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Country Report on Terrorism 2018 - Chapter 1 - Afghanistan

Overview: Afghanistan cooperates with the United States in a bilateral counterterrorism effort as part of Operation Freedom’s Sentinel (OFS), the U.S. operation in Afghanistan. The U.S. military also works with Afghanistan to improve the ability of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) to combat insurgent groups through NATO’s Resolute Support Mission. In 2018, the Afghan Taliban concentrated their offensive operations against the ANDSF, the Afghan government, Resolute Support Forces, and Afghan civilians. Meanwhile, the Islamic State’s Khorasan Province (ISIS-K) and the Afghan Taliban-affiliated Haqqani Network (HQN) increased high-profile terrorist attacks targeting Afghan civilians, government officials, and members of the international community.

The Afghan government and the Afghan Taliban took steps towards a political process in 2018. In June, the Afghan government initiated a successful Eid-al-Fitr cease-fire, although ANDSF and Resolute Support committed to continue operations against al-Qa’ida and ISIS-K during the cease-fire. In September, President Trump appointed Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad as the Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, who has engaged with stakeholders to advance a political settlement in Afghanistan. In December, the Pakistan government, Afghan government, and Afghan Taliban delegations attended discussions in Abu Dhabi.

Afghanistan is a member of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS.

2018 Terrorist Incidents: Terrorist groups continued to use VBIEDs and complex attacks that involve multiple attackers wearing suicide vests to target ANDSF, Afghan government buildings, foreign governments, polling centers, journalists, and soft Afghan and international civilian targets to include international organizations. The following list details a fraction of the terrorist incidents that occurred:

- On January 27, the Taliban’s HQN packed an ambulance with explosives and detonated it on a crowded street in Kabul, killing 103 people – mostly civilians – and injuring at least 235.
- On March 23, the Taliban detonated a VBIED as spectators departed a wrestling match in Lashkar Gah, Helmand, killing at least 14 civilians and sparking a women-led mass protest against Taliban violence.
- On April 22, an ISIS-K suicide bomber detonated his vest at an identity card distribution center in a predominantly ethnically Hazara, Shia-minority neighborhood in Kabul, killing more than 60 civilians.
- On April 30, ISIS-K members conducted a suicide bombing in Kabul and a shooting in eastern Khost province killing 25 people, including 10 journalists. Following the first explosion, a second bomber, holding a camera and posing as a journalist, killed rescue workers and journalists who had rushed to the scene.
- On June 4, an ISIS-K suicide bomber detonated his vest at a gathering of prominent Muslim religious scholars, who had convened in Kabul to issue a pro-peace Islamic edict calling for an end to violence against Muslims, killing 20 civilians.

- On August 15, an ISIS-K suicide bomber detonated his suicide vest at a private school in a predominantly ethnically Hazara, Shia-minority neighborhood in Kabul, killing 48 students as they prepared to take their university entrance examinations.
- On November 20, a suicide bomber detonated his vest among a gathering of religious clerics at the Uranus Wedding Hall in Kabul, killing more than 50 people. The clerics had gathered to commemorate the Prophet Mohammed’s birthday.

Legislation, Law Enforcement, and Border Security: The Afghan Attorney General’s Office investigates and prosecutes violations of the laws that prohibit membership in terrorist or insurgent groups, violent acts committed against the state, hostage taking, murder, and the use of explosives against military forces and state infrastructure.

U.S. law enforcement assisted the Ministry of Interior, National Directorate of Security (NDS), and other Afghan authorities in disrupting and dismantling terrorist operations and prosecuting terrorist suspects. Working with U.S. partners, Afghan security forces are developing the capacity to investigate terrorist financiers and facilitators. Recent investigative developments include the targeting of unlicensed *hawaladars* that launder narcotics proceeds and support insurgent financing.

In 2018, Afghan civilian security forces continued to participate in the Department of State’s Antiterrorism Assistance program, receiving capacity-building training and mentorship in specialized counterterrorism-related skillsets such as crisis response, methods of entry, and response to an active shooter. Specialized police units known as Crisis Response Units (CRUs) for Afghanistan’s major cities continued to thwart attacks. For example, CRU-222 responded swiftly during a November 2018 attack in Kabul against a British security contractor compound, securing the compound and killing the attackers. President Ghani is working to double the number of these units throughout the country.

In October, the government opened the Maslakh truck screening facility, which allowed for more comprehensive searches of large vehicles entering Kabul’s international zone (IZ), significantly augmenting IZ security. The Afghan government also established a new security unit with sole responsibility for protecting an expanded perimeter, integrating command and control to establish a unity of effort with IZ security. The new unit replaced a patchwork of police, military, and private security contractors that previously reported to the Ministries of Interior and Defense through different chains of command.

Afghanistan continued to face significant challenges in protecting the country’s borders, particularly in the border regions with Pakistan and Iran. Under the Afghanistan-Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity, which met for the first time in July, Afghan and Pakistani officials agreed in principle to create a mechanism for communication between forces on each side of the border. However, this has so far been limited to informal cooperation and ad hoc meetings between border commanders on both sides.

Afghanistan continued to process traveler arrivals and departures at major points of entry using a U.S.-provided border security system, PISCES, which has been successfully integrated with INTERPOL’s I-24/7 platform.

Countering the Financing of Terrorism: Afghanistan is a member of the Asia/Pacific Group on Money Laundering (APG), a FATF-style regional body. In line with FATF recommendations, Afghanistan’s FIU, the Financial Transactions and Reports Analysis Center of Afghanistan (FinTRACA), initiated a money laundering and terrorist financing risk assessment that will conclude

in 2019. Despite technical compliance, insufficient cooperation and lack of capacity still hamper terrorist finance investigations. FinTRACA distributes UN sanctions lists under UNSCRs 1267 and 1988 to financial institutions via a circular and a link on FinTRACA’s website. As of October, FinTRACA designated 258 persons to its watchlist, froze 29 bank accounts, revoked or suspended 25 business licenses, and imposed US \$74,000 in fines on money service businesses and banks for failure to comply with AML/CFT laws.

For additional information on money laundering and financial crimes, see the *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR), Volume II, Money Laundering and Financial Crimes* (<https://www.state.gov/2019-international-narcotics-control-strategy-report/>).

Countering Violent Extremism: In 2018, the Office of the National Security Council worked to finalize a national CVE strategy. The Ulema Council, with support from the High Peace Council, participated in conferences in Indonesia and Saudi Arabia that called on the Afghan Taliban to engage the Afghan government directly in peace negotiations. On June 4, the Ulema Council and High Peace Council gathered nearly 3,000 religious scholars in Kabul to issue a pro-peace Islamic edict challenging religious justifications for violence. ISIS-K conducted attacks against this meeting, religious minority groups, and other gatherings of moderate religious scholars.

An estimated 100,000 out of 160,000 mosques are not registered with the Ministry of Hajj and Religious Affairs (MOHRA) and operate independently of the government. MOHRA reported that unregistered madrassahs continued to “radicalize” vulnerable populations in 2018.

International and Regional Cooperation: Afghanistan is a member of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS.

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