



## BRIEFING PAPER

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# Troops in Afghanistan: July 2018 update

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Approximately 650 UK armed forces personnel are currently deployed in Afghanistan. The Government announced in July 2018 it will deploy an additional 440 troops, bringing the UK total deployment to 1,100 personnel by early 2019. They are part of NATO's Resolute Support mission to train, advise and assist the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) and institutions. UK personnel are deployed in non-combat roles, principally at the Afghan National Army Officer Academy, protecting coalition and diplomatic personnel and supporting Afghan security forces in the capital.

NATO has increased troop numbers since the Resolute Support mission began in January 2015. It currently stands at just over 16,000 troops from 39 nations (the addition of Qatar and the United Arab Emirates will bring this total up to 41).

The security situation remains 'highly unstable'. The UN reported over 10,000 civilian casualties in 2017, over half of which were attributed to the Taliban. Complex and suicide attacks are a leading cause of civilian casualties. The US has significantly increased the number of airstrikes since President Trump unveiled a new South Asia Strategy last August, releasing more weapons in 2017 than in any year since 2012.

Library Briefing paper [Afghanistan 2017](#) examines the political situation. This note focuses on UK deployments since 2015.

## A new role for NATO

Between August 2003 and December 2014 NATO led the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. ISAF was wound up on 31 December 2014, although combat operations formally ended for UK forces two months earlier, in October.

NATO agreed to remain in Afghanistan in a new, non-combat capacity, to train and develop the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces. On 1 January 2015 NATO transitioned to the new [Resolution Support Mission](#) and the ANDSF assumed responsibility for security in Afghanistan. At its summit in Warsaw in summer 2016, NATO agreed to extend the Resolute Support Mission beyond 2016.

NATO has not set an end date for the mission. NATO's Secretary-General has said it is a condition rather than time-based mission "meaning that we stay there as long as we

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deem it necessary to stay there” but added “of course it’s not a totally open-ended mission”.<sup>1</sup> He explained:

We don't think that there is a military solution to the conflict in Afghanistan, but we strongly believe that we need a strong Afghan force to be able to create the conditions for a political solution.<sup>2</sup>

Gavin Williamson, the Secretary of State for Defence, has similarly refused to put an end date on the deployments:

We want to be in Afghanistan to ensure that we get the right outcomes for the peace process, and it is not possible to put a date on when that will be concluded.<sup>3</sup>

NATO reaffirmed its commitment to the Resolute Support Mission at the [Joint Statement](#) issued at the end of its July 2018 Brussels Summit. NATO committed to “sustain the non-combat Resolute Support Mission.... until conditions indicate a change in the mission is appropriate”.

NATO has consistently ruled out a return to a combat mission.

### The legal basis

NATO’s presence in Afghanistan is based on a Status of Forces Agreement agreed with the Government of Afghanistan in November 2014. This sets out the terms and conditions under which NATO forces are deployed in Afghanistan.

UN Security Council [Resolution 2189](#), adopted on 12 December 2014, supported the creation of the Resolute Support mission.

### Increasing troop levels

The number of troops deployed to the Resolute Support mission has steadily increased and currently stands at 16,229 troops from 39 nations. The US is by far the biggest contributor (8,475) followed by Germany (1,300), Italy (895) and Georgia (870). Some countries contribute a handful of personnel. The US provides over half of the troops.

NATO Defence Ministers [agreed](#) in November 2017 to increase troop levels from around 13,000 to around 16,000 troops in 2018.

Troops numbers are provided by NATO in [placemats](#). The most recent is [July 2018](#), timed to coincide with the NATO Summit in Brussels, but that was the first update since May 2017 (the NATO Secretary General’s [annual report 2017](#), published on 15 March 2018, also cited the May 2017 figures). In May 2017 the total number was 13,576.

Qatar and the United Arab Emirates are to join the Resolute Support mission, bringing the total number of nations to 41 – this was [announced](#) at the 2018 NATO Brussels Summit.

The Resolute Support Mission Commander is General John Nicholson, who is also the Commander of US forces in Afghanistan.

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<sup>1</sup> [NATO press conference](#), 9 November 2017

<sup>2</sup> Jens Stoltenberg, [NATO press conference](#), 15 February 2018

<sup>3</sup> [HC Deb 11 July 2018 c975](#)

UK troop numbers: Operation Toral

The UK's name for the Operation is Operation Toral. The number of deployed UK personnel, as at July 2018, stands at about 650 personnel.<sup>4</sup> The Defence Secretary announced on 11 July 2018 an additional 440 personnel will be deployed. The increase will come in two parts – about half in August 2018 and the remainder “will follow no later than February 2019”.<sup>5</sup> This will take the total UK contribution to around 1,100 personnel. The MOD says this will make the UK the third largest troop contributor to the NATO operation.

The request for additional troops came from NATO in March 2018. A formal decision was agreed by the National Security Council on 26 June and subsequently approved by the Treasury and No. 10.<sup>6</sup>

The UK Government has a policy of not commenting on special forces operations and therefore will not comment on whether special forces are operating in Afghanistan.

Until mid-2016 the number of UK armed forces personnel remained relatively steady at around 450 personnel. Since then the Government has announced plans to increase numbers on four occasions since Op Toral began:

- July 2016: The Prime Minister [announced](#) plans to deploy an additional 50 troops, bringing the deployment to 500 personnel. The announcement was made at NATO's Warsaw Summit in July 2016. They [deployed](#) in early 2017.
- June 2017: An [additional](#) 85 personnel in response to NATO's request for more troops to support NATO's Train Advise and Assist Resolute Support (RS) mission in Afghanistan. This brought the total to approximately 585.
- November 2017: An [additional](#) 60 service personnel to be deployed in early 2018 to “support the work of the Afghan Army”. This brought the total to approximately 650.
- July 2018: An [additional](#) 440 service personnel, around half will deploy in August 2018 and the remainder “will follow no later than February” “2019. Bringing the total deployment to 1,100.

UK forces perform several roles in Afghanistan under the broad umbrella of training, advising and supporting Afghan security forces. UK military personnel train staff at the Afghan National Army Officer Academy; protect coalition and diplomatic personnel in the capital by leading the Kabul Security Force (also referred to as the [Kabul Protection Unit](#));<sup>7</sup> and provide a Quick Reaction Force in the capital in support of Afghan security forces (who have primacy for responding).

At the time of writing the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Welsh Guards are deployed with the Kabul Security Force, who assumed responsibility on [11 April 2018](#) for Op Toral 6. They replaced 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion the Yorkshire Regiment who served in Op Toral 5. 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Royal Irish served

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<sup>4</sup> [PQ126439](#), 2 February 2018; “[Afghan security and stability remains top of UK agenda](#)”, Ministry of Defence press release, 19 March 2018

<sup>5</sup> HC Deb 11 July 2018 c974

<sup>6</sup> Defence Minister Earl Howe, [HL Deb 11 July 2018 c934](#)

<sup>7</sup> [HCWS16](#), 29 June 2017

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with the Kabul Protection Unit in 2017 and were profiled by [Forces News](#), and they expect to return to Afghanistan in 2019.<sup>8</sup>

The Defence Secretary said in July 2018 that the additional soldiers who will deploy in August 2018 will come from the Welsh Guards, who are already in Kabul. Earl Howe, when asked of the danger of troops being drawn into combat operations (while giving the statement in the Lords), said:

the roles that are being and will be performed by our personnel in Afghanistan are non-combat roles. They are therefore quite distinct from the kind of role that we saw being performed under the ISAF banner before 2015, when our troops were very definitely on the front line against the Taliban. Chiefly, our troops will be charged with supplementing the Kabul defence force within Kabul itself.<sup>9</sup>

The RAF has also deployed Puma Mark 2's in support of the [Toral Aviation Detachment](#) to move troops and civilians around the capital. The Ministry of Defence does not provide regular updates of Op Toral deployments.

Gavin Williamson, the Secretary of State for Defence, [visited](#) Afghanistan for the first time in March 2018.

Two British personnel have died while deployed on Op Toral. Ft Lt Geraint Roberts and Ft Lt Alan Scott died, with three others, when their Puma helicopter [crashed](#) in [Kabul](#) in October 2015.

### US forces

The US has 8,475 personnel deployed with NATO's Resolute Support Mission (as of [July 2018](#)). By comparison, in November 2017 there were approximately 7,400.<sup>10</sup>

Thousands more are deployed in support of Operation Freedom's Sentinel, which is America's counter-terrorism mission in Afghanistan, through air operations, training Afghan special forces, and conducting counterterror operations.<sup>11</sup>

The US Army is in the process of creating new Security Force Assistance Brigades to train and advise the forces of partner nations, to free up combat troops for other roles. The first of these [deployed](#) to Afghanistan in March 2018.

The US has committed \$4.9bn to the Afghan Security Forces Fund (ASFF) in FY2018, \$674.3 million more than was authorised in FY2017.<sup>12</sup>

### Selected other nations

NATO Defence Ministers [agreed](#) in November 2017 to increase troop levels from around 13,000 to around 16,000 troops in 2018.

Germany's cabinet [approved](#), in March 2018, an increase in troop numbers by a third to 1,300. The first additional troops [arrived](#) in Afghanistan in April 2018.

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<sup>8</sup> [Wafare Today](#) provided a list of Army deployments in an article on Op Toral in May 2017. Wikipedia's entry for "[Operation Toral](#)" has a list of Army deployments so far but this has not been corroborated by the Library.

<sup>9</sup> HL Deb 11 July 2018 c934

<sup>10</sup> "[Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security and US Policy](#)", Congressional Research Service, 13 December 2017

<sup>11</sup> [The US Special Investigator General for Afghanistan Reconstruction quarterly report](#), 30 January 2018, p88

<sup>12</sup> [SIGAR quarterly report](#), 30 January 2018, p80

## The security situation remains ‘challenging’

Senior UN, US and UK officials continue to describe the security situation in Afghanistan as challenging and highly unstable. There were 10,453 civilian casualties in 2017 (including 3,438 deaths) two thirds of which were attributed anti-government elements, mainly the Taliban and ISIS-Khorasan/Daesh.<sup>13</sup> [Crisis Group](#) suggests Afghanistan experienced the most intense fighting last winter (2017/18) than any other winter since 2001 (winter usually sees a lull in fighting).

The UN Secretary-General has assessed the situation as ‘highly unstable’ in his last two quarterly reports to the UN Security Council, drawing particular attention to mass casualty incidents in urban areas which “threaten to undermine confidence in the Government”.<sup>14</sup> Parliamentary elections are scheduled for October 2018.

The UN recorded the highest number of security-related incidents in 2017 – 23,744 – although it noted this was only negligibly higher than in 2016. Armed clashes continued to represent the highest proportion of incidents – 63% - followed by improvised explosive devices. Air strikes, targeted killings, abductions and suicide attacks also increased in 2017. The eastern and southern regions accounted for over half of all security incidents.<sup>15</sup>

NATO [says](#) the additional troops requested in November 2017 will help “fracture the Taliban”.

A number of terror attacks in December 2017/January 2018, targeting civilians, humanitarian workers and NGOs, prompted an urgent question by Stephen Doughty on [29 January 2018](#). Foreign Office Minister Mark Field said Afghanistan remains a dangerous place and the security situation remains challenging:

The ungoverned space for terrorist groups remains persistent. The Taliban, I fear, remain capable of attack across the country, and in Helmand province they remain the single biggest challenge for the security forces.<sup>16</sup>

The Taliban launched their spring offensive on 25 April 2018. For a brief three days in June unilateral Afghan government and Taliban ceasefires for Eid overlapped, which UNAMA said was the first time both sides had honoured their respective ceasefires in the past 17 years of conflict.

The Taliban victory in capturing [Sangin](#) in March 2017 is particularly relevant to the UK as it was the scene of over 100 British deaths a decade ago. The BBC [reported](#) that the Taliban controlled “more territory than at any point since the US-led invasion in 2001 which toppled its regime”.

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<sup>13</sup> UNAMA [annual report 2017](#), February 2018. Analysis of the growth of ISIS-K is available in Mukhtar A. Khan, “[Islamic State a deadly force in Kabul](#)”, Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor, 6 April 2018

<sup>14</sup> “[The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security: report of the Secretary-General](#)”, A/72/768 S/2018/165, 28 February 2018; “[The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security: report of the Secretary-General](#)”, A/72/888 S/2018/539, 6 June 2018

<sup>15</sup> “[The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security: report of the Secretary-General](#)”, A/72/768 S/2018/165, 28 February 2018, para 14; Further analysis of the situation in Helmand province is available from Long War Journal: “[In Helmand, Taliban dominates security situation](#)”, RealClearDefense, 21 April 2018

<sup>16</sup> HC Deb 29 January 2018 c568

Further resources: UN reports are collated on the [UNAMA website](#). In addition to the UN Secretary-General reports, the US Special Investigator General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) provides [quarterly reports](#) to Congress which provide a highly detailed assessment of the security situation, including statistics, and assessments of Afghan forces. The US Lead Inspector General also produces [quarterly reports](#) to Congress on Operation Freedom Sentinel. Together these reports provide a detailed US assessment of the security situation in Afghanistan.

### New South Asia strategy

President Trump [unveiled](#) a new South Asia strategy in August 2017. He pledged “no hasty exit”, a conditions based strategy that will support the Afghan government and its military. He added: “we are not nation building again. We are killing terrorists”. The new strategy allows US forces to collaborate with Afghan forces to actively pursue and attack “terrorist elements”. This is the task of Operation Freedom Sentinel and means US combat forces “can pursue the Taliban and others more aggressively”.<sup>17</sup>

US media [reported](#) in July 2018 that the White House is planning a review of its strategy in Afghanistan. At the time of writing this has not been confirmed.

### Significant increase in US airstrikes

General Nicholson was [reported](#) (in October 2017) to have called for a “tidal wave of airpower” although a [transcript](#) of his comments suggest he was discussing coming improvements in Afghan air force capabilities: “a tidal wave of Afghan airpower is on the horizon”.

Nonetheless, there has been a significant increase in the use of air strikes by the US in Afghanistan. US Air Force Central Command publishes [monthly summaries](#) of airstrikes for Operation Freedom Sentinel and Resolute Support mission. As at 31 May 2018:

- 4,361 weapons released in 2017, a 226% increase on the previous year (1,337 were released in 2016) and the highest number since at least 2012<sup>18</sup>
- 2,339 weapons released in the first five months of 2018 with numbers for each month the highest corresponding months in previous years since at least 2012<sup>19</sup>

AFCENT figures do not differentiate whether airstrikes were released in support of the Resolute Support mission or Operation Freedom Sentinel. Targets include revenue sources for the Taliban – for example narcotics processing and storage facilities and stockpiles.

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<sup>17</sup> “[The path to win.’ What’s different in 2018?](#)”, NATO, 15 January 2018

<sup>18</sup> The 31 March 2018 has figures dating back to 2013. The [31 December 2017](#) summary has figures dating back to 2012 and the total for 2012 was 4,083 weapons released.

<sup>19</sup> The comparison with 2012 is taken from the [31 December 2017](#) summary.

## District control

The US Special Investigator General for Afghanistan Reconstruction quarterly reports provides detailed analysis of population, district and land-area control in Afghanistan. The [addendum](#) to the [30 January 2018](#) report stated:

- The percentage of districts under insurgent control or influence has doubled since 2015.
- The percentage of contested districts has risen by nearly 50% since 2015.
- The percentage of districts under government control or influence had decreased by over 20% since 2015.

The percentage of districts under insurgent control has doubled since 2015.

Afghanistan has 407 districts in 34 provinces. The 30 April 2018 report suggests the Afghan government made some modest improvements to its control in the most recent quarter. However, the Afghan Government's control of districts is at its second lowest level, and the insurgency's at its highest level, since SIGAR began receiving district control data in November 2015. Roughly 65% of the population live in areas under Afghan government control or influence, 23% in contested areas and 12% live in areas under the control or influence of the insurgents.

The data shows that Afghan Government control or influence of districts has declined, from 72% of districts in November 2015 to 56% in January 2018, while the number of contested districts has increased from 21% to 29%.<sup>20</sup>

3.9 million Afghans (12% of the population) live in districts under insurgent control or influence.

As of January 2018:

- 73 are under government control
- 156 are under government influence
- 119 are contested
- 46 are under insurgent influence
- 13 are under insurgent control

The provinces with the largest percentage of insurgent-controlled or -influenced districts are Urugzan (4 out of 6), Kunduz (5 out of 7) and Helmand (9 out of 14 – Sangin and Musa Qala are both assessed to be under insurgent control).<sup>21</sup>

The data shows that the proportion of the population living in areas under Afghan government control or influence has declined from 72% in November 2015 to 65% in January 2018 and the proportion living under insurgent control or influence has risen from 9% to 12%.<sup>22</sup>

FDD's [Long War Journal](#) has compiled its own district level assessments of control in Afghanistan based on open-source information. Long War Journal has compared their

<sup>20</sup> [SIGAR quarterly report](#), 30 April 2018, p86

<sup>21</sup> [SIGAR quarterly report](#), 30 April 2018, p86 and [SIGAR quarterly report](#), 30 January 2018, addendum

<sup>22</sup> [SIGAR quarterly report](#), 30 January 2018, figure 3.27; [SIGAR quarterly report](#), 30 April 2018, p86

assessment with SIGAR's newly released information on districts. Long War Journal assesses the Taliban controls 38 districts and contests an additional 150.<sup>23</sup>

## Civilian casualties

The UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) is required by UN Security Council Resolution 2274 (2016) to monitor the situation of civilians in Afghanistan. UNAMA produce annual and quarterly [reports](#). The annual reports provide extremely detailed analysis of casualties by type, tactics, actor, method and location.

The [annual report 2017](#) stated:

- 10,453 civilian casualties (3,438 deaths and 7,015 injured), a 9% decrease from 2016
- This is the fourth consecutive year that UNAMA recorded more than 10,000 civilian casualties
- Children comprised 30% of all civilian casualties
- A rise in combined improvised explosive device (IED) tactics
- 2,300 civilian casualties were caused by suicide and complex attacks, a 17% increase from 2016
- 65% of civilian casualties are attributed to anti-government elements, mainly Taliban and Daesh
- Pro-government forces were responsible for 20% of civilian casualties
- 583 casualties (92 deaths) came from one attack in Kabul on 31 May 2017
- 500 casualties are from suicide attacks against places of worship, mostly claimed by Daesh
- 631 civilian casualties (295 deaths) from 139 aerial operations conducted by Pro-Government Forces, the highest number of civilian casualties from airstrikes in a single year since UNAMA began systematic documentation in 2009. Of these, UNAMA attributed 309 civilian casualties to 68 aerial operations carried out by the Afghan Air Force; 246 civilian casualties to international military forces during 50 aerial operations and the rest to airstrikes conducted by undetermined Pro-Government Forces<sup>24</sup>

The most recent quarterly report, for [1 January to 31 March 2018](#):

- 2,258 civilian casualties (763 deaths and 1,495 injured) reflecting similar levels of casualties to 2017 and 2016
- 583 child casualties (155 deaths and 428 injured) an overall decrease of 23% compared to the same period in 2017. The decrease mainly resulted from fewer children killed and injured during ground engagements, though this incident type

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<sup>23</sup> ["Afghan mission releases district-level assessments"](#), FDD's Long War Journal, 13 April 2018 (posted on [RealClearDefense](#) 16 April 2018)

<sup>24</sup> UNAMA report footnote: "only the Afghan Air Force and international military forces officially conduct aerial operations in Afghanistan. UNAMA shared all incidents of aerial strikes attributed to international military forces with NATO Resolute Support. The incidents attributed to undetermined Pro-Government Forces are those where NATO Resolute Support reported it was not aware of any international military force aerial operations during a 72-hour period around the time of the airstrikes."



remained the leading cause of child casualties. Also 89% of civilian casualties from explosive remnants of war are children

- Suicide improvised explosive devices and complex attacks were the leading cause of civilian casualties, a new trend observed in 2018, followed by ground engagements
- Child (under 18 years old) recruitment by anti-government elements remains a problem
- 67% of all civilian casualties attributed to anti-government elements (50% to Taliban, 11% to Daesh/ISKP, 4% to unidentified AGEs and 2% to fighting between AGE groups)

UNAMA reiterated its concern at continued high numbers of civilian casualties from aerial attacks - 142 casualties (67 deaths and 75 injured) - similar to the same period in 2017. Of these, 35% of civilian casualties were attributed to international military forces, 35% from Afghan Air Force and the remainder to unidentified Pro-Government Forces.

Figures for casualties for previous years are available on the UNAMA website. Statements by UNAMA on specific incidents can be found in the [press release](#) section of the website.

## The debate over ending combat operations in 2014

The merits of and conduct during the Afghan war will continue to be long debated. Of note is the public disagreement between NATO leadership and the US over the withdrawal of troops in 2014 that emerged during the NATO defence ministers meeting in June 2017.

The US Defence Secretary Jim Mattis said the withdrawal was too quick: "looking back on it, it's pretty much a consensus that we may have pulled our troops out too rapidly, reduced the numbers a little too rapidly."<sup>25</sup> Mattis made similar remarks to Senators in mid-June 2017 when he said part of the reason for the resurgence of violence was the reduction of international support: "we pulled out our forces, at a time ... when the violence was lower... But we pulled them out on a timeline, rather than consistent with the maturation of the government and the security forces".<sup>26</sup>

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg offered a different view, suggesting NATO should have moved from a combat operation to a training Afghan forces mission sooner:

We should have started earlier to train the Afghans, earlier to enable them to take full responsibility for their own security. So it was not a wrong decision to end the NATO combat operation and to move into a train, assist and advise mission because I strongly believe that in the long run it is much more sustainable to enable the Afghans themselves to take care of their own security, to fight Taliban and terrorist groups themselves instead of having a large number of German, UK, Norwegian, other troops from NATO allied countries fighting in Afghanistan. So I strongly believe that it's better to enable local forces to stabilize their own country instead of NATO combat troops doing that job in many different countries. So if anything we should

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<sup>25</sup> ["US, allies withdrew from Afghanistan too fast – US Defence chief"](#), Reuters, 29 June 2017

<sup>26</sup> ["President gives Mattis authority to set US troop strength in Afghanistan"](#), DOD news, 14 June 2017

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have done it before, so gone from a combat operation to a train, assist and advise operation.<sup>27</sup>

Since Mattis' comments on timeline, President Trump explicitly [said](#) his new South Asia Strategy would be led by conditions on the ground rather than a time-based approach. The President argued a hasty retreat "would create a vacuum that terrorists, including ISIS and al Qaeda, would instantly fill, just as happened before September 11<sup>th</sup>".

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<sup>27</sup> [Press conference](#), NATO HQ, 29 June 2017

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