

The neo-Taliban and the super-jihadi state

Afghanistan will become the top jihadi state in the world. Al Qaeda, Haqqani, and even ISIS will eventually be incorporated in its power. Intra jihadi deals will be cut, even if occasionally skirmishes and power struggles take place.

by Walid Phares



The shock left by the reckless withdrawal from Afghanistan ordered by the Biden administration has had significant dramatic consequences among the Afghan population, particularly its women, youth and minorities. The bloody repression waged by the jihadi militia targeting service members, journalists, civil society activists, and ethnic communities across the country is only the beginning of what could become a decades-long saga for a nation that has already suffered more than a half century of tragic wars. But this catastrophic surrender of an ally country to a terror army also leaves a deep impact in the hearts and minds of most American citizens. They wonder how it was possible that their government first negotiated with a jihadi terror network—and before it reforms and renounces violence! How was it possible to engage with them in Doha without the participation of the duly democratically elected government? And how is it even conceivable that a US administration practically coordinated and collaborated with the Taliban takeover of the presidency, parliament, ministries and armed forces installations with \$80 billion worth of American made weapons and equipment? The sheer size of this reckless and suicidal act of collaboration with jihadi terrorists goes against everything the United States stands for and has fought against since 9/11. How did Washington sink to this low?

AMERICAN CONSENSUS

After 9/11, a bipartisan national consensus was built in the US about a sustained strategic response to the mass jihadi terror executed by Al Qaeda in New York, Washington, DC, and Pennsylvania, killing about 3,000 people. The gist of that consensus was to remove the Taliban regime, dismantle Al Qaeda and, as importantly, empower the Afghan people, government and army to build and defend their nascent democracy against jihadi militias of all types. This was confirmed by the recommendations of the bipartisan 9/11 Commission in 2004. The US national security doctrine since was focused on striking Al Qaeda, not just in Afghanistan, but also around the region and the world. The jihadi terror group had repeatedly taken aggression against the US homeland with about 50 planned attacks, some bloody, and by striking democracies and Western allies around the world, from Spain to the UK, Russia, France, India, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan and many others. The US strategic goals aimed at keeping the Taliban guerilla at bay in Afghanistan until two conditions were met: The establishment of an Afghan army capable of leading the fight with ally support, and counter-radicalization efforts to remove extremist material from the educational system and assist in the rise of civil society forces. That was the goal.

THE BUSH CAMPAIGN AGAINST TERROR

The Bush administration, which was in charge during the attacks and the years that followed, removed the Taliban from power, followed Al Qaeda to Tora Bora and waged counterterrorism campaigns against affiliates on four continents. Furthermore, the US engaged in a mass reconstruction of Afghanistan, mimicking the Marshall plan after WWII, and attempted to strengthen democratic institutions in that country. The early stage of elections and counter extremist efforts peaked between 2002 and 2006. However, after the defeat of the Republicans in the 2006 midterm elections and the rise of a more radical majority in both Houses, the Bush administration was delayed, paralyzed

and blocked from resuming its counter jihadi strategies in Afghanistan. Afghan democracy was launched, but its support from Washington dwindled.

THE OBAMA AGENDA

With the election of Barack Hussein Obama as President in 2008, a massive change in US foreign policy was felt across the Middle East. Obama signalled his tilt towards collaborating with the Islamists, starting with an historic speech delivered at the Cairo University in June 2009, where the fight against Islamist ideology was replaced with partnership with the Muslim Brotherhood. Since then, US bureaucracies shifted from campaigning against Islamic fundamentalists to campaigning with them in preparing for their return or arrival to power across the Greater Middle East. This was the case during the so-called Arab Spring of 2011, with clear Obama support to the Ikhwan in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and beyond. His administration, when they pulled out from Iraq prompting the pro-Iranian militias to return, had to face the blitz of an ISIS Caliphate that rose in reaction to the post-withdrawal militia takeover. Thus, after Iraq, the Obama administration had to postpone a deal with the Taliban that was to be the basis for a pull-out from Afghanistan. In 2014, Washington had to take down ISIS in Iraq and Syria before offering Afghanistan to the Taliban, an impossible equation to impose on the American public. Besides, the Obama team was focusing on the Iran deal talks and wanted to achieve that deal first, before entering the fray of a Taliban Deal.

THE TRUMP SHORT TERM

The Trump campaign committed to crush ISIS, push back against the Taliban and counter the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood. Once in the White House, the Trump team delivered on ending geographical Daesh control and kept the support going for the US mission in Afghanistan. But after the 2018 midterms, when the Democratic opposition seized the congressional majority again, plans for Afghanistan changed

again. The Trump administration decided to engage in talks with the Islamist militia under Qatar's mediation, but the "deal" that was reached (which I did criticize then) at least put draconian conditions on a return of the Taliban to Kabul. The latter had to engage in dialogue with the elected government, eventually disarm, integrate the armed forces, and form a national unity government with the other political parties. Perhaps the Trump plan was to defend the slogan of "ending wars" and then adopt a tougher stance with the Taliban after re-election. But after "difficult elections," it was a Biden administration that decided the future of Afghanistan.

BIDEN CATASTROPHE IN AFGHANISTAN

Within just a couple months after inauguration, the old Obama plans were reactivated, and the Taliban Deal signed by the Trump administration was remodelled into a new deal, accepting Taliban control of the country and government in exchange for change of policy by the jihadi militia. Either this was sheer naivete on behalf of Washington or it was part of the Obama vision of collaboration with the Islamists who would be in charge in the Muslim world. Both realities are catastrophic. And so it was on the ground. The Biden administration met with the Taliban in Doha and announced them as its new partners and the leaders of the new government in Kabul. In addition, the White House was adamant in refusing any military support to the Afghani military when attacked by Taliban and jihadi militias. That, by itself, signalled to the Afghan state that America had shifted alliance from the democratically elected government and parliament of Afghanistan to the jihadi forces it fought for twenty years. Without air support, and more importantly the imposing voice of America in the regional and international arena, the battle was lost for the Afghan state, already undermined by corruption yet willing to fight nevertheless. The Taliban invaded the country, the army crumbled, and many fled into exodus.

THE NEW JIHADI STATE

The neo-Taliban, as radical as before but using modern propaganda techniques from their political operation in Doha, are obliterating their opposition in Afghanistan via assassinations, executions, and fighting the last free enclave in the Panjshir valley. They immediately went back to their old ways of oppressing women, youth and minorities. But two differences play to their advantage. One, the US has withdrawn and the Biden administration is ready to enter political and financial partnership after some stabilization. Two, the Taliban seized \$80 billion worth of US military equipment and arms, which they will use to fulfil their agenda. So, what is that agenda?

First, fully crushing the domestic opposition, seizing the border, and opening their regime to jihadists from around the world. Afghanistan will become the top jihadi state in the world. Al Qaeda, Haqqani, and even ISIS will eventually be incorporated in its power. Intra jihadi deals will be cut, even if occasionally skirmishes and power struggles take place.

The decision, by the Biden administration to go back to the original Obama plans to collaborate with the Islamists has gone too far, as this apparently assisted in the rise of a super "Islamic Emirate," which will irreversibly become—as ISIS was—a building block for another jihadi Caliphate. The new regime will target Tajikistan and central Asia, India, the Arab Gulf, Egypt, Europe, and in the end will make the US suffer for having delayed the Islamists' fantasy of a medieval Caliphate with modern weaponry.

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