



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات  
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

Situation Assessment | 17 August 2021

# Repercussions of the Taliban's Return to Rule Afghanistan

Unit for Political Studies

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Series: **Situation Assessment**

17 August 2021

## Unit for Political Studies

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With the fall of the Afghan capital of Kabul on 15 August, the Taliban has returned to rule the country twenty years after being ousted by United States in November 2001. The US invasion followed the September 11 attacks in New York and Washington, orchestrated by Al Qaeda, the time hosted by the Taliban, who, in turn, refused to shutdown Al Qaeda camps and hand over its leaders. President Biden's administration has met with backlash for the way it handled the withdrawal process from Afghanistan (the agreement for which was signed under Trump) in light of fears about the Taliban's return to ruling Afghanistan and the possibility of it turning, once again, into a magnet for extremist currents targeting the United States and other countries in the area. Contrary to popular opinion, the US decision to withdraw was not the result of a military defeat, but rather a political failure, the consequences of which have proved dire. The United States was able to maintain President Ashraf Ghani's government with a relatively small number of US soldiers and their NATO allies. It was thus a political-economic decision to end involvement in Afghanistan, one that serves as recognition of another political failure in the US "nation-building" or "state-building" mission as an occupying power.

## The Return of the Taliban

In 2018, a classified US intelligence assessment,<sup>(1)</sup> leaked earlier this year, concluded that a rapid withdrawal could lead to civil war and the Taliban's return to power, but the Trump administration insisted on negotiating with the Taliban and withdrawing in a way that secures some guarantees that Afghanistan will not host any "terrorist organization" in the future. The Biden administration concluded that there are greater challenges facing the United States, in addition to its assessment that the Afghan troops are able to confront the Taliban, for a period of up to two years, allowing for a settlement to be reached with the Taliban. The intelligence warnings went far beyond a scenario resembling the Islamic State's campaign to win control over large parts of Iraq and Syria in the summer of 2014, following its withdrawal of Iraq in 2011. They envisioned a possible repeat of the fall of Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam, in 1975, as the North Vietnamese forces marched on the city after the US abandoned the war and its southern allies.

In a press interview in July 2021, President Biden refused to draw a comparison between Saigon and what might happen in Kabul in the event of the withdrawal of US troops, stressing that "The Taliban is not [...] the North Vietnamese army." He went even further to say that "the likelihood there's going to be the Taliban overrunning everything and owning the whole country is highly unlikely..."<sup>(2)</sup> However, developments proved him very wrong, when 3,000 US soldiers had to be sent to evacuate the US embassy staff, starting on 12 August 2021, as the Taliban forces began closing in on the capital, rising to 5,000 soldiers two days later. The sight of US helicopters ferrying embassy staff to the airport in Kabul did indeed bring back memories of Saigon, a major historical failure for the US.

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1 Dion Nissenbaum & Gordon Lubold, "Military Believes Trump's Afghan War Plan Is Working, but Spy Agencies Are Pessimistic," *The Wall Street Journal*, 31/8/2018, accessed on 17/8/2021, at: <https://on.wsj.com/3xOoAHX>.

2 "Remarks by President Biden on the Drawdown of U.S. Forces in Afghanistan," The White House, 8/7/2021, accessed on 17/8/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3yTo9xD>.



But the Biden administration is not solely responsible for the failure in Afghanistan, which can be considered a belated expression of the inevitable. According to secret US government documents revealed by the Washington Post in 2019, titled “The Afghan Papers,” successive US administrations, since George W. Bush, concluded that it is not possible to eliminate the Taliban. Moreover, the US political and military leaderships were aware of the scale of the corruption and weakness of the government in Kabul. Yet the Trump administration ignored these facts to avoid admitting failure in the so-called state building mission. Under the US tutelage, Afghan political elites and parasitic groups have grown dependent on US military and economic support, succumbing to infighting and failing to take root for themselves or state institutions in Afghan society, especially in rural areas.

From 2006, it was clear to the Bush administration that things were not going in the right direction, but it decided, however, to ignore the warnings and continue to spread a positive atmosphere about the developments of the battles on the ground. When Obama took office, he shifted his focus after redirecting his troops from Iraq to Afghanistan, in a fresh attempt to defeat the Taliban. He raised the number of US troops there from 36,000 to 83,000, in addition to another 32,000 NATO forces, along with thousands of civilian contractors who provide military advice and services. However, the significant increase in the number of combat forces did not change the facts on the ground, which forced Obama to announce, at the end of 2014, that the number of US forces would be reduced to about nine thousand and that they would theoretically remain in “non-combat” missions. Having that number (in fact less) was enough to prop up the government and its military against the Taliban throughout the Trump era. The latter did not advance until after the withdrawal of these nine thousand Americans. In many states, including the capital, regular forces collapsed without a fight, as US troops withdrew.

Although Trump made promises to end this most expensive and longest-running war in US history, in 2017, he authorized the US military command in Afghanistan to increase the number of troops, if it saw the need to do so, as well as giving his administration the green light to launch an intense air bombing campaign with the most powerful non-nuclear bombs available in the US arsenal,<sup>(3)</sup> especially after the emergence of ISIS aligned forces in Afghanistan. But US military efforts again failed to bring about a fundamental change on the ground, which led him to seek peace with the Taliban in 2018. Indeed, his administration began negotiating with the Taliban in Doha, and ended with the signing of a peace agreement with them that stipulated a full US withdrawal ending in early May 2021, in exchange for the movement to sever its ties with Al Qaeda and “other terrorist groups.”<sup>(4)</sup> When the Doha agreement was signed, the Taliban controlled nearly half of the country.<sup>(5)</sup>

When Biden took office in early 2021, he indicated his commitment to the outgoing administration’s agreement with the Taliban. In April 2021, it was announced that US troops, who numbered 3,500 soldiers at the time, and NATO forces, at 7,000 soldiers, would begin to withdraw from

3 “The U.S. War in Afghanistan: 1999 – 2021,” The Council on Foreign Relations, accessed on 17/8/2021, at: <https://on.cfr.org/3xUbVn4>

4 The Editorial Board, “Biden Takes the Easy Way out of Afghanistan. The likely Result is Disaster,” *The Washington Post*, 13/4/2021, accessed on 17/8/2021, at: <https://wapo.st/2UmDo2S>

5 Shannon Pettypiece, “As the Taliban Gains Ground, Biden Grapples with the Ghosts of Saigon,” *NBC News*, 3/8/2021, accessed on 17/8/2021, at: <https://nbcnews.to/3AF5HJw>



Afghanistan at the beginning of May 2021, provided that they were withdrawn before 11 September 2021.<sup>(6)</sup> On 8 July, Biden brought the date for the withdrawal of US forces to the end of August 2021 and confirmed that his administration was developing plans to prevent Al Qaeda and other organizations from strengthening their presence in Afghanistan. This included the establishment of the US Central Command, within the scope of action of which falls Afghanistan, by moving some of its forces to Pakistan or Tajikistan to provide a rapid response capability in the event of any threat in Afghanistan. But the rapid advance of Taliban forces and collapse of Afghan government forces (in most cases without resistance) took Washington by surprise, revealing a major intelligence failure.

## Intelligence Failure and Government Corruption

The decision to withdraw from Afghanistan was based on Washington's belief that the Afghan army would be able to fend off Taliban attacks, especially on the capital. The president's advisors had expressed confidence that the Taliban would not be able to control any of the capitals of the 34 provinces of Afghanistan before autumn 2021 at the earliest.<sup>(7)</sup> Until 13 August 2021, one day before the Taliban besieged and entered Kabul, US Defense Department spokesman John Kirby confirmed that the capital was not under threat. Meanwhile, it seems that the US intelligence agencies did not have enough information about the Taliban's capabilities, equipment, number of fighters, and plans. More importantly, it did not realize the extent of the psychological and material dependence of the regime on the US presence, to the point that the army's lost morale with the exit of the Americans. The absence of sufficient coordination with the Afghan government forces has also emerged. An example of this is when, in July 2021, the US forces left Bagram base, north of Kabul, and cut off the electricity, without notifying the Afghan commander of the base, who only discovered their departure two hours later.<sup>(8)</sup>

The widespread corruption among government forces also played a role in this outcome. Theoretically, the balance of power has tilted strongly in favour of the Afghan army, which is about four times more powerful than the Taliban, possesses more advanced weapons, and has an air force, albeit limited, as well as the training, funding, and resources afforded by Washington. This is what President Biden was counting on. He referred to these factors in his speech in July 2021 when he justified his decision to withdraw from Afghanistan, noting that the United States and its allies trained and armed hundreds of thousands of Afghans, including more than 300,000 soldiers and security men in the face of 75,000 fighters from the Taliban. However, a large portion of these soldiers existed only on

6 "Remarks by President Biden on the Way Forward in Afghanistan," The White House, 14/4/2021, accessed on 17/8/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3CSRtqa>.

7 Talal Ansari, Max Rust & Andrew Mollica, "How the Taliban Took over of Afghanistan's Provincial Capitals Is Unfolding," *The Wall Street Journal*, 13/8/2021, accessed on 17/8/2021, at: <https://on.wsj.com/37OdEzx>.

8 Kathy Gannon, "US left Afghan Airfield at Night, didn't Tell New Commander," *The Associated Press*, 6/7/2021, accessed on 17/8/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/2V5Zefr>.



paper given the spread of the so-called “ghost” or “alien” soldiers phenomenon, as some corrupt officials have tended to exaggerate the numbers of those affiliated with their military units to steal their salaries and allowances.<sup>(9)</sup>

Although the United States has spent about 83 billion dollars on training and arming the Afghan army, it has not been able to cultivate the will to fight among its members. Morale has remained low due to corruption and mismanagement among the Afghan government and its military leadership. Thousands of Afghan police and soldiers, for example, have not received their salaries for months. The same applies to the lack of food and other provisions. The deployment of the army and police forces in areas far from their homes has contributed to creating a feeling of unease and a weak sense of belonging. With the departure of the Americans and the advance of the Taliban, many of them fled to their hometowns to defend their families. Not many of them were eager to defend Ashraf Ghani’s government, which they saw as weak and corrupt, so they dropped their weapons and fled as soon as the vanguard of the Taliban forces appeared. Government forces have also had problems with their ability to operate the weapons they possess. This was most evident in the Air Force. The Afghan forces were unable to operate their aircraft after withdrawing civilian contractors.<sup>(10)</sup> Meanwhile, the Taliban proved much stronger militarily than US estimations had suggested, with their capabilities enhanced by the advanced US weapons they had managed to plunder.

## Repercussions of the Taliban’s Return

The withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan, the fall of the Kabul government, and the return of the Taliban will have major local, regional and international repercussions, the most important of which are:

- Decline in trust and credibility of the United States among its regional and international allies; The way in which Washington has abandoned its allies in Afghanistan suggests that it has watered down any commitments that might impede its ability to face strategic challenges and threats such as the rise of China.
- The possibility that the return of the Taliban to rule Afghanistan will revive the extremist organizations that received a major blow after the defeat of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, given that this will be seen as a great victory for the movement and its supporters.
- The possibility of a decline in the gains made by Afghan women during the past two decades, including the right of young girls to education, and the imposition of a strict regime.
- The emergence of a power vacuum in Afghanistan that fuels the spirit of competition between regional and international powers; potentially turning Afghanistan into a new arena of conflict. Conflicts of an ethnic or national nature are not unlikely after the recent shock.

<sup>9</sup> Alia Shoaib, “Why the US-trained Afghan National Army have been Defeated with Ease by the Taliban,” *Business Insider*, 14/8/2021, accessed on 17/8/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3jXOpk9>.

<sup>10</sup> Robbie Gramer, “How Did Things Go So Bad So Fast in Afghanistan?” *Foreign Policy*, 12/8/2021, accessed on 17/8/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/37MvN0T>.



## Conclusion

With the return of the Taliban to rule, Afghanistan is facing a new era characterised by uncertainty. Although the movement appears interested in allaying domestic and international concerns that it will adopt a hard-line approach to governance and gaining international recognition, much will depend on its next steps after regaining power. The Taliban is currently focused on avoiding a repetition of what happened to it during its rule between 1996-2001, when its hard-line rhetoric and policies led to its isolation and non-recognition. The Taliban, since their takeover of Kabul, has adopted a moderate political discourse through which it hopes to succeed in persuading the international community to accept it, and perhaps even extract economic aid to achieve stability in a war-ravaged country.

Pakistan's recognition of the Taliban's rule was not surprising, of course, but China, which is fighting what it calls "Islamic extremism," and holds its Uighur citizens in detention camps, is also leaning towards recognition, seeing only US decline. Russia, which does not hide its glee, is taking a similar stance but prefers to wait and follow the policies of the Taliban, which has influence in the Asian republics. The United States, its allies in the European Union and NATO, can still isolate the movement and prevent it from gaining wide acceptance in the international arena. Perhaps this is what prompted the Taliban to adopt a "moderate" discourse so far, including respect for political pluralism and the basic freedoms of Afghans. This will be put to the test during the coming period to gauge how the international community deals with the new reality in Afghanistan.











