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ACCORD – Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation

ecoi.net featured topic on Afghanistan: Overview of security in Afghanistan

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Note: For information on the security situation and socio-economic situation in Herat-City and Mazar-e Sharif please refer to the following link:

<https://www.ecoi.net/en/countries/afghanistan/featured-topics/security-situation-and-socio-economic-situation-in-herat-city-and-mazar-e-sharif/>

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Overview of security in Afghanistan

1. Security in the country

For information on the security situation in Afghanistan during the period from January 2010 to September 2018, see the following report:

- ACCORD: Afghanistan: Entwicklung der wirtschaftlichen Situation, der Versorgungs- und Sicherheitslage in Herat, Mazar-e Sharif (Provinz Balkh) und Kabul 2010-2018, 7 December 2018

<https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2001546.html>

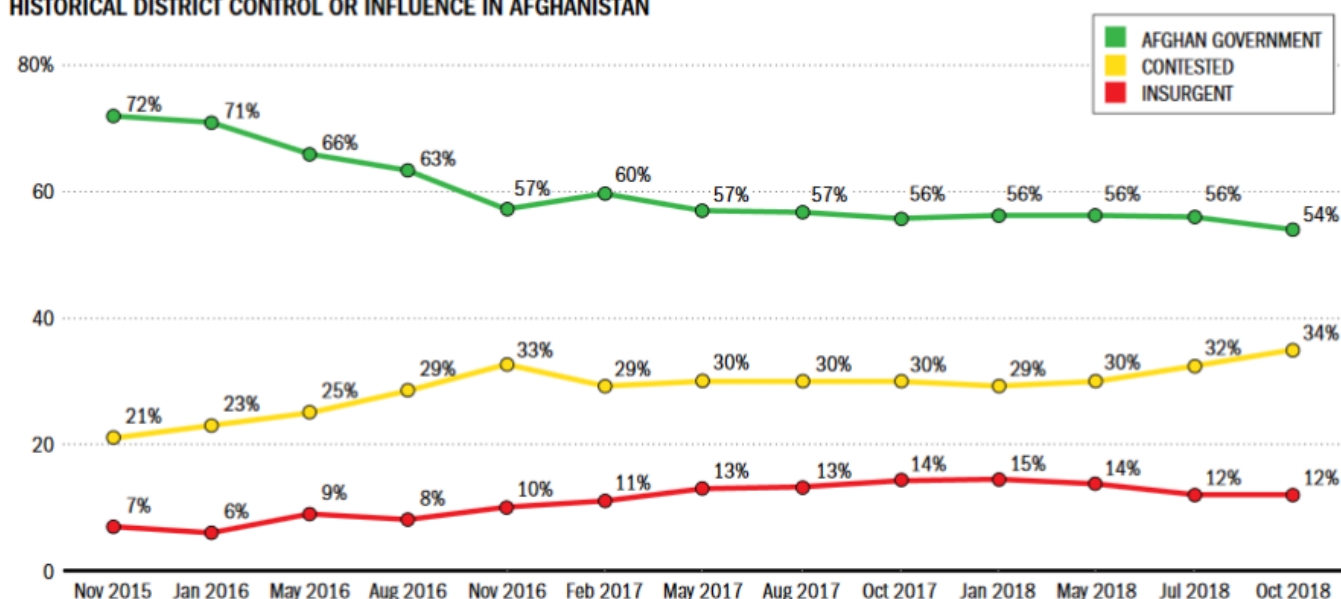
2019

"Afghan President Ashraf Ghani says more than 45,000 members of the country's security forces have been killed since he became leader in 2014." ([BBC News, 25 January 2019](#))ⁱ

"Since SIGAR began receiving district-control data in November 2015, Afghan government control and influence over its districts has declined by more than 18 percentage points; contested districts have increased by about 13 points; and insurgent control or influence has risen by about five points." ([SIGAR, 30 January 2019, p. 71](#))ⁱⁱ

The following graph by SIGAR illustrates the percentages of territories under Afghan government control or influence, territories under insurgent control or influence, and contested territories for selected months since November 2015:

HISTORICAL DISTRICT CONTROL OR INFLUENCE IN AFGHANISTAN



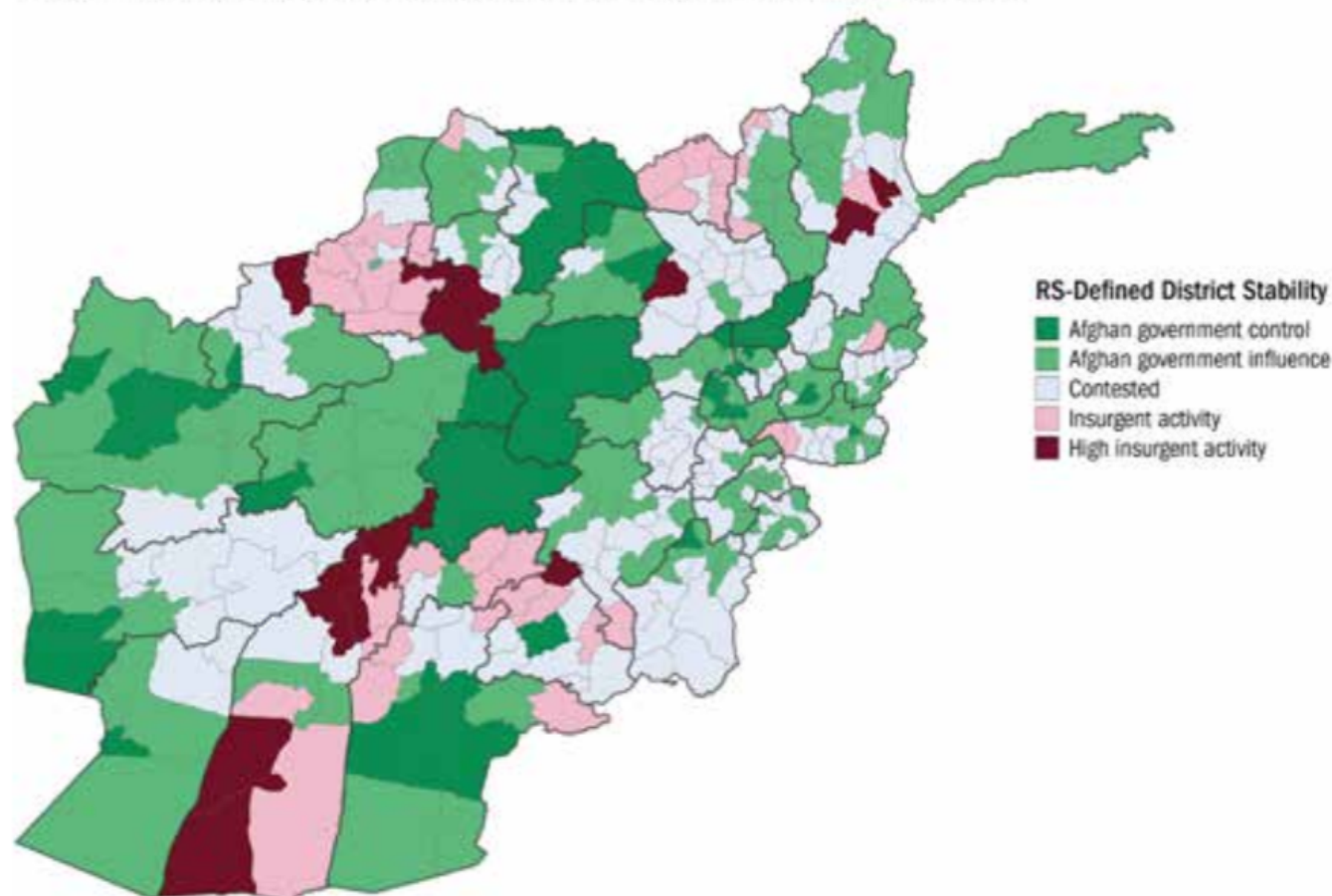
Note: Component numbers may not add to 100 due to rounding. Afghan government and insurgent figures include control and influence.

Source: RS, response to SIGAR data call, 11/27/2015, 1/29/2016, 5/28/2016, 8/28/2016, 11/15/2016, 2/20/2017, 5/15/2017, 8/28/2017, 10/15/2017, 3/22/2018, 6/22/2018, 9/19/2018, and 12/20/2018; RS, response to SIGAR vetting, 1/16/2018.

(SIGAR, 30 January 2019, p. 70)

The SIGAR report also contains a map illustrating population density in conjunction with level of control of territory by the Afghan government and insurgent groups:

STABILITY LEVEL OF AFGHANISTAN'S 407 DISTRICTS AS OF OCTOBER 22, 2018



(SIGAR, 30 January 2019, p. 71)

According to data of the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) of the University of Sussex, 43,750 people (civilians and non-civilians) were killed in reported conflict events in 2018 in Afghanistan. (ACLED, 29 April 2019)iii

"The armed conflict in Afghanistan continued to harm civilians at unacceptably high levels in 2018, with overall civilian deaths, including child deaths, reaching record high levels. UNAMA documented 10,993 civilian casualties (3,804 deaths and 7,189 injured) as a result of the armed conflict, representing a five per cent increase in overall civilian casualties and an 11 per cent increase in civilian deaths as compared to 2017. There were significant increases in civilian casualties from suicide attacks by Anti-Government Elements, mainly Daesh/Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). This, in addition to increases in harm to civilians from aerial operations and search operations, more than offset the continued decrease in civilian casualties from ground fighting. Suicide attacks and aerial operations each caused the most civilian casualties ever recorded by UNAMA for those tactic types." (UNAMA, February 2019, p. 1) iv

The March 2018 German-language expert opinion on Afghanistan by Friederike Stahlmann provides comments on the validity of casualty figures for Afghanistan (Stahlmann, 28 March 2018, section 7)v

"Based on the available data, as many as 372,000 conflict displacements are estimated to have occurred in 2018. Despite the historically high levels of violence, this number is lower than the estimated displacements in 2017 (about 474,000 displacements). [...] Total number of IDPs [as of 31 December 2018] 2,598,000" ([IDMC, May 2019, p.1](#))^{vi}

"Press reports in December 2018 and early 2019 indicate that the Trump Administration may be considering withdrawing some U.S. forces, though U.S. officials maintain that no policy decision has been made to reduce U.S. force levels. Many observers assess that a full-scale U.S. withdrawal would lead to the collapse of the Afghan government and perhaps even the reestablishment of Taliban control. By many measures, the Taliban are in a stronger military position now than at any point since 2001, though at least some once-public metrics related to the conduct of the war have been classified or are no longer produced (including district-level territorial and population control assessments, as of the April 30, 2019, quarterly report from the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction)." ([CRS, 1 May 2019, p. ii](#)) ^{vii}

„Das neue Jahr in Afghanistan ist erst gut zwei Wochen alt, aber schon deutet sich an, dass die Kämpfe landesweit zunehmen. Beide Seiten haben angekündigt, dass sie Frühjahrsoffensiven starten wollen bzw werden. [...] Am 19.3.19 informierten der nationale Sicherheitsberater Hamdullah Moheb, der amtierende Innenminister Massud Andarabi, Verteidigungsminister Assadullah Chalid (den einige westliche Länder, darunter Truppensteller für Resolute Support, wegen Foltervorwürfen nicht offiziell treffen), Geheimdienstchef Massum Stanaksai und Präsidentenberater Fasl Fasl Mahmud den Präsidenten Aschraf Ghani über „geplante Sicherheitsoperationen“. Am darauffolgenden Tag gab das Innenministerium den Beginn seiner „Operation Chalid“ für den nächstfolgenden Tag bekannt. [...] Die offizielle Ankündigung über den Start der Taleban-Jahresoffensive steht noch aus. (Im letzten Jahr geschah das erst am 25. April [...]) Trotzdem wurde bereits vor dem Naurus-Fest in mehreren Provinzen gekämpft.“ ([Ruttig, 7 April 2019](#)) ^{viii}

"American military officials have told Crisis Group they are escalating the pressure on Taliban strongholds in hopes of encouraging the insurgents to soften their approach to peace talks. The strategy includes heavy reliance on air power. The nine months that followed the 2018 ceasefire brought a record-breaking 5,914 airstrikes to Afghanistan, more than a 50 per cent increase from the same period a year earlier. The period from July 2018 to March 2019, the latest month for which data is available, included 5,914 weapons released by U.S. manned and remotely piloted aircraft. The same nine-month period a year earlier included 3,913 weapons releases. These numbers do not include strikes by the Afghan Air Force, which have also escalated in 2019. "2013-2019 Airpower Statistics", Combined Forces Air Component Commander, 31 March 2019. [...] The bulk of these airstrikes hit rural areas from where there is generally little public reporting about daily life and the impact of the conflict on it. [...]

Patterns of violence are changing. In the past, the insurgents inflicted the majority of civilian casualties. That started to change this year. The latest wave of fighting includes a greater number of civilians killed by international forces and their Afghan allies." ([ICG, 5 July 2019](#)) ^{ix}

The June 2019 EASO report on Afghanistan provides further information on the security situation at provincial level ([EASO, June 2019](#))^x

"On 28 September, Afghanistan held its fourth Presidential election since 2004. While levels of election-related violence remained relatively low in the months leading up to polling day, two high-profile suicide attacks on election-related sites in July and September, alongside an extended campaign by the Taliban to intimidate Afghan citizens not to participate in the election, raised concern and doubt as to what would transpire on election day. [...] [O]n 28 September, the day of the presidential elections, UNAMA documented 100 election-related incidents with civilian casualties across the country, mainly attributed to the Taliban, including many civilians who were not participating in the presidential election" ([UNAMA, October 2019, p. 1](#))

"From 1 January to 30 September, UNAMA documented 8,239 civilian casualties (2,563 deaths and 5,676 injured), similar to the same period in 2018. Anti-Government Elements continued to cause the majority of civilian casualties in Afghanistan and also caused slightly more civilian deaths than Pro-Government Forces in the first nine months of 2019, contrary to the first half year of 2019 when Pro-Government Forces caused more civilian deaths. Forty-one per cent of all civilian casualties were women and children. Civilians living in the provinces of Kabul, Nangarhar, Helmand, Ghazni, and Faryab were most directly impacted by the conflict (in that order). During the first nine months of 2019, the combined use of suicide and non-suicide improvised explosive devices (IEDs) was the leading cause of civilian casualties causing 42 per cent of the overall total, up from 28 per cent after the first two quarters of 2019. Ground engagements was the second leading cause of civilian casualties (29 per cent), followed by aerial attacks (11 per cent). Aerial operations remained the leading incident type of civilian deaths, causing 23 per cent of civilian deaths." ([UNAMA, 17 October 2019, pp. 1-2](#))

"From 1 January to 30 September 2019, Anti-Government Elements caused 5,117 civilian casualties (1,207 deaths and 3,910 injured), accounting for 62 per cent of all civilian casualties. While this represents a three per cent overall decrease in civilian casualties attributed to Anti-Government Elements compared to the same period in 2018, the recent increase of civilian casualties attributed to Taliban is noteworthy. UNAMA attributed 3,823 civilian casualties (922 deaths and 2,901 injured) representing 46 per cent of all civilian casualties to the Taliban. Civilian casualties attributed to the Taliban increased by 31 per cent in the first nine months of 2019 as compared to the same time period in 2018. However, comparing the months of July, August and September of 2019 to the third quarter of 2018, it shows more than a tripling of civilian casualties caused by the Taliban. UNAMA attributed 1,013 civilian casualties (229 deaths and 784 injured) representing 12 per cent of all civilian casualties, to Daesh/Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). This is a 49 per cent decrease as compared to the first nine months of 2018. Unidentified Anti-Government Elements caused 281 civilian casualties (56 deaths and 225 injured) three per cent of all civilian casualties." ([UNAMA, 17 October 2019, p. 3](#))

"From 1 January to 30 September 2019, Pro-Government Forces caused 2,348 civilian casualties (1,149 deaths and 1,199 injured), a 26 per cent increase from the corresponding period in 2018. Pro-Government Forces were responsible for 28 per cent of civilian casualties overall. During the first nine months of 2019 UNAMA attributed 1,261 civilian casualties (484 deaths and 777 injured), representing 15 per cent of all civilian casualties, to Afghan national security forces, similar to the civilian casualty figures from the same time period in 2018. UNAMA attributed 682 civilian casualties (468 deaths and 214 injured), representing eight per cent of civilian casualties, to International Military Forces, which is over a four-fold increase as compared to last year. UNAMA attributed 155 civilian casualties (79 deaths and 76 injured), representing two per cent of all civilian casualties, to pro-Government armed groups, with Paktika-based Shaheen Forces surpassing the Khost Protection Force in terms of civilian casualties caused. The remaining 250 civilian casualties (118 deaths and 132 injured), representing three per cent of all civilian casualties, were attributed to undetermined or multiple Pro-Government Forces." ([UNAMA, 17 October 2019, p. 8](#))

"AIHRC figures show that during the first six months in 1398 [21 March - 21 September], a total of 6,487 civilians were killed and injured in Afghanistan, of which 1,611 were killed and 4,876 civilians were injured. These figures show an increase of 8.36% compared to the first six months in 1397. [...] According to findings by AIHRC during the first six months in 1398, almost 75% of civilian casualties were committed by the Taliban, 3% by Daesh and 11% by the government forces. The perpetrators were not identified for 10% of civilian casualties. Remaining casualties were caused by Pakistani rockets fired on Kunar province." ([AIHRC, 21 October 2019](#))^{xi}

"This quarter [1 July – 30 September] saw heavy fighting among all parties to the Afghan conflict, as President Donald J. Trump called off peace negotiations with the Taliban after the insurgents claimed an attack that killed a U.S. soldier on September 5, and as the Afghan government carried out its late-September presidential election." ([SIGAR, 30 October 2019, p. 67](#))

"The United States has [on 7 December 2019] resumed talks with the Taliban in Qatar, three months after President Donald Trump abruptly halted diplomatic efforts that could end the US's longest war." ([Al Jazeera, 7 December 2019](#))^{xii}

"ACLED-recorded 4,005 political-violence and protest incidents this quarter (June 1–August 31, 2019), a 61% increase compared to the same period last year, with incidents concentrated in southern and eastern Afghanistan. The data show that this significant year-on-year change was mainly driven by an increase in the number of battles recorded this quarter: 2,530 versus 1,579 recorded during June–August 2018. ACLED defines a battle as "a violent interaction between two politically organized armed groups at a particular time and location," such as armed clashes or the government or non-state actors taking territory. Battles can occur between armed and organized state, non-state, and external groups, or in any such combination." ([SIGAR, 30 October 2019, p. 72](#))

"In total, between 9 August and 7 November 2019, UNAMA recorded 6,654 security-related incidents, a 13 per cent increase compared with the same period in the previous year. The highest number of incidents occurred in the southern region, followed by eastern and south-eastern regions, with those three regions accounting for 60 per cent of all incidents. The most active areas of conflict were Helmand, Kandahar and Nangarhar Provinces. After a decrease in fighting during the Eid-al-Adha holiday in mid-August, the conflict intensified in September. [...]"

"On Election Day, the United Nations recorded 643 security-related incidents, the highest such figure on an election day since 2004. [...] with Kunduz and Kabul City recording most incidents. In total, 77 attacks were directed against polling stations, including 35 schools. [...]"

Despite the high tempo of the conflict, neither pro-government forces nor anti-government elements achieved significant territorial gains during the reporting period. The Taliban maintained pressure on urban areas, mostly in the north-east and launched two offensives against the provincial capitals of Baghlan and Kunduz in early September. The Taliban captured Anar Darah District Administrative Centre in Farah Province and temporarily overtook seven other district administrative centres in

Takhar (Darqad, Chah Ab and Khwaja Ghar), Kunduz (Dasht-e Archi, Qal'ah-ye Zal and Khanabad) and Baghlan Provinces (Guzargah-e Nur). During the presidential election, the Taliban overran three district administrative centres in Takhar Province (Khwaja Ghar, Baharak and Chah Ab) as well as Qush Tepah District in Jowzjan Province. [...]

In response, Afghan National Defence and Security Forces launched large-scale operations to decrease Taliban pressure on the main roads and highways, for example, in the southern part of Zabul Province and in the north-eastern provinces. Afghan forces recaptured district administrative centres in Yamgan, Warduj and Kiran-wa-Munjan in Badakhshan Province, Dahana ye-Ghori in Baghlan Province and Jaghatu in Ghazni Province, some of which had been under Taliban control for three to four years. [...]

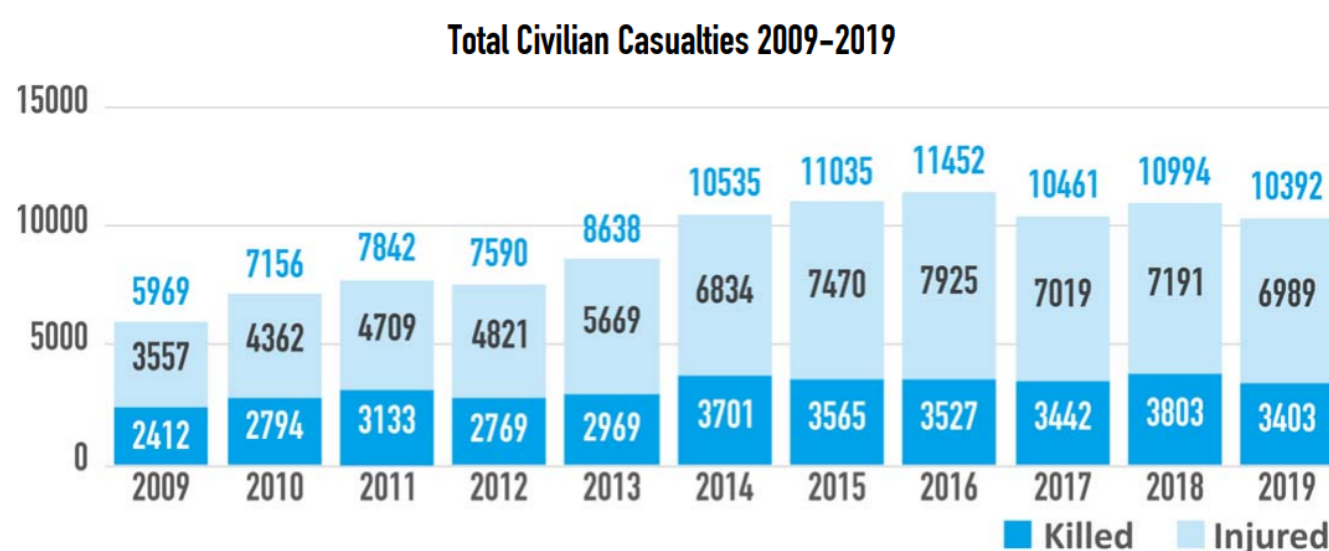
High-profile attacks by anti-government elements increased, with 31 suicide attacks during the reporting period, compared with 25 in the same period in 2018. [...]

Afghan and international military forces maintained pressure on Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan Province (ISIL-KP) strongholds in Eastern Afghanistan, and the movement was involved in continued clashes with the Taliban in Nangarhar and Kunar Provinces. [...] ISIL-KP claimed only one attack during the reporting period, the 17 August attack against a Shia wedding celebration in Kabul City, compared with nine attacks claimed in the same period in 2018." ([UNGA, 10 December 2019, p. 5-6](#)) [xiii](#)

2020

"UNAMA documented 10,392 civilian casualties (3,403 killed and 6,989 injured) as a result of the armed conflict, representing a five per cent decrease as compared to 2018 and the lowest overall level of civilian casualties since 2013. This reduction was driven by decrease in civilian casualties caused by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant – Khorasan Province (ISIL-KP). Civilian casualties caused by the other parties increased, particularly by the Taliban and by the international military forces. There were significant fluctuations in violence throughout the year, coinciding with gains and setbacks made during negotiations between the Taliban and the United States of America in Doha. The first half of the year was characterized by an intense campaign of airstrikes by international military forces and search operations by Afghan forces, particularly by the National Directorate of Security Special Forces. These operations contributed to a higher number of civilian deaths attributed to Pro-Government Forces than Anti-Government Elements at the midyear point, a trend that UNAMA had not documented before 2019. This was followed by a particularly violent third quarter, which showed the highest number of civilian casualties of any quarter since UNAMA began systematic documentation in 2009. This was mainly due to a spike in civilian casualties from suicide and non-suicide IED attacks by Anti-Government Elements, primarily the Taliban, as well as election-related violence. Despite low levels of civilian casualties in the fourth quarter as compared to the same time period in 2018, the year ended with record high levels of civilian casualties from airstrikes and search operations in a single year and the highest number of civilian casualties from non-suicide improvised explosive devices (IEDs) since 2015." ([UNAMA, February 2020, pp. 5-6](#))

The following chart shows numbers of civilian casualties (deaths and injured) documented by UNAMA for each year since 2009:



([UNAMA, February 2020, p. 5](#))

"A total of 10,772 civilians were killed or injured in 2019. Among the aforementioned number, 2,817 are killed, and 7,955 are injured. [...] Findings by AIHRC show that the majority of civilian casualties have occurred in South-Western Zone in 2019. There is a total of 3,453 civilian casualties in this zone which amounts to 32 percent of all civilian casualties in 2019. Likewise, here is the percentage of civilian casualties by zone: Eastern Zone, 2,271 civilian casualties (21 percent); Central Zone, 2,161 civilian casualties (20 percent); North-eastern Zone, 965 civilian casualties (nine percent); Western Zone, 749 civilian casualties (7 percent); Northern Zone, 638 civilian casualties (six percent); and Southern Zone, 535 civilian casualties (four percent)." ([AIHRC, 4 February 2020](#))

"Nearly two thousands attacks were carried out in Afghanistan last year, in which 22,300 people suffered casualties, a Pajhwok tally shows, indicating 16 percent reduction in casualties over previous year's. In 1926 armed attacks happening in 2019, more than 12500 people lost their lives and another 9800 sustained wounds across the country. According to Pajhwok Afghan News information, on average 61 people suffered casualties each day in 2019 in the country, compared to 73 people each day in 2018. However, unlike other years, the winter season of 2019 was bloodiest like the summer of 2018. Among every 22 casualties, nine were killed or wounded in winter last year. Pajhwok daily security reports based on difference sources show 1926 attacks took place in 2019, in which 12522 people were killed and 9771 people were wounded. In 2018, there were 2390 attacks, killing 16010 people and injuring 10679. In 2018, 274 airstrikes were carried out and in 2019 the number of airstrikes was 214. In 2019, as many as 56 suicide attacks occurred. [...] airstrikes and suicide attacks also caused heavy casualties because such attacks inflicted casualties on civilians as well. [...] In 2019, most of the attacks (175) took place in eastern Nangarhar province, 168 in Faryab, 134 in Ghazni, 117 in Kandahar, 103 in Helmand, 93 in Kabul, 72 in Jawzjan, 75 in Logar and the remaining 978 attacks took place in the rest of 25 provinces. [...] According to reports last year most of the attacks --- 113 --- took place on presidential elections day, the September 28, but most of casualties accounted for 343 people inflicted on September 3. [...] Militants, civilians and security forces are among the dead and injured of last and the previous year [...] Government says that the Taliban killed 2,219 civilians and injured 5,172 others but the Taliban claimed 5,423 civilians were killed and 3,284 others injured in 2,291 incidents last year. The Taliban blamed security forces and foreign troops for the killing of 5,152 civilians and added the remaining 280 were killed in traffic accidents." ([PAN, 7 January 2020](#)) xiv

"From 1 January to 31 March 2020, UNAMA documented 1,293 civilian casualties (533 killed and 760 injured), highlighting that the conflict in Afghanistan continues to be one of the deadliest in the world for civilians, at a time when the potential impact of COVID-19 poses a threat to all individuals in Afghanistan. [...] The overall number of civilian casualties in the first quarter, however, represents a 29 per cent decrease as compared to the first quarter of 2019 and is the lowest figure for a first quarter since 2012. [...]

Anti-Government Elements continued to be responsible for the majority of civilian casualties – 55 per cent - during the first quarter, causing 710 civilian casualties (282 killed and 428 injured). UNAMA attributed 39 per cent to Taliban, 13 per cent to Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant – Khorasan Province (ISIL-KP) and the remainder to undetermined Anti-Government Elements. UNAMA verified a significant decrease of civilian casualties attributed to the Taliban during the first two months of the year in comparison to the same period in 2019, particularly from a drastic reduction in suicide and complex attacks. However, in the month of March, following the reduction in violence week and the signing of the 29 February agreement between the US and the Taliban, civilian casualties attributed to the Taliban increased in comparison to March 2019, mainly due to a notable increase in civilian deaths resulting from nonsuicide IEDs and ground engagements. [...]

Pro-Government Forces were responsible for 32 per cent of all civilian casualties during the first quarter of 2020, causing 412 civilian casualties (198 killed and 214 injured). [...] UNAMA attributed 21 per cent of overall civilian casualties to Afghan national security forces, eight per cent to international military forces⁹ and the remainder to pro-government armed groups and undetermined Pro-Government Forces." ([UNAMA, April 2020, pp. 1-5](#))

The April 2020 UNAMA report contains the following chart showing the civilian casualties of the first quarter 2020 by incident type:

([UNAMA, April 2020, p. 4](#))

"On March 2, Defense Secretary Mark Esper confirmed he ordered USFOR-A to begin a phased drawdown of U.S. troops from Afghanistan, as stipulated in the agreement signed between the United States and the Taliban on February 29.¹²² The United States has committed to drawing down its number of troops in Afghanistan to 8,600 within 135 days of the agreement's signing and to withdraw all troops within 14 months, if the Taliban meet the conditions outlined in the agreement.¹²³ On March 18, USFOR-A spokesperson Colonel Sonny Leggett confirmed that the drawdown of U.S. troops was proceeding, but did not specify how many had already been withdrawn or how many remained in country." ([SIGAR, 30 April 2020, p. 70](#))

2. State and Non-State Actors

2.1. Afghan Government and Security Forces

"Three ministries have responsibility for law enforcement and maintenance of order in the country: the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Defense, and the NDS. The ANP, under the Ministry of Interior, has primary responsibility for internal order and for the Afghan Local Police (ALP), a community-based self-defense force. The Major Crimes Task Force (MCTF), also under the Ministry of Interior, investigates major crimes including government corruption, human trafficking, and criminal

organizations. The Afghan National Army, under the Ministry of Defense, is responsible for external security, but its primary activity is fighting the insurgency internally. The NDS functions as an intelligence agency and has responsibility for investigating criminal cases concerning national security. The investigative branch of the NDS operated a facility in Kabul, where it held national security prisoners awaiting trial until their cases went to prosecution." ([USDOS, 13 March 2019, section 1d](#))^{xv}

"As of January 26, 2020, CSTC-A [Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan] reported 281,548 ANDSF [Afghan National Defence and Security Forces] personnel (182,173 MOD [Ministry of Defence] [Afghan National Army including Afghan Air Force] and 99,375 MOI [Ministry of Interior] [Afghan National Police]) biometrically enrolled and eligible for pay in APPS [Afghan Personnel and Pay System]. This does not include 7,395 civilians (3,238 MOD and 4,157 MOI) or roughly 19,000 Afghan Local Police (ALP)." ([SIGAR, 30 April 2020, p. 74](#))

"ALP [Afghan Local Police] members, known as "guardians," are usually local citizens selected by village elders or local leaders to protect their communities against insurgent attack, guard facilities, and conduct local counterinsurgency missions. [...] NSOCC-A [NATO Special Operations Component Command-Afghanistan] reported that according to the ALP Staff Directorate, the ALP had roughly 28,000 guardians on hand as of July 17, 2019, roughly 23,500 of whom were fully trained, the same as last quarter." ([SIGAR, 30 October 2019, p. 99](#))

The March 2018 German-language expert opinion on Afghanistan by Friederike Stahlmann provides further information on state actors in Afghanistan ([Stahlmann, 28 March 2018, section 3.2](#))

2.2 Insurgent Groups

"Anti-Government Elements encompass all individuals and armed groups involved in armed conflict with or armed opposition against the Government of Afghanistan and/or international military forces. They include those who identify as 'Taliban' as well as individuals and non-State organised armed groups taking a direct part in hostilities and assuming a variety of labels including the Haqqani Network, Hezb-e-Islami, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Islamic Jihad Union, Lashkari Tayyiba, Jaysh Muhammed, groups identified as 'Daesh' and other militia and armed groups pursuing political, ideological or economic objectives including armed criminal groups directly engaged in hostile acts on behalf of a party to the conflict." ([UNAMA, August 2015, p. 2, Footnote 5](#))

"Terrorist and insurgent groups exploit Afghanistan's ungoverned spaces, including the border region of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Islamic State's Khorasan Province (ISIS-K), elements of al-Qa'ida, and terrorist groups targeting Pakistan, such as Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), continued to use the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region as a safe haven. The Government of National Unity (GNU) struggled to assert control over this remote terrain, where the population is largely detached from national institutions." ([USDOS, 1 November 2019](#))

Taliban

"The insurgency is still led primarily by the Taliban movement. 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 Akhunzadeh, 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](#))

"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](#))^{xvi}

"By the start of the 2019 fighting season, which was announced on 12 April under the name 'Al-Fath' or 'Victory' the political backdrop had changed. In fact, extensive talks had already taken place in early 2019 between the Taliban and the United States of America. The first week of Al-Fath saw the highest level of security incidents in two years. The Taliban enjoy robust supplies of weapons, ammunition, funding and manpower, with 60,000 to 65,000 fighters and half that number or more of facilitators and other non - combatant members" ([UN Security Council, 13 June 2019, p. 3](#))

"[T]he Taliban had reportedly undertaken a restructuring and made numerous appointments to senior leadership positions inside Afghanistan, which were described as the removal of the older generation in favour of younger Taliban leaders. According to the same interlocutors, the provincial shadow and deputy shadow governors, along with the provincial military commanders, were all replaced in the Provinces of Bamyan, Baghlan, Kabul, Kapisa, Kunar, Laghman, Parwan, Samangan,

Takhar and Uruzgan. Ousted individuals were reportedly removed owing to complaints from rank and file Taliban concerning deficiencies in logistical and financial support." ([UN Security Council, 30 May 2018, p. 5](#))

"Since the post-2014 U.S. military withdrawal from [Afghanistan](#), there is little sign that the Taliban's firepower has waned, or that the group is suffering from battle fatigue. Through persistent violence, the Taliban formations have proven they are still a major force in Afghanistan. It is likely the support structures the group has established over the last two decades remain intact. Since the fall of its so-called Islamic Emirate in 2001, the militant group has restricted the governments that followed from fully governing the country." ([JF, 2 June 2018](#))

"On 29 February, the Taliban and the U.S. signed an agreement that commits the U.S. to a fourteen-month phased withdrawal of military forces in exchange for Taliban commitments to prevent Afghanistan from being used as a safe harbour for terrorists. The agreement also obligates the Taliban to commence peace negotiations with the Afghan government and other Afghan power-brokers. This breakthrough comes after a decade of on-and-off U.S. and other efforts to catalyse a peace process, throughout which observers have questioned the Taliban's willingness to negotiate a political settlement that will require substantive compromise. The group's willingness to compromise remains an open question, but its interest in probing whether it could achieve its objectives through a negotiated settlement appears genuine – prompted, at least in part, by the elusiveness of a clear military victory." ([ICG, 30 March 2020](#))

Hezb-e-Islami

"Another significant insurgent leader is former mujahedin party leader Gulbuddin Hikmatyar , who leads Hizb-e-Islami - Gulbuddin (HIG). The faction received extensive U.S. support against the Soviet Union, but turned against its mujahedin colleagues after the Communist government fell in 1992. The Taliban displaced HIG as the main opposition to the 1992 - 1996 Rabbani government. In the post-Taliban period, HIG has been ideologically and politically allied with the Taliban insurgents, but HIG fighters sometimes clash with the Taliban over control of territory in HIG's main centers of activity in provinces to the north and east of Kabul. HIG is not widely considered a major factor on the Afghanistan battlefield and has focused primarily on high-profile attacks [...]." ([CRS, 6 June 2016, p. 22](#))

"The peace deal signed today by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, leader of Hezb-e Islami, and President Ashraf Ghani, has been hailed by the Afghan government as the first major peace achievement of the last fifteen years. However, expectations should be tempered. Given Hezb-e Islami's almost total absence on the battlefield, the deal is unlikely to significantly lower the current levels of violence." ([Osman, 29 September 2016](#))xvii

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](#))

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](#))

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. [...]

"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](#))

"Fierce fighting between the Taliban and Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K), the Afghan chapter of IS, have seen hundreds of militants killed in Jowzjan and Faryab provinces, two provinces in northern Afghanistan considered to be IS-K strongholds. About 300 militants were killed in two weeks of clashes between IS-K and the Taliban, which began on July 25 in the Darzab district of Jowzjan. It was the Taliban's third major offensive against their rivals, and saw about 200 IS-K fighters hand themselves over to government forces rather than face the Taliban. [...] The Taliban reportedly attacked IS-K forces, inflicting heavy losses on the group. Senior commanders on both sides were killed in the fighting." ([JF, 10 August 2018](#))

"IS-K's initial losses were considerable—it lost its first three emirs to U.S. drone strikes in just two years. However, the group was nevertheless able to maintain its rudimentary structure, and the eventual inflow of jihadists following the fall of the main IS operations in Iraq and Syria has paved the way for further development. A change in the leadership of the Afghan Taliban has allowed IS-K to consolidate, and Akhundzada [Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada, leader of the Taliban], in the midst of this year's spring offensive, appears unwilling to risk rupturing relations with an entrenched IS-K and open up fighting on another front." ([JF, 14 June 2018](#))

"Throughout 2018, ISIL is assessed to have carried out 38 terrorist attacks in Afghanistan, many of them high profile, including some in Kabul. ISIL targets have included Afghan security forces, the Taliban, North Atlantic Treaty Organization military personnel, diplomats, employees of the United Nations and non-governmental organizations, journalists and medical institutions, as well as religious minorities viewed by ISIL as soft targets. ISIL suffered a severe setback in northern Afghanistan during the reporting period. In July 2018, 1,000 Taliban attacked ISIL positions in Jowzjan province, killing 200 ISIL fighters, while 254 ISIL fighters surrendered to government forces and 25 foreign terrorist fighters surrendered to the Taliban." ([UN Security Council, 1 February 2019, p. 7](#))

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](#))

"In the very high mountains of Nangrahar are hiding out the last few, small groups of Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) fighters in that province. The group was driven out of their last remaining bases in Nangrahar at the end of last year. Who drove them out is, however, contested: the government, the Taleban and local people have all claimed the victory. Speaking to local sources, AAN's Obaid Ali finds a picture emerging in which all three played a role in pushing back the militant

group, as well as the US military and finally, the weather. [...] The organisation could regroup when the pressure on them subsides, but it seems it would need a long time for it to revive its networks, if indeed that is possible." (AAN, 1 March 2020)^{xviii}

"Last December, Afghan and US forces claimed to have meted out a humiliating defeat to ISKP in Nangarhar, its main stronghold in the war-torn country. But in the past weeks, the group resurfaced again claiming responsibility for the killing of more than 50 people in two attacks targeting the minority Shia and Sikh communities in the Afghan capital. [...] But according to Watkins, while the ISKP has indeed faced defeat in Nangarhar, some of its forces managed to escape to the Kunar province or across the border to Pakistan. The recent attacks by the ISKP in Kabul, it seems, are an attempt to show that although their military capacity weakened, they can still inflict major casualties in urban centres." (Al Jazeera, 2 April 2020)

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

ii The Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) is a US government body that provides oversight on reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan.

iii The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) of the University of Sussex collects data on reported conflict events in selected African and Asian countries.

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

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

vi The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) is an international non-governmental organisation based in Geneva, which advocates a better protection of and a more effective support for Internally Displaced Persons.

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

viii Thomas Ruttig is one of the co-directors of the Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN).

ix 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.

x The European Asylum Support Office (EASO) is an agency of the European Union providing support to EU member states in asylum issues.

- [xi](#) 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.
- [xii](#) Al Jazeera is a Qatar-based TV news network.
- [xiii](#) 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.
- [xiv](#) Pajhwok Afghan News (PAN) is an independent news agency headquartered in Kabul.
- [xv](#) The US Department of State (USDOS) is the US federal executive department mainly responsible for international affairs and foreign policy issues.
- [xvi](#) 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.
- [xvii](#) Borhan Osman is an analyst for the Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN), an independent non-profit policy research organisation headquartered in Kabul which provides analysis on Afghanistan and its surrounding region.
- [xviii](#) The Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN) is an independent non-profit policy research organisation with its main office in Kabul

This featured topic was prepared after researching within time constraints. It is meant to offer an overview on an issue and is not, and does not urport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status, asylum or other form of international protection. Chronologies are not intended to be exhaustive. Every quotation is referred to with a hyperlink to the respective document.

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