Twitter Thread by Andrew Watkins



Andrew Watkins
@and_huh_what



THREAD/ Taliban's messaging/ approach to Biden admin's policy review:
-high-level meetings with top US adversaries
-insists foreign troops will be targeted if not gone by 1 May
-repeats accusations of US non-compliance with deal (and insists a delay in withdrawal would be same).

Taliban repeating their view of Doha deal: smoothed the way for US to leave after "unsuccessful" 20-year intervention. A "safe passage" deal.

The more Taliban insist they are meeting deal's conditions, the less need for a "review." Almost as if to pre-argue a US policy shift. /2

But no Western official or international audience is convinced by Taliban claims alone. Even Taliban can't believe that.

Who is Taliban's audience, as they display rigidity on the deal's terms and insist their interpretation is justified? /3

Perhaps Taliban reached a point where offering compromise/ flexibility to US on withdrawal would be perceived as too weak among its own ranks.

Or the interpretation & expectation of a swift return to power was genuine - and everything US did the past year seems like welching. /4

Or, regardless of internal discourse, current Taliban assessment could be that US/NATO will not leave by May deadline.

Since US does not seem to have begun re-negotiating or bargaining on a withdrawal extension, Taliban might feel boxed in by that, obliged to posture. /5

Taliban have historically avoid firm, public declaration of policy positions. Once they do, these are not easily changed.

The further Taliban messaging hardens, the more difficult it might make any US attempt to smoothly extend its exit date. /6



Close observers of the Taliban also note that last-minute decision-making has been a movement trait from the earliest days – and the Taliban's current leadership council still largely consists of the same generation that steered the Emirate. One Afghanistan-based researcher said these figures do not discuss controversial matters until the moment they deem absolutely necessary and are unlikely to change tack regarding peace talks. 98

Crisis Group telephone interview, researcher, Afghanistan, July 2020. The researcher told Crisis Group that a number of personal contacts in the movement operate with the attitude embodied in an Afghan proverb, which roughly translates as "don't take off your shoes until you see the river".

Hide Footnote

Note: one thing Taliban's hard stance (both in messaging and use of violence, which is reaching record levels for winter months) disproves is the idea that they are "waiting out the US, ready to strike once they exit".

Taliban are already striking. /7

Some have asked: wouldn't Taliban's most logical path to a US exit lie in low violence? Deceive them, then strike later?

Question is fair, but does not account for:
1) depth of Taliban's mistrust of US, combined with differing interpretations + year of delays + mixed signals. /8

2) Apparent importance of being seen as strong.
Past year, Taliban has displayed consistent response to flexibility of others: to probe for and take advantage.

See: Helmand attacks days after Trump tweets on US troops coming home. Then Kandahar after most US troops leave KAF. /9

Bottom line: Biden team has shown it needs further time to review Afg policy choices.

But the first big deadline might not be May; it could be right now. If US does not engage Taliban on issue of withdrawal soon, the group might posture themselves out of negotiating room. /END