

The Danger of Iran

by Michael Curtis



The powerful bomb blast attack by an ISIS affiliate, ISIS-K (Khorasan), a deadly terror group of jihadists from Syria and other areas, on American forces and Afghani civilians in Kabul on August 26, 2021, killed 13 U.S. troops and more than 90 Afghans. This was a dark day for the U.S., the deadliest day for U.S. military forces in Afghanistan since 2011. The event was tragic and ironic for at least six reasons: the lamentable deaths of people trying to help others; the devastating refutation of President Joe Biden's electoral campaign promise of competent decision making and understanding of foreign affairs; the chaotic nature of the actions for withdrawal of U.S. troops; the incongruity of 6,000 U.S. troops being sent to help with the evacuation of the 2,5000 already there; the reliance of the U.S. troops and NATO members for their security on the Taliban, the group they were trying to kill a month earlier; the access of the Taliban to U.S. supplied military equipment, vehicles, planes, helicopters, arms, body armor and night vision goggles, and intelligence.

Moreover, the attack was a victory for a terrorist group whose elimination was purportedly the reason for the U.S. intervention in the first place after 9/11. That terrorist group, in slightly different form, instead of being eliminated, has been active over the last year including the brutal attack in June 2021, and killing of ten mine cleaners on the Halo Trust, a non-political and non-religious charity which removes debris, land mines, left by war. ISIS is now in a position to begin carrying out its objective, the establishment of a Caliphate in south and central Asia, governed by Sharia law.

Internal and international controversy will continue and mount over the debacle in Kabul and responsibility. President Biden has declared the "buck stops" with him. But the mistakes of his administration are more compelling than the rhetoric: debate will continue on the hasty exit timetable for U.S. from Afghanistan; on the disagreements between U.S. military leaders and the President on withdrawal; on Biden's abrupt abandonment of Bagram Airbase which could have been used for evacuation of Americans; alleged sharing of security arrangements; the giving a list to the Taliban of Afghans who aided the U.S.; the lack of success by a country with remarkable assets; 150 countries host U.S. troops ; 200,000 U.S. troops are located abroad; annual military spending is \$770 billion; the fleet has 11 aircraft carriers.

The world has been left uncertain about the acumen and practicality of Biden's policy in foreign affairs after the chaos to end what he called the "for-ever war." In view of his inability to secure the drawdown of U.S. troops in a secure and orderly way, the question arises, "Is Biden reliable as an American and world leader or is he detached from reality?"

Foreign countries are concerned: Ukraine, whether Biden can help deter Russia; can Taiwan rely on U.S. protection from China; should NATO leaders now call for an independent European security operation from which the U.S. is excluded? Most immediately, there is the problem of whether Biden is genuinely, as well as rhetorically, committed to preventing Iran from becoming a nuclear weapons power.

The ISIS massacre occurred about an hour before a scheduled meeting was to take place in the White House between President Joe Biden and Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett who was to be the first foreign visitor to the White House since the Biden decision of withdrawal from Afghanistan. Bennett, head of a diverse coalition of right, center, and right parties, doves and hardliners, of which Bennett is one, with a wafer

thin majority of one, avoids issues that are divisive. He follows 12 years of leadership by Benjamin, Bibi, Netanyahu with whom he has little in common except they both speak perfect English. Bennett originally was an adherent of the Israeli right, a leader of a settler movement, lived for a time in a settlement, and even expressed an opinion for unilateral annexation of the West Bank. But he changed his views.

Bennett is anxious to make clear he is not Netanyahu, and is interested in bringing a "new spirit," a spirit of hope, goodwill, and cooperation to Washington with which Israel shares values of democracy, and respects for human rights.

Netanyahu, after Biden took office, reduced the flow of information that Israeli security officials conveyed to the U.S. about contemplated operations, above all in Iran. One can suggest four reasons: Bibi believed the U.S. had leaked information about Israeli operations; intelligence sharing had declined during the Obama administration; Bibi believed that U.S. spy agencies kept him under surveillance; Biden seems determined on returning to the Iranian nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, 2015, from which the Trump administration pulled out in 2018 and reimposed sanctions on the Iranian economy.

There had been a change under the Trump administration. The U.S., Trump and the then CIA director, Mike Pompeo, were the only foreign officials briefed before the Mossad attack on Iran's nuclear archives in 2018. Israel was made aware of Israeli bombing attacks, of the assassination of Iran's top nuclear scientist, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, and cooperation in the killing of former Islamic Revolution Guards Corps commander, Qasem Soleimani, and another leader hiding in Tehran.

The close relationship cooled when Biden took office. He spoke of the "unalterable partnership" between the U.S. and Israel, but he also spoke of returning to the Iranian nuclear deal. When Israel was involved in striking the Iran nuclear facility

in April 2021, the Mossad gave the U.S. only two hours notice before the blast. Political differences emerged regarding Palestinians. Unlike Israel, Biden has mentioned the possibility of east Jerusalem as capital of a Palestinian state.

However, what is most important is the issue of the Iranian nuclear accord. Bennett has called an Iranian nuclear weapon a "nightmare for the whole world." The issue is stark. Biden appears to persist in pursuing a deal with Iran. Israeli defense minister Benny Gantz holds that Iran is only two months away from acquiring the materials for a nuclear weapon, and that its nuclear program could incite an arms race in the region and the entire world. Iran, an important power, is a manifest danger in many ways. It could operate through proxies in Iraq, Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, and Gaza. It employs UAVs and guided missiles, it is able to disrupt maritime international trade as shown by operations as in the Mercer Street attack. It operates in cyberspace.

By the JCPOA, the nuclear, agreement, Iran was prohibited from transferring weapons to third countries. Yet, Iran which possesses more than 1,000 short and medium range ballistic missiles, has sent weapons to the Hezbollah, Hamas, and Iraq. It has rockets that can reach Israeli territory, including the Khorramshahr 2, with a range of 1,243 miles, and the Shahab -3.

Bennett has made no secret that Iran is Israel's top priority, that Iran is expediting its nuclear program, and that ties with the U.S. are essential on this issue to fend off and , as Antony Blinken remarked, to curtail Iran's attempt to dominate the region.

Biden on taking office made known his concerns; restoring millions in funding to Iran and providing relief from sanctions after Trump had ended this aid, including funds to UNRWA, repairing the U.S. relationship with the Palestine

Authority and the PLO; advancing a two state solution; providing humanitarian assistance programs to the Middle East; and reentering the Iran nuclear deal in return for promises not to pursue a nuclear weapon. But the reality is that Iran is accelerating its uranium enrichment program and building of advanced centrifuges.

At the 50 minute one on one White House meeting on August 27, Biden again spoke of the "unshakeable partnership between our two nations," and of establishing a strong personal relationship with Bennett. Agreement was reached on some issues: U.S. support for Israel's Iron Dome system; progress on the U.S. Visa Waiver program which would allow Israelis to visit the U.S, and vice versa, without a visa.

But differences remain: on a U.S. consulate to Palestinians in east Jerusalem; on the expansion of West Bank settlements, and above all on Iran. Iran is vital. On this the U.S. position is enigmatic. Biden has said, we're putting diplomacy first and seeing where it takes us. "If diplomacy fails we're ready to turn to other options." The essential problem is whether Biden, regarding those "options," can carry a "big stick." Afghanistan has disposed of the cultivated image of Joe Biden as an experienced, wise and capable leader.