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Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Islamic Extremism; Israel; Afghanistan; Southeast Asia; Pakistan

MORE QUIET NORMALIZATION WITH ISRAEL

Last fall and winter, a quartet of Muslim nations (the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco) moved to publicly normalize their relations with Israel in what has come to be known collectively as the "Abraham Accords." Since then, however, questions have swirled in Washington about the future of the trend, especially in light of the Biden administration's changed foreign policy priorities in the Middle East (including its diplomatic outreach to Iran). Within the Muslim World, however, momentum toward normalization continues apace.

The latest movement comes from Bangladesh, which recently lifted its travel ban on Israel. In the past, the South Asian nation formally outlawed travel to Israel, making it punishable by charges of high treason. In May, however, the country's Home Minister, Asaduzzaman Khan, confirmed that national passports would no longer single out Israel for exclusion - opening up the possibility of legal tourism and travel between the two countries. Israeli officials have been quick to laud the move, and to encourage more such gestures. "This is a welcome step & I call on the Bangladeshi government to move forward and establish diplomatic ties with #Israel so both our peoples could benefit & prosper," Gilad Cohen, the Israeli Foreign Ministry's director-general for Asia and the Pacific, commented on social media. (*Jerusalem Post*, May 23, 2021)

ISLAMIST STRIFE IN INDONESIA

The world's most populous Muslim nation is grappling with new threats from Islamic militancy. In its predominantly Christian Papua province, Indonesian police recently arrested eleven suspected Islamic militants accused of plotting attacks on several churches. According to the local police chief, those arrested are suspected to have been part of Jemaah Anshorut Daulah, an ISIS affiliate which has already carried out many suicide bombings throughout Indonesia. (*Washington Post*, May 31, 2021)

THE TALIBAN GAINS GROUND...

As American troops begin their exit from Afghanistan, the Taliban appears to be gaining momentum in its long-running struggle for power against the country's government. Last month, Taliban fighters besieged seven rural Afghan military outposts in eastern Afghanistan, and by mid-month security forces had surrendered all seven. The capitulation is part of a larger trend, fueled by declining morale among Afghan forces and what appears to be a deteriorating war effort on the part of the government of president Ashraf Ghani in Kabul. Since May 1st, at least 26 outposts and bases in four provinces have surrendered after negotiations, according to village elders and government officials.

Afghan officials now say that Afghan security forces are fighting against the Taliban in 104 districts across the country, while the conflict has generated thousands upon thousands of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, as of late May, approximately 100,000 people had been displaced by the conflict in 2021 alone. (*New York Times*, May 27, 2021; *Voice of America*, May 27, 2021)

...AS AMERICA MULLS MAKING PAKISTAN A POWER BROKER

Washington, meanwhile, is desperately pondering ways to maintain an intelligence and counterterrorism presence in the country beyond the September 11th deadline the Biden administration has set for troop withdrawal - including by erecting bases in neighboring nations. One potential solution reportedly now being considered by U.S. policymakers is the establishment of a military and intelligence presence in Pakistan. The idea, however, carries a raft of complications. For one thing, Islamabad has been a persistent supporter of the Taliban, and of Islamist regional activity - a factor that U.S. policy would need to account for. For another, in their early discussions with their American counterparts, Pakistani officials have insisted on having veto power over the types of activities that would be carried out by U.S. forces, as well as their targets.

Whether the scheme ultimately succeeds remains to be seen. For the time being, at least, the United States is relying on a nearby aircraft carrier to enable aerial sorties against militant targets on a continuing basis. However, officials say, that is unlikely to be suitable as a long-term solution to the problem caused by a retraction of U.S. forces from the country and the anticipated resurgence of the Taliban there. (*New York Times*, June 6, 2021)

