

MARCH 2015

LAUREN McNALLY AND PAUL BUCALA

AFGHANISTAN REPORT II

THE TALIBAN RESURGENT: THREATS TO AFGHANISTAN'S SECURITY



Cover: An Afghan National Army (ANA) soldier keeps watch at the Forward Base in Nari district near the army outpost in Kunar province, February 24, 2014. The Afghan Taliban killed 21 soldiers in the assault on Sunday in the remote mountainous region, the Afghan government said, and six soldiers were missing after the militants' most deadly assault on the security forces in months. REUTERS/Omar Sobhani Reproduced with permission.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The success or failure of the U.S. mission in Afghanistan has reached a critical juncture. Newly appointed Defense Secretary Ashton Carter announced on February 21, 2015 that the United States is considering a number of changes to the U.S. mission in Afghanistan, including slowing the drawdown timetable and rethinking the U.S. counter-terrorism mission. On March 16, 2015, anonymous U.S. officials confirmed that the United States is likely abandoning its plans to cut the number of U.S. troops to 5,500 at the end of the year. The United States could allow many of the 9,800 troops in Afghanistan to remain beyond 2015. A visit by Afghan President Ashraf Ghani to Washington, DC from March 22-25, 2015 is intended to discuss these issues.

The security environment in Afghanistan as it stands warrants at least this revision of drawdown rate and timeline. The Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) face numerous challenges in 2015 that may significantly hinder their capacity to assume responsibility for the country's security.

First, the insurgency itself threatens the Afghan government's control over terrain. Taliban attack patterns in 2014 were not typical of the previous two years. The Taliban conducted high-profile attacks on district centers and security checkpoints throughout the country in late 2014, often with massed, coordinated assaults. These factors led to casualty rates for both Afghan security forces and Afghan civilians in 2014 higher than in any of the last six years.

A persistent Taliban presence outside of Kabul indicates that the insurgency is fighting for more than remote district centers, and furthermore that it can regenerate itself and strengthen its military capability. This continued threat will set conditions for greater security challenges in 2015. The escalation in high-profile attacks within Kabul also indicates that the Taliban maintains the capability to threaten the presence of Western interests in the capital.

Far from defeated, the ongoing Afghan insurgency remains a serious challenge and threatens to reverse hard-won prior gains. This assessment contradicts some more optimistic statements by U.S. leaders at the end of 2014. The Afghan government is actively pursuing peace negotiations with the Taliban, but increased fracturing within the Taliban will likely impede a comprehensive peace deal. A looming deadline for withdrawal by international forces incentivizes the Taliban to strengthen its hand through future offensives. A fixed deadline, even further in the future, not tethered to the achievement of specific goals will not address this challenge.

Second, the ANSF lack requisite capacities as a counterinsurgent force. Although the ANSF was able to push back insurgents from seized district centers over the past year, the ANSF may not be able to sustain a sufficient forward presence to prevent their return. Helmand province in southern Afghanistan underwent repeated ANSF clearing operations, despite reports of success in ridding districts of Taliban militants. Security forces further north in Kunduz province, meanwhile, are unable to prevent the Taliban from expanding local governance institutions within contested districts. The insurgency's resilience in the face of ANSF clearing operations suggests that the ANSF lacks the ability to clear and hold terrain decisively. The fight will protract over the long term, which is a problem at this rate of combat loss.

The ANSF continues to suffer from key capability gaps, especially in air support assets. As such, the Afghan Air Force will not be able to offer ground forces the same level of support that coalition air units provided. The lack of aviation for both firepower and mobility is likely one reason why the insurgents have been able to mass in larger numbers. If the current trend of insurgent attacks continues in 2015, the ANSF will experience increasing attrition through casualties and desertion, hampering its ability to complete its mission to secure Afghanistan.

Third, al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups continue to be present in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Al-Qaeda maintains safe havens in the region from which it continues to provide support to global terrorist activity. Concerns are also rising over reports of groups affiliated with the Islamic State spreading in Afghanistan. Preventing these groups from maintaining

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or gaining a solid foothold in Afghanistan is a strategic goal of the U.S. counter-terrorism mission, and is unlikely to be achieved by the ANSF on its own. There is little discussion about maintaining a counter-terrorism and advisory force past the 2016 end date for the U.S. mission. The violence witnessed in the last year is indicative of a resurgent enemy, and the ANSF will require robust, long-term assistance from the United States for support in containing these threats.

In light of these concerns, the reevaluation of U.S. policy toward Afghanistan already in progress is a necessity. A residual U.S. and international force will remain in Afghanistan through 2016 under current policy. Under the current withdrawal schedule, the U.S. plans to end its presence, apart from a Kabul-centric embassy protection force, by the end of 2016. This will leave the United States largely unable to identify and assist the ANSF with developments at the local level, permitting the Taliban to expand in ways that undermine core U.S. interests, such as seeing to it that Afghanistan has the ability to defend its borders.

The lessons learned from the withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 serve as a warning for a premature withdrawal from Afghanistan. The U.S. departure from Iraq left a fractionalized Iraqi Security Force incapable of providing security and a divisive government under Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. Perceived sectarian actions by the government and security forces hindered their ability to provide security and led to a resurgence of anti-government groups. The rise of the so-called Islamic State is a manifestation of the failure to address these political and security challenges in the wake of the U.S. withdrawal.

Afghanistan is not condemned to the same future as Iraq. The progress of the national unity government is a promising start. Early signs of cooperation between President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah alleviated fears of rekindled ethnic tensions within political institutions and helped prevent divisions within security forces. The ANSF maintains the capacity to protect key urban centers and will benefit from further capability-building and professionalism training under the guidance of the Resolute Support Mission. If given the chance, Afghanistan could become a secure and stable long-term partner for the United States.

President Ghani is a willing and welcoming potential partner in the Resolute Support Mission and wants to see both U.S. and Afghan interests met. One of Ghani's first acts as president was to sign the Bilateral Security Agreement, and he remains a strong advocate of a continued U.S. presence in Afghanistan. The United States is in a position to support Ghani as he leads Afghanistan into a new decade of transformation that includes a long-term and effective Afghan-U.S. security partnership, although he will face tough requirements to preserve the security of the country even so.

U.S. officials should consider whether Operation Resolute Support's policy objectives, namely ensuring "stability" and "strong governance," as well as U.S. long-term foreign policy goals can be realistically achieved in this two-year span. As Secretary of Defense Carter stated, "the U.S. has a very successful campaign in Afghanistan, but it is not finished and it needs to be won." The risks of insufficient action are clear and threaten to reverse what progress has been made.

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THE TALIBAN RESURGENT: THREATS TO AFGHANISTAN'S SECURITY

By Lauren McNally and Paul Bucala

The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) officially ended its thirteen-year combat mission in Afghanistan on December 28, 2014. A residual U.S. and international force will remain for the next two years under the auspices of the new NATO-led advisory mission, “Operation Resolute Support,” focused on training and assisting the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). The Resolute Support Mission (RSM) seeks to develop the long-term sustainability of the ANSF and enable the Afghan military to provide security across Afghanistan. U.S. troops will also fulfill a limited counter-terrorism mission named “Operation Freedom’s Sentinel” which will focus on combating remnants of Al-Qaeda (AQ) and other foreign fighters. U.S. forces will operate under greater constraints restricting their ability to enter into ground operations against the Taliban or to provide close-air support for the Afghan military, though they will retain the authority to target insurgents that pose a direct threat to RSM forces or Afghan centers of governance.

Current U.S. policy in Afghanistan rests on the ability of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) to assume responsibility for the country’s security. The capability of the ANSF to withstand emerging threats will determine whether the U.S. will achieve its long-term strategic objectives in Afghanistan, namely to ensure that the country does not once again become a safe haven for terrorists groups. Unless the ANSF can provide security with this reduced level of international support, Afghanistan will likely witness an increasingly lethal Taliban insurgency, and potentially the reemergence of multiple international terrorist groups.

Western officials expressed confidence in the readiness of the ANSF until recently. The Defense Department concluded in its October 2014 report to Congress that the ANSF could successfully assume security responsibilities upon the conclusion of the ISAF combat mission.¹ Numerous officials echoed this sentiment, including Lieutenant General Joseph Anderson, who at the time served as Commander of the three-star Intermediate Joint Command (IJC), who called the ANSF in November 2014 a “hugely capable fighting force” that “has been in the lead for the entire year;”² Pentagon Press Secretary Rear Adm. John Kirby, who told reporters in December 2014 that the ANSF would be well-equipped to deal with future security challenges despite an uptick in attacks in 2014;³ and General John Campbell, Commander of U.S. Forces Afghanistan (USFOR-A) and Operation Resolute Support, who similarly testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee on February 12, 2015 that,

“The ANSF successfully maintained control of all key terrain and populated areas in 2014. The insurgents were only able to temporarily overrun four district centers in isolated portions of the country. [...] insurgents could not hold ground anywhere when challenged by the ANSF in force.”⁴

Two months into Operation Resolute Support’s first year, newly appointed Defense Secretary Ashton Carter announced on February 21, 2015 that the United States is considering a number of changes to the U.S. mission in Afghanistan, including slowing the drawdown timetable and rethinking the U.S. counter-terrorism mission. During Secretary of Defense Carter’s February visit to Afghanistan, he stated the United States was “considering a number of options to reinforce our support for President Ghani’s security strategy, including possible changes to the timeline for our drawdown of U.S. troops.”⁵ Carter’s statement acknowledges that, despite earlier assessments, future forecasting for Afghanistan’s long-term security is not certain. Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani is a vocal proponent for re-examining the U.S. withdrawal timetable and argues that “real” progress in Afghanistan will require a less stringent mission deadline.⁶

During his testimony on Worldwide Threats before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper also warned the Taliban is “positioning itself for greater territorial gains in 2015.”⁷ According to the report Clapper submitted before his testimony, he assessed the Afghan National Security Forces will be facing “an increasingly aggressive” Taliban insurgency

that sees the exit of international forces from the country as “a sign of its inevitable victory.”⁸ Clapper also wrote that the economic slowdown in Europe and Japan “has made it harder for key donors to provide financial aid” to support the ANSF, stating that Afghan security forces “will probably not remain a cohesive or viable force” without sufficient international funding.⁹ This introduces an additional concern, that the ANSF may not remain intact in the face of rising violence.

During a joint conference in Afghanistan in February 2015, Secretary Carter and President Ghani agreed that in order to ensure that “progress sticks” in Afghanistan, the international coalition must reach an agreement on how to best support Afghanistan’s security strategy.¹⁰ President Ghani has stated that he believes the situation on the ground in Afghanistan has changed from when the withdrawal timetable was drafted, and that the current “ecology of terror” necessitates a stronger visible partnership between Afghanistan and the United States. As President Ghani prepares to visit Washington D.C. in March 2015, he has made it clear that he hopes he and President Barack Obama will “come to a view of what troop numbers should be in the time to come.”¹¹ It is telling that Secretary Carter’s first trip, only days after his confirmation by the Senate, was to Afghanistan.¹² As the United States evaluates its policy toward Afghanistan, both the public and policy-makers must be aware of current developments in the country and their implications for U.S. interests in the region.

This report will examine the 2014 fighting season in Afghanistan in closer detail to explain why these estimates have changed. This report will demonstrate that Taliban attack patterns in 2014 were not typical of the previous two years. The Taliban conducted high-profile attacks on district centers and security checkpoints throughout the country in late 2014, often with massed, coordinated assaults. These factors led to both Afghan security forces and civilians in 2014 enduring higher casualty rates than in any of the last six years.¹³ The challenges that the ANSF encountered during the 2014 fighting season, coupled with the limited presence of ISAF, created an environment in which the Taliban was able to consolidate and broaden its influence. Afghan security officials are already predicting that 2015 will witness even more Taliban attacks.¹⁴ U.S. long-term strategic interests therefore likely require adapting force drawdown timelines.

A persistent Taliban presence outside of Kabul indicates that the insurgency is fighting for more than district centers, and further that it can regenerate itself and strengthen its military capability, which will set conditions for greater security challenges in 2015. Although the ANSF was able to push back insurgents from seized district centers, the ANSF may not be

able to sustain a sufficient forward presence to prevent their return. The ANSF may be capable in 2015, but the foes it faces are also becoming increasingly lethal. This report will therefore explore three issues. The first section will analyze the security situation and ANSF responses in Afghanistan’s southern, southern highlands, eastern, and northern regions, as well as Kabul and its environs. The second section will assess the challenges that still face Afghan security forces as international forces withdraw. The report will finally provide an overview of the planned U.S. and NATO force mission in 2015 and discuss the implications of their withdrawal.

Sourcing Note

This report explores Taliban activity in Afghanistan exclusively through open-source material. NATO and U.S. Forces no longer report levels of insurgent-related violence publicly, a change in the public information environment that took effect in 2013.¹⁵ The security situation in Afghanistan is now monitored at ISW through local sources, namely official reporting through the Afghan security forces and Afghan media. Research therefore focuses upon major inflections and notable events¹⁶ to describe major shifts in Taliban behavior rather than overall violence trends. An absence of reporting may correlate with significantly worsening security patterns in some cases. Parts of Ghazni, Zabol, Paktia, Khost, Wardak, Logar, Nuristan, Kunar, and Nangarhar provinces where reporting is negligible likely reflect this condition. This report therefore conservatively estimates areas of Taliban influence as of March 2015.

THE AFGHAN TALIBAN’S STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

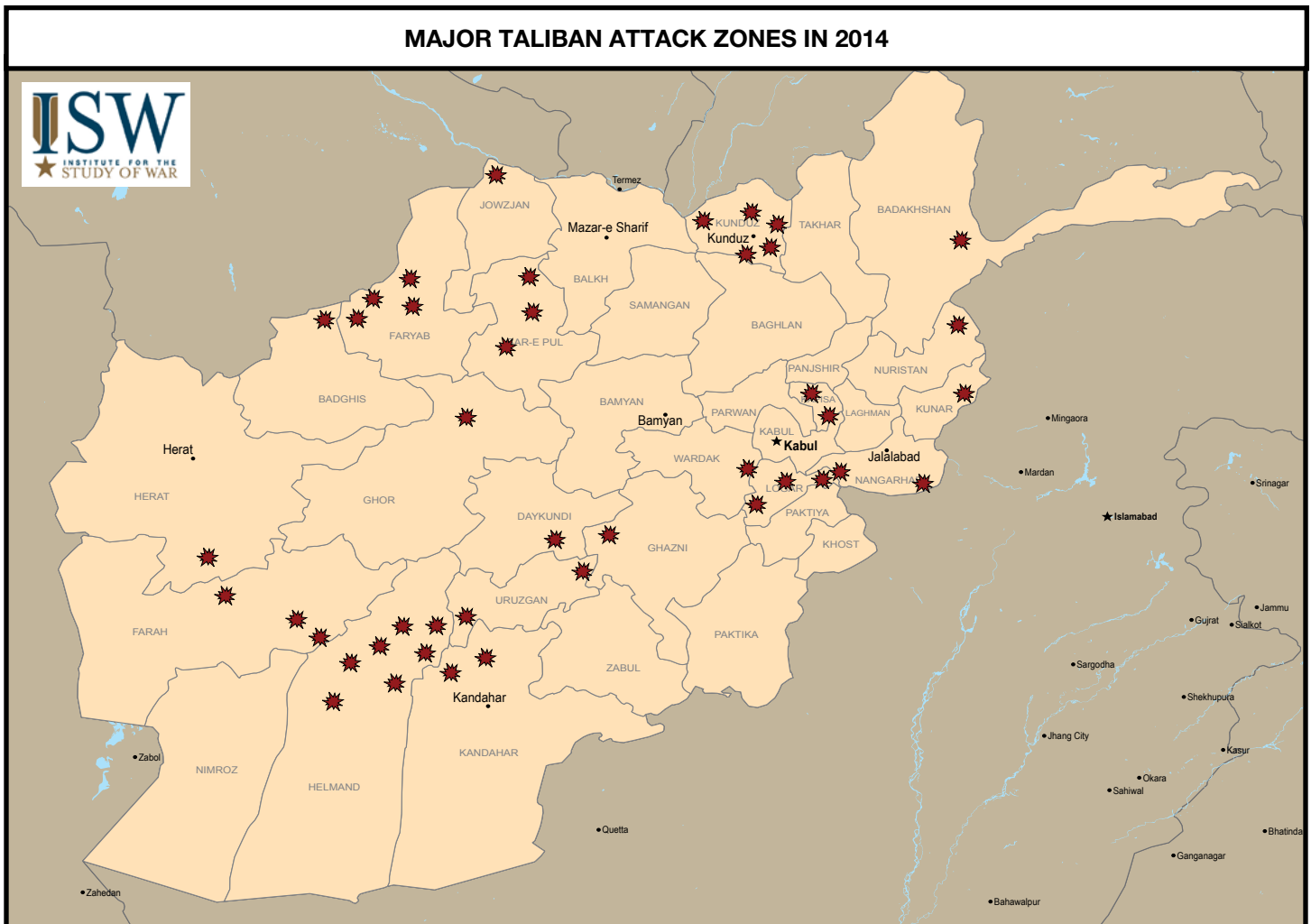
The goals of the Afghan Taliban have not changed since the beginning of the ISAF mission in Afghanistan, as demonstrated by its statements to the media and its actions in controlled areas. The Taliban sees itself as a government in exile. Its leadership continues to demand that international forces completely withdraw from Afghanistan and an Islamic government be established in the country.¹⁷ It is in this sense an insurgency. There are several potential paths the Taliban could choose to this end. The Taliban could attempt to carve out a local “emirate” and continue to challenge the Afghan National Unity Government from within Afghan territory. It could try to overthrow the central government in Kabul violently, though this seems implausible. It could also attempt to leverage conditions to broker a political deal with Kabul in the coming years. It is therefore worthwhile to consider what the Taliban meant to accomplish through its 2014 fighting season and expected 2015 campaigns.

The Taliban’s strategy at the local level is to subvert, weaken, and drive out institutions of state governance, isolate the Afghan security forces, and build parallel institutions with which to increase its influence across Afghanistan’s periphery. As Taliban Emir Mullah Omar claimed to his followers in a message published during the summer of 2014, “Writ and administration of the Islamic Emirate [have] become stronger comparatively.”¹⁸ The Taliban leader lists a number of areas where the Taliban has made progress in expanding governance in the countryside. “Parallel to the battle ground, activities of the Islamic Emirate are forging ahead with initiatives in other sectors as well. Great services have been rendered in sectors of education, economy, adjudication and justice, call and guidance, cultural activities, martyrs, the handicapped, coordination and management of NGOs, prisoner’s affairs and civilian casualties.”¹⁹

This could be dismissed as empty rhetoric if not matched by comparable military action. Unfortunately the current security

situation in Afghanistan has begun to reflect the strategic landscape before the 2010 surge. ANSF units are increasingly confined to their bases and security checkpoints, unable or unwilling to go out on patrol in the community. This leaves the Taliban free to provide its own forms of governance in the countryside. Such a situation allows insurgents to sustain ground attacks on ANSF units. The ability of the Taliban to project force into Afghanistan’s outlying areas where the ANSF cannot persistently defend creates durable political opportunities for the Taliban to follow through on such aims.

Taliban activity escalated in three significant ways in 2014 during its summer and fall offensives. The Taliban focused on controlling territory and was able to seize district centers and threaten provincial capitals. The insurgency was also able to launch offensives and control ground far from its traditional strongholds in the eastern and southern areas of the country, as the above map illustrates. The Taliban additionally managed to solidify its influence in captured areas by expanding

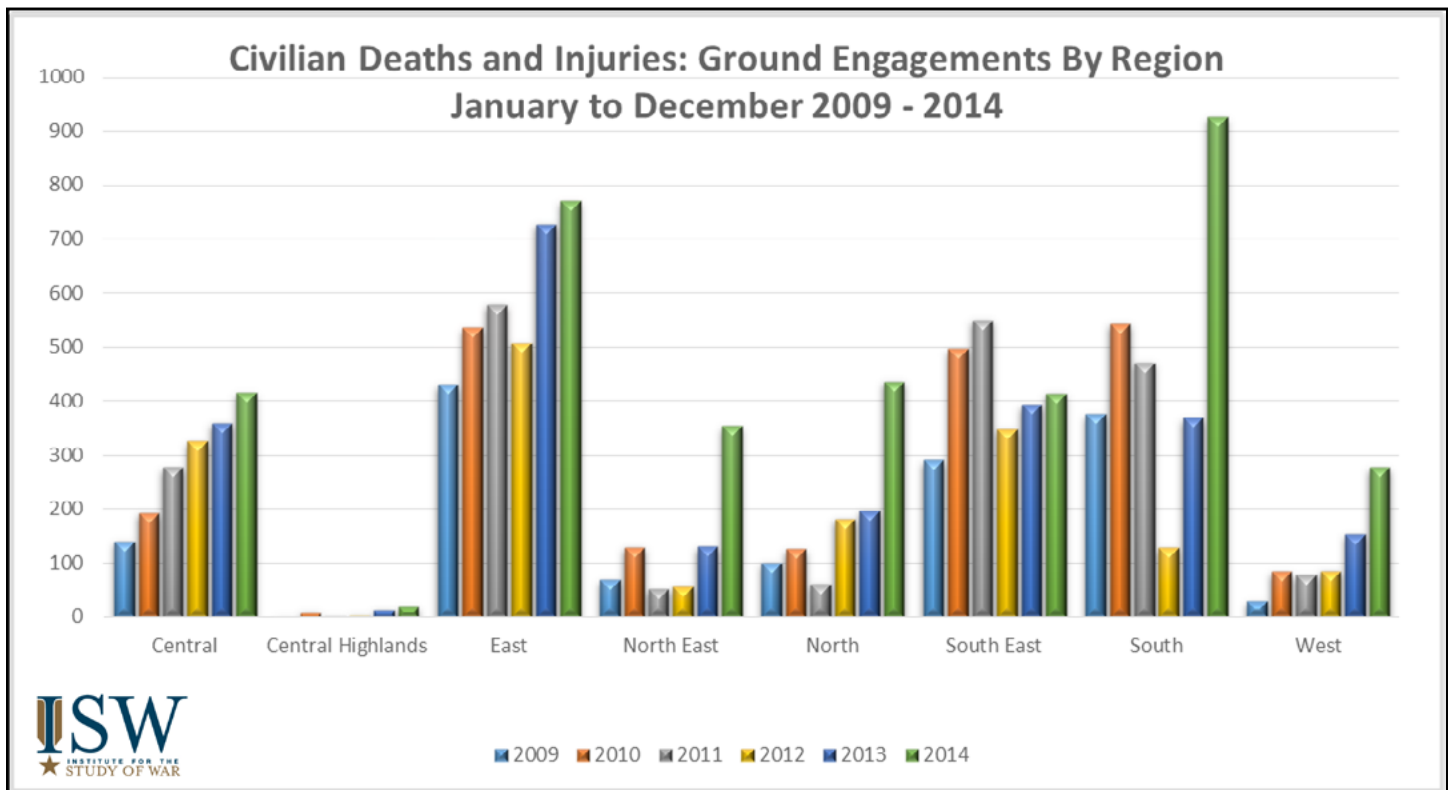


shadow governance institutions relating to taxation, education, and Shari'a-based law and order. The above map highlights districts that witnessed massed Taliban attacks or demonstrable action by Taliban shadow governments in 2014 to show concentrations of activity and growing support. The above map indicates that the Taliban has been able to exert influence and conduct attacks throughout large swaths in the eastern and southern sections of the country. It has also managed to increase its presence in Afghanistan's northern region, and thereby extend the insurgency's national reach. In so doing, the Taliban positioned itself for multiple follow-on opportunities across the political and military spectrum in 2015.

One of the best metrics in 2014 to demonstrate increasing Taliban activity across Afghanistan is civilian casualties (see chart below.) The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) civilian casualty report from February 2015 indicates a significant increase in civilian casualties from ground engagement between anti-government forces and the ANSF throughout all regions of Afghanistan.²⁰ For the northern, northeastern, and western regions, civilian casualties from ground engagements in 2014 doubled as compared to 2013. Civilian casualties from ground engagements nearly tripled for the southern region.²¹

Taliban activities in Afghanistan's peripheral territories are significant to the overall stability of the state. Notable Taliban activity occurred in four separate Taliban systems, including the southern region, the eastern provinces, Kabul, and the Afghan north. An increased Taliban presence in rural areas in 2014 allowed the Taliban to develop safe-havens and launch attacks against more precious targets, including Kabul. This report will examine the Taliban's activities in each region in late 2014.

The rise in Taliban activity in 2014 was likely event-driven. The Taliban's leadership viewed the political turmoil that surrounded Afghanistan's presidential run-off elections on June 14, 2014 as an opportunity to establish greater control of terrain in early 2014, according to Afghan security officials.²² The insurgency not only escalated attacks, but also sought to drive the ANSF from the countryside. According to an anonymous high-ranking Afghan security official, the Taliban had initially planned to undertake an aggressive strategy in 2015 and capitalize on the withdrawal of U.S. combat forces.²³ Kabul in particular remains an attractive target for Taliban attacks for its symbolic value and high visibility. The nation-wide resurgence in Taliban activity suggests that the Taliban will continue to capitalize on any drawdown to launch ever more deadly attacks against Western and Afghan forces to improve their relative position.



Number of Civilian Deaths and Injuries by Year and Region. Source: "Afghanistan Annual Report 2014: Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict," United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan, February 2015.

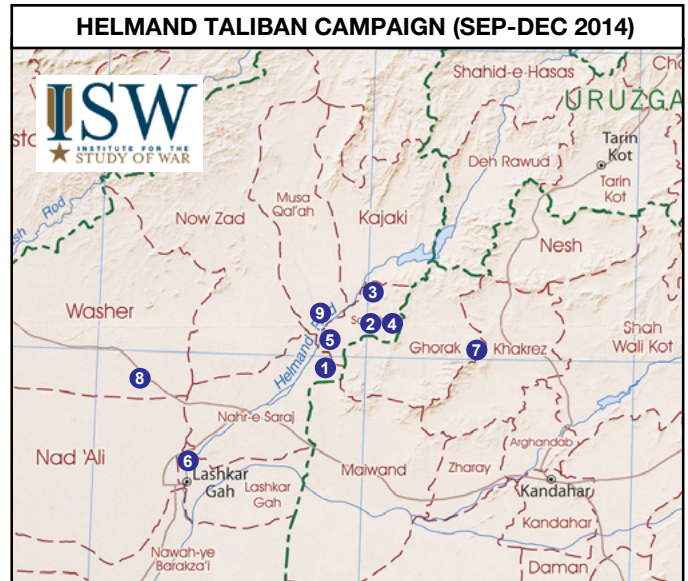
TALIBAN MAIN ATTACKS IN SOUTHERN AFGHANISTAN

Waves of violence throughout the summer and fall of 2014 demonstrate that Afghanistan's south remains the country's most restive region. In the 2014 fighting season, the Taliban carried out multiple, large-scale assaults on several districts primarily focused within Helmand province. The most notable of these assaults were those centered on Sangin district, where insurgents launched attacks from police checkpoints into the district center and repeatedly placed the district on the precipice of Taliban control. Sangin lies at the epicenter of Afghanistan's poppy industry, serving as a transit center and historic base of operations for insurgents to finance their operations through drug trade.²⁴ The province's major road network converges on Sangin district at Highway 611. Greater control of this network offers the Taliban extensive mobility within the province and access to resources far from the central government's reach. Sangin provides greater access for Taliban operations into the surrounding districts, including the provincial capital Lashkar Gah, as well as into neighboring provinces like Nimroz, Farah, Uruzgan, and Kandahar.

Consequently, Sangin district has always been one of the most hotly contested and deadly operating areas for international and Afghan security forces. More personnel have lost their lives in Sangin than in any other district in Afghanistan since the ANSF assumed the primary role in that region's security, according to a late 2013 report.²⁵ Sangin district was the target of aggressive Taliban offensives in May, June, and August of 2014, with reports of nearly eight hundred individual attacks within those months alone according to the *New York Times*.²⁶ These attacks reversed many of the gains achieved by both ISAF and the ANSF in previous years. Casualty rates for ANSF personnel in Helmand reached a new high in 2014, with over 1,300 personnel killed during counterinsurgency operations between July and November, with checkpoints frequently changing hands between local police and Taliban control.²⁷

Sangin

The violence in Sangin increased after the June 2014 presidential run-off election in Afghanistan. The Taliban coordinated several suicide attacks in Sangin and Lashkar Gah and engaged in skirmishes with the ANSF at police checkpoints leading into Sangin, resulting in numerous security force and civilian fatalities by September 2014.²⁸ As clashes intensified, local media sources reported that the district was close to falling after the Taliban took control of ten checkpoints on September 22, 2014.²⁹ Afghanistan's Ministry of Defense denied that militants were closing in on the district



1) September 22, 2014: Taliban militants capture ten checkpoints on the roads leading to Sangin district.

2) September 25, 2014: Local government officials report the ANSF is “unable” to push Taliban militants from the Sangin district center.

3) September 30, 2014: With international coalition support, ANSF operations kill 45 militants. An ISAF drone strike takes out a convoy of militants heading to Sangin from Kajaki district.

4) October 5, 2014: Residents report Taliban militants have returned to Sangin in the days following ISAF air strikes, retaking several police checkpoints and planting improvised explosive devices (IEDs) on the roads leading to the district center.

5) October 8, 2014: ISAF and ANSF launch joint operations in Sangin. By October 12, the ANSF reports all Taliban militants have been expelled from the district.

6) October 2014: On the 8th and 22nd of the month, the Taliban carries out two major suicide vehicle borne improvised explosive device (SVBIED) attacks targeting the district police chief and the border police chief respectively in the provincial capital Lashkar Gah.

7) October 27, 2014: Afghan National Police (ANP) calls on the ANSF to extend its clearing operations into Ghorak and Khakrez districts in Kandahar province to address waves of Taliban fighters shifting from neighboring Helmand.

8) November 27, 2014: Taliban militants launch a large-scale raid on Camp Shorabak. ANSF repels the attack after a night of clashes but fighting continues between security forces and militants near the surrounding villages.

9) November 29, 2014: The Taliban reinstate attacks in the areas immediately surrounding Sangin. Residents report the militants have control of all roads running through the district.

governor's compound, although the Ministry of the Interior sent additional aid and troops to combat the militants the same day.³⁰ ANSF efforts failed to repel the Taliban offensive and, by September 25, the Taliban reportedly possessed near full control of Sangin.³¹ The Taliban also managed to take control of most of the villages and police checkpoints in the areas around the district center.³²

The Afghan Ministry of Defense refuted most reporting about the crisis, calling Sangin “an easy task” for the ANSF.³³ The ANSF were able to clear Sangin and Kajaki districts by September 30, 2014 with ISAF air support, which dramatically shifted the course of the fighting according to local news.³⁴ These gains appeared to be temporary as the Taliban continued its siege on Sangin. Residents in the area reported on October 5, 2014 that Taliban fighters were planting improvised explosive devices (IEDs) on all routes leading into Sangin to prevent ISAF and ANSF reinforcements from reaching the district.³⁵ By October 8, 2014, the ANSF and ISAF announced they would undertake joint operations around Sangin to rid the district of insurgents. By October 12, 2014, the Ministry of Defense announced it had “cleared” all militants out of Sangin.³⁶ ISAF close air support was likely a critical factor in the ANSF's ultimate success.³⁷

The ANSF and ISAF were able to drive the Taliban from the Sangin district center, but this proved insufficient to stabilize the regional security situation. In the weeks following ANSF operations in Sangin, scattered Taliban elements launched coordinated attacks targeting districts around Sangin. Two significant suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (SVBIED) attacks on October 8 and October 22, 2014 struck the provincial capital of Lashkar Gah, along with a series of IEDs that demonstrated the Taliban's escalating challenge to ANSF control in Helmand province.³⁸ The district governor of Now Zad reported on October 22, 2014 that his district came under siege by Taliban fighters.³⁹ Further south along the highway, the Taliban conducted sophisticated and coordinated attacks in Nahr-e Saraj district involving a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) targeting a police convoy and an ambush targeting a police patrol.⁴⁰ The Taliban therefore maintained freedom of movement and attack throughout key districts in Helmand in October 2014 despite increased ANSF attention on the area.

The Taliban also launched attacks into neighboring Kandahar province. On October 27, 2014, Afghan National Police (ANP) called on the ANSF to extend its clearing operations into Kandahar in order to block waves of Taliban fighters reportedly shifting into Khakrez and Ghorak districts from neighboring Helmand. The militants were reportedly fleeing operations in Sangin district and planting mines along the highway leading to Kandahar city.⁴¹ This shift in Taliban

disposition is not necessarily indicative of a Taliban defeat in Helmand, but rather demonstrates the Taliban's ability to move across provincial lines when challenged by the ANSF in one area. This is an enduring challenge to the ANSF in southern Afghanistan and a reason why holding district centers is not a sufficient security strategy.

Camp Shorabak

The Taliban attacked Camp Shorabak, formerly Camp Bastion, on November 27, 2014, which was the most significant attack in Afghanistan's south in 2014. During the attack, Taliban fighters were able to infiltrate the base and inflict casualties and battle damage to the ANSF.⁴² While the Afghan National Army (ANA) was eventually able to repel the attack, Taliban reinforcements launched follow-on attacks on the base and its surrounding areas into the early hours of November 28, 2014.⁴³ Despite ANSF clearing operations to push the Taliban out of the surrounding area, the Taliban again tactically withdrew from the area with its military capabilities largely intact. This attack indicated that the Taliban was prepared to challenge the ANSF by attacking its bases directly.

Sangin district police chief Ahmadullah Anwari reported on November 30, 2014 that Taliban fighters moved back into the district following the assault on Camp Shorabak and were attacking police checkpoints “almost daily.”⁴⁴ Local forces again said they had neither the equipment nor the weapons to hold off such an influx of Taliban fighters.⁴⁵ The former district governor of Sangin, Suliman Shah, said on November 29, 2014 that the current situation in the province “still isn't good” and that “the Taliban are still holding the territory they have taken. No operation has been yet conducted by the government to take the territory back.”⁴⁶ The threat estimate in Sangin at the end of 2014 therefore appeared to have reverted back to September 2014 conditions.

The ANSF suffered around 1,300 casualties in Helmand province between August 2014 and December 2014, according to a *New York Times* estimate.⁴⁷ This figure would be nearly a quarter of the ANSF's casualties nationwide in 2014. The Taliban's attacks in Helmand corresponded to the withdrawal of international troops from the vicinity. Rather than wait for the next fighting season, the Taliban extended their attacks beyond the standard summer fighting season likely to take advantage of new freedom of movement.

Taliban activity in Afghanistan's southern region increased further from January 2015 to March 2015 despite ANSF clearing operations.⁴⁸ As of March 2015, security forces have proved unable to reduce militant activity in Helmand's central

region or deter ongoing attacks. The Taliban conducted coordinated attacks on population centers, including an SVBIED targeting a security force checkpoint on the outskirts of Lashkar Gah city on March 10, 2015.⁴⁹ In the latest attack on March 18, 2015, the Taliban detonated an SVBIED outside the governor's compound in Lashkar Gah city, wounding as many as forty-one civilians and further demonstrating the Taliban's ability to carry out attacks in spite of area security operations.⁵⁰ The Taliban will likely continue to attack districts like Sangin and bases like Camp Shorabak in 2015. ISAF personnel will remain in neighboring Kandahar province until the end of 2015 by current drawdown standards, which may be extended into 2016 in order to provide continued support to the ANSF in Helmand.⁵¹

THE TALIBAN'S HIGHLAND SANCTUARY

Significant Taliban attacks and skirmishes in nearby Uruzgan province also increased during the 2014 fighting season, particularly in September and October 2014. Uruzgan, Daikundi, and western Ghazni province comprise a remote and mountainous region east of Sangin that has historically served as sanctuary for the Taliban in central Afghanistan.⁵² This region lies between the Taliban's southern areas of operation and eastern Afghanistan. Uruzgan lacks major infrastructure and ANSF presence compared to Kandahar, allowing the Taliban to become entrenched over time. Security in the province improved in 2010 with the development of a robust Village Stability Operations (VSO) effort and Afghan Local Police (ALP), which helped ISAF to establish security in rural villages and promote local governance and development from 2010-2012.⁵³ Provincial police commander Matiullah Khan's private army and other local powerbrokers also supplemented ISAF security operations.⁵⁴ Over the past two years, however, many of these safeguards have gone away, particularly with the withdrawal of ISAF forces from Camp Holland in 2013,⁵⁵ leaving local police forces on their own to repel Taliban assaults.⁵⁶

Uruzgan

Local media sources reported large Taliban contingents moving through Uruzgan province toward eastern Khas Uruzgan district in August 2014.⁵⁷ By October 19, 2014, Taliban fighters surrounded and took control of villages within Gizab district.⁵⁸ The militant activity shut down roads leading to the provincial capital of Tarin Kot and closed down most schools across the district. The attacks also carried a symbolic value, taking place four years after ISAF-supported VSO teams had ejected the Taliban from the district.⁵⁹ By the end of October 2014, the Taliban reportedly controlled at least eighty percent of the district, prompting civilians to request help from the ANSF.

In response to these distress calls, security forces deployed to the area and clashed with Taliban forces in Gizab district and its surrounding districts, including in Deh Rawud district near the Uruzgan provincial capital by November 5, 2014.⁶⁰ Taliban fighters likely shifted back and forth between Uruzgan and Helmand, leveraging their established transit networks to evade decisive confrontations with the ANSF.⁶¹ The spread of attacks across Uruzgan and Helmand likely exceeded the operational reach of the ANSF in southern Afghanistan. The Taliban have therefore been able to re-establish influence proximate to key southern provinces and demonstrate its ability to reverse significant ISAF and ANSF successes against the insurgency.

Ajirestan

The rural Ajirestan district of Ghazni province, bordering Uruzgan and Daikundi provinces came under a major assault by the Taliban around the same time on September 26, 2014. Reports indicated large numbers of Taliban militants descended on the district, setting fire to civilian homes and allegedly beheading at least fifteen Afghan Local Police officers and members of their families.⁶² The district governor immediately urged the ANSF and ISAF to intervene and warned that the district was on the verge of collapse after only one day. Members of the Wolesi Jirga and provincial officials claimed militants wearing black masks and carrying ISIS flags were among the Taliban fighters.⁶³ A Taliban spokesman claimed responsibility for the assault in Ajirestan, insisting that Taliban fighters killed several ALP officers and were still in control of at least two villages in the days following the assault.⁶⁴

The Afghan government concluded that civilians and local security forces exaggerated the threat by calling it 'ISIS' in September 2014 in order to recruit ANSF reinforcements to drive out the Taliban.⁶⁵ While the specific claims of brutality in the attack were likely false, reports of a sudden concentration of militants outside of this traditional Taliban safe haven is plausible. Ajirestan has been captured by the Taliban twice since 2009.⁶⁶ It lies on the provincial boundary between Ghazni and Uruzgan, and consequently between southern and eastern Afghanistan. The ANA 205th Corps is responsible for the southern zone encompassing the former RC-South, including Uruzgan, Helmand, and Kandahar. The ANA 203rd Corps is responsible for the former RC-East, including Ghazni province. Taliban sanctuary in this area is therefore difficult to prevent.⁶⁷

The chance of receiving ANSF reinforcements in districts like Ajirestan therefore depends on the threat level raised

by local reporting and government officials on the ground. Claims of beheadings and attacks carrying the ISIS signature in the attacks on September 26, 2014 were enough to gain attention from both Western media outlets and the central government, which was quick to deploy Kabul's Quick Reaction Force (QRF) for clearing operations with ISAF air support despite the district's strategic insignificance.⁶⁸ The QRF cannot necessarily respond to every remote security incident, however. The fact that this attack was subsequently downgraded raises questions for how the ANSF in Kabul will communicate with outlying and local organizations about changes in the security environment going forward.

Lack of ANSF response in the remote mountain areas of western Ghazni province may lead to a greater connection between Taliban elements operating in the south and east of Afghanistan. ANSF bases and security posts are stationed near the major cities and crossroads in the eastern region of Ghazni province, which leaves the areas in the west largely undefended against insurgent attacks. In the Ajirestan case, a force of fifty Afghan Local Police officers was the only security force on the ground to defend several villages against movements of Taliban.⁶⁹ The ANSF in Ghazni must prioritize traditional Taliban safe havens near Ghazni City that could be used to limit ANSF access to the Ring Road or to stage attacks on Kabul. This prioritization is not likely to change because attacks in eastern Afghanistan and the capital region are also on the rise.

STRENGTHENING TALIBAN POSITIONS IN EASTERN PROVINCES

Taliban attacks in eastern Ghazni along the Ring Road in 2014 were likely perpetrated by a separate Taliban system. The Taliban also benefits from a cross-border vein in eastern Afghanistan that runs through Paktika, Khost, and Nangarhar provinces. Taliban elements operating farther east toward Kabul may have been reinforced since June 2014 by an influx of insurgents fleeing the Zarb-e Azb operation, the Pakistan military offensive in North Waziristan.⁷⁰ The presence of Pakistani insurgents in eastern Afghanistan will likely increase along the border with potentially destabilizing effects upon bordering provinces. More importantly, this influx, along with other international threats like the Haqqani Network, may become increasingly emboldened in eastern provinces closer to Afghanistan's interior, near the capital region.

Reports of Taliban activity in Paktika and Khost were negligible in 2014, but Taliban activity in Ghazni and areas closer to Kabul indicates that the Taliban may have stronger positions

in the east than in previous years. 2014 Taliban attacks in eastern Ghazni resembled historic patterns, particularly along the Kabul-Kandahar highway dubbed the 'highway to hell' for its concentration of IED attacks and fierce clashes at security checkpoints.⁷¹ Most notably, a Taliban suicide attack killed the deputy governor of Ghazni on September 28, 2014.⁷² Increased militant activity in the area has the potential to cut it off from the Ring Road, which is why the ANSF remain concentrated near Ghazni city. The fact that attack levels remained consistent in Ghazni while attacks increased elsewhere in eastern and southern Afghanistan indicate an overall escalation in insurgent activity in 2014.

South and North of Kabul

The Taliban has also reportedly consolidated safe-havens in provinces immediately proximate to Kabul, including Wardak, Kapisa, and Logar. Sayyibadad district in Wardak province was reported to be firmly under the control of the Taliban as of October 20, 2014 according to a BBC reporter who gained access to the Taliban governor in the district.⁷³ According to the BBC report, the insurgency collected taxes from the local populace, ran the schools, and oversaw a rudimentary court system.⁷⁴ The BBC reporter also noted that the Taliban insurgents maintained freedom of movement, even though there was the risk of U.S. drone strikes. Unable or unwilling to conduct patrols, the ANA was reportedly confined to a nearby military base, possibly FOB Apache, from which ISAF withdrew in 2011.⁷⁵ Located on the Herat-Kabul and Kabul-Kandahar highways, Sayyibadad has a long record of Taliban activity. In 2011, insurgents shot down a Chinook helicopter the nearby Tangi Valley, killing over 38 Afghan and U.S. soldiers.⁷⁶

A similar model of Taliban influence may exist to the north of Kabul in Kapisa province. The Taliban has nominal control over Tagab and Nijrab districts and has reportedly negotiated a détente with ANSF forces in the area, whereby the ANSF remain mostly on bases and hardly venture out on patrol.⁷⁷ Tagab also lies on the Kabul-Jalalabad highway, connecting the district to Nangarhar, and the area likely plays an important role in providing a safe haven for insurgents trying to infiltrate Kabul. The Taliban has also expanded into neighboring Alasay district and increased its presence there, according to a *New York Times* report dated July 6, 2014.⁷⁸ The Kapisa Police chief reportedly noticed that the Taliban has changed its tactics during the 2014 fighting season and began massing in larger numbers in summer 2014.⁷⁹ Increased insurgent attacks led to an inflow of displaced families from Tagab and Negral districts to Kabul and the provincial capital in Kapisa, according to a local report in December 2014.⁸⁰ The displacement is a potential indicator of escalating Taliban control.

These insurgent enclaves lie on the highway network leading out of Kabul. Taliban control of the roadways is not a new development; in fact, criminal rackets to collect insurance from cargo trucks were a constant in 2010-2012.⁸¹ Taliban activity in 2014, however, appears designed to impede ANSF mobility, which has several grave implications for Afghanistan's regional security environment. Safe-havens near Kabul make it possible for the Taliban and associated armed groups to launch attacks into the capital. They also threaten the ANSF's ability to reinforce troops stationed in other areas of the country. Should the insurgency mount further offensives in the south, the Afghan government may be forced to dispatch troops from Kabul. In this way, Taliban control in these areas threatens the Afghan government's ability to maintain security within the other provinces in Afghanistan.

The insurgency demonstrated the intent to disrupt ANSF forces traveling out of Kabul in October 2014 in an event that may indicate a future trend. When the joint offensive was announced against Sangin in mid-October 2014, the ANSF responded by sending military convoys on the Kabul-Kandahar highway. On October 12, Taliban insurgents in the Sayyibadad district staged two ambushes on these ANA convoys, resulting in seven ANSF killed and multiple vehicles destroyed.⁸² Although this attack is not directly indicative of cross-front interoperability among Taliban systems, it highlights how the Taliban's control of road systems will severely limit the ANSF's freedom of movement in the coming years.

The Taliban also staged numerous attacks on police checkpoints and military installations in provinces north and south of Kabul. In late August 2014, massed waves of Taliban fighters reportedly attacked ANSF checkpoints and bases in Logar province south of Kabul.⁸³ The Taliban focused their attacks in Charkh district and neighboring towns, an area between the Kabul-Kandahar and the Kabul-Gardez highways. The Taliban likely desires to control Charkh in order to disrupt the road networks south of Kabul. Insurgents were also reportedly staging attacks in Azra district in Logar province on the Afghan-Pakistan border in August 2014 according to Reuters.⁸⁴ Traditionally one of the most unstable provinces, Logar is reportedly under increasing Taliban influence as of December 2014, demonstrated by Taliban revenue collection and an uptick in targeted killings of local officials.⁸⁵ In December 2014, security officials reported that the insurgency had driven ANSF units back and was threatening to re-establish presence in Azra, Charkh, and Kharwar districts.⁸⁶ This posture has continued into 2015, with a major attack against Afghan police officers reported by the *New York Times* in February 2015 in the provincial capital, Pul-e Alam.⁸⁷

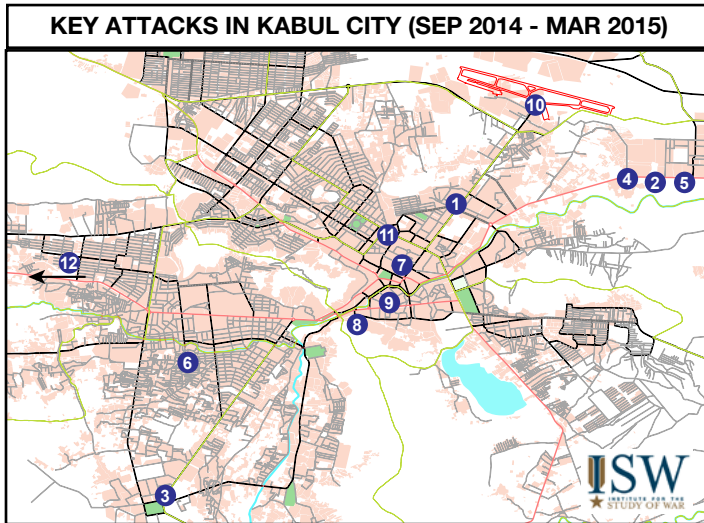
East of Kabul

Farther to the east, the Taliban has maintained its traditionally high levels of influence in Nuristan, Nangarhar, Kunar, and Laghman. This area of country witnessed some of the fiercest fighting against ISAF forces historically, particularly in the Korengal valley. After the closure of most NATO bases in the region, many areas became "black-boxes" for reporting of violence to indicate the presence of the Taliban. Nevertheless, there are credible reports of increasing Taliban presence in these areas, the foremost being a series of massive Taliban attacks in Kunar province at the end of 2014. Media sources reported that in December 2014 large groups of Afghan Taliban, Pakistani Taliban, and Laskhar-e-Taiba fighters attacked Afghan security forces in Dangan district, including the district center.⁸⁸ Elsewhere in Kunar, Nuristan, and Nangarhar, remote valleys and villages have likely returned to Taliban control.⁸⁹ As of March 2015, despite ANSF and Afghan Special Forces operations in the east,⁹⁰ the Taliban likely maintained its presence in this area, along with their ability to launch attacks from the periphery into Kabul.⁹¹

While the ANSF works to contain instability in other areas of the country, Taliban influence east of Kabul should not be dismissed. The Taliban's continued presence in the east provides important staging areas for Haqqani, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), and other Pakistani militant organizations operating in Afghanistan. These groups are widely regarded as the best equipped and trained of the militant organizations in Afghanistan.⁹² Access to training camps and revenue sources in these areas will allow these organizations to regroup and gather strength. With regards to the ANSF, Haqqani and IMU militants have already been reported operating with Taliban fighters in attacks against Afghan government forces across the country, including the increasingly unstable northern provinces.⁹³ With regards to the U.S's counter-terrorism mission, the United States must consider how an increased Taliban presence in the east and along the road-networks might facilitate these groups in attacking western interests in Afghanistan.

THE SECURITY SITUATION IN KABUL

Analysts and media sources alike have noted a significant escalation in violence in Kabul during the latter months of 2014. Insurgent violence in Kabul increased in July 2014 and maintained a consistent level of intensity through March 2015. In these attacks, militants focused on targeting Afghan government and Western interests, including foreign military and diplomatic personnel, Afghan security forces,



1) September 16, 2014: SVBIED attacks ISAF convoy and kills two American soldiers and one Polish soldier. Another ISAF soldier seriously injured and sixteen Afghan civilians wounded in the blast.

2) November 13, 2014: SVBIED targets ISAF convoy near Green Village. One civilian killed and three civilians wounded in attack. No ISAF casualties were reported.

3) November 16, 2014: SVBIED targets prominent anti-Taliban lawmaker. The blast kills three civilians and wounds thirty-two others.

4) November 19, 2014: Insurgents attack Green Village with SVBIED, automatic weapons, and RPGs. No casualties reported.

5) November 27, 2014: SVBIED targets British diplomatic convoy. The blast kills five civilians, including one British diplomat and an Afghan who worked at the British Embassy, and injures over thirty seven civilians.

6) November 29, 2014: Three insurgents launch complex attack on a foreign NGO guest house. Two employees of the NGO, including a foreign national, killed in the attack. The two children of the foreign national were also killed.

7) December 11, 2014: Haqqani-linked teenage bomber targets French run High School in Kabul. Suicide vest attack kills one German national and wounds sixteen other civilians.

8) December 13, 2014: Adhesive explosive device targets Ministry of Defense Bus. Six Afghan Army soldiers killed in blast.

9) December 28, 2014: Adhesive explosive device targets government vehicle and injures three members of the Wardak provincial government.

10) January 29, 2015: An Afghan security officer opens fire on group of Defense Department contractors at the Kabul International Airport. Three contractors are killed and a fourth wounded in the engagement. The Taliban later claim responsibility.

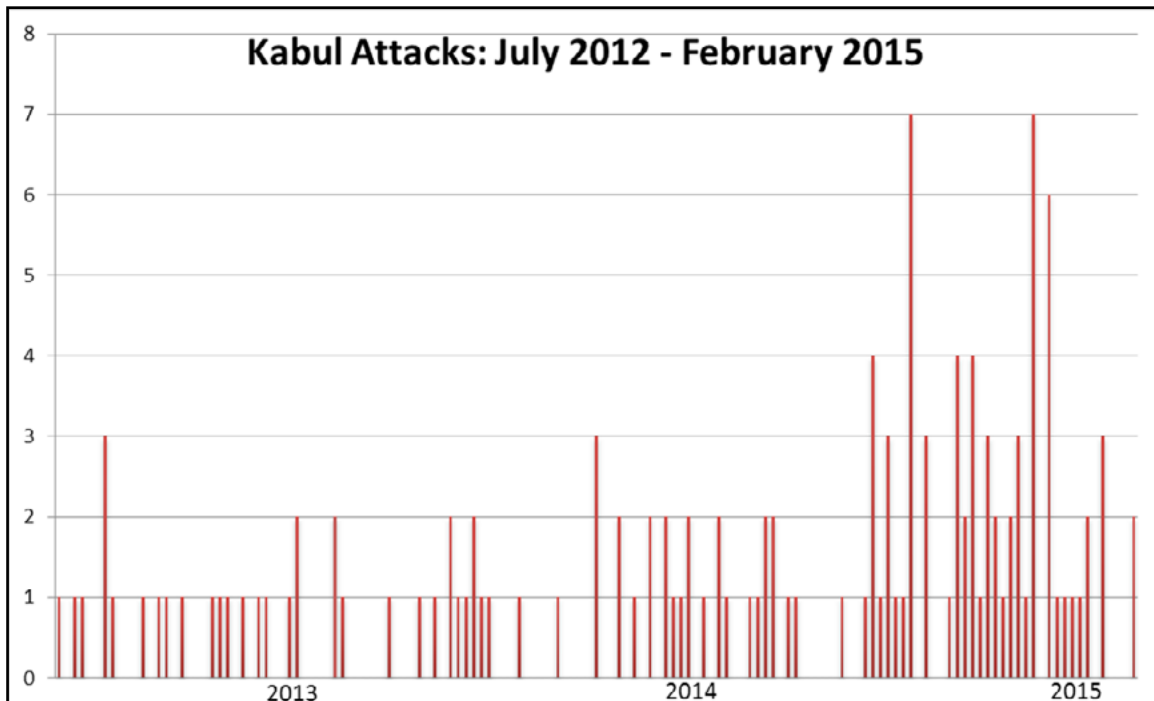
11) February 26, 2015: A Turkish soldier and an Afghan civilian killed when SVBIED targets a Turkish embassy convoy.

12) March 7, 2015: Several gunmen storm a Sufi worship center in the western part of the capital. Six civilians were killed and five were wounded in the attack. The militants managed to escape the scene before security forces arrived. Reports indicate that the attackers used pistols equipped with silencers.

and western NGOs. According to ISW's estimate, at least 77 attacks occurred in Kabul in 2014, compared to the 29 attacks recorded in 2013.⁹⁴ An analysis by IHS Jane's supports this assessment, showing that at least 80 attacks occurred in 2014, again more than double the number of attacks recorded in 2013.⁹⁵ As the timeline below indicates, the pattern of violence in Kabul occurred in bursts, indicating reset periods for planning and coordinating attacks. This indicates design behind the campaign of attacks. The bombing campaign during the latter half of 2014 occurred at a much higher frequency than previous time frames. This indicates increased capability. Attack patterns in Kabul permit this type of trend analysis because of greater fidelity in reporting in the Afghan capital. Attacks in Kabul tend to be more visible than movement of small Taliban forces or attacks on remote outposts or other, smaller population centers.

It would be incorrect to dismiss the escalation in violence as an act of "desperation" or a marker of Taliban weakness.⁹⁶ Instead, the uptick in violence in the capital is indicative of the insurgency's strength in outlying areas and potentially a shift in their overall campaign. The Taliban would require safe havens ringing the capital in order to stage the campaign of attacks witnessed since 2014. The higher frequency and intensity of this violence suggests that the insurgency has established a more sophisticated support network for planning, resourcing, coordinating and executing attacks, though the Taliban is likely not the only group participating in attacks in the capital region. National Directorate of Security (NDS) chief Rahmatullah Nabil told lawmakers in December 2013 that over 107 terrorist cells were operating in and around Kabul.⁹⁷ This network likely remains active today.

Previous analysis indicates that the insurgency in Kabul operates through a network of Taliban and Haqqani insurgents known as the "Kabul Attack Network."⁹⁸ There has been a slight escalation in the complexity of Kabul attacks in 2014,⁹⁹ matching Haqqani Network signatures, suggesting their continued involvement. The Haqqani Network's rat-lines to Kabul lead from its sanctuaries in Pakistan's tribal areas, where the senior leadership plays an important role in selecting targets and creating an overall strategy for spectacular attacks in Kabul. Interviews with captured insurgents in Kabul in early 2015 indicate that many of them have been radicalized and trained in the tribal areas, allegedly by Haqqani operatives.¹⁰⁰ Haqqani commanders serve as the key figures in the "network of networks" that the Kabul Attack Network uses to move suicide attackers, weapons, and bomb-making materials into the capital from the surrounding provinces.¹⁰¹ NDS officials have reportedly managed to seize several Haqqani weapon caches and command centers throughout the capital.¹⁰²



Number of Enemy-Initiated Attacks by Week. Source: Data from open sources collected by Institute for the Study of War. Contact ISW for more information.

The Kabul Attack Network attacked symbols of the central government in an apparent effort to score propaganda victories. Insurgent commanders likely recognize that spectacular attacks in Kabul attract more attention from foreign media than ground operations in the periphery. In demonstrating that they still have the ability to escalate attacks in the capital, the insurgency is likely trying to embarrass Western militaries during the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces. The militants have another presumed goal as well: to raise the cost for Western organizations to operate in Afghanistan. With attacks against Western targets mounting, NGOs, foreign businesses, and even foreign governments might be forced to restrict their presence and subsequently their support to the Afghan government. The uptick of attacks reportedly caused some NGOs to pull their staff out early ahead of the winter holidays.¹⁰³

The escalation of violence in Kabul is likely linked to the increase of Taliban activity in the periphery. As ISAF troops closed their forward operating bases and pulled back to provincial capitals in the transition to Resolute Support, the insurgency was able to operate with greater freedom of movement and consolidate pre-existing strongholds in areas around Kabul. The insurgency maintains safe-havens in areas abutting three major highways leading into Kabul. The Taliban can funnel weapons, funds, and fighters from these areas and along the highways in order to support operations in Kabul. The Taliban's ability to reinforce the Kabul Attack

Network is made easier by an ineffective ANSF presence around the capital. With their limited capabilities, Afghan forces are reportedly struggling to maintain an adequate level of security on the roadways leading into Kabul. In a meeting with lawmakers on December 17, 2014, NDS chief Rahmatullah Nabil said that the ANSF can monitor only four of the twenty six access points into Kabul.¹⁰⁴

The Taliban have also ramped up IED attacks in the capital, the vast majority of which have targeted military and government convoys. In particular, the insurgency has increased its use of "sticky bombs" or Adhesive Explosive Devices (AEDs) in targeting military vehicles. Most of the successful IED and AED attacks have targeted ANSF vehicles, particularly ANA buses, rather than ISAF or RSM units. This is probably due to the ANSF's lower operational security. Taliban operatives likely also wish to reserve their more spectacular SVBIED and suicide vest (SVEST) attacks against foreign targets. Nevertheless, the surge in IED and AED usage among the Kabul Attack Network poses a considerable threat to the activity of international groups in Kabul, as evidenced by the November 24, 2014 IED attack against an ISAF convoy, which resulted in the deaths of two ISAF soldiers.¹⁰⁵

When compared to vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices, IEDs are relatively easier to construct so insurgents can conduct IED attacks at a lower cost. IED systems also

generally indicate a greater degree of freedom of movement to emplace IEDs within the capital. In response to the uptick in insurgent attacks, Afghan security and intelligence services took steps to protect security institutions and personnel. The Afghan National Army suspended its bus service in the capital, which resulted in a relative lull in the overall number of IED attacks in January and February 2015.¹⁰⁶ Despite this, the security situation in Kabul remains precarious, especially for foreign security and diplomatic institutions. Heightened risk of attacks targeting international organizations could threaten development efforts by forcing these groups to withdraw from the country.

Several high-profile attacks have already occurred against foreign targets in 2015. On January 29, 2015, three U.S. contractors were killed in a “green on blue” attack in the Kabul International Airport.¹⁰⁷ Insurgents also carried out at least two major SVBIED attacks, the first on January 5, 2015 against a European Union convoy on the eastern outskirts of the capital¹⁰⁸ and the second on February 26, 2015 against a Turkish diplomatic convoy in the heart of Kabul city.¹⁰⁹ These incidents demonstrate that the Taliban maintains the capability to launch highly destructive attacks in the capital targeting foreign interests. These are significant attacks, designed to maximize political consequences. They are also not the only attacks occurring across Afghanistan. The insurgency’s escalation in Kabul reflects other important security developments elsewhere across Afghanistan’s periphery.

THE INSURGENCY IN AFGHANISTAN’S NORTHERN PROVINCES

Taliban activity also escalated in Afghanistan’s northern provinces according to UNAMA civilian casualty statistics. Insurgents seized and held large swaths of territory, particularly in Kunduz, Sar-e Pul, and Faryab provinces. These provinces were centers of Taliban influence before the 2010 surge of ISAF troops. With the support of other insurgent groups, including the IMU and Hezb-e Islami Gulbuddin (HiG), the Taliban used the Pashtun communities in these areas to expand its presence in the non-Pashtun majority northern provinces. With the ANSF stretched thin across much of the northern region, the Taliban reportedly established a basic government structure in several of these areas.

The 2014 fighting season marked the insurgency’s return to levels of activity observed before the 2010 surge, particularly within Kunduz province. Straddling the crossroads of Route 2 and Route 302, Kunduz has historically been a concentration point for the insurgency in Afghanistan’s

northern provinces.¹¹⁰ Route 2 links Afghanistan’s southern and eastern provinces to the porous Tajikistan border. Route 302 also grants access to the eastern provinces of Takhar and Badakhshan, which provide more entry points for cross-border drug and weapons trafficking. Kunduz therefore constitutes an ideal staging area for the Taliban to expand its influence in the north.

The 2014 fighting season underscores the continued weakness of the ANSF in the region. On the frontline against Taliban offensives, the ALP and ANA have often been unable to hold ground against massed Taliban attacks. This can be partly attributed to the under-equipping of ALP forces. ALP and ANA units tend to lack heavy weaponry and the necessary ammunition to repel sustained attacks of Taliban fighters. During the spring 2014 offensives in Faryab for example, the ALP and ANA were forced to abandon their checkpoints and flee when they ran out of ammunition.¹¹¹ ALP units are also reported to be corrupt, inefficient, and embedded within the narcotic smuggling networks. The ALP’s bad behavior tends to drive many locals into supporting the Taliban and its shadow government. The ALP has also managed to aggravate ethnic tensions with the minority Pashtun communities in the north, since many of the ALP units consist of Tajik or Uzbek fighters. The Taliban’s success in 2014 in Kunduz, Faryab, and Badakhshan highlight the general inability of ALP and ANA forces to provide an effective defense against Taliban militants.

Kunduz

Local security officials reported in August 2014 that insurgents pushed out of their traditional strongholds and threatened the district centers in Chahar Dara and Dasht-e-Archi.¹¹² On August 21, 2014, the Taliban had reportedly captured over fifteen police checkpoints in Chahar Dara district alone.¹¹³ Despite clearing operations conducted by ANSF forces, reports dated October 25, 2014 claimed that most of Chahar Dara and Dasht-e-Archi districts were under insurgent control.¹¹⁴ These areas remain under Taliban influence in 2015.¹¹⁵ The conflict in Chahar Dara and Dasht-e-Archi also spilled north into Kunduz’s northernmost Imam Sahib district. Interviews with locals indicated that insurgents captured several towns in the southern area of Imam Sahib in August 2014.¹¹⁶ On October 23, 2014, the Imam Sahib provincial chief reported that massed Taliban fighters had staged an assault on Imam Sahib, presumably from Dasht-e-Archi district.¹¹⁷ Imam Sahib has historically been one of the province’s most stable districts with a population resistant to Taliban influence.¹¹⁸ Despite ISAF and ANSF clearing

operations in October 2014 and again in January 2015, Imam Sahib remains a contested district.¹¹⁹

Renewed Taliban influence has also threatened Kunduz City. Following their push from Dasht-e-Archi and Imam Sahib district, insurgents seized several villages around the provincial capital in August 11, 2014.¹²⁰ In an interview with Al-Jazeera, an anonymous Afghan intelligence officer reported on August 29, 2014 that insurgent forces were five kilometers away from the center of Kunduz City.¹²¹ The Taliban was able to increase its influence in the city's outskirts, which allowed insurgents to infiltrate deeper into the city to carry out attacks. One such attack occurred on October 27, 2014, when Taliban insurgents detonated an SVBIED and stormed an appeals court building within Kunduz city.¹²² Insurgents maintained pressure on Kunduz city in 2015. By January 5, 2015, local officials reported that insurgents had "effectively surrounded" the provincial capital.¹²³ The Taliban carried out several attacks within Kunduz city itself, including an SVBIED attack on the provincial police headquarters on February 11, 2015.¹²⁴ Kunduz governor Mohammad Omer Safi acknowledged that the province remained "highly insecure" and that "the government has no control in most places."¹²⁵

The Taliban also demonstrated a renewed ability to consolidate control of parts of Kunduz province through the establishment of governance institutions, including tax, justice, and education systems. After capturing territory during the August 2014 offensive, local security officials reported that Taliban militants started collecting *Zakat* and *Ushr* taxes in areas of Chahar Dara, Dasht-e-Archi, and Khanabad.¹²⁶ When locals resisted paying the taxes in August 11, 2014, militants executed twenty civilians.¹²⁷ Locals also relate that the Taliban has also been managing and equipping schools, presumably in order to increase legitimacy with local communities.¹²⁸ According to interviews with residents of Chahar Dara district in October 2014, Taliban insurgents expanded informal court systems to administer their interpretation of Shari'a law.¹²⁹ With many locals dissatisfied with the formal justice system, the Taliban is likely attempting to curry favor by appealing to popular notions of justice and order. With the Taliban's focus on creating governance, the insurgency in Kunduz is beginning to mirror the same dynamics witnessed before the 2010 U.S. troop "surge." Afghan security officials reported in October 2014 that Mullah Abdul Salam, the shadow Taliban governor of Kunduz before the surge captured in Punjab province in 2010, is now back on the battlefield and is in charge of coordinating Taliban activity in Kunduz.¹³⁰

Other Provinces in the Northern Insurgency

Although northern fighting in 2014 was most fierce in Kunduz province, other areas of northern Afghanistan also witnessed Taliban activity. To the east of Kunduz, Badakhshan province has been struggling with a localized insurgency, particularly on October 27, 2014 when insurgents staged numerous attacks on security checkpoints in Warduj district.¹³¹ To the west, Sar-e Pul province also witnessed an increasing Taliban presence in October 2014. The Taliban killed 22 security personnel outside the provincial capital, Sar-e Pul city in one particularly deadly attack on an ANA convoy on October 18, 2014.¹³² Outside the city, there have been reports that the Taliban has been consolidating its influence; one Afghan news source reported in October 2014 that the Taliban has been playing an active role in managing local schools in Sar-e Pul.¹³³

The province of Faryab has seen multiple massed Taliban attacks since the spring and summer offensives. Qaiser district was the epicenter of most Taliban activity in Faryab in 2014. In the first week of April 2014, Taliban fighters reportedly captured the Shakh village area in Qaiser district after routing ANSF troops and prompting the exodus of hundreds of civilians.¹³⁴ In July, massed Taliban fighters again attacked the Shakh village area, but were presumably beaten back by ANSF troops again.¹³⁵ Taliban militants also staged attacks on checkpoints to seize control of the Ghormach-Qaiser highway, which would allow militants in Faryab access to an important highway route in the province and drug flows into Central Asia.¹³⁶ By December 2014, the Taliban published a video in the northern language of Dari that lauded the establishment of a training camp in the district, suggesting an increasingly institutionalized Taliban network in Faryab.¹³⁷

The increase in the Taliban activity in Afghanistan's north has significant implications for the future of Afghanistan's government. The northern insurgency tends to be more criminalized, more local, and less powerful than the insurgency in the south. And, yet, the insurgency threatened to destabilize areas in 2014 that have traditionally been the main support base for the central government. The northern insurgency challenged the limited numbers of ANSF in the region while the ANSF's national strategy remains focused elsewhere. With little to no presence of security forces in some districts, many northern communities have militarized to resist the Taliban independently, which has eroded the state's legitimacy even further in these remote areas.

ANSF CHALLENGES IN 2015

The U.S. Defense Department concluded in its October 2014 report that Afghan security forces were on track to assume full responsibility for security in 2015 and had made “significant strides” toward achieving operational autonomy.¹³⁸ This argument is largely based upon the ANSF’s ability to achieve stability during the 2014 presidential elections, which demanded a heightened level of security across all provinces to defend against Taliban efforts to disrupt and discourage voter participation. The Taliban conducted a total of 761 attacks during the elections, though only about 174 were effective.¹³⁹ The ANSF also conducted a number of successful operations against militants throughout the summer offensive. The ANSF had already assumed responsibility for the majority of planning and execution of operations and counterinsurgency efforts by April 2014, some involving multiple ANSF branches, with coalition support mostly limited to air support.¹⁴⁰

Nevertheless, the mixed record of ANSF performance during Taliban offensives in the summer and fall of 2014 indicate the remaining limitations in ANSF capabilities. The Taliban increased the intensity of its attacks and sought to undermine local confidence in Afghan security forces as international troops completed their drawdown in the latter half of 2014. In 2015 and beyond, the Taliban will likely continue to test the capabilities of the increasingly independent ANSF in 2015 and beyond to discover weaknesses. Operations in 2014 demonstrated several key gaps in ANSF capabilities. Failing to address these gaps will not only lead to severe losses for Afghan security forces but also could reverse the gains and stability instilled by national and international security forces.

Close Air Support

Close air support is vital for Afghan security forces fighting the insurgency. It provides a tactical advantage over the Taliban in clearing operations, as most militants do not have access to effective surface-to-air weapons and other air defense capabilities.¹⁴¹ As security forces lose access to this capability, militants will likely be able to recover more quickly from counter operations and re-launch attacks in contested areas. This is especially true in Helmand province. Without ISAF air support during ANSF operations in 2014, clashes with the Taliban would likely have protracted, resulting in more civilian and security force casualties. Lack of close air support also limits the effectiveness of clearing operations. In February 2015, Afghan officials claimed ANSF forces with limited air support cleared militants from the districts around Sangin,¹⁴² only to have militants ramp up attacks against civilians and security forces just days after operations concluded.¹⁴³

Air support is vital for non-combat capabilities as well, including battlefield airlift and medical evacuation (med-evac) capabilities. High ANSF casualty rates during ground operations can be partially attributed to lack of these capabilities.¹⁴⁴ The lack of effective airlift capability also hampers the ability of Afghan forces to quickly reach remote areas. Land med-evac is too slow in many areas due to the difficult terrain, poor road conditions, and sparse distribution of major hospitals across Afghanistan. Still, the ANSF has rapidly taken on training to improve its med-evac and casualty evacuation (cas-evac) capabilities using its own limited air units as of October 2014.¹⁴⁵ ISAF reported that the ANSF as of 2014 handled 88 percent of all med-evac and cas-evac emergencies, although that statistic accounts for action by both air and ground, the former rarely yielding casualties.¹⁴⁶ Effective med-evac capabilities will be essential for the ANSF to maintain combat readiness as well as the morale of its fighting force.

The Afghan Air Force is hampered by a shortage of its own effective aircraft. The Afghan Air Force (AAF) has a planned fleet of around one hundred and forty aircraft at its disposal but only a fraction of those are operational; many are reportedly grounded due to lack of spare parts and proper maintenance.¹⁴⁷ The AAF currently has five Mi-35 helicopters, the only dedicated attack helicopters available to the Afghan security forces. The demand for close-air support platforms has led the AAF to arm some of its Mi-17 helicopters with 23 mm machine guns and 57 mm rockets.¹⁴⁸ Operation Resolute Support command is working to provide more air platforms to the AAF, including delivering a dozen MD-530 attack helicopters by the middle of 2015.¹⁴⁹ NATO also has plans to introduce a number of other airframes, but these deals have been held up by legal and security disputes.¹⁵⁰

As such, the AAF will not be able to offer ground forces the same level of support as coalition air units. ISAF was able to fly almost 133,000 flight missions during the height of the surge, and almost 34,000 of those were for close support.¹⁵¹ The AAF flew a total of 7,000 missions in 2014, a fraction of which were in support of ground units.¹⁵² It is also important to note that the Afghan Air Force suffers from a chronic shortage of adequately trained, professional pilots. A number of new pilots are currently in training programs as part of Operation Resolute Support, but it will be some time before they are combat ready.

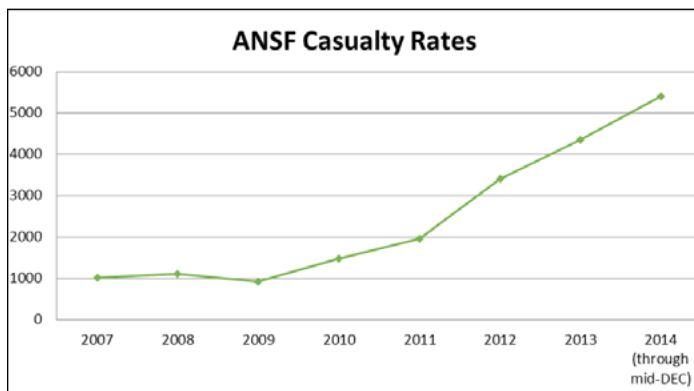
NATO announced in October 2014 that it would continue to offer air support until the AAF is ready to carry out autonomous missions in late 2016,¹⁵³ although an independent U.S. Congress assessment in January 2014 determined that the AAF will not be near capacity until at least 2018.¹⁵⁴ It remains to be seen how much support NATO

will actually be able to provide given the cuts and diminished troop numbers it is already facing as of 2014.¹⁵⁵ While serving as COMISAF in Afghanistan, General John Campbell stressed in remarks in October 2014 that given “the number of platforms that we have, the amount of ISR [Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance], the amount of CAS [close air support], the amount of med-evac we’ll have will be greatly diminished from what we have today.”¹⁵⁶ The ANSF has not yet attained these capacities. Afghan security forces will need to rely on lingering U.S. and NATO Forces capabilities as well as training and assistance programs in the next several years in order to meet the growing threats posed by the Taliban.

Attrition Rates

Major recruitment efforts since 2009 have expanded the ANSF to its greatest size and strength yet. January 2014 assessments put ANSF size at just under the fully authorized level at 352,000 personnel, mostly divided into ANA and ANP, with an additional 37,000 personnel in ALP.¹⁵⁷ However, a SIGAR report from March 2015 indicated that the Afghan National Army troop numbers declined eleven percent from January to November 2014, reducing their force to around 169,000 from the optimal force strength of 195,000.¹⁵⁸ Several factors threaten ANSF’s ability to maintain these numbers with less international coalition assistance and coordination in its recruitment efforts. The ANSF continues to face high attrition rates from a combination of high casualty, desertion, and annual withdrawal numbers.

Casualty rates are the chief cause of the current ANSF attrition concern. General John Campbell noted in a February 12, 2015 briefing to the Senate Armed Services Committee



Total Casualties by Year. Source: Watson, “As War Looms, US Warns Afghan Troops Taking ‘Unsustainable’ Casualties;” Stancati and Totakhil, “Afghan’s War Remains Fierce After Coalition Ends Combat Mission;” Ian S. Livingston and Michael O’Hanlon, “Afghanistan Index,” Brookings Institution, March 31, 2014.

that the high casualty rate has already “had an impact on combat readiness” and that “it will pose challenges to force development over time.”¹⁵⁹ General Campbell specifically observed that the ANSF’s operational tempo was four times higher in 2014 than in 2013.¹⁶⁰ As ANSF took on increasing leadership roles in operations, its personnel assumed a larger burden of casualties. This alone does not account for the numerous factors arising from the end of the international coalition’s combat mission that have created a more dangerous operating environment for Afghan security forces. The increased necessity and duration of ANSF-led ground operations, coupled with lesser capabilities, less protective equipment, and less frequent assistance from international forces, has left ANSF personnel a greater target for Taliban attacks.¹⁶¹

Former IJC Commander Lieutenant General Joseph Anderson also called the 2014 ANSF casualty numbers “not sustainable in the long run,” but said they were expected “given the higher role they’ve played and where they’ve been.”¹⁶² This higher casualty rate is partially due to the change in Taliban tactics in targeting ANSF personnel and the presence of larger Taliban gatherings for attacks across multiple provinces. The dearth of current medical facilities and med-evac capabilities in Afghanistan further exacerbates this issue. In 2014 at least 5,400 Afghan police and army personnel were killed in action, a 6.5% jump over the previous year’s rate.¹⁶³ This toll increased even as the number of Taliban-initiated attacks actually decreased from 24,000 in 2013 to some 18,000 in 2014 according to ISAF Joint Command.¹⁶⁴ The ANSF has taken steps to reduce these casualty rates by focusing on improving protection against explosives and boosting its med-evac and medical care abilities.¹⁶⁵

Along with high casualties, the ANSF is having difficulty retaining soldiers. The heavy losses indicated in the March 2015 SIGAR report were due not only to combat deaths but also to discharges and desertion among the army’s ranks.¹⁶⁶ These losses, combined with equipment and pay shortages, have created a morale crisis within ANSF. Desertion rates among the national police have gone up as well.¹⁶⁷ In November 2014, ISAF reported that the ANSF was aiming for a goal of 1.2 percent AWOL rates between the ANA and the ANP, with ALP numbers more difficult to parse out.¹⁶⁸ Several reports on the ground say pay shortages and delays are major causal factors for ALP defections,¹⁶⁹ and local media reported in November 2014 some Afghan security personnel have resorted to selling their weapons and ammunition to the Taliban in order to make ends meet.¹⁷⁰

The Department of Defense report in October 2014 acknowledged the difficult outlook for victory over the Taliban,

and many obstacles within the ANSF remain.¹⁷¹ The budget for the maintenance of the ANSF is almost exclusively reliant on international coalition aid, which suggests future problems of sustainability. Although the U.S. has pledged significant funds to fill gaps in Afghan government and security force salaries, including \$6.1 billion USD approved by Congress in 2014 alone, higher desertion rates threaten to disrupt the cohesion and trust between the central government and security forces out in the periphery.¹⁷² Rumors persist from several provinces that some ANA units have struck “live and let live” deals with pockets of Taliban fighters in order to avoid casualties.¹⁷³ An ANSF that does not assertively challenge Taliban control in the country’s periphery will be unable to prevent threats from reaching provincial capitals or Kabul itself. Low morale and dependence on international aid suggest that continued support is required to reach a level of self-sufficiency.

Corruption

Widespread allegations of corruption further call into question the ANSF’s military effectiveness. Perceptions of corruption will damage the population’s trust in the country’s security institutions. An independent assessment of the ANSF commissioned by Congress claimed that there was “pervasive corruption” within the Afghan security institutions.¹⁷⁴ Once the Operation Resolute Support mission withdraws its oversight of Afghan security institutions in 2016, patronage networks and factionalism have the potential to disrupt security force cohesion in the face of a revitalized Afghan insurgency. Patronage networks among the ANSF at the national level tend to be more centralized than those at the local level and might even lend a certain type of short-term stability to the political system. Nevertheless, corruption generally distorts incentives and creates informal divisions of power that threaten cohesions and loyalty.

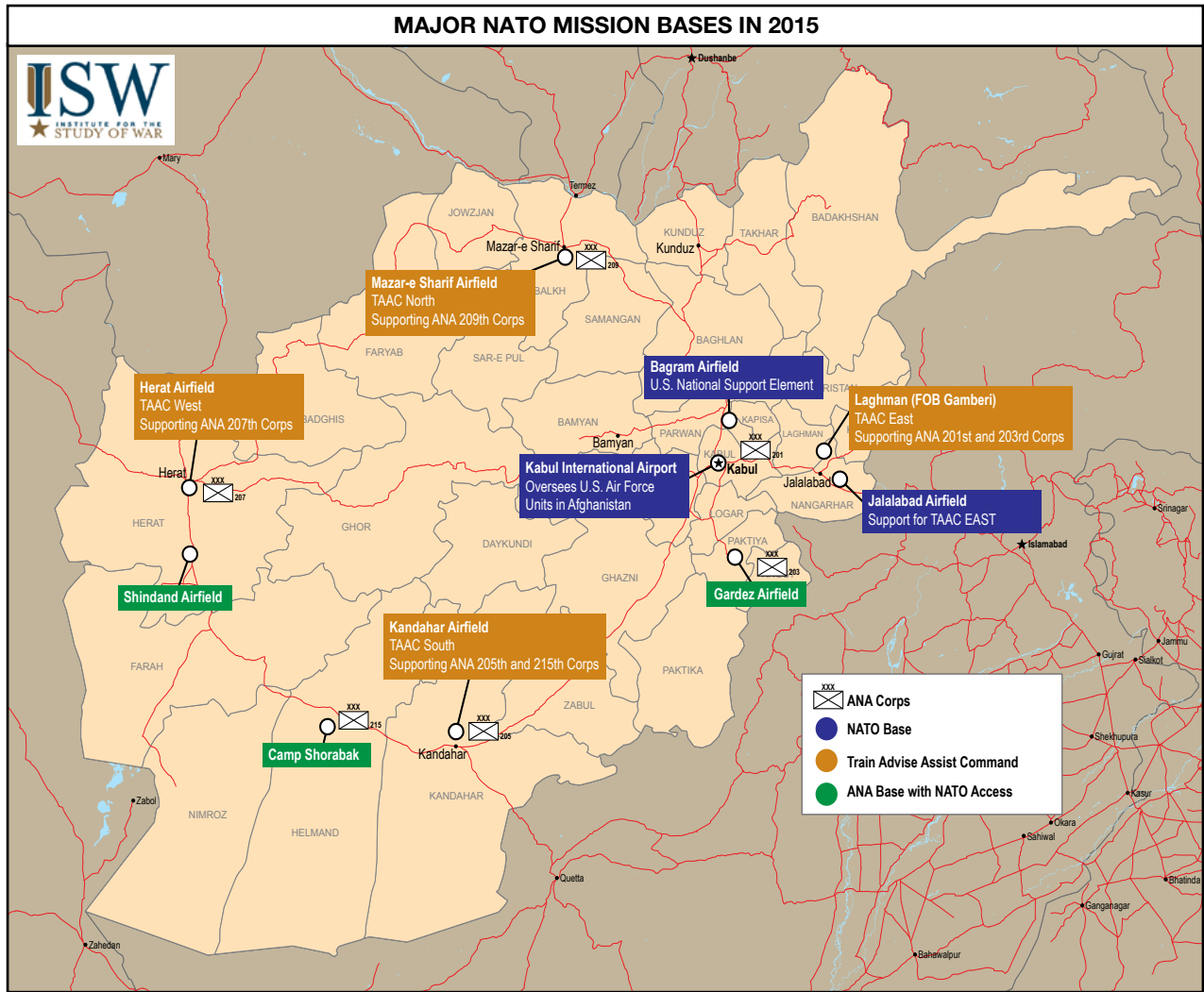
Afghan commanders and soldiers reportedly pocket the salaries of “ghost-workers” or sell fuel, ammunition, or weapons to criminal groups and insurgent fighters. According to a January 2015 SIGAR report, there are “as many as double the number of identification cards in circulation as there are active ANP personnel.”¹⁷⁵ General John Campbell testified to the SASC in February 2015 that poor leadership, from corruption or otherwise, within the ANSF remains one of the main contributors to their staggering attrition rate. He assessed the ANSF would benefit greatly from “sound leadership and strict accountability” as “ANSF soldiers and police perform well when they are well led.”¹⁷⁶ In addition, the coalition’s decreased footprint would likely mean that Resolute Support Mission command risks losing oversight on the military aid given to the ANSF. In such a scenario, military assistance would simply reinforce existing patronage networks rather than be used to fight the insurgency.

ENDURING COALITION PRESENCE IN AFGHANISTAN

U.S. and NATO forces still have an opportunity to address some of the vulnerabilities described above. Since the official end of the combat mission, U.S. and NATO forces have shifted their focus to the train, advise, and assist mission described in Operation Resolute Support and counter-terrorism mission in Operation Freedom’s Sentinel. The Operation Resolute Support mission includes developing ANSF capabilities in intelligence, aviation, and logistics, with the perceived end goal to complete the shift from combat advising to “functionally based security force assistance.”¹⁷⁷ The train, advise, and assist mission aims to complete this transition by supporting several key areas in the development of ANSF, including security force planning, programming, and budgeting; transparency and accountability among ANSF leadership and personnel; adherence to rule of law and good governance; and the establishment and sustainment of force generation, recruitment, training, managing, and developing personnel.

The NATO summit at Wales on September 3-4, 2014 laid the groundwork for Operation Resolute Support and Operation Freedom’s Sentinel, which were contingent on the signing of the U.S. Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) and NATO Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) on September 30, 2014. The agreements formalized the international coalition withdrawal time frame as well as ANSF funding beyond the combat mission. The United States reiterated its promise to maintain a military presence of 9,800 troops starting in 2015 for two separate missions: to provide the bulk of forces for Operation Resolute Support and to develop Afghanistan’s security institutions and their capabilities. Within the NATO-led non-combat mission, the U.S. announced its intentions to continue its counter-terrorism mission to target Al-Qaeda and its affiliates in Afghanistan in order to “degrade their capability to target the U.S. and its allies.”¹⁷⁸

On December 8, 2014, the United States formally updated its troop commitment as well as the rules for combat operations within its mission in Afghanistan. The United States readjusted its withdrawal timeline; up to 10,800 U.S. troops will remain in Afghanistan for at least the first three months of 2015.¹⁷⁹ The updated mission will allow the U.S. to launch operations against militants while adhering to the advise and assist mission in both combat and air support in ANSF-led operations.¹⁸⁰ President Obama authorized U.S. forces in Afghanistan to carry out military operations against Taliban and AQ targets, an authorization which would become the cornerstone of Operation Freedom’s Sentinel.¹⁸¹ In a December 2, 2014 Pentagon briefing, Rear Adm. John Kirby reiterated that there is “no expansion of [U.S. counter-



terrorism] authorities in Afghanistan going into 2015.”¹⁸² A senior military official added that the U.S. is remaining in “armed combat with Al-Qaeda and the Taliban,” and that the same circumstances authorizing combat, including force protection and assistance to Afghan forces, would apply to U.S. troops in operations against Taliban offshoots such as the Haqqani Network.¹⁸³

In accordance with the BSA, the U.S. now has access to ANSF-run bases in nine locations throughout Afghanistan in order to coordinate support and training to ANSF forces.¹⁸⁴ Operation Resolute Support established its central hub in Kabul, with nearby support from Bagram Airfield, in order to support ANSF leadership by advising in military strategy, assisting in running operational missions, and developing Afghan national security forces central institutions. The current mission also operates out of four “spokes” at Mazar-e Sharif, Herat, Kandahar, and Laghman, with bilateral use of

the base near Jalalabad in Nangarhar province. These bases will run the new Train Advise Assist Commands (TAAC) in place of the Regional Commands active during the combat mission.¹⁸⁵ The U.S. maintains a smaller presence and access at three other bases, namely the airfields in Shindand in Herat province, Camp Shorabak in Helmand province, and Gardez Airfield in Paktia province. Within these TAACs, U.S. forces will act in an advisory role for operations from bases under ANSF authority.

These bases will allow the United States to maintain some presence in the most contested areas in Afghanistan, although this access will still not equate to the level of presence the U.S. maintained in these areas during its combat mission. Four of the six ANA Corps will be directly supported by TAACs,¹⁸⁶ but some units will receive little attention. For instance, the 215th Corps, based in Helmand province, will operate out of Camp Shorabak with a minimal U.S. interface from TAAC South.¹⁸⁷ The U.S. is not providing on-site training units

or combat support forces for the 203rd Corps stationed in Gardez and responsible for the Loya Paktia area. Coalition officials are planning on flying in advisors from TAAC East to Gardez in order to train troops from the 203rd Corps.¹⁸⁸ The Loya Paktia area is particularly significant considering its designation as a major safe haven for insurgent fighters and the prevalence of smuggling routes used to transfer equipment and fighters from the tribal areas into Paktika and Khost and eventually into Kabul. Thus the current strategy largely leaves alone the area home to the lethal Haqqani network.

The current U.S. drawdown timetable would have U.S. forces withdrawn from these TAAC hubs by the end of 2015. In the February 2015 SASC briefing, General John Campbell assessed that with foreign forces increasingly drawing down, the Taliban, AQ, and AQ affiliates would “undoubtedly attempt to reestablish their authority and prominence in Afghanistan” and “present a formidable challenge” to the ANSF in 2015.¹⁸⁹ On the U.S. withdrawing from its base in Kandahar province, the historic stronghold of the Taliban, Campbell admitted that a weakened coalition presence “would provide the Taliban momentum” to launch a stronger offensive into the rest of the country.¹⁹⁰ According to current plans, the U.S. military would have to completely withdraw from Kandahar at the end of 2015. Retrograde operations would initiate several months before, meaning that the U.S. would begin to wind down operations during the summer fighting season. The attack on Camp Shorabak in November 2014 serves as a reminder for what can happen late in the year, a particular concern given the projected US timeline.

The updated mission guidelines for U.S Forces in Afghanistan have allowed them to address some of the ANSF’s most crucial capability gaps, particularly its air support and counter-terrorism capabilities. In November 2014, President Ashraf Ghani lifted the ban on nighttime raids, which were banned by his predecessor Hamid Karzai citing the risk of civilian deaths.¹⁹¹ Like close air support, the ability to conduct night operations gives the ANSF a tactical advantage over the Taliban. Afghan intelligence commandos and American Special Operations forces resumed joint night raids in the last few months of 2014. Although top military officials allege Afghan Special Forces have been launching night raids “independently,” anonymous Afghan and U.S. officials say American forces were “still playing direct combat roles in many of the raids and were not simply going as advisors” as of February 2015.¹⁹²

Commander of ANA 205th Corps in Kandahar Major General Abdul Hameed reiterated that the ANSF is still not capable of carrying out night raids effectively, and insisted that “strong backing” from foreign forces is still necessary to train ANSF to fly helicopters, use night vision devices and

GPS, and complete basic training. Hameed added, “[The Taliban] are moving around at night and passing messages and recruiting people for fighting...the only solution to stop their movement is night raids.”¹⁹³ The U.S. mission in Afghanistan in 2015 allows the U.S. to act as a “combat enabler” in other ANSF operations, meaning the U.S. may support ANSF in functions like air support, transportation, intelligence gathering, and communication.¹⁹⁴ Operation Resolute Support has also outlined plans to continue its work with the Ministry of Defense, Ministry of the Interior, and NDS to develop widespread ANSF counter-intelligence and counter-terrorism capabilities alongside the NATO mission.¹⁹⁵

A top priority for the continued U.S. mission in Afghanistan is providing intelligence and counter-terrorism support to ANSF operations, particularly in Kabul and eastern provinces that serve as safe havens for the Taliban. NDS chief Rahmatullah Nabil said in December 2014 that the ISAF drawdown to 13,000 troops in 2014 left an “intelligence vacuum” that hindered ANSF’s ability to detect and thwart certain attacks in 2014.¹⁹⁶ Nabil claimed that ANSF’s diminished access to western technology and support facilitated the rash of suicide attacks in Kabul in 2014 as well as the overall increase in large-scale Taliban assaults in the periphery. In Helmand province, for instance, Nabil reported that the attacks in late 2014 were possible largely because ISAF withdrew its high-tech surveillance balloons from the province.¹⁹⁷ In Kunar province, Nabil said that ANSF was unable to defend against a surge of militants into the district because they lacked the airlift capabilities to actually reach the district. In the early months of the 2015 ANSF-led counterinsurgency, such capabilities will be vital components in addressing the probable major security threats in the country’s most restive areas.

General Campbell, who at the time was Commander of ISAF forces in Afghanistan, announced that even with the increase to 10,800 U.S. troops in Afghanistan at the beginning of 2015, the timeframe of the withdrawal would not change. He said the United States will shut down all regional TAAC hubs and halve its troop numbers to 5,500 by the end of 2015, ultimately transitioning to a “Kabul-centric mission” by the end of 2016.¹⁹⁸ By this time, the U.S. aims to maintain an embassy presence of around 1,000 troops in the capital “with a security assistance component.”¹⁹⁹ As the recent Taliban offensive and increasing attacks in the capital demonstrate, the Taliban’s own “Kabul-centric” campaign has made protecting Afghan government and western targets in Kabul a top priority for international and national security forces.²⁰⁰

Operation Resolute Support and Operation Freedom’s Sentinel are tremendous commitments in time, money, and manpower, and there is a worry that the U.S. withdrawal

deadlines are driven more by U.S. domestic political objectives rather than attainable deadlines for progress in the coalition mission. General John Allen, who served as COMISAF and Commander of USFOR-A until February 2013, argued in 2012 that the current dual mission objectives, coupled with a continuously diminishing U.S. footprint for the next two years, significantly “increases the risk of the mission failing.”²⁰¹ Lieutenant General Joseph Anderson agreed on December 8, 2014 that realistic prospects of Operation Resolute Support under current conditions are low, and “the fact that we are in less places, the fact that there are less of us as a coalition, is obviously concerning.”²⁰²

Deputy Commander for U.S. Forces-Afghanistan Army Major General John M. Murray in a statement on December 10 admitted that “the number of [Taliban] attacks is a bit higher than it’s been historically,” and that he anticipates that these numbers will increase into the next fighting season.²⁰³ Although there is an overarching desire to leave most of the U.S. mission in Afghanistan, as Lieutenant General Joseph Anderson said, “in the rearview mirror,”²⁰⁴ the U.S. and NATO commitment in Afghanistan remains important given the resurgence of Taliban attacks and sustained influence across numerous districts. The next few months in Afghanistan mark the start of the new decade of transformation for Afghanistan, and the ANSF response and capabilities against the anticipated Taliban 2015 spring offensive will be a formative period for the Afghan security environment for years to come.

CONCLUSION

The decision to draw down U.S. forces in Afghanistan is a critical moment for the future of Afghanistan’s national security. U.S. officials in recent weeks have wavered over the decision to slow the pace of the drawdown, particularly in 2015, after facing reports of continued attacks and increased casualties among the ANSF forces. Commander of USFOR-A and Resolute Support General John Campbell in February 2015 indicated he favors “more flexibility” in determining the pace within the next year, particularly before RSM forces withdraw from TAACs and bases outside Kabul.²⁰⁵ Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter and Pentagon officials have expressed their support for reassessing the level of U.S. presence in Afghanistan into 2015, a decision that will likely be announced during President Ghani’s Washington visit between March 22-25, 2015.²⁰⁶ Some U.S. officials are already predicting that President Obama could potentially reverse earlier plans to cut down U.S. troops to 5,500 by the end of the year.²⁰⁷

Delaying the reduction of these troops, as General Campbell has argued, would avoid unnecessary disruptions to the train, advise, and assist mission and would strengthen the

U.S. counter-terror mission well beyond the 2015 summer offensive.²⁰⁸ The pace of the U.S. drawdown will affect the final withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan, still set firmly at the end of 2016. This decision challenges one of the key tenets of President Obama’s national security strategy: the removal of all troops from Afghanistan by the end of his second term. With the withdrawal plan as it currently stands, it is questionable whether the ANSF has the capacity to secure U.S. interests without continued assistance beyond 2016. An independent assessment of the ANSF commissioned by Congress in January 2014 found that “the ANSF will require international enabling assistance — including advisors — through at least 2018.”²⁰⁹

The violence witnessed since late 2014 and so far in 2015 in Afghanistan is not an anomaly, but indicative of a resurgent enemy. Defense Intelligence Agency Lieutenant General Vincent Stewart acknowledged in 2015 the insurgency will “again attempt to increase its influence in rural areas, operate in larger formations, and continue to test security forces by temporarily seizing a number of vulnerable rural Afghan checkpoints and district centers.”²¹⁰ Director of National Intelligence James Clapper’s testimony in February 2015 acknowledged that the ANSF will require more long-term international support in the counterinsurgency against Taliban and other insurgent groups.²¹¹

The U.S. already plans to leverage its remaining offensive capabilities, including the authorization for night raids and use of U.S. air power and drones as a “combat enabler,” as part of its counter-terrorism mission to support operations against Taliban and AQ targets.²¹² This offensive capability, however, is linked to a remaining U.S. presence. In his testimony to the House Armed Services Committee on March 4, 2015, General Campbell reiterated how flexibility in the drawdown plan is crucial in determining what level of U.S. capabilities are necessary to support the ANSF in combating the Taliban during the upcoming spring and summer fighting season.²¹³

The Afghan central government too is preparing to face a difficult spring and summer offensive in 2015. Operation Zulfiqar, the first independent solo operation conducted by the ANSF and planned in part by President Ghani himself, has achieved definite gains in insurgent-heavy areas in Afghanistan’s south.²¹⁴ The operation aimed to demonstrate the coordination and overall strength of the ANSF, particularly the Afghan National Army. While the ANA was able to clear several districts of Taliban fighters, particularly in Helmand province,²¹⁵ many of these gains have been short-lived.²¹⁶ If anything, the operation demonstrates some of the continued shortfalls in the ANSF’s capabilities.

At the same time, President Ghani is pushing the Afghan government into peace negotiations with Afghan Taliban leadership, presumably within the next month, with Pakistan and China providing open and back channel support.²¹⁷ In his joint conference with Secretary Carter, Ghani said that “the grounds for peace have never been better in the last 36 years.”²¹⁸ The Taliban, however, has offered mixed messaging. While Taliban leadership is rumored to be negotiating with regional partners leading up to face-to-face talks with Afghan government representatives,²¹⁹ some Taliban sources say their leadership is still planning to execute the “biggest offensive” ever in Afghanistan once the spring season begins.²²⁰ On the ground, the insurgency shows no sign of halting, with insurgents attacking military checkpoints and bombing ANSF convoys on a daily basis. Regardless of the terms of any hypothetical agreement, extremist factions within the Taliban would likely splinter away and continue to wage war against the Afghan government. The ANSF will therefore require coalition support to fight an emboldened enemy.

The level of NATO forces will also play an important role in determining the success of peace talks. A sudden pullout of U.S. troops would likely embolden the Taliban leadership. Taliban commanders might believe that they could seize enough territory from Kabul to outweigh whatever benefits may be gained from negotiations. In the event that Taliban commanders did come to the bargaining table, they would attempt to extract even greater concessions. Any deal negotiated from a position of Taliban strength would pose a challenge to U.S. interests in the region. Without a sizeable international force on the ground, insurgents or local-power brokers might be tempted to violate the terms of a settled agreement.

The lessons learned from the withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 serve as a warning for a premature withdrawal from Afghanistan. In the February 2015 Senate Armed Services Committee hearing with General John Campbell, Senator John McCain predicted that the sharp drawdown in 2015 could “allow terrorists to foment the same disaster in Afghanistan as we have seen in Iraq - growing instability, terrorist safe havens and direct threats to the United States.”²²¹ The parallels are telling. The U.S. departure from Iraq left a fractionalized Iraqi Security Force incapable of providing security and a divisive government under Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. Perceived sectarian actions by the government and security forces hindered their ability to provide security and led to a resurgence of anti-government groups. The rise of the so-called Islamic State is a manifestation of the failure to address these political and security challenges in the wake of the U.S. withdrawal.

Afghanistan is not condemned to the same future as Iraq. The progress of the national unity government is a promising

start. Early signs of cooperation between President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah alleviated fears of rekindled ethnic tensions within political institutions and helped prevent divisions within security forces. ANSF still retains the capability to move units and supplies along major road networks to reinforce urban centers against large-scale Taliban advances. And with more than 150,000 troops, the ANA theoretically has the ability to field significant numbers of men and equipment. It is hard to imagine a massed Taliban force marching on Kabul without a major breakdown of the national government.

The insurgency does not need to precipitate a wholesale collapse of the state in order to challenge U.S. interests in Afghanistan. The insurgency only has to carve out areas of influence resistant to ANSF operations and in which al-Qaeda and other foreign terrorist organizations could operate and consolidate their networks under the supervision of the Taliban. As this report has illustrated, the insurgency has already begun to create such areas throughout Afghanistan. The worsening security situation might also be exacerbated by the actions of local powers in response to the NATO pullout. Should the Afghan state fail to provide an adequate level of protection, local communities would be tempted to militarize, creating a breakdown of state authority that would facilitate the regeneration of transnational terrorist groups in the country.

In light of these concerns, the reevaluation of U.S. policy toward Afghanistan already in progress is a necessity. U.S. officials should consider whether Operation Resolute Support’s policy objectives, namely ensuring “stability” and “strong governance,” as well as U.S. long-term foreign policy goals can be realistically achieved in this two-year span. As Secretary of Defense Carter stated, “the U.S. has a very successful campaign in Afghanistan, but it is not finished and it needs to be won.”²²² The risks of insufficient action are clear and threaten to reverse what progress has been made.

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