**What Ghani can learn from Assad**

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The US military is rapidly working on its complete withdrawal from Afghanistan and has already closed an important base in volatile Helmand province. Its air force is busy transporting military hardware out of the country. It is estimated that some 1,300 pieces of equipment that can’t be removed will either destroyed or given to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF).

It is against this backdrop that the Taliban are continuing their push to capture more territory. This includes Afghanistan’s second-largest dam — the Dahla Dam in southern Kandahar province — which provides irrigation, power, and clean drinking water. The group has also been on the offensive in Helmand province since the start of the month. Thus, it’s highly speculated that once foreign forces completely exit the country, President Ashraf Ghani’s regime will be quick to fall; especially since the Taliban are determined to control the territory currently under government writ.

My work as a journalist means that I track developments in the Af-Pak region with keen interest. I have interviewed key Taliban leaders as well as government officials. My work covering the Middle East has seen me visit the Zaatari Syrian refugee camp, the world’s largest, along the Syrian-Jordan border. In addition, I have also interviewed important leaders from across the political spectrum, such as members of the Damascus government, the Turkey-based opposition and the Syrian Kurdish PYD/YPG.

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As far as Syria goes, one thing is certain: the Assad regime has proved extraordinarily resilient, despite initial blows. Not only did it not crumble — it succeeded in keeping intact its civilian government systems, military forces, and security apparatus. President Bashar Al-Assad has definitely used brutal force against his opponents, including civilians. And while none of this can be condoned, it does afford tactical lessons, particularly for Afghanistan’s political set-up.

Here are some crucial factors that Kabul can learn from:

Strong support of allies: The most decisive issue that contributed to President Assad’s hold on power has been the support of Russia, Iran and Hezbollah. The Afghan government therefore needs to ensure that the US, its most important ally, continues providing financial assistance, weapons and intelligence even after withdrawal. Material support from other regional allies should also be secured.

Strategic deployment of forces: Since the start of the Syrian conflict President Assad organised reliable forces by selectively deploying units while raising pro-regime militias and pursuing a clear-and-hold strategy in major urban areas using indirect fire. In the same way, President Ghani should deploy only the most loyal and competent forces around Afghanistan’s core territories and vital urban centres. Elite and special forces should focus around the capital, Kabul.

Effective use of air power: The Syrian Air Force represented the most critical element in all major military campaigns against the rebels. Similarly, the Afghan government has a functioning air force, which admittedly may not be very advanced but can still inflict significant militant losses. It should therefore be used for deep strikes in Taliban strongholds, targeting ammunition storage, concentration of forces, and high-value targets.

Minorities’ support: All minority groups in Syria, that is, Christians, Alawites, Druze, and Ishmaelites firmly support President Assad. Thus, President Ghani should also ensure that Afghanistan’s ethnic minorities champion his regime. But for this to happen, he needs to send the message that only the legitimate Afghan government can provide security to minority populations.

Divide rebel ranks: Infighting among the rebel ranks has plagued the Syrian opposition since the start of the uprising against the regime in 2011. This division was mainly due to local rivalries as well as ideological differences between the jihadists and more nationalist groups. President Ghani must also create fissures within the Taliban and among other groups to the benefit of his regime.

Hold on population and economic centres: President Assad is in control of the majority of the surviving population, thereby enabling him to tap manpower reserves to aid the regime’s fight while restricting civilians from joining the Syrian opposition. If Kabul ensures that it has similar control over its own population and economic centres, it will immensely benefit from long-term economic activity that generally doesn’t exist in militant-held areas. Moreover, this will also ensure a constant supply of new recruits to government forces.

Strong intelligence: The Syrian regime maintained the efficiency and preparedness of its Military Intelligence Directorate. It will be to the advantage of Afghan forces if they are provided with accurate intelligence inputs. Kabul should focus on increasing advanced electronic surveillance capabilities, and cross-communication between the National Directorate of Security (NDS) and security forces in the field.

Of course, these measures alone won’t guarantee the Ghani regime victory in its conflict with the Taliban and other groups. But they will ensure the survival of the government and prevent Afghanistan from becoming a failed state. Since it isn’t morally right to suggest that an elected government endeavours to hold on to some key areas only — the above mentioned should only be adopted in the event of imminent state collapse. Otherwise, the government should always aim to control every inch of its territory.

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