

Column: Terrorist 'safe havens' are a myth

John Glaser and John Mueller

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America's longest war may be coming to an end. Although major obstacles remain, the Trump administration's negotiations with the Taliban, led by U.S. special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad, have made progress toward an agreement that would include a U.S. military withdrawal. In July, President Trump said "it's ridiculous" that we're still in Afghanistan after almost two decades of stalemate. His 2020 Democratic challengers seem to agree — most have called for an end to the war — and fewer and fewer Republicans are willing to defend it.

But one persistent myth continues to frustrate the political momentum to end the war and may inhibit the impending debate over withdrawal. It is by far the most common justification for remaining in Afghanistan: the fear that, if the Taliban takes over the country, the group will let Al Qaeda reestablish a presence there, leaving the terrorist organization to once again plot attacks on the United States.

Experts have effectively contended that, although the Sept. 11 attacks were substantially plotted in Hamburg, Germany, just about the only reason further attacks like that haven't taken place is that Al Qaeda needs a bigger territorial base of operations — and that such a base will inevitably be in Afghanistan.

Virtually all promoters of the war in Afghanistan have stressed this notion. Barack Obama applied it throughout his presidency. Gen. David H. Petraeus, who commanded American forces in Afghanistan, recently contended that a U.S. withdrawal is still premature and would risk leaving behind a haven for terrorist groups comparable to the rise of Islamic State following the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, according to a Wall Street Journal op-ed he co-wrote.

Trump reflected this thinking as well when he authorized an increase of troops to Afghanistan in his first year in office. His "original instinct," he noted, was "to pull out," but his advisors had persuaded him to believe that "a hasty withdrawal would create a vacuum that terrorists ... would instantly fill, just as happened before" the Sept. 11 attacks.

This key justification for staying in Afghanistan has gone almost entirely unexamined. It fails in several ways.

To begin with, it is unlikely that a triumphal Taliban would invite back Al Qaeda. Its relationship with the terrorist group has been strained since 1996, when Osama bin Laden showed up with his entourage. The Taliban extended hospitality, but insisted on guarantees that Bin Laden refrain from issuing incendiary messages and from engaging in terrorist activities while in the country. He repeatedly agreed and broke his pledge just as frequently.

Veteran foreign correspondent Arnaud de Borchgrave said he was “stunned by the hostility” expressed for Bin Laden during an interview shortly before Sept. 11 with the top Taliban leader. According to Vahid Brown of the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, relations between the Taliban and Al Qaeda during this period were “deeply contentious, and threatened by mutual distrust and divergent ambitions.”

Bin Laden’s Sept. 11 ploy not only shattered the agreement, but brought armed destruction upon his hosts. The last thing the Taliban would want, should it take over Afghanistan, is an active terrorist group drawing fire from the outside. Moreover, unlike Al Qaeda, the Taliban has an extremely localized perspective and would be primarily concerned with governing Afghanistan.

In addition, it is not at all clear that Al Qaeda would want to return to a ravaged, impoverished, insecure and factionalized Afghanistan even if it were invited. It’s difficult to see how an Afghan haven would be safer than the one Al Qaeda occupies in neighboring Pakistan.

There is also concern that the small branch of Islamic State in Afghanistan would rise if the Americans withdrew. However, Islamic State has suffered repeated tactical failures, has little to no support from the local population, and the Taliban has actively fought the group on the battlefield in Afghanistan for years, making a Taliban-sponsored safe haven for that group unlikely.

Most importantly, the notion that terrorists need a lot of space and privacy to hatch plots of substantial magnitude in the West has been repeatedly undermined by terrorist attacks in Madrid in 2004, London in 2005, Paris in 2015, and Brussels and Istanbul in 2016. None of the attackers in those incidents operated from a safe haven, nor were their plans coordinated by a group within a safe haven. Al Qaeda Central has not been all that effective since Sept. 11, but the group’s problems do not stem from failing to have enough territory in which to operate or plan.

Pretending that the Taliban can be defeated, and that an independent and democratic government can be left in its place, is unrealistic. The Taliban may very well make further gains following a U.S. withdrawal, but the myth that territorial safe havens provide great utility to terrorists planning transnational attacks should not continue to justify a war that America cannot win.

John Glaser is director of foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute. John Mueller is a political scientist at Ohio State University and a senior fellow at the Cato Institute.