



FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Will Afghanistan Become a Terrorist Safe Haven Again?

Just Because the Taliban Won Doesn't Mean Jihadis Will

BY DANIEL BYMAN August 18, 2021

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The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban's return to power is a victory for al Qaeda. But just how much of a win is it? This question is at the heart of the Biden administration's decision to withdraw from the country. Defending his choice despite the chaos and horror descending on Afghanistan as the government collapsed, President Joe Biden declared on Monday, "Our only vital national interest in Afghanistan remains today what it has always been: preventing a terrorist attack on [the] American homeland."

Republicans are taking Biden to task on this very point. Representative Michael McCaul, a Republican from Texas and the ranking member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, warned, "We are going to go back to a pre-9/11 state—a breeding ground for terrorism." General

Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, cautioned that al Qaeda and the Islamic State (also known as ISIS) could quickly rebuild their networks in Afghanistan.

The risk of an al Qaeda comeback is real, but Afghanistan's reversion to its pre-9/11 role as a safe haven for jihadi terrorism is unlikely. Although the Taliban's victory will undoubtedly make Washington's counterterrorism policy far harder to carry out, al Qaeda's weakness, the Taliban's own incentives, and post-9/11 improvements in U.S. intelligence coordination, homeland security, and remote military operations all reduce the threat.

ANOTHER WIN?

With the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban triumph, the jihadi world gains a propaganda victory similar to one it experienced more than 30 years ago. A core myth of the modern jihadi movement is that foreign fighters battling to oust the Soviet Union from Afghanistan were not only crucial to Moscow's defeat in 1989 but also sped the collapse of the Soviet Union and communism in general. This myth persisted even though foreign volunteers were not militarily important in the overall anti-Soviet struggle.

Today, al Qaeda will again claim the withdrawal of a foreign power as a victory, even though it was the Taliban whose fighting pushed out the United States and not that of al Qaeda or other foreign jihadis. This time, however, the argument will be more credible, since Washington itself justified the 20-year war as a struggle against international terrorism. The defeat of the United States is thus another superpower notch in al Qaeda's belt. Its supporters are celebrating.

The collapse of the Afghan government also provides a jolt of energy to

al Qaeda's operatives in the country. There is no reason to think that with their victory complete, the Taliban will cut ties to the group. Links between the two have endured for over 20 years, despite U.S. pressure and inducements. The Taliban recognize the fighting skill and dedication of al Qaeda members and feel a sense of obligation to them for their sacrifices over the past 20 years. UN officials report that al Qaeda is heavily embedded within the Taliban, conducting joint operations and training. Al Qaeda, for its part, claims that it remains loyal to the leadership of the Taliban.

Not all jihadis, however, will benefit as much as al Qaeda. Al Qaeda's rival, ISIS, also has an active presence in Afghanistan. ISIS is bitterly opposed to both al Qaeda and the Taliban, claiming that the latter have abandoned Islam in favor of Afghan nationalism. Beyond ideological differences, however, there is a power struggle for influence within the broader jihadi movement. The Taliban are likely to try to woo ISIS commanders to their side and crush those who refuse to bend the knee. This will deal another blow to ISIS's brand, which has suffered since it lost the last shred of its self-proclaimed caliphate in Iraq and Syria in 2019.

The most important counterterrorism question, however, is not whether the Taliban will maintain their ties to al Qaeda and other foreign jihadis but whether the Taliban will again allow al Qaeda to use Afghanistan as a base for international terrorist attacks. From the Taliban's Afghanistan, Osama bin Laden and other al Qaeda leaders were able to direct their group's activities with relative impunity. Before 9/11, al Qaeda and other foreign jihadis ran an archipelago of camps in the country. Terrorists trained in these outposts, as did aspiring jihadis who went on to fight in conflicts in Algeria, Indonesia, Libya, Somalia, and other countries. In

addition to providing training, al Qaeda was also able to forge connections among senior members of various jihadi groups and indoctrinate the thousands of volunteers who flocked to Afghanistan to train. Between 10,000 and 20,000 recruits passed through the camps from 1996 to 2001, according to U.S. intelligence. These volunteers began to share al Qaeda's more global, anti-American worldview and committed numerous terrorist attacks.

NOT SO SAFE HAVEN

Losing Afghanistan will undoubtedly hamper U.S. counterterrorism efforts and increase the risk that al Qaeda will again use the country as a launch pad for attacks. Without troops in the area and contacts with the local population, the United States will have less intelligence on terrorist activities. U.S. and Afghan forces are no longer on the ground to prevent al Qaeda from establishing training camps or headquarters.

Despite these difficulties, however, an expansive safe haven comparable to the pre-9/11 period is unlikely. The Taliban's own incentives to support international terrorism against the West are low, whatever bonds the group's leaders might have with al Qaeda. The Taliban were not consulted about 9/11, and they didn't favor previous terrorist attacks the group carried out, such as the 1998 embassy bombings in East Africa. The Taliban also paid a heavy price for 9/11, losing power for 20 years and seeing much of their core leadership die in the fight with the United States.

Pakistan, the Taliban's sponsor, also has reason to oppose al Qaeda terrorist attacks on the West. Bruce Riedel, a former senior U.S. intelligence officer, has argued that the latest Taliban offensive relied on Pakistani support, and the Taliban have long used Pakistan as a haven in their fight against the United States and the Afghan government. Given

that Pakistan's ally won, the country now has little reason to risk encouraging the return of U.S. forces—something that could occur in the aftermath of a spectacular al Qaeda attack on the West. Such violence does not serve any of Pakistan's strategic objectives.

That said, the United States cannot rely on Pakistan as a counterterrorism partner in Afghanistan. Pakistan may still favor using foreign jihadis to conduct terrorist attacks in India and wage war in Kashmir, as it has in the past. It might therefore want the Taliban to allow foreign fighters to train and otherwise improve their skills in Afghanistan, playing with fire in the hope that Pakistan can direct the blaze toward New Delhi. Pressure on Pakistan will therefore be vital. Unfortunately, U.S. efforts to coerce Islamabad to rein in the Taliban over the last decades largely failed. The United States may have more success now that it no longer depends on Pakistan's goodwill to support operations in Afghanistan. But policymakers should lower their expectations, especially as the Biden administration has shunned Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan rather than courting him as an ally. Washington should focus on making sure that Islamabad knows that it, too, will pay a price if its Taliban allies support international terrorism.

Although Pakistan's help may be limited at best, al Qaeda itself has changed in ways that make it less able to take advantage of Afghanistan. The group has lost many leaders and much of its funding and has otherwise sustained significant damage since 9/11. Indeed, bin Laden's successor, Ayman al-Zawahiri, may be dead. In response to its decline, al Qaeda has emphasized struggles within the Muslim world—working with local affiliates that embrace parts of its agenda but, in practice, often focus on their own limited concerns. Much of the energy of al

Qaeda's leaders has been spent trying to control and influence these affiliates. These groups are primarily a threat to their own countries and regions, although some, notably al Qaeda's Yemeni affiliate, have attempted or conducted terrorist attacks on the West. The most recent jihadi attack on the United States was the 2019 shooting of three sailors at a naval base in Pensacola, Florida, by a Saudi trainee influenced by al Qaeda's Yemeni branch.

Moreover, U.S. intelligence agencies have been preparing for a military withdrawal by ensuring that they maintain some collection capacity—enabling them to disrupt would-be al Qaeda trainees en route, identify potential plots against the West, and target terrorists. The U.S. military has explored ways to use air power from bases outside Afghanistan to strike al Qaeda camps or otherwise operate in the country if necessary. Now that the Taliban are in power, such efforts are needed more than ever. The United States already conducts long-distance operations in Somalia, Yemen, and other countries with active jihadi groups. Carrying out such strikes in Afghanistan would make it harder for al Qaeda and other groups to run large-scale training camps, as they did before 9/11, and would put their leaders at risk.

Finally, U.S. homeland security has improved dramatically since 9/11, and there is a global intelligence effort targeting al Qaeda, ISIS, and other jihadi movements. Would-be recruits will find it harder to get to Afghanistan and, should they make it, risk detection and arrest upon return.

ALL TIED UP

In the short term, both the Taliban and the United States will have their hands full. The Taliban need to consolidate their power throughout Afghanistan, much of which is in chaos, and it will take time for al

Qaeda to fully reconstitute itself. The United States must focus on the unfolding humanitarian crisis in the country and, in particular, aid the tens of thousands of Afghans who risked their lives to work with the U.S. military and the broader counterterrorism effort.

This short-term imperative, however, should not blind Washington to the need to have a strong counterterrorism capacity and to keep pressure on regional governments to prevent Afghanistan from again becoming the center of the global jihadi movement. Such an approach is hardly the grand victory over terrorism Americans hoped for after 9/11. But it is a manageable and sustainable strategy.

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