



Afghanistan in the Shadow of the US and NATO Withdrawal

Dr. Michael Barak

August 2021

The US and NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan, planned to end at the end of August 2021, the rapid Taliban takeover of tens of provinces in the war-torn country and the meddling of regional actors, such as Russia, Pakistan, Iran, and China, in the Afghani affairs, have worrying strategic ramifications for the future of the country and poses political and security challenges for its neighbors. Worse than that is the threat to the Afghani civil society that in the past two decades enjoyed liberal democratic values. Should the Taliban regain control over Afghanistan, the latter might become again a focal point for global international terrorism and pose a threat to the western world, Israel included.

The war on Afghanistan is the longest in US history. For 20 year the US has waged a tenacious war against al-Qaeda's terrorism nests and the Afghani Taliban. Unwillingly, it was dragged to this war following the 9/11 attacks. Indeed, it managed to wear down al-Qaeda, kill tens of its senior leaders and force many of them to seek refuge in Pakistan and Iran, however it didn't break al-Qaeda and despite Taliban vehement denials a few hundreds al-Qaeda fighters are still active in Afghanistan.

In February 2020, President Trump arrived at understandings with the Taliban (the Doha Agreement) within which he undertook to release Taliban prisoners and withdraw US forces from Afghanistan within 14 months, in return for the Taliban undertaking not to harbor al-Qaeda and negotiate for peace with the pro American regime in Kabul, to ensure the country's stability. The election of President Biden stalled the withdrawal in light of the president's wishes to reexamine the details of the agreement. The Taliban stressed that this was a breach of the Doha Agreement and threaten to pick up the hostilities against the US troops. The fear of security escalation in Afghanistan led Biden to surprisingly instruct an immediate withdrawal starting July 2021 to end by the end of August 2021 save for a contingency of 650 troops that will provide security for Kabul. So far over 90% of the US installations have been vacated including the notorious Bagram base where Taliban prisoners were incarcerated and tortured.

The American withdrawal attracts wide criticism from Republicans and Democrats alike, NATO and the Afghani regime who all fear that it will lead to the fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban. Western intelligence officers warn that Afghanistan might turn again into a no man's land for terrorists and threaten the national security of many countries around the world. Sir Alex Younger who until recently headed the MI6 warned that al-Qaeda and ISIS may rehabilitate and reestablish themselves

in Afghanistan and if the Afghani regime's allies will turn their back on it the threat of terrorism will significantly increase.

The civilian population in Afghanistan is ambivalent about the withdrawal. On the one hand it has its blessing and on the other hand it criticizes it claiming that no security stability has been guaranteed for Afghanistan. Many Afghani younger people are concerned of a Taliban takeover that will threaten civil liberties, freedom of the press, women, and minority rights the achievements in education and democracy attained over the past two decades. That fear leads to the formation of local militias wishing to block the Taliban advancement.

The Taliban doesn't hide its ambition to retake the entire Afghani territory. Per him, the government on Kabul is illegitimate as it is a pro-western regime that protects American interests. In its publications the Taliban clarifies that the liberation of Afghanistan will be achieved by a combination of "smart Dawah" (i.e., encouraging the Afghani army troops to lay down their weapons and cease cooperation with the regime, all to be supported by tribal leaders as Taliban brokers) and imposing a siege on military installations while initiating attacks on opponents. This goal seemed unrealistic given the Taliban's military inferiority. The Taliban has some 60,000 troops whereas the Afghani army has 300,000 equipped and trained by the Americans. Yet, the Taliban proved that the tenacious fighting over time managed to drive most of the foreign forces from Afghanistan and intend to use that alongside psyops campaign to demoralize and crumble the Afghani army.

The Taliban as well as al-Qaeda and other Salafi organizations describe the US withdrawal as a glorious victory over the great western superpower. Sheikh Abd al-Mehdi al-Razuk, a Salafi cleric identified with Idlib's Hyat Tahrir al-Sham, implores his followers to adopt the Taliban model in the fighting against Assad. Per him, the unity of the fighters, continuous tenacious fighting and Dawah are the "recipe" for victory.

The American withdrawal also significantly affects the geopolitical arena and the dynamics among countries that wish to promote the security, political and economic interests in the region:

- **Iran** – the Irani regime sees fit to maintain good relationship with both the Taliban and the Kabul regime. That, in light of Raisi's wishes to rehabilitate the Iranian economy on the backdrop of the nuclear talks with the US and their desire to maintain good commerce relationship with Afghanistan. The Iranians also

wish to protect the Hazara Shiite minority in central Afghanistan, inter alia via the formation of a militia to protect it.

- **China** – conducts two communication channels. One with the Taliban and the other with the regime however China is wary of investing massively in the country due to the security unclarity. That said, the Chinese are very sensitive to the presence of Uyghur fighters that fight alongside the Taliban. The Chinese received a commitment from the Taliban to prevent the Uyghur from using Afghanistan as an operations base for attacks on Chinese soil and targets, but this seems to be just a lip service until the Taliban take over the entire country. De facto, Uyghur fighters operate in Afghanistan and promote anti-Chinese discourse that mainly stresses the Islamic nation's duty to help the Uyghur liberate Xinjiang province in Western China and establish there an Islamic autonomy that will benefit the Muslim inhabitants through jihad.
- **Russia** – uses the developments in Afghanistan to deepen its influence on the central Asian states (e.g., Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan) inter alia through offerings of military assistance and counter-terrorism knowledge, claiming terrorism might spill over from Afghanistan. By that Russia wishes to foil the US intentions to post troops in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan who all have a border with Afghanistan.
- **Pakistan and India** – Pakistan sees fit to maintain good relations with the Taliban, inter alia in light of sympathy it has in many sectors of the Pakistani society and the thought that supporting them might compromise India's national security. The Indian regime is concerned of the rise of the Taliban to power and its connections with the Pakistani intelligence and therefore supports the Kabul regime.
- **Turkey** – the forming agreement between Turkey and the US to post some 500 Turkish troops in Kabul to protect the airport and government installations may be considered a gesture by Erdogan aimed at improving its relationship with NATO and the Biden administration however it is possible that the former is leveraging the geopolitical developments to deepen the Turkish influence in the region as he did when he formed Turkish strongholds in other conflict areas (e.g., northern Syria, Libya and Somalia). Regardless of Erdogan's intentions it seems that the Turkey-Taliban relationship deteriorate. The Taliban called for jihad on the Turkish forces claiming that they are part of NATO therefore they are a foreign force that needs to be driven out of Afghanistan. Erdogan too uses harsh rhetoric and demands that the Taliban to stop the conquest of Afghanistan.

In summation, due to the American withdrawal, it seems that the Taliban managed to gain a significant perception victory over its opponents. That way it promotes a narrative of victory saying that despite military and technological inferiority it managed to defeat a leading superpower by fighting it tenaciously for two decades. The main concern is that Afghanistan is on its way to another civil war and may turn, again, to an operation base and a safe haven for global terrorism. The legitimacy provided by Iran, Qatar, and Russia to the Taliban, inter alia through diplomatic

relationships and opening a Taliban embassy in Qatar only strengthens the latter. The Russian deputy ambassador to India even said that it was the better that the world would politically recognize the Taliban much like it recognized Hezbollah because it was an integral part of Afghanistan. Biden's decision that from now on the fate of Afghanistan is at the hands of the Afghans justifiably evoke grave concerns regarding the civilian population and the stability of the pro-American Kabul regime. Even now there is a growing stream of Afghan refugees fleeing areas taken by the Taliban and seeking refuge in Iran and Pakistan. A civil war in Afghanistan will affect not only Afghanistan but also the regional states and the international community.

ABOUT THE ICT

Founded in 1996, the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) is one of the leading academic institutes for counter-terrorism in the world, facilitating international cooperation in the global struggle against terrorism. ICT is an independent think tank providing expertise in terrorism, counter-terrorism, homeland security, threat vulnerability and risk assessment, intelligence analysis and national security and defense policy.

ICT is a non-profit organization located at the Interdisciplinary Center (IDC), Herzliya, Israel which relies exclusively on private donations and revenue from events, projects and programs.