From Afghanistan to the Middle East:

Implications of the U.S. Withdrawal and Taliban Victory

by Kathryn Wheelbarger **(/experts/kathryn-wheelbarger)**, Aaron Y. Zelin **(/experts/aaron-y-zelin)**, Patrick Clawson **(/experts/patrick-clawson)**

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Brief Analysis

Three Institute scholars discuss the fallout from Kabul, with special focus on the consequences for global jihadism, Iranian policy, and regional responses.

On August 19, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Kathryn Wheelbarger, Aaron Y. Zelin, and Patrick Clawson. Wheelbarger is the Institute's Rosenblatt Visiting Fellow and former acting assistant secretary for international affairs at the Pentagon. Zelin, an expert on global jihadist movements, is the Institute's Richard Borow Fellow. Clawson is the Institute's director of research and Morningstar Senior Fellow, specializing in Iranian affairs. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Kathryn Wheelbarger

What is happening today in Afghanistan reflects decades of history as well as complex domestic, regional, and international dynamics. The past twenty years of U.S. engagement hold many lessons, and deciding how and where to apply those lessons will take careful consideration.

The current situation presents challenges, of course. For one, the withdrawal may erode America's credibility in its global security partnerships, including those in the Middle East. The tumultuous nature of the pullout also highlights the costs associated with ending ongoing commitments. Perhaps this will be a moment to reflect on the shortcomings found in common critiques of "forever wars."

At the same time, one benefit of robust regional relationships is that times of crisis can also present opportunities to advance mutual interests. Looking to the future, the Biden administration should focus on actionable plans that support partners in the Middle East—for example, launching joint programs or enhancing cyber cooperation. Particularly in Iraq, the United States and its European allies have emphasized a shared interest in security and stability through train-and-equip missions and an increased NATO presence. They might also consider what can be done to bolster security partners in Syria.

Part of the reason for the Afghan withdrawal was to facilitate the reallocation of resources toward America's most urgent regional and global priorities. Yet what has unfolded so far seems closer to the opposite: with the Taliban's violent takeover and the plight of refugees dominating headlines, U.S. officials are understandably unable to turn away. Resource constraints cannot be ignored indefinitely, however—after decades of on-the-ground engagement in Afghanistan, the United States should divide its time and energy in ways that better reflect current strategic objectives. Investing in relationships with other regional partners would fortify the U.S. approach to global issues while continuing to support overall stability in the Middle East.

Aaron Y. Zelin

Four main elements will shape jihadist activity related to the Afghanistan withdrawal: the mobilization of foreign fighters, the manner in which other extremist groups react to the Taliban's takeover, the identity of freed prisoners, and the degree to which key al-Qaeda figures reenter the Afghan scene.

Regarding the first element, jihadist demographics in Afghanistan have changed considerably since al-Qaeda first garnered public attention in the 1980s and '90s. In contrast to the group's predominantly Arab ranks early on, its membership today consists mainly of local Afghans and individuals from the Indian subcontinent, surrounding countries, and southeast Asia.

As for the Islamic State (IS), it has maintained a foreign fighter presence in Afghanistan since 2015 (albeit a much smaller one than al-Qaeda). Historically an opponent of the Taliban, IS may now try to capitalize on its rival's gains, seeking to boost recruitment by presenting itself as the rightful "Afghan Islamic State." In other words, another jihadist mobilization is inevitable—the question is not whether it will occur, but how large it will be. IS forces already appear to be stepping up their attacks on Taliban units, as seen in Nangarhar province just before Kabul fell.

Regarding reactions from the wider jihadist movement, many groups and individual operatives have already **commended the Taliban (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/return-islamic-emirate-afghanistan-jihadist-state-play)** on its success. The specific content of these statements varies (e.g., the Syrian group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham expressed a desire to replicate Kabul's capture in Damascus), but most of them echo the same main theme: that the concurrent withdrawal of U.S. forces and collapse of state institutions demonstrates the value of jihadist "piety" and persistence.

One notable exception to this outpouring of support is al-Qaeda's network, which has so far remained silent about Kabul, at least on its official channels. Perhaps the group will offer more insight on its views and the whereabouts of leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in the coming weeks, especially as the twentieth anniversary of the September 11 attacks approaches.

Regarding prisoner releases, the Taliban has been freeing large numbers of jailed jihadists. The U.S. government has not yet specified which individuals have been freed and which are still detained, so assessing how jihadist groups stand to benefit from the releases is complicated.

Going forward, al-Qaeda seems like the group to watch following the Taliban's ascent. Recent events have put the organization in a position to rebuild, though it is difficult to estimate how many operatives remain inside Afghanistan and who they are, despite some knowledge of certain key figures. To what extent will al-Qaeda's diffuse international network attempt to reenter the country now that the Taliban is in power?

Perhaps al-Qaeda affiliates in Syria—at least those who have survived Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's crackdown and U.S. drone strikes—will go back to Afghanistan. Perhaps Saif al-Adel, Zawahiri's potential successor, will return there from Iran. Whatever the case, Washington's ability to intercept terrorist plots at an earlier stage will likely be limited somewhat by the lack of ground intelligence, despite the deep sophistication of current U.S. counterterrorism mechanisms.

Patrick Clawson

Iran has many reasons to be hostile toward the Taliban. These tensions can be traced back to before the Islamic Republic, when Iran began vying for water rights in Afghanistan's longest river. In the 1990s, Iran strongly supported the Northern Alliance, a Taliban adversary. In 1998, the Taliban killed Iranian diplomats while overrunning northern Afghanistan, spurring Tehran to mobilize over 200,000 troops for a possible invasion. The Taliban has also slaughtered members of the Hazara ethnic group, co-religionists to Shia-dominated Iran. Moreover, Taliban members largely control Afghanistan's opium trade, which has had a devastating effect on Iran's population.

Even so, Tehran appears to have changed its outlook somewhat over the past decade or so. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, historically hypercritical of the Taliban, has not spoken out against the group since 2015. And at least some Iranian military assistance has been proffered as well, according to eminent Afghanistan scholar Barnett Rubin. When Supreme National Security Council chair Ali Shamkhani visited Kabul in 2018, he told the government that Tehran was supplying the Taliban with arms and ammunition. Iran also remains one of Afghanistan's largest trade partners, and their border crossing points have continued to operate. Likewise, Iran's Kabul embassy remains open.

As for Tehran's response to the U.S. withdrawal, local media output indicates that the regime is primarily focusing on the theme of American defeat rather than Taliban takeover. Common hostility toward Washington has proven to be a powerful incentive for Tehran to cooperate with extremist Sunni groups, even those that have slaughtered Shia (e.g., al-Qaeda in Iraq). Such cooperation has ended only when Iranian leaders come to believe that these groups pose a threat to the regime itself. Hence, their views on the Taliban could shift sharply if the organization appears to threaten their hold on power at home, whether directly or indirectly.

Ultimately, however, Iran will go to great lengths to partner with U.S. opponents, and this reality should continue to shape Washington's approach. Tehran is extremely unlikely to abandon its goal of destabilizing the region and fielding missiles that threaten U.S. and allied targets, so Washington should not invest undue energy in trying to curtail these activities (as opposed to defending against/responding to them). A much bigger priority is to establish longer and stronger nuclear restrictions, since it would be inappropriate to expect that the Islamic Republic will ever abandon its nuclear ambitions.

This summary was prepared by Hannah Labow. ❖

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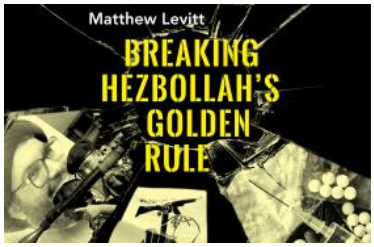

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