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War in Afghanistan in 2020: Just as much violence, but no one wants to talk about it

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[Kate Clark](#)

As memories of the relative peace of the Eid ul-Adha ceasefire fade and direct talks between the government and the Taliban should be about to begin, it seems a good time to look again at what has been happening in the conflict since the United States and the Taliban signed their agreement on 29 February. The US has largely stayed out of the conflict. Intra-Afghan violence, meanwhile, has carried on undiminished, although the nature and geography of the fighting has shifted. Insurgent violence has also become a little murkier, with more attacks remaining unclaimed. Moreover, as AAN Co-Director, Kate Clark reports, although the conflict has been almost as deadly for civilians in 2020 as in 2019, the Taliban and ANSF are now downplaying their attacks, minimising rather than exaggerating their actions.

This report is the fourth published by AAN to understand the conflict since the eight-days of Reduction in Violence (RiV), 21-29 February, which marked the US-Taliban agreement. (1)

Milestones in war and peace this year

2020 has been marked, on the one hand, by the US-Taliban agreement and the prospect of intra-Afghan talks, and, on the other, by continuing violence. By mid-July, the US had withdrawn several thousand troops, bringing its numbers down from about 13,000 to 8,600. It has also largely stepped away from a direct role in the conflict, except for occasional airstrikes in defence of the Afghan government forces (ANSF). The Taliban have continued to accuse the US of attacking them, in the words of the [Eid Message](#) from Taliban leader, Hebatullah Akhundzada, by “carrying out frequent drone strikes, bombardments, raids and artillery attacks.” Yet the US’s withdrawal from a major direct role in the conflict is testified to by UNAMA’s reporting on civilian casualties; it attributed the last civilian casualties to international forces to an airstrike in Herat province on 17 February.

The US [thought](#) it had a verbal agreement with the Taliban for the reduction in violence to last beyond the signing of the agreement in February in a way that would be “meaningful and felt by the Afghan people.” (2) The Taliban said no such agreement had been made. A statement by the group on 5 April (original in English [here](#)) referred to them desisting voluntarily from some types of attack, while insisting the agreement gave them the right still to:

... attack Kabul administration all military centres whether in rural areas or in urban areas but Islamic Emirate, neither has attacked their centres in major cities, nor had carried out operations at major military centres. Only checkpoints in some rural areas where the people were scare [sic] of enemy attacks have been attacked that is very less as compared to last year.

Meanwhile, the ANSF, although initially acting with restraint after the 29 February agreement, officially changed its stance on 7 April from defensive to ‘active defensive’ in the face of sustained Taliban attacks. President Ghani [ordered](#) this stance to be changed again to ‘offensive’ after the attack on patients at the Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF)-run maternity wing of the Dasht-e Barchi hospital in Kabul on 12 May. No party claimed that attack, but the government blamed the Taliban, who disavowed it. The US Special Inspector General of Afghanistan Reconstruction, (SIGAR), quoting the US military in its last quarterly report, [said](#) the ANSF was actually still in an ‘active defensive’ posture which would allow “them to preemptively strike to prevent an enemy attack.” It also reported, however, that the majority of ANSF forces remained “in defensive positions.” (p65)

Has Afghanistan become less violent?

In looking at the trends in violence this year, this report draws on two data sets, the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) and UNAMA’s reporting on the protection of civilians in the war. ACLED collects the dates, actors, locations, fatalities and modalities of all political violence and protests across Afghanistan (and other countries) that are reported in open sources; these include independent media, both Afghan and international, state-run media and Taliban websites. It collates and reports these incidences of violence weekly. Roger Helms has

illustrated the ACLED data in graphs and maps in this report to give an overall sense of how violent the conflict is and of the contrasting roles of the Taliban and pro-government forces, both Afghan and US, over time, in different districts and in comparison with last year.

UNAMA’s granular detail of the grim impact of the war on civilians also helps in understanding what is happening on the ground: the general level of violence compared with earlier years; how active the various parties to the conflict are; their changing tactics, and where the conflict is worst – in which provinces and whether it is urban or rural, for example. [UNAMA’s latest Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict report](#) covered the first six months of this year. Its teams around the country verify civilian casualties using “at least three different and independent types of sources, i.e. victim, witness, medical practitioner, local authorities, confirmation by a party to the conflict, community leader or other sources” (for more detail, see footnote 3).

At first, UNAMA appeared to have some relatively good news: it documented a 13 per cent reduction in the civilians killed or wounded in the first six months of 2020 compared to the same period in 2019 (see the 2019 mid-year report [here](#)). 3,458 people were killed or injured, compared to 3,812 in 2019.

However, there were many more days than usual of reduced violence in 2020: eight days of the Reduction in Violence in February and then three days of ceasefire for each of the two Eid holidays. In other words, in the grim calculus of working out the average number of civilian casualties per week of fighting, 146.6 civilians were killed or injured, on average, each week in the first six months of 2019; in 2020, the figure was only marginally lower – 144. An actual 13 per cent reduction would have given the figure of 127 civilians killed or injured each week.

Secondly, the drop in civilian casualties was largely due to US forces and the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP) being less involved in the war. As can be seen below, the ANSF and Taliban were both responsible for an increased proportion of civilian casualties and greater absolute numbers of those killed and injured in 2020 compared to 2019. The civilian casualties caused by insurgents whose allegiance UNAMA could not determine, also rose. In other words, the UNAMA figures did not indicate any lessening in the violence this year and documented the Taliban and the ANSF both causing more civilian deaths and injuries.

ACLED’s data set also appeared initially to point to a reduction in violence in 2020. However, unpacking its data revealed a very different picture, not just what the different parties to the conflict are actually doing, but also the impact the peace process is having on how they choose to portray their acts of violence.

Fighting... but not talking about it

We have been puzzling for some time as to why, according to ACLED’s raw data, Afghanistan had seen a huge reduction in violence in 2020 since the RiV in February, compared to 2019. This did not ring true. It has *felt* as if there have been some changing patterns of geography and types of violence, but no overall reduction. Rather, it appeared that the Taliban launched their spring offensive as normal, although without announcing it; that the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) have largely been responding, rather than going on the offensive; that the US has mainly been sitting on the sidelines and; that insurgent attacks of dubious origin are on the increase. The UNAMA civilian protection reporting for the first half of this year backed up that impression. However, this only added to our bewilderment because the trends between different data sets, in this case between ACLED and UNAMA’s, almost always match each other. Yet they did not – apparently – this year.

It was only when we started unpacking ACLED’s sourcing that it became evident that there has been a change in how the parties to the conflict have been reporting their actions: since the RiV, both the Taliban and the ANSF have been under-reporting, minimising rather than exaggerating, their offensive actions, and the US military has stopped providing data on the war almost completely. We stripped away reports of attacks that appeared only in government or Taliban outlets from the ACLED data in both 2020, when the ANSF and Taliban were under-reporting their actions, and in 2019, when they were exaggerating them. When only independent press reports and mutually confirming Taliban and government reports were left, the apparent reduction in violence melted away.

This reduced data set provides a picture of the conflict that *is* consistent with UNAMA’s, and its conclusion that civilian casualties at the hands of both parties have risen. For readers wondering why ACLED captures all reports of incidents, including those from parties to the conflict, it [argues](#) that the independent press focuses on large-scale incidents and thereby misses much of the conflict in Afghanistan, which is often small-scale or in difficult-to-reach parts of the country. The Taliban and government media have, in the past, tended to pick up such incidents. Stripping these reports out, however, when comparing the violence in 2019 and 2020, makes sense because of the drastic change in Taliban and government reporting. The resulting data set is, it should be noted, probably skewed to reflecting larger attacks in ‘better known’ provinces and most likely fails to cover the magnitude of the violence in both years.

There has also, in general, been far less official reporting of the conflict. In April 2020, the Afghan interior and defence ministries stopped routinely posting reports of fighting to their internet sites. An Afghan military spokesperson [told](#) AAN in July, “We have received a letter signed by the defence minister and the Chief of Army Staff, which reads that we are not allowed to share any kind of information to the media until the talks between the government and the Taliban resume.”

This is in contrast to the period prior to the RiV, when the government was anxious to report its offensives and Taliban losses, and loath to admit to its own. Mujib Mashal of The New York Times noted the shift in a [22 June tweet](#). Quoting National Security Council spokesperson Jawid Faisal [offering](#) statistics about large government losses—40 members of the ANSF killed and 80 wounded on average each day in the previous week—Mashal said:

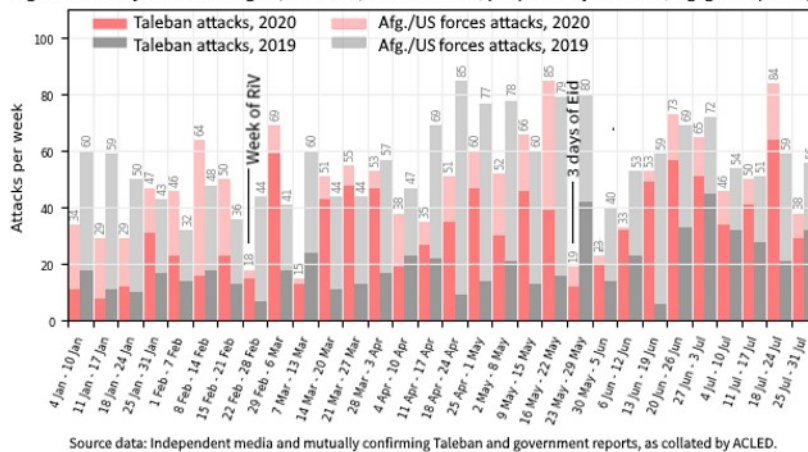
... For context: this's been the reality of the ANDSF losses for past few years, but the government is only admitting to numbers publicly now because it serves politically...

This new willingness to acknowledge government casualties has, however, only applied to summary statements by higher-level government spokespeople. Government statements about specific incidents – the kind that ACLED captures – have largely ceased.

The US has also stopped publishing data on its now much more limited activities. In March 2020, US Air Forces Central Command [said](#) it would no longer release monthly reports on the number of airstrikes and munitions released because of a “multiplicity of diplomatic relational concerns, including how the report[ing] could adversely impact ongoing discussions with the Taliban regarding Afghanistan peace talks.” (Details are now only available from 31 January 2012 to the end of February 2020, see [here](#).) Resolute Support also recently classified its reporting of ‘enemy-initiated attacks’ that used to be publicly available via SIGAR (on page 4 of its first [quarterly report](#) to the Congress this year, for example).

Figure 1 illustrates how violent the conflict has been this year compared to last. It uses only independent press reports, along with a very few mutually confirming Taliban and government reports, as collated by ACLED. It shows a Taliban spring offensive, albeit unannounced, on a par with last year's. It does not appear to support the Afghan government's claim of an unprecedented surge in violence. However, as mentioned earlier, the data on which it relies is skewed to larger, more newsworthy attacks, in areas accessible to the press, so it may be missing an increase in smaller scale attacks and ones in more remote areas. (A graph using all reports (figure 5) can be seen at the end of this report.)

Fig. 1: Attacks by Taliban and govt/US forces, 2019 and 2020, per press or joint Taleb/Afg. govt reporting



The reasons why the different parties to the conflict have changed how they speak about their actions will be returned to after a more in-depth scrutiny of trends in the war. But first we will turn to the findings of the most recent UNAMA report on the harm done to civilians in the conflict.

Trends in the conflict 1: Who was killing and injuring?

UNAMA documented 3,458 civilian casualties in the first half of 2020 (1,282 killed and 2,176 wounded). Figure 2, below, gives UNAMA's breakdown of responsibility for casualties in 2020 and 2019, with the figure in bold indicating which year that group was responsible for more deaths and injuries. (4)

Figure 2: Parties responsible for civilian casualties, 2019 and 2020 per UNAMA

<i>Party responsible</i>	<i>Casualty count</i>		<i>Percent of total</i>	
	<i>1st half of 2020</i>	<i>1st half of 2019</i>	<i>1st half of 2020</i>	<i>1st half of 2019</i>
Taleban	1,473	1,437	43%	38%
Afghan National Security Forces	789	685	23%	18%
Islamic State - Khorosan Province	299	423	9%	11%
International Military Forces (last on 17/2/20)	109	457	3%	12%
Pro-government armed groups	54	91	2%	2%
Undetermined, but anti-government	217	108	6%	3%
Unidentified or multiple, pro-government	30	164	1%	4%
Crossfire and ‘other’	487	447	14%	12%
<i>Total</i>	3,458	3,812	100%	100%

Bold indicates the year with the higher civilian casualties.

Source: https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama_poc_midyear_report_2020_-_27_july-.pdf

The **Taleban** were responsible for far more civilian casualties, according to UNAMA, than any other party – about two in every five civilian casualties in the first half of 2020. UNAMA also documented a small increase in the absolute number of civilian casualties caused by the Taleban, and within that, a sharp rise in the number of civilians *killed* by the Taleban (580 people). This was up by a third compared to last year. The increased lethality of Taleban actions was a consequence of their use of IEDs, targeted killings and summarily executing civilians whom they had abducted.

As for the **ANSF**, it was responsible for about one in five of all civilians killed and injured in the first six months of this year, and for a sharper increase in absolute numbers than the Taleban. These deaths and injuries came largely in airstrikes and from indirect fire, ie from weapons such as mortars which are difficult to aim accurately, during ground engagements.

The war also became a little murkier in 2020. In 2019, 108 people were killed or injured by **undetermined insurgents**, three per cent of the total; in 2020, that number had doubled, to 217, or six per cent of the total. These attacks included some particularly heinous attacks, including the killing with a remotely-controlled IED of two employees of the Afghanistan Independent Commission for Human Rights (AIHRC), Fatima ‘Natasha’ Khalil and Javid Foad on 27 June, and the [mass killing](#) at the Médecins Sans Frontières maternity wing of the hospital in Dasht-e Barchi in west Kabul on 12 May when gunmen deliberately targeted mothers. The Taleban denied involvement in both attacks.

The nature of the attack on the hospital was clearly sectarian in that the gunmen targeted a hospital in a part of Kabul which is overwhelmingly populated by Hazara Shia Muslims and thereafter sought out mothers rather than other patients. The attack seemed to have all the hallmarks of an ISKP atrocity. Yet, ISKP did not claim the attack, which was strange if the group was responsible, as it has appeared to have no red lines in terms of considering actions so shameful or horrific that they should be denied in public. The suspicion that the Taleban, or elements within the movement, might have been responsible lingered therefore. In general, the increase in attacks unclaimed by insurgent groups may point to the Taleban carrying out attacks without wanting to appear to do so, or to an actual muddying of the waters, of elements within the Taleban operating without explicit permission from the leadership, or of ISKP now carrying out attacks without claiming them.

UNAMA attributed fewer civilian casualties in the first half of 2020 compared to 2019 to: the now largely passive international military forces; a much reduced ISKP and; pro-government armed groups (5). UNAMA noted that 85 per cent of **ISKP**’s toll on civilians came from just three incidents: the attacks on the 6 March memorial for Abdul Ali Mazari in Kabul, a Sikh-Hindu temple in Kabul on 25 March and a funeral in Nangrahar on 12 May. It is also worth stressing that the reduction in civilians killed and injured by the **US military** was a fall from a very high level, as the US Congressional Information Service [reported](#) on 25 June 2020:

U.S. air operations have escalated considerably under the Trump Administration: the U.S. dropped more munitions in Afghanistan in 2019 than any other year since at least 2010 (see Figure 1). These operations contributed to a sharp rise in civilian casualties; the U.N. reported that the third quarter of 2019 saw the highest quarterly civilian casualty toll since tracking began in 2009, with over 4,300 civilians killed or injured from July 1 to September 30, though 2019 overall saw a slight decrease in civilian casualties. In the first two months of 2020 alone, U.S. forces conducted 1,010 strikes in 27 of Afghanistan’s 34 provinces.

If the US had carried on with its use of airstrikes after the RiV to the same extent as in the first seven weeks of the year, it would have killed or injured just over 405 civilians in the first half of the year, not 109, ie only somewhat fewer than the 447 in 2019.

UNAMA said that more than a fifth of all the civilians killed or injured in the conflict in the first half of 2020 – 770 individuals – had been targeted deliberately. It attributed 429 – more than half – of these casualties to the Taliban, 187 to ISKP, one to the Pakistani Taliban and 81 to the ANSF or pro-government armed groups. Among those deliberately targeted were religious leaders (in 18 incidents), healthcare personnel (13), members of the judiciary (11), civil society activists (9), NGO workers (8) and journalists (3).

Trends in the conflict 2: How were civilians killed and injured?

Looking at UNAMA’s breakdown of the types of violence that caused those deaths and injuries, some further trends become apparent in how the war is being fought this year, as shown below in figure 3.

**Figure 3: Actions resulting in civilian casualties
in 2019 and 2020, per UNAMA**

<u>Actions</u>	<u>1st half of 2020</u>	<u>1st half of 2019</u>
Ground engagements	35%	33%
IEDs	20%	20%
Targeted/deliberate killings	21%	10%
Airstrikes	9%	14%
Suicide attacks	4%	8%
Explosive Remnants of War	6%	7%
Search operations not mentioned in 2020	0%	6%
Other	5%	2%
	100%	100%

Bold indicates the year with the higher civilian casualties.

Source: [https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/](https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama_poc_midyear_report_2020_-_27_july-.pdf)

[unama_poc_midyear_report_2020_-_27_july-.pdf](https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama_poc_midyear_report_2020_-_27_july-.pdf)

Ground engagements (such as armed clashes, cross-fire and ground-launched attacks, whether involving small arms or heavy weapons) continue to be the main menace to civilians. They caused more than a third of all civilian casualties in the first six months of the year. They were also the main cause of civilian casualties attributed by UNAMA to pro-government forces, with 80 per cent of those casualties coming from indirect fire. UNAMA has again called on the Afghan government to stop its forces using such difficult-to-target weapons in civilian-populated areas. It also expressed concern at a tripling of the number of civilians killed in **airstrikes** by the Afghan airforce (86 in total, with a further 103 injured). There have been “numerous” airstrikes, it said, on “residential buildings that have resulted in high numbers of casualties, particularly women and children.”

In situations where the Taliban launch attacks from residential areas and the ANSF responds with fire into those areas, neither party is taking all feasible precautions to avoid, or at least minimise harm to civilians, as the Laws of War obligate them to. UNAMA describes, for instance, what happened on 29 June in Sangin district of Helmand when the Taliban launched a mortar from behind a market at an ANA base and the ANA fired three mortars back; they landed in the busy market place, killing 19 people, among them six children and injuring 31, including 11 children.

The proportion of civilian casualties from **IEDs** has stayed constant – they were the cause of one in five of those killed or injured in the conflict. However, casualties from pressure-plate IEDs rose, after two years which had seen a sharp reduction. In the first half of 2019, 210 civilians were killed or injured by pressure-plate IEDs; this year, the figure was 316, a rise of 50 per cent. Pressure-plate IEDs, which can be triggered by anyone stepping on them, even a child, are inherently indiscriminate and therefore, under the Laws of War, considered illegal. One third of the civilians killed and injured by IEDs in the first half of 2020 were children. UNAMA has again called on the Taliban to abandon their use of this weapon.

The numbers of civilians killed or injured in **suicide attacks** fell sharply, not only because ISKP has been less active but also because, under pressure from the US and in the context of efforts to reach an agreement, the Taliban have carried out relatively few major urban attacks (they tailed off after about September 2019).

Targeted and deliberate killings, including mass shooting incidents, were responsible for twice as many civilian casualties as in 2019 and were the leading cause of civilian deaths.

The Taliban’s use of **abduction** increased in the first half of 2020, possibly driven by the need to have enough ‘government prisoners’ to exchange for Taliban held in government jails, as required under the US-Taliban agreement (on prisoners, see [this AAN report](#)). There was a five-fold increase in the number of civilians who were killed following an abduction by the Taliban (40 people). UNAMA also expressed its concern about insurgents threatening, harassing and intimidating civilians

Finally, one noticeable absence in the gamut of causes of civilian casualties this year compared to last is **search operations**. In 2019, these operations led to six per cent of all civilian casualties. ‘Campaign forces’, ie pro-government armed groups such as NDS Special Forces and the Khost Protection Force, which are supported by US Special Operations Forces or the CIA and appear to have, at best, limited Afghan command and control, merited a whole section of UNAMA’s 2019 report. It is just possible that documentation on the summary executions of civilians in their own homes, among other abuses, by UNAMA, groups such as [Human Rights Watch](#), [AAN](#) and [others](#), might have led to a trailing off of such operations. More likely, however, is that the US stopped supporting night raids as part of its February agreement with the Taliban, or because of reduced capacity following the withdrawal of a third of its forces.

Trends in the conflict 3: Geographic trends in the violence

UNAMA reporting on the provinces where the greatest number of civilians were killed and injured in the first half of 2020 points to the geography of the war having shifted. For the first time in many years, Helmand has not featured in the list of the worst-affected provinces. Far fewer airstrikes and also far fewer IEDs, said UNAMA, has meant fewer civilians there killed and injured in 2020. Meanwhile, three northern provinces now feature: Balkh and Kunduz have joined Faryab as among the five provinces most badly-affected by the conflict. Balkh and Kunduz were particularly badly hit in strikes carried out by the Afghan airforce.

Worst provinces for civilian casualties, January-June 2020

- Balkh: 344 civilians killed or wounded
- Kabul: 338
- Nangrahar: 281
- Faryab: 233
- Kunduz: 205

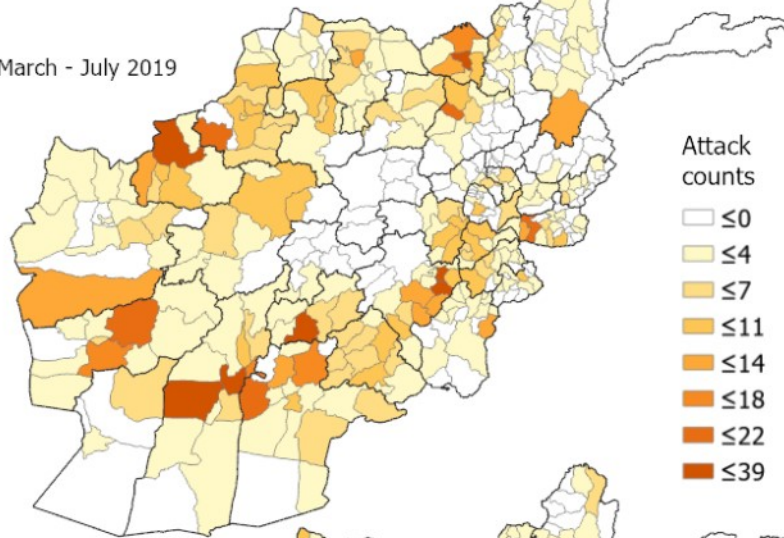
Worst provinces for civilian casualties, January-June 2019

- Kabul: 473 civilians killed or wounded
- Helmand: 440
- Nangrahar: 401
- Faryab 271:
- Ghazni 186:

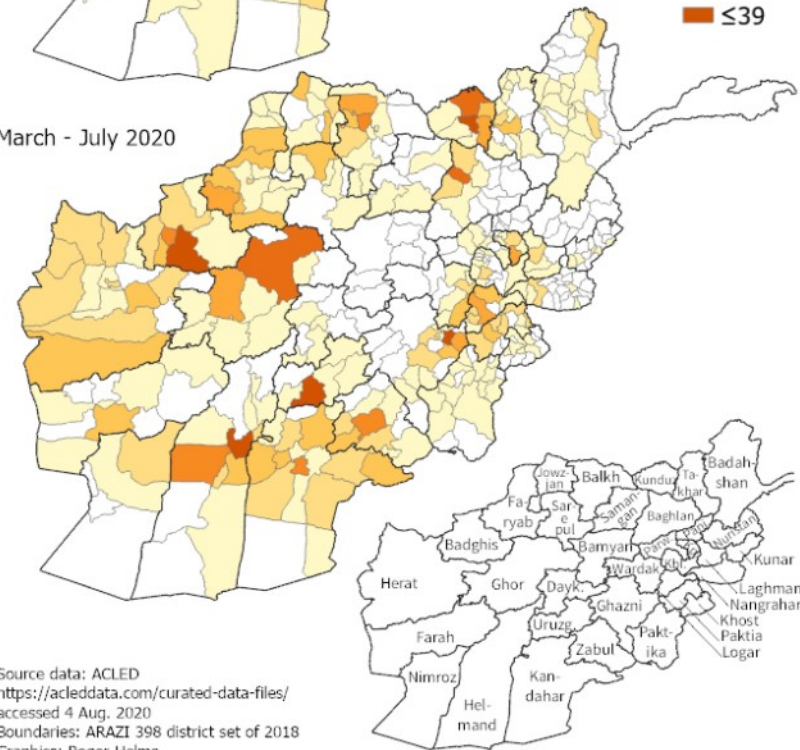
This possible shift is backed up to a certain extent by the ACLED data, illustrated in maps for 2019 and 2020 showing incidents of violence by district (figure 4). The south, south-east and east all appear to have been less violent this year; the west (particularly Herat province) appears to have become more violent.

Figure 4: Attacks by Taliban or Afghan government / US forces as reported by independent press, or jointly by Taliban and Afghan government sources

March - July 2019



March - July 2020



Such a shift may have significant consequences for how people view the peace process in different parts of the country. In [our reporting a month after the RiV](#), when the return to violence was very patchy, we found interviewees living in Taliban-controlled areas had really benefitted from the reduced role of the US military and the defensive (or active defensive) stance of the ANSF. They spoke about being able to go out at night for the first time in years and farm their land without fear. They were also generally much more hopeful about the prospects for peace. This contrasted with people in government-held areas that were contested. They expressed despair at the resurgence of violence that followed the wonderfully calmer days of the RiV and tended to be more sceptical about the talks.

Conflict, 'information management' and what happens to civilians

Even more so than previously, this is now an intra-Afghan war. While all Afghan parties to the conflict are supported by foreign countries, those doing the killing and those being killed are now almost all Afghan. Also, thus far in 2020, the conflict has continued unabated, despite the coronavirus pandemic and the peace process. Indeed, it has often seemed that the war was the only activity unaffected by Covid-19. The US-Taliban agreement and planned intra-Afghan talks have so far brought few benefits to Afghan civilians overall, although probably more to those living in Taliban-held areas and in cities who have been spared, respectively, night raids and US airstrikes, and fewer large-scale urban attacks.

This is also now a war that, for various reasons, the various parties to the conflict want to talk about less. This reluctance to provide detailed information is largely tied up with the peace process. Concerning the Pentagon for example, [The New York Times](#) said it had “not openly acknowledged most of its attacks [since the RiV]” and that this was probably “an attempt to keep the already shaky peace process on track.” The Kabul government seems to be following the US lead in shutting down its public information on the war.

Taleban motives may be somewhat different. They appear to be fighting as hard as ever, while, at the same time avoiding certain actions and places. They have ceased attacking foreign troops, as they committed to do in the 29 February agreement. They have also tempered their violence in other ways, either as per their unacknowledged verbal agreement with the US, or voluntarily: they have largely refrained from attacking provincial centres, have carried out – or at least claimed – few mass-casualty, urban, terrorist attacks and carried out only a few attacks on major military centres.

The exceptions to this, such as a series of major attacks in May, appeared driven by a calculation of the political impact. For example, the Taliban said a [truck bomb attack in Gardez](#), provincial capital of Paktia, on 14 May and a [Humvee bomb attack against the NDS headquarters in Ghazni](#) on 14 May were a response to Ghani ordering the ANSF to be put on the offensive. A rare Taliban attack on an urban centre this year, on Kunduz on 19 May also appeared part of this move. In that case, the Afghan government responded with an airstrike on an NGO clinic that was treating wounded Taliban fighters alongside civilian patients. On that same day, US envoy for Afghan peace, Zalmay Khalilzad, was meeting Taliban officials in Doha to discuss the intensifying violence, [The New York Times reported](#) and push them to respect the 29 February deal and start negotiations with the Afghan government. The first ceasefire of the year, over Eid ul-Fitr, soon followed.

Meanwhile, although a third of all civilians killed and wounded in the first half of this year were harmed in ground offensives, there has been little shift in territorial control. The Taliban appear *not* to have been trying to take over district or provincial centres as they have in previous years, but rather to be consolidating their control, including over major highways – through targeted killings, threats, harassment, checkpoints, abductions, IEDs and taxation. The other strong trend this year is the increase in the number of civilians killed and injured in insurgent attacks by unidentified authors. At least some of these may be attacks carried out by the Taliban which they have not wanted to publicly acknowledge. Overall, the Taliban appear to have been probing to see what they can do without attracting US airstrikes or pulling the US back into a direct role in the conflict.

The image they have chosen to project of themselves, however, is of a party ready to talk peace. Taliban leader Hebatullah said in his Eid message, for example, that, having fulfilled their obligations, the “domestic parties” should also remove all remaining obstacles so that “Afghans may jointly eliminate all internal and potential causes of war and conflict, restore peace to our homeland and reach an understanding among themselves over future Islamic government.” His words also came with an inherent threat that the “struggle” remained an option if their goals were not met through talks. (6)

The unwillingness of the various forces to speak about their actions, and especially the growing murkiness surrounding who is responsible for some of the insurgent attacks, is worrying. For humanitarian actors, in particular, trying to work in Afghanistan despite the conflict, knowing who is responsible for attacks and who needs to be approached to negotiate guarantees of security or safe passage, is crucial.

One last point to note is that in the past, US airstrikes and US-supported night raids have caused terrible fear and distress, deaths and injuries, and damage to the property of the civilian population of Afghanistan. They also hampered the Taliban from massing and launching large-scale attacks. This was seen most vividly as ISAF withdrew its forces – the last left in December 2014 – and only the US remained as a foreign force with a mandate to fight. A change in orders by President Barack Obama limited the US military to target only al-Qaeda and ISKP. Taliban violence intensified sharply, as they made a grab for territory and 2014 and 2015 saw increases in civilian casualties. In [our analysis](#) of UNAMA’s annual report on the protection of civilians in 2015, we said:

The single biggest factor affecting the Afghan conflict in 2015 was the almost complete absence of international forces on the battlefield. The Taliban have felt confident enough to mass fighters and menace urban centres in ways not seen for a decade. They captured 24 district centres during 2015 (and are still holding four) and one provincial centre, Kunduz; in 2014, they captured just four. Compared to the previously most violent year in the recent conflict (in terms of security incidents, rather than civilian casualties), 2011, when tens of thousands of extra US ‘surge’ troops ‘took the battle to the Taliban,’ in 2015, it was the Taliban driving the conflict, with the ANSF largely trying to defend territory.

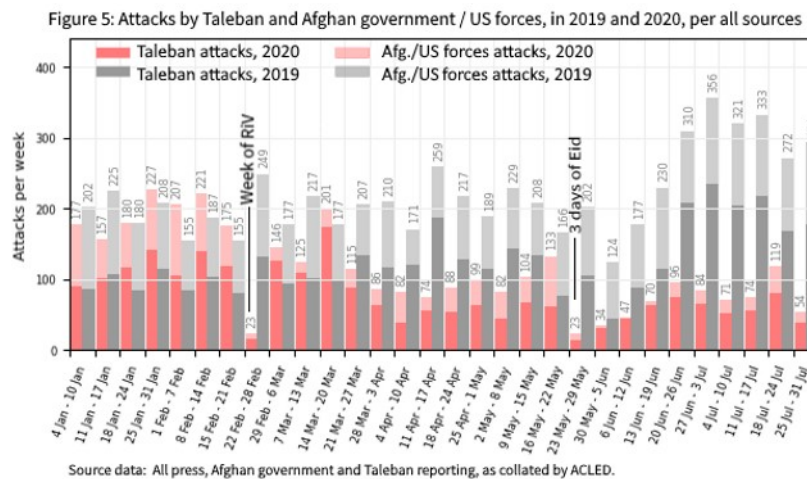
In 2020, since the RiV, the immediate result of the almost complete US withdrawal from the battlefield, and the reduction of the US threat against the Taliban, has been very different. The Taliban do appear to have intensified their use of violence, but as yet, they have held back from attacking and trying to take over district or provincial centres. However, this is not to say that their capacity for this has gone away. Should talks fail and the US remains a minor or withdrawing player in the conflict, worse violence may yet be to come.

Edited by Martine van Bijlert

The author wants to thank Roger Helms for discussions over data and sourcing and for providing the graphs/tables/maps.

Annex: How violent the conflict looks using all reports, as collated by ACLED.

Figure 5 shows how using all reports, including only Taliban or only government, skews the graph to show an apparent reduction in violence this year. In reality, the difference between 2019 and 2020 is accounted for by changes in how the two parties to the conflict report their actions, exaggerating them last year and minimising them this year.



(1) The earlier reports were:

AAN team, [Voices from the Districts, the Violence Mapped \(1\): What has happened since the reduction in violence ended?](#), 21 March 2020;

Kate Clark, [Voices from the Districts, the Violence Mapped \(2\): Assessing the conflict a month after the US-Taliban agreement](#), 8 April 2020;

Reza Kazemi and Fazl Rahman Muzhary, [Covid-19 in Afghanistan \(4\): A precarious interplay between war and epidemic](#), 19 June 2020.

(2) That there was indeed some sort of agreement that the Taliban reduce violence was also suggested by the Commander of US and NATO forces in Afghanistan General Austin ‘Scott’ Miller, who said on 4 March 2020 that the US had always been “very clear” with the Taliban “about our expectations—the violence must remain low.” That day, a US airstrike had targeted Taliban whom the US military spokesman said had been attacking an ANSF checkpoint in Nahr-e Seraj in Helmand (also known as Gereshk), while the previous day, the Taliban had attacked 43 check posts in the province. The lack of outrage against the airstrike from the Taliban suggested that they had indeed breached some sort of understanding.

(3) UNAMA only includes civilian casualties in its count which [are](#):

... recorded as ‘verified’ where, based on the totality of the information reviewed by UNAMA, it has determined that there is ‘clear and convincing’ evidence that civilians have been killed or injured. In order to meet this standard, UNAMA requires at least three different and independent types of sources, i.e. victim, witness, medical practitioner, local authorities, confirmation by a party to the conflict, community leader or other sources. Wherever possible, information is obtained from the primary accounts of victims and/or witnesses of the incident and through on-site fact-finding. These forms of fact-finding are not always possible, primarily due to security-related constraints affecting access. In such instances, UNAMA relies on a range of techniques to gain information through reliable networks using as wide a range of sources and information as possible, all of which are evaluated for credibility and reliability. These techniques include examination of digital evidence gathered at the scene of incidents such as still and video images as well as audio recordings; visits to hospitals and medical facilities; reports of the United Nations Department of Safety and Security and other United Nations entities; accounts by secondary sources; information gathered by non-governmental organizations and other third parties; and the parties to the conflict themselves. UNAMA proactively consults sources of different genders, as well as those belonging to minority racial, religious and ethnic groups, and marginalized sectors of society, to ensure a variety of opinions and reduce risk of any particular bias. Where UNAMA is not satisfied with the quantity or quality of information concerning civilian casualties, it will not consider it as verified. Unverified incidents are not included in this report.

(4) Until each annual report is finalised, all numbers from UNAMA are provisional. However, they tend to rise a little as it documents and confirms more casualties. In this table, the author has cited the preliminary figures for 2019 as published in the 2019 mid-year report, as they are a better comparison for the preliminary figures for 2020. The final numbers for 2019 can be read in [UNAMA’s 2019 annual report](#).

(5) When looking at the table on civilian casualties, the apparent disparity in absolute numbers and percentages of civilian casualties caused by pro-government armed groups (in both cases presented as 2%) is the result of figures being rounded up or down to their nearest whole number: in 2020, 1.56%, was rounded up to 2%; in 2019, 2.38% was rounded down to 2%.

(6) The relevant passage of Hebatullah's Eid message in full is:

Our Jihad was and continues to be for ending the occupation and establishing a pure Islamic government, therefore, we reassure our Mujahid and persecuted nation that their aspirations will not be betrayed, Allah willing. Our clear message remains that we are not looking for monopoly over power because all the diverse Afghan tribes and ethnicities are in need of one another – rather the consummation, sovereignty and power of an Islamic system is tied with the unity and oneness of Afghans. Islam orders us all towards Islamic brotherhood, honesty and bestowing responsibility upon those qualified. Every individual in society is entitled to exercise all the rights and privileges of life and have their political and social status determined on the basis of merit and piety.

Afghanistan is the shared home of all Afghans and it is the responsibility of every Afghan to develop this home, protect its religious and national interests and defend its sovereignty and borders.

Our ongoing struggle is a tool for achieving the above objectives. If these goals can be achieved through talks and understanding then we completely support it and consider sincere and serious dialogue one of the fundamental ways for finding a resolution.

We do not hold personal vendetta against anyone but have raised arms to defend the sovereignty of our homeland and establish a pure Islamic government. We seek a peaceful life with everyone once those objectives have been met.

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