



Forum for American Leadership

Counterterrorism in Afghanistan: Where We Are, Where To Go

September 9, 2021

The Taliban's victory in its 20-year insurgency against the U.S.-backed Afghan government is a major setback to U.S. counterterrorism efforts. Since the fall of Kabul, the U.S. and its allies likely face a higher risk of international terrorist attack emanating from South Asia than at any time since 2001.

- While the Taliban ostensibly promised not to allow safe haven for al-Qaida in the 2020 U.S.-Taliban peace deal, it was transparently negotiating in bad faith and the deal came with no monitoring or enforcement mechanisms. The Taliban reneged on other parts of the agreement over the past year, and the UN [publicly assessed](#) in June that the Taliban continued to work with al-Qaida after signing the deal.
- Al-Qaida has regained some measure of safe haven in Afghanistan and the tribal areas of western Pakistan. For 20 years, al-Qaida and affiliated militants focused their energy on evading U.S. intelligence, air strikes, and special forces raids, and on planning immediate, short-term attacks on U.S. forces in the region. With the U.S. presence gone, they now have operational space to recruit, train, fundraise, and plan longer-term and more ambitious attacks.
- The U.S. military withdrawal also means the withdrawal of most intelligence, reconnaissance, and surveillance assets. We no longer have the eyes and ears on the ground with which we monitored al-Qaida's activity. We do not have a clear picture on the group's size, strength, or capabilities going forward.

The Taliban values its relationship with al-Qaida, and vice versa. Officials in the Trump and Biden administrations have suggested that the Taliban could become a counterterrorism partner against al-Qaida. There is no evidence for that, while there is evidence for the opposite.

- The Taliban and al-Qaida remain strongly intertwined. Some [reports](#) suggest al-Qaida militants gave direct support to the Taliban's final push for military victory in early August.
- The Taliban have never denounced al-Qaida or acknowledged its responsibility for the 2001 terrorist attacks. The two groups remain strongly aligned ideologically, and al-Qaida groups worldwide publicly celebrated the Taliban's victory as a victory for the cause of global jihad. Al-Qaida's leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, swore allegiance to the Taliban's spiritual leader, Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada, in 2016, illustrating how closely the two groups continue to be.
- Ties between Afghan insurgents and al-Qaida is even more pronounced with the Haqqani Network. While formally part of the Taliban, the Haqqanis have always maintained some

degree of independence and are certain to continue their decades long partnership and protection of al-Qaida on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

- The Taliban is unlikely to allow al-Qaida's presence to be as overt as it was prior to 2001 to avoid international scrutiny, sanctions, or military action. But equally so, the Taliban will not prevent the group's activity and may give it low-level support—both because of their ideological alignment and to protect the Taliban's relationships with other jihadist groups, fundraisers, and suppliers worldwide who support al-Qaida's vision.
- To the extent the Taliban acts against militants, it will target the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant – Khorasan Province (ISIS-K), whom they [view](#) to be foreign invaders and whom they have fought in the past. The possibility of transactional agreements between the Taliban and these purportedly external groups should not, however, be dismissed as impossible. The Taliban do not view al-Qaida as foreigners but as protected guests and, in some cases, as family through decades of intermarriage.

The Taliban's victory also has geopolitical implications. Afghanistan's proximity to Iran, Pakistan, India, and China makes the U.S. withdrawal and Taliban government relevant for U.S. interests—including counterproliferation and great power rivalry—across the region.

- While Afghanistan in itself is of tertiary geopolitical importance, the dramatic and public nature of the U.S. withdrawal demoralized Americans and allies throughout the free world, ceding initiative to our adversaries to advance a rival vision of world order. Within days of the fall of Kabul, Chinese state propaganda directed at Taiwan emphasized America's unreliability to its allies.
- Indians see the U.S. withdrawal as the de facto cession of Afghanistan to Pakistan. As a result, India may slow or recalibrate its investment in long-term ties with the U.S., uncertain of our commitment to south and central Asia. Ties had been strengthening for the past 25 years and a bilateral partnership has long been central to U.S. strategy in the 21st century.
- Iran, feeling emboldened by the U.S. withdrawal and simultaneously threatened by the Sunni jihadist Taliban regime, will assuredly grow more overt in pursuing weapons of mass destruction.

What to Do: The United States must continue to pursue and identify an opportunity to rebuild an intelligence and counterterrorism partnership in Afghanistan.

- The notion of “over the horizon” counterterrorism in Afghanistan is a fallacy. The U.S. currently has little to no ability to identify threats or strike them in a timely manner. This challenge will become more pronounced over time. The U.S. and our allies need assets in Afghanistan to conduct counterterrorism activity.
- Congressional intelligence committees should push the Biden administration for the use of title 50 authority to continue counterterrorism efforts in Afghanistan as well as

unconventional warfare activities to undermine and disrupt Taliban attempts to solidify and maintain control.

- The Panjshiri Tajiks constituted the core of the old Northern Alliance, the group that fought the Taliban in the 1990s and with whom U.S. forces allied during the first phase of the war in Afghanistan in late 2001. Given the Taliban's advances and relative defeat of the Panjshiri resistance, it is likely that this entity will not be a viable partner for the U.S. in Afghanistan.
- Congress should require the U.S. national security community to provide regular updates on evaluating entities within Afghanistan that could, at some future point, serve as a viable intelligence and counterterrorism partner and the associated resources that such support would require.

The Forum for American Leadership (FAL) is a non-profit organization that presents expert analysis and national security recommendations to policymakers in Congress and the Executive Branch.



Want to learn more about this subject, arrange an interview, or set up a briefing with FAL experts? Contact us [here](#).