the Taliban's rule.

The primary goal of the war—preventing a recurrence of the deadly terrorist attacks on American soil—is a new cause for reflection following the US exit from Afghanistan. The takeover by the Taliban infused new life into the struggle waged by terrorist entities all over the world, and is liable to accelerate a trend toward international terrorism. The Taliban, which many countries classify as a terrorist organization, has not severed its ties with al-Qaeda, and has not yet consolidated its sovereignty in Afghanistan. Evidence of this lies in the fact that the recent terrorist events committed by ISKP have a common denominator with the organization's goals: attacking non-Islamic foreign forces, attacking the heretical Taliban regime, and attacking Shiites. Following 20 years of warfare by the world's greatest power, there is a return to the starting point similar of the original situation. The question arises whether terrorism will again afflict the home soil of the United States.

The dynamic of violence in Afghanistan, governmental instability, and the Taliban's reliance on various interest groups such as the Haqqani network, al-Qaeda, and other terrorist organizations are liable to bring about internal changes there with fateful consequences for the future of Afghanistan and the entire region. The geopolitical dimension reviewed offers a broader perspective of the possible effects of this dynamic on both the countries bordering Afghanistan and the major powers: the United States, China, and Russia. It is possible that the same country that served as a base for the worldwide war on terrorism will become the site of an updated struggle for regional influence between the great powers.

The consequences of the United States withdrawal from Afghanistan are many. They not only signal the end of the unremitting war

in Afghanistan, but also set in motion processes that will affect United States national security, its status as a leading power, and the regional and global order. The future foreign policy of the United States will change according to the situation, and will affect the formation of the policy pursued by its allies and rivals.

Amit Ayalon is a third-year undergraduate studying government, diplomacy, and strategy at Reichman University in Herzliya. She is an Argov Fellow in the Leadership and Diplomacy Program for outstanding students (2019-2022). She completed an internship at the INSS Terrorism and Low Intensity Conflict research program under the direction of Yoram Schweitzer (2020-2021), where she specialized in United States foreign policy and strategy in fighting terrorism. Amit is a graduate of the StandWithUs Fellowship program for public diplomacy and leadership and of the ILYP Israel Young Pugwash program for conducting unofficial negotiations on core issues in international relations (2019-2020). amit.ayalon@gmail.com

Ido Gadi Raz is an intern in the INSS Terrorism and Low Intensity Conflict research program, specializing in Southeast Asia and suicide attacks. Ido studies Arabic and Middle Eastern studies at Bar Ilan University (2020-2023), and participates in a program for outstanding students researching social networks in the Arab world. He was a platoon commander in the Artillery Corps and the fire operations officer of the Kfir Brigade. idoraz96@gmail.com

Baruch Amiel is an intern in the INSS Terrorism and Low Intensity Conflict research program, specializing in Southeast Asia. He is in his final year of studies at Reichman University for outstanding students on strategy and decision making (2019-2022). He is also an intern at the Deloitte consulting firm and in the IDF strategy directorate, and works as a strategic consultant at Nir Solar, an environmentally friendly energy company. He served as an officer in the IDF Combat Engineering Corps and completed a course for company commanders. baruchamiel@gmail.com

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