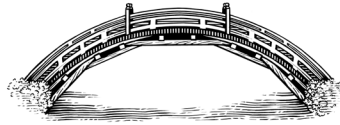


SPECIAL ESSAY

# Afghanistan after the U.S. Withdrawal: Trends and Scenarios for the Future

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**KEYWORDS:** AFGHANISTAN; UNITED STATES; TALIBAN; GOVERNANCE

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This essay discusses the prospects for Afghanistan after the completion of the U.S. forces withdrawal and assesses that a relatively wide range of outcomes remain possible.

### MAIN ARGUMENT

Neither the Taliban's leadership nor any of their regional sponsors aim for the re-establishment of a Taliban autocracy. However, the deadlock in intra-Afghan talks raises the possibility of that happening by default, especially if the Taliban gain such a military edge that a balanced negotiated outcome becomes impossible. A Taliban military campaign could increasingly weaken the Taliban's willingness to make concessions, whether to the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan or to individual factions of the political elite in Kabul. In that scenario, two outcomes are possible: a de facto Taliban autocracy, in which fragments of the old political elite could be co-opted in a marginal, window-dressing role; or state collapse, in which the Taliban would not be able to assert order over the chaos created by the defeat of the republic.

### POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Unblocking the intra-Afghan talks will be a top priority for Kabul's elite officials, and arguably, if to a lesser extent, for the Biden administration too. While political (and possibly physical) survival is at stake for Kabul's elite, the problem for the Biden administration is one of ending U.S. intervention with a somewhat positive outcome.
- Direct and unofficial talks between Taliban and elements of Kabul's political elite, bypassing the Ghani administration, are likely to increase in intensity and seriousness, even if the distance between most of the political factions and the Taliban remains wide.
- At the same time, there is also likely to be an intensification of scheming to unseat Ghani and replace him with an interim government that is deemed to be more acceptable to the Taliban and better able to prevent the deterioration of the government's hold on the country.
- Regional powers, already skeptical of the staying power of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, are likely to view both growing Taliban strength and the bickering among political factions in Kabul as additional reasons to distance themselves from the internationally recognized Afghan government and throw their weight behind either the Taliban or a political solution that circumvents the Ghani administration.

It would be hard to describe U.S. engagement with Afghanistan after 2001 as anything resembling a success. Over twenty years, the United States spent around \$2 trillion and lost almost 2,500 American lives. In a conflict pitting the world's greatest superpower against a rag-tag band of reactionary insurgents, the superpower should have won quickly and definitively. One currently popular explanation for this failure lays much of the blame on the United States' local partners, the Afghan political elite that has been running the Islamic republic since 2001.<sup>1</sup> There is surely much truth to this argument. Yet it is equally fair to argue that it was the U.S. approach to "nation building" that turned the Afghan political elite into a corrupt bunch of bickering politicians.

Analysts from all disciplines have already highlighted many of these issues, and no doubt the debate will continue well into the future. In the near term, however, the main concern will (and should) be how to sort out the present situation in Afghanistan and determine what can be salvaged. This essay examines the trends that are likely to play out after the U.S. withdrawal and considers how these trends could interact with each other and shape different scenarios. The future may matter more than the past, but the past must inform analysis of what the future may bring.

## RECENT TRENDS

### *The Taliban's Ambition to Deglobalize Jihad*

One of the key conditions of the U.S.-Taliban agreement, signed in February 2020, is that the Taliban must cut off links to global jihad.<sup>2</sup> Until the autumn of 2020, the Taliban sought to address this commitment by reaching out to al Qaeda and the global jihadist groups aligned with it and asking them to sign asylum agreements. The Taliban in essence offered these groups the opportunity to remain in Afghanistan in exchange for fully registering

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<sup>1</sup> See, among others, Vanda Felbab-Brown, "The U.S. Decision to Withdraw from Afghanistan Is the Right One," Brookings Institution, April 15, 2021 ~ <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/04/15/the-us-decision-to-withdraw-from-afghanistan-is-the-right-one>; Carter Malkasian, "How the Good War Went Bad: America's Slow-Motion Failure in Afghanistan," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2020; Ezzatullah Mehrdad, "How Liberal Values Became a Business in Afghanistan," *Foreign Policy*, April 6, 2021 ~ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/04/06/afghanistan-ngo-liberal-values-became-business>; and Adam Weinstein, "Q&A: What Do Afghans See as the Main Impediments to Peace?" Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, January 26, 2021 ~ <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2021/01/26/qa-what-do-afghans-see-as-the-main-impediments-to-peace>.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of State, "Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan Which Is Not Recognized by the United States as a State and Is Known as the Taliban and the United States of America," February 29, 2020.

their members with the Taliban, including members' exact whereabouts, and renouncing the use of Afghanistan as a base for attacks against other countries. These agreements were meant to tighten pre-existing agreements, according to which foreign jihadists would be allowed into Afghanistan on condition of "postponing" their own jihads elsewhere. According to Taliban sources contacted in October and November 2020, during the summer of 2020 just three jihadist groups signed the new, tighter agreements: the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, and Lashkar-e-Taiba. All the other groups (including al Qaeda, Imam Bukhari Jamaat, Jaish-e-Mohammad, and the Tehrik Taliban Pakistan) either refused outright to sign or kept negotiating inconclusively.

Taliban sources within their political commission indicated in February 2021 that during the previous autumn the Taliban decided to freeze negotiations of these agreements, as their deal with the United States appeared increasingly in trouble. The situation worsened when President Joe Biden decided on April 13 to delay the departure of U.S. troops to September 11, 2021, as opposed to May 1, 2021, as specified in the United States' agreement with the Taliban. After a couple of weeks of tough internal discussions, the Taliban went back to the team of U.S. special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad, offering to accept a delayed withdrawal if it was completed by July. The Taliban were in all likelihood well aware that the United States was already trying to complete the withdrawal by July 4 rather than September 11.<sup>3</sup> Eventually in May the Taliban agreed with the United States that a withdrawal completed by the end of July or early August would be acceptable to them and would not undo the U.S.-Taliban agreement.<sup>4</sup> The attitude of the Taliban appears to reflect genuine concern to salvage the agreement.

With such an accord substantially reached (even if President Biden later fixed the completion date at the end of August), by early July the Taliban were resuming their negotiations with al Qaeda and its allies. The Taliban have been at war with the Islamic State–Khorasan for years, so they would have no hesitation in resuming their campaign against it and its allies.

Aside from the fate of the agreement with the United States, the Taliban's leadership has other good reasons for finding a way to manage global jihadists based in Afghanistan. Sources in the Taliban's political commission, contacted repeatedly over 2020 and early 2021, indicated that many neighboring and

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<sup>3</sup> In fact, the process was nearly complete by early July, with over 90% of U.S. troops withdrawn and the final deadline moved to August 31. See Keven Liptak, "Biden Defends Pulling U.S. Out of Afghanistan as Taliban Advances: 'We Did Not Go to Afghanistan to Nation-Build,'" CNN, July 8, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Author's correspondence with a Taliban source in the political commission, May 2021.

regional countries (e.g., Russia, China, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan) had clearly warned the Taliban that they would not establish positive relationships with a Taliban-dominated government in Afghanistan if the Taliban were in any way allowing the export of jihad and terrorism. As the regional powers have repeatedly reminded the Taliban of this red line, the leadership is fully aware of the consequences if it fails to deliver.

The issue is therefore not so much one of whether the current leadership of the Taliban wants to cut ties with jihadists (in the event of getting close to power). There are two problems with the Taliban's approach to global jihad. One concerns how the break with jihadist groups is implemented. The Taliban's interest is to extract as many concessions as possible from the United States in exchange for shutting off any global jihadist base in Afghanistan. Any U.S. or regional hesitation in delivering to the Taliban the international legitimacy that they seek could lead to delays in the Taliban implementing the deglobalization of their jihad or to threats of stopping it altogether.

The other is whether the Taliban can effectively cut ties with jihadist groups that refuse to sign the agreement. Given that the Taliban might never be able to bring all of Afghanistan under its strict control, there could be areas where even global jihadists, linked to al Qaeda or otherwise, could be based, without having to be subject to the Taliban's rule. From an external viewpoint, any failure to police the agreements with the global jihadists would be seen as suspicious. There are certainly many Taliban commanders and even leaders who disagree with the policy of cutting off ties to global jihad, as acknowledged by Taliban sources both in the political and military commissions and in the leadership council, contacted on various occasions throughout 2019–21. The Taliban's political leadership has sought to address these objections by offering jihadists a choice: under the asylum agreement, those not able to relocate could safely live in Afghanistan as long as they comply with the Taliban's rules. They hope this can appease the majority of the Taliban's rank and file. However, the problem the leadership still must resolve is how to convince the majority of reluctant foreign jihadists—for whom agreeing to these terms would mean abandoning global jihad, at least as long as they are based in Afghanistan—to agree. If the Taliban fail to do so, they would need to consider military action, which would be hugely controversial within the organization (despite the precedent of fighting against the Islamic State and aligned groups).

Perhaps the only way out of this dilemma for the Taliban leadership would be to make Afghanistan as unsafe as possible for jihadists unwilling to sign their proposed agreement. Withdrawing Taliban protection would leave

the foreign jihadists more exposed to airstrikes, especially if Taliban members felt they could share information with foreign intelligence agencies. Many in al Qaeda and allied jihadist groups already think that the Taliban have helped the United States track down their members, contributing to al Qaeda suffering some of the heaviest casualties to U.S. airstrikes in Afghanistan over the last twenty months. According to sources both within the Taliban and within al Qaeda, contacted in October and November 2020, there appears to have been an outflow of members of al Qaeda toward Iran and to a lesser extent Pakistan, suggesting that they no longer feel safe in Afghanistan despite the rapidly shrinking U.S. footprint.

### *The “Free Riders” Start Taking Responsibility*

On April 30, 2021, Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated that the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan was bound to “concentrate” the minds of the “free riders,” seemingly referring to regional actors active in and around Afghanistan.<sup>5</sup> These actors have, to various degrees, been criticizing U.S. policies in Afghanistan and, in several cases, even actively undermining them, including by supporting the Taliban. The evidence of this in the public domain is strong at least in the cases of Pakistan,<sup>6</sup> Iran,<sup>7</sup> and, to a lesser degree, Russia.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Nicole Gaouette and Jennifer Hansler, “Blinken Says U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan Will Concentrate the Minds of ‘Free Riders’ in the Region,” CNN, April 30, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos: The U.S. and the Disaster in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008); Matt Waldman, “The Sun in the Sky: The Relationship Between Pakistan’s ISI and Afghan Insurgents,” Crisis States Discussion Paper, no. 18, June 2020; Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Jayshree Bajoria and Eben Kaplan, “The ISI and Terrorism: Behind the Accusations,” Council on Foreign Relations, May 4, 2011 ~ <https://www.cfr.org/background/isi-and-terrorism-behind-accusations>; and Vanda Felbab-Brown, “Why Pakistan Supports Terrorist Groups, and Why the U.S. Finds It So Hard to Induce Change,” Brookings Institution, January 5, 2018 ~ <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/01/05/why-pakistan-supports-terrorist-groups-and-why-the-us-finds-it-so-hard-to-induce-change>.

<sup>7</sup> Leah Farrall, “Interview with a Taliban Insider: Iran’s Game in Afghanistan,” *Atlantic*, November 14, 2011 ~ <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/11/interview-with-a-taliban-insider-irans-game-in-afghanistan/248294>; Ahmad K. Majidyar, “Iran’s Hard and Soft Power in Afghanistan,” American Enterprise Institute, August 27, 2012 ~ <https://www.aei.org/articles/irans-hard-and-soft-power-in-afghanistan>; Barnett Rubin, “A New Look At Iran’s Complicated Relationship with the Taliban,” War on the Rocks, September 16, 2020 ~ <https://warontherocks.com/2020/09/a-new-look-at-irans-complicated-relationship-with-the-taliban>; and Shahram Akbarzadeh and Niamatullah Ibrahim, “The Taliban: A New Proxy for Iran in Afghanistan?” *Third World Quarterly* 41, no. 5 (2020): 764–82.

<sup>8</sup> Nurlan Aliyev, “How Russia Views Afghanistan Today,” War on the Rocks, October 19, 2020 ~ <https://warontherocks.com/2020/10/russias-contemporary-afghan-policy>; Sajjan M. Gohel and Allison Bailey, “This Time, Russia Is in Afghanistan to Win,” *Foreign Policy*, July 1, 2020 ~ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/01/russia-afghansitan-united-states-bountygate>; and Kirill Krivosheev, “Why Russia Is Hedging Its Bets in Afghanistan,” Carnegie Moscow Center, March 15, 2021 ~ <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/84070>.

Blinken is certainly right in thinking that the withdrawal will concentrate minds. As regional actors take responsibility, however, they will of course focus on protecting their own interests rather than the United States'. Some of these actors might want to keep the wider picture in mind and take U.S. interests into consideration, in the hope of either trade-offs elsewhere (in the case of Russia) or of improved relations with Washington (in the case of Pakistan). The regional actors have been disruptive in the past partly because their policies diverged significantly with U.S. policies with regard to Afghanistan.<sup>9</sup> The U.S. military presence in Afghanistan was problematic for many of them. Now some of these actors will be more open to collaborating with the United States on achieving stability in Afghanistan. Others, such as Iran and perhaps China, are more likely to be tempted to ignore U.S. interests or even actively work to undermine them.

The regional actors, moreover, are not all on the same page with each other about what should be done. None wants chaos in Afghanistan or state collapse. Beyond that, however, their interests start diverging. Pakistan would like to have a friendly government in Afghanistan but also wants to keep the United States happy in the hope of improving relations with Washington. Even within the Pakistani establishment, there are different views on which of these two primary aims should be prioritized. Prioritizing Islamabad-Washington relations would likely lead to lower levels of Pakistani influence and control in Kabul in the future, and vice versa. For now, Pakistan has tried to prevent the Taliban from sliding toward a military solution as a reaction to the obstacles met on the diplomatic path. Sources in the Taliban's political and military commissions, contacted in February and May 2021, confirmed that the Pakistani authorities have put pressure on the Taliban leadership to salvage the agreement with the United States, despite the delayed plan for U.S. withdrawal. Although Pakistan's leverage over the Taliban has been decreasing for some time, the Taliban's leaders as of late seem to be trying to act relatively constructively with regard to salvaging the agreement, as discussed above.

Those same Taliban leaders are nonetheless having problems in containing the hubris generated by the U.S. withdrawal among their rank and file and especially their military commanders. According to the Taliban sources mentioned in the previous passage, Pakistan has been helping prevent a Taliban slide toward militancy by cutting the level of funding and supplies, though allegedly only temporarily. These actions ensure that sustaining an all-out military offensive for several months will be hard for the Taliban.

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<sup>9</sup> See footnotes 6, 7, and 8 above.

But Pakistan does not seem ready to abandon some aims in Kabul—first and foremost seeing the establishment of an interim government in place of the Ghani administration.

According to members of the Taliban's political commission, contacted repeatedly in 2020–21 (after the signing of the U.S.-Taliban agreement), Iran is wary of the United States leaving Afghanistan on good terms with the Taliban and has been doing what it can to preempt that outcome. Among everything else, if the U.S.-Taliban agreement were to collapse, the Taliban's leverage at the intra-Afghan table would be reduced and Iran would have more room of maneuver to protect its interests and see its Afghan allies and clients achieve a greater share of power and influence.

According to these same Taliban sources, Russia is less interested than Iran in sabotaging the agreement and has instead appeared supportive of it. Russia appears to insist on the Taliban accepting collaboration with other Afghan parties and factions, suggesting that the country would also like to see the Taliban “trapped” in a web of political agreements with other Afghan political actors. Such a scenario would facilitate conditions for controlling and restraining the Taliban, including in matters related to the export of jihad.

What shapes could intraregional actors' cooperation take? Their primary shared concern is stability. None of these actors is much concerned about the specifics of the future regime that will run Afghanistan, except that they would like it to be pluralistic—that is, incorporating different factions and groups, especially those connected to the regional actors themselves. The regional actors should not be expected, therefore, to argue for or support the preservation of the Afghan constitution in its current form, which establishes an elections-based competitive system. For the interests of the regional actors to be protected, a power-sharing system, where the distribution of the spoils is not affected significantly by events such as elections, is best because it would ensure the greatest stability. For these states, managed or staged elections with essentially prearranged results could well be part of the final settlement as long as they do not cause instability.

Policy divergence occurs among regional actors mainly with regard to the weight of different actors inside Afghanistan, among both regional actors and Afghan ones. The Taliban's perception of their own power appears to have been magnified by the approach of the team of U.S. special envoy Khalilzad in the U.S.-Taliban talks, as well as by the apparent weakness of the Afghan security forces. For the Taliban and other actors on the Afghan political-military scene to come to a common assessment of their relative weight in any future power-sharing arrangement might take a while, if a



consensus ever emerges. There are also different views about how power sharing should be managed. In particular, disillusioned by the management of Afghan elections so far, important actors such as the Jamiat Islami and the Hizb Wahdat constellations (each having fragmented into multiple factions) are now looking at some type of federal solution as an integral part of a peace settlement. Yet the Taliban and Pashtun parties and politicians in general flatly reject that option.<sup>10</sup>

It is possible that the regional actors might succeed in brokering some agreement among their Afghan allies and clients and that a stable system could still emerge out of successful intra-Afghan talks. But there seems to be a steep mountain to climb to achieve these outcomes.

### *The Possible Trend toward Lebanization*

If the Afghan conflict continues into the future, the division of the country into spheres of influence becomes a real possibility. In such a context, a “Lebanization” of Afghanistan might end up being accepted either as inevitable or as the lesser evil by the regional actors and most of the Afghan players. By Lebanization, I mean the de facto acceptance by the main actors in the conflict that the country is divided at least temporarily into cantons and that a relative balance of forces exists.

While not a long-term solution, Lebanization would be preferable to a fluid civil war for most actors and could lay better conditions for constructive intra-Afghan talks. Iran and Russia would feel reassured if the west and the north of Afghanistan were dominated by actors that are close to them. Pakistan, of course, would like the Pashtun belt of Afghanistan to be controlled by actors linked to it, such as the Taliban. Among the Afghan actors, some might prefer the breakup of the country to a faster conflict resolution process, which would likely marginalize them. Lebanization, for example, could entrench some form of power devolution into any political settlement, as it implies that actors such as the different factions and leaders of Junbish Milli (of General Abdul Rashid Dostum), Jamiat Islami, Hizb Wahdat, and related groups would have demonstrated their resilience and power.

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<sup>10</sup> Taliban sources in the political commission and the leadership council rejected any idea of federalism repeatedly when contacted in 2020–21. For the position of Afghan Pashtun politicians, see “Federalism and Its Opponents and Proponents in Afghanistan,” MENAFN, October 4, 2020 ~ <https://menafn.com/1100902661/Federalism-and-Its-Opponents-and-Proponents-in-Afghanistan>; and Michael Semple, “Power to the Periphery? The Elusive Consensus on How to Decentralise Afghanistan,” in *Telling the Story: Sources of Tension in Afghanistan & Pakistan: A Regional Perspective (2011–2016)*, ed. Emma Hooper (Barcelona: Barcelona Centre for International Affairs, 2016).

Lebanization, however, would likely only emerge after a period of open civil war and muscled confrontations, such as the ones that have already started in the first half of 2021 in northwest Afghanistan (pitting Junbish against the central government) and Hazarajat (where Hazara militias are in conflict with the central government). Violent conflict would be the way in which different actors test each other's actual power and support. In fact, there is no way of knowing beforehand whether civil war would lead to Lebanization, state collapse, or the outright victory of one of the sides in the conflict. In order for Lebanization to be possible, a large degree of consolidation of territorial control would have to occur. At the time of writing, that process might well have been slowly underway, with the Afghan government abandoning many rural areas and also beginning to pull out of entire districts, whether or not by design.

However, the Taliban do not seem to be pushing to take the most exposed and vulnerable positions of the Afghan government forces. They instead prefer to apply pressure on the nerve points of Kabul's defensive system—highways and some major cities.<sup>11</sup> For the Taliban, it is convenient to have the government forces dispersed among thousands of positions, each of which must be supplied and supported, often from the air. Such a strategy would not lead toward the strategic consolidation required for Lebanization, at least not directly; it could lead either to a stalemate (if the government in Kabul managed to hold the line) or to state collapse (if not). However, if Kabul were able to keep the Taliban in check, the latter might change strategies and seek to score easier gains by turning their attention to more exposed areas, such as remote districts and provinces. This, in turn, would gradually lead to strategic consolidation as the Afghan government would have to abandon many of these areas to defend the rest.

### *Centrifugal Forces*

Indeed, a civil war after the U.S. withdrawal could be the prelude to Lebanization, to a successful resumption of intra-Afghan talks, or to state collapse, as happened in 1992. Lebanization presumes some degree of stable control over part of the country by opposite factions, with limited or absent efforts to expand the respective areas of control. It also presumes that the primary Afghan actors in the conflict maintain a relatively high degree of internal coherence. None of this is guaranteed to happen.

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<sup>11</sup> See Antonio Giustozzi, "Taliban Preparations for Spring Offensive Underline Fragility of Peace Process with U.S. and Afghan Governments," *Jane's Terrorism and Security Monitor*, April 1, 2021.

While Dostum's Junbish has remained relatively cohesive, with dissidents remaining quite marginal, parties like Jamiat Islami and Hizb Wahdat, which each command a large following among the Tajik and Hazara communities, are already badly factionalized. Hizb Wahdat has been divided into several factions for years and in fact cannot be considered a single party anymore. Jamiat Islami now has two competing leaders, Atta Muhammad Noor and Salahuddin Rabbani, and former key party member Ismail Khan in Herat has announced his intention to set up his own separate faction of Jamiat Islami. There are also several smaller, more militant splinters as well.

So far, the Taliban have managed to navigate through splinter politics quite well. The main split that they suffered in 2015, leading to the formation of the so-called Rasool Shura, has largely been reabsorbed, and the Rasool Shura is completely marginal today. The most divisive issues for the Taliban are the relationship with al Qaeda and its allies, and how much of the old Taliban's Islamic emirate framework will have to be abandoned in a political settlement. If the U.S.-Taliban agreement were to collapse and the country to face civil war, it would be easier for the group to remain united. However, even without a formal split, the willingness of different Taliban components to contribute to the general effort of the organization has varied in the past. Disgruntled leaders have repeatedly hoarded their forces, either not participating or marginally participating in the military operations ordered by the leadership. The Haqqani network, for example, has recently been rather quiet, as its leader Serajuddin Haqqani has little sympathy for Haibatullah Akhundzada and does not want to help him achieve any success.

Poor cohesion within the different competing factions thus could make the stabilization implicit in Lebanonization harder to achieve. Buying off the internal rivals of opposed factions will be an option for all parties in conflict, and internal disagreements could lead to the sudden collapse of some factions' ability to compete with the others. In this scenario, Afghanistan would look like it did in the 1990s.

### *Centripetal Forces*

The centrifugal forces discussed above are easy to spot. There are, however, also centripetal forces at work in Afghanistan and the surrounding region that push for keeping the country together:

- The population has been growing increasingly weary of war and regional actors do not want chaos in Afghanistan.

- The Taliban's political leadership would prefer a political solution to the conflict, not just because it would like to legitimize its power internationally, but also because Haibatullah and other leaders with a chiefly political curriculum would be hard-pressed to justify their leadership role if the Taliban took the military path to power. Aside from the uncertain outcome (many Taliban are confident that they would win easily), Haibatullah would risk being overshadowed by the military leaders who engineered the victory.
- The Taliban could overplay their hand, driven by hubris and the belief that the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan is doomed, and raise their demands to the point where the political elite in Kabul is driven back together and opts to resist the Taliban in a joint effort.
- Last but not least, the "old mujahideen" of the 1980s–90s (who make up most of Kabul's political elite) see a better chance of reinvigorating their fading glory by becoming the protagonists of a deal with the Taliban than by fighting in a new civil war for which they are no longer fit.

Some form of power sharing in Kabul between the Taliban and some or all of the political parties and factions gathered under the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan could emerge in one of at least two alternative ways. The first is the revitalization of the Doha process, currently making only very slow progress, whether via Istanbul or other third parties.<sup>12</sup> Getting the process to take off is a primary aim of the Biden administration, but there are no guarantees that even if it resumes, it will eventually be successful.<sup>13</sup> The Biden administration hopes to keep the process together both with financial and diplomatic incentives (such as "international legitimacy" for the Taliban) and with the threat of targeting the Taliban with long-range airstrikes, some of which were conducted in May. While this might prevent the peace process from collapsing altogether, it will also clearly not be enough to make the process succeed.

Though intra-Afghan talks tenuously restarted in June, the Taliban's leadership and its diplomatic team have not said much about their end goal. What is clear from the negotiating strategy the Taliban have deployed so far is that they aim to exploit the deep differences and rivalries that affect the

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<sup>12</sup> "Afghan Gov't and Taliban Negotiators Meet in Doha to Discuss Peace," Reuters, June 9, 2021 ~ <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/afghan-govt-taliban-negotiators-meet-doha-discuss-peace-2021-06-09>.

<sup>13</sup> Joe Biden, "Remarks by President Biden on the Way Forward in Afghanistan," White House, April 14, 2021 ~ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/04/14/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-way-forward-in-afghanistan>.

Islamic republic camp. The Taliban have not formally proposed an interim government, nor have they even stated that they would accept one of several draft proposals. Off the record, however, Taliban diplomatic and political cadres acknowledge that they do aim for an interim government, a concept first raised by Pakistani officials in late 2018.<sup>14</sup> Ideally, the Taliban want an interim government presided over by a neutral personality. Their main concern is to avoid negotiating with President Ashraf Ghani, whom they do not trust.

The Taliban probably also believe that with Ghani out of the way, the coalition of nationalists and modernizers gathered around him would disintegrate for lack of a unifying figure. Even President Ghani's own main popular base in eastern and southeastern Afghanistan could be up for grabs if he were sidelined. Indeed, some of Ghani's former allies are already courting the eastern Pashtun tribes, trying to siphon his support there. This reflects a perception of the president's vulnerability.

The Taliban are reasonably confident that with an interim government in place, they would be negotiating with an Islamic republic delegation dominated by the former mujahideen of the 1980s, primarily Jamiat Islami, Hizb Wahdat, and Hizb Islami, plus some smaller groups. These main mujahideen groups are all deeply divided into mutually hostile factions (around half a dozen large and small factions of Jamiat Islami, at least four large and small factions of Hizb Wahdat, and at least three factions of Hizb Islami). Thus, there would be plenty of room for the Taliban's efforts to divide and rule, as already demonstrated in the past twenty years, first by President Hamid Karzai and later by President Ghani. Both leaders have relied on manipulating factions and personalities within the old mujahideen's ranks to create political space for their own policies. The more divided the old mujahideen elite and Afghan political elite in general, the less likely the centripetal forces discussed above will prevail.

Opportunities for divide and rule aside, the Taliban count on the fact that they also see some ideological convergence with the old mujahideen. While the majority of these groups have their roots in the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Taliban have theirs in clerical Deobandism, they could in principle share the aim of "Islamizing" the Afghan government. In fact, the Taliban have

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<sup>14</sup> Taliban sources in the political commission, contacted in December 2018, said that the Pakistani authorities raised the idea of an interim government with Zalmay Khalilzad and with the Taliban as soon as Khalilzad started meeting them. Pakistan's prime minister Imran Khan then went public with the idea. See Hamid Shalizi, "Afghanistan Recalls Ambassador in Row over Pakistan PM Remarks," Reuters, March 26, 2019 ~ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-pakistan-idUSKCN1R723P>.

already established quite friendly relations with some of these groups (e.g., the Hekmatyar faction of Hizb Islami, Mahaz Milli, and Harakat Enqelab). The Taliban have reasonable hopes that their agenda of Islamization could break through in future negotiations, even if important old mujahideen factions, such as virtually all the Jamiat Islami and Hizb Wahdat factions, no longer make political Islamism the focus of their politics.

The Taliban have been reaching out to Jamiat Islami and Hizb Wahdat leaders, facilitated by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard, but talks have not yielded positive results so far, according to Taliban sources in the leadership council and the political commission, contacted in February and May 2021. Hizb Wahdat politicians are more concerned about the status of the Shia community in the future, whereas Jamiat Islami politicians are interested in some form of autonomy for minority-populated regions. It did not help the Taliban's cause that in their exchanges with Afghan politicians in Doha some of the Taliban delegates came across as arrogant and dismissive of the old mujahideen, according to some of the delegates themselves, who spoke to Afghan journalists.<sup>15</sup> The more common ground the Taliban and the old mujahideen find, the likelier the centripetal forces are to prevail.

Overall, neither the strategy of divide and rule nor of consensus Islamization is guaranteed to work, especially as the Taliban struggle to fully discipline their cadres to follow a soft approach toward their Islamic republic counterparts. Within the Taliban's ranks, the idea remains popular of forming a kind of "united front from below" with the old mujahideen—that is, of co-opting their members and local leaders, while leaving out the majority of the top figures. The Taliban have practiced this policy for many years now, with a fair amount of success. Many of their local and regional leaders are former members of Hizb Islami, Jamiat Islami, and other parties. Hence, for many Taliban, including high-ranking military leaders, the option of relying on military strength to break through and then co-opt the old mujahideen piecemeal remains more attractive than lengthy negotiations and political compromise. Needless to say, many in the Afghan government, including in President Ghani's camp, would rather have the Taliban go down this route than seek top-level accommodation through a formal peace process and via an interim government.

However, by early July 2021 there were clear signs of many of old mujahideen reaching local and provincial-level agreements with

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<sup>15</sup> Dexter Filkins, "Last Exit from Afghanistan," *New Yorker*, March 8, 2021 ~ <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/03/08/last-exit-from-afghanistan>.

the Taliban and of Kabul's efforts to reach out to the old mujahideen achieving little. The rhetoric about a "new resistance" propagated by some of the old mujahideen and their offspring seems directed as much against Ghani as the Taliban in the light of the incidents of Behsud and Faryab, where local militias clashed with the authorities.<sup>16</sup> In a speech in Kabul on May 5, 2021, Ahmad Massoud, son of commander Ahmad Shah Massoud, spoke at length against Ghani while announcing his intention to mobilize a militia.<sup>17</sup> Politicians such as Karzai promoted themselves as brokers who could unify the Islamic republic camp, but their odds of success remain unclear.

### SCENARIOS FOR THE NEAR FUTURE

The five trends discussed in the preceding section (the Taliban cutting off links to global jihad, the regional powers taking responsibility, Lebanization, fragmentation, and power sharing) will interact with each other in a variety of ways. Of course, not having the gift of fortune-telling, to foresee what exactly is going to happen is impossible. What this section considers is what scenarios are more likely out of the many that are at least in principle possible.

#### *The Doha/Istanbul Track Takes Off and Succeeds*

An optimistic scenario would see the Doha/Istanbul diplomatic process succeed, spoilers defeated or marginalized, and the main conflict in Afghanistan settled within a couple of years. Extreme jihadists such as the Islamic State and perhaps some Taliban dissidents would likely fight on, but their overall impact on the stability of Afghanistan would be limited. For this scenario to unfold, the two sides (the Islamic emirate and Islamic republic) would have to agree to a hybrid system. This is easier said than done, of course, but since there is some overlap between the Taliban's and old mujahideen's ideologies, the scenario is not altogether impossible. It would see the regional "free riders" leaning heavily on their clients and allies inside Afghanistan to push hard for a negotiated solution, the Taliban leadership

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<sup>16</sup> Ali Yawar Adili, "Preparing for a Post-Departure Afghanistan: Changing Political Dynamics in the Wake of the U.S. Troop Withdrawal Announcement," Afghan Analysts Network, June 4, 2021 ≈ <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/preparing-for-a-post-departure-afghanistan-changing-political-dynamics-in-the-wake-of-the-us-troop-withdrawal-announcement>; and Rahim Faiez, "Afghanistan Warlords Remain Wild Cards in Path to Progress," *Christian Science Monitor*, March 23, 2021 ≈ <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2021/0323/Afghanistan-warlords-remain-wild-cards-in-path-to-progress>.

<sup>17</sup> Ahmad Massoud, "Ahmad Massoud Speech Today at 8 Sawr," VIP Plus, YouTube video, 30:07, May 5, 2021 ≈ [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9T4a5V\\_erpE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9T4a5V_erpE).

successfully imposing its policy of severing links with global jihad, the trend toward political fragmentation being contained, and a power-sharing agreement being successfully negotiated.

Even this success, however, would come at a price. There would be losers, in particular President Ghani's coalition of secularists and modernizers, pro-Western civil society groups, and others. Among the regional powers, India would in all likelihood be a loser. Although the United States might not be so bothered to see its influence in Afghanistan be reduced, this will eventually translate into reduced funding to the country, both civilian and military. Why would Washington pay to see the "free riders" manage Afghanistan as they please? An increasing outflow of Afghans, either compromised by their association with the bygone pro-Western regime or simply not fitting in with the new regime, would target Western Europe, the United States, and Turkey as immigration destinations. The political axis of the new regime would strongly shift toward the conservative end of the spectrum.

### *The State Collapses*

The most pessimistic scenario would feature state collapse. Fragmentation would be the dominant trend, with failed intra-Afghan talks leading to civil war. The strategic choices of the opposed political and military leaderships would determine whether the civil war ends in state collapse. State collapse implies that the Islamic republic disintegrates and that the Taliban cannot immediately take over, either because the components of the Islamic republic (parties, tribes, and leaders) fight on separately, likely with foreign support, or because the Taliban themselves, having lost their main enemy, lose internal coherence. State collapse could take different shapes, depending on the interplay between the trends toward fragmentation and Lebanization and the ability of regional powers to exert influence successfully.

The regional powers would be big losers, as they would have to deal with the consequences of chaos in Afghanistan. Their strong incentives to invest significant resources in stabilizing the country make Lebanization a more likely outcome of civil war. As the conflict drags on, a growing number of Afghan actors are likely to consent to Lebanization as a lesser evil and possible transitional solution while settlement talks are restarted.

### *The Long War Gets Even Longer*

If the Islamic republic were to hold together while rejecting Taliban demands, a stalemate would likely ensue. If that were to last long enough,



it could eventually lead to new intra-Afghan talks. The Taliban would have to admit that the Islamic republic is here to stay and would need to approach the talks with more humility. The stalemate could also lead to a long-term conflict, adding to the over 40 years that Afghanistan has already been at war. For this to happen, the Islamic republic would likely need to consolidate its territorial control, abandoning the more exposed areas. Trends such as Lebanization, power sharing, fragmentation, and regional intervention would all be interacting with each other.

If Lebanization were to prevail, it again could become the basis for new settlement talks. It is doubtful that the Afghan state could endure an even more protracted conflict without collapsing and bringing the previous scenario back into play.

### *The Taliban Take Over*

Finally, there is always the possibility of a Taliban military takeover. This could result from the failure of intra-Afghan talks, regardless of the cause. With the diplomatic route closed, even Haibatullah would have no choice but to support a military solution, despite being personally averse to it. If the Taliban had access to the funds and supplies needed for an all-out and sustained military offensive and the Islamic republic lacked internal cohesion or sufficient external support, a Taliban victory would be likely. The question remains of whether the Taliban could effectively bring the country under their control or would face a series of insurgencies from some of the republic's supporters and from hard-line jihadists like the Islamic State–Khorasan.

In any scenario, the Taliban would come under pressure from multiple sources to seek accommodation with as many groups and factions as possible, especially the old mujahideen. The Taliban likely would be willing to do so, but it remains to be seen whether they could reach mutually satisfactory agreements that leave even the regional actors happy. The U.S.-Taliban agreement might end in tatters anyway, and the Taliban regime would only receive limited international recognition.

### *The U.S. Role*

The United States' role in these scenarios is potentially far from negligible. The optimistic scenario in particular requires sustained U.S. diplomatic engagement, with the exploitation of all the leverage accumulated by the United States over the years in Afghanistan, as well as vis-à-vis Pakistan. Keeping talks on track will prove a complex task, especially in the absence of

a peacekeeping mission. The resumption of Doha talks in June 2021 appeared to be a cold start, mainly meant to keep the Doha track open, while waiting for political developments in Kabul and military developments on the battlefield.

Even in the stalemate scenario, the United States would play an important role. Without high levels of U.S. funding, aid, and other forms of support, potentially including airstrikes, the stalemate would eventually lead to the collapse of the Islamic republic. Yet stability in Afghanistan and the survival of the republic cannot be guaranteed simply by sending money and carrying out the occasional airstrike. Even at the peak of foreign support, the country was never cohesive, and it is quite possible that the bickering of the Afghan elites will intensify, despite the unifying incentive of U.S. funding coming through the Afghan state. How the United States can engage constructively with the Afghan elites is the big question. Especially problematic will be for the United States to continue monitoring how its money and equipment are used, not least because in the spring of 2021 there were already signs that the dominant attitude within the Afghan security forces was to “take the gloves off” and fight back against the Taliban without the constraint of the rules of engagement or the rule of law advocated in the past by Western advisers. If human rights abuses by the security forces were to rise significantly, it might become hard for Washington to maintain the same level of support, even if in principle it wanted to.

In conclusion, the final outcome of the Afghan conflict remains wide open, even if the possibility of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan surviving in its current form appears already more and more remote. By mid-July a substantial number of the stakeholders of the Islamic republic seemed to have reached an understanding with the Taliban on handing over to them much of the country. The Taliban appear highly likely to emerge as the dominant player in any future government, even if the collapse of any tentative alliance of their different factions remains a definite possibility. ♦