

Leaving Without Losing: The War on Terror After Iraq and Afghanistan

Written by Mark N. Katz

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MARK N. KATZ, APR 30 2012

On September 11, 2011, the War on Terror entered its second decade. Despite the death of Osama bin Laden on May 2, 2011, the War on Terror continues—with no end in sight.

Intervening in Afghanistan and Iraq has not led the United States to victory in the War on Terror. But withdrawing from these two countries will not either. The conflicts within each country seem certain to continue whether the United States stays or not. Several other conflicts linked to the War on Terror—such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Indo-Pakistani dispute, and unrest in Yemen, Somalia, the North Caucasus, and elsewhere— also appear likely to persist indefinitely.

What should the United States do now? What can it do?

These are the questions I take up in my new book: *Leaving without Losing: The War on Terror after Iraq and Afghanistan*. In the book, I argue that, although the U.S. is likely to endure some negative consequences from its disengagement, overall withdrawal need not mean defeat. I put forth a number of policies that can help Washington mitigate the adverse consequences withdrawing from Iraq and Afghanistan will have for these countries and the

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larger war on terror.

The wisdom of these policies has been adequately demonstrated by recent U.S. history. At the time of this writing, the United States has withdrawn from Iraq and is in the process of withdrawing from Afghanistan. This is reminiscent of the early 1970s when Washington withdrew from Indochina following the Nixon administration's decision to end U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War.

During that time, domestic opponents of Nixon and Kissinger's decision predicted that many negative consequences would follow U.S. disengagement. Some of these proved accurate. For example, the Marxists, emboldened by the knowledge that the United States was unlikely to undertake another Vietnam, were able to take power in Indochina as well as in several countries elsewhere in the Third World.

By the start of the 1980's it seemed apparent to all that Marxism was on the march worldwide while the U.S.-championed liberal order was fast receding. But the Marxists' fortunes quickly changed as their recent successes bred overconfidence and caused them to overreach in places like Afghanistan, southern Africa, and Central America. Washington was then able to exploit these blunders so much that by the early 1990's, Marxism was a spent force.

Similarly, Islamic radicals might now be emboldened by the knowledge that the United States does not want another Iraq or Afghanistan. But just as the U.S. withdrawal from Indochina led to Marxist overconfidence and overexpansion in the 1970s that the United States was then able to exploit, the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan might similarly cause the Islamic radicals to overextend themselves. The United States can then exploit this to its own advantage.

In addition, the War on Terror resembles the Cold War (especially in the Third World) in that it is not one monolithic conflict but instead consists of numerous regional and local conflicts that, although linked, all have their own separate dynamics. As noted above, these include the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Indo-Pakistani dispute, and continued unrest and instability in places like Yemen, Somalia, and the North Caucasus. Even while connected to the larger War on Terror, each of these is driven primarily by local grievances and actors. The United States could reduce the intensity of the War on Terror if it could resolve some of these conflicts and thus decouple them from the larger confrontation. But as the U.S. experience during the Cold War showed, this is not easy to accomplish.

The United States must also be mindful not only of how new factors—such as the Arab Spring—affect the War on Terror, but also of how the War on Terror fits into the larger geopolitical context. Ironically, while American overextension in Afghanistan and Iraq may have assisted the efforts to further the great power ambitions of other countries—such as China, Russia, and Iran—U.S. withdrawals may actually negatively impact these countries more than the United States.

This is especially true in the case of Afghanistan where Russia, India, Iran, and China all have a vested interest in preventing the Taliban from reoccupying the country. As they nervously watch the United States withdraw from Kabul, it's not unthinkable that these countries may increase their own efforts to shore up the current Afghan government or empower non-Pashtun Afghans who have the strongest interest in preventing the Taliban from reclaiming the territory it lost following the U.S.-led invasion in October 2001.

Finally, it's important to recall that while the War on Terror now appears to be endless, so too did the Cold War to those who lived through it. The Cold War did, however, come to an end. The War on Terror can too.

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