



Stay Engaged in Afghanistan or Face a Terrorist Resurgence

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The Biden administration would like to forget about Afghanistan and its tragic, humiliating endgame to America's twenty-year commitment to the country. But one former Afghan government official thinks that American disengagement at this critical time could sow the seeds for a global terrorist resurgence.

Masoud Andarabi served as Afghanistan's interior minister until last March when he was forced out by former President Ashraf Ghani. In a recent interview with this author, Andarabi laid most of the blame for the collapse of the Afghan government on its former president.

Why Afghanistan Collapsed

Andarabi stressed that the loss in Afghanistan was “more of a political failure” than a military defeat. When properly supported, the Afghan national forces could fight effectively. In 2019, Afghan troops backed by U.S. air power managed to recapture large swaths of territory from the Taliban, even as negotiations were ongoing in Doha. “That was the very best time when there was high morale,” Andarabi said. “If we would have continued that without this ‘reduction of violence’ nonsense we would have really hurt the Taliban.”

The Taliban had promised a “reduction of violence” as part of a peace deal brokered in February 2020, one of the conditions for the withdrawal of Western forces. In fact, however, there was no reduction; Taliban attacks surged shortly after the deal was signed.

Ghani was unable to cope with this newly aggressive Taliban. “The failure was there,” Andarabi said. “Everyone in Kabul, from the intelligence, from military, from diplomatic...we were all talking about how badly Ghani was running things.” The former minister said the consensus was that “whatever he was doing was going to sink us all.” But Ghani would not accept any criticism. Last spring, when Andarabi raised concerns about the course of the conflict, he was sacked.

It was left to Ghani and the rest of his government to try to cope with a Taliban on the march, facilitated by the gradual withdrawal of critical capabilities that had been supplied by the United States. The Biden administration abandoned the original “conditions-based” peace framework in favor of a strict withdrawal timeline disconnected from events on the ground. The leaked transcript of a July 23 telephone call between Ghani and President Joe Biden showed a White House more concerned with managing perceptions than dealing with reality, while the helpless Ghani pleaded for its ally to “front load” air support and “move with speed” against a “full-scale invasion.”

Eventually, Ghani himself moved with speed—out of Kabul. “Last day, imagine that,” Andarabi said, “the president escaped.” Ghani's departure was not a profile in courage. At noon, he told his chief of staff he was going to take a nap. The chief of staff “was there in the dining room eating when he heard the helicopter. He said, ‘What's going on?’ Someone said, ‘the president's gone.’” Andarabi laughed. “He didn't tell his chief of staff who was there in his office. Forget about the minister of defense or interior or intelligence or anyone. I mean, he grabbed the bags and left.”

Ghani said he fled Afghanistan to prevent further bloodshed—perhaps his own. But Andarabi believes that the former president would not have been treated roughly by the Taliban, because former President Hamid Karzai was not immediately punished, and he was a worse offender in the eyes of the Taliban. “Ghani's mistakes brought [the Taliban] back to power, but Karzai was the one who brought the Americans who killed thousands of Taliban,” Andarabi said. “So they hated [Karzai] more than anyone in the country, and he has not been killed.” At least not yet.

The Taliban and Terrorism

The White House believes that the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan is not necessarily a dire national security threat. After all, in 2011, then-Vice President Biden said that “the Taliban per se is not our enemy,” and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark A. Milley believes it may be possible to cooperate with the Taliban against ISIS-K. But Andarabi says this is wishful thinking.

The “Taliban and other terrorist group[s] relationship is one, there is no difference,” he said. “They are the tactical arm for Taliban’s fighting capability.” This includes “Al Qaeda, anyone, you name it, the twenty groups that are there, are very much with [the] Taliban.” The foreign fighters have become part of the Afghan landscape; they have “been there for 20 years for them, giving them money, support, making ammunition, IEDs, mines, everything.”

The one exception is ISIS-K, though the wedge between them and the Taliban is not as wide or as durable as the White House claims. Conflicts between the Taliban and ISIS-K tend to be situational and temporary. “In some areas, there was fighting between Taliban and Daesh [i.e., ISIS-K],” Andarabi said, but elsewhere they “made coalitions.” Most importantly, he said there is a “tactical relationship” between the two groups in Kabul, as well as with the notorious Haqqani network, which provides the Taliban with internal security. “I would doubt that the latest attack on Americans in Kabul would have been without Taliban lower-level groups’ involvement,” Andarabi said.

These close relationships could spur the reemergence of the type of security concerns present twenty years ago when the Taliban gave safe haven to Al Qaeda to develop a global terror network. However, this depends on whether the Taliban will allow the foreign fighters to remain. If they do, it “certainly will harm interests,” Andarabi said, and spur attacks, “if not in the United States certainly [against] its interests in the region.”

The Need to Stay Engaged

Despite the Biden administration’s desire to be rid of Afghanistan, now is not the time to disengage. This was the mistake made in the 1990s in the wake of the Soviet war in Afghanistan. Insufficient attention was paid to the developing jihadist threat in Afghanistan, leaving the United States vulnerable to the type of transnational terrorism that spawned the September 11, 2001, attacks. Andarabi believes continued engagement is key for both American and Afghan interests.

First, the United States and its allies should pursue “intelligence engagement for years,” which unfortunately will now be much more difficult due to the end of the U.S. presence in Afghanistan and a heavy dose of mistrust among Afghans. But intelligence activity is vital in monitoring the nascent terror threat. “Particularly if there is no deep engagement and collecting [intelligence] about them, their training camps, and other areas,” he said, “then over the years certainly they will pose a big threat.”

The United States and its coalition partners should also develop and maintain ties to “people who are against the Taliban.” They should be engaged with and encouraged to resist, “through their voices, their activities, from Afghanistan and from outside the country.” Andarabi believes that there will be strong pockets of opposition, for example, in Panjshir province, a resistance center during the first Taliban regime and the Soviet occupation. Despite reports of Taliban success in Panjshir, armed groups are still active and eventually will be able to fight back against the Taliban. “Keep these pockets that are there,” Andarabi said, “encourage them, support them, and then they can conduct some of this kind of work.”

Might this lead to future U.S. military engagement of the type seen in 2001, with special operations forces and CIA paramilitaries providing Afghan resistance forces with air support and access to other assets? No time soon, says Andarabi. “Right away? No. At one stage when we are seeing that [terrorist] cells are being activated with the potential of harming outside of Afghanistan, certainly that should be an option on the table.”

The Kinder, Gentler Taliban

Taliban spokesmen have projected a kinder, gentler image to a world that mostly remembers them—if at all—as backward fundamentalist radicals who oppressed women and gave safe haven to terrorism. But have they really changed? “Who is the Taliban?” Andarabi asks. “There’s twenty people who have been present at Doha, they talk with an audience, they say good words, they talk with Americans.” But the real Taliban is “the mass, who have been fighting and killing ‘infidels.’ They are drug dealers, they are terrorists, they are other elements. Who says they changed?”

In fact, the Taliban only talk moderation “in the areas that get [media] coverage” but elsewhere there is “a massacre going on of people who are against them.” One prominent recent victim of Taliban brutality was a beloved folk singer, Fawad Andarabi (no relation to Masoud), who was pulled out of his house and shot in the head for the crime of making music. This came only days after Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid told the *New York Times* that even though “music is forbidden in Islam,” the Taliban were hoping to “persuade people not to do such things, instead of pressuring them.”

The old Taliban government was an international pariah state, lacking official recognition from all but a few countries, and roundly condemned for its abysmal human rights record. The “new” Taliban—mostly the same people—are trying to change that perception, but will they succeed? “I don’t think so,” Andarabi said, “unless they come out and detain thousands of terrorists, detain the leaders of different terrorist groups, announce that they would hold elections and allow international observers to be there, then yes.” But he was skeptical any of this could happen. “The best scenario? Highly unlikely. The worst scenario is they are not recognized by anyone, terrorists will run behind the scenes, and Taliban will do these things like keeping women inside their houses and killing here and there. That’s the worst case, but also highly likely.”

Andarabi believes that it would take a Taliban civil war for the group to change, in which the radicals that form the core leadership of the group were displaced by those “moderate Taliban”—if they exist at all—desiring to establish a responsible government and drive the terrorists out of Afghanistan. Is this remotely conceivable? “I don’t think so,” Andarabi said. “I hope so, but looking at it, it’s not possible.”

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