US Withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban’s Return, One Year Later

TRANSCRIPT

Discussion

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- Bill Roggio, Senior Fellow, Foundation for Defense of Democracies, and Editor, Long War Journal
- Javid Ahmad, Senior Fellow, Atlantic Council, and Former Ambassador of Afghanistan to the United Arab Emirates
- Matin Bek, Former Chief of Staff to the Afghan President
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A video of the event is available: https://www.hudson.org/events/2138-virtual-event-us-withdrawal-from-afghanistan-and-the-taliban-s-return-one-year-later-82022

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Husain Haqqani:

Hello, and welcome to our viewers around the world. I am Husain Haqqani, Director for South and Central Asia, here at the Hudson Institute. It has been one year since the United States withdrew its forces and allied forces from Afghanistan. Questions are still being asked whether the US made a mistake in withdrawing from that country. The Trump administration may have committed an error in signing an agreement with the Taliban to fulfill the president's promise of withdrawing American troops from forever wars. The Biden administration transformed folly into disaster in the way the withdrawal was executed. The alternative of withdrawing troops through a deal with the Afghan government was just not explored. The Afghan government forces collapsed. The Taliban took power again.

As a result of the withdrawal and the Taliban's return to power, US prestige took a huge hit. At the same time, there have been other issues that have resulted from the withdrawal. America's allies were left wondering if the US would fulfill its commitments about their defense or leave them on their own like it did the faltering Republic of Afghanistan. Other questions arose about US resolve: Can America's leaders maintain domestic support in long-running international conflicts? And if they cannot, can America still be the world's leader while China is trying to become its peer? There are also questions about the Biden administration's competence, which was not reflected much during the withdrawal.

The international Jihadi terrorist movement has certainly been rejuvenated. Groups that had become dormant are now active all the way from Africa to East Asia. Other consequences of the Afghan withdrawal and its less than competent execution might have been the assumption in Moscow and Beijing, that they too can test US willingness to undertake military operations. After all, if the US gets tired of having forces in a country too long, why would it be willing to put up a fight if Russia and China try to feel or demonstrate their power in their neighborhood?

In the meantime, Afghanistan faces multiple crisis. The world's attention seems to have moved on, the US is paying very little attention, but the Taliban's return to power has been totally disastrous for the Afghan people. Afghan women and girls have lost their basic rights. Ethnic and religious minorities are losing their lives. And the economy has collapsed. The United States recently found and eliminated al-Qaeda leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri in Kabul. This indicated that ties between international terrorist groups and the Taliban are continuing and that the Taliban are unwilling to abide by the Doha courts. The Biden administration has suggested that it also shows that the US can manage counter-terrorism operations over the horizon, without having a military presence in Afghanistan, but without some policy about the future of Afghanistan, what is that country's future, and will it become a safe haven for terrorism once again, like it was before 9/11?

Having withdrawn from Afghanistan, the US must now deal with the continued terrorist threat there and also confront the consequences of Taliban rule. US claims about upholding or
spreading democratic norms and human rights is not going to be very credible if it starts dealing with the Taliban as a reality, and is not able to change their behavior.

To discuss all of this and more, we are fortunate to have with us an excellent panel. Bill Roggio is a Senior Fellow at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies and Editor of FDD's Long War Journal, which provides original reporting and analysis on the global war on terror from Afghanistan and Pakistan to Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, North Africa, Iran and beyond.

Abdul Matin Bek is an Afghan politician who was formerly Chief of Staff to the Afghan president and member of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan's Peace Negotiating Team. He also served as Deputy Director of the National Directorate of Intelligence of Afghanistan.

Javid Ahmad, a long time and objective South Asia hand has served as a Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council for many years. He is a non-resident scholar at the Middle East Institute and also served as Afghanistan's Ambassador to the UAE from 2020 to 2021.

And finally, Metra Mehran is a human rights activist and a Fellow at New York University's Center for Global Affairs. A leading voice in education and women empowerment, she co-founded The Feminine Perspectives Movement ahead of intra-Afghan peace negotiations.

I would like to not only welcome our panelists, but also suggest that each one of us be prepared to openly discuss any of the questions. Don't deem it limiting that I ask someone specifically for an answer. If any of you want to jump in, just go ahead. So I would like to begin our discussion and get the ball rolling by asking Bill Roggio, was there an alternative to how the United States ended up withdrawing from Afghanistan and leaving the Taliban back in charge? Bill?

**Bill Roggio:**

Hello, Husain. Thanks for having me on and thanks everyone, for joining us. It was a horrific decision that President Biden made to withdraw as well as President Trump to negotiate with the Taliban, but there was an alternative to how this withdrawal was executed. First, let me state that I understood the Americans growing tired of Afghanistan. It was twenty years of failed policy, of political and military and intelligence leaders being deceptive about the US mission there, what we were doing, who our enemies were.

So I did understand the desire to disengage, but that being said, you could not have done it the way president Biden did it. He literally pulled the rug out from the Afghan military and the Afghan government. There was never any time given for them to adjust. The US and NATO built an Afghan military that was wholly dependent on US support, maintenance, US weaponry, their intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance. And they created an Afghan military that
operated in a certain way. Once the US withdrew those combat enablers, it was just a matter of time before the Afghan military was going to fail.

So it was sickening to me to hear President Biden say things like, "The Afghan people, the Afghan military won't fight." They weren't prepared to fight. More than 50,000 Afghan soldiers and policemen died fighting the Taliban, far, far more than Americans and NATO soldiers that died there. There was an alternative. That withdrawal needed to take a slow period of time. One of the things I heard from Afghans that I spoke to, both before President, because I was warning that the US was leaving. The writing was on the wall. I read those tea leaves politically here, both under the Trump administration and then after the Biden administration.

So for the year prior to the announcement, I was telling various Afghan officials, political advisors and people in the military, people in intelligence, politicians that, "The US is leaving. You need to find your own way. The US is not going to be there." And through a man I heard, we've been assured by state or the Defense Department or the CIA or even administration Obama, or I'm sorry, Trump or Biden administration officials that the US would not abandon them.

So I think the Afghan establishment wasn't prepared mentally for the US withdrawal. So the US needed to give them time to adjust to the fact that withdrawal needed to take place over a slow period of time. The reality is the Afghan government and the Afghan military had to cede significant amount of ground to the Taliban, particularly in the south and the east. They were unwilling to do so, but I think if they had been given time to adjust for the realities of the US leaving, that they may have made these adjustments. And they also needed to clear areas in the north and the west that the Taliban were surprisingly strong, in order to reestablish what I would call Northern Alliance 2.0 where an Afghan government and Afghan military could defend Kabul, the provinces surrounding it and defend key power bases in the north and the northwest. But instead, the US just pulled everything out within three months and the collapse was inevitable.

**Husain Haqqani:**

Matin Bek, you were there in Kabul till the last day when the Taliban came in. How could this have been done differently? And what, if any path exists for the future?

**Matin Bek:**

Thank you, Ambassador Haqqani. Let me go a little bit further because I was in the heart of all this. I used to happen, the opportunity to be in all the meeting related to peace with the American officials, with the Afghan government. At the same time, I was there negotiating with the Taliban in Doha. And before that negotiation, I had the chance to have a three-day dialogue with them.
So let me describe the moment when I was in Doha, when Biden announced the withdrawal, how we felt, how the Taliban felt. When the Trump administration, when they were negotiating the Doha deal, I personally told Ambassador Khalilzad, our understanding with... Before the intra-Afghan negotiation started, we had a three-day dialogue in July of 2019 with the Taliban. I remember on the concluding day, I with one other colleague, had a meeting with Ambassador Khalilzad, General... The US Commander at that time, I forgot his name at the moment.

Bill Roggio:
General Miller, that is-

Matin Bek:
General Miller and some other people from the other agencies. So we briefed them what was our discussion about. I personally requested, pled to Ambassador Khalilzad. I said, "For God's sake, the Talibans are not interested to negotiate with us, and only after the US withdrawal. So I personally request you, please don't sacrifice Afghanistan. If the objectives of your government is to withdraw, then make that deal with the Afghan government. If the objectives is different than a withdrawal, a peace, so the US should not withdraw until Taliban agree to political settlement. Because the only leverage the United States and Afghan government had with the Taliban was the US withdrawal of forces." And I remember what Ambassador Khalilzad told me at that moment. He told me, "Matin, don't worry. I have cornered the Taliban. I have cornered the Taliban."

And this statement, what he told me, I keep always asking him afterwards. When we entered negotiation with the Taliban, when we were forced to release more than 5,000 Taliban hardcore fighters from our prisons, when the reduction of violence was there, I kept asking them, "Talibans are not negotiating. What happened to what you had promised us?" And he had no answer.

Second, after election, when Biden became president, so Taliban was very unhappy and unhappy about that they had lost a chance. They were thinking the Doha deal, it wouldn't be any more valid. And so two side of us, the Afghan negotiating team and the Taliban came under tremendous pressure from international community to come to an understanding, to give our interstate, we produced an interstate to the facilitators, to the UN, to the Turks, to the Qataris, to the Germans and Americans. The Taliban kept promising, but not delivering anything. They refused negotiating. They were under tremendous pressure.

So before that, they always used to blame us for not being serious, but now they were the one who were not giving their interstate and not be ready to be on the table. It was a night in Doha when President Biden announced the withdrawal, everything changed. The next day, Taliban was smiling, celebrating, and they were saying, "Now, let's talk, let's talk." So of course what they mean by talk, they meant it, "We're just waiting for the day to come to Kabul. All of you have to surrender." For the Taliban, peace was always meant surrender. Nothing more than the surrender.
So then I came back to Kabul and we start negotiating among ourselves. I agree with Bill, we never took the American withdrawal serious. It was mixed messages was coming to us, but of course, if we were smart, twenty years of dealing with Americans, we should have read that they're leaving, but we were also naive. Different messages were coming, we were naive. We didn't prepare. I went back and with negotiating with different Afghan politicians, telling what the Taliban are thinking, "They're not going to make peace." We start thinking of launching a national resistance on this, around this, with the center of the government, with the ANSF. That's how I joined the government. And I agree with Bill and with the opening remarks of Ambassador Haqqani, it's still even with the announcement of withdrawal with that window of time, we had, if we had to work, if Afghan government also was a little bit serious, we still had a chance to withstand.

I remember my own family, my brother was a member of parliament. Metra and Javid knows that very well. He went in Taloqan in the north and with other people and they resisted Taliban almost for sixty days. For sixty days. And there, even with a small group of Afghan forces, whenever Afghan forces supported with the local community, they really fought well. With a few number, they could resist, but unfortunately we couldn't help. And also American didn't challenge it, didn't change their policies.

So I would say there was a way, there was an alternative. This could have been prevented and the Afghan government could have withstand on its own and the army would not have collapsed. Of course, there is an Afghan dimension too, which I have, already have expressed that detail. Our government failed. We also are accountable to an extent.

Husain Haqqani:

Metra, there can be no peace when half the population is seen as a subject people, as people who have to bear all the brunt of the Taliban's medieval beliefs, which is women and girls. From their perspective, this has been a total disaster. How do you see the situation in Afghanistan right now? And how can that disaster at least be diminished, if not finished? And what can be done to try and protect the rights of Afghanistan's women and girls, but also as a whole, ensuring that Afghanistan does not become a medieval Emirate, like it was in the few years in the 1990s, when the Taliban held sway?

Metra Mehran:

Thank you, Ambassador. So let me start by saying that reflecting past one year, one thing that we can say is people of Afghanistan, especially women are stripped of their human dignity. They don't have access to education, to employment. Freedom of movement is taken away from them. When they protested, they were imprisoned, tortured and killed. And then we are the only country on earth that girls cannot attend secondary school. The situation is really bad, but what I feel, speaking here is it's not that we didn't know. It's not that we didn't expect. We knew who Taliban are. Not only because of 1994, but between 1996 to 2001, but also in areas, they had control in rural areas. And still girls were not able to go to school, women were not able to go to work. They were stoning and lashing women on public spaces to spread fear, but also what's that they believe in, that is their core ideology.
And we kept talking about it in Feminine Perspectives Campaign, it was one of those efforts that we went across Afghanistan, to rural areas and asked women what they want. And what they wanted was access to their basic human rights. And no one listened to us.

Before signing the agreement, during Trump administration, if you see all the meetings Ambassador Khalilzad had, there is no single Afghan woman present there. After that, when we had the... Always, women's right for everyone during the negotiation process was a side event. It was not the main thing. And there was many consultative meetings that once people returned from Doha, they had with people like me. And then when I talked about it, I remember Ambassador Khalilzad was saying that, "Okay, let's make sure that we do not talk about this sensitive issues at these meetings. We can have a side event for women, but once we are able to agree on certain big things with Taliban, then we can talk about women issues." I don't know with what logic he thought, and maybe he still believes, or the negotiation team that were involved, that women's issue should be a side event thing, not that important. And that should be discussed after the negotiation, because it's sensitive and it can make Taliban to not agree on certain big political military stuff they believed in.

Husain Haqqani:

I think he was not the only one. President Biden himself used to say, when he was Vice President, I remember he used to say that, "We can't keep troops in another country just to protect the women of that country. Otherwise, we'd have to have troops in many, many countries." It was an oversimplification, basically how the Taliban treat the women of Afghanistan reflects their core belief system. And that belief system includes support for terrorist groups like al-Qaeda. So it was an attempt to ignore the core belief system of the Taliban, that is how I would frame this issue, that there was a willingness to think, "Ah, we can do business with these people. It's time for us to get out. And if the Taliban, so be it." I think that has proved wrong in the last one year.

Metra Mehran:

And I think the women's issue is so much interconnected with politics and security and everything that was totally ignored by Americans, and unfortunately, by so many other stakeholders that were part of the process. Now, what hurts me most is no one listened to us. And there was not meaningful participation of women as we expected it.

But what I am proud of is women in Afghanistan are not silenced. They face gun points. They know the consequences of imprisonment and torture, but they are on the streets, demanding their rights. And as you say, what at least can diminish is, I expect the world from now on to listen to women of Afghanistan. That we need, contextualize the policies or other development initiatives that we are taking in Afghanistan first. And the second thing is please stop believing that there is a Taliban 2. And then I don't know why the Taliban are hurt more than we are.

Husain Haqqani:
Right. Javid-

Bill Roggio:

Husain, can I jump in really-

Husain Haqqani:

Sure. Of course, of course.

Bill Roggio:

I could not agree more with what Metra just said. The big lie that we were told was the Taliban were moderating, Taliban 2.0. She nailed it. All you had to do was watch what they were doing in areas they controlled or heavily contested. They were being Taliban 1.0. I always say, Meet the new Taliban. Same as the old Taliban. This was a lie that we were told, just like al-Qaeda wasn't present in Afghanistan, that Taliban-al-Qaeda ties were broken, that justified withdrawal. Three successive administrations here in America told the American public this, and this is part of the reason that the American public tired of the war. And it's just disgraceful.

Husain Haqqani:

Well, Bill, I would broaden the comment. And I would say that this kind of wrong understanding of a rival or an enemy applies rather broadly. Every few years, somebody tells us, "Putin's changing." Everybody will tell us, "China's changed." The authoritarian autocratic regimes, groups with perverse ideologies, they don't always easily change. They change when it threatens their power structure or their ability to hold onto power. If somebody comes tomorrow and tells me, "Kim Jong-un has changed," I'm not going to believe that readily. And this willingness to change, I think it comes from a segment that I call the peace at any price advocates in Washington, DC.

And so Javid, I would like to bring you in at this point. Feel free to answer any of the other questions I've asked, but also, I would like you, because you're a Washington, one of those people who's been in Washington think tanks, policy discussions, et cetera. After reviewing this first year, what are America's policy options moving forward, but also a little reflection on the mistakes that were made before. And what brought us to this point?

Javid Ahmad:

Sure. Just to go back to your earlier point, Ambassador, about what alternatives were available or what alternatives were possible that were not explored. And none of these alternatives, if they were available or if they were possible, were perfect for each side. It no longer matters, because the Taliban are in charge now, and that's basically the reality that we need to deal with. Now, do we like it? Absolutely not, but that's the grim reality. But to me, the outlook, this very grim, bleak outlook in the country right now presents a very stark reminder of our collective failure of imagination. Of course, there're various factors of Afghanistan's crashing collapse, but the failure of imagination is the one that requires more examination and more looking into.
And I think at the core of this failure of imagination are two very important paradoxes, both from the past, but also from the present, which I think broadly explained America's own past twenty-year engagement in Afghanistan and then subsequent disengagement from the country. And I think unless we acknowledge this failure and unless we resolve these contradictions and paradoxes, it is going to be crucial to reimagining today's Afghanistan.

And so what were those two paradoxes? One was that in the past, the unresolved paradox was that every time Washington withdrew planes to withdraw, it adversely created those conditions for it to remain in the country. Today, with the Taliban in charge, the paradox seems to be that the country has never been this safe, but it has also never been this dangerous. And I think the killing of al-Zawahiri in central Kabul was just the tip of that iceberg of this kind of morphine threat stream in my perspective.

So from the US' perspective, I think they've come a full circle. The engagement started with terrorism when they went after al-Qaeda and it ended with terrorism, including last year this time, or a week or two weeks later after this, when ISIS claimed attack on Kabul Airport in the last leg of the US withdrawal. And then one year later now, the terrorism cycle in this kind of circle that still revolves, has begun to spin again as was witnessed in last week's strike on al-Zawahiri, but everything in between was to create this very untenable version of American dream for Afghanistan. And even today, I think this unfinished dream reinforces America's continued centrality in Afghanistan, including Afghanistan's continued reliance and dependence on US cash in economic and other support for survival.

So that's important for me. Now, what can we do going forward? It's a very tough question because as you mentioned, we have not yet resolved this, reaching this equilibrium between the two extremes and at times two unacceptable extreme. And that's very important because US policy generally swings like a pendulum from one extreme to another, and we need to find that middle ground. And I think that is a problem. And for some ways, hearing it in DC policy circles, how there's always this readiness for changing from that one extreme to another.

With respect to Afghanistan, I think we need to ask ourself, could the ongoing engagement with the Taliban open up a path between these two unacceptable extreme, in this swinging or constantly swinging pendulum? For now, it's still a work in progress to find that middle path. But unlike in the past, when the US engagement in Afghanistan was, the more United States was doing, the less it was, right now, it is the less the US is doing, the more it is. So that contradiction also needs to be resolving.

Then the other thing it needs to do is that the US appears, and quite rightly, I must say, they want to regionalize the Afghan problem because it's too far, physically and otherwise from Afghanistan. But even if one removes the US factors or the centrality of US factor from the Afghan debacle, the region isn't on the same page with Afghanistan. In fact, they aren't even reading from the same book. So even though Washington has made it very clear that there will be no recognition of Taliban regime, they still want normal engagement with them. So in
essence, the recognition in the US system doesn't really mean much. So, look at US' relationship with Cuba, Russia, North Korea, they're recognized countries, but what matters is normalization and I'm not sure the Taliban understands that distinction between recognition and normalization.

**Husain Haqqani:**

Matin Bek, on the subject of recognition, normalization and engagement with the Taliban, any thoughts?

**Matin Bek:**

Well, I have engaged a lot personally with the Taliban on the frontline, on the table, on anyway possible. And I always keep saying, Taliban is not the reality of Afghanistan. They're an acne. They will soon will disappear. And probably it looks, seems the reason why I keep telling that because they owe their military victory, a limited military victory, of course, Afghanistan was surrendered to them, that we all know through the Doha deal. But some extent of their military success is, they owe that to a lot of terrorist organization. It's al-Qaeda, from where the terror suicide bombings came. Suicide bombings came as a, not, whatever you call it, the technology, if you call it human technology, it came from al-Qaeda to the Taliban.

What was the rule of IMU in the north? How IMU, ETIM turned the north to the Taliban, how TTP played a role for Taliban, and how AQIS, after the first cease fire, how they burned Ghazni. I remember that time I was the Head of Local Governance. So it's naive to expect Taliban will change and engagement will produce, and we have to open our eyes. Look, a year of engagement. Every time they keep promising, it could be open. And we see what's happening with that. And for years, since 2000, even beyond 2009, when Obama started talking with the Taliban indirectly, informally, they keep promising they have no relation with al-Qaeda, but time and again, time and again, it was proved how they were connected.

So I believe the engagement will have no outcome, no positive outcome for Afghanistan, for the region, for the America. This kind of fooling yourself because Talibans have decided to be enemy of the Afghan people. They are completely different from the mujahideen. The mujahideen was a different, whatever they had. They were the Son of the Sword. With all the problem they had with the civil war, everything, but they make peace with the people. The Talibans are totally aligned with our-

**Husain Haqqani:**

Taliban behave like a conquering army with an ideology and they're the only ones.

**Matin Bek:**

They have taken away Navroz from our calendar. They have taken away Muharram holiday from the calendar. They are not allowing any celebration.
Just for context for the Americans in the audience. Navroz is a festival that is an Afghan historic spring festival. The Taliban and their belief system considerate un-Islamic. Similarly, Muharram is observed by Shia Muslims more than others. Although in Afghanistan, it was observed by everyone. The Taliban in their orthodoxy do not consider it worthy of a holiday. Let us just-

**Matin Bek:**

And just one more point, I'll add, Ambassador. Talibans have nullified all our democratic institutions, they have closed all door of negotiation, peaceful negotiation. The only thing we have left for Afghan is armed resistance against them. Or even if a woman are protesting, how they have been dealing with the woman. We know that's a public knowledge now. So Talibans are taking the country to a civil war and they are pragmatizing the society further. And they're responsible for the idea of Afghanistan might face a lot of challenge. The challenge of unity. That's a Taliban responsible for that.

**Husain Haqqani:**

Well, Metra, Javid and Bill, I want you all to weigh in. There are two or three things that Matin has said. The prospect of civil war, almost everybody seems to agree that engagement with the Taliban, except at a very basic level where you actually have to deal with them for certain things, getting people out of Afghanistan, negotiating with them in terms of delivering food aid, medical aid, et cetera, that nothing good will come out of it. Javid has explained that just like North Korea and Cuba, you can actually recognize, but you still do not have good relations because of the bad behavior on the other side. How do you see things developing in the next one year? So I will let all three of you weigh in, Metra first, then Javid, then Bill. And include any policy ideas and recommendations that you have. How should the US deal with what you think will be emerging in the next one year?

**Metra Mehran:**

So what's happening currently in of Afghanistan, I don't see a peacefully year ahead, honestly. The reason is unfortunately in DC, people describe security too physically and militarily for Afghanistan. There is crisis. People don't have any security. Yes, maybe you see silence, but we say there is silence in prison too, because people don't have the voice. Media don't have the presence, but at the same time, I think everyone knows context of Afghanistan, that we are very diverse, ethnic, linguistic and religious wise. And no one is represented in their government. It's only predominantly Pashtuns who are very extremist in their religious beliefs, and who have been fighters of Taliban. Even if international community is thinking that the aid may help somehow, women are not receiving the aid. Minorities are not receiving the aid. It's only the Taliban's fighters who enjoy and leverage all the money and aid going inside Afghanistan.

Women are tired, and people are tired, no one find themselves in their de facto system or whatever. Let's not call it government. And there is no law. They have certain announcements or declaration, but there is no legal binding to that. So any Talib can do anything anywhere they want to. Based on my experience, honestly, with the women protesters, those who are in Kabul and they were imprisoned, they were taught, let's say, not that harsh, but the women in the provinces, there is no word to describe what has happened to them. And then the reason is
Taliban don't have any control over their fighters and soldiers still in provinces. So where I come from, for example, Badakhshan, I have heard that because there is so much mines, for example, and now illegally people are using them. They say, if Taliban says, "Don't do it," then as simple as this, they're going to go and use the flag of ISIS.

So they don't have control over Afghanistan. People don't connect with them and no one relate to them too. Maybe with the fear and terror, they control people for sometimes, but it going to explode somewhere. And I don't see any, even the physical military security they are pretending or showing to the world, I don't see that sustaining in longer term, honestly, in Afghanistan.

Husain Haqqani:
Javid?

Javid Ahmad:
On the engagement or not engagement or normalization, no normalization, it's really hard not to do those, but even when you do it, there are ways to do it. Mainly because there are still thirty-six, thirty-seven million Afghans that require help. They're starving, they're dying, they're soaring unemployment. There's an uncertain economic and political future and they're effectively imprisoned. And in that larger and expanding Afghan geography and Taliban have increasingly become, as was mentioned, internally oppressive and externally aggressive as we have seen with the broader region.

But even with normalization or some kind of recognition, which I don't see happening, as much as I hate it to happen, we need to also realize that there will still be question around the ideological underpinnings of the US' engagements because for any US engagement to be productive, however limited, it's important, find that common language with the Taliban ideologs, with their clerics, especially those who are sitting today in Kandahar and pulling the strings and they command greater legitimacy, greater control, but that engagement so far has been either negligible or nonexistent. And I'm saying this mainly because there're practically two capitals in Afghanistan now. There's Kabul and then there is Kandahar, but there's also very little visibility into the inner workings of the regime, both in Kabul and in Kandahar. So whatever we know is through a handful of Taliban characters who present themselves so called pragmatists and spokesperson, and have effectively become the face of the regime. But what's important is that we have very little credible insight, if at all, into the actual decision making process of the clerical leadership in place-

Husain Haqqani:
All of that is very opaque. And there are those who say that those who speak on behalf of the Taliban in Doha don't necessarily have any effective influence over what people in Kandahar and Kabul decide or do.

Javid Ahmad:
Exactly. But no, but we still have to know this whole decision making process. How do they decide? How do they convene? How do they deliberate? What do they see as a point of compromise? And how do they arrive at those decisions before they implement it? There’s a very interesting kind of stream in that respect as to how they relay decision from Kandahar to Kabul and then across the periphery in Afghanistan and implementing that. So unless you understand that process, you won't be able to shape it by informing the Taliban's choices, however they're making those choices, whatever their options are. And I think that dirt or lack or absence of that insight has put the United States at a great disadvantage.

The second point on the next step, as you mentioned, was it was very interesting that this past Sunday I saw, everybody saw a former member of the Columbian M-19 guerrilla group who was sworn in as president of Columbia. Of course, he contested the election, but he was voted in. And I knew, it just occurred to me that even though Columbia is a very different country with very different internal dynamics, very different neighborhood and whatnot. But what I found interesting was that despite a great deal of dissimilarities between groups like M-19, Columbian groups like the Taliban, the principle ideology of the M-19 was also this toxic nationalism, something the Taliban are today respectively claiming under the banner of Islam. And they have also increasingly weaponized it.

And what I found interesting was that the M-19, which was the second largest guerrilla organization after FARC in Columbia, demobilized the group, and they turned it into a political party and they began to operate under an established Columbian state, where despite their own disagreements with different Columbian governments, they accepted the broader nature and the character of the Columbian state, which was established, which was known, which was accepted, which was recognized. And today they have a new president.

In Afghanistan today unfortunately, that very concept of acceptance is missing, both on the Taliban side, also on the non-Taliban side, and that includes folks like myself and Matin and Metra. I think the idea of a compromise or some kind of an accommodation, tactical or otherwise between the Taliban and non-Taliban groups on the nature and character of an Afghan state that's acceptable to all is missing. We are also swinging in our own pendulum of one extreme into another, but we have to realize that reality, it's really hard. And in between all of this, what the Taliban are doing as was mentioned, they're knitting together the different social and religious species, to cobble together their own ideological state. And they have done an impressively good job at it. They're very organized, very patient campaign to effectively re-Islamize the Afghan society because they don't see it as Muslim enough.

And they've made it very, very crystal clear that they want God's laws and not manmade laws, because God laws are unimpeachable. And that is exactly what they fought for. So for them, it's a very long twilight struggle and they're effectively validating themselves as this vanguard for pure Islamic leadership. They're burnishing their originalist credentials, they're re-engineering the concept of Afghan nationalism and Afghan nationalism based on Islam or Islamic nationalism. And so the idea is this, and this was mentioned, I think by Metra, is that what
they're doing is that they're trying to re-engineer a common Afghan identity based on that Afghan Islamic nationalism. So in doing so, what they're doing is that they are trying to strip non Afghans of their purist identity because they have turned the Taliban brand into its own ethnicity, its own language, its own qualification requirement for patronage and appointment.

What's missing on the other side, however, is in a viable, competitive alternative. And that alternative-

Husain Haqqani:

We'll come to that in a minute.

Javid Ahmad:

Yeah, exactly. So whether that alternative is supporting them or leaving, it doesn't really matter.

Husain Haqqani:

Bill, you and I have spoken about this, we have discussed that. How long can they sustain themselves? Yes, a new identity, a new nationalism, et etcetera, can be built. Authoritarian regimes can actually make their people suffer and last for a very long time. But at what point does their collaboration with international terrorists, the threat that those terrorists pose to other countries, the regional dynamic, the developments that we are witnessing right now in Pakistan, where there is a feeling that, "Oops, what have we done?" India reconsidering its relationship with the Taliban on a pragmatic basis. At what point does this cauldron start boiling over in a way in which the Taliban cannot manage it?

Bill Roggio:

That's a great question, Husain. I'm very pessimistic on that answer. I believe they could sustain this for quite some time. The last iteration of the Taliban did it for what? Six years, seven years. And it took a US invasion to kick them out. And I believe the Taliban were weaker and less organized and less united then than they are today. They have all of the advantages of the weapons left behind, US supplied weapons to the Afghan military. They've fought a superpower for twenty years and well, mujahideen obviously defeated the first superpower.

The Taliban, in my opinion, they control right now, all of Afghanistan, except for some very lightly contested areas in Panjshir. I think the Taliban hold all the cards here. And this gets to the previous question you were asking, and how do you know when the Taliban is lying? They're sitting in front of you at the negotiating table. The Taliban, the negotiators lied to us before, during and after the Doha talks. Yet, we talked about compromise here, everyone here in this panel would sit down and actually strike out some compromise that would be good for the Afghan people. The Taliban never will do this. And they said this in their public statements. I remember reading one that'd always stuck with me where they, "And voice of jihad," in English. They weren't hiding it from Americans. They said things like, "We aren't going to sacrifice decades of resistance and decades of sacrificing our people for some silly ministerial post."
They were telling us all along they would never compromise with an Afghan government. And we never should have believed them. We should not negotiate with the Taliban.

**Husain Haqqani:**

And even now we should be very clear-headed that their ideology is everything to them. Their belief system is everything to them. And that belief system is essentially what it is. It is not a pragmatic group that thinks about how to make a better living for people, how to provide a better economy. These are our views, not theirs. We should not put our views into their words and read them that way. We should understand that they have a very different world in mind. They have a very different country in mind. A quick round.

**Bill Roggio:**

Husain, really quick. That's wish casting. We wished that the Taliban negotiated. We wish they would compromise, but they wouldn't. We shouldn't negotiate with them. We shouldn't engage with them, because any money that we give for aid is going to go through the Taliban and be used by them. It supports the Taliban government or regime, whatever you want to call it. And I agree with Matin, the answer here is supporting the resistance. That's the only hope the Afghan people have.

**Husain Haqqani:**

But is there a coherent resistance emerging and when will it emerge? That would be a different subject for a different date.

**Bill Roggio:**

Absolutely.

**Husain Haqqani:**

But let me do a quick round before we end our discussion for today. Let's ask Metra, what are the two or three things she would like the international community, the United States to do so that the developments in Afghanistan make it, if not easy for the women and girls of Afghanistan and the people of Afghanistan, at least reduce their pain and their difficulties. And any other suggestion that you have in the policy realm.

**Metra Mehran:**

Thank you so much. So let me start by saying that what hurts us the most is that still women are not included. We are not on that table, but there is red carpets for Taliban across the world. And-

**Husain Haqqani:**

So one of the things I would say, if you would agree with me, is that the European Union and the American government, when they interact with the Taliban, they need to say, "You know what? We are not going to meet you without the presence of some women from your side. Or we will have women on our side and you are not going to force them to dress a certain way or
not because we are meeting you as representatives of our countries and our governments, not living by your values and your standards."

Metra Mehran:

Let me add something here that I'm so proud to say that women in Afghanistan are not going to engage with Taliban. Taliban are not going to have a woman, independent woman to be able to talk, to sit with them and represent their side. So even if they bring some woman, that will be forced. So that's not going to happen. That's what I want to say. But the thing is, what I want to ask people is start respecting women of Afghanistan, because they are the ones suffering. And make sure that the aid that goes to Afghanistan, it gets to women too. Now the women don't have freedom of movement, how you ensure that they can walk to some place to include their names in certain lists or get the aid they need? So that is the first thing.

The second thing is engaging with Taliban shouldn't mean legitimizing or normalizing them. I think world have done enough wrong at that end. And it's time that we listen to women of Afghanistan. And also contextualize things. Don't see women in Afghanistan as victims or subjects anymore. They are a very strong resistance force at that front now. And we need to realize and recognize it and shouldn't be... There is another narrative that really bothered me, is believing or certain people want to believe that all women in Afghanistan are culturally aligned with what Taliban say or what it is that they believe. Your beliefs doesn't have to be as extreme as Taliban's. Okay. Women are Muslim, they practice certain things, but definitely that's not what they want, what Taliban are doing at that political, economic and social fronts.

So that's important thing. And then I want to end, or I think there is, I don't want the world to come with certain policies and expect that that's the right thing for women of Afghanistan. I think they are there now. We need to listen to them. We need to engage with them. We need to make sure that they are on those tables with us, if not with Taliban. And then I am tired of the world being so appeasant, approaching Taliban so appeasingly. It hurts me why they're not using their leverage against Taliban. And I want the world to use that.

Husain Haqqani:

Okay. Matin Bek.

Matin Bek:

As I mentioned earlier, Taliban doesn't belong to Afghan society. They are a bunch of Pakistani madrassas educated people. They have invaded Afghanistan and Afghanistan was surrendered to them unfortunately, through the Doha deal. Through them, also surrender to Taliban and a syndicate of terrorism. Afghans are starting resisting, either you speak to woman movement or other pockets of resistance in Panjshir and Herat, in Balkhab, in Takhar, in Samangan, in a year, these people already have, with no resources, no backing, have been able to resist Taliban and it will take time. It will become bigger.
And second point I would like to mention there, we all owe them, Afghans, our armed forces, and they have been abandoned. And on a daily basis, they have been killed by the Taliban. My recommendation to do, specifically to the United States would be that, because the only reason they're being killed by Taliban, because they helped the United States go after the culprits of 9/11. Today, they are paying the price and they're being killed on a daily basis.

My recommendation is that the United States should start working with those forces inside Afghanistan or outside Afghanistan. There is a professional force. They represent all Afghan and Taliban sooner or later, might take some year, they will disappear the way they came and they will disappear probably last time as they did, like a house of card, they will collapse. But my recommendation is working with Afghan people, with the former ANSF, with the woman, with the civil right activist.

Husain Haqqani:

Basically, working with those Afghans who were opposed to the Taliban, who became America's allies after 9/11, and who should been empowered enough to actually form a effective governing team, which couldn't happen because as Bill Roggio said, the American decision was that they will build a military that would be totally dependent on the US instead. Maybe this time not create that kind of dependency, but still provide assistance. Okay. Bill Roggio.

Bill Roggio:

Yes, I couldn't agree more with what both Metra and Matin had said. We have to be supporting all elements of civil society that opposes the Taliban. There's a lot of way this opposition, I mean, I think the most important is military opposition, is resistance to the Taliban. It is forming. It is taking the fight to the Taliban. It's at the beginning stages in Panjshir and Badakhshan and Takhar and Kapisa and Baghlan as well, where the main fighting that I'm watching is occurring. And I think it's important and you're absolutely right saying, we need to enable the Afghans, let the Afghans... The US came in, and NATO, put a Western stamp on Afghanistan. And to me, that was the seeds of failure of this entire project. It needs to be Afghan-led and Afghan-driven. We could help, we could provide money, we could provide weapons, we could provide advice, we could provide intelligence, but let the Afghans lead the fight against the Taliban because they clearly know how to fight the Taliban better than the US does.

Husain Haqqani:

Javid Ahmad. And before you go, I would just summarize what Bill and Matin said just now, and Metra. I think that the big lesson from Afghanistan is that the US went too big into Afghanistan. And then because of lack of political support at home, just withdrew, whereas perhaps America needs to develop ways of supporting other countries and ensuring its own security. Because the real reason for going after 9/11 was to ensure American security, which may yet be challenged once again by the resuscitation of al-Qaeda and the ISIS finding a new home. So better to do it in a way in which it is sustainable and is locally owned, not withstanding that maybe Afghanistan's politics is not going to be like New Jersey politics or Maryland politics. It's going to be far more complicated and difficult, but then it's not for American diplomats and American
generals to try and bring some coherence to that. Let that be support for the purpose of national security in a limited way. Go on, Javid. You have the last word.

Javid Ahmad:

No, precisely, Ambassadors. There are things that concerns Afghans and for which Afghans need take responsibility and take the initiative. And there are things where the United States and Afghanistan’s partners or former partners could come in and then play their role. For Afghans, the United States cannot define their national interests or what that national interest should be or what their identity should look like or what their character or nature of the state should look like or what a viable competitor should look like, vis-à-vis the Taliban and others. I think that depends on us and the onus falls on our shoulder for us to come to that consensus, including, with the Taliban, and then reach out and branch out for external support.

For the United States, it's important that it determines its new mission space in Afghanistan, which remains pretty vague. In the midst of this humanitarian tragedy, I really believe that sometimes the best humanitarian action is armed action. Besides over the horizon counterterrorism engagement and despite its own limitation, I don't think, and I wouldn't underestimate the value of targeted and covert action. We saw it with al-Zawahiri, and it really weakened, at least at the core level, al-Qaeda, also their relationship with the Taliban, in between the Taliban faction themself. I think those kind of action, targeted action should be creatively expanded and that could potentially involve some of the Afghans as well, including former counterterrorism pursuit teams that may or may not be on the ground.

The other thing we really need to determine is that are we looking to find a counterweight to the Taliban, an external counterweight? If not, then are we looking to cultivate an institutional counterweight within the Taliban, put one against the other? Because they are in some ways polarized and that also, we need to fix.

And then lastly, I think if we're going to regionalize the Afghan problem, then solution should also need to be largely regionalized as well. Maybe we should look at some kind of a regional pack, but in doing so, I don't think we should depend on a single country, a single regional country for a solution. Be it for example, Pakistan, because it is going to repeat that toxic policy circle of the past. It is going to involve caving into demands, front loading concessions, and we're going to get very little in return.

Husain Haqqani:

Thank you very much, Bill Roggio, Matin Bek, Metra Mehran and Javid Ahmad. I think we discussed various aspects of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the consequences that have manifested in the last one year and what we can expect moving forward. I hope that some of these ideas will find resonance in American policy moving forward. Thank you all very much.