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U.S. and France rethink strategies to fight jihadism

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Is it better to abandon the land to the jihadists and weak local government forces? Or is it better stay and fight without any prospect of victory in the short or medium terms? This is the dilemma which affects the entire West and their campaigns against jihadists

in Afghanistan, Iraq and the Sahel, but it seems that few people grasp the strategic importance of the decisions that will be taken.

Recently, General Kenneth McKenzie, head of American central command operations in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan, blamed the Taliban for the violence in Afghanistan. "Isis pales in comparison to what the Taliban are doing. They are unleashing a series of attacks across the country against Afghan forces, with targeted killings in different urban areas. The violence is not directed at us or our NATO coalition friends. It is directed against the Afghan military, security forces and the general population," McKenzie said.

As early as 29 January, the Pentagon accused the Taliban of failing to deliver on its promises, including reducing attacks and cutting ties with terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda. The Taliban, who have launched a series of offensives concentrated in the south, responded by urging the U.S. to respect the Doha agreement reached with Donald Trump. The agreement calls for the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan by May in exchange for security guarantees. The Biden administration appears open to revising the agreement, but it is not yet clear whether this is a reassessment of the entire military campaign or just a squabble directed at the previous administration. "Without compliance to the commitment of renouncing terrorism and stopping attacks against Afghan security forces and, therefore, the Afghan people, it is very difficult to see specifically how we can move forward with the negotiated agreement," Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said in late January, stressing that no decision had yet been made.

Kirby had reiterated that the Biden administration wants to keep its commitment to the agreement. "The Defence Secretary was clear in his Senate hearing that we must find a reasonable and rational end to this war, and that must come through a negotiated agreement involving the Afghan government." Secretary of State Antony Blinken, on the other hand, stated there would be a review of the agreement to "understand exactly what commitments have been made by the Taliban and what commitments have been made by us." Beyond the nuances of political language, the issue seems very clear, at least in military terms: the withdrawal of the United States and its allies will lead to a large-scale Taliban attack aimed at disrupting the defences established by forces in Kabul and regaining control of the Central Asian nation.

If the Americans show uncertainty and hesitation, NATO must follow suit. "We are facing many dilemmas and there are no easy options. We have not taken a final decision on our future presence there, but as the 1st May deadline approaches, we will

continue to consult and coordinate together as an alliance," NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said on 18 February following the Atlantic Alliance ministerial summit. For Stoltenberg, NATO "will leave Afghanistan only when the time is right." The priority "is to support dialogue and peace efforts", he said, which represent "the only path to peace" in the country where "the Allies arrived together and will leave together."

In Iraq and Syria, the situation is equally uncertain. While the Islamic State is becoming active again, increasingly organised and deadly, the presence of the United States is ever the less welcome both to Syrian government forces (who consider them invaders) and to Turkish troops (who consider the U.S. friends of the Kurdish "terrorists") who have occupied part of northern Syria and Iraq and to the pro-Iranian Scythian Iraqi militias (who attack coalition bases with rockets and mortars). To show signs of discontinuity with the Trump era, the Biden administration has sent 200 additional troops to Eastern Syria (where there are less than 1,000 Americans) and is considering sending some reinforcements to Iraq, where there are only 2,500 US soldiers present, just like in Afghanistan. These forces are, at any rate, insufficient to constitute any credible deterrent or allow for the training and support of local government troops on the battlefield.

Hence, were the White House to renounce withdrawal, it would have to proceed with a new reinforcement of temporary troops, especially in Afghanistan, while once again seeking help from its NATO allies and renewing a strategic tug-of-war which has rendered past victories all but useless and its operational capacities deployed inconsistent.

In recent months, France has faced the same dilemma in the Sahel region of Africa. At the G5 Sahel summit in N'Djamena, President Emmanuel Macron announced last 16 February that the French military presence in the Sahel would be revised, as many in Paris are asking for, but not right away. "Undoubtedly significant changes will be made to our military arrangements in due course but not immediately so," Macron said. Operation Barkhane against the jihadists in the Sahel will not be reduced for the time being: it involves 5,100 military personnel with 500 armoured vehicles, more than 400 logistical vehicles, in addition to roughly 20 aircraft and 40 helicopters that flank French forces in Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad and Mauritania (G5 Sahel), in addition to the U.N. troops stationed in Mali. U.S. military forces are also present in the region but are being reduced in Africa. Paris has paid for its wearying commitment with 55 casualties, hundreds of wounded, costs that have exceeded one billion euro a year, and without its victories leading to a decisive defeat of the enemy nor its European partners

providing any substantial troops and means.

If we exclude small amount of troops being supplied by the Czech Republic, Estonia, Sweden and, soon, by Italy to the Takuba special forces, the campaign against al-Qaeda jihadists (the Support Group for Islam and Muslims and the Katiba Macina) and the Islamic State (the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara) will remain a French "affaire". Yet, one only has to look at the map to realise that curbing jihadists in the Sahel region would be a common interest and that the campaign should be fought by the all of Europe, not just France. A jihadist victory on this account would increase pressure on North African nations which are already heavily exposed to jihadist threats, and Southern Europe. Expanding the reach of jihadist forces is already a *de facto* reality: in November 2020, the head of the General Directorate for External Security, Bernard Emié, said that al-Qaeda is developing an "expansion project" towards the Gulf of Guinea, particularly in Ivory Coast and Benin.

France announced that it was sending 600 soldiers to reinforce its presence in the Sahel and that the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara was the main enemy to be defeated. One year later, Paris is stressing the need to fight the al-Qaeda militias, which have grown so strong that the governments of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso are now planning to open negotiations with the insurgents, just like the United State and later the Kabul government did with the Taliban. The consequences are there for all to see.