



ISSUE BRIEF #1 » PEACE IN AFGHANISTAN

Support Full Military Withdrawal from Afghanistan

The United States-Taliban deal—parts of which remain secret—envisions the withdrawal of all U.S. and NATO troops from Afghanistan, in exchange for assurances that the Taliban will not allow Afghanistan to harbor terrorist groups that threaten the United States. Because the deal was negotiated without any participation by the Afghan government or Afghan civil society, it sets the terms for a U.S. military exit without setting the stage for peace.

While the text of the U.S.-Taliban exit deal calls for an initial reduction of troops to a total of 8,600 followed by full withdrawal within 14 months, U.S. officials continue to insist that these are “aspirational” goals.¹ Public reporting further indicates that the Pentagon may be poised to maintain a network of Special Operations forces in the country,² and many elected officials have urged maintaining residual counterterrorism forces or continuing targeted drone strikes.

It is likely that there will be severe challenges in the withdrawal process. Coronavirus may limit the movement of troops by all parties, as well as their ability to carry out operations, and could weaken Taliban command and control systems. Political infighting and disarray could reduce the Afghan government’s ability or desire to host intra-Afghan talks and comply with its obligations and commitments under any agreement. Warlords and armed groups not under Taliban control may seek to use the withdrawal as an opportunity to advance their own power and position. Acts of terrorism and violence could provoke either an acceleration or a suspension of troop reductions. Already the Taliban has ramped up its attacks against Afghan forces.

In this environment of uncertainty and risk, Congress must avoid trying to micromanage the withdrawal. Instead, it should accept the following realities:

The United States does not have the power to control outcomes in Afghanistan.

Much of the discussion about U.S. objectives in Afghanistan rests on the illusion that we can impose or ensure a particular outcome by using our military, political, and economic power in the right way. But nearly two decades of occupation have proven the opposite. The United States can help or harm Afghan-led solutions, but it cannot impose its own agenda.

Read the Issue Briefs

Support Full Military Withdrawal from Afghanistan

Ramp Up Bilateral and Multilateral Diplomatic Efforts

Support Long-term Afghan-led Solutions

Oppose Continued Militarized Counterterrorism in Afghanistan

The Taliban is here to stay.

U.S. military operations in Afghanistan have moved far beyond the original premise of counterterrorism operations conducted in response to the attacks of 9/11. The United States has now inserted itself into what is fundamentally an insurgency conflict between the Afghan central government and the Taliban, with no hope of a military solution. The Taliban, while not monolithic, are Afghans, with local aspirations, and have demonstrated a resilience against military force that has caused the United States to lose leverage with every year it continues to fight.³ One of the consequences of this willful blindness is that the Taliban are now in a stronger position than at any time since the 2001 invasion.⁴ Therefore, while a durable peace cannot be created without involving the Taliban, it also cannot be created by the Taliban alone.

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The challenge of terrorism does not justify a continued military presence in Afghanistan.

The U.S. occupation of Afghanistan is a relic of the failed, fear-based immediate response to the attacks of 9/11, not a tactic that is responsive to realities on the ground. While al-Qaeda certainly exists in Afghanistan, it is estimated to have only 400–600 members.⁵ Even the attacks of 9/11—the stated justification for invading Afghanistan—had little to do with Afghanistan. The Taliban was not involved in the 9/11 attacks, most of the hijackers and planners were from Saudi Arabia,⁶ and most of the planning was done in Europe and the United States.⁷ There is simply no evidence to suggest that the U.S. invasion and occupation of Afghanistan have enhanced or will enhance American security.⁸ Nor will retention of Special Operations forces in Afghanistan, private contractors, targeted assassinations, or partnerships with warlords, kill teams, and militias end the threat of terrorism.⁹

There is simply no evidence to suggest that U.S. invasion and occupation of Afghanistan have enhanced or will enhance American security.

In truth, proposals for a continued militarized approach to Afghanistan are fueled more by fear and misinformation than by realities on the ground. The result is that Afghan civilians pay the heaviest price.¹⁰

What Congress can do:

- Reject any legislation that mandates a continued military presence in Afghanistan or demands unrealistic conditions before withdrawal is completed. Such restrictions stem from the false premise that U.S. military power can secure a better future for the people of Afghanistan, and they lay the groundwork for an indefinite military presence.
- Endorse a complete winding down of all U.S. military operations in Afghanistan, including not only combat troops but also Special Forces, private contractors, targeted assassinations, and partnerships with kill teams, militias, and warlords.
- Review, discuss, and publicize the findings of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) regarding the scope, costs, and results of U.S. military operations in Afghanistan.
- Support continued long-term diplomatic, development, and peacebuilding engagement in Afghanistan to enhance the chances for a sustainable peace.

Further reading

- Adam Wunische, “The U.S.–Taliban deal is not a military withdrawal; it should be, Quincy Brief No. 4,” *Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft*, March 6, 2020.
- Astri Suhrke and Antonio De Lauri, “The CIA’s ‘Army’: A Threat to Human Rights and an Obstacle to Peace in Afghanistan,” *Brown University Watson Institute Costs of War Project*, August 21, 2019.
- Ben Connable, Martin C. Libicki, *How Insurgencies End* (Arlington, VA: RAND Corporation, 2010).
- Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Lessons Learned* Reports series.
- Craig Whitlock, “Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War,” *Washington Post*, December 9, 2019.
- *A New Way Forward: Rethinking U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: Afghanistan Study Group, 2010).

Endnotes

1. Lolita C. Baldor and Robert Burns, “US commander paints grim picture of US-Taliban peace accord,” *ABC News*, March 10, 2020.
2. Dan Lamothe, “New Special Operations network will serve as security backbone in Afghanistan ahead of U.S. withdrawal,” *Washington Post*, March 5, 2020.
3. Theo Farrell, “Unbeatable: Social Resources, Military Adaptation, and the Afghan Taliban,” *Texas National Security Review*, Vol 1 Iss 3, May 2018; Andrew Watkins, “Taliban Fragmentation: A Figment Of Your Imagination?” *War on the Rocks*, September 4, 2019.
4. Jason Lyall, “If you’re surprised by what’s in the Afghanistan Papers, you haven’t been paying attention,” *Washington Post*, December 12, 2019.
5. Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, *Twenty-fifth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da’esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities* (New York: United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee, 2019).
6. “September 11 Hijackers Fast Facts,” *CNN*, September 8, 2019.
7. “The Hamburg Connection,” *BBC News*, August 19, 2005; Daniel Byman, “It’s Hard to Commemorate 9/11 If You Don’t Understand It,” *Foreign Policy*, September 11, 2019.
8. Daniel L. Davis, “Foreign Terrains and Twisted Minds,” *Washington Times*, December 31, 2018. (“But a careful analysis of how the 9/11 plot came about shows the flaws in that thinking. The authoritative rendering of how the Sept. 11 attacks were hatched, prepared and carried out is the 9/11 Commission Report published in 2004. As the report explains, Afghanistan was little more than incidental to the attack. The bottom line is that the most crucial terrain in which the 9/11 plot was hatched wasn’t any country, but in the twisted minds of brutal men. No amount of combat troops on the ground in Afghanistan, therefore, is going to prevent a future attack.”)
9. CIA support for paramilitary forces in Afghanistan is an under-the-radar but highly consequential aspect of U.S. engagement. These forces, with U.S. backing, frequently engage in extrajudicial executions, enforced disappearances, other human rights abuses and violations of the laws of war. For more on the harm done by U.S. reliance on kill teams, militias, and warlords that commit human rights abuses with impunity, see Deedee Derksen, “In Afghanistan, Today’s Pro-Government Militias Could Be Tomorrow’s Insurgents,” *War on the Rocks*, December 11, 2017; Patricia Gossman, “They’ve Shot Many Like This”: *Abusive Night Raids by CIA-Backed Afghan Strike Forces* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2019); Astri Suhrke and Antonio De Lauri, “The CIA’s ‘Army’: A Threat to Human Rights and an Obstacle to Peace in Afghanistan,” *Brown University Watson Institute Costs of War Project*, August 21, 2019. For more on how such efforts almost always fail to achieve objectives, see Mark Mazzetti, “C.I.A. Study of Covert Aid Fueled Skepticism About Helping Syrian Rebels,” *New York Times*, October 14, 2014.
10. “Afghanistan: Civilian casualties exceed 10,000 for sixth straight year,” *UN News*, February 22, 2020.

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