

AFGHANISTAN PARTIAL THREAT ASSESSMENT: THE TALIBAN AND ISIS

Key Takeaway: *Security in Afghanistan has been deteriorating since U.S. force levels dropped from a high of 100,000 in 2011 to the current force size of 9,800 they reached in June 2014. Lt. Gen. John W. “Mick” Nicholson, the incoming commander of Operation Resolute Support and U.S. Forces in Afghanistan, agreed with the remark that “the security situation in Afghanistan has been deteriorating rather than improving” in a Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC) hearing on January 28. Outgoing Resolute Support Commander General John Campbell reiterated this concern on February 2, stating that the ability to train Afghan security forces will be “very limited” if U.S. forces are reduced to 5,500 by the end of January 2017 as planned. Taliban militants are capitalizing on the overextension of the Afghanistan National Security Forces (ANSF) and dearth of U.S. and NATO forces to increase attacks, particularly in Helmand Province.*

ISW last published its Afghanistan Threat Assessment on December 11, 2015. Since then, Taliban militants have regained much of their traditional stronghold of Helmand Province, taking control of Now Zad and Musa Qal’ah Districts after ANSF withdrew between February 20 and 22. Militants are also besieging ANSF in Sangin and Marjah Districts while attacking ANSF near Gereshk, the district center of Nahr-e Saraj. The Taliban is thereby gaining freedom of maneuver around Helmand’s provincial capital, Lashkar Gah, even though they do not control the city itself. The gains are not limited to Helmand alone. Taliban militants are also exploiting the ANSF’s lack of capacity to increase attacks and expand territorial control in rural areas of northern Afghanistan, administering judicial governance in Baghdis, Ghor, Faryab and Sar-e Pul Provinces.

The ANSF nevertheless made substantial gains against ISIS in eastern Afghanistan. The ANSF supported by U.S. airstrikes successfully dislodged ISIS from its primary base in Achin District in southern Nangarhar Province during late February 2016. U.S. forces were able significantly to increase airstrikes on ISIS positions in support of ANSF ground operations because the Obama Administration gave them new authorities to do so in late December 2015. The clearing of Achin may only disrupt ISIS, however, which has continued recruitment south of Kabul, namely in Logar, Ghazni and Paktika Provinces, where the Taliban and Haqqani Networks have maintained support and control zones in the past. Alternatively, fleeing ISIS militants may cross into Pakistan’s mountainous border areas or may join ISIS-linked forces elsewhere in Afghanistan.

This map partially depicts areas of Taliban and ISIS control and support across Afghanistan as of February 23, 2016. The map also illustrates the status of district centers that have been attacked by Taliban militants in 2015 and 2016. This map partially depicts areas of Taliban and ISIS control and support across Afghanistan as of February 23, 2016. The map also illustrates the status of district centers that have been attacked by Taliban militants in 2015 and 2016. High-confidence ISIS support zones represent areas with reliable reporting of ISIS presence at the sub-district level. Low-confidence ISIS support zones represent areas with reliable reporting of ISIS presence at the district level, with zones assessed based on terrain and historic militant presence, or areas with unconfirmed reporting of ISIS presence at the sub-district level. Some Taliban support zones depicted on the map exceed the bounds of the districts explicitly researched as

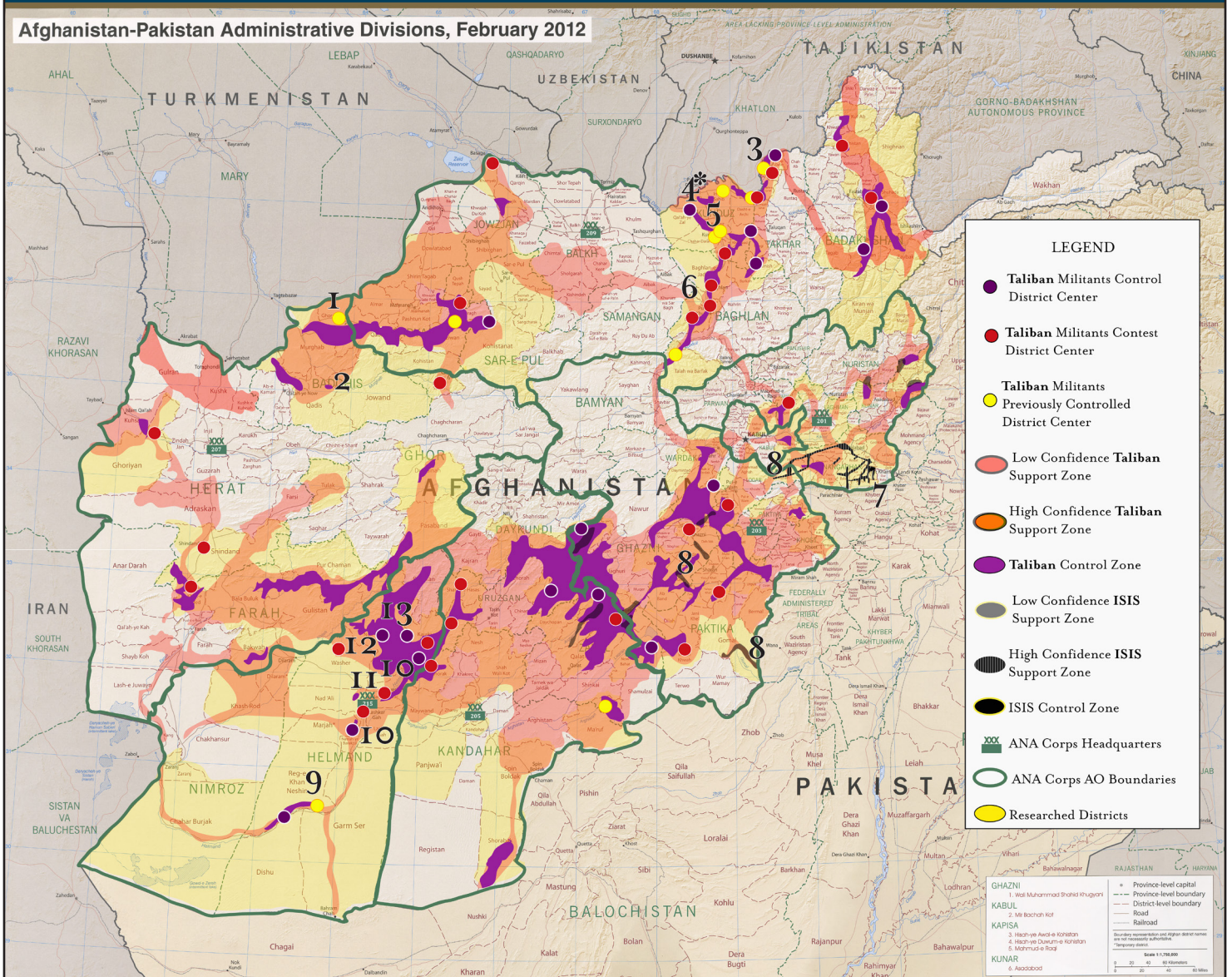
part of this project. These low-confidence Taliban support zone assessments are based upon historical, terrain, and demographic analysis. High-confidence Taliban support zones are depicted in districts that were fully researched as part of this project. ISW analysts have assessed conditions in 200 of 409 districts. ISW will update this map as ground conditions change and as analysts continue to assess support zones.

SUPPORT ZONE: A support zone is an area “free of significant enemy action” which permits “the effective logistics and administrative support of forces,” according to U.S. military doctrine. Support zones on this map are assessed on the basis of whether militants can operate and move freely in the district regardless of ANSF presence in order to support attacks and the establishment of control in other districts. Places where militants historically have popular support in the district are also considered support zones.



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Afghanistan-Pakistan Administrative Divisions, February 2012



CONTROL ZONE: Control is defined by “physical or psychological pressure to assure that individuals or groups within the area respond as directed,” according to U.S. military doctrine. Control also requires a military commander “to maintain physical influence over a specified area to prevent its use by an enemy.” A control zone therefore refers to an area where an actor maintains capacity to repel opposing forces and govern or compel the behavior of the local population. Evidence of Taliban control includes a withdrawal of ANSF from an area, the administration of alternate governance by Taliban forces within an area, and claims by Afghan officials that Taliban forces control an area. Combat actions to defend against the ANSF are also indicators of militant control.

1. The ANSF retook Ghormach District Center, Baghdis Province from Taliban militants. ANSF regained control of government buildings in the Ghormach District Center on December 24, after several weeks of Taliban militant control.

2. Taliban militants exercised social control in Qadis District, Baghdis Province. A Taliban court executed a man for adultery in northern Qadis Province on January 12. The application of extra-governmental Taliban legal systems in the Nakhjiristan area indicates sub-district social and area control.

3. The ANSF retook Darqad District Center, Takhar Province from Taliban militants. ANSF clearing operations on January 9 and 10 ended three months of Taliban control. Other parts of Darqad District changed hands between ANSF and Taliban militants throughout January, indicating that the Taliban sustains a presence outside of the district center. Taliban militants still control neighboring Yangi Qal’ah District and contest neighboring Khwaja Bahawuddin District.

4. Security forces moved government offices to a safer location in Qal’ah-ye Zal District, Kunduz Province after Taliban militants seized the district center’s bazaar on February 3. The ANSF subsequently designated a new district center in the cleared Aqtapa area, approximately 12 kilometers away, informing the change on this map. Taliban militants remain in much of Kunduz Province, including on the outskirts of Kunduz City, which the Taliban seized for two weeks in late September 2015.

5. Taliban militants reportedly control schools in Kunduz. Provincial officials claimed Taliban militants control more than 300 schools in Chahar Darah, Imam Sahib, Dasht-e Archi, Khanabad, and Qal’ah-ye Zal Districts. Qal’ah-ye Zal and Imam Sahib Districts are predominantly Turkmen and Uzbek, respectively, indicating the Taliban is extending social control to areas outside of its Pashtun support base.

6. Taliban militants targeted electricity infrastructure in Pul-e Khumri District, Baghlan Province. Militants have increasing power and freedom of movement in the district, demonstrated by their ability to deny populations electricity access despite resistance from government forces. Taliban militants sabotaged electricity infrastructure near the highway leading to the district center on January 26 and February 1, which security forces were not able to reach or to repair until February 17.

7. ANSF and U.S. airstrikes dislodged ISIS Wilayat Khorasan from its base in Achin District, Nangarhar Province. Afghan forces retook territory in Achin previously under ISIS control with support from U.S. airstrikes. ANSF reopened schools previously used by ISIS as shari’a law courthouses, indicating that ISIS lost social control. The ANSF operation may push ISIS militants across Nangarhar’s southern border into the Tirah Valley of Pakistan, through which the group originally entered Nangarhar in the spring of 2015.

8. ISIS’s Wilayat Khorasan expanded its presence in Ghazni, Paktika, and Logar Provinces. Alleged ISIS militants reportedly recruited local fighters in Zana Khan, Giro, Andar, and Gilan Districts, Ghazni Province. Zana Khan and neighboring Kharwar Districts are historically out of government reach. Taliban militants also clashed with allegedly ISIS-linked militants attempting to establish recruitment “offices” in Gomal District, Paktika Province on February 10. Recruitment in these areas could provide ISIS with a new route to Kabul from the south. ISIS reportedly also recruited Taliban militants in Azrah District, Logar Province, which connects to its original base in Nangarhar Province.

9. The ANSF retook Reg-e Khan Neshin District Center, Helmand Province from Taliban militants on December 18. This isolated success for the ANSF in a district with little strategic importance comes amid continued challenges for security forces throughout central Helmand Province.

10. Taliban militants contested control of Gereshk, the district center of Nahr-e Saraj District, Helmand Province. Taliban militants launched attacks in Gereshk throughout January and February, causing the ANSF to withdraw from districts in northern Helmand between February 20 and 22 to reinforce the operationally important city. Gereshk, near Helmand’s provincial capital Lashkar Gah, is also a crossing point for vehicles traveling between Kandahar and Herat Provinces, which militants can exploit to levy tolls on trade and illegal smuggling in the area.

11. Taliban militants contested control of Washer District Center, Helmand Province by attacking security check-posts on December 18. Taliban militants have support zones throughout northern Washer District and are likely attacking the district center in order to degrade security forces and expand control.

12. Taliban militants have besieged the ANSF in Sangin and Marjah District Centers. Taliban militants have effective military control of Sangin and Marjah District Centers as the ANSF are unable to move or maneuver outside of the few buildings under ANSF control. Taliban militants control the majority of Sangin District and launch frequent attacks on government forces in the district center, most recently on February 15. Meanwhile, Taliban militants are besieging roughly 550 ANSF in the Marjah District Center as of February 16 and have cut off ground routes into the district center. ANSF had reportedly regained positions in Sangin and Marjah District Centers in late December and early January respectively after significant U.S.-supported clearing operations. The Taliban subsequently reversed the gains, leaving the ANSF unable to effectively assert control in either district without significant reinforcement.

13. The ANSF withdrew from Musa Qal'ah and Now Zad Districts, ceding control to Taliban militants. Afghan National Army (ANA) 215th Corps Commander Mohammad Moeen Faqir announced on February 20 that ANSF pulled back from their main base and other checkpoints in Musa Qal'ah District in northern Helmand in order to reinforce troops in Gereshk, the district center of Nahr-e Saraj District. ANSF also withdrew from Now Zad District on February 22 in order to concentrate defensive forces on areas surrounding the provincial capital Lashkar Gah and the ring road between Kabul and western Herat city.

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