Afghanistan

Quick Facts

Population: 34,124,811 (July 2017 est.)

Area: 652,230 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, other (includes smaller numbers of Baloch, Turkmen, Nuristani, Pamiri, Arab, Gujar, Brahui, Qizilbash, Aimaq, Pashai, and Kyrghyz)

GDP (official exchange rate): $20.89 billion (2017 est.)

Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated August 2018)

Introduction

Afghanistan is among the nations most affected by Islamic militancy. Myriad militant groups varying in size, tactics, and political objectives that perpetrate violent Islamist activity are active in the country. Key groups active in the country include the Afghan Taliban and their splinter affiliates, the Haqqani Network, Pakistan-based jihadi groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba, Sipah-e-Sahaba, and Tehrik-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi, Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, as well as transnational jihadi groups like al-Qaeda, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and the Afghan offshoot of the Islamic State (IS, ISIS, or Da'esh), known as Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP). The largest of these remains the Afghan Taliban. Under the leadership of their spiritual leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar, the group seized control of the Afghan state in 1996, effectively ending the Afghan civil war that followed the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979-89). The Taliban regime was subsequently ousted in 2001 by a U.S.-led coalition in response to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks perpetrated by the Afghanistan-based al-Qaeda, led by Osama bin Laden. In the 17 years since, the U.S.-led coalition and the Afghan government, headed first by former President Hamid Karzai and now by his successor, Ashraf Ghani, have struggled to subdue an insurgency waged by the Taliban and its ideological affiliates, which have enjoyed sanctuaries in, and financial and military support from, neighboring Pakistan.

Despite a modest American and NATO military footprint in Afghanistan, the country remains a hotbed of externally-enabled insurgency. Despite growing frictions within the insurgency, the movement persists, threatening a fragile Afghan government ahead of the planned parliamentary and presidential elections scheduled for October 2018 and May 2018, respectively.

Islamist Activity

Seventeen years after the U.S.-led intervention, the Afghan state continues to fight an active Taliban-led insurgency in the country. In the first half of 2013 alone, over 1,300 Afghan civilians were killed and an estimated 2,500 injured, a 23 percent increase over 2012.[1] According to UN estimates, civilian casualties

rose by 24 percent in the first half of 2014.[2] Subsequently, in their 2015 mid-year report on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and the UN Human Rights Office documented almost 5,000 civilian casualties – with close to 1,600 deaths and over 3,300 injured – in the first half of 2015.[3] By the end of 2015, civilian casualties had risen to over 11,000.[4] In 2016, civilian casualties hit a record high with 3,498 deaths and 7,920 injured, with a ten-fold increase in losses caused by the Islamic State.[5] A recent UN report shows that, in the first half of 2017, almost 1,700 Afghan civilians were killed, a two-percent increase from same period in 2016, and a 10-fold increase in the casualties caused by ISKP. There has also been a 23 percent rise in the number of women killed.[6]

More and more Afghan civilians are killed through ground operations and crossfire than because of improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Over 21,000 Afghan civilians are estimated to have been killed since late 2001, with 2016 the worst year on record for Afghan civilians.[7] Meanwhile, 2015 and 2016 were the bloodiest years on record for the Afghan security forces, which have assumed primary responsibility for security from the U.S.-led coalition.[8] In 2015 alone, an estimated 5,000 members of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) were killed and another 14,000 were injured while fighting the insurgency.[9] Additionally, in the first eight months of 2016, ANDSF endured an estimated 5,523 casualties.[10] Similarly, in 2017, an estimated 10,453 Afghan civilians had been wounded or killed in Afghanistan, according to a UN report.[11] The casualties, reportedly a record high, saw a significant increase in the number of deaths of women and children, mainly due to the use of use of large-scale attacks by the Taliban, the Haqqani Network, the Islamic State and their affiliates in urban areas and their use of homemade bombs. One such large-scale attack occurred in May 2017 when a truck bomb carrying over 1.5-ton explosives detonated in central Kabul, killing over 150 people and wounding over 200 civilians. In 2017, child casualties grew by an estimated 9 percent to 436, compared with the same period in 2016, and at least 1,141 children were injured. Female deaths saw a 23 percent increase, with an estimated 174 women killed and another 462 injured.

Between 2001 and 2005, the U.S. intervention effectively degraded the Taliban's capabilities and sent its leadership fleeing into Pakistan. During this period, the northern part of Afghanistan was largely free from Taliban activity. Afghanistan's north has traditionally been dominated by ethnic Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras who were previously members of the erstwhile anti-Taliban Northern Alliance. Taliban tactics in the early years of the war amounted to sporadic raids on U.S. and international forces and attacks on major population centers in the country's south, where the group enjoys the most sympathy. Though Taliban forces were able to control significant swathes of the countryside in the south and east, and along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, they were unsuccessful in launching major attacks against American and international forces elsewhere. The so-called "swarm attacks" on American and international forces often resulted in heavy losses for the Taliban, which then switched to traditional guerilla and terrorist tactics. When pressure was applied to Taliban strongholds in the south and east of Afghanistan, they simply took refuge across the border in Pakistan's northwestern frontier, or the tribal region, where international troops could not pursue them. Within the tribal region of Pakistan, the Taliban and its affiliates were concentrated most heavily in the city of Quetta, as well as in the North and South Waziristan Agencies. They continue to maintain operational and virtual presence in those areas today. However, Quetta, located in Pakistan's Baluchistan province, served as the headquarters for the exiled Afghan Taliban leadership and was the place where Taliban spiritual leader Mullah Omar supposedly resided.[12] In recent years, Baluchistan has become the prime target of the U.S. drone campaign, killing high value Taliban operatives. For instance, in May 2016, a U.S. drone strike killed Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour, the leader of the Afghan Taliban who had succeeded Mullah Omar after the Taliban confirmed their spiritual leader had died in July 2015.[13] Interestingly, according to an official statement issued by the Afghan government, Mullah Omar, too, had died in Pakistan in 2013, before which he had allegedly been hospitalized in the city of Karachi.[14]

The Taliban's fortunes changed between 2005 and 2008. During this period, a radical Pakistani

offshoot of the Afghan Taliban, the Tehrik-e-Taliban-e-Pakistan (TTP), or the Pakistani Taliban, formed, gaining control over parts of Pakistan's Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa Province (formerly known as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas or FATA). Unlike the Afghan Taliban, with which it shares loose links and affiliations, the Pakistani Taliban focused its attacks largely on the Pakistani state, which had taken a hands-off approach to the Afghan Taliban residing within its borders.

Between 2005 and 2008, the Afghan Taliban began to regroup in Pakistan and reconstitute its command structure. The movement expanded operations in Afghanistan, including to the northern province of Kunduz, where a sizeable and sympathetic Pashtun population lives amid Tajiks and Uzbeks. The Taliban also expanded operations in Kunar and Nuristan provinces in the country's north, and in the west of Afghanistan around Herat province, while consolidating its hold over the Pashtun-strongholds of Kandahar and Helmand in the south.[15] The use of suicide attacks, which were virtually unknown to Afghanistan before 2001, multiplied exponentially between 2005 and 2008, with approximately 100-130 suicide attacks carried out in the country each year.[16]

During this period, the Afghan Taliban also began to incorporate tactics developed by insurgent and jihadist groups in Iraq (namely suicide bombs and IED attacks). In the past, IEDs served as the primary cause of casualties in U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, although a large number of suicide attacks that were directed against international forces have proved less successful in recent years than was true in the past.[17] Targeting foreign nationals, especially aid workers, whenever possible was much more effective as a tactic, and significantly downgraded the efforts of international aid and relief organizations operating in Afghanistan, although the number of such attacks remains small. Still, as recently as 2014, the greatest number of attacks on aid workers was in Afghanistan, which, at 54, was twice the number of the next most violent setting, Syria (26).[18] Today, such attacks on aid workers continue to be a major issue in Afghanistan.[19]

The Taliban have adopted a robust, resource-efficient operational strategy meant not only to fragment Afghan forces but also to capture more territory. This strategy has enabled the group to determine where and when to fight, in which they skillfully avoid the strongest elements of Afghan forces and instead target where they are weakest. The group frequently employs similar tactics in their operations such as ambushes, traps, surprise and simultaneous coordinated attacks and, increasingly, the use of snipers.

At the same time, since the death of their spiritual leader in 2014, the Taliban have become more extremist as a unit. For example, today when a Taliban commander gets killed or captured, he is replaced by another one (oftentimes from the same family) who is more radical, cruel, and uncompromising.[20] Several factors have contributed to Taliban becoming more extremist. First, it is no longer a homogeneous group. Taliban fighters now include Pashtuns, Tajiks, Punjabis, Hazaras, Uzbeks, Arabs, and even Chechens. Second, the Taliban have lost their pragmatic leaders through systematic internal marginalization, assassinations, detention, and intimidation. Those leaders have been carefully replaced by uncompromising extremist elements who have closely woven the Taliban movement into a broader extremist framework through alliances with terrorist groups, including the Haqqani network.

A second major component of Islamist activity in Afghanistan is al-Qaeda, which has been active in Afghanistan since the 1990s. Although the core of al-Qaeda is Arab, its ranks also include fighters from Uzbekistan,[21] Pakistan, Turkey,[22] Chechens, and Muslims of European descent,[23] as well as those of other nationalities.[24] These affiliated radicals cannot be easily distinguished from their counterparts in Pakistan (nor are all of them necessarily members of al-Qaeda Central), and they regularly utilize virtual or operational bases scattered throughout Pakistan's tribal areas, particularly in North Waziristan, to train, plan and plot against Afghan and foreign forces in Afghanistan.

While the Taliban appear to have tried to minimize civilian casualties from suicide and IED attacks, al-Qaeda and its allies have not shown such restraint, and are presumed to be responsible for the many mass-casualty suicide attacks that have occurred in the country since 2005.[25] In addition, al-Qaeda carried

out one of the most successful penetration suicide attacks to date against a CIA base in Khost, Afghanistan on December 30, 2009.[26] During the operation, an al-Qaeda double agent claiming to work for the CIA detonated a suicide bomb among a group of CIA agents at U.S. Forward Operating Base–Chapman in Khost province, killing eight in the single deadliest incident in the CIA's history. However, although al-Qaeda and its allies may supply shock troops and suicide bombers to the Taliban, their overall role in the Afghan insurgency remains limited. Rather, al-Qaeda's primary aid to the Taliban comes in the form of shared battlefield tactics as well as in the employment of sophisticated Internet and social media propaganda designed to promote insurgent activities and attract new recruits.[27]

At present, the Taliban is gradually shifting from guerrilla hit-and-run tactics to more conventional military methods. The organization conducts more coordinated raids using advanced weapons, including night vision goggles and snipers, and operates a special forces unit with a robust intelligence and informants network across Afghanistan. While al-Qaeda once maintained a strong presence in Afghanistan with thousands of militants, its footprint has shrunk significantly in recent years: total strength for the group is now estimated to be between 150-300 fighters in Afghanistan.[28] Al-Qaeda's smaller presence has been accompanied by a change in tactics, with the group placing greater emphasis on forging alliances with other radicals active in the Afghan theater. For example, in June 2016, current al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri pledged allegiance to the new leader of the Afghan Taliban, Hibatullah Akhundzada, in a largely symbolic move aimed at rebuilding al-Qaeda-Taliban alliance to counter a shared threat: the Afghan offshoot of the Islamic State, known as the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP).

ISKP emerged in Afghanistan in 2015, and represents a more recent threat to the Afghan government and people as well as Western elements present in the country.[29] Its grand strategic objective is to establish a trans-regional caliphate—by expanding its military presence and menacing activities outside Iraq and Syria (or the Levant)—as part of an "apocalyptic war" against the West.[30] The Islamic State's rationale for its presence in the region is rooted in its interpretation of Islamic religious texts, which states that an army of true believers will convene in Wilayat Khorasan (Khorasan Province), a historic region that encompasses Afghanistan, Pakistan, and parts of Central Asia, before the "apocalypse" or Day of Judgment.[31] Additionally, the Islamic State's presence in the region enables the group to challenge and replace its rival, al-Qaeda, as the leader of the global jihadist movement.[32]

After the Islamic State's declaration of a "caliphate" in Iraq in June 2014,[33] it began to gain support among jihadist groups in the "Khorasan" region, particularly in Pakistan. As the Pakistani Taliban or the TTP splintered after the death of its leader Hakimullah Mehsud in November 2013, fractures in the group prompted defections, starting with the TTP's spokesman, Shahidullah Shahid, who publicly announced his allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in October 2014 along with most of the movement's regional commanders, forming ISKP's most formidable support base in the region.[34] By contrast, the Afghan Taliban do not share ISKP's objective of establishing a global caliphate encompassing the entire Muslim community. Instead, the Taliban hold a narrow ethnic and nationalistic agenda of establishing an Islamic Afghan state under their rule, which is the basis for the hostility between the two groups.[35] At the time of ISKP's emergence, U.S. commanders in Afghanistan said that this represented a rebranding of 'marginalized or renegade Taliban'[36] that began to operate under a different name, flag, and a leader. In 2016, the United States designated ISKP as a foreign terrorist organization in its own right.[37]

The group's activities predated the creation of this cadre; in April 2015, a suicide bomber blew himself up in front of a bank in Jalalabad, the capital of Nangarhar province, killing at least 33 people and injuring more than 100 in an attack that was subsequently claimed by ISKP.[38] Subsequently, Islamic State in Khorasan also claimed responsibility for the June 2016 assassination of Sher Wali Wardak, a member of the Afghan Parliament.[39] On July 23, 2016, ISKP took responsibility for the deadliest attack of the year, and the biggest it has carried out since the start of its militant operations in Afghanistan, when two suicide bombers detonated their suicide belts among thousands of minority Shiite Hazaras who had gathered near

the Afghan Parliament to demand the rerouting of a planned power line through Bamyan province.[40] As a result, over 80 innocent civilians were killed and over 250 wounded.[41]

In 2017, ISKP launched several large-scale attacks in Afghanistan, including detonating a 1.5-ton truck bomb in central Kabul in May that killed over 150 people, and another attack on a hospital in Kabul in March that left at least 49 people dead.[42]

ISKP has also clashed with the Taliban for territory and has challenged Taliban fighters through turf wars and has recruited scores of senior Taliban advisers and foot soldiers. At one point, the group operated a radio station, the Voice of the Caliphate, to disseminate its propaganda in a daily 90-minute broadcast to boost its popularity. The group has even operated its own schools and madrassas in eastern Afghanistan.

In March 2016, ISKP maintained a sizable presence (between 1,000-3,000 fighters) in eastern Afghanistan, mainly Nangarhar and Kunar provinces.[43] At present, while ISKP's overall strength is estimated to be between 700-1,100 fighters (down from over 3,000 fighters),[44] there is little information about where the group gets its material and financial support from, which local militant groups it is affiliated with, and how much control ISIS' core leadership exercises over it.

However, one thing remains clear: ISKP has no friends in Afghanistan. Yet, many Afghan leaders also believe that Pakistan is complicit in the Taliban's rebranding, and that elements within Pakistan's security apparatus have manufactured ISKP as a new proxy group to enable Islamabad to shrewdly alternate its policy positions.[45]

American and Afghan forces have increasingly targeted ISKP in the past two years through both ground offensives and drone strikes. Joint operations have killed almost all of the group's founding leaders and taken out hundreds of its fighters, the number of which down to 700 from 3,000 in 2016.[46] Coalition activity has also shrunk ISKP's territory by almost two-thirds, and ISKP is now active in only a handful of Afghanistan 400 districts.[47] In April 2017, the United States even dropped the so-called "Mother of All Bombs" to destroy ISKP hideout tunnels and caves in eastern Afghanistan. Nonetheless, while the Islamic State's presence in Afghanistan is limited so far, the group is starting to gain global attention as a new vanguard of reinvigorated jihadism in Afghanistan.

The third Islamist component present in Afghanistan is the Hizb-e-Islami group led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. Hekmatyar was an important commander in the anti-Soviet jihad and was allegedly backed by Pakistan's military and intelligence apparatus. During Hekmatyar's brief but controversial stint as Afghanistan's prime minister during the Afghan civil war in 1990s, the Hizb-e-Islami was accused of numerous atrocities and war crimes, earning Hekmatyar the moniker of "The Butcher of Kabul."[48] He later fled to Iran in order to escape the Taliban once the group assumed power in 1996. His base of support within Afghanistan collapsed, and although he returned to Afghanistan in 2002, he has not been able to mobilize mass support among Afghans. Most of the fighters that belong to Hizb-e-Islami - Hekmatyar (there do not appear to be any authoritative numbers in this regard) operate in the northeastern parts of the country, close to the border with Pakistan, and many hail from the Pashtun ethnic group.[49] The principal division between Hizb-e-Islami - Hekmatyar and the larger Taliban resistance appears to be personal, as Hekmatyar was one of the major mujahideen warlords against whom the Taliban fought between 1994 and 1996. Though Hizb-e-Islami - Hekmatyar had previously engaged in talks with the Karzai government (and, most recently, with the National Unity Government), and even though it has been less aggressive in its attacks on U.S. and international forces, the group does appear to be responsible for several attacks targeting Afghan government officials, including assassination attempts against President Karzai in 2007 and 2008.[50] However, in September 2016, the Afghan government signed a peace deal with Hizb-e-Islami – Hekmatyar after the group agreed to cease hostilities in return for official recognition.[51] Subsequently, in February 2017, the United Nations Security Council Sanctions Committee removed Hekmatyar's name from its sanctions list.[52] These measures followed Hekmatyar's return to Kabul, where he was hosted inside the Afghan presidential palace by President Ghani, alongside hundreds of his supporters and other

political and jihadi leaders.[53]

Islamism and Society

Located at the crossroads of the Middle East, Central Asia and South Asia, Afghanistan is divided by geography and ethnicity. The central section of the country is bisected by the Hindu Kush mountains (impassable except through the Salang Pass), while the southern section is divided from Pakistan by the mountainous tribal region and consists of semi-mountainous and arid regions tapering into full desert along the Iranian border.

There are at least 14 ethnic groups in Afghanistan that are protected by the Constitution and are recognized in the Afghan national anthem. Ethnically, the estimated 15 million Pashto-speaking Pashtuns of Afghanistan comprise over 40 percent of the population, dominating Afghanistan's south and east along the Pakistani border. Dari-speaking Tajiks make up an additional 25-30 percent of the population and are located in the northeast and along the Iranian border to the west. Other significant minorities include the Uzbeks (approximately 9 percent) located along the border with Uzbekistan to the north, and Hazaras (approximately 9 percent) located in the central mountainous region. A number of other minorities, including Turkmen, Aimaks, Pashais, Kizil Bashis and Baluchis, comprise the rest of the population.[54] Although there is a substantial Shiite population in Afghanistan, mainly made up of ethnic Hazaras, it has traditionally not been prone to violent Islamist activity.

In general, Sufism—a less rigid, more mystical variety of Islam—has held a central place in Afghan society. There are three major Sufi orders: the Naqshbandiyya (which tends to be closer to mainstream Sunnism), the Chishtiyya (associated with India) and the Qadiriyya (which is pan-Islamic). The Tajik population has traditionally had a close cultural relationship with the Sufi heritage of Iran, though they are not Shiite, while the Pashtuns have been more influenced by the reformist Sunni Deobandi movements originating in India and Pakistan.

Before the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, Afghanistan was largely ruled by a semi-secular elite that was either pro-western in its orientation or, later, pro-communist. Afghanistan has traditionally hosted a weak central government more adept at resisting foreign attempts at domination than actually ruling the country. The efforts of reformist rulers such as King Amanullah Khan (1919-29), who sought to establish a strong, liberal regime, were overwhelmingly unsuccessful.[55] Starting in the 1950s, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) established close relations with Afghanistan and gradually built up the local Communist party, an effort that culminated in the overthrow of the Afghan last monarch, King Mohammad Zahir Shah, in 1973 and the establishment of a Communist-dominated regime there five years later. This regime based its power upon the Pashtun Durrani tribe (in opposition to the traditional cultural domination of the Tajiks), but was quickly beset by popular opposition. The USSR came to the aid of the Afghan Communist regime, invading the country in 1979 to bolster it. After the initial invasion, the Soviets remained and became embroiled in a bloody, protracted fight against the U.S.-backed Islamist opposition or mujahideen fighters (based out of Peshawar, Pakistan) before ultimately withdrawing in 1989.

Although the conflict ended in defeat for the Soviet Union, Afghanistan's jihadi leaders, or the mujahideen, were unable to adequately exploit the Soviet Union's withdrawal and instead fell to fighting amongst themselves. The period between 1992 and the rise of the Taliban in 1994-96 was characterized by the Balkanization of Afghanistan. Tribal, jihadi, and local Islamist leaders, in a frenzy for territory, carved out separate fiefdoms throughout the country and attacked Kabul at will. The ethnic-tribal conglomeration that had been forcefully put together by the Afghan kings in the late 19th century fell apart when central rule collapsed. Separate Uzbek, Tajik and Hazara mini-states were created in the north and west of Afghanistan, while the Pashtun lands in the south and the east fell into chaos. The Uzbek, Tajik and Hazara strongholds were ruled over by strongmen or "warlords" such as Ismail Khan, former governor of Herat province, and Gen. Rashid Dostum, now Afghanistan's First Vice President, a symbolic role, who brought a modicum

of stability to their regions. During this period, the country's dependence upon the illicit drug trade grew immensely.

The Taliban (translated as "the students" in Pashto and Farsi) first appeared in Pakistani madrassas (schools of Islamic learning) in 1994, portraying itself as a movement of youth dedicated to eliminating anarchy and chaos.[56] This tribal-religious movement spread into Afghanistan among the Pashtuns living in the country's war-torn south, where mujahideen-turned-bandits preyed on the common people. In response, a group of religious students, or Talibs, united under a local mullah named Omar and created vigilante groups. These then moved through the Pashtun south, disarming mujahideen groups and enforcing strict sharia law. By 1995, the Taliban had conquered most of the Pashtun south and had begun to move against Tajiks in the northeast.

Until 1997, the movement appeared invincible, capturing Kabul in 1996, and pushing government supporters led by then-leader of the Northern Alliance, Ahmad Shah Masoud, into the far northeast corner of the country. The Taliban suffered reverses in 1997 and 1998 and responded with massacres. By 2001, it controlled approximately 95 percent of the territory of Afghanistan and ruled the country with its draconian laws, including banning girls from attending schools and introducing capital punishments.

In the absence of international recognition and support except for those offered by Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, the Taliban began to rely upon foreign extremist groups like al-Qaeda for financial support. Islamist jihadi groups began gravitating toward Afghanistan because of the Taliban's strict imposition of sharia law. Its influence was symbolized by the March 2001 destruction of the Buddhas of Bamyan, Afghanistan's greatest historical site, because they were deemed to be "heathen idols."[57]

When former U.S. President George W. Bush demanded that the Taliban hand over Osama bin Laden and his affiliates after the attacks of September 11th, the Taliban refused, at first believing al-Qaeda's denials of involvement. Following the U.S.-led invasion, Mullah Omar and other Taliban leadership, owing to a strict Pashtun code of hospitality, doubled down on their relationship with the group.

Yet the Taliban and al-Qaeda do not occupy the same ideological space. The Taliban, whose roots are in the Deobandi reformist school of north India, generally differs from the global jihadis of al-Qaeda, who tend to be Arab by ethnicity and Salafi-Wahhabi in ideology. Deobandis, for example, generally do not express the same abhorrence of Sufism and Shi'ism that is characteristic of Salafis. Nevertheless, Taliban commanders regularly comment favorably on al-Qaeda. Former Taliban leader Mullah Dadullah famously explained: "We like the al-Qaeda organization. We consider it a friendly and brotherly organization, which shares our ideology and concepts. We have close ties and constant contacts with it. Our cooperation is ideal."[58] In August 2015, al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri declared his support for the Taliban as he pledged allegiance to the new (now late) "commander of the faithful," Mullah Mansour, maintaining their relations of reciprocity.[59]

Islamism and the State

The central government in Afghanistan is fragile and relies upon the support of both local elites (meaning traditional tribal elders and city-based elites) and foreign aid (both governmental and from non-governmental organizations). Traditional tribal support is reflected in the institution of the loya jirga, the tribally-appointed consultative body that ratified the Afghan constitution in December 2003. The government's support for political Islam is reflected in Chapter 1, Article 2 of the Afghan Constitution, where it states: "The religion of the state of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan is the sacred religion of Islam."[60] In general, Islamists sought to portray the Karzai government as one that is subservient to the wishes of the United States and its Western allies, and corrupt and un-Islamic as a whole.[61] Taliban propaganda, for example, routinely referred to former President Karzai as the "new Shah Shuja," a reference to the Afghan king put on the throne by British invaders in the 19th century. Although the Taliban

has not been as dogmatic in its opposition to democratic elections as other radical Islamist groups, it has frequently threatened voters with violence.[62]

There are, however, several Islamic parties that are either somewhat allied with the government or participate in the political process. One such example is the Jamiat-e-Islami, led by Salahuddin Rabbani, the current foreign minister. The party participated in elections and the national political process. Other Islamists maintain an antagonistic relationship with the state, hoping to supplant it in the future, and return the country to sharia rule. The Karzai government, during its time in office, often spoke of the possibility of reconciliation with the Taliban,[63] and promulgated at least some aspects of sharia law in an effort to co-opt the Islamist opposition into the Afghan government. However, those overtures to the Taliban leadership yielded little to no results.

Before the end of the U.S. combat mission in Afghanistan in 2014, the Afghan government and the Obama administration pushed for a negotiated settlement with the Taliban. In July 2013, the Taliban opened diplomatic offices in Doha, Qatar, with the intention of using the facility as a neutral base from which to enter peace negotiations with the United States and Afghanistan. Peace efforts quickly stalled when the Taliban staged a flag-hoisting ceremony thought by the Afghan government and its Western allies to have been a Taliban government in exile, and after they issued unreasonable preconditions for negotiations. While the office has remained open, the Doha negotiations with the Taliban have remained moribund ever since.[64] A parallel track of engagement is purportedly being facilitated by Pakistan. In the summer of 2013, Islamabad released several high-level Taliban prisoners from its custody, including Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, who was the long-time second-in-command to Mullah Omar before being imprisoned by Pakistani forces in 2010. Baradar is believed to be one of the few Taliban commanders who could serve as an interlocutor in Afghan-Taliban peace talks and was rumored to be exploring that option in 2010 shortly before his arrest.[65] However, Baradar's release did not yield any significant results in jump-starting the stalled peace negotiations with the Taliban. Today, Baradar is reportedly living under house arrest in Pakistan.

As part of the peace and reconciliation campaign, Ghani's government also established a Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG), which includes Afghanistan, Pakistan, China and the United States. The QCG planned to meet several times in the spring of 2016, in hopes that Pakistan will end its "undeclared war" against Afghanistan and sincerely bring the Taliban to the negotiating table.[66] However, the Taliban delegation did not attend, causing such frustration among the Afghan delegation that it demanded the Taliban be declared irreconcilable.[67] It was not until April 2016 – after a suicide attack outside Afghanistan's intelligence headquarters, the National Directorate of Security (NDS), claimed 64 lives and wounded almost 350 others[68]— that President Ghani appeared to fully realize that Pakistan and its Afghan proxies will continue to disregard his pleas for peace. Following the attack, Ghani addressed the nation with the boldest declaration since the 1990s, stating that Afghanistan no longer wants Pakistan to facilitate negotiations with the Taliban, and pledging that those who shed the blood of their own people for the interests of outsiders would be brought to justice. Ghani also declared that amnesty and a lenient approach would no longer define Afghan policy toward militancy, but that Afghanistan's doors would remain open to those who wish to lay down their weapons and reconcile.[69] It remains unclear what the future will bring as relations continue to sour between Afghanistan and Pakistan over Islamabad's duplicitous policy towards Kabul. However, by any measure, Pakistan's subversive role has alienated the country from potential friends in Kabul, as well as from Washington.

This new diplomatic push between Afghanistan and Pakistan comes after U.S. President Donald Trump announced his new Afghanistan strategy on August 21, 2017. The new approach provides an open-ended U.S. military commitment to Afghanistan and makes a marked shift from a previously timeline-driven approach to one driven by conditions on the ground. The strategy also increases U.S. troop levels in Afghanistan by roughly 4,000 additional troops and takes a harsher stand vis-à-vis Pakistan for its

subversive role in supporting the Taliban and other insurgent groups.[70]

In February 2018, President Ashraf Ghani extended an invitation to the Taliban to come to the negotiating table without preconditions. In his peace proposal, Ghani offered the Taliban generous peace terms, including offering to recognize the Taliban as a political group, providing them immunity, political office, security guarantees for Taliban fighters and their families, and removing Taliban leaders from blacklists. In response, the Taliban not only ignored Ghani's offer but instead announced their spring offensive. In June 2018, Ghani extended another olive branch to the Taliban by announcing a ceasefire opportunity during the annual Eid celebrations to be held on June 15. Accordingly, Ghani announced a unilateral ceasefire for eight days (from the 27th day of Ramadan to the 5th day of Eid) and ordered Afghan security forces to not conduct any offensive operations against the Taliban for the duration of the ceasefire. In response, the Taliban also announced a 3-day ceasefire. The ceasefire proved to be a success and is likely to play an important role in building mutual trust between the two warring parties. Building on the initial success of the ceasefire, the Afghan government is likely to announce another ceasefire during the Eid-ul-Adha celebration on August 2018. These ceasefires could potentially help to restart the stalled peace talks with the Taliban.

Endnotes

Endnotes

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