If The Afghan Government Falls To The Taliban, The Country Could Once Again Become A Haven For Terrorists

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History, they say, doesn't really repeat itself, but it does sometimes rhyme. That's an apt description for the Biden administration's policy toward Afghanistan, which risks recreating the very conditions that made possible the September 11 attacks against America two decades ago.

In one sense, the current U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan is quite predictable. Twenty years after the terrorist attacks on New York and the Pentagon, popular support for the U.S. presence in Afghanistan has fallen off dramatically. Afghanistan is now seen as a "forever war" – a conflict with unclear objectives which continues to cost the U.S. dearly in both blood and treasure.

The numbers tell the story. In an April MorningConsult poll, some 69% of respondents backed the administration's decision to withdraw forces from Afghanistan by the twentieth anniversary of September 11.

Such stark figures are why, during its time in office, the Trump administration sought to strike a truce with the Taliban as a precursor to withdrawing forces from the country. And it is also the reason that the Biden administration, for all its public opposition to the priorities of its predecessor, has followed the same policy – although on a slightly longer timeline.

Yet if the withdrawal makes sound political sense, its practical effects are likely to be ruinous.

Already, the Taliban – long held in check by a combination of U.S. and NATO forces – has begun to retake the strategic offensive. In recent weeks, the Islamist movement has chalked up a series of high profile victories, taking control of strategic districts throughout the country and increasingly encroaching on the capital, Kabul. The surge has laid bare the inherent weakness of the Afghan government, which appears increasingly outmanned and outgunned by its more motivated Islamist opponent.

This state of affairs is deeply disheartening. It reflects the fact that two decades of U.S. military support and political assistance have failed to net meaningful stability in the country, or result in a mature, self-reliant government in Kabul. Against that backdrop, as President Biden noted in his July 8 speech, the U.S. simply can't be expected to remain in the country "indefinitely."

It's a fair point, but it skirts the core rationale for why the United States entered Afghanistan in the first place: to prevent the country from ever again becoming a terrorist haven. This objective has been achieved in recent years, but the inherent weakness of the Afghan government suggests that, absent external assistance, such stability is only a temporary condition.

The alternative is a return of Afghanistan to conditions reminiscent of the last period of Taliban rule in the 1990s. That episode was short (stretching only from 1996 to 2001), but exceedingly brutal. It involved, among many other things, the widespread repression of women, massive educational and cultural restrictions, and the destruction of irreplaceable historical landmarks deemed to be un-Islamic. Animated by a common worldview, the Taliban also allowed ideological fellow-travelers like al-Qaeda to take refuge on Afghan soil, and plot against the West from there. The rest, as they say, is history.

It's a history that most Afghans don't remember, given that Afghanistan is one of the youngest countries in the world, with more than 40 percent of its 47.5 million person population aged 14 years old or younger. American policymakers, on the other hand, should. They should likewise understand that a return to power by the Taliban will recreate the very same conditions that made Afghanistan a cockpit for global terror two decades ago.

Indeed, the movement has made abundantly clear that it aims to reconquer the entirety of the country, and to reimpose its own draconian version of *sharia* law once it does. "A genuine Islamic system is the best mean[s] for solution of all issues of the Afghans," Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the group's deputy leader, has asserted publicly. Older Afghans understand all too well what that is likely to mean, which is why there has been a veritable exodus of civilians and government forces from the country in recent weeks.

Which brings us back to the role of the United States. It is by now obvious that an open-ended presence in Afghanistan has become an untenable proposition. That's a fact Republicans understood during the Trump era, and Democrats grasp now. But departing the country without putting in place a serious strategy for shoring up the Afghan government, preventing a Taliban reemergence, and empowering regional neighbors to ensure security and governance there will invariably create a political vacuum for revanchist forces to fill.

As a result, the period after September 11, 2021 may end up looking a great deal like the one leading up to that terrible date two decades ago. That should be an outcome no one except the Taliban desires.

Ilan Berman is Senior Vice President of the American Foreign Policy Council in Washington, DC.