



## BRIEFING PAPER

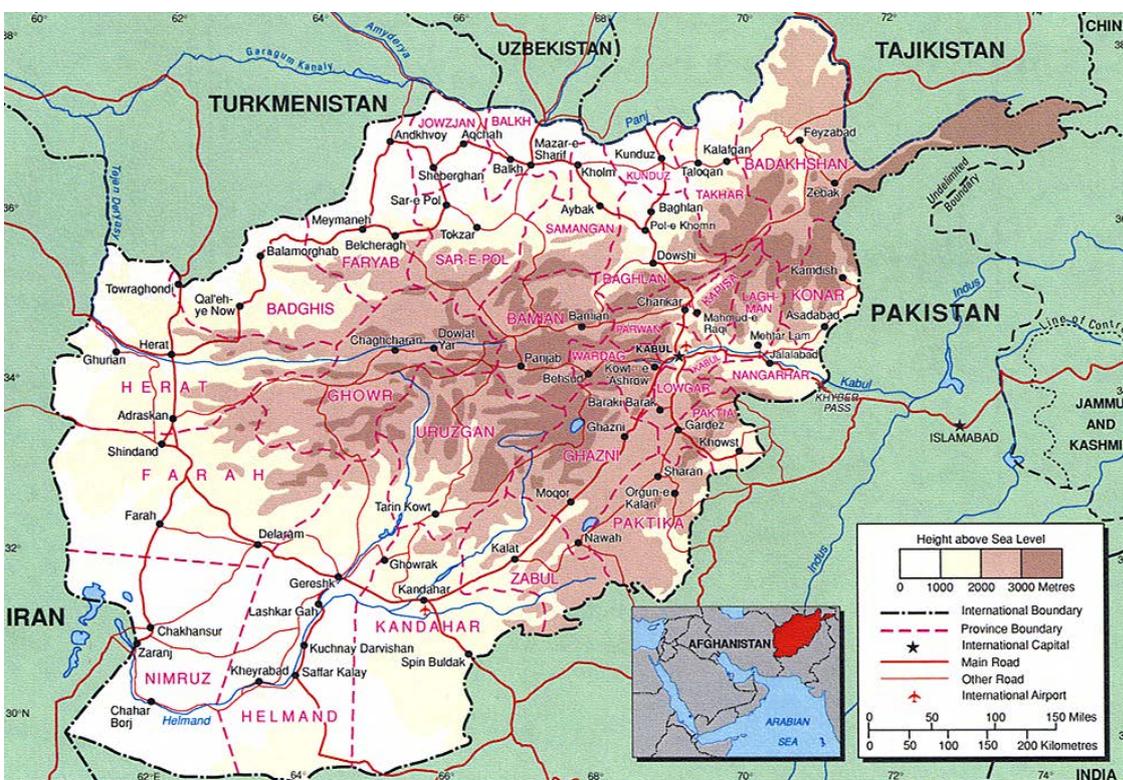
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# Afghanistan - back on the agenda?

By Ben Smith

Inside:

1. Afghan government
2. Shifting balance on the ground
3. Gains under threat
4. Prospects for peace talks
5. UK position and new NATO mission



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## Summary

The unity government in Afghanistan is plagued by disputes, and recent military gains for the Taliban have undermined hopes that the Afghan National Security Forces could keep order in the country with little outside help. The provincial capital of Kunduz in the north briefly fell to the Taliban and the group has a presence across much of the country.

ISIS has gained a significant foothold in the east of the country and there are fears that the violence could spread to neighbouring Central Asia.

In October 2015 the US announced a slowdown in the withdrawal of troops, despite President Obama's pledge to end US participation in the war. At the end of 2016, rather than the 1,000, based at the US embassy, that was the plan until the announcement, there will be 5,500. The current number of 9,800 will remain in Afghanistan, with commanders on the ground deciding when to bring the number down to 5,500.

Shortly afterwards, the UK government announced that it would extend its deployment of about 450 personnel throughout 2016.

Face-to-face peace talks in Pakistan in July were presented as a breakthrough but it is not clear that fighters and commanders on the ground favour negotiations. The second round of negotiations was postponed.

The Afghan government may have difficulty in paying for its security forces and other commitments, especially if aid is withdrawn sharply.

The UK withdrew its last combat troops in 2014 but is participating in NATO's new Resolute Support mission, launched on 1 January 2015. The UK is contributing 470 personnel to Resolute Support. 162 of the 470 are working at the Afghan National Army Officer Academy, on which the UK is spending £70-80 million from 2012 -16.

# 1. Afghan government

The Afghan 'unity government' was announced in September 2014 after deadlock over the election results. Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah are supposed to share power and cabinet posts under the agreement. Difficulties were pointed up by the fact that an initial cabinet was not announced until January and the majority of posts were not filled until March 2015. There remains no agreed defence minister, which is hampering the country's security operations.<sup>1</sup>

The government has been plagued by disputes between the two sides, and some suspect that President Ghani is trying to monopolise power. One of Ghani's main policies has been to foster relations with Pakistan, hoping that the Pakistanis will bring the Taliban to the negotiating table. Ghani pinned his colours to the Sunni mast by declaring full support for the Saudi intervention in Yemen, at the risk of alienating Afghanistan's other powerful neighbour, Iran.

## 1.1 Afghan National Security Forces

Until a few months ago, commentators were reasonably optimistic about the prospects of the Afghan Army and other members of the security forces holding their ground against anti-government forces. In the course of 2015 that optimism has faded, particularly since the fall of Kunduz in September 2015. Before that, however, there were already indications that the ANSF were struggling. Already at the beginning of 2015 Afghan security personnel were dying at a far higher rate than they had been when US forces were there to help them. The number of Afghan soldiers absent without leave increased sharply after autumn 2012.<sup>2</sup>

More ANSF personnel dying

Donor support for the ANSF is vital, with international support paying for much of the operating cost of Afghan security.<sup>3</sup> The Afghan government already runs a budget deficit and, rather than decreasing as hoped, the present situation means that security expenditure may have to increase.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, increasing conflict will hit investment and economic growth and reduce government revenues further.

<sup>1</sup> ['Can Afghan Forces Resist the Taliban?'](#), Council on Foreign Relations, 9 October 2015

<sup>2</sup> [Afghanistan Index](#), Brookings Institution, July 2015

<sup>3</sup> Steve Sternlieb, 'Inadequate Revenue Threatens Afghanistan's Stability' *Stability, International Journal of Security and Development*,

<sup>4</sup> ['Afghanistan's Continuing Fiscal Crisis: No End in Sight'](#), US Institute of Peace, May 2015

## Afghan Local Police

The Afghan Local Police (ALP) have become a major component of Afghanistan's pro-government forces. However, they are poorly-regulated and little better than a militia, with many reports of abuses and corruption. International Crisis Group recommends that the better units should be subject to improved regulation while worse ones should be disbanded.<sup>5</sup>

Little better than a militia

The government has also tolerated militias run by local power brokers, who help in the fight against the Taliban. These often prey on the local population and are one of the reasons for support for the Taliban in the first place. Afghanistan's official security forces are overstretched, however, so the government is reluctant to rein in these militias.

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<sup>5</sup> [\*The Future of the Afghan Local Police\*](#), International Crisis Group, June 2015

## 2. Shifting balance on the ground

### 2.1 Taliban gains in the north and south

Since the drawdown of international forces, there has been a worrying increase in the number of deaths. Civilian casualties in Afghanistan topped 10,000 in 2014, a 22% increase over the 2013 figure.<sup>6</sup> That increase has been sustained so far in 2015. Because the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) are fighting without NATO support, casualties among the official forces are far higher than they were in 2014.

The fact that the ANSF are managing to fight alone was hailed as progress, at least until Taliban advances in September 2015, when it gained control of the northern city of Kunduz, population of 300,000, its largest victory in more than a decade. US air strikes helped the government regain control of some of the city, but a Médecins Sans Frontières hospital was hit by one of them, causing at least 22 deaths. MSF said the incident could be a “war crime.”<sup>7</sup>

Fall of Kunduz

In October 2015 it was reported that the Taliban were gaining ground near Lashkar Gah, the provincial capital of Helmand and headquarters of the British aid and military effort in Afghanistan. Large numbers of civilians were said to be leaving the city.<sup>8</sup>

Analysts have said that Afghanistan may be at a tipping point and that the complete withdrawal of international forces planned for 2016 could lead to Afghanistan becoming another Iraq, as the Taliban gain in confidence and organisational capacity.<sup>9</sup>

The evident momentum in the Taliban’s operations suggests that the group has not been undermined by the announcement of the death of the former leader, Mullah Omar (see below) and the overt assumption of power by Mullah Akhtar Mansur.

Asked about recent defeats for Afghan national forces, the Middle East Minister Tobias Ellwood said that the UK remains a committed partner of the Afghan government:

We enjoy a close security dialogue with the National Unity Government in Kabul. The Commander Joint Forces Command, the Deputy Chief of the Defence Staff and the Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Mr Fallon) have all visited Afghanistan recently to discuss the security situation with Afghan counterparts. When the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) assumed full responsibility for national security at the end of 2014, we and they understood that there would inevitably be testing times ahead. The ANDSF have responded well. The Taliban attack on the city of Kunduz

<sup>6</sup> [‘In Afghanistan’s deadliest year, civilian casualties top 10,000 in 2014 – UN’](#), UN press release, 18 February 2015

<sup>7</sup> [‘Afghan conflict: MSF ‘disgust’ at government hospital claims’](#), *BBC News Online*, 5 October 2015

<sup>8</sup> [‘Taliban seize British stronghold in Helmand as security unravels’](#), *Daily Telegraph*, 20 October 2015

<sup>9</sup> [‘Kunduz battle raises Afghanistan fears’](#), *Financial Times*, 3 October 2015

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was a setback for ANDSF, but government forces have regained control of the city. NATO will be working with the Afghan Government to identify lessons from this incident and the fighting season more broadly. NATO and the UK remain committed partners of the Afghan Government. The Taliban should accept President Ghani's invitation now to end the fighting and join the peace process.<sup>10</sup>

### 2.2 Regional spread?

The fall of Kunduz also raised alarm about the stability of neighbouring Central Asian countries such as Tajikistan, across the border. Uzbek and other Central Asian militants helped the Taliban to take Kunduz.

Increased *jihadi* presence in Central Asia would pose a serious threat to the south of the Russian Federation and the west of China. One noted analyst has called for more cooperation with those countries.<sup>11</sup>

Kyrgyzstan reinforced its border with Afghanistan in October 2015.

Central Asian leaders travelled to Moscow to discuss the situation in October. There have been calls from the region for more military help from Russia, and Russia is reported to have sent more helicopters to its base in Tajikistan, its largest overseas base. Several Central Asian countries are members of the Collective Security Treaty organisation (CSTO), the Moscow-led collective defence organisation, and there may be pressure for Russia to help these countries more if violence does increase. However, with Russia already preoccupied with conflicts in Ukraine and Syria, the Kremlin may be reluctant to get drawn into another.

Central Asia

### 2.3 ISIS gaining a hold in the east

The influence of ISIS/Daesh in Afghanistan appears to be growing since the group announced in January 2015 the *Wilayat* Khorasan, its administrative unit in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The group has built up a base in the eastern province of Nangarhar since June 2015, taking at least seven districts of the province. ISIS has started taxing locals and executing Taliban members and local leaders who resist them. Other provinces have seen attacks claimed for ISIS. There have been clashes between the Taliban and ISIS,<sup>12</sup> and an ongoing struggle between ISIS and al-Qaeda for influence over the Taliban since the announcement in July 2015 the death of Mullah Omar, the former Taliban leader.

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<sup>10</sup> [HC Written question – 11697](#), 21 October 2015

<sup>11</sup> Ahmed Rashid, '[The far-flung fallout from the capture of Kunduz](#)', *Financial Times*, 1 October 2015

<sup>12</sup> Institute for the Study of War, [Afghanistan](#)

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, pledged allegiance to ISIS shortly after the announcement of the death of Omar. The IMU is an important *jihadi* group that has aligned itself at various times with al-Qaeda and the Taliban and mounted attacks in Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

IMU signs up to ISIS

An increase in ISIS influence in the Afghan conflict could be disastrous, with much greater inter-ethnic and sectarian violence likely, along with far more civilian casualties than the struggle with the Taliban presently causes.

### Iran supporting the Taliban?

In June 2015, there were reports of Iran supporting the Taliban in their fight against ISIS.<sup>13</sup> Iran has not confirmed any such move; it would be a radical shift for Shiite Iran to back the extremist Sunni Taliban, with its history of oppression of the Afghan Shiite minority.

Such a move would show that Iran fears the ISIS transnational agenda more than it does the Taliban. Tehran may also be aiming to undermine US influence and its protégé, the present Kabul government. Thirdly, it may be a vote of confidence in the Taliban, whose recent military successes may give it a good deal in any peace settlement and lead Taliban commanders to positions of power.

## 2.4 More US troops to stay

The US administration had already announced in March 2015 that it would slow the planned drawdown of troops.

On 15 October 2015, the White House announced that the US troop drawdown would be further slowed, meaning that 5,500 troops will be stationed in Afghanistan at the end of 2016, rather than the 1,000, based at the US embassy, that was the plan until then. For most of 2016 the current number of 9,800 will remain in Afghanistan, with military commanders on the ground to decide when to bring the number down to 5,500. Soldiers will be located at the US bases in **Kabul, Bagram, Jalalabad and Kandahar**. US troops will concentrate on counterterrorism and training official Afghan forces.<sup>14</sup>

Obama U turn

The US is also in talks with allies with a view to a bigger NATO presence than hitherto envisaged.

A NATO commander in Afghanistan said:

The problem is that it's not just about keeping troops in Afghanistan. What's really needed is more than we have currently. The Afghans aren't ready for us to step back in any meaningful way.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> ['Iran Backs Taliban With Cash and Arms'](#), *Wall Street Journal*, 11 June 2005

<sup>14</sup> ['White House: More U.S. troops to stay in Afghanistan'](#), *CNN*, 15 October 2015

<sup>15</sup> ["Obama U-turn will leave troops in Afghanistan"](#), *Financial Times*, 15 October 2015

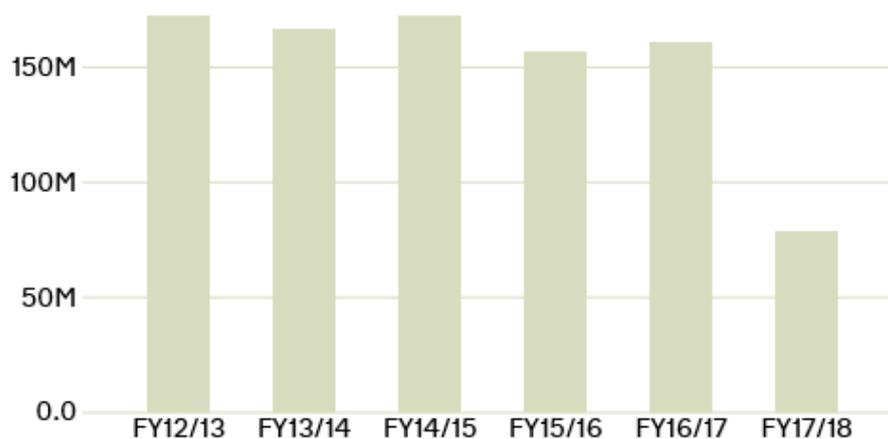
### 3. Gains under threat

Despite growing violence, there has still been much progress for ordinary Afghans, with many indicators improving sharply since 2001:

- Afghanistan has made progress in the UN's Human Development rankings, climbing from second to bottom in 2009 to 180 in 2014, overtaking 16 countries.– still in the 'low' human development category but a significant improvement.<sup>16</sup>
- In most years since 2001, the economy has grown strongly, although much of that has been dependent on military and aid spending by other countries.
- Enrolment in primary and secondary education has grown from about 2 million in 2002 to 10 million in 2013, with a far higher proportion of girls going to school.
- In 2007 only 7% had access to electricity. Now that figure has risen to about 30%.
- Life expectancy has risen from 42 for both men and women in 2004 to 62 and 64 respectively in 2010.<sup>17</sup>

Analysts worry that those gains could be lost if the international military presence is abruptly terminated and development aid and technical assistance is withdrawn.

At present, the UK's aid is due to drop sharply in 2017/18, as shown in this graph:



Amounts in £. Source: DFID [Development Tracker Afghanistan](#)

<sup>16</sup> UNDP [Human Development reports](#)

<sup>17</sup> See Brookings Institution's [Afghanistan Index](#) for data on these and other indicators

Although some reduction in Western aid with the foreign troop withdrawal seems inevitable and poses a threat to Afghan quality of life, it may also bring some opportunities. A report from Chatham House argues that it could result in Afghans controlling more of their economy, a reduction in corruption and an increase in aid from Afghanistan's neighbours.<sup>18</sup>

An opportunity to improve humanitarian work?

The same report points out that military objectives have often distorted the aid effort in Afghanistan. The reduction in international troops may provide an opportunity to focus aid better.

Nevertheless, the report warns of the dangers of sharp reductions in aid:

Afghanistan's long-term sustainment needs are a consequence of systems put in place by the international community itself. Better planning is required to reduce fiscal dependency. In the past, sharp reductions in aid have contributed to the fall of Afghan governments, underscoring the need for a responsible reduction in foreign aid. Long-term, predictable support at reasonable levels would encourage domestic and foreign private investment, and reinforce social and economic gains.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Matt Waldman, [\*Opportunity in Crisis - Navigating Afghanistan's Uncertain Future\*](#), Chatham House, July 2015

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p19

## 4. Prospects for peace talks

Ashraf Ghani, Afghanistan's recently elected President, had something of a breakthrough when officials from his government sat down with Taliban officials on 7 and 8 July in Muree, Pakistan. US and Chinese officials were also present.

These were the first face-to-face negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government so far, reportedly the result of Pakistani pressure. The attitude of the Pakistani military has always been an important factor for the prospects of a negotiated settlement and analysts say that support for the Taliban among Pakistani security services has decreased, especially after the army school massacre in Pakistan in December 2014, carried out by TTP – the Pakistani Taliban. This led some Pakistani officials to re-assess their attitude to the Afghan Taliban.

As part of his strategy of improving relations with Pakistan, Ashraf Ghani, the Afghan President, has also scaled back cooperation with India; fears of its giant south eastern neighbour has a strong influence on Pakistani policy in Afghanistan.

On 30 July 2015, just before the second round of talks was about to begin, the Taliban announced the death of Mullah Omar. Earlier in July the Taliban had issued an edict in favour of negotiations purporting to be from Omar and the admission of his death in 2013 left a leadership vacuum. Pakistan hastily announced the postponement of the talks and there are fears that the group will split over the issue of peace talks. Mullah Akhtar Mohammed Mansur is nominally the new leader; he is in favour of reconciliation but his leadership is not universally accepted. Far from leading to any diminution of unrest, the announcement of Omar's death saw local factions vying to outdo each other in violence in order to claim control of the movement.<sup>20</sup>

Death of Omar  
conceded

Afghan intelligence estimates that 10% of Taliban fighters could defect if the leadership continues on the negotiations track.<sup>21</sup> Western sources say that it could be more than that. Commentators fear that they could join more radical groups in order to continue fighting. They could take orders from ISIS or they could become local warlords in their own right, profiting from local organised crime, the drug trade and extortion.

Although the admission of the death of Omar was the immediate cause of the hiatus in the 'Muree Process', analysts warn that forcing the Taliban to the negotiating table with Pakistani threats would in any case have been unlikely to bring success. As Pakistan increased the pressure on Taliban leaders living in Pakistan, many moved out to the Gulf or to Iran. The Taliban's political office in Qatar has consistently been

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<sup>20</sup> Institute for the Study of War, [Afghanistan](#)

<sup>21</sup> Graeme Smith, '[Taliban factionalism rises after Mullah Omar's death](#)', *The Interpreter*, 13 August 2015

opposed to the talks and the Taliban never officially admitted that they had happened in the first place.<sup>22</sup>

The meeting was made public, contrary to an agreement between the Taliban and the Pakistani government, and after it the Taliban issued a statement to the effect that the Qatar political office would in future handle all negotiations:

“... from now onwards, all of Islamic Emirate’s foreign and internal political affairs are entrusted to the Islamic Emirate’s Political Office as their sole responsibility. The Political Office has full capacity and agency powers to conduct or postpone, in light of Islamic principles and national interests, negotiations with internal and foreign parties wherever and whenever it deems suitable”

This did not bode particularly well for the Muree Process.

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<sup>22</sup> Borhan Osman [‘The Murree Process: Divisive peace talks further complicated by Mullah Omar’s death’](#), Afghan Analysts Network, 5 August 2015

## 5. UK position and new NATO mission

The last UK combat service personnel left Afghanistan on 23 November 2014 and NATO's ISAF mission ended in December 2014. The UK government issued its final progress report on Afghanistan in January 2015.<sup>23</sup>

A Status of Forces agreement was concluded between Afghanistan and NATO in November 2014 and the new Resolute Support mission was launched on 1 January 2015. The UK is contributing 470 personnel to Resolute Support. 162 of the 470 are working at the Afghan National Army Officer Academy, on which the UK is spending £70-80 million from 2012 -16.<sup>24</sup> On 27 October 2015 the Defence Secretary said in a statement to the House of Commons that a review of the capacities of the Afghan National Security Forces had been concluded and that the government had decided to "maintain the scale of the UK's current military mission in the country in 2016."

Afghan National  
Officer Academy

In June 2015 there are 110 UK civilians from across government working at the Kabul embassy, excluding security personnel.<sup>25</sup>

The threat to UK nationals remaining in Afghanistan was underlined by a suicide bomb that targeted a NATO convoy of British armoured vehicles in Kabul in October 2011. The attack wounded three civilian bystanders, according to reports.<sup>26</sup>

### 5.1 Interpreters

The UK government's treatment of interpreters has been the subject of discussions in recent months. Critics say that those who have worked with UK forces are vulnerable to intimidation and attacks from anti-government elements, and that the UK government has not been generous to them.

In August 2015 Armed Forces Minister Penny Mordaunt issued a statement defending the options offered to Afghan staff who have worked with UK forces, disputing many of the criticisms.

There is a scheme in place to investigate claims of intimidation, offering:

...specific security advice to the staff member, to providing assistance to relocate the staff member and their family to a safe place in Afghanistan or, in the most extreme cases, relocation to the UK.<sup>27</sup>

The policy has seen 150 former employees move to the UK. There is also a redundancy package for those meeting certain conditions.

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<sup>23</sup> [Afghanistan Monthly Progress Report for November - December 2014: Written statement - HCWS238](#), 29 January 2015

<sup>24</sup> [HC Written question – 226509](#), 5 March 2015

<sup>25</sup> [HC Written question – 5039](#), 30 June 2015

<sup>26</sup> ['Suicide car bomb targets NATO troop convoy in Kabul'](#), *al-Jazeera*, 11 October 2015

<sup>27</sup> ['HMG Policy on Afghan Interpreters'](#), MoD blog post, 21 August 2015

## 5.2 Sergeant Alexander Blackman

Sergeant Blackman (Marine A in earlier court proceedings) was debated in the House of Commons on 16 September 2015. He was convicted in 2013 of murdering a Taliban fighter. His sentence was reduced on appeal from 10 to eight years in 2014, but there is a campaign to have his charged reduced to one of manslaughter.

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