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ecoi.net featured topic on Afghanistan: Overview of recent developments and key players in Afghanistan

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Overview of recent developments and key players in Afghanistan

1. Developments in 2021

"On 14 April, United States President Joe Biden announced that 'U.S. troops, as well as forces deployed by our NATO Allies and operational partners, will be out of Afghanistan before we mark the 20th anniversary of that heinous attack on September 11th.' The announcement was not totally unexpected given that the US-Taleban deal signed in Doha, Qatar on 29 February 2020 required the withdrawal of all foreign forces by 1 May 2021. However, the announcement was a significant departure from what many had expected given that, up to then, the US had claimed the withdrawal would be a condition-based. It was commonly construed, based on the US-Taleban Doha deal, that the conditions allowing a full withdrawal of foreign forces would be a significant reduction in violence and at least the framework for a political settlement between the government and the Taleban. Biden, however, made it clear that this was not the case, saying, 'American troops shouldn't be used as a bargaining chip between warring parties in other countries.'" ([AAN, 10 June 2021](#))^[i]

"On 15 August, the Taliban capped their drive for power in Afghanistan by taking Kabul, the country's capital, for the first time since they ruled most of the country from 1996 to 2001. With the previous government's collapse, the group is now the de facto power throughout the country and is in the process of forming a new government and revamped state system." ([ICG, 26 August 2021, p. 1](#))^[ii]

"Pansjshir province withstood a series of attacks from the Taliban throughout the remainder of August, but on the 6 September, the Taliban entered the Panjshir Valley and captured the districts of the province, including the provincial capital, Bazarak." ([DIS, September 2021, p. 11](#))^[iii]

"The Taliban announced an "interim" cabinet on 7 September, their first step since taking power on 15 August toward forming a government and signalling how they intend to rule. The cabinet is filled with long-time key Taliban figures from their days as a government and later an insurgency, and it bears a strong resemblance to their former regime of the 1990s." ([ICG, 9 September 2021](#))

"Fearing for their lives, rights and security, thousands of Afghan citizens rushed to Kabul's Hamid Karzai International Airport, attempting to leave the country, where the United States of America had increased its military presence to manage the evacuations of foreign nationals, including diplomats, and Afghans at risk, with all

commercial flights having been suspended. Reports emerged from Taliban-held areas of the imposition of restrictions on personal and social freedoms and the erosion of women's rights and access to services, including education." ([UNGA, 2 September 2021, p. 1](#))^[iv]

"High-profile attacks by anti-Government elements occurred countrywide prior to the Taliban takeover of major cities. Between 16 May and 31 July, 18 suicide attacks were documented, compared with 11 in the prior period, including 16 suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices primarily targeting Afghan National Defence and Security Forces positions. In addition, there were 68 attacks using magnetic improvised explosive devices, including 14 in Kabul." ([UNGA, 2 September 2021, p. 6](#))

"Unprecedented numbers of civilians were killed and injured in the early months of 2021 and at least 560,000 people were displaced, including nearly 120,000 fleeing to Kabul as they sought refuge from Taliban advances. Those numbers represent the worst-ever period in what for some years has been the world's deadliest conflict. The count of displaced people in Afghanistan over the last seven months was twice the monthly average in the last five years, and the figures are expected to grow as aid agencies' accounting catches up with the scale of the crisis. Some 80 per cent of those fleeing violence since the end of May have been women and children. Thousands of displaced people in Kabul have been sleeping in the open air, and only a minuscule portion of them escaped during the international airlift that ended on 30 August." ([ICG, 2 September 2021](#))

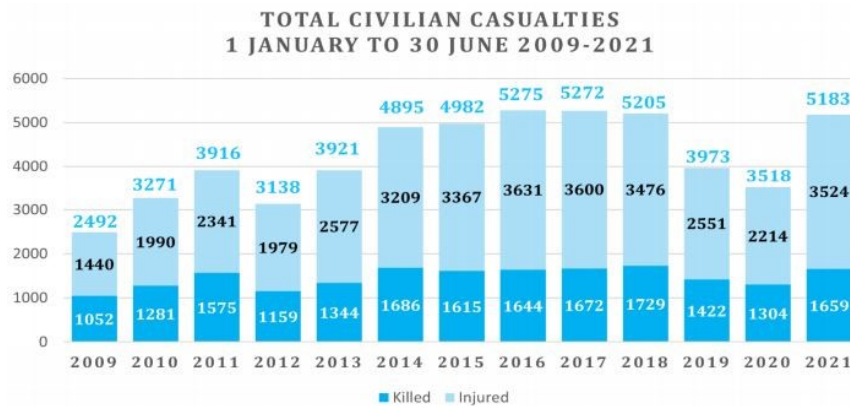
"Between 16 May and 31 July, the United Nations recorded 6,302 security-related incidents, a 25.6 per cent increase from the 5,016 incidents recorded during the same period in 2020. Armed clashes rose by 37.8 per cent, from 2,931 to 4,039 incidents; airstrikes increased by 236 per cent, from 136 to 457; and assassinations increased by 6 per cent, from 235 to 250. By contrast, detonations caused by improvised explosive devices decreased by 15 per cent, from 635 to 538. The southern, eastern and northern regions accounted for 60.4 per cent of all recorded incidents, with Helmand, Kandahar and Nangarhar Provinces consistently ranking as the most conflict-affected. As the Taliban progressively consolidated its territorial control since early August, conflict related types of security incidents, such as airstrikes, armed clashes and improvised explosive devices-related incidents, decreased significantly. ([UNGA, 2 September 2021, pp. 5-6](#))

"Attacks claimed by or attributed to Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant Khorasan (ISIL-K) increased. Between 16 May and 18 August, the United Nations recorded 88 attacks, compared with 15 during the same period in 2020. The movement targeted civilians in urban areas using asymmetric tactics. It has claimed the launches of an estimated seven rockets targeting the presidential palace in Kabul during the official Eid celebration on 20 July, as well as a series of attacks using improvised explosive devices against religious minorities, including a Hazara gathering in Kunduz city on 13 May and a Sufi mosque in Kabul on 14 May, and several passenger vans either carrying Hazara Shias or traveling through predominantly Hazara Shia populated areas in Parwan Province and Kabul between 1 and 12 June. The group also claimed an attack on HALO Trust deminers in Baghlan Province on 8 June, in which 10 deminers were killed. Several claims concerned attacks on economic infrastructure and assets. Not all claims were verified amid controversy over the extent to which ISIL-K claimed attacks carried out by other groups or in coordination with it. The movement also issued an editorial on 17 June announcing plans to escalate attacks and in recent weeks had increasingly sought to challenge the Taliban as it asserted control across Afghanistan." ([UNGA, 2 September 2021, p. 6](#))

"On 26 August ISKP carried out two bomb attacks at the entrance to Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul, killing as many as 170 civilians and 13 U.S. service members." ([DIS, September 2021, p. 14](#))

"Between 1 January and 30 June 2021, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) documented 5,183 civilian casualties (1,659 killed and 3,524 injured). The total number of civilians killed and injured increased by 47 per cent compared with the first half of 2020, reversing the trend of the past four years of decreasing civilian casualties in the first six months of the year, with civilian casualties rising again to the record levels seen in the first six months of 2014 to 2018. Civilian casualties increased for women, girls, boys, and men. Of particular concern, UNAMA documented record numbers of girls and women killed and injured, as well as record numbers of overall child casualties." ([UNAMA, July 2021, p. 1](#))^[v]

The UNAMA report on civilian casualties for the first six months of 2021 provides the following chart on civilian casualties:



(UNAMA, July 2021, p. 1)

“During the first six months of 2021, and in comparison with the same period last year, UNAMA documented a nearly threefold increase in civilian casualties resulting from the use of non-suicide improvised explosive devices (IEDs) by Anti-Government Elements. This was the most civilian casualties caused by non-suicide IEDs in the first six months of a year since UNAMA began systematic documentation of civilian casualties in Afghanistan in 2009. Civilian casualties from ground engagements, attributed mainly to the Taliban and Afghan national security forces, also increased significantly. Targeted Killings by Anti-Government Elements continued at similarly high levels. Airstrikes by Pro-Government Forces caused increased numbers of civilian casualties, mainly attributed to the Afghan Air Force.” (UNAMA, July 2021, p. 1)

“Anti-Government Elements were responsible for nearly 64 per cent of the total civilian casualties: 39 per cent by Taliban, nearly nine per cent by Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISIL-KP), and 16 per cent by undetermined Anti-Government Elements. Pro-Government Forces were responsible for 25 per cent of civilian casualties: 23 per cent by Afghan national security forces, and almost two per cent by pro-Government armed groups and undetermined Pro Government Forces. UNAMA attributed the remaining 11 per cent of civilian casualties to ‘crossfire’ during ground engagements, mainly between Afghan national security forces and Taliban, where the exact party responsible could not be determined (nine per cent) and ‘other’, mainly explosive remnants of war where the responsible party was unable to be determined (two percent). The number of civilian casualties attributed to Anti Government Elements increased by 63 per cent compared with the same period in 2020, while the number of civilian casualties attributed to Pro Government Forces increased by 30 per cent.” (UNAMA, July 2021, pp. 3-4)

„The Taliban’s return to power raises major concerns as regards the respect of human rights in Afghanistan. These concerns are twofold: that the progress which has been achieved in the past twenty years, especially in areas such as women’s rights, is dismantled; and that the Taliban, even when holding de facto power, continue to pursue the same methods they used as an insurgent group, including summary and targeted killings, torture, and other human rights and humanitarian law violations.

These concerns are well-founded. While in their public discourse, the Taliban have pledged to respect human rights – within the framework of Sharia law – the reality on the ground contradicts these statements, as reported by the United Nations, NGOs and media sources.

Groups particularly at risk include: – people who have worked for foreign troops and diplomatic missions – as interpreters, drivers, security officers or other civilian occupations; – members of the Afghan security forces or Afghans who held political or administrative responsibilities; – women and girls – the main issues concerning the right to education, freedom of movement, access to work, to health care and the right to participate in public and political life; – children, some of whom are being recruited as child soldiers; – persons belonging to ethnic and religious minorities; – journalists and human rights defenders.“ (CoE-PACE, 28 September 2021, p. 12)[vi]

“Over 3.5 million have been displaced from their homes by conflict and remain inside the country, including some 630,000 uprooted during 2021.” (UNHCR, 15 September 2021)[vii]

2. The Taliban

“The Taliban is an umbrella organization comprising loosely connected insurgent groups, including more or less autonomous groups with varying degrees of loyalty to the leadership and the idea of The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. The Taliban’s organisational structure is hierarchical, with an Amir ul – Muminin (Commander of the Faithful) on the top. He gives moral, religious and political statements, oversees judges, courts, and political commissions, assigns shadow governors and is in command of the military organization.” (Landinfo, 13 May 2016, p. 4)[viii]

“After first seizing power in the 1990s, the Taliban introduced and supported punishments according to their strict interpretation of Islamic law: they publicly executed murderers and adulterers and amputated thieves' limbs. Under the leadership of the reclusive Mullah Mohammed Omar (who is thought to have died in 2013), the Taliban also banned television, music, movies, make-up, and stopped girls aged 10 and over from attending school.” ([BBC, 8 September 2021b](#))[ix]

“The death in 2013 of its original leader, Mullah Umar, was revealed in a July 2015 Taliban announcement. In a disputed selection process, he was succeeded by Akhtar Mohammad Mansour, who in turn was killed by a U.S. unmanned aerial vehicle strike on May 21, 2016. Several days later, the Taliban confirmed his death and announced the selection of one of his deputies, Haibatullah Akhundzadeh, as the new Taliban leader. The group announced two deputies: Mullah Yaqub (son of Mullah Umar) and Sirajuddin Haqqani (operational commander of the Haqqani Network).” ([CRS, 19 May 2017, p. 16](#))[x]

“Hibatullah Akhundzada became the supreme commander of the Taliban in May 2016, and is now leader of the so-called Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. In the 1980s, he participated in the Islamist resistance against the Soviet military campaign in Afghanistan, but his reputation is more that of a religious leader than a military commander. Akhundzada worked as head of the Sharia Courts in the 1990s. ([BBC, 8 September 2021b](#))

“Sirajuddin Haqqani, the acting interior minister, is head of the militant group known as the Haqqani network, who are affiliated with the Taliban and have been behind some of the deadliest attacks in the country's two-decade-long war - including a truck bomb explosion in Kabul in 2017 that killed more than 150 people. Unlike the wider Taliban, the Haqqani network has been designated a foreign terrorist organisation by the US. It also maintains close ties to al-Qaeda.” ([BBC, 8 September 2021a](#)) More detailed information on Taliban-associated groups can be retrieved in the chapter of the same name below.

“In the year following the US-Taliban peace deal of February 2020 - which was the culmination of a long spell of direct talks - the Taliban appeared to shift its tactics from complex attacks in cities and on military outposts to a wave of targeted assassinations that terrorised Afghan civilians.

The targets - journalists, judges, peace activists, women in positions of power - appeared to suggest that the Taliban had not changed their extremist ideology, only their strategy.[...] The group is thought to now be stronger in numbers than at any point since they were ousted in 2001 - with up to 85,000 full time fighters, according to recent Nato estimates.” ([BBC, 3 July 2021](#))

In his March 2021 analysis, Thomas Ruttig discusses “the question of whether the Afghan Taliban have changed their repressive pre-fall 2001 positions, particularly on rights and freedoms even their wider ideology, and if so, how much and whether for good”. ([Ruttig, March 2021](#))[xi] A September 2021 policy brief by the research institute swisspeace outlines recent changes in the “new” Taliban's (media) appearance. ([Swisspeace, September 2021](#))[xii]

“[On 7 September 2021, the Taleban] announced their new interim administration. It is all-male, almost all-Pashtun, almost all clerical and all-Taleban. Set alongside their sustained military campaign in the Panjshir, the only province that held out against the Taleban takeover, and their violent response to protests across the country, it seems the movement's priorities have coalesced – internal cohesion, monopolisation of power, silencing of open dissent and dividing the ‘spoils of war’, in terms of government posts, between themselves.” ([AAN, 15 September 2021](#))

„What do the new appointments signify?

On 22 September, the Taliban published several new appointments, including at ministerial levels. The announcement came a day after the Chinese, Russian and Pakistani envoys met with the head of the Taliban government, Mullah Hassan Akhund, calling for more inclusive governance. The list of new appointees very slightly broadens the new government's makeup, as the interim administration is no longer composed entirely of Taliban stalwarts. Most of the new appointees either have no prior affiliation with the group or are not prominent members of it. Key appointees such as the ministers for trade and public health, and their deputies, do not appear to have past affiliations with the Taliban. Others with no formal connection with the movement include Nazar Mohammad Mutmaeen, head of the National Olympic Committee, and Najeebullah, head of atomic energy. Still, many of these outsiders are considered sympathetic to the Taliban.

Has the interim government now become inclusive?

Yes, slightly. With these additions, the new government now counts four Tajiks, two Uzbeks, one Turkmen, one Hazara, one Nuristani (an ethnic group native to Nuristan province) and one Khwaja (claiming Arabic lineage, Khwajas generally speak Dari as their native tongue). With a total of 53 members, this expanded cabinet is a small gesture toward including ethnic minorities, though it is still dominated by Pashtuns. Several of the new names appear to have been selected, in part, because of their ethnic backgrounds or professional experience. Noorudin Azizi, the new trade minister, is from Panjshir province, where the Taliban have been fighting the remnants of the Northern Resistance Front (NRF). [...]

Do the appointments include women or former establishment figures?

Despite continued international pressure, the Taliban have so far failed to appoint any women in their cabinet. [...]

Similarly, the Taliban have resisted calls from regional and Western governments to include figures from the previous Western-backed political establishment. Taliban interlocutors claim to Crisis Group that despite an internal push by some members to include figures associated with the former system in the new government, most of the top Taliban leadership has so far opposed such a move due to the perception that former politicians were corrupt and discredited. Perhaps more importantly, there were also concerns among the Taliban that if they moved to bring in either women or former politicians, they could risk backlash from the rank and file, who might view the leadership as betraying their ideals.” ([ICG, 28 September 2021](#))

Preliminary reports after the Taliban’s seizure of power

“The Taliban have attempted to portray to the world that they will respect human rights - however the ground reality is far from this. This briefing specifically documents the repression of the rights of women and girls, the intimidation of human rights defenders, the crackdown on freedom of expression, the reprisals on former government workers as well as the challenges faced by refugees and those who wish to leave Afghanistan. These incidents form a litany of abuses that demonstrate the need for an independent monitoring mechanism in response to the human rights situation in Afghanistan.” ([AI et al., September 2021](#))^[xiii]

“After seizing Kabul, Taliban fighters erected checkpoints throughout the capital and increased patrols, without uniforms. Reports also suggested that some people had been shot after having crossed checkpoints without approval. While statements by the Taliban included instructions not to enter anyone’s house without permission and that “life, property and honour” would be protected, numerous reports emerged of the Taliban conducting house-to-house searches for government personnel, weapons and property, and in some cases confiscation of the latter. Some reports indicated that the Taliban were allegedly searching for people who had “worked with foreigners” and at times, beating them.” (UNGA, 2 September 2021, p. 5)

“There continues to be a great deal of anxiety about reports that Taleban are searching for specific people. While there is no doubt that this is happening, it is difficult to cut through the noise, particularly since much of the current reporting on Afghanistan consists of repeating unverified claims.” ([AAN, 19 August 2021](#))

“Taliban forces advancing in Ghazni, Kandahar, and other [Afghan](#) provinces have summarily executed detained soldiers, police, and civilians with alleged ties to the Afghan government, Human Rights Watch said today. Residents from various provinces told Human Rights Watch that Taliban forces have in areas they enter, apparently identify residents who worked for the Afghan National Security Forces. They require former police and military personnel to register with them and provide a document purportedly guaranteeing their safety. However, the Taliban have later detained some of these people incommunicado and, in cases reported to Human Rights Watch, summarily executed them.” ([HRW, 3 August 2021](#))^[xiv]

“Following the fall of the Spin Boldak district of Kandahar province to the Taliban and the publication of reports of the killing of civilians by the group, the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) despite serious challenges in the area investigated and documented the incident and, in order to obtain reliable and accurate information, while referring to reliable local sources, it also interviewed a number of victims’ families and eyewitnesses. The evidence indicates that the Taliban, in violation of international humanitarian law, committed retaliatory killings of civilians and looted the property of several local residents, including the properties related to former and current government officials.” ([AIHRC, 31 July 2021](#))^[xv]

“Taliban fighters massacred nine ethnic Hazara men after taking control of Afghanistan’s Ghazni province last month, Amnesty International said today. On-the-ground researchers spoke to eyewitnesses who gave harrowing accounts of the killings, which took place between 4-6 July in the village of Mundarakht, Malistan district.” ([AI, 19 August 2021](#))^[xvi]

“Khost saw a procession on 17 August waving the black-red-green republic’s flag, while on 18 August, Taleban fighters responded violently to a demonstration in Jalalabad in which the Taleban flag was replaced, killing at least three men and wounding several others. The Taleban spokesperson subsequently sought to defuse future protests responded by saying that people could raise whatever flag they wanted.” ([AAN, 19 August 2021](#))

“From 15 to 19 August, people gathered in Nangarhar and Kunar provinces to mark national flag-raising ceremonies. According to credible reports, during these three days when protests took place, the Taliban reportedly killed a man and a boy, and injured eight others, when firing in an apparent attempt to disperse the crowds. On Tuesday this week (7 September), during a protest in Herat, the Taliban reportedly shot and killed two men and wounded seven more. That same day in Kabul, credible reports indicate that the Taliban beat and detained protesters, including several women and up to 15 journalists.” ([OHCHR, 10 September 2021](#))^[xvii]

“Peaceful protesters across various provinces in Afghanistan over the past four weeks have faced an increasingly violent response by the Taliban, including the use of live ammunition, batons and whips. On Wednesday, 8 September, the Taliban issued an instruction prohibiting unauthorized assemblies. Yesterday, Thursday, they ordered telecommunications companies to switch off internet on mobile phones in specific areas of Kabul.” ([OHCHR, 10 September 2021](#))

“In Jalalabad, the Taliban reportedly dispersed protests by firing into crowds, resulting in the death of at least one person. Reports indicated that Taliban members had physically assaulted two local journalists taking footage of the rally. Similar incidents were reported in Kunar and Khost Provinces.” (UNGA, 2 September 2021, p. 2)

“According to media reports, peaceful protests in Kabul, Badakhshan and Herat over the past two days have been dispersed by Taliban fighters firing rifles into the air, while some female protesters have reportedly been lashed with cables.

Amnesty International has independently verified videos of Taliban fighters firing guns into the air to disperse protests in Kabul, and also verified videos of violence against women protesters between 4 and 7 September in Kabul committed by the Taliban.

Journalists and cameramen from Afghan media outlets Ariana, Tolo and Etilaat-e- Roz have said that they were beaten up and detained by Taliban fighters while trying to cover protests, before having their equipment confiscated or their footage destroyed.” ([AI, 8 September 2021](#))

“Afghan journalists have been harassed by the Taliban, arrested and beaten with cables. Some reporters have been subjected to mistreatment amounting to torture. Incidents involving media personnel have been on the rise in both Kabul and provincial cities since the start of the week.” ([RSF, 10 September 2021](#))^[xviii]

“Reporters Without Borders (RSF) is very disturbed by the ‘11 journalism rules’ that the Taliban announced at a meeting with the media on 19 September. The rules that Afghan journalists will now have to implement are vaguely worded, dangerous and liable to be used to persecute them. [...] The first three rules, which forbid journalists to broadcast or publish stories that are “contrary to Islam,” “insult national figures” or violate “privacy,” are loosely based on Afghanistan’s existing national media law, which also incorporated a requirement to comply with international norms, including article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The absence of this requirement in the new rules opens the door to censorship and repression, because there is no indication as to who determines, or on what basis it is determined, that a comment or a report is contrary to Islam or disrespectful to a national figure. “ ([RSF, 22 September 2021](#))

“The Taliban appear to have shut down the women's affairs ministry and replaced it with a department that once enforced strict religious doctrines.

On Friday, the sign at the ministry was removed, and a sign for the ministry of virtue and vice put in its place.” ([BBC, 17 September 2021](#))

“The Taliban have excluded girls from Afghan secondary schools, with only boys and male teachers allowed back into classrooms. [...] Taliban officials who seized power last month said they were working to reach a decision on the matter. Many fear a return of the regime of the 1990s when the Taliban severely restricted girls' and women's rights. Under their new government, Taliban officials have said that women will be allowed to study and work in accordance with the group's interpretation of Islamic religious law.” ([BBC, 18 September 2021](#))

„Their failure to [appoint women in government functions] exacerbates concerns about significant deterioration in women's rights under the new regime, especially after the new government announced that secondary school would resume for male students only, while claiming that female students will be able to return in the near future. No public explanation has been provided for why girls have been prevented from resuming their education. In addition, the majority of women in the public sector have not yet been allowed to return to work.” ([ICG, 28 September 2021](#))

“The new Taliban mayor of Afghanistan's capital Kabul has told female municipal employees to stay home unless their jobs cannot be filled by a man. Hamdullah Nomany said the Taliban ‘found it necessary to stop women from working for a while.’” ([BBC, 19 September 2021](#))

“The Taliban in Afghanistan’s western city of Herat are committing widespread and serious human rights violations against women and girls, Human Rights Watch and the San Jose State University (SJSU) Human Rights Institute said today. Since taking over the city on August 12, 2021, the Taliban have instilled fear among women and girls by searching out high-profile women; denying women freedom of movement outside their homes; imposing compulsory dress codes; severely curtailing access to employment and education; and restricting the right to peaceful assembly.” ([HRW, 23 September 2021](#))

“The Taliban's notorious former head of religious police has said extreme punishments such as executions and amputations will resume in Afghanistan. Mullah Nooruddin Turabi, now in charge of prisons, told AP News amputations were ‘necessary for security’. He said these punishments may not be meted out in public, as they were under previous Taliban rule in the 1990s. But he dismissed outrage over their past public executions: ‘No-one will tell us what our laws should be.’” ([BBC, 25 September 2021](#))

“The Taliban say they have shot dead four alleged kidnappers and hung their bodies in public squares in the Afghan city of Herat. The gruesome display came a day after a notorious Taliban official warned that extreme punishments such as executions and amputations would resume. The men were killed in a gun battle after allegedly seizing a businessman and his son, a local official said. Local residents said a body was hung from a crane in the city centre.” ([BBC, 25 September 2021](#))

“The Taliban have banned hairdressers in Afghanistan's Helmand province from shaving or trimming beards, saying it breaches their interpretation of Islamic law.

Anyone violating the rule will be punished, Taliban religious police say.

Some barbers in the capital Kabul have said they also received similar orders.

The instructions suggest a return to the strict rulings of the group's past tenure in power, despite promises of a milder form of government." ([BBC, 26 September 2021](#))

3. Other actors

"Although these rapid developments in the conflict have put the Taliban in control of all of Afghanistan but the Panjshir Valley and other small pockets of resistance, it should be noted that the Taliban does not constitute the only actor in the country." ([DIS, September 2021](#), p. 12)

3.1 Taliban-associated groups

3.1.1 Haqqani Network

"The 'Haqqani Network,' founded by Jalaludin Haqqani, a mujahedin commander and U.S. ally during the U.S.-backed war against the Soviet occupation, is often cited by U.S. officials as a potent threat to U.S. and allied forces and interests, and a 'critical enabler of Al Qaeda.'" [...] Some see the Haqqani Network as on the decline. The Haqqani Network had about 3,000 fighters and supporters at its zenith during 2004-2010, but it is believed to have far fewer currently. However, the network is still capable of carrying out operations, particularly in Kabul city. [...] The group apparently has turned increasingly to kidnapping to perhaps earn funds and publicize its significance." ([CRS, 19 May 2017, p. 20](#))

"Strength: HQN [Haqqani Network] is believed to have several hundred core members, but it is estimated that the organization is able to draw upon a pool of upwards of 10,000 fighters. HQN is integrated into the larger Afghan Taliban and cooperates with other terrorist organizations operating in the region, including al-Qa'ida and Lashkar e-Tayyiba.

Location/Area of Operation: HQN is active along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border and across much of southeastern Afghanistan, particularly in Loya Paktia, and has repeatedly targeted Kabul in its attacks. The group's leadership has historically maintained a power base around Pakistan's tribal areas.

Funding and External Aid: In addition to the funding it receives as part of the broader Afghan Taliban, HQN receives much of its funds from donors in Pakistan and the Gulf, as well as through criminal activities such as kidnapping, extortion, smuggling, and other licit and illicit business ventures." ([USDOS, 19 September 2018](#))^[xix]

"After the death of his father, Jalaluddin Haqqani, he [Sirajuddin Haqqani] became the new leader of the Haqqani network, which has been credited with some of the most violent attacks that have occurred in Afghanistan against Afghan forces and their Western allies in recent years. The Haqqani network is currently one of the region's most powerful and feared militant groups. Some say it is even more influential than the Islamic State group in Afghanistan." ([BBC, 8 September 2021b](#))

"Based on a Skype-interview with 'Sune Engel Rasmussen (SER), a well-informed journalist with extensive and updated knowledge about the situation in Afghanistan' the Danish Immigration service (DIS) states that the Haqqani network constitutes the most anti-Western part of the Taliban and will likely outline the Taliban's policy in the future. They are further said to have a very close relationship to al-Qaeda and also have some form of connection to the Islamic State in Afghanistan (ISKP). Furthermore, they report that there is consensus between the (former) Afghan security services and Western intelligence that the Haqqani network has facilitated and contributed to the very bloody terrorist attacks carried out by the ISKP in Kabul, where the victims have primarily been Hazaras." ([DIS, September 2021, p. 38](#))

3.1.2 Al Qaeda

"From 2001 until 2015, Al Qaeda was considered by U.S. officials to have only a minimal presence (fewer than 100) in Afghanistan itself, operating mostly as a facilitator for insurgent groups and mainly in the northeast. However, in late 2015 U.S. Special Operations forces and their ANDSF partners discovered and destroyed a large Al Qaeda training camp in Qandahar Province—a discovery that indicated that Al Qaeda had expanded its presence in Afghanistan. In April 2016, U.S. commanders publicly raised their estimates of Al Qaeda fighters in Afghanistan to 100-300, and said that relations between Al Qaeda and the Taliban are increasingly close. Afghan officials put the number of Al Qaeda fighters in Afghanistan at 300- 500." ([CRS, 19 May 2017, p. 17](#))

"Al Qaeda (AQ) is still assessed to have a presence in Afghanistan and its decades-long ties with the Taliban appear to have remained strong in recent years. In May 2021, U.N. sanctions monitors reported that Al Qaeda 'has minimized over communications with Taliban leadership in an effort to 'lay low' and not jeopardize the Taliban's diplomatic position.' In October 2020, Afghan forces killed a high-ranking AQ operative in Afghanistan's Ghazni province, where he reportedly was living and working with Taliban forces, further underscoring questions about AQ-Taliban links and Taliban intentions with regard to Al Qaeda. In general, U.S. government assessments indicate that the Taliban are not fulfilling their counterterrorism commitments concerning Al Qaeda. For example, in its report on the final quarter of 2020, the Office of the Inspector General for the Department of Defense relayed an assessment from the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) that the Taliban maintain ties to Al Qaeda and that some AQ members

are ‘integrated into the Taliban’s forces and command structure.’ In a semiannual report released in April 2021, the Department of Defense stated, ‘The Taliban have maintained mutually beneficial relations with AQ-related organizations and are unlikely to take substantive action against these groups.’” ([CRS, 11 June 2021, pp. 1-2](#))

“The security situation in Afghanistan remains fragile, with uncertainty surrounding the peace process and a risk of further deterioration. As reported by the Monitoring Team in its twelfth report to the Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution 1988 (2011) (see S/2021/486), Al-Qaida is present in at least 15 Afghan provinces, primarily in the eastern, southern and south-eastern regions. Its weekly Thabat newsletter reports on its operations inside Afghanistan. Al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) operates under Taliban protection from Kandahar, Helmand and Nimruz Provinces.” ([UN Security Council, 21 July 2021, p. 14](#))[xx]

“Al-Qaeda is bound to the Taliban by a pledge of allegiance - or “bay’ah” - which was first offered in the 1990s by Osama Bin Laden to his Taliban counterpart Mullah Omar. The pledge has been renewed several times since, although it has not always been publicly acknowledged by the Taliban.

Under the 2020 peace deal with the US, the Taliban agreed not to allow al-Qaeda or any other extremist group to operate in areas under their control. They reiterated this vow days after the takeover of Kabul on 15 August. But they do not appear to have publicly rejected al-Qaeda either. [...]

And al-Qaeda reportedly maintains strong links with the Haqqani network, which is part of the Taliban.” ([BBC, 7 September 2021](#))

According to DIS the journalist and Afghanistan expert Sune Engel Rasmussen estimates that al-Qaeda will get even firmer in the future foothold in Afghanistan either directly facilitated by the Taliban or due to the emerging lawlessness in remote parts of the country. It is already known that al-Qaeda is in Afghanistan under the Taliban’s protection, and it could have an impact on the situation of the Hazaras in the future. ([DIS, September 2021, p. 38](#))

3.2 Islamic State – Khorasan Province

“An Islamic State affiliate—Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP, often also referred to as Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan, ISIL-K), named after an area that once included parts of what is now Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan—has been active in Afghanistan since mid-2014.” ([CRS, 19 May 2017, p. 20](#))

“IS formally launched its Afghanistan operations on January 10, 2015, when Pakistani and Afghan militants pledged their allegiance to its so-called caliphate in Syria and Iraq[...]. Since then, IS-Khorasan has proved itself to be one of group’s most brutal iterations, attacking soft targets, targeting Shia populations, killing Sufis and destroying shrines, as well as beheading its own dissidents, kidnapping their children and marrying off their widows. [...]

IS-Khorasan chose to base itself in Afghanistan’s Nangarhar Province, a strategic location bordering Pakistan’s tribal areas. Its recruits came from both sides of the porous border and could easily escape a surgical strike or military operation by fleeing to either side of the Durand line. [...]

From the very beginning, IS-Khorasan identified its targets—Shia communities, foreign troops, the security forces, the Afghan central government and the Taliban, who had not previously been challenged by an insurgent group.” ([JF, 6 April 2018](#))

“At present, ISIL strongholds in Afghanistan are in the eastern provinces of Nangarhar, Kunar, Nuristan and Laghman. The total strength of ISIL in Afghanistan is estimated at between 2,500 and 4,000 militants. ISIL is also reported to control some training camps in Afghanistan, and to have created a network of cells in various Afghan cities, including Kabul. The local ISIL leadership maintains close contacts with the group’s core in the Syrian Arab Republic and Iraq. Important personnel appointments are made through the central leadership, and the publication of propaganda videos is coordinated. Following the killing of ISIL leader Abu Sayed Bajauri on 14 July 2018, the leadership council of ISIL in Afghanistan appointed Mawlawi Ziya ul-Haq (aka Abu Omar Al-Khorasani) as the fourth ‘emir’ of the group since its establishment.” ([UN Security Council, 1 February 2019, p. 7](#))

“Beyond the Taliban, a significant share of U.S. operations have been aimed at the local Islamic State affiliate, known as Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP, also known as ISIS-K). Estimates of ISKP strength generally ranged from 2,000 to 4,000 fighters until ISKP “collapsed” in late 2019 due to offensives by U.S. and Afghan forces and, separately, the Taliban. ISKP and Taliban forces have sometimes fought over control of territory or because of political or other differences. A number of ISKP leaders have been killed in U.S. strikes since 2016, and Afghan forces arrested and captured two successive ISKP leaders in the spring of 2020. U.S. officials caution that ISKP remains a threat, pointing to several high profile attacks attributed to the group in 2020. The United Nations reports that casualties from ISKP attacks in 2020 decreased 45% from 2019. Some suggest that the Taliban’s participation in peace talks or a putative political settlement could prompt disaffected (or newly unemployed) fighters to join ISKP.” ([CRS, 11 June 2021, pp. 5-6](#))

“Despite territorial, leadership, manpower and financial losses during 2020 in Kunar and Nangarhar Provinces, Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan (ISIL-K) (QDe.161) has moved into other provinces, including Nuristan, Badghis, Sari Pul, Baghlan, Badakhshan, Kunduz and Kabul, where fighters have formed sleeper cells. The group has strengthened its positions in and around Kabul, where it conducts most of its attacks, targeting minorities, activists, government employees and personnel of the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces. [...]

In its efforts to resurge, ISIL-K has prioritized the recruitment and training of new supporters; its leaders also hope

to attract intransigent Taliban and other militants who reject the Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the United States of America and the Taliban and to recruit fighters from the Syrian Arab Republic, Iraq and other conflict zones.” ([UN Security Council, 21 July 2021, pp. 14-15](#))

According to a report of the Norwegian COI entity Landinfo, in the aftermath of the attack on August 26 2021 on the Kabul airport, it is speculated whether the ISKP is capable of challenging the Taliban's control, which could lead to the continuation of hostilities in the country. Basically, ISKP pr. August 2021 is said to be an actor with limited military force in Afghanistan. They are said to have no territorial control and the number of warriors is limited. But it can still not be excluded that they may play a role in the time to come as some Taliban fighters may disagree with the direction that the Taliban chooses, especially if they settle on a moderate and inclusive line. This can lead to some Taliban changing sides and switching to ISKP. The same could happen if divisions among the Taliban appear. Furthermore, Landinfo states that in connection with the Taliban's seizure of power, many prisoners were released, among whom some may have been affiliated with ISKP, which can increase the impact of the ISKP. ([Landinfo, 2 September 2021](#))

3.3 National Resistance Front (NRF)

“In the Panjshir Valley, the remnants of the former Afghan government and local militias had formed the National Resistance Front (NRF) led by former Vice President of the Republic, Amrullah Saleh and Ahmad Massoud. The NRF was said to consist of several thousand men with equipment from the Afghan army prior to the Taliban capture of Panjshir. In the days following the Taliban capture of Panjshir, Massoud vowed that the NRF would continue to resist the Taliban.” ([DIS, September 2021](#), p. 12)

“In the prevailing atmosphere of insecurity, several political opposition figures announced the establishment of “resistance forces” and councils to coordinate local defence efforts, often supported by members of parliament and provincial councils, community elders and religious leaders. Following the takeover of Kabul on 15 August, First Vice President Amrullah Saleh posted on social media an invitation for Afghans to join the resistance to the Taliban, announcing himself as caretaker under the constitution.” (UNGA, 2 September 2021, pp. 2-3)

“The Taliban said on Tuesday they had taken the valley [Panjshir] - the last region of Afghanistan holding out against their rule - from the Afghanistan National Resistance Front. The NRF, led by Ahmed Shah Massoud's son, said they would continue to fight.” ([BBC, 10 September 2021](#))

The March 2018 German-language expert opinion on Afghanistan by Friederike Stahlmann provides further information on non-state actors in Afghanistan ([Stahlmann, 28 March 2018, section 3.1](#))^[xxi]

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[i] The Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN) is an independent non-profit policy research organisation with its main office in Kabul.

[ii] The International Crisis Group (ICG) is a Brussels-based transnational non-profit, non-governmental organization that carries out field research on violent conflict and advances policies to prevent, mitigate or resolve conflict.

[iii] The Danish Immigration Service (DIS) is an agency within the Danish Ministry of Immigration and Integration that deals with cases concerning foreigners' right to visit and stay in Denmark.

[iv] The UN General Assembly (UNGA) is one of the six principal organs of the United Nations and the only one in which all member nations have equal representation.

[v] The UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) is a political UN mission established on 28 March 2002 by United Nations Security Council Resolution 1401.

[vi] The Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly (Coe-PACE) is an interparliamentary body consisting of 318 deputies from the parliaments of its 47 member states dealing with democracy, human rights and political, economic and social issues.

[vii] The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is a United Nations agency with the mandate to protect and support refugees and assist in their voluntary repatriation, local integration, or resettlement to a third country.

[viii] The Norwegian Country of Origin Information Center Landinfo is an independent body within the Norwegian

immigration authorities that provides COI services to various actors within Norway's immigration authorities.

[ix] The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) is a British public service broadcaster headquartered in London.

[x] The US Congressional Research Service (CRS) is a public policy research arm of the US Congress.

[xi] Thomas Ruttig is an analyst for the Afghanistan Analyst Network (AAN), an independent non-profit policy research organization headquartered in Kabul which provides analyses on Afghanistan and its surrounding region.

[xii] swisspeace is an independent peace research institute based in Basel.

[xiii] Amnesty International (AI) is an international non-governmental human rights organisation. It based on London (UK).

[xiv] Human Rights Watch (HRW) is an international non-governmental organisation, headquartered in New York City, which seeks to protect human rights worldwide.

[xv] The Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) is a national human rights organisation in Afghanistan, dedicated to promoting, protecting and monitoring human rights and the investigation of human rights abuses.

[xvi] Amnesty International (AI) is an international non-governmental human rights organisation. It based on London (UK).

[xvii] The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) is a department of the Secretariat of the United Nations, mandated to promote and protect human rights and to prevent human rights violations.

[xviii] Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF) (English: Reporters Without Borders) is a Paris-based international non-governmental organization devoted to protecting freedom of expression by reporting on violations of press freedom.

[xix] The US Department of State (USDOS) is the US federal executive department mainly responsible for international affairs and foreign policy issues.

[xx] The United Nations Security Council (UNSC), one of the six main organs of the UN, is primarily responsible for maintaining international peace and security. The UNSC regularly publishes reports about their international missions and worldwide developments concerning politics, security, human rights etc.

[xxi] Friederike Stahlmann is a researcher at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology (Germany) with a focus on Afghanistan.

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