How Not to Repeat My History with the Taliban

by David Pollock **(/experts/david-pollock)**

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Articles & Testimony

To avoid the worst outcomes, Washington needs to assiduously enforce any deals with the new Afghan leadership, cooperate effectively with other world powers, and explain to a domestic audience how the withdrawal will facilitate a focus on different priorities.

The Taliban reconquest of Kabul is a trauma for many Afghans—but, one must admit, a triumph for others. Each competing segment of that society is living through something quite like a repeat of history. From my personal perspective, though mercifully far from the scene, it means reliving a professional nightmare that began in early May of 2001.

At that moment, as the regional expert in the State Department's Policy Planning Staff who had followed the Taliban ever since their first arrival in Kabul, I wrote a formal memorandum to the Secretary about them. Its opening line (later cited in unclassified form in my official performance evaluation) read simply as follows: "The United States can no longer live with Taliban support for terrorism." The evaluation commended me for that "stunningly prescient" warning, along with my proposed emergency preemptive measures. But by then, of course, it was too late; 9/11 had already happened.

Afterward, I spent the next five years as Senior Advisor for the Broader Middle East in State's Office of International Women's Issues, helping to launch initiatives like the U.S.-Afghan Women's Council, the Secretary's International Women of Courage Award, and vocational mentorship programs for Afghan women and girls. All the while, I had to keep a wary eye on Taliban and other opposition to these social transformations. Truth be told, credible surveys showed that Western women's ways are still widely considered offensive by many Afghans.

Still, such projects were reasonably effective, despite all the well-known waste, corruption, cultural

misunderstandings, and growing unpopularity—at home and in Afghanistan—that dogged the overall American experience in that country. Whatever the weak strategic rationale for our withdrawal, it is painful to see so much of that progress literally go up in smoke right now. But again, it is too late to lament this fait accompli.

So, now that the Taliban are once again in power, will the worst such tragedies recur? We cannot know for sure, so we should not waste much time on futile prognostications. We do know, however, that this is not inevitable; once again, the outcomes depend at least partly on what we do next. In that spirit, I offer seven lessons learned from previous chapters, with due allowance for all the changes that have taken place until today.

1. Stop trying to find "moderate" Taliban. There aren't any who matter, though there are some tactical differences among them. I participated in many internal debates about this in the decade after the Taliban took Kabul the first time, all of which only confirmed my grim conclusion. Today I see little evidence that this has changed for the better. The possible inclusion of non-Taliban figureheads in some new Afghan government—even former president Hamid Karzai or chairman Abdullah Abdullah—will almost certainly not fundamentally alter this fact. Still, the tactical differences offer a window for bargaining, leading to the next suggestion.

2. Make deals with the Taliban—but only if you are prepared to enforce them afterward. Their credibility in negotiations with the West is near zero, so long as they believe they can get away with murder. Regarding Taliban support or tolerance for cross-border terrorism, which they are currently at pains to disavow, it would make sense to send very explicit and specific private warnings to them about U.S. determination to forcibly preempt or (if that fails) punish any violations immediately. And it would be essential to act on those warnings as the need arises.

The two or three U.S. strikes against Islamic State–Khorasan (IS-K) terrorists since the horrific Kabul airport suicide bombings were a start. But this needs to be a sustained campaign, not just a few parting shots; it needs to avoid further civilian casualties, which is exceedingly difficult; and it needs to be targeted against Al-Qaidah as well, not just against the avowed IS-K rival of the Taliban. If that can be done in coordination with the Taliban, fine, so long as it is done on a "do not trust, and verify" basis.

A new statement by the senior Taliban spokesman in Doha, Zabihullah Mujahid, reiterating his denial of any "proof" linking Bin Laden with 9/11, is a bad omen in this regard. Nevertheless, in many other Muslim-majority states, both public opinion and government policies turned hard against some of the most extreme jihadi groups after mass-casualty terrorism in their own cities. Perhaps the Taliban will eventually follow suit.

3. Use money as leverage. President Biden has publicly hinted that Taliban access to frozen foreign exchange reserves or international aid might be dependent on how they treat their own citizens, including female ones. This is worth a try. One Taliban official has just declared that this time around, women and girls will be allowed to work and go to school—but separately from men and boys. Idealists may argue that the Taliban should be sanctioned, not bribed. But that has never worked with them before.

To be sure, the Taliban don't care much about economic development, and they have other income from the drug trade and similar skullduggery. Yet they probably want more, and may be willing to bargain for it. The key is to strike hard, incremental bargains, rather than give away (or take away) the whole store at once. And if the Taliban do not fulfill their end of the bargain, then the bucks should stop there.

4. Work with others—both friends and adversaries—to contain the Taliban and their kin. We have common interests with Russia, China, and even Iran in countering potential terrorist threats from Afghanistan. We have periodically engaged with each of them on this, fairly successfully, in the past, without prejudice to other issues. We should therefore intensify the effort to regain this common ground, notwithstanding the public gloating in those countries about the American "failure" in Afghanistan.

5. At the same time, the U.S. should strive to reassure our allies and partners, throughout the Near East/South Asia

and beyond, that we will continue to support joint efforts against terrorists and in favor of our friends. That means clarifying our intention to maintain the very modest but crucial military advisory presence we have in Iraq, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere in the region.

In other words, there should be no more Afghanistans on the horizon. Senior U.S. officials have already conveyed that message to the Iraqi government, and to the Syrian Democratic Forces. But messages alone will no longer suffice; a demonstrated, continuing commitment on the ground will be required.

6. Explain how the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan will help us focus on bigger issues, like "great power competition" with China or Russia. We have heard plenty of vague talk about this, but specifics are sorely lacking. They need to be provided, and then proved in practice. If not, then this line of argument is not a real rationale but merely a rationalization for the U.S. withdrawal, feeding domestic political doubts. That leads to the final recommendation:

7. Work with others to restore some common ground at home. This may be the hardest task of all, but it is vital. To the maximum extent possible, the partisan or bureaucratic blame game about Afghanistan should be relegated to the sidelines for a while—as was the case with my own Taliban story. Only in that way will the upcoming twentieth anniversary of 9/11 become an occasion for renewed American resolve, rather than endless—and pointless—recrimination. ❖

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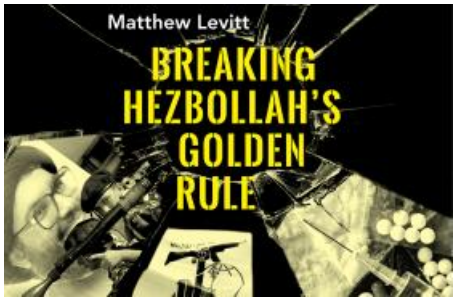

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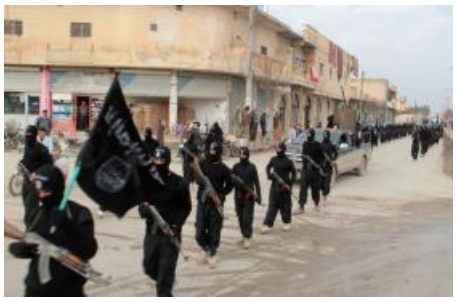

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