

Afghanistan, Again, Becomes a Cradle for Jihadism—and Al Qaeda

The terrorist group has outlasted the trillion-dollar U.S. investment in Afghanistan since 9/11.

By Robin Wright

In March, I travelled to Afghanistan and the Middle East with General Kenneth (Frank) McKenzie, Jr., the Alabama-born marine who heads Central Command. He has been overseeing the frantic evacuation out of Kabul. During one of several interviews aboard his plane, I asked him, “Do you really think, given the intermarriage, the interweaving of the Taliban and Al Qaeda, that the Taliban is really ever going to be able or willing to restrain Al Qaeda from doing anything against us?” By then, the Taliban held roughly half of Afghanistan, a country about the size of Texas. McKenzie was chillingly candid. “I think it will be very hard for the Taliban to act against Al Qaeda, to actually limit their ability to attack outside the country,” he replied. “It’s possible, but I think it would be difficult.”

For more than a year, both the Trump and Biden Administrations had reams of warnings—from the military and diplomats, congressional reports and a commissioned study group, its own inspector general, and the United Nations—that the collapse of the Afghan government, an ever-growing possibility, would also mean a resurgence of Al Qaeda. In April, a U.S. intelligence assessment warned Congress that Al Qaeda’s senior leadership “will continue to plot attacks and seek to exploit conflicts in different regions.” The jihadist group, which carried out the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, was active in fifteen of Afghanistan’s thirty-four provinces, primarily in the eastern and southern regions, the United Nations reported in June. The Taliban and Al Qaeda remained “closely aligned and show no indication of breaking ties,” it noted, as like-minded militants celebrated developments in Afghanistan as a victory for “global radicalism.” In a haunting final report on the lessons learned from America’s longest war, John Sopko, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, warned that the U.S. decision to pull out the last U.S. troops “left uncertain whether even the modest gains of the last two decades will prove sustainable.” The decision to pull out was made by President Trump in February last year, with the timetable decided by President Biden in April this year.

With the Taliban takeover, the trillion-dollar investment in a campaign to contain Al Qaeda may have changed little since 9/11. Bruce Hoffman, a senior fellow for

counterterrorism and homeland security at the Council on Foreign Relations and the author of "Inside Terrorism," was blunter. "The situation is more dangerous in 2021 than it was in 1999 and 2000," he told me. "We're in a much-weakened position now. We've learned so little." The Taliban takeover is the biggest boost to Al Qaeda since 9/11 and a global game changer for jihadism generally, Rita Katz, the executive director of the Site Intelligence Group, a leading tracker of extremist activity worldwide, told me. There is a "universal recognition" that Al Qaeda can now "reinvest" in Afghanistan as a safe haven, Katz said. Jihadism effectively has a new homeland, the first since the collapse of the ISIS caliphate in March, 2019. "It foreshadows a new future that sadly couldn't have been further from what we would hope for after twenty years of war," she said. It's a boon for Al Qaeda and its franchises, which now stretch from Burkina Faso in West Africa to Bangladesh in South Asia. "Militants from across the world—whether they be regionally focused Islamists or globally focused jihadists—will surely seek to enter Afghanistan's porous borders," Katz added.

Since the U.S. raid that killed Osama bin Laden, in 2011, Al Qaeda's central core has often been overshadowed by its more visible franchises in Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. The group is now led by Ayman al-Zawahiri, a seventy-year-old Egyptian physician who was indicted by the United States for the 1998 bombings of the U.S. Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania and was widely linked to the September 11th attacks, too. In a break from bin Laden's style, Zawahiri has issued few audio messages over the past decade. As the core of the movement came under U.S. military pressure, he and bin Laden advocated for the creation of Al Qaeda branches across the Islamic world as part of its survival strategy, according to Ali Soufan, a former F.B.I. special agent for counterterrorism and the author of "The Black Banners: The Inside Story of 9/11 and the War Against al-Qaeda." Zawahiri's more patient strategy has worked, while the more aggressive strategy of the rival Islamic State has flamed out, Soufan told me. ISIS had many times more members, but Al Qaeda fighters were far more experienced, more strategic, and hardened in battle. Al Qaeda's strategy—dubbed the "management of savagery"—has three phases. The first includes terrorist attacks to weaken the international and regional order. The second, as government authority erodes or collapses, is to prevent other political forces from filling the vacuum, so as to allow Al Qaeda's movements to "take pride of position," Soufan said. The final stage is to establish a state and stitch the other regions together into a caliphate.

Al Qaeda's numbers in Afghanistan have slightly increased, from four hundred fighters before 9/11 to around six hundred before the Taliban takeover, experts say. U.S. and Afghan operations eliminated senior leaders and largely shut down the training camps that once operated in the country, but the movement has adapted. In October, the Afghan military claimed that it had killed the red-bearded Egyptian Husam Abd al-Rauf, whose nom de guerre was Abu Muhsin al-Massry. He was on the F.B.I.'s "Most Wanted Terrorists" list. Despite Al Qaeda's low public visibility, however, experts said that the group was pivotal in the Taliban's sweep across Afghanistan. It provided "the élite backbone" in the Taliban campaign, Hoffman told me. "In recent years, Al Qaeda has been the force multiplier behind the Taliban" by enhancing intelligence, communication, and fighting skills. Its fighters were "more cosmopolitan and better educated than the Taliban, who are coming down from the mountains. They bring a lot of skills to an army of country bumpkins," he added. "The number was not large, but it was outsized in its significance."

There was no secret about the ongoing Al Qaeda presence or its willingness to fight side by side with the Taliban, despite claims by successive U.S. Presidents. In December, the Afghan defense ministry announced that it had killed fifteen Al Qaeda operatives fighting with the Taliban in southern Helmand Province. In recent weeks, the numbers of Al Qaeda and ISIS-Khorasan, the franchise in Afghanistan, both grew after the Taliban released some five thousand prisoners from Pul-i-Charkhi Prison at the Bagram Airfield on August 15th. The U.S. abruptly abandoned Bagram, its largest military base of operations, last month. The doors to other prisons were unlocked as the Taliban swept across the country. On Saturday, the U.S. Embassy—which is now working out of the Kabul airport—warned Americans still in Afghanistan not to go to the airport unless provided specific instructions, because of a new threat from ISIS. The Afghan wing of the Islamic State is a rival of both the Taliban and Al Qaeda, and an enemy of the United States. U.S. officials have been worried that ISIS might try to ignite a confrontation at the airport, where Taliban and U.S. forces are only a few feet apart.

Since the Taliban takeover, Al Qaeda has bragged that its calculus worked, unlike ISIS's, according to Soufan and the Site Intelligence Group. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, based largely in Yemen, heralded the "beginning of a pivotal transformation" worldwide. In North Africa, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb celebrated the rapid sweep of Taliban military victories as proof that violent jihadist struggle is "the only way to restore the Ummah's glory." ("Ummah" is the Arabic term for the global Muslim community.) The

Taliban victory has also breathed new life into groups far afield, including some of Al Qaeda's rivals. "The Taliban's victory is a story that can be bent to energize and justify any jihad or Islamist uprising, no matter how many years of bloodshed it may bring," Katz told me.

The Site Intelligence Group tracked the jubilant bravado and energized aspirations in jihadist media. Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, based in Gaza, gloated that the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan proved that Palestinians, too, will ultimately achieve their return to former Palestinian lands in Israel— "by the permission of Allah." The common thread among the congratulatory messages is that God's guidance— rather than American fatigue with a costly war or the crumbling of the Afghan government and military—was responsible. In Syria, H.T.S. (or the Organization for the Liberation of the Levant) announced its split from Al Qaeda four years ago. Yet it, too, tapped into the new jihadist narrative. "We in the Syrian revolution draw our inspiration, steadfastness and persistence" from the example of "adhering to the choice of resistance and jihad," it announced, according to the Site Intelligence Group.

Since 9/11, all four U.S. Presidents have claimed victories against Al Qaeda. In December, 2001, as the Taliban government was ousted and Al Qaeda fighters retreated to the caves of Tora Bora, George W. Bush proclaimed, "There can be no doubt how this conflict will end. Our enemies have made the mistake that America's enemies always make. They saw liberty and thought they saw weakness. And now, they see defeat." A decade later, Barack Obama said that the killing of bin Laden "marks the most significant achievement to date in our nation's effort to defeat al Qaeda." Last year, President Trump suggested that his unilateral U.S. peace deal with the Taliban would isolate Al Qaeda. "We welcome the Taliban commitment not to host international terrorist groups, including Al Qaeda," Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said, at the opening of peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government last September. And, on Friday, Joe Biden told the nation, "What interest do we have in Afghanistan at this point with Al Qaeda gone? We went to Afghanistan for the express purpose of getting rid of Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, as well as getting Osama bin Laden. And we did." All four Presidents have been proved painfully wrong.

The common flaw in U.S. policy has been the focus on the fight rather than the economic, political, and social flash points that gave rise to multiple jihadist movements among both Sunni and Shiite Muslims, dating back at least four decades, Soufan said.

“We’ve been spiking the ball at the five-yard line,” like a football player claiming points before actually scoring a touchdown, he told me. “Yes, we defeated the physical manifestation of the caliphate in Iraq and Syria, but we never dealt with the ideology.” The extremist brands of politicized Islam have usually emerged in countries plagued by poverty and high unemployment, autocratic rule and political alienation, sectarian or social marginalization, and heavy foreign influence. “All the elements that gave rise to these movements, they’re all worse than they were immediately prior to 9/11,” Edmund Fitton-Brown, a former British diplomat who is now the coordinator of the U.N. Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team that tracks extremist movements, told me. “I can’t think of a serious underlying factor in the rise of ISIS or Al Qaeda that has been mitigated, and some are worse.”

Al Qaeda’s resurgence may not have immediate consequences for the U.S. homeland, the experts said. “Al Qaeda probably does not pose, right now, a direct threat to the West,” Fitton-Brown said. “But it intends to do so and has a route to do so, which may bear fruit in one or more of these locations,” whether Syria, Yemen, Somalia, the Sahel and West Africa, or elsewhere. “It would be premature and risky to regard Al Qaeda and ISIS as defeated, and to relax that counterterrorism pressure.” Al Qaeda’s broader focus, Soufan said, will be on destabilizing Muslim countries where, as in Afghanistan, governments are frail, have fled, or do not exist. The goal now is to replicate the victory in Afghanistan elsewhere—phase two. “Their plan,” he said, “is much more dangerous than a terrorist attack.”

Robin Wright, a contributing writer and columnist, has written for The New Yorker since 1988. She is the author of “Rock the Casbah: Rage and Rebellion Across the Islamic World.”