



## The Real Lesson of the Afghanistan Debacle

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Afghanistan has proved once again that even a superpower cannot win a war against a proxy as long as it refuses to confront the power that supports it. This is of vital importance to Israel, which is facing a proxy war being waged against it by Iran via its regional proxies Hezbollah and Hamas.

The seeds of the humiliating American withdrawal from Afghanistan were laid shortly after the post 9/11 US invasion of the country, when it refrained from confronting Pakistan over its continued support of its Taliban proxy.

The Taliban was founded in 1980 as a joint US-Pakistani-Saudi effort to combat Soviet troops in Afghanistan shortly after the USSR invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979.

Pakistan provided the geographical base and an almost endless supply of manpower, primarily Pashtuns, who comprise about 40-45% of Afghanistan and approximately 20% of Pakistan. About 85% of them live in "Pashtunistan," which straddles the [Durand line](#). The US provided the weapons while Saudi Arabia provided the funding to buy those weapons and cover the costs of maintaining Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan.

The Pashtun-dominated Taliban rapidly emerged as the biggest and best-armed component of the *mujahedeen*, the umbrella organization of Afghan rebels fighting Soviet troops in Afghanistan.

After the Soviet withdrawal, Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence ([ISI](#)) continued to support the Taliban in the Afghani civil war that followed, despite the fact that the Taliban had already begun cooperating with al-Qaeda.

Pakistani aid proved vital in ensuring the Taliban victory over its former less radical *mujahedeen* partners.

Pakistan made a great show of abandoning the Taliban after 9/11, but in reality never turned its back on its Afghani proxy. Realizing that any attempt to confront US forces would be suicidal and could spell the end of Pakistan's vital alliance with the US, the Pakistan military convinced the Taliban to retreat without a fight to Pakistan, where, under ISI supervision, they were allowed to set up camps and training facilities.

Pakistan, with Saudi financial backing, continued to maintain the Taliban as a viable force to be deployed when, in the fullness of time, the US would tire of the neverending war in the country and begin extricating itself. In addition, Pakistan continued to play a double game with the US by allowing the ISI-backed [Haqqani](#) network to continue to operate in Pakistan. Khalil Haqqani, who, despite having a \$5 million bounty on his head as a wanted terrorist, had long been a regular visitor to ISI HQ, is now is one of the new rulers of Afghanistan.

It is clear that even as late as June 2021, had the US made clear to Pakistan that if it didn't ensure that the Taliban would permit a peaceful and orderly withdrawal of all US personnel and their Afghan allies who wished to leave the country there would be hell to pay, this debacle would never have happened. The US has almost unlimited leverage over Pakistan, from applying crippling sanctions to broadly hinting it would give India a green light to retake the parts of Kashmir ([Gilgit-Baltistan](#)) that have been under unrecognized Pakistani occupation since 1948. Given the huge disparity between Pakistani and American capabilities, Pakistan's limited nuclear capabilities would have been irrelevant, because 165 warheads mounted on relatively short range (2,650 kilometers) Shaheen-3 missiles do not compose an actual threat to the US. Pakistan's generals might have chutzpah but are competent professionals, not suicidal maniacs. In the face of a credible US threat, they would seek a diplomatic solution.

This is not the first time the US has lost a war against a proxy by refraining to take any meaningful action against the power behind it. The most obvious case is Vietnam, which was a Soviet proxy. Despite several years of directly assaulting North Vietnam, it was unable to force Hanoi to stop assisting the Vietcong. Only the cessation of Soviet aid could have achieved that, and because the US was justifiably unwilling to risk a crisis with its rival nuclear superpower, Vietnam was able to eventually force the US to realize that short

of a full-scale invasion of North Vietnam, it would never decisively defeat the Vietcong. The result was a humiliating American withdrawal followed by a North Vietnamese victory.

The lesson for Israel is clear and ominous. For almost two decades, Iran has been conducting a two-front proxy war against Israel. Hezbollah is a total proxy of Iran and Hamas a partial one, as it also has to take into account the interests of the Turkish-Qatari-Muslim Brotherhood axis which do not always align with those of Iran.

Despite ongoing Israeli efforts, including significant attacks against Iranian forces in Syria, the threat posed by Iran's proxies continues to evolve into an ever more menacing one. Though clearly incapable of defeating Israel, their ability to exact an increasingly dear price from Israel continues to grow, with Iranian assistance. This will not change as long as Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei knows he can fight Israel to the last drop of Lebanese blood and be confident of his and his regime's safety in Tehran. Indeed, despite enjoying a significant conventional weapons qualitative edge over an Iranian military that has been hobbled by decades of tight international sanctions, Israel has so far refrained from actions aimed at decisively defeating either of the proxies or exacting a high enough price from Iran to force it to reconsider its proxy war against Israel.

Militarily, the main reason has been the Iranian missile program, which, though still equipped entirely with conventional warheads, has seemingly succeeded in sufficiently deterring Israel. This is despite the fact that Israel possesses the world's only fully operational multi-layer missile defense system (Arrow, David's Sling, and Iron Dome).

This is not, however, the only reason, as militarily, Israel has the capacity to defeat both Iranian proxies. In order to destroy Hamas, Israel would have to resume the status of Gaza's occupying power, or ensure in advance that a multinational force of some kind would be available and capable of assuming responsibility for Gaza. No such force is likely to come into existence any time soon. A unilateral Israeli occupation of Gaza is possible, but would exact a prohibitive price economically, diplomatically, and in terms of public opinion.

Destroying Hezbollah would require Israel to destroy half of Lebanon, since Hezbollah is a state within a state that is more powerful than the legitimate state itself. Militarily it can be done, but would create a humanitarian and public relations disaster. Israel has therefore based its policy on containment

and management, having concluded that the economic, diplomatic, and military sacrifices and ramifications the alternative would entail are too expensive.

Afghanistan provides a compelling reminder of the futility of fighting a proxy war while refraining from confronting the power supporting the proxy, even if you are the preeminent global power, which the US still is.

Israel's priority must be to ensure it does not reach a situation where it ends up facing a proxy backed by a nuclear-armed power. In order to achieve that, it must, without delay, reassess its current containment policy. It must formulate a new policy based not on threat containment but threat neutralization. That means confronting Iran.

As heavy as the costs of such a policy might be, it is clear that the costs of not adopting such a policy will, very possibly and unfortunately in the not too distant future, be much higher. The question Israel's strategic policymakers should be asking themselves is not whether it can afford to bear the costs of threat elimination, but whether it can afford not to.

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