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# IMPACT OF IMPROVISED EXPLOSIVE DEVICES ON CIVILIANS IN AFGHANISTAN

UNAMA HUMAN RIGHTS

15 August 2021 – 30 May 2023



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## About this report

This report is part of a series of thematic studies on current human rights issues of concern to the people of Afghanistan, carried out by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan's (UNAMA) Human Rights Service in the framework of Security Council Resolution 2626 (2022), which was extended by Resolution 2678 (2023). Resolution 2626 tasks UNAMA with engaging with "all stakeholders at the national and subnational levels and civil society and international non-governmental organizations in the protection and promotion of the human rights of all Afghans", and to "monitor, report and advocate with regard to the situation for civilians (and) the prevention and elimination of violence." As part of this engagement, Afghanistan's *de facto* authorities were invited to provide factual comments on the content of the report and their response is annexed.

## Overview

Despite a significant reduction in civilian casualties in Afghanistan since the Taliban takeover on 15 August 2021, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) has continued to document significant levels of civilian harm resulting from deliberate attacks employing improvised explosive devices (IEDs).

Between 15 August 2021 and 30 May 2023, UNAMA recorded a total of 3,774 civilian casualties (1,095 killed, 2,679 wounded).

Three quarters of these civilian casualties (2,814 civilian casualties: 701 killed, 2,113 wounded) were caused by indiscriminate IED attacks in populated areas, including places of worship, schools and markets.

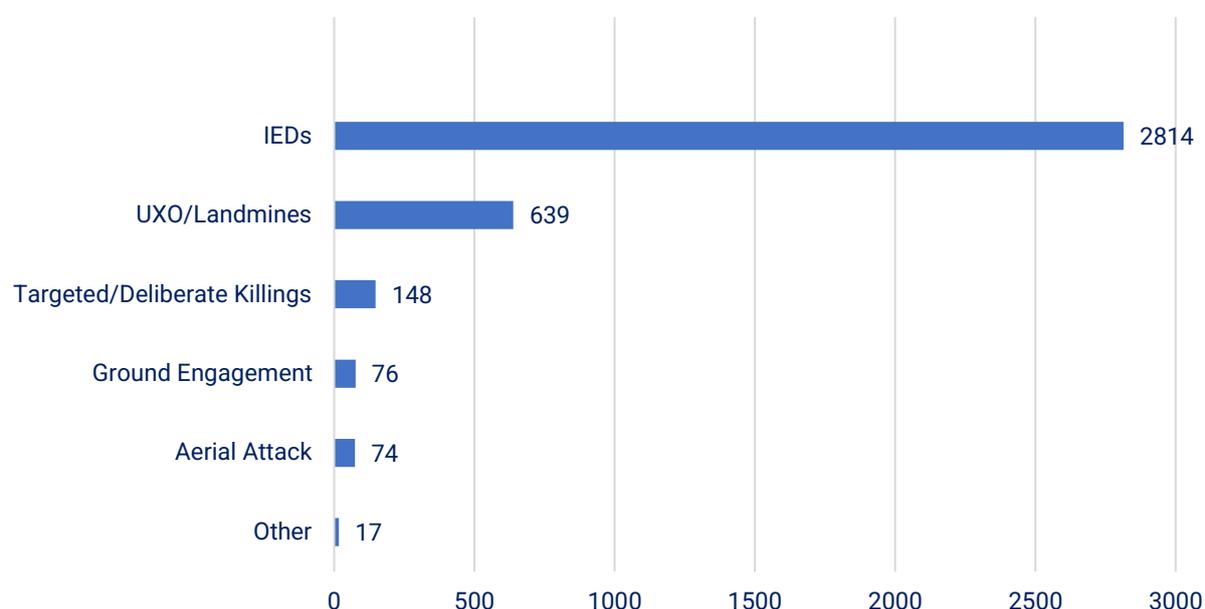
*"I can't remember many things, but I have seen those who were near the explosion torn into pieces and those who were a bit further they were a bit fine, I saw my brother and my other classmate also among the injured...one of my classmates also died during the transfer to Balkh hospital due to serious wounds he sustained. In Samangan provincial hospital there are more than 25 students hospitalized now some of them in critical situations and I hope they will be fine. Most of the students were below 18 years of age but we also had classmates who were above 18 years."*

Statement by victim of IED explosion in a madrassa, Samangan province, 1 December 2022.

## Key figures

Between the Taliban takeover on 15 August 2021 and 30 May 2023, UNAMA recorded 3,774 civilian casualties (1,095 killed, 2,679 wounded), among them 233 women (92 killed, 141 wounded) and 866 children (287 killed, 579 wounded). The leading causes of civilian harm during this period were deliberate IED attacks (2,814 civilian casualties), explosive remnants of war (639 civilian casualties) and targeted killings (148 civilian casualties).

CIVILIAN CASUALTIES RECORDED 15 AUGUST 2021 - 30 MAY 2023



UNAMA documented at least 2,814 casualties (701 killed, 2,113 wounded) as a result of IEDs from 15 August 2021 – 30 May 2023. Among those killed and wounded were 289 children (75 killed, 214 wounded) and 168 women (64 killed, 104 wounded).

The majority of civilian casualties (1,701) as a result of IEDs were due to such attacks carried out by the self-identified Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant – Khorasan Province (ISIL-KP). A significant number of casualties (1,095), however, resulted from IED attacks which were never claimed and/or for which UNAMA was unable to attribute responsibility.

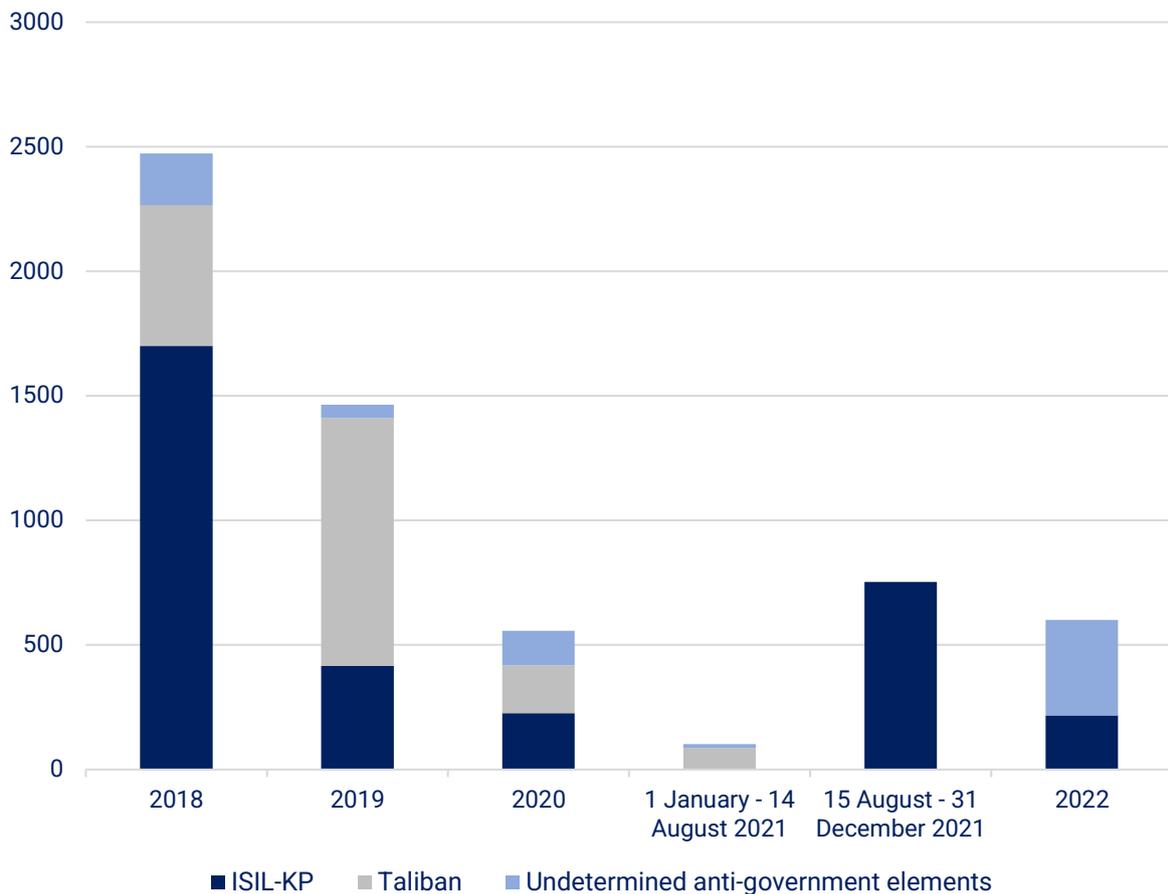
## Civilian harm as a result of suicide attacks

Despite a significant overall reduction in civilian casualties in Afghanistan since 15 August 2021, there has not been a corresponding decrease in civilian harm caused by suicide attacks. UNAMA's figures highlight not only the ongoing civilian harm resulting from such attacks, but an increase in the lethality of suicide attacks since 15 August 2021, with a smaller number of attacks causing a greater number of civilian casualties. Additionally, while in recent years there had been a decrease in civilian harm resulting from suicide attacks carried out by ISIL-KP, this significantly increased in the immediate aftermath of the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan.

- In 2018, 50 suicide attacks caused 2,473 civilian casualties (763 killed, 1,710 wounded).
  - ISIL-KP were responsible for 27 suicide attacks causing 1700 civilian casualties; Taliban were responsible for 17 suicide attacks causing 566 civilian casualties; undetermined anti-government elements were responsible for six suicide attack causing 207 civilian casualties.
- In 2019, 31 suicide attacks caused 1,464 civilian casualties (301 killed, 1,163 wounded).
  - Taliban were responsible for 23 suicide attacks causing 995 civilian casualties; ISIL-KP were responsible for five suicide attacks, causing 416 civilian casualties; undetermined anti-government elements were responsible for three suicide attacks causing 53 civilian casualties.
- In 2020, 16 suicide attacks caused 557 civilian casualties (114 killed, 443 wounded).
  - ISIL-KP were responsible for two suicide attacks causing 227 civilian casualties; Taliban were responsible for ten suicide attacks causing 191 civilian casualties; undetermined anti-government elements were responsible for four suicide attacks causing 139 civilian casualties.
- Between 1 January and 14 August 2021, eight suicide attacks caused 102 civilian casualties (19 killed, 83 wounded).
  - Taliban were responsible for six suicide attacks causing 87 civilian casualties; undetermined anti-government elements were responsible for two suicide

attacks causing 15 civilian casualties; ISIL-KP were responsible for no suicide attacks causing civilian casualties.

- Between 15 August and 31 December 2021, three suicide attacks caused 753 civilian casualties (253 killed, 500 wounded).
  - ISIL-KP was responsible for all three suicide attacks.
- In 2022, eight suicide attacks caused 600 civilian casualties (205 killed, 395 wounded).
  - Undetermined actors were responsible for four suicide attacks, causing 383 civilian casualties; ISIL-KP was responsible for four suicide attacks, causing 217 civilian casualties.



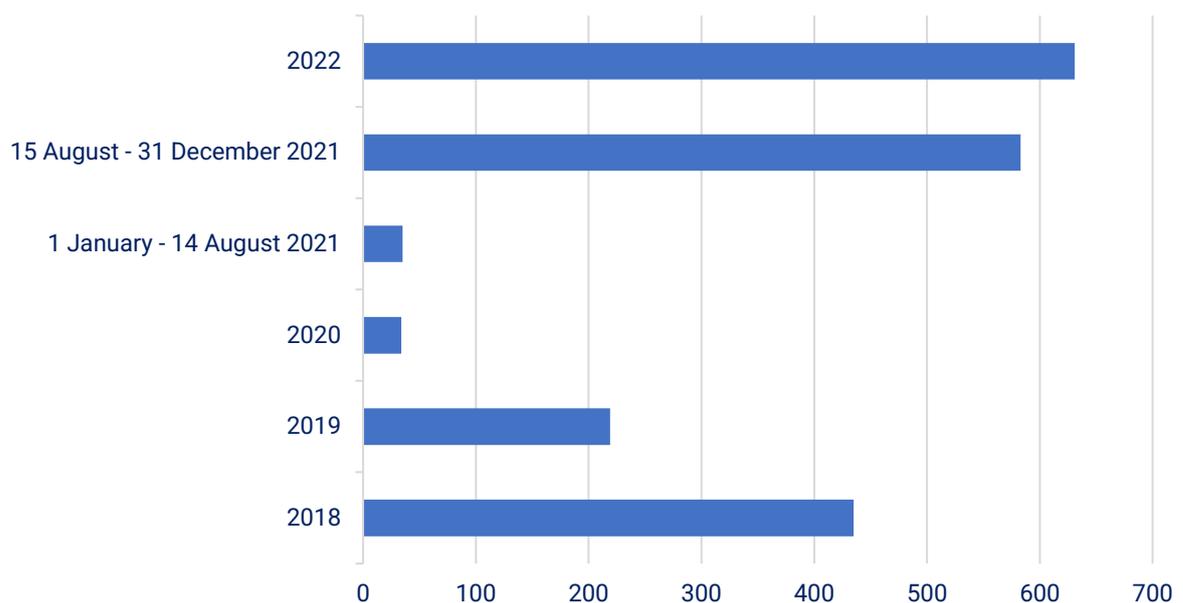
## Civilian harm from attacks on places of worship

*“One of the families who wanted to find their relative in the incident scene, were unable to find them. Later they approached the hospital. The victim was not found among any killed or wounded people. Later when his family member moved around the incident area, they just found a hand and a foot, which was identified by the victim’s relative. And there are many in such condition.”*

Statement by witness of attack on Gazargah mosque in Herat, 4 September 2022.

IED attacks on places of worship caused 1,218 civilian casualties (368 killed, 850 wounded) between 15 August 2021 and 15 February 2023. Among these casualties were four women (one killed, three wounded) and 100 children (39 killed, 61 wounded). IED attacks on places of worship accounted for more than one third of all civilian casualties recorded during this period, with UNAMA’s figures indicating a significant increase in civilian harm resulting from IED attacks on places of worship compared with prior to the Taliban takeover:

- In 2018, nine IED attacks on places of worship caused 435 civilian casualties (143 killed, 292 wounded).
- In 2019, nine IED attacks on places of worship caused 219 civilian casualties (70 killed, 149 wounded).
- In 2020, six IED attacks on places of worship caused 34 civilian casualties (9 killed, 25 wounded).
- Between 1 January and 14 August 2021, one IED attack on a place of worship caused 35 civilian casualties (10 killed, 25 wounded).
- Between 15 August and 31 December 2021, four IED attacks on places of worship caused 583 civilian casualties (184 killed, 399 wounded).
- In 2022, 14 IED attacks on places of worship resulted in 631 civilian casualties (183 killed, 448 wounded).

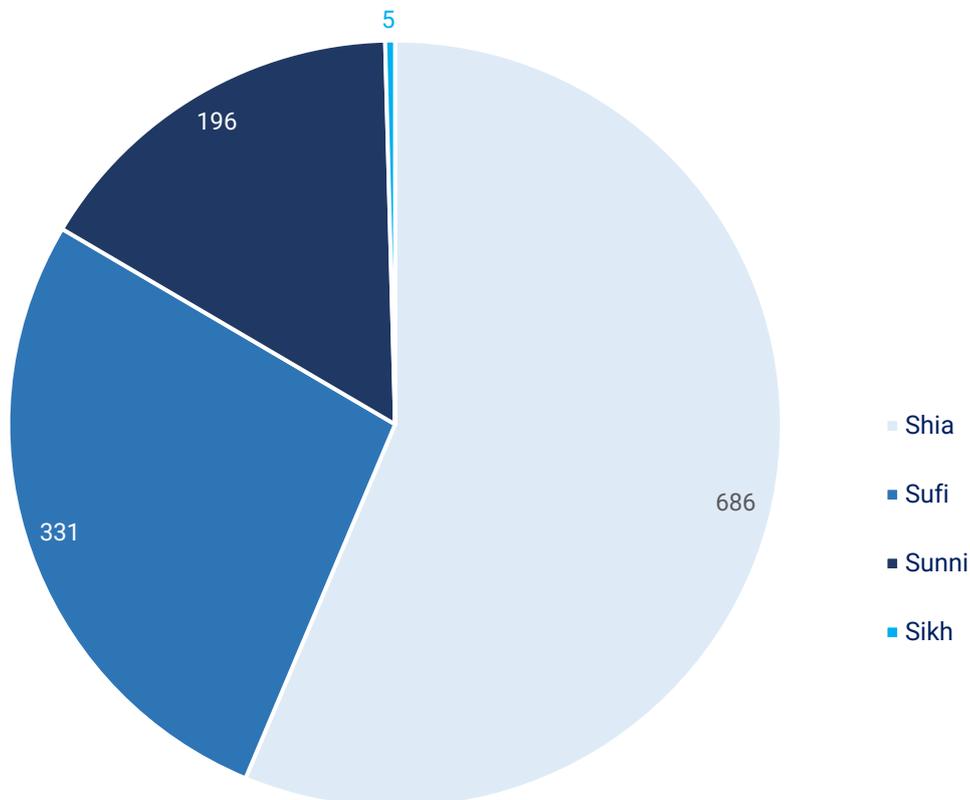


ISIL-KP was responsible for the majority of IED attacks on places of worship carried out between 15 August 2021 and 30 May 2023. UNAMA documented nine attacks on places of worship resulting in 853 civilian casualties (284 killed, 569 wounded) attributed to ISIL-KP.

Attacks on Shi'a places of worship accounted for over half of civilian casualties resulting from attacks on all places of worship during this period. Sufi, Sunni and Sikh places of worship and religious gatherings were also affected.

- 226 people were killed and 460 wounded in four IED attacks on Shi'a places of worship. All four attacks were claimed by ISIL-KP.
- 103 people were killed and 228 wounded in four IED attacks on Sufi places of worship/religious gatherings. Three attacks remain unattributed, while the fourth attack was attributed to ISIL-KP (50 killed, 55 wounded).
- 37 people were killed and 159 wounded in ten IED attacks on Sunni places of worship. Nine attacks remain unattributed, while the tenth attack was attributed to ISIL-KP (three killed, 12 wounded).
- Two people were killed and three wounded in an IED attack on a Sikh place of worship. ISIL-KP claimed responsibility for the attack.

#### CIVILIAN CASUALTIES ON PLACES OF WORSHIP BY DENOMINATION



## Civilian harm from attacks targeting the Hazara community

*“I was travelling home that day of the incident, 25th May, by the local transportation and using a flying coach to Hassan Abad. It was a bad day of my life, the IED inside our car exploded and left many of us dead and wounded. I remember, it was so strong as it blew every one of us outside the car and we lay wounded on the street. I was wounded on my two legs, however, now am receiving treatment and am fine. Happily, my legs have not been amputated, the doctors said I can still walk.”*

Statement by victim of an attack against the Hazara community in Mazar-e-Sharif, 29 May 2022.

In addition to attacks on Shi’a places of worship, a number of IED attacks targeting the – predominantly Shi’a Muslim – Hazara community in schools, educational facilities, crowded streets and on public transportation occurred between 15 August 2021 and 30 May 2023. UNAMA documented at least 345 (95 killed, 250 wounded) casualties as a result of attacks targeting Hazaras during this period.

Two attacks were carried out in Hazara-populated areas of Kabul immediately prior to the Shi’a Muslim commemoration of Ashura (8 to 9 August 2022). On 6 August, an IED explosion in a market killed three people and wounded 54 others and on 7 August, an IED attached to a minibus killed two people and wounded 22 others. Both attacks were claimed by ISIL-KP.

In 2022, three attacks against educational facilities in Dasht-e-Barchi, a predominantly Hazara area of Kabul, caused at least 236 civilian casualties:

- On 19 April 2022, consecutive IED attacks were carried out at two educational facilities in Dasht-e-Barchi – Abdul Rahim-e-Shahid High School (18 killed, 44 wounded) and Mumtaz Educational Centre. Among those killed and wounded in both incidents were 47 children (12 boys killed, 34 boys and one girl wounded) and four women (one killed, three wounded).
- On 30 September 2022, a suicide IED attack against Kaaj Educational Centre in Dasht-e-Barchi killed 54 people and wounded 114 others, most of them young women and girls (48 females killed including three children, 67 females wounded including nine children). The youngest victim was a 14-year-old girl who was wounded.

While the majority of attacks against the Hazara community were claimed by ISIL-KP, a number of significant incidents – including the abovementioned attacks targeting educational facilities in West Kabul – remain unclaimed.

## Civilian harm from attacks targeting the *de facto* authorities

IED attacks targeting the *de facto* Taliban authorities caused 426 civilian casualties (63 killed, 363 wounded) during the period. More than two thirds of these attacks were claimed by ISIL-KP.

These incidents affected both civilian employees of the *de facto* authorities and bystanders. For example, on 10 October 2022, an IED detonated against a *de facto* security force vehicle as it passed through a crowded market area in Mehtarlam city, Laghman province, wounding eight children, five women and 29 men, in addition to two *de facto* police officers. There was no claim of responsibility.

On 11 January 2022 in Kabul, a suicide attack at the gates of the *de facto* Ministry of Foreign Affairs killed 10 people and wounded 53 others, mostly *de facto* Ministry of Foreign Affairs employees. ISIL-KP claimed responsibility for the attack.

UNAMA also recorded one incident claimed by the armed group identified as the “National Freedom Front”, which targeted the *de facto* authorities and caused civilian harm. On 25 October 2022 in Kandahar, an IED attached to a *de facto* Police vehicle detonated, killing a boy and wounding two men who were passing through the area on foot at the time of the attack.

## Media freedom and safety of journalists

During the period, UNAMA recorded a number of incidents in which journalists were prevented from accessing sites of mass casualty IED incidents for reporting purposes, including through excessive or inappropriate use of force, threats and arbitrary arrests and detention. For example, on 11 February 2022, *de facto* security forces beat a number of journalists who were attempting to report on an IED explosion which had occurred in the Grand Mosque of Qala-i-Naw, Baghdis province. The *de facto* security force members reportedly also fired in the air to disperse the journalists and prevent them from filming at the scene of the incident. In another incident in Kabul, on 15 August 2022, an Ariana News journalist who attempted to take a picture of the scene of an IED attack which killed two people and wounded 17 others, was severely beaten by *de facto* security force members.

While the *de facto* security forces did release public information about incidents – usually via their *de facto* Spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid or *de facto* Police spokesperson for the relevant area – civilian casualty figures cited were often far lower than those recorded by UNAMA.

## Legal framework

Widespread or systematic attacks directed against a civilian population (including religious and/or ethnic minorities) in which civilians are intentionally killed may constitute crimes against humanity. In addition, attacks deliberately targeting civilians and the murder of civilians are serious violations of international humanitarian law that amount to war crimes. International humanitarian law prohibits, and international criminal law criminalizes, attacks directed against places of worship which constitute cultural property.

The rules of international humanitarian law apply to IED attacks carried out in the context of an armed conflict. UNAMA has previously acknowledged the presence of a number of non-international armed conflicts in Afghanistan, including between what were then characterized as “non-State armed opposition groups”, for example, the Taliban and ISIL-KP. Some of these armed conflicts have not ended and are subject to international humanitarian law. There are, however, a

number of IED attacks discussed in this report which remain unclaimed and without a clear link to a situation of armed conflict. It is therefore not possible to clearly determine whether IHL applies to these attacks or not.

Afghanistan is a State party to numerous international human rights treaties, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which obligates States parties to respect and ensure all persons' human rights within the territory or jurisdiction of the State. The *de facto* authorities therefore hold the primary responsibility to protect and promote the rights to life and physical integrity. The Human Rights Committee has stated that an important element of the protection of the right to life contained is the obligation for: "States parties, where they know or should have known of potentially unlawful deprivations of life, to investigate and, where appropriate, prosecute the perpetrators of such incidents". Such investigations should be: "independent, impartial, prompt, thorough, effective, and transparent". States parties also have an obligation to take steps to prevent the recurrence of similar violations in the future. The Human Rights Committee has further noted that Article 6, and the accompanying obligation to investigate violations thereof, continues to apply in situations of armed conflict.

## Conclusions

While UNAMA has recorded a significant reduction in civilian casualties in Afghanistan since the Taliban takeover on 15 August 2021, it continues to document significant levels of civilian harm from deliberate IED attacks. Of particular concern is the apparent increase in the lethality of suicide attacks since 15 August 2021, with fewer incidents causing a higher number of civilian casualties in that period. It is also evident that the threat posed to civilians by IED attacks carried out by ISIL-KP has not diminished.

Ongoing civilian harm as a result of IED attacks is occurring in the context of a nationwide financial and economic crisis. Under the former government, victims of armed conflict and violence struggled to access essential medical, financial and psychosocial support. This continues to be the case and is exacerbated by the absence of donor funding.

The *de facto* authorities continue to prevent journalists from covering mass casualty IED attacks, with UNAMA recording a number of instances of arbitrary arrest and detention, ill-treatment and excessive use of force deployed against media workers attending the sites of such incidents. In addition, while the *de facto* authorities do release information on incidents, casualty figures are often inaccurate and unrealistic.

Attacks directed against civilians and civilian objects are prohibited under international law. These attacks must cease and utmost efforts should be made to prevent them from occurring. The *de facto* authorities of Afghanistan hold the primary responsibility to respect and ensure the rights of all individuals within their territory or jurisdiction to go about their daily lives in safety and without fear of attack. It is critical that the *de facto* authorities uphold their obligation to protect the right to life by carrying out independent, impartial, prompt, thorough, effective, and transparent investigations into IED attacks effecting civilians and by implementing protection measures with a view to preventing the recurrence of similar attacks in the future, taking into account the specific risks faced in places of worship and educational facilities and within Hazara Shi'a communities.

## Recommendations

### **Armed groups:**

- Cease the indiscriminate and disproportionate use of all IEDs, particularly in populated areas, and the targeting of civilians and civilian objects, such as places of worship and educational facilities.

### **The *de facto* authorities:**

- Conduct independent, impartial, prompt, thorough, effective, and transparent investigations into IED attacks, making the utmost efforts to identify and prosecute perpetrators of attacks.
- In consultation with affected communities, particularly Hazaras, increase efforts to strengthen security and protection measures in places of worship, educational facilities and other areas at risk of attack from IEDs.
- Ensure that the public has access to timely, accurate information about IED attacks, including by facilitating media access to incident sites.

## **Annex: Methodology**

This report presents only data and information on casualties and incidents which have been determined by UNAMA to be credible.

Civilian casualties are reported as 'verified' where, based on the totality of the information reviewed by UNAMA, it has determined that there is 'clear and convincing' information that civilians were 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, community leader or other sources. Wherever possible, information is obtained from the primary accounts of victims and/or witnesses of incidents and through onsite fact-finding.

UNAMA does not claim that the data presented in this report are complete and acknowledges possible underreporting given the limitations inherent in the current operating environment in Afghanistan.

