The State of the Fighting in the Afghan War in Mid-2019

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Executive Summary
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The Afghan War has entered a critical period in which the U.S. is actively seeking a peace settlement with the Taliban, and doing so in spite of the fact that it is negotiating without the full participation of the Afghan government.

Peace is a highly uncertain option. There are no official descriptions of the terms of the peace that the Administration is now seeking to negotiate, but media reports indicate that it may be considering a full withdrawal within a year of a ceasefire, and other reports indicate that it is considering a 50% cut in U.S. military personnel even if a peace is not negotiated.

As of mid-August 2019, the Taliban has continued to reject any formal peace negotiations with the Afghan government, and has steadily stepped up its military activity and acts of violence while it negotiates with the United States. Terrorist groups like ISIS-K add to the threat, as do the many splits within the Afghani government and political structure. The Taliban has not encouraged further ceasefires, or shown any clear willingness to accept a lasting peace on any terms but its own. It may well see peace negotiations as a means of negotiating a withdrawal of U.S. and other allied forces and a prelude to a peace that it could exploit to win control of Afghanistan.

At the same time, major uncertainties also exist regarding continuing support for the war. Some press reports indicate the Administration is seeking a 50% reduction in active U.S. military manpower in country by the end of 2019 or some point in mid-2020 regardless of whether a peace settlement is reached. Some members of Congress have called for major U.S. force cuts and shown only a limited willingness to keep up U.S. support of the Afghan government and forces if peace negotiations do not succeed.

Much depends on current trends in the war, and the extent to which the Afghan Government or the Taliban are winning control and influence over the country. Much also depends on the degree to which the Afghan government forces can stand on their own if a peace negotiation leads to the withdrawal of U.S. and Resolute support forces, or if the U.S. makes major further force cuts.

Understanding the Trends in the Fighting

The Burke Chair at CSIS has prepared a report that draws on recent official reporting by the Resolute Support Command, the Office of the Secretary of Defense (1225 Report), the Lead Inspector General for Overseas Contingency Operations (LIG-OCO), the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR), the United Nations, and a variety of outside sources.

The report is entitled *The State of the Fighting in the Afghan War in Mid 2019*. The report compares the key data and conclusion in each recent official report to show their assessments of the threat, and the problems in estimating Government vs. Taliban influence and control. It examines key problems in the reporting on the levels of violence and civilian casualties, and in the estimates of the terrorist threat.
The report is divided into the following five major sections:

- **Estimates of Military Balance and Size of the Threat Show Little or No Progress in Defeating the Taliban (pp. 12-24)**
  All of the sources shown indicate that the Taliban continues to be a major threat, and that the level of violence inflicted by other movements and by terrorist organizations continues to be serious. The OSD reporting seems to understate the levels of Taliban activity, but the LIG and SIGAR reports – as well as a CIA report – war and that the Taliban may be gaining.

  Broadly speaking, all of the reports describe a near stalemate. The differences are largely over whether this stalemate currently favors the Taliban. None of the reports address the degree to which the Afghan Government and Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) are dependent on support from U.S. airpower, elite ground troops, and the forward deployment of security force train and assist personnel at the combat unit or Kandak level to prevent major Taliban gains in Afghan population centers, or what would happen if U.S. and other major Resolute Support forces were severely cut or withdrawn.

- **Estimates of Levels of Government and Threat Control and Influence Get Steadily Worse and Then Are Cancelled or Classified (pp. 25-44)**
  The official reporting on the war by OSD and Resolute Support has steadily cut the level of reporting on which side is winning influence and control, and on the successes and problems in building up effective Afghan forces. It is coming closer and closer to mirroring the “follies” in providing on favorable reporting on the war that characterized far too much of the reporting on Vietnam. This has now culminated in the cancellation of all official reporting on which side controls, influences, or contests given districts.

  Reporting by SIGAR and the LIG, however, strongly indicates that the Taliban continues to make gains, as does reporting by the *Long War Journal* – which has consistently provided the best outside assessments of progress on each side. None of these reports indicate that the Taliban is strong enough to seize control of the country or most of its major population centers, but they are a warning that the Taliban may be making serious progress even while the U.S. and Resolute Support forces are still present and actively supporting the Government in the fighting, and that a political decision has been made within OSD and Resolute Support to avoid publicly reporting the level of Taliban progress.

- **Estimates of Combat Activity as Largely Useless Indicators of the Trends in the War (pp. 45-60)**
  These warnings are sharply reinforced by the fact the OSD Report and Resolute Support have substituted virtually meaningless indicators of the trends in Effective Enemy Attacks (EEAs) and Enemy Initiated Attacks (EIAs) for reports on Government versus Taliban influence and control – the key measures of progress and success in insurgency and counterinsurgency.
As the report shows in detail, these EEA and EIA indicators are defined and presented in ways that make them virtually useless indicators even of the level of violence in the fighting, and seem to be designed to provide a more favorable picture of ANSF success without any regard to the importance of given battles and role played by outside combat support.

Other official metrics like the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) are not as positive, and both the EEA and EIA metrics ignore the fact that the struggle for influence and control over the population does not require the Taliban to directly attack prepared and well-organized Afghan government forces and the very nature of counterinsurgency warfare.

The most that can be said about these official assessments of combat activity is that they too have the same character as the reporting that one expected at the Vietnam “follies” — something that becomes all too clear from independent observers and media reports, and from informal discussions with members of the security train and assistance and combat teams.

For example, a report by Rod Norland and David Zucchino in the *New York Times* on August 13, 2019 — entitled “As U.S. Nears a Pullout Deal, Afghan Army Is on the Defensive,” — examined more than 2,300 combat deaths of government forces. These were compiled in daily casualty reports by *The New York Times* from January through July 2019. The *Times*, found that,

“...more than 87 percent occurred during Taliban attacks on bases, checkpoints or command centers. These numbers indicate that the Taliban could attack many such bases almost at will. During that seven-month period, the Taliban mounted more than 280 such attacks — an average of more than one a day...Police and soldiers are stuck in their bases,” said Abdul Aziz Beg, head of the district council in Badghis Province in western Afghanistan. “The Taliban are killing security forces easily, but no one pays attention.”

Local government officials in several provinces said the only ground operations against the Taliban were being carried out by the American-backed Afghan Special Forces...“They come here, kill some people and arrest some, and that’s it. When they leave, the Taliban come back” and kill regular troops in their bases, said Rahmatullah Qaisari, a district governor in Faryab Province in northern Afghanistan... “To make people happy, security officials announce operations,” said Tor Khan Zarifi, a tribal elder in Herat Province in the north. “These operations are kind of show-off — they don’t have any impact.”

A senior American military official, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss military operations, acknowledged that the Afghans were increasingly relying on elite units such as commandos and special police units to attack the Taliban. He said regular Afghan units still sustained most of their casualties while trying to hold on to territory anchored by bases and checkpoints.”
Casualty Trends Show Limited Growth in Total Deaths, but Growing Differences in Resolute Support and UNAMA Assessments of the Impact of ANSF and Coalition Attacks on Civilians (pp. 61-80) Civilian casualties do provide some crude indications of the impact of the war on the civilian population and the intensity of the fighting in given areas. They do not, however, reflect the efforts of the Taliban, warlords, and narco-traffickers to intimidate the population – classic aspects of counterinsurgency warfare. The data are often highly uncertain, and reflect a natural bias towards counting military battles and air strikes and no the overall pattern in the country side.

The data also reveal a major difference between the Resolute Support and UN estimates of the casualties inflicted by Afghan Government forces and by airpower – which largely consists of U.S. strikes. In this case, quotes explaining the UN methodology indicate that it probably exaggerates the civilian casualties inflicted by pro-Government forces although the data on the Resolute Support estimates indicate that it may undercount to a lesser degree.

The UN assessment also seems somewhat unrealistic in assessing what any military force can actually do in a war where the Taliban routinely uses human shields, where accurate air strikes often produce far fewer casualties than land fighting through and in populated areas, and prolonging the fighting by carrying out fewer strikes would probably produce higher civilian dead and injured.

In broad terms, however, both sets of estimates indicate that the total levels of civilian casualties are far lower than in Iraq and Syria, and are not steadily rising.

As for military casualties, the level of U.S. and other Resolute Support casualties is now very low. THE LIG report for the first quarter of 2019 noted that, “Four U.S. military personnel died because of combat injuries during the quarter. The DoD announced that a Soldier died of wounds sustained on January 13 in Badghis province; a Soldier died on January 22 as a result of small arms fire in Uruzgan province; and two Soldiers died as a result of wounds sustained in Kunduz province on March 22...Resolute Support did not report any casualties among its non-U.S. partner forces during the quarter.” (p.31)

The level of ANSF casualties is a different story. The actual numbers are classified, as are the details of the reasons for the shrinking manpower totals in the ANA – evidently to disguise the level of the problems that now occurring. However, virtually all independent reporting talks about steadily higher levels, particularly in the Afghan National Police (ANP), but in the Army (ANA) as well.
The LIG report for the first quarter of 2019 notes that,

USFOR-A told the DoD OIG that the number of ANDSF casualties during the period December 2018 to February 2019 was approximately 31 percent higher than the same period one year ago. The number of casualties during defensive operations increased by 45 percent while the number of casualties during offensive operations increased by 21 percent. Almost half of the ANDSF casualties during this 3-month period were inflicted during checkpoint security operations.

...USFOR-A classified ANDSF casualty and attrition rates at the request of the Afghan government. However, Afghan political leaders occasionally release some information about ANDSF casualties to the media. In January 2019, President Ghani stated that 45,000 ANDSF members had been killed since he took office in 2014.

The same report in the New York Times mentioned earlier states that,

Afghanistan’s minister of defense, Asadullah Khalid, said that since taking command in December he had worked to shift regular forces out of their defensive posture...“Their mind-set has changed from defensive to offensive,” Mr. Khalid said in an interview at the defense ministry in Kabul.... “Let’s be clear: These bases are not for us to just stay there and sleep there. They are going out on the offense.”

But Mr. Khalid also said that some regular forces had sustained high casualty rates this year during Taliban attacks on checkpoints and bases, in areas where the militants were not threatened by government offensives. “We are trying to reverse that situation,” he said.

Only about three percent of the 2,300 deaths in the casualty reports compiled by the Times this year occurred during offensive combat operations carried out by regular forces. Among those were troops killed in Taliban ambushes after being sent to reinforce besieged bases or checkpoints.

Roughly 10 percent of the deaths occurred in other actions, away from bases and checkpoints. They were attributed to roadside bombs; attacks on convoys; snipers; insider attacks; friendly fire; and ambushes of soldiers or police who were on food runs, driving to work, in their homes, in bazaars, at weddings, in mosques.

• Estimates of Terrorism in Afghanistan Are Uncertain but Seem to Reflect Steady Increases (pp. 82-91) All of the sources reflect warnings that ISIS-K and other terrorist movements are now playing a role in the fighting, although this role so far remains limited. This is a warning that Afghanistan might become potential center for international terrorism if the Afghan government was defeated, although it is not clear that Taliban has such intentions or would tolerate such rivals. The data are also uncertain, poorly defined and categorized, and cannot be meaningfully updated now that the State Department has cancelled the START database effort.

In summary, the official views on the course of the fighting data are mixed, uncertain, and increasingly politicized. They do, however, make it clear that the Taliban remains a major force, and they do raise critical question about whether the Afghan Government can survive any major cuts in U.S. military aid, train and assist efforts, and combat support if there is no peace settlement. At the same time, they raise equal question about the ability to implement any peace settlement without some form of continuing U.S. presence, aid, and security guarantees to keep the Taliban from taking over. There are far too many similarities to a similar period in the Vietnam War when the ARVN at least appeared to be far stronger before a peace settlement—a and a U.S. withdrawal—than the ANSF appears to be today.
The Other Sides of the War

It should also be stressed that this study only examines one element of the current situation in Afghanistan. The other aspects are addressed in far more detail in three other Burke Chair reports:


- **Creating a Real Peace in Afghanistan,** [https://www.csis.org/analysis/creating-real-peace-afghanistan](https://www.csis.org/analysis/creating-real-peace-afghanistan), July 17, 2019

In brief, the following additional issues must be considered:

A Failed Civil Side of the War

Afghanistan is a “failed state” whose civil structure is poorly prepared for either peace or for continuing the war. The civil side has long presented critical problems in terms of leadership, stability, and meaningful efforts to meet the needs of the Afghan people, and there is little prospect that this situation will change. Afghan politics are both corrupt and deeply divided. An election was held for the Afghan Legislature in October 2018, but then did not take office until April 2019. SIGAR estimates that it remains as divided and ineffective as in the past.

A Presidential election will be held in September 2018, but none of the 18 candidates have high popularity on a national basis or inspire broad confidence – including the current President Mohammed Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Dr. Abdullah Abdullah. If one candidate does not receive 50% of the vote, another election must be held later in November.

The government is widely ranked as one of the most corrupt in the world, and the World Bank ranks it as one of the world’s least effective governments. SIGAR notes that local government is particularly weak and corrupt, and that actual governance is often dominated by the Taliban.

The CIA, IMF, and World Bank all rank the Afghan economy as failing to meet popular needs, corrupt, subject to critical employment shortfalls, and as having exception poverty. The only major export is narcotics. At the same time, SIGAR reporting makes it all too clear that U.S and international aid efforts have had only a limited real-world impact on poverty, employment, and the other elements of civil stability.
U.S. Economic Support Funding for the civil side of the war has dropped from well over $3 billion a year to $500 million in FY2018, and the U.S. is the largest contributor to the UN’s Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). It is not clear, however, that the U.S. has any clear plan to help the Afghan Government deal with its civil problems after a peace settlement or address Afghanistan’s needs if a peace settlement fails.

A Military Side Indefinitely Dependent on U.S. and Resolute Support Aid and Assistance

Afghanistan is making some progress in creating more effective military forces, but that progress is fragile at best and largely affects the Afghan National Army (ANA)—which is taking high casualties and has recently begun to lose personnel by desertion. SIGAR’s July 30, 2019 report to Congress warns that serious cuts are taking place in total ANA manning, and OSD, LIG, and SIGAR reports all warn that the Army’s offensive and counteroffensive capability is heavily dependent on a small number of elite, over-stressed units which are, in turn, dependent on support from U.S. elite ground troops, Security Force Assistance Brigade or their equivalent, and U.S. combat air support and IS&R capabilities.

The Afghan Air Force cannot come close to providing the kind of air support provided by AFCENT, and current plans will not provide such capabilities at any point in the future. Aside from, one Special Mission unit, they also lack anything like the precision strike and advanced intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities of U.S. manned and remotely piloted aircraft. These are critical shortfalls, given the ANA’s current dependence on combat air support.

The Afghan Police have only one brigade-equivalent of effective, elite paramilitary forces. Most, police and local security forces lack the ability to fight effectively as a paramilitary force. The overall mix of such Ministry of the Interior forces is poorly structured and corrupt, casualties are high, and these weaknesses are compounded by widespread corruption in the courts and legal system, and Districts where there are no effective courts or actual governance.

In broad terms, Afghan forces are years away from being able to stand on their own, and is now critically dependent on U.S. and allied support in terms of military aid funds, train and assist personnel, direct combat support, and U.S. air power.

U.S Funding and Combat Support

There is no way to cost the future U.S. role in Afghanistan in either peace of war. This will not be possible until and unless, the U.S. actually provides some transparency as to its peace plan and some agreement is reached upon such a plan with the Taliban—or the U.S. has decided whether to stay or withdraw if a peace plan fails.

It is also important to note that the U.S. has still never published a credible cost of the estimate of the war that shows what expenses are actually included, and how they are allocated. Three Administrations, and some 18 years worth of Congresses, have all failed to provide such data. SIGAR’s July 31, 2019 report did, however, report the figures provided in
the DOD, *Cost of War Monthly Report*, for Total War-related Obligations by Year Incurred, data as of March 31, 2019. The total was $755.7 billion for the war, and $120.7 billion for reconstruction, for a total of $876.4 billion. (pp. 41-45)

This is an immense amount of money for the entire period from FY2002 through FY2019, but it needs to be kept in careful perspective. The cost per year has dropped from a peak of $111 billion in FY2012 to $19 billion in FY2019. The cost of providing security guarantees for a peace settlement could be much lower, and it seems uncertain that the cost of continuing the war would be much higher. The bulk of the $19 billion in the FY2019 budget also goes to paying for U.S. forces and presence. SIGAR reports an estimate of $0.68 billion in civil and military aid to Afghanistan in FY2019. (p. 43).

SIGAR does not provide any estimate of the cost of air support to Afghan forces, but it does report a comparatively limited U.S. military presence *in Afghanistan*: (pp. 71-72)

According to DOD, as of June 2019, approximately 14,000 U.S. military personnel were serving as part of the U.S. Operation Freedom’s Sentinel mission in Afghanistan, the same number reported for over a year. An additional 10,648 U.S. citizens who serve as contractors are also in Afghanistan as of July 2019. Of the 14,000 U.S. military personnel, 8,475 are assigned to the NATO RS mission to train, advise, and assist Afghan security forces, unchanged since last quarter.105 The remaining U.S. military personnel serve in support roles, train the Afghan special forces, or conduct air and counterterror operations.

As of June 2019, the RS mission included 8,673 military personnel from NATO allies and non-NATO partner nations, bringing the current total of RS military personnel to 17,148 (a 114-person increase since last quarter). The United States continues to contribute the most troops to the RS mission, followed by Germany (1,300 personnel) and the United Kingdom (1,100).

The U.S. has also made real progress in providing a more effective train and assist mission. Again drawing on the SIGAR report, (p.72)

DOD reported in June that General Austin Scott Miller, Commander of RS and USFOR-A, rolled out a new operational design for the U.S. and NATO mission in Afghanistan over the last six months. The new design reportedly streamlines U.S. operations in the country by synchronizing U.S. counterterrorism capabilities with increased ANSF operations and focused RS Train, Advise, and Assist (TAA) efforts to the “point of need.” DOD said this model has “restored the Coalition’s tactical initiative and put heavy pressure on the Taliban . . . to generate strong incentives for them to engage in meaningful negotiations with the U.S. and Afghan governments.” DOD also said the new operational design and current U.S. military footprint are the “most efficient use of small numbers and resources to generate combat power and battlefield effects since the opening year of the war in Afghanistan.” DOD reiterated that the U.S. strategy in Afghanistan is conditions-based, with commanders on the ground continually evaluating conditions and making recommendations on appropriate force levels.
As for current casualty levels, every U.S. loss counts, but SIGAR notes that the casualty levels are now far lower than in the past. (p. 73)

According to DOD, five U.S. military personnel were killed and 35 were wounded in action (WIA) in Afghanistan this reporting period (April 17 to July 15, 2019). As of July 15, 2019, a total of 72 U.S. military personnel have died in Afghanistan (53 from hostilities and 19 in non-hostile circumstances) and 427 military personnel were WIA since the start of Operation Freedom’s Sentinel on January 1, 2015. Since the beginning of U.S. operations in Afghanistan in October 2001, 2,419 U.S. military personnel have died (1,898 from hostilities and 521 in non-hostile circumstances) and 20,530 have been WIA.

Some reporting on the war has focused on the total cost of the war from FY2002 onwards. Other reporting has sharply exaggerated probable future casualties. It should be recognized that future costs for security a peace could be relatively limited by any past standard, and that sustaining the Afghan war effort might also be affordable if it could be made more effective in civil and military terms.
Estimates of Military Balance and the Size of the Threat Show Little or No Progress in Defeating the Taliban
Estimates of Military Balance and the Size of Threats Show Little or No Progress - I

The following charts in this section provide summary assessments of the Taliban threat from three different U.S. official reports on the war. They include official reporting by the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), by the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR), and the Lead Inspector General for Overseas Contingency Operations (LIG).

Unlike the metrics and the maps in the sections that follow, these assessment broadly agree in judging the seriousness of the Taliban threat, as well as the threat posed by other groups and terrorist elements like ISIS-K. They do not indicate that either the Taliban or Afghan government force are winning, and later sections show that key metrics assessing the control and influence by each side are no longer being issued, and that the official metrics that are being issued have little value or relevance.

It should be noted, however, that the reports do differ in many other respects, particularly in their assessments of the progress being made in developing effective Afghan Security forces, and in creating effective political leadership and stability, effective and honest governance, and the economic conditions that can create loyalty to the government and help encourage and then sustain national stability.

All three reports touch upon serious issue with training, effective leadership, and corruption in the Afghan national security forces (ANSF), but only the SIGAR report warns that past reporting may have seriously exaggerated total personnel levels. SIGAR estimates (p. 78) a 22% drop in the ANP, and 8% drop in the ANA between 4/2018 and 5/2019.

The OSD report no longer provides a meaningful assessment of the civil aspects of the war. Early versions addressed them in some detail. The LIG report does cover some aspects but in limited depth. SIGAR provides more detail on U.S. aid programs, but does not address many of the economic issues affecting popular support and stability raised by the UN, World Bank, and IMF. The SIGAR report is also the only report that highlights the lack of Afghan compliance with the new levels of “conditionality” established as part of the change in strategy initiated by the Trump Administration.

None of the reports attempt to assess the possible impacts of a peace settlement or a U.S. withdrawal, or estimate any timeframe in which the Afghan forces or government could stand on their own without major U.S military support and military and civil aid.

All three touch upon the level of direct land combat support that Afghan forces now receive, and the impact of the reforms in security assistance that have strengthened the role of U.S. advice and assistance on the land combat or Kandak level. Only the SIGAR July 31, 2019 Report to Congress describes these differences in detail:

According to DOD, as of June 2019, approximately 14,000 U.S. military personnel were serving as part of the U.S. Operation Freedom’s Sentinel mission in Afghanistan, the same number reported for over a year. An additional 10,648 U.S. citizens who serve as contractors are also in Afghanistan as of July 2019. Of the 14,000 U.S. military personnel, 8,475 are assigned to the NATO RS mission to train, advise, and assist Afghan security forces, unchanged since last quarter. The remaining U.S. military personnel serve in support roles, train the Afghan special forces, or conduct air and counterterror operations.

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Estimates of Military Balance and the Size of Threats Show Little or No Progress - II

SIGAR does, however, indicate that the advances in support of the ANA may be offset by problems in the organization and effectiveness of the Ministry of Information and ANP (p. 77).

Only the LIG report stresses the fact that the Afghan Air Force still has only token effectiveness, and that the ANSF only is able to consistently defeat or recover from Taliban attacks because of the major increases in U.S. combat air support since 2015.


Terrorist and insurgent groups continue to challenge Afghan, U.S., and Coalition forces. During this reporting period, ISIS-K made territorial gains in eastern Afghanistan. Regionally the group continues to evade, counter, and resist sustained CT pressure. While ISIS-K remains operationally limited to South and Central Asia, the group harbors intentions to attack international targets. Al-Qaeda (AQ) and Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) routinely support, train, work, and operate with Taliban fighters and commanders. AQ maintains an enduring interest in attacking U.S. forces and Western targets. Even if a successful political settlement with the Taliban emerges from ongoing talks, AQ, ISIS-K, and some unknown number of Taliban hardliners will constitute a substantial threat to the Afghan government and its citizens, as well as to the United States and its Coalition partners. This enduring terrorist threat will require the United States, the international community, and the ANDSF to maintain a robust CT capability for the foreseeable future.

Despite elevated levels of violence and heavy losses, ANDSF recruitment and retention outpaced attrition for the first time in several reporting periods. The ANDSF increased its offensive operations and reduced or consolidated static checkpoints. The Afghan Special Security Forces (ASSF) curbed the misuse of forces in defensive positions, met growth milestones, and increased the number of independent, offensive operations. Finally, the Afghan government instituted a number of leadership changes that are helping move the ANDSF towards becoming a more professional force. However, the ANDSF will continue to require sustained TAA and financial support to overcome shortfalls. The ANDSF struggles to maintain, account for, and distribute equipment and material throughout the country, properly manage facilities, and adhere to strict training and reset cycles. While the ANDSF can secure population centers, provide security for elections, and control major ground lines of communication, the conventional Afghan security forces require persistent TAA, and the ASSF needs fires, lift, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) support to maintain peak combat effectiveness.
Collectively, terrorist and insurgent groups continue to present a formidable challenge to Afghan, U.S., and Coalition forces. The presence of more than 20 terrorist organizations in the region creates the largest concentration of terrorist and organizations in the world.

The Taliban

During this reporting period, the Taliban, including the Haqqani Network (HQN), has continued to conduct operations. On April 12, 2019, the Taliban announced the start of their spring offensive, naming the campaign Operation Fath (Arabic for “Victory”). The Taliban is conducting a nationwide insurgency in Afghanistan in pursuit of the following goals: the withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan, establishment of a government with Islamic principles, and international political recognition. The Taliban is attempting to use its battlefield efforts to strengthen its negotiating position with the United States. Throughout the winter, the Taliban conducted attacks against ANDSF and Coalition Forces, including a high-profile attack and a complex attack. Recent peace negotiations have not halted the Taliban’s military operations and asymmetric attacks. During the reporting period, Pakistani military operations had no observable impact on Taliban and HQN battlefield activities or military capabilities.

The Haqqani Network continues to be integral to the Taliban’s effort to pressure the Afghan Government in Kabul and Afghanistan. According to press reporting and public Taliban release statements, since Sirajuddin Haqqani’s installment as Deputy Leader of the Taliban in 2015, he has likely increased the Haqqani Network’s influence within the Taliban as well as in areas outside of HQN’s normal operating region: Paktika, Paktiya, and Khost Provinces in eastern Afghanistan.

The Taliban has demonstrated an increasing capability to threaten district centers, attack well defended military installations, and attack compounds with a Coalition presence. During this reporting cycle, however, more than 50 percent of Taliban attacks against the ANDSF targeted isolated checkpoints and outposts. The Taliban maintains control in some rural areas that lack effective Afghan Government representation, seeking to exploit ANDSF weaknesses and the reduced international military presence. The Taliban continues to maintain its ability to conduct high-profile asymmetric attacks. The early March 2019 attack on the 215 Maiwand Corps at Camp Shorab in Helmand Province killed 23 soldiers at the cost of 20 Taliban fighters. This attack penetrated a heavily defended base, suggesting that the Taliban has enough confidence of success to commit considerable resources towards high-profile assaults against heavily defended military installations.

SIGAR: Key Security Issues and Events: July, 2019 - I

Fighting between the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) and the Taliban has increased in recent months as the parties to the conflict engaged in a series of peace talks, according to the Department of Defense (DOD) and Resolute Support (RS), the U.S.-led NATO mission in Afghanistan.

DOD reported that, with U.S. and Coalition support, the ANDSF “increasingly targeted the Taliban with military pressure throughout the winter and into the spring to convince the Taliban that they cannot achieve their objectives by prolonging the conflict, and to set the conditions for a negotiated settlement.”...The increase in offensive operations was primarily driven by Afghan Special Security Forces (ASSF) missions focused on disrupting the Taliban’s freedom of movement and defending “key terrain,” such as major population centers, critical infrastructure, entry points into Afghanistan, and communication lines between population centers.

The Taliban also increased the number of its overall as well as “effective” (casualty-producing) attacks against the ANDSF and Coalition this quarter. According to RS, from March 1–May 31, 2019, enemy-initiated attacks (EIA) increased by 9% and effective enemy-initiated attacks (EEIA) increased by 17% compared to the preceding three months. However, this period’s EIA and EEIA fell somewhat compared to the same reporting period last year (March 1–May 31, 2018). DOD said that while “Taliban fighting capacity also suffered [from December 2018 to May 2019], the Taliban retain safe havens and recruiting pools in areas not targetable by ANDSF.”

DOD continued to note that the primary goal of the U.S. military strategy in Afghanistan is to support ongoing peace talks occurring between the parties to the conflict, and that violence typically spikes around these talks when the parties seek to increase their negotiating leverage...U.S. officials met in early May and late June/early July in Doha, Qatar, for a series of talks with the Taliban. At the July intra-Afghan talks that followed, Afghan government officials in an unofficial capacity met with Taliban representatives along with other Afghans...

Two of the most deadly security incidents this quarter occurred while these talks were under way. The first was a series of Afghan and NATO airstrikes on May 6 in Farah Province that reportedly killed 150 Taliban militants, wounded 40, and destroyed 68 narcotics labs; the second was a July 1 Taliban car bomb targeting an Afghan government facility in Kabul City that killed at least 40 people and wounded 116 others (including 51 children)...
U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad called the latest round of talks between the U.S. and Taliban representatives “the most productive session to date.” He said the intra-Afghan dialogue that took place subsequently was “a critical milestone in the Afghan peace process,” but that “there [was] still important work left to be before we have an agreement.”... For a full account of recent peace talks between the parties to the conflict, see pages 102–104 of the Governance section.

The human toll of the conflict continues to concern the international community as well as the Afghan government. The UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) issued statements this quarter listing several incidents in which dozens of were killed during the month of Ramadan and afterwards, and urged the parties to the conflict to do more to protect Afghan civilians...Afghan National Security Advisor Hamdullah Mohib also said on June 18 that at least 50 people per day die “in the fight against terrorism” in the country...Though effective attacks against the ANDSF may have declined since the same period last year, RS reports that “casualty rates for the ANDSF are the same this quarter as they were in the same quarter one year ago.”

ANDSF personnel strength figures reported this quarter declined considerably compared to last quarter. Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan (CSTC-A) said this was due to the ANDSF switching their reporting of personnel strength to the number of personnel enrolled in the Afghan Personnel and Pay System (APPS) rather than the number reported on-hand by ANDSF components. This means that only those ANDSF personnel who have been biometrically validated in APPS are included in strength figures. The change was part of an effort by the United States and its partners to reduce opportunities for corrupt ANDSF officials to report “ghost” (nonexistent) soldiers and police on personnel rolls in order to pocket the salaries. CSTC-A said there are 180,869 Afghan National Army (ANA) and 91,596 Afghan National Police (ANP) personnel enrolled and accounted for in APPS as of May 25, 2019. This is roughly 10,000 ANA fewer and 25,000 ANP fewer than the numbers reported to SIGAR last quarter...This quarter’s strength of 272,465 puts the ANDSF at 77.4%, and 79,535 personnel short, of its goal strength of 352,000...

When asked about the gulf between last quarter’s Afghan-reported strength numbers and this quarter’s APPS validated ones, CSTC-A said that it “does not expect that the APPS reported data will ever equal the amount that was self-reported [by the Afghans]” and that it “cannot categorize the excess individuals as ‘ghost’ personnel, because it is not known why the Afghan reported numbers are higher”...SIGAR’s Investigations Directorate is investigating the matter, and is contributing to efforts by SIGAR’s Audits Directorate, CSTC-A, and the Afghan Attorney General’s office to identify and address measures to reduce and/or eliminate payments for nonexistent police officers.

The Taliban remains a serious challenge for the Afghan Government in almost every province. The Taliban still considers itself the rightful government of Afghanistan, and it remains a capable and confident insurgent force fighting for the withdrawal of foreign military forces from Afghanistan, establishment of sharia law, and rewriting of the Afghan constitution.

In 2019, negotiations between the US and the Taliban in Doha entered their highest level yet, building on momentum that began in late 2018. Underlying the negotiations is the unsettled state of Afghan politics, and prospects for a sustainable political settlement remain unclear.

The American military says the Afghan government effectively “controls or influences” 56 percent of the country. But that assessment relies on statistical sleight of hand. In many districts, the Afghan government controls only the district headquarters and military barracks, while the Taliban control the rest.

On paper, Afghan security forces outnumber the Taliban by 10 to 1, or even more. But some Afghan officials estimate that a third of their soldiers and police officers are “ghosts” who have left or deserted without being removed from payrolls. Many others are poorly trained and unqualified.

The Afghan government says it killed 13,600 insurgents and arrested 2,000 more last year — nearly half the estimated 25,000 to 35,000 Taliban fighters an official United States report said were active in the country in 2017. But in United States officials said insurgents numbered at least 60,000, and Afghan officials recently estimated the Taliban’s strength at more than 77,000.
USFOR-A told the DoD OIG that it estimated the Taliban has 20,000 to 30,000 fighters in Afghanistan. An additional 10,000-25,000 fighters periodically join the Taliban for attacks, though only a portion of them are fighting at any given time. USFOR-A derived this estimate through multiple open source assessment, and told the DoD OIG that it made this assessment with “low confidence.” Weakly defended Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) checkpoints continued to be frequent targets for Taliban attacks, often resulting in casualties on both sides. USFOR-A said that the high number of checkpoints as a major vulnerability for Afghan forces. Despite promises to reduce the number of checkpoints, the ANDSF still maintains hundreds of checkpoints on key transit routes throughout Afghanistan. Local leaders often insist that the checkpoints should remain. Checkpoints can bolster the appearance of security and are also a source of illegal income for local commanders, according to USFOR-A. Almost half of ANDSF casualties during the quarter occurred at checkpoints.

Weakly defended Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) checkpoints continued to be frequent targets for Taliban attacks, often resulting in casualties on both sides. USFOR-A said that the high number of checkpoints as a major vulnerability for Afghan forces. Despite promises to reduce the number of checkpoints, the ANDSF still maintains hundreds of checkpoints on key transit routes throughout Afghanistan. Local leaders often insist that the checkpoints should remain. Checkpoints can bolster the appearance of security and are also a source of illegal income for local commanders, according to USFOR-A. Almost half of ANDSF casualties during the quarter occurred at checkpoints.

In addition to small-scale attacks on checkpoints, the Taliban mounted several larger attacks against the ANDSF during the quarter, including “high-profile attacks” that involved an improvised explosive device (IED). On January 21, the Taliban attacked a National Directorate of Security (NDS) training facility in Wardak province. Provincial officials said that at least 45 people were killed in the attack, and as many as 70 were wounded. On February 16, the Taliban attacked an Afghan Border Force base in Kandahar, killing all 32 personnel posted there. On March 23, Taliban fighters launched a coordinated attack on ANDSF positions in Helmand province, killing at least 40 personnel. Also in March, Taliban fighters ambushed a convoy carrying First Vice President Abdul Rashid Dostum in Balkh province, killing one of Dostum’s security guards. Dostum was unhurt.

The NDS attack was an example of the Taliban’s commonly observed multi-phase strategy to conduct attacks on government facilities. USFOR-A told the DoD OIG the Taliban stole an ANDSF High Mobility Multipurpose Vehicle (HMMWV or "Humvee") and converted it into a vehicle-borne IED. On the morning of the attack, they detonated the explosive-laden vehicle near the NDS compound. Two armed fighters, posing as ANDSF soldiers, then attempted to enter the facility amidst the chaos caused by the explosion, and were later killed. The ANDSF later discovered and neutralized a second explosive-laden vehicle near the facility that was intended to support the initial attack.

USFOR-A assessed that the Taliban “likely lacks the capability to challenge government control” of Maimanah. However, as was the case with the Farah and Ghazni attacks, the high-profile attacks that the Taliban mounts against Maimanah and neighboring transit routes can have a positive impact on their efforts, as they provide valuable propaganda opportunities and undermine public confidence in Afghan security forces. Further information on the Taliban threat to regional capitals is provided in the classified appendix to this report.

Afghan media reported this quarter that a Taliban leader surrendered to the Afghan government in Jowzjan province. According to a USFOR-A estimate, 217 Taliban fighters have surrendered since 2018, a small number when compared to the Taliban’s overall estimated force size of up to 50,000 full-time and temporary fighters. Many other surrenders were reported by the media but were subsequently disproven. USFOR-A said that the reasons for these surrenders are varied, including military operations against the Taliban, lack of supplies, and financial incentives for the families of those who surrender. Overall, USFOR-A said, these surrenders have had “little to no effect on the ANDSF and USFOR-A operations.

As U.S. and Taliban representatives met in Doha, Taliban fighters continued their campaign of violence during the quarter, conducting daily attacks against Afghan government personnel, security forces, and civilians. U.S. Forces–Afghanistan A) told the DoD OIG that the Taliban uses these attacks to undermine public opinion of the Afghan government, exacerbate concerns about a potential withdrawal of international forces, and improve Taliban leverage in the negotiations. Taliban attacks continued through the 2018-2019 winter, following a trend in recent years to sustain attacks during the period between the group’s declared fighting seasons.

Under General Miller’s command, the United States has been on targeting Taliban leadership. USFOR-A told the DoD OIG that “consistent military pressure placed on Taliban senior leadership by Coalition and Afghan forces will potentially sustain Taliban intent to engage in talks.” USFOR-A said that this strategy also limits the willingness of Taliban leaders and their fighters to gather and plan attacks in some areas.

USFOR-A told the DoD OIG that these operations “demonstrated the ability to continue to pressure the enemy to keep them at the negotiation table.” USFOR-A reported that coalition and ANDSF operations “likely are causing the Taliban to shift tactics throughout the country.” In addition, NATO Special Operations Component Command–Afghanistan (NSOCC-A) said that the Taliban has been using more defensive tactics, such as IED emplacement, during the quarter. However, it is unclear how much of a factor the strikes against Taliban leaders affect the Taliban’s decision to continue participation in the peace talks.

USFOR-A routinely operates with the ANDSF as they target Taliban fighters and their leaders. An incident this quarter, however, highlighted the impact of miscommunication among allied forces. In March, U.S. forces conducting ground operations in Uruzgan province reportedly encountered friendly fire from Afghan soldiers at a checkpoint. U.S. forces, unable to ascertain that Afghan security forces were mistakenly shooting at them, could not de-escalate the confrontation and called in a self-defense airstrike. The strike killed five Afghan soldiers.
The Taliban remained active in areas on the periphery of several provincial capitals during the quarter. The Taliban did not stage a major attack against a provincial capital, as it did when it attacked the capitals of Farah and Ghazni provinces in 2018. However, USFOR-A’s assessment that the Taliban’s intent to conduct more attacks against provincial centers remains unchanged, in part because the Taliban benefits from the media attention the attacks generate.

Taliban activity in Afghanistan’s northwestern provinces during the quarter illustrates how the group exerts security pressure on provincial capitals. As noted in the previous Lead IG quarterly report, two districts in Faryab province experienced increasing Taliban control between July and October 2018, according to a Resolute Support assessment. During this quarter, the Taliban continued to attack ANDSF positions along the portion of Highway 1 that passes through Faryab and Badghis provinces. USFOR-A told the DoD OIG that the Taliban maintains influence in much of Faryab and seeks to isolate Maimanah, the provincial capital. The ANDSF has been challenging the Taliban in Faryab, particularly in Qaisar, Dowlatabad, and Almar districts, but has suffered some widely-publicized defeats. On February 13, the Taliban attacked Almar district, killing several soldiers and attacking soldiers sent from Maimanah to reinforce them. On March 11, the Taliban attacked a rural outpost in Murghab district of neighboring Badghis province, killing 28 soldiers and reportedly capturing more than 150 others as they fled across the border to Turkmenistan.

USFOR-A assessed that the Taliban “likely lacks the capability to challenge government control” of Maimanah. However, as was the case with the Farah and Ghazni attacks, the high-profile attacks that the Taliban mounts against Maimanah and neighboring transit routes can have a positive impact on their efforts, as they provide valuable propaganda opportunities and undermine public confidence in Afghan security.

Estimates of Levels of Government and Threat Control and Influence Get Steadily Worse and Then Are Cancelled or Classified
Military Balance, Patterns of Combat Activity, and Levels of Control and Influence

Virtually every piece of data on Afghanistan and the Afghan War has been uncertain since the beginning of the U.S. intervention, and the apparent precision of many reports disguises the fact that they often lack reliable inputs or that the data are different or conflict from source to source. Even estimates of basic data like total population, poverty, unemployment, life expectancy, infant mortality, and education levels are notoriously uncertain.

The estimates of Government versus Taliban control of Afghan Districts and its population have always been a key source of controversy. ISAF and the Resolute Support Command have issued over-optimistic estimates for years, and ones where apparent Government control of a small part of a District like its Capital could disguise strong Taliban or other insurgent influence in most of that District. The same has been true of the estimates of "contested" districts, where Resolute Support issued low-end estimates that many outside experts questioned.

These command estimates became more uncertain and controversial after 2014, when U.S. forces in the field were cut back and U.S. access to much of the country became limited. However, Resolute Support did produce less favorable estimates over time. By early 2018, even the official estimates reflected a stalemate with trends that slightly favored the Taliban, although no one could assess the level of relative uncertainty in the official versus outside estimates.

By the end of 2018, most estimates indicated that the situation had further deteriorated, although the various estimates still differed. The metrics in this section show that Lead Inspector General (LIG) of the Department of Defense stated in its February 2019 report (p.17) that full Afghan Government "control" dropped from 75 to 74 districts (18%) out of a total of 407 between Jul 2018 and October 2018, and that Government "influence" dropped from 151 to 145 districts (36%). At the same time, Government control over the total population stayed constant at 34% of the population, although Government influence over the population dropped from 31% to 29%.

In contrast, the LIG reported that Taliban "control" rose from 10 to 12 districts, although its "influence" dropped from 39 to 38 districts and its mix of control and influence over the population remained constant at 11%. The LIG also reported that the number of "contested" Districts where neither side dominated rose from 132 to 138, and the percentage of the total population that was contested rose from 24% to 26%. Put differently, this meant a total of 188 districts were contested or under Taliban control and influence by late October 2018, and 37% of the population.

Another official U.S. source, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) used a similar set of figures in the report that it issued at the end of January (pp. 71-72). This estimate did, however, put the October 2018 numbers in perspective. It stated that the Government "control" and "influence" over the Districts had dropped
by more than 18% since SIGAR first began receiving such reports from the Resolute Support Command in November 2015. It also stated that the number of contested Districts had risen by nearly 13% and the number under insurgent control or influence had risen by 5%.

The end result was that all official reporting on the level of Taliban vs. government was cancelled. SIGAR reported in the first Quarter of 2019 that Resolute Support had stopped making such estimates. Some have since suggested that the command may have cancelled the reports because these estimates provided a level of bad news that it did not want to publicize. It is not clear that this is the case. What is clear is that Resolute Support has stopped making such estimates, and there now is no meaningful official estimate of progress in the war since late 2018.

Moreover, one of the most respected outside sources — the *Long War Journal* — that made independent estimates had long produced less favorable results. It continued to make its own estimates, and the estimate on the *Long War Journal* web page on August 8, 2019 indicated that the Taliban now controlled 66 out of 397 (407?) Districts (17%). It estimated that a total of 191 Districts were disputed (48%), and that the now government controlled 140 Districts (35%). The *LWJ* also estimated that the Taliban now controlled 3.7 million Afghans out of a total of 33 million (11%). The control of 13.5 million (41%) was contested, and the Government controlled 15.8 million (48%) (https://www.longwarjournal.org/mapping-taliban-control-in-afghanistan)

Put differently, the *Long War Journal* estimated that the Taliban "contested" or controlled 52% of the total population, versus Resolute Support’s previous estimate that it had an "influence" over only 26%. This higher level of Taliban success (and Afghan government weakness) is one that many reporters and outside analysts feel may be more correct. However, there is no way to establish the facts since the *Long War Journal* uses a different methodology from Resolute Support, and "contested" does not have the same meaning as "influence."

In short, there now are no official metrics that begin to provide a reliable way to know who is "winning," or the relative level of "stalemate." This gap in reporting is further compounded by the fact that other official estimates of progress — like Enemy Initiated Attacks do not show the level of government control or influence. As the following metrics show, The SIGAR quarterly report for July 2019 makes clear that the actual role of the central government may be weak to negligible in many supposedly government controlled or disputed Districts — not only because the Taliban or other extremist forces control much of the countryside and have checkpoints on roads, but because some warlord, power broker, narcotrafficker, or other corrupt official is effectively in charge.

These uncertainties are not minor considerations in a war for "hearts and minds," and in country whose security problems are compounded by critical civil problems, and by a level of governance and political leadership that the World Bank and Transparency International estimate is one of the worst and most corrupt in the world. They make it almost impossible to assess the prospects for a real peace or for success if the U.S. continues to provide funds and forces for the war.
SIGAR on Cancellation of Key Reporting on Afghan Government and Insurgent Control and Influence

This quarter, NATO’s Resolute Support (RS) train-advice-assist mission in Afghanistan formally notified SIGAR that it has discontinued producing one of its most widely cited Afghan security metrics: district, population, and territorial control data. The command said they no longer saw decision-making value in these data. The latest data from the few remaining publicly available measures of the security situation in Afghanistan—enemy-initiated attacks, general ANDSF casualty trends, and security incidents—show that Afghanistan experienced heightened insecurity over the winter months.

According to Resolute Support (RS), enemy-initiated attacks rose considerably: the monthly average attacks from November 2018 through January 2019 was up 19% compared to the monthly average over the last reporting period (August 16 to October 31, 2018). USFOR-A said that from December 1, 2018, through February 28, 2019, “the number of ANDSF casualties were approximately 31% higher during this three-month period when compared to the same period one year prior.” The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) reported 2,234 security-related incidents in Afghanistan from December 1, 2018–February 28, 2019, a 39% increase compared to same period the year before. These trends are notable considering that violence has typically waned during the winter months in Afghanistan over the last several years.

These data align with the U.S. intelligence community’s most recent public assessment that “Afghan forces generally have secured cities and other government strongholds, but the Taliban has increased large-scale attacks, and Afghan security suffers from a large number of forces being tied down in defensive missions, mobility shortfalls, and a lack of reliable forces to hold recaptured territory.” Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats projected in late January that in 2019 “neither the Afghan government nor the Taliban will be able to gain a strategic advantage in the Afghan war in the coming year, even if Coalition support remains at current levels.” General Votel echoed this statement in March. When pressed whether current conditions in Afghanistan merit a withdrawal of U.S. forces, General Votel said “The political conditions... right now don’t merit that.”

**ANDSF Data Discontinued**

USFOR-A discontinued the following data this quarter:
- District-stability assessments (district, population, and territorial control data)

Source: SIGAR, Quarterly Report to Congress, Reconstruction Update, April 30, 2019, pp. 73-74.
When President Trump announced his “conditions-based” South Asia strategy in August 2017, members of Congress asked top defense officials: how should the American public measure progress under the strategy? Since then, Resolute Support and the U.S. military has produced several types of data that measure aspects of the OFS mission, many of which are included in this report.

This quarter, the DoD OIG learned that Resolute Support had discontinued two of those measures, the District Stability Assessment and the ANDSF workstrand tracker. These changes represent a shift in recent months toward qualitative measures of progress, which may better reflect the current status of the conflict but may also undermine the American public’s understanding of progress toward U.S. goals in Afghanistan.

...The District Stability Assessment was a measure of an elemental component of the conflict in Afghanistan: control of territory and the people who live there. Using this measure and others, General John Nicholson, the commander of USFOR-A and the Resolute Support mission from 2016 to 2018, tracked progress toward the goal established by President Ghani to have 80 percent of Afghanistan’s population living in areas under Afghan government control or influence. The DoD’s Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy (OUSD(P)) later said that the District Stability Assessment was “not indicative of progress toward security and stability in Afghanistan,” in part due to the subjectivity of information used to make the assessment. Furthermore, a Lead IG analysis questioned the analytical foundation of the 80 percent goal. This quarter, USFOR-A told the DoD OIG that Resolute Support stopped producing the district control assessment because it was no longer of operational use to General Miller.

The ANDSF workstrand tracker measured Afghan security forces’ progress towards goals of the U.S.-Afghan Compact. The Compact is a list of more than 1,200 activities related to security, reconciliation, rule of law, and other areas of government performance. The tracker summarized these activities into a few dozen lines of efforts (“workstrands”) and measured Afghan government activity toward an undefined goal of becoming “sustainable.” Resolute Support plans to replace the tracker with a new tool that is more “manageable,” and better aligned Resolute Support assessment priorities. The DoD, per Section 1211 of the FY 2019 National Defense Authorization Act, is exploring methods to better assess, monitor, and evaluate security cooperation programs in Afghanistan.

The District Stability Assessment, the workstrand tracker, and other data included in this report, such as enemy-initiated attacks and civilian casualties, are far from perfect measures of what is actually happening in Afghanistan. These measures rely on information inputs that can be incorrect, inconsistent, or subjective. This is especially true with data that is originally gathered by the ANSF. Despite these weaknesses, these measures applied a consistent methodology over time and reveal important trends, such as two years of no change—a stalemate—in the District Stability Assessment and uneven progress across “workstrands” on the tracker.

...Population and district control measure Taliban and Afghan control of territory and, importantly, how many Afghan citizens are affected by that control. Resolute Support reported that it ceased production of its District Stability Assessment in October 2018 because it “was of limited decision-making value” to General Miller. Resolute Support has released this data to the public nearly every quarter since 2015. The most recent Resolute Support District assessment in October 2018 found that 63 percent of Afghan citizens lived in areas under government control or influence.

Control of Afghanistan’s districts—and the number of citizens who live in them—has been one of the most commonly cited measures of security in Afghanistan. Both the U.S. Government and independent analysts produce assessments of district control. These assessments use different methodologies and, as a result, produce conflicting assessments of which districts are under Taliban control, under Afghan government control, or contested. For example, the Long War Journal’s July 2018 assessment of district control found that 48 percent of Afghans lived in areas under Afghan government control. The U.S. intelligence community continues to produce their own district control assessments, one of which is provided in the classified appendix to this report.

The reasons for discontinuing or classifying data about U.S. military operations in Afghanistan vary. Military leaders may choose to change quantitative measures or rely on more qualitative assessments of progress to address unreliability in their data, to execute new strategies that are not addressed by existing data, or simply because that is their decision-making style. Some of the data is classified or not releasable to the public because it was originally produced and classified by the Afghan government (such as ANDSF casualty data).

SHIFT TOWARD QUALITATIVE MEASURES Since Ambassador Khalilzad began talks with the Taliban in October 2018, U.S. officials have said that progress toward reconciliation is the most important metric of the conflict in Afghanistan. General Miller has said that military pressure on the Taliban is designed to support the ongoing peace talks. U.S. military and diplomatic leaders said that Taliban participation in multiple rounds of talks since October 2018 and the initial “agreement in draft” are indications that the strategy is working. Progress toward reconciliation is an inherently non-linear and non-quantifiable metric, and the talks could break down at any time, particularly if the Afghan government does not join the talks. Since most U.S. intelligence about Taliban intentions is not shared with the public, it is unclear how U.S. military pressure on Taliban leaders factors into the Taliban’s decision to continue participation in the peace talks. The DoD OUSD(P) told the DoD OIG that “the real measure of success will be a lagging one and qualitative: do the terms of a political settlement ensure our national interest in preventing terrorist attacks on the homeland?” Until a political settlement is reached, if at all, the American public and their representatives in Congress may have less information about how ongoing military and diplomatic activities are bringing the United States closer to that goal. The Lead IG agencies will continue to request and analyze available data the progress of the overseas contingency operation.

Resolute Support-LIG: Population and District Control and Influence: 8/16-10/18

Source: Adapted from Lead Inspector General, OPERATION FREEDOM’S SENTINEL, LEAD INSPECTOR GENERAL REPORT TO THE UNITED STATES CONGRESS, OCTOBER 1, 2018–DECEMBER 31, 2018, p. 17.
The most recent Resolute Support District Stability Assessment, conducted in October 2018, found that the percentage of Afghan citizens who live in areas under government control or influence decreased slightly compared to the previous quarter. As shown in Table 3, 63 percent of Afghan citizens were assessed to be living in areas under government control or influence in October, compared to 65 percent in July. The net total of districts assessed as contested increased by six districts, and the net total of districts assessed as under Taliban control or influence increased by one district. The provinces with the greatest number of Afghans living under insurgent influence or control were Faryab, Kunduz, and Helmand.

In late 2017, USFOR-A and the Afghan government stated that a major objective of the South Asia strategy and Afghan Road Map was to increase security to the point that 80 percent of the Afghan population lived in areas under government control or influence by the end of 2019. A previous Lead IG quarterly report questioned the analytical foundation for that goal. The DoD stated this quarter that district and population control “are not indicative of the effectiveness of the South Asia strategy.” The DoD also attributed the lack of large changes in district and population control to the “uncertainty in the models that produce them.”

Source: Adapted from Lead Inspector General, OPERATION FREEDOM’S SENTINEL, LEAD INSPECTOR GENERAL REPORT TO THE UNITED STATES CONGRESS, OCTOBER 1, 2018–DECEMBER 31, 2018, p. 17.
Since SIGAR began receiving district-control data in November 2015, Afghan government control and influence over its districts has declined by more than 18 percentage points; contested districts have increased by about 13 points; and insurgent control or influence has risen by about five points. A historical record of district control is shown in Figure 3.31.

RS identified the provinces with the most insurgent-controlled or -influenced districts as Kunduz (five of seven districts), and Uruzgan (four of six districts), and Helmand (nine of 14 districts). DOD reported in December that the provincial centers of all of Afghanistan’s provinces are under Afghan government control or influence. See Figure 3.32, for an RS-provided map showing Afghan government and insurgent control or influence by district.

As seen in Table 3.3 on the next page, RS reported that the Afghan government controlled or influenced 360,000 square kilometers (56.1%) of Afghanistan’s total land area of roughly 644,000 square kilometers, down less than half a percentage point since last quarter. The insurgency controlled or influenced 111,000 square kilometers (17.3%) of the total land area, also down by roughly half a percentage point since last quarter. The remaining 171,000 square kilometers (26.6%) was contested by the government and insurgents, a one percentage-point increase since last quarter.
Since SIGAR began receiving district-control data in November 2015, Afghan government control and influence over its districts has declined by more than 18 percentage points; contested districts have increased by about 13 points; and insurgent control or influence has risen by about five points.111 A historical record of district control is shown in Figure 3.31.

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Source: Adapted from Lead Inspector General, OPERATION FREEDOM’S SENTINEL, LEAD INSPECTOR GENERAL REPORT TO THE UNITED STATES CONGRESS. OCTOBER 1, 2018–DECEMBER 31, 2018, pp. 22-23.
SIGAR versus Long War Journal Estimates of Taliban Control: May 2018

Notes: U.S. government data is as of May 15, 2018, and analysts’ data is as of May 16, 2018. District boundaries are as of 2014.

The Taliban has continued to make incremental gains in Afghanistan's provinces despite an uptick in US airstrikes during the past year. The US military downplayed the Taliban’s gains, stating that this is “not indicative of effectiveness of the South Asia strategy or progress toward security and stability in Afghanistan.” However, the last commander of US forces said less than two years ago that regaining control of 80 percent of Afghanistan’s territory was crucial to defeating the Taliban. The Taliban has increased its control or influence by seven districts, or 1.7 percent, since the summer, according to a report by the Special Investigator General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR). Taliban control of population has also increased by 1.7 percent between July and Oct. 2018.

SIGAR receives its data directly from Resolute Support, NATO’s mission in Afghanistan, and the US Department of Defense. According to Resolute Support, the Afghan government controls or influences 219 of Afghanistan’s 407 districts (53.8 percent), and insurgents (the Taliban) control or influence another 12.3 percent. The remaining 33.9 percent are contested.

FDD's *Long War Journal*, which has tracked the status of Afghanistan’s districts since 2014, believes the security situation in Afghanistan and the status of the districts is worse than is being reported by Resolute Support.

LWJ assesses that the Afghan government controls 35.1 percent of Afghanistan's 407 districts, and the Taliban controls another 13.0 percent. The remaining 49.6 percent are contested, while seven districts (or 1.7%) cannot be accurately assessed at this time.

A major difference in Resolute Support and LWJ’s methodologies is that LWJ does not assess “influence,” as influence is merely a measure of control. LWJ believes that Resolute Support uses influence to skew the data and provide a rosier picture of the security situation to prop up the Afghan government. On multiple occasions, LWJ has detected Resolute Support gaming the status of districts.

As the Taliban gains ground in Afghanistan, the Afghan National Security Defense Forces continues to shrink. According to SIGAR, the ANSDF “decreased by 3,635 personnel since last quarter and is at the lowest it has been since the RS [Resolute Support] mission began in January 2015.”

The Taliban has also gained ground despite a marked uptick in US airstrikes. The US military “dropped 6,823 munitions in the first 11 months of 2018,” according to SIGAR. “This year’s figure was already 56% higher than the total number of munitions released in 2017 (4,361), and is more than five times the total in 2016.”

**Resolute Support says district control is not important. Last Resolute Support commander said it was.**

Resolute Support is now downplaying the importance of government control of Afghanistan’s districts. According to SIGAR:

> “When providing district and population control data this quarter, DOD and RS reported for the first time that this data is “not indicative of effectiveness of the South Asia strategy or progress toward security and stability in Afghanistan.” DOD and RS also reiterated that there is “some uncertainty in models that produce [the data]” and subjectivity in the assessments that underlie it.”

Yet, General John Nicholson, Resolute Support’s last commander, said in Nov. 2017 that the goal of regaining control of 80 percent of Afghanistan’s territory was crucial to defeating the Taliban. “This we believe is the critical mass necessary to drive the enemy to irrelevance, meaning they're living in these remote outlying areas, or they reconcile, or they die,” Nicholson said, according to Reuters.

Resolute Support’s attempt to downplay the importance of Taliban control is contrary to everything known about counterinsurgency. In Afghanistan, the Taliban has been adept at using areas under its control to further its goal of retaking control of the country. In areas the Taliban controls or contests, it raises taxes, produces opium, and recruits, indoctrinates, and trains fighters. It also uses these areas to stage attacks on districts, towns, and cities under government control.

This is not the first time that Resolute Support and the US military have downplayed the Taliban’s control of Afghan districts. In 2016, after SIGAR noted that the Taliban was slowly gaining ground, Nicholson said that “the enemy is primarily in more rural areas that have less impact on the future of the country.”

More than two years later, the Taliban continues to use these “rural areas that have less impact on the future of the country” to make gains.

Long War Journal Estimate of Taliban Control in April 2019

The Afghan government is unable to administer 64 districts from the district centers, according to a recent survey. The 64 districts, which are located in 19 of Afghanistan’s 34 provinces, are either being administered remotely, or the district centers have been moved due to heavy fighting with the Taliban. The data track with an ongoing analysis of the security situation in Afghanistan’s districts by FDD’s Long War Journal.

The fact that a district cannot be administered from its district center is a clear indication that the government cannot control the district.

The information was gathered by TOLONews, which conducted a survey of the district governors. The names of 20 of the 64 districts which cannot be administered from its center were identified.

According to the survey, Faryab province takes the lead, with 9 of its 15 districts out of government control. Unfortunately the report did not name the 9 districts. However, this closely tracks with LWJ’s analysis: 5 districts are Taliban controlled and 6 are contested.

Ghazni is next, with 8 districts outside of government control. Again the report did not name the districts. LWJ’s analysis indicates that 11 of Ghazni’s 19 district are Taliban controlled and the remaining 8 are contested. Note that The New York Times first reported on this phenomena in Ghazni; in Aug. 2017 it noted that 7 districts were being governed from Ghazni City. [Also see LWJ report, Resolute Support obscures status of 7 Ghazni districts as 3 more fall to Taliban.]

Helmand and Farah are next, with 7 districts each that cannot be administered properly. Again, the districts were not named in the report. LWJ’s reporting indicates that 6 of Helmand’s 13 districts are Taliban controlled, and the other 7 are contested; and 4 of Farah’s 11 districts are Taliban controlled, and 6 more are contested.

The TOLONews report named 20 districts that are out of government control: 4 in Kandahar, 4 in Paktika, 4 in Kunduz, 3 in Baghlan, and 3 in Zabul. LWJ updated the status of 13 of these 20 districts from contested to Taliban controlled based on the data.

Again, the survey tracks closely to LWJ’s analysis of the security situation in Afghanistan’s districts. The new information puts LWJ’s numbers at 63 districts under Taliban control, 1 district unconfirmed Taliban controlled, and 193 district contested. This means that nearly 16 percent of Afghanistan’s districts are Taliban controlled, and 47 percent are contested.

Resolute Support Mission, NATO’s command in Afghanistan, and the US military ceased reporting on the security situation in Afghanistan’s districts in the fall of 2018. The two organizations claimed that the reporting was not indicative of progress in Afghanistan, and said that so-called peace talks with the Taliban was the real measure of success. However, the military’s own reporting showed a slow but sure deterioration of security in Afghanistan’s districts, which countered its narrative of success.
SIGAR on Lack of Effective Afghan Governance – July 2019 - I

NATIONAL GOVERNANCE

President Ghani inaugurated the first new parliament since 2011 (minus representatives from Kabul and Ghazni Provinces) on April 26, 2019. The elections took place in October 2018, but the Afghan election-management bodies did not finalize the results for Kabul Province until May 14, more than six months later. The parliamentarians from Kabul Province were sworn in on May 15. State reports that a dispute over the selection of the new speaker of the lower house and other administrative positions has prevented parliament from passing any legislation since it reconvened.

Parliament’s recent internal dysfunction may coincide with a broader marginalization of the institution vis a vis the executive branch. For example, in 2018, President Ghani issued 34 legislative acts by decree under emergency powers, while both houses of parliament only passed 14 laws.

In another example of the legislative branch’s weakness, the UN reported also this quarter that the Afghan government, effective October 2018, suspended the salaries of parliamentarians who failed to declare their assets per the terms of the anticorruption law that President Ghani enacted by presidential legislative decree. (According to the UN, the salary suspension was followed by a “remarkable” increase in asset declarations by parliamentarians, showing the importance of political will for anticorruption reforms.) For 2018, at least, the executive branch appears to have taken the lead in developing the laws it then executes.

This quarter, the Afghan news organization TOLOnews conducted an investigation on the presence of Afghan government institutions at the district level. In June, TOLOnews interviewed local officials, members of parliament and provincial councils, and, in some cases, visited selected districts. TOLOnews found that in 64 out of 364 official and 11 unofficial districts, the Afghan government’s civil offices either were working outside the district (for example, a district administrator worked out of a location such as the province capital) or were no longer functional. Figure 3.39 shows the districts TOLOnews reported with no Afghan government civil offices.

According to TOLOnews, the Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG) confirmed that in approximately 20 of these districts, the Afghan government had no government presence (civil and security) at all. SIGAR has not independently verified this information but the latter findings do conform to other information provided to SIGAR.
The Taliban have not ruled Afghanistan since 2001, but they still exert a heavy influence on the Afghan government’s delivery of public services in many parts of the country. The Taliban seldom provide services themselves, but they reportedly can co-opt, modify, or choose to facilitate or hinder Afghan government services.

These observations—troubling given the Afghan government’s need to improve perceptions of its legitimacy and effectiveness—emerge from studies conducted in the past two years by the Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN), the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), and the World Bank. Although has not independently verified these studies, they highlight a rarely acknowledged aspect of service delivery in Afghanistan: bargains with insurgents are often a necessary compromise when operating in areas they control or influence. The ODI study described the situation in 2018:

Aid agencies, the [Afghan] government and the international community seem worryingly unaware of [the growing Taliban efforts to control and influence service delivery], deeply unprepared and reluctant to engage with the Taliban, despite their growing influence on the ground, including over aid and government programs.

These studies have largely sought to describe the Taliban’s role in service delivery rather than examine its political consequences. However, some analysts argue that the Taliban’s approach is part of a larger governing strategy. According to the scholar Antonio Giustozzi, some Taliban leaders seem to believe involvement in service delivery can be a source of political legitimacy for them. Since the group has few resources to dedicate to providing services themselves, it is more efficient, according to Giustozzi, for the movement to “hijack” Afghan government-provided services.

Since December 2018, AAN and USIP have issued a series of case studies on life in Taliban-controlled or influenced districts. This research relied on semi-structured interviews with key informants from districts under varying levels of insurgent influence. As shown in Table 3.23, there was a pattern to the Taliban’s activities across districts. The Taliban were reported to monitor schools, prohibit some school subjects such as science, promote others such as Islamic studies, restrict polio campaigns from going door-to-door but instead to operate from the village mosque, and run commissions that would register nongovernmental service providers.

As one USIP author summarized, service delivery in Taliban-controlled and -influenced areas is a “hybrid of state- and nongovernmental organization-provided services, operating according to Taliban rules.” The Taliban have been both disrupters and advocates or facilitators of services. For example, the Taliban regularly threaten cell phone
providers to stop service at night. Conversely, the Taliban have threatened to attack Afghan government electrical infrastructure to force the government to provide electricity to villages under their control.

In multiple districts, the Taliban reportedly co-opted government services, taxing service providers, monitoring services, and presenting candidates for government jobs. These actions by the Taliban’s “shadow state” are parallel to, but in many ways parasitically dependent on, the for- mal Afghan government. In some cases, the Taliban appeared to advance community interests. For example, respondents in Andar District in Ghazni Province reported that the Taliban removed nonexistent or “ghost” teachers from the Afghan government’s roster. In other cases, the Taliban reportedly benefited from corruption. In Nad Ali District, Helmand Province, respondents said the Taliban collected ghost-teacher salaries.

The UK’s ODI and the World Bank published research in 2017 and 2018, respectively, showing that development programming can continue (in some cases, rather successfully) in Taliban-controlled or-influenced areas through bargains with insurgents. ODI, relying on interviews with 162 individuals, reported that the Taliban co-opted government- and aid agency- provided goods and services in areas under their control. The report says that Afghan government service delivery ministries have struck deals with local Taliban and that most provincial or district-level government health and education officials interviewed for the report said they were in direct contact with their Taliban counterparts.

Similarly, an Afghan government official interviewed for the recent AAN/USIP study of Dasht-e Archi District, Kunduz Province described how the responsibilities for school monitoring were divided between the government and the Taliban, depending on which group controlled the areas in which the school resided.

The World Bank wrote that where the Taliban was relatively reliant upon local support, agreements with local elites emerged to support delivery of government-funded health and education services. The World Bank found that after launching attacks on schools in 2006–2008, the group has since changed to attempting to influence state schools through local-level negotiations with Ministry of Education officials. Some Taliban were thus bargaining about co-opting rather than closing schools.

While the AAN/USIP, ODI, and World Bank studies offered similar descriptions of Taliban involvement in service delivery, only the ODI study drew strong conclusions on the consequences for Taliban governance. The World Bank demurred on a critical question, writing that their study did not address “the question of whether or how service

delivery may contribute to, or undermine, state-building, peace-building, or conditions of fragility,” as they saw improving the delivery of services as a worthy goal in its own right. However, ODI argued that the bargains around service delivery were indicative of a coherent Taliban governing strategy. According to ODI, the Taliban’s involvement in service delivery allows the group to exert influence beyond the areas under its direct control in furtherance of its goal to impose its rule.
Methodology: The primary data and research behind this are based on open-source information, such as press reports and information provided by government agencies and the Taliban. This is a living map that LWJ frequently updates as verifiable research is conducted to support control changes. Any “Unconfirmed” district colored orange has some level of claim-of-control made by the Taliban, but either has not yet been—or can not be—independently verified by LWJ research. A “Contested” district may mean that the government may be in control of the district center, but little else, and the Taliban controls large areas or all of the areas outside of the district center. A “Controlled” district may mean the Taliban is openly administering a district, providing services and security, and also running the local courts. Beginning in Jan. 2018, LWJ incorporated district-level data provided by the Special Investigator General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, which is based on assessments by Resolute Support, NATO’s command in Afghanistan. Resolute Support/SIGAR has five assessment levels: insurgent controlled, insurgent influenced, contested, government influenced, and government controlled. LWJ does not maintain an “Influenced” assessment for the districts, and simply has three assessment levels: insurgent controlled, contested, and government controlled. LWJ considers the influenced assessment to equate to contested. The reasoning is that if the Taliban wield influence in, say 30% or 70% of a district, the end result is the same. Neither the government, nor the Taliban, fully control the district, and it is therefore contested. LWJ uses the following methodology to reconcile SIGAR/Resolute Support’s information with LWJ’s data:

- If RS/SIGAR assessment of a district matches LWJ’s assessment, there are no changes.
- If RS/SIGAR identifies a district as Insurgent Controlled and LWJ identifies as contested, then LWJ assesses the district as Insurgent Controlled (based on review of available information).
- If RS/SIGAR identifies a district as Insurgent Influenced and LWJ determines it to be Contested, LWJ assesses the district as Contested.
- If RS/SIGAR identifies a district as Contested and LWJ has no determination, LWJ accepts RS/SIGAR’s assessment and identifies the district Contested.
- If RS/SIGAR identifies a district as GIRoA Influenced, and LWJ has information there is significant Taliban activity in the district (frequent attacks on police and military, attacks on the district center or military bases, closing schools, etc.), then LWJ assesses the district as Contested.
- If RS/SIGAR identifies a district as GIRoA Influenced, and LWJ cannot see evidence of Taliban activity, LWJ assesses the district as GIRoA Controlled.

Estimates of Combat Activity as Largely Useless Indicators of the Trends in the War
Estimates of Combat Activity Have Very Limited Value and Are Currently Used to Disguise a Lack of Progress - I

Afghanistan is not a war against terrorism. While it is certainly ideologically driven, it is being fought as a classic counterinsurgency conflict in which the insurgents are seeking to win control of the government and the nation. While experts differ over the extent of Taliban influence and control, they do not differ over the fact that it has been able to rebuild itself as a major military force, and has been able to achieve a near stalemate with Afghan security forces in spite of the train and assist, direct land combat support, and massive increases in combat air support they have had from the U.S. and its allies in Resolute Support.

As noted in the previous section, this has been a major factor in the decision to cease issuing Resolute Support and official U.S. estimates of the relative control and influence of the government and the Taliban. They have substituted a different set of metrics called Enemy Initiated Attacks (EIAs) or Effective Enemy Attacks (EEAs). As SIGAR states in its July 31, 2019 report to Congress, “According to RS, enemy-initiated attacks are defined as all attacks (direct fire, indirect fire, surface-to-air fire, IED, and mine explosions, etc.) initiated by insurgents that are reported as [significant activities] (SIGACTs...Resolute Support labels an enemy-initiated attack as “effective” if it causes a casualty.”

These EIA and EEA data can provide a crude illustration of the different levels of threat activity in given parts of Afghanistan, but they are not really relevant to assessing the course of the counterinsurgency in Afghanistan, and seem to be designed to deliberately fake or exaggerate Afghan government success. They combine trivial clashes and serious battles, and define casualties as measures of effectiveness rather than increases or losses of Taliban control. As a result, the patterns at best approach the status of statistical “noise,” rather than show the patterns in the war.

Such EIA and EEA data are particularly useless as long as U.S. air and land combat support of Afghan forces can keep the Taliban from scoring lasting victories. The increase in combat air support since 2015, and the improved “forward deployed” focus of the train and assist mission in aiding actual Afghan combat units or Kandaks, has so far achieved this goal.

The Taliban are still fighting at levels where they can expand their influence and control in the countryside, but cannot achieve lasting defeats of government military forces in battles for District and Provincial capitals or Kabul. So far, the U.S. has been able to support elite elements of the Afghan Army with train and assist forces, land combat forces, and airpower, and either defend such centers or allow their recovery after temporary Taliban gains. As a result, the Taliban tends to severely restrict its number of direct open attacks on Afghan forces. It instead concentrates on winning influence and politico-economic control over the population in the countryside, carrying out acts of terrorism and assassination in population centers, and accepting defeat in serious combat encounters after it has demonstrated that it does have significant combat power and has broadly intimidated the Afghan population and signaled that the U.S. has not scored any form of lasting gains or victory.
Estimates of Combat Activity Have Very Limited Value and Are Currently Used to Disguise a Lack of Progress - II

Quite frankly, it is hard to believe that the analysts, commanders, and policymakers that prepare and use such EIA and EEA data do not realize this, and issuing it reflects directly on their professional integrity.

Other metrics further illustrate the extent to which the the EIA and EEA data do not provide a useful measure of the levels of violence. The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) comes far closer to providing such indicators. ACLED is “a disaggregated conflict collection, analysis, and crisis-mapping project” funded by the State Department.

“The project collects the dates, actors, types of violence, locations, and fatalities of all political violence, protest, and select non-violent, politically important incidents across several regions, as reported from open, secondary sources. ACLED’s aim is to capture the modes, frequency, and intensity of political violence and opposition as it occurs. ACLED considers the event data it collects as falling into three categories and six subcategories: ‘violent events,’ including battles, explosions/remote violence, and violence against civilians; ‘demonstrations,’ including protests and riots; or ‘nonviolent actions,’ including strategic developments (agreements, arrests, or looting/property destruction).”

The charts and maps in this section provide a comparison of both recent EIA/EEA and ACLED data. The contrast is striking. SIGAR’s July 31, 2019 report states that, “This quarter’s EIA data shows that enemy attacks have increased over the last few months, following a violent winter, though this spring appears to be slightly less violent compared to spring 2018. RS reported 6,445 enemy-initiated attacks this quarter (March 1–May 31, 2019). This period’s figures reflect a 9% increase compared to the preceding three months (December 1, 2018–February 28, 2019), but a 10% decrease compared to the EIA reported during the same period last year (March 1–May 31, 2018).”

As the charts at the end of this section show, SIGAR also reports that, “ACLED recorded 2,801 incidents in Afghanistan this quarter (March 1–May 31, 2019). This figure reflects a 66% increase in incidents compared to the same period in 2018 (1,691 incidents). Unlike RS’s EIA and EEIA data, ACLED incidents include the violent and nonviolent activity of all the parties to the conflict, though violent activity made up 98% of the recorded incidents this quarter (battles, 72%; explosions/remote violence, 23%; violence against civilians, 3%). The data show that this significant year-on-year change was mainly driven by an increase in the number of battles recorded this quarter (2,026) versus 962 recorded during March–May 2018. USFOR-A said this is likely due to the increase in ANDSF operational tempo this quarter.

Elsewhere in the SIGAR report, however, SIGAR only counts 5 major actions by government forces between May and July 2019, and five actions by anti-government forces (SIGAR, July 31, 2019, p. 64). In a war for hearts and minds, the EIA and EEA data seem useless even as indicators of dead bodies.
Resolute Support Estimate of Violent Incidents vs. District Control: August 1-October 31, 2018

Source: SIGAR, Quarterly Report to Congress, Reconstruction Update, January 30, 2019, p. 73.
UN Estimate of Security Incidents: 2015-2018

AVERAGE DAILY SECURITY INCIDENTS BY UN REPORTING PERIOD, SINCE 2015

Note: UN reporting periods occasionally vary, leading to some gaps in data.


Source: Source: SIGAR, Quarterly Report to Congress, Reconstruction Update, January 30, 2019, p. 75.
SIGAR also analyzes security incident data from Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), which records district-level data of political violence and protest incidents across Afghanistan. For consistency with RS’s enemy-initiated attacks data, SIGAR is presenting ACLED data at the provincial level this quarter (see Figure 3.32) and chose a date range for the data in alignment with RS’s reporting period (January 1–December 31, 2018).

ACLED recorded 7,366 security-related events in Afghanistan in 2018, roughly the same as the 7,345 recorded in 2017. The three provinces with the most events were unchanged from 2017 to 2018: Nangarhar, Ghazni, and Helmand. The events occurring in these three provinces accounted for 35% of 2018’s total events. Eight of the top 10 provinces with the most ACLED-recorded security-related events in 2018 were also within the top 10 provinces where RS recorded the most enemy-initiated attacks in 2018 (Helmand, Farah, Faryab, Uruzgan, Kandahar, Herat, Ghazni, and Nangarhar).

ACLED recorded 2,234 security-related events over the winter months (December 1, 2018–February 28, 2019), a roughly 30% increase compared to the 1,610 events reported during the same period one year prior. The three provinces with the most security-related events were Helmand, Kandahar, and Nangarhar. Much of the increase in events this reporting period compared to the same period the year before was due to increases in events reported in Kandahar and Helmand Provinces.

Source: Excerpted from SIGAR, Quarterly Report to Congress, Reconstruction Update, April 30, 2019, pp. 76-77.
Resolute Support Estimate of Enemy Initiated Attacks: 2018

Source: Excerpted from SIGAR, Quarterly Report to Congress, Reconstruction Update, April 30, 2019, p. 74-76.
Resolute Support labels an enemy-initiated attack as “effective” if it causes a casualty. USFOR-A reported that there were 2,517 effective enemy-initiated attacks in Afghanistan between October and December. This represents a decline in enemy initiated attacks compared to the July to September period (3,093), but a nearly 10 percent increase compared to the same period in 2017 (2,298). During 2018, approximately 49 percent of reported enemy-initiated attacks (10,955 out of 22,495 attacks) effective. However, the ANDSF often does not report attacks that do not result in casualties, so the actual percentage of enemy-initiated attacks that were effective may be lower.

Source: Lead Inspector General, OPERATION FREEDOM’S SENTINEL, LEAD INSPECTOR GENERAL REPORT TO THE UNITED STATES CONGRESS OCTOBER 1, 2018–DECEMBER 31, 2018, p. 17.
Measure of violence provide some insight into the intensity, type, and perpetrators of conflict. Resolute Support collects data on “enemy-initiated attacks” in Afghanistan, which it defines as attacks by the Taliban, ISIS-K, or other enemy groups. Resolute Support labels an enemy-initiated attack as “effective” if it results in a casualty (killed or wounded). Resolute Support reported 5,547 enemy-initiated attacks during the quarter, of which 2,202 (40 percent) were effective, as shown in Figure 3. The number of enemy-initiated attacks during the quarter was 20 percent fewer than last quarter and 7 percent fewer than the same period one year ago. The number of effective enemy-initiated attacks was 7 percent fewer than last quarter and 11 percent fewer than the same period last year.

The majority of enemy-initiated attacks (84 percent) and effective enemy-initiated attacks (76 percent) were the result of direct fire. IEDs were the second most frequent type of enemy-initiated attack (7 percent), accounting for 14 percent of attacks that were labeled effective. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) collects and reports data on “security incidents” in Afghanistan. In contrast to the Resolute Support “enemy-initiated attacks,” the UNAMA reports of “security incidents” include violence initiated by Afghan and international forces (such as airstrikes), in addition to attacks by the Taliban, ISIS-K, and other violent organizations. UNAMA reported that during the period November 16, 2018 to February 7, 2019, it recorded 4,420 security incidents. This represents an 8 percent decrease from a similar period the previous year. As with prior quarters, armed clashes accounted for the majority of security incidents. UNAMA noted that suicide attacks decreased by 61 percent compared to one year ago. UNAMA suggested that this decrease may be a result of successful ANDSF operations in Kabul and Nangarhar province.


DoD Reporting on Security Trends: June 2019

From December 1, 2018, to May 15, 2019, the total number of effective enemy-initiated attacks was 4,312 and the monthly average was 784. By comparison, the total number of effective enemy initiated attacks during the same time last year (December 1, 2017 to May 15, 2018) was 4,795 and the monthly average was 872.

The Coalition relies largely on ANDSF reporting for all metrics, including effective enemy initiated attacks, which are a subset of all security incidents. Direct fire attacks against minimally manned Afghan outposts and checkpoints remain by far the largest source of effective enemy-initiated attacks, followed by IED attacks and mine strikes). Consistent with trends during the last several years, indirect fire and surface-to-air fire remain the least frequent sources of effective enemy-initiated attacks. The number of IED attacks and mine strikes has remained relatively steady during the last 18 months.

The number of ANDSF casualties suffered while conducting local patrols was at the same level as the same period last year. The number of ANDSF casualties suffered while conducting checkpoint operations were seven percent higher than the same reporting period last year. The number of casualties incurred during offensive operations has increased by 17 percent over the same period.

The majority of ANDSF casualties continue to be the result of direct fire attacks; IED attacks and mine contribute to overall casualties but at a much lower level.

(Since ANDSF units often do not report insurgent attacks that do not result in casualties, the number of effective enemy-initiated attacks is the most representative metric of overall security conditions rather the total number of reported security incidents. Security incidents comprise all enemy action, including enemy-initiated direct fire and indirect fire, such as mortar, rocket, and artillery; surface-to-air fire (SAFIRE) and explosive hazard events, including executed attacks (IED explosion, mine strike); and potential or attempted attacks (IEDs or mines found and cleared, premature IED detonations, and IED turn-ins). Security incidents do not include friendly action (e.g., direct fire and indirect fire initiated by friendly forces))
DoD Reporting on Security Trends: June 2017-May 2019

Effective Enemy Initiated Attacks by Type

- Direct Fire
- IED Explosion/Mine Strike
- Indirect Fire
- SAFIRE

* Data cut-off, May 15, 2019


RS-REPORTED EFFECTIVE ENEMY-INITIATED ATTACKS IN 2019

Note: The date range of the data is January 1-May 31, 2019. The total EEIA for that period was 10,296 and EIA was 4,319.


...RS-reported enemy-initiated attack (EIA) data comes from an official source, but is only available unclassified at the provincial level and does not include Afghan and Coalition-initiated attacks on the enemy.

...RS offered new caveats about EIA data this quarter. First, it said the figures are based on Afghan operational reporting, which is often delayed. RS said it “currently measure[s] a reporting lag of 15 days to capture 85% of all reported incidents.” The data thus become more comprehensive over time. Second, RS said that while it “cannot confirm the accuracy and completeness of this data, we maintain that it can be used to substantiate broad inferences and trends over time. Currently we assume . . . SIGACTs [Significant Activities] in general to be about 10% inaccurate.” RS recommends using EEIA data to compare enemy activity between provinces and EIA data to analyze enemy activity over time and also within specific provinces or regions.

DOD uses EEIA data in its official reporting to analyze security trends. Both DOD and RS view EEIA data to be a more reliable indicator of security trends compared to EIA or overall SIGACTs. They say this is because ANDSF units do not always report insurgent attacks that do not result in casualties. The number of EIA could thus be higher than what RS has reported, which would also impact the percentage of EEIA to EIA.

According to RS, “enemy-initiated attacks are defined as all attacks (direct fire, indirect fire, surface-to-air fire, IED, and mine explosions, etc.) initiated by insurgents that are reported as [significant activities] (SIGACTs).”

This quarter’s EIA data shows that enemy attacks have increased over the last few months, following a violent winter, though this spring appears to be slightly less violent compared to spring 2018. RS reported 6,445 enemy-initiated attacks this quarter (March 1–May 31, 2019). This period’s figures reflect a 9% increase compared to the preceding three months (December 1, 2018–February 28, 2019), but a 10% decrease compared to the EIA reported during the same period last year (March 1–May 31, 2018).

When looking at the geographic distribution of EIA thus far in 2019 (January–May), more than half (52%) occurred in just five of Afghanistan’s 34 provinces: Helmand, Badghis, Faryab, Herat, and Farah. Of these provinces, the most EIA reported by far were in Helmand (2,788), followed by Badghis (808) and Faryab (657). The most common methods of EIA in 2019 have been direct fire (84%), followed by IED explosions (8%), and indirect fire (5%). Similar trends for 2018 were reported last quarter.

Of the 6,445 EIA reported this quarter (March 1–May 31, 2019), roughly 43% (2,801) were considered “effective” enemy-initiated attacks (EEIA) that resulted in ANDSF, Coalition, or civilian casualties. The number of EEIA this period reflects a 17% increase compared to the preceding three months (December 1, 2018–February 28, 2019), but a 7% decrease compared to the same period last year (March 1–May 31, 2018).

The geographic distribution of the most deadly attacks in the first five months of the year has been slightly different from EIA. As seen in Figure 3.31, Helmand Province had the most EEIA, followed by Kandahar and Badghis Provinces, which placed sixth and second (of 34 provinces) for the most EIA respectively. Table 3.6 shows that the provinces with the highest proportion of EEIA were in many cases not the provinces with the most total EEIA or EIA: in Kandahar, 68% of EIA were EEIA, followed by Khost (66%), and Zabul (65%).

ACLED-Recorded Incidents Increase: March 1–May 31, 2019 - I

...Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) event data can be disaggregated to the district level, to a variety of security incident types, and to all the parties to the conflict, but depends entirely on media reporting of political and security-related incidents.

...The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) is “a disaggregated conflict collection, analysis, and crisis-mapping project” funded by the State Department. The project collects the dates, actors, types of violence, locations, and fatalities of all political violence, protest, and select non-violent, politically important incidents across several regions, as reported from open, secondary sources. ACLED’s aim is to capture the modes, frequency, and intensity of political violence and opposition as it occurs.

ACLED considers the event data it collects as falling into three categories and six subcategories: “violent events,” including battles, explosions/remote violence, and violence against civilians; “demonstrations,” including protests and riots; or “nonviolent actions,” including strategic developments (agreements, arrests, or looting/property destruction).

...According to RS, “enemy-initiated attacks are defined as all attacks (direct fire, indirect fire, surface-to-air fire, IED, and mine explosions, etc.) initiated by insurgents that are reported as [significant activities] (SIGACTs).”

This quarter’s EIA data shows that enemy attacks have increased over the last few months, following a violent winter, though this spring appears to be slightly less violent compared to spring 2018. RS reported 6,445 enemy-initiated attacks this quarter (March 1–May 31, 2019). This period’s figures reflect a 9% increase compared to the preceding three months (December 1, 2018–February 28, 2019), but a 10% decrease compared to the EIA reported during the same period last year (March 1–May 31, 2018).

When looking at the geographic distribution of EIA thus far in 2019 (January–May), more than half (52%) occurred in just five of Afghanistan’s 34 provinces: Helmand, Badghis, Faryab, Herat, and Farah. Of these Figure 3.32 shows that the most common methods of EEIA in 2019 have been direct fire (76%), followed by IED explosions (15%), and indirect fire (6%), roughly in line with the 2018 trends reported last quarter.

ACLED-Recorded Incidents Increase: March 1–May 31, 2019 - II

ACLED-Recorded Incidents Increase
SIGAR analyzes incident data from Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), which records district-level data of political violence and protest incidents across Afghanistan. For consistency with RS’s enemy-initiated attacks data, SIGAR presents its analysis of ACLED’s data aggregated to the provincial level and chooses the date range for the data in alignment with RS’s reporting period (March 1–May 31, 2019).

ACLED recorded 2,801 incidents in Afghanistan this quarter (March 1–May 31, 2019). This figure reflects a 66% increase in incidents compared to the same period in 2018 (1,691 incidents). Unlike RS’s EIA and EEIA data, ACLED incidents include the violent and nonviolent activity of all the parties to the conflict, though violent activity made up 98% of the recorded incidents this quarter (battles, 72%; explosions/remote violence, 23%; violence against civilians, 3%). The data show that this significant year-on-year change was mainly driven by an increase in the number of battles recorded this quarter (2,026) versus 962 recorded during March–May 2018. USFOR-A said this is likely due to the increase in ANDSF operational tempo this quarter.

When examining the provincial breakdown of ACLED-recorded incidents thus far in 2019, the three provinces with the most incidents shifted slightly compared to the same period in 2018. In 2019 (through May 31), Helmand Province has had the most incidents (603), followed by Kandahar (460) and Ghazni (3); the same period last year saw Nangarhar with the most incidents (490), then Helmand (248) and Ghazni (245). RS’s enemy-initiated attacks and ACLED’s incident data only slightly align in that they show Helmand and Kandahar as having the most EEIA and incidents, respectively, from January through May 2019. Seen in Figure 3.33, ACLED-recorded incidents are concentrated in a several key provinces: the incidents occurring in the top 10 most violent provinces accounted for 62% of this year’s total incidents.

Figure 3.34 shows that of all the ACLED-recorded incidents from January 1 through May 2019, battles account for the vast majority (about 74%), followed by explosions and remote violence (22%). This is a shift from the same period last year, when battles made up about 58% of recorded events, and explosions and remote violence 33%.

Casualty Trends Show Limited Growth in Total Deaths, but Growing Differences in Resolute Support and UNAMA Assessments of the Impact of ANSF and Coalition Attacks on Civilians
Casualty Trends

The metrics in this section reflect serious differences between UN and largely US sources. The UN and the Resolute Support Command have long differed in making estimates of civilian casualties. Most of the recent differences come from higher UN estimates of the casualties caused by Coalition and Afghan air attacks, and attacks by ANA land forces, than those issued by the Resolute Support Command, Afghan government, and U.S. official sources.

Resolute Support Command argues that it is careful to minimize civilian losses when it uses airpower, and civilian, deaths are very low. The UN argues that they rose sharply in 2018 and have been rising steadily since 2014.

Part of the differences in each side’s estimates comes from the fact that the UN relies heavily on on-the-ground interviews. Resolute Support argues that many of those who make claims about civilian casualties are exaggerating them because they support the Taliban or ISIS, or in a search for compensation.

Some of the Resolute Support claims that the Taliban does manipulate such accounts to exaggerate civilian losses, and understate its presence in the target area seem to be valid. However, UN and other claims that the U.S and Afghan government may be under-reporting civilian casualties and issue cannot be dismissed. An independent analysis of US air attacks on narcotics targets published in April 2019 tended to support the UN estimates. It argued that civilian casualties were substantially higher than Resolute Support admitted, although this BBC analysis also relied heavily on eye-witness accounts after the event.

At the same time, war is war. Forces cannot fight in areas occupied by civilians without inflicting civilian casualties and some of the UN demands seem to ignore the realities and uncertainties in close combat, the “fog over war” in air operations with even the most advanced IS&R systems, and the fact an enemy that uses human shields and propagandizes every casualty has to be fought on real world terms. They also seem to ignore the fact that acting decisively may sometimes trade short term casualties for much higher casualties if the failure to use force prolongs the battle.

Moreover, both sets of estimates do not show a major rise in casualty levels after 2015, and the overall levels of civilian casualties are surprisingly low in comparison with comparable civilian casualty estimates in Iraq and Syria and in other similar wars. This may reflect the fact that combat in Afghanistan is generally more sporadic and localized. The Afghan War has certainly been a long one, but the U.S. has made a major effort to avoid civilian casualties, the Taliban has so far focused on winning influence and control over the population, and the number of major battles in civilian areas has been limited.
International forces in Afghanistan aim for zero civilian casualties, applying that standard to all stages of operations. One civilian death is one too many, and General John Nicholson, Commander of Resolute Support, and United States Forces- Afghanistan, has said “We go to extraordinary lengths to avoid civilian casualties, and we wave off strikes if we identify civilians.”

Since 2009 the United Nations mission in Afghanistan, UNAMA, has investigated reports of civilian casualties in Afghanistan. Their work to highlight war’s effect on normal life, and in particular to improve protection for women and children, is tireless and rightly highly regarded. The downward trend recorded in their annual figures for 2017 – the first move down since 2012 – is welcome, especially amid a campaign when insurgents have specifically targeted civilians on a scale never before seen in Afghanistan.

Investigating every civilian death is no less thorough inside the Resolute Support Mission. Using a different methodology than UNAMA, the trend of casualties recorded by the RS Civilian Casualty Mitigation Team (CCMT) is in the opposite direction to that found by UNAMA. While UNAMA found that civilian casualties caused by the conflict fell 9 percent to 10,428 in 2017, RS recorded a rise to 8,319, perhaps explained by more accurate reporting by Afghan forces who, with better training, have become more aware of the effect of the war on the civilian population.

In assessing what accounts for the difference in these figures, there is no doubt who causes most civilian casualties in Afghanistan – insurgents whose hypocrisy was laid bare as they turned to Afghan civilians as their prime target in 2017 after they failed to gain ground against superior Afghan forces. RS investigators calculate that 88 percent of Afghan civilians killed and injured in 2017 were victims of the Taliban, IS-K and other insurgent groups. UNAMA assessed the proportion at 65 percent.

In other areas there were even bigger differences in assessing those killed and injured. In 2017, RS recorded no civilian casualties from international forces on the ground, and 51 from the air – 19 killed and 32 injured. RS assessed another 69 casualties (33 dead and 36 injured) were caused by the Afghan Air Force. UNAMA attributed 246 casualties to international military air strikes (154 deaths and 92 injured), and 309 casualties to the Afghan Air Force, with a further 76 casualties from air strikes attributed to unknown pro-government forces.

So how can these discrepancies be explained?

Both UNAMA and RS have experienced teams who examine every allegation. One explanation lies in different sources that are available to either UNAMA or RS. In the case of ground attacks, the RS team collect and assess operational planning data, and upon completion of operations potential civilian casualties are assessed, with some reported immediately by units involved. For air strikes, RS know whether a plane or unmanned aerial vehicle was involved. Everything is recorded and stored, including gun-tapes from Afghan planes and helicopters, which now carry out most air strikes.

The RS investigation team assess that in several of the cases where casualties were alleged to be from air strikes, no aerial platforms were nearby at the time, and reported explosions may have resulted from concealed IEDs or insurgents firing rockets and mortars. In other cases, RS investigators have access to surveillance information that gives them confidence that civilians were not present at the scene of a strike.

For example, on November 19, 2017, in the air campaign under new US authorities striking Taliban revenue streams, a suspected drug lab was struck in northern Helmand. UNAMA relayed information to RS alleging that nine civilians from the same family were killed in the strike. They shared detailed information about three women, two boys and four girls – including a one-year-old. This claim of nine dead was included in the UNAMA report, but not counted by RS. RS investigations disproved the allegation as surveillance of the house over a significant period of time showed no sign of the presence of a family. Local government officials said that no civilians were killed.

While RS shares evidence with UNAMA to enhance understanding, UNAMA investigations rely primarily instead on eyewitness accounts, requiring at least three independent sources per incident. UNAMA proactively search for sources of different genders and from different ethnic groups, evaluating them for credibility. But at times are unable to conduct onsite investigations owing to security constraints, and in order to protect privacy will not share eyewitness identity, which means their accounts are difficult to corroborate.

Resolute Support on RS vs. UNAMA Casualty Estimates: April 2018 - II

This difference in methodology is only one explanation for disparate findings. Of the 99 separate allegations of civilian casualties by international military forces passed to RS by UNAMA, only three air strikes were proved to be confirmed civilian casualty cases to the satisfaction of the RS investigation board.

Another discrepancy results from different definitions for ‘civilian’ and for ‘casualty’. Legal advisers on both sides assess civilians differently. For UNAMA the definition is wide, giving legal protection to people who might be considered combatants under other interpretations of international humanitarian law. And in defining ‘casualties’, UNAMA includes those treated at the scene who return home, while a casualty to RS is someone whose injuries involved treatment at a medical facility.

**Improved protection for civilians in Afghan military operations**

Increasingly Afghan forces, in the air and on the ground, are conducting the campaign without international support. They now have their own forward ground controllers to identify targets, and Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) platforms to send accurate information to attack planes. On many occasions Afghan planes return to base without releasing their weapons rather than risking civilian lives (as indeed do the air platforms of international military forces).

UNAMA “acknowledged the significant measures undertaken by the Afghan national security forces to improve the protection of civilians in 2017, especially during ground fighting and related operations.” As well as new policies, UNAMA noted “the adoption of practical measures on the battlefield, including relocation of security bases from civilian areas, and increased constraints on the use of mortars and other indirect fire weapons during ground fighting in civilian-populated areas.”

There were also indications that the “overall increase in air operations may have played a role in constraining and/or deterring large scale attacks against cities by anti-government elements.” And this is in stark contrast to the way the enemy is increasingly prosecuting its campaign. Afghanistan’s prime security concern is large-scale attacks by insurgents who indiscriminately pursue civilians in their homes, schools, hospitals, markets and places of worship, rather than carrying out their fight on the battlefield. Instead of seeking military targets, insurgents led a massacre of 150 civilians, with another 600 injured, while destroying the German Embassy in May 2017.

And already in 2018, the Taliban have stormed the Intercontinental Hotel in Kabul with AK-47 assault rifles, killing 22 civilians. IS-K attacked Save the Children in Jalalabad, killing four people and wounding 22 at an organization whose primary aim is to help Afghan children have a better life and future. And in a commandeered ambulance, the Taliban again unleashed their fury upon innocent civilians on the streets of Kabul, killing 103 and injuring 235 more.

There was no dispute over who was responsible for these casualties.

Excerpted from Civilian Casualties, [www.rs.nato/int.media-center/bacgrounders](http://www.rs.nato/int.media-center/bacgrounders), April 2018.
UNAMA Estimates of Total Civilian Casualties: 2009-2018

Total Civilian Deaths & Injured
January to December 2009 - 2018

UNAMA Estimates of Causes of Casualties: 2018

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responsible party (attributed by UNAMA)</th>
<th>Civilians killed</th>
<th>Civilians injured</th>
<th>Total civilian casualties</th>
<th>Percent of overall civilian casualties</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Taliban</td>
<td>1,348</td>
<td>2,724</td>
<td>4,072</td>
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<td><em>Daesh/ISKP</em></td>
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<td>482</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other/multiple</td>
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<td>31</td>
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<td>Less than 1 per cent</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Responsible Party (Attributed by UNAMA)</th>
<th>Civilians killed</th>
<th>Civilians injured</th>
<th>Total Civilian Casualties</th>
<th>Per cent of overall civilian casualties</th>
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<tr>
<td>Afghan national security forces</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pro-government armed groups</td>
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<td>81</td>
<td>180</td>
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<tr>
<td>International military forces</td>
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<td>74</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>223</td>
<td>2 per cent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIG: Conflicting Estimates of Civilian Casualties: 2018
Civilian Casualties by Quarter and Reporting Organization, October-December 2018

Source: Adapted from Lead Inspector General, OPERATION FREEDOM’S SENTINEL, LEAD INSPECTOR GENERAL REPORT TO THE UNITED STATES CONGRESS. OCTOBER 1, 2018–DECEMBER 31, 2018, p. 20.
In the first quarter of 2019, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) continued to document high levels of harm to civilians from the armed conflict. From 1 January to 31 March 2019, UNAMA documented 1,773 civilian casualties (581 deaths and 1,192 injured), including 582 child casualties (150 deaths and 432 injured). This represents a 23 percent decrease in overall civilian casualties as compared to the same period last year and is the lowest for a first quarter since 2013.

The overall reduction of civilian casualties was driven by a decrease in civilian casualties by suicide improvised explosive device (IED) attacks. UNAMA notes the particularly harsh winter conditions during the first three months of the year, which may have contributed to this trend. It is unclear whether the decrease in civilian casualties was influenced by any measures taken by parties to the conflict to better protect civilians, or by the ongoing talks between parties to the conflict.

UNAMA is very concerned by the continued targeting of civilians and increase in civilian casualties from the use of non-suicide IEDs by Anti-Government Elements, as well as significant increases in civilian casualties from aerial and search operations, which drove an overall increase in civilian casualties by Pro-Government Forces. Civilian deaths attributed to Pro-Government Forces surpassed those attributed to Anti-Government Elements during the first quarter of 2019.

Ground engagements were the leading cause of civilian casualties, causing approximately one-third of the total. A single mortar attack incident by Daesh/Islamic State Khurasan Province (ISKP) on 7 March 2019 in Kabul caused approximately one-fifth of all civilian casualties from ground engagements (see below). The use of IEDs was the second leading cause of civilian casualties. Contrary to 2017 and 2018 trends, the majority of IED civilian casualties were caused by non-suicide IEDs rather than suicide IEDs. Aerial operations were the leading cause of civilian deaths and the third leading cause of civilian casualties, followed by targeted killings and explosive remnants of war. Civilians living in Kabul, Helmand, Nangarhar, Faryab and Kunduz provinces were most affected (in that order).

AFGHAN SECURITY PERSONNEL CASUALTIES

USFOR-A told the DoD OIG that the number of ANDSF casualties during the period December 2018 to February 2019 was approximately 31 percent higher than the same period one year ago. The number of casualties during defensive operations increased by 45 percent while the number of casualties during offensive operations increased by 21 percent. Almost half of the ANDSF casualties during this 3-month period were inflicted during checkpoint security operations.

USFOR-A classified ANDSF casualty and attrition rates at the request of the Afghan government. However, Afghan political leaders occasionally release some information about ANDSF casualties to the media. In January 2019, President Ghani stated that 45,000 ANDSF members had been killed since he took office in 2014.

U.S. AND COALITION FORCES CASUALTIES

Four U.S. military personnel died because of combat injuries during the quarter. The DoD announced that a Soldier died of wounds sustained on January 13 in Badghis province; a Soldier died on January 22 as a result of small arms fire in Uruzgan province; and two Soldiers died as a result of wounds sustained in Kunduz province on March 22.

Resolute Support did not report any casualties among its non-U.S. partner forces during the quarter.
Resolute Support assesses reports of civilian casualties using ANDSF and coalition operational reports, aircraft video footage, records of U.S. and Afghan weapons releases, and other coalition and Afghan government-generated information. Resolute Support reported that it verified 1,472 civilian casualties (372 killed, 1,100 wounded) during the quarter. Most of these civilian casualties were the result of IED and direct fire attacks. The provinces with the greatest number of civilian casualties during the quarter were Kabul, Nangarhar, and Helmand.

UNAMA reported that it had verified 1,773 civilian casualties (581 killed, 1,192 injured) during the quarter. This figure represents a 23 percent decrease from the same period in 2018, which UNAMA attributed, in large part, to a reduction in casualties caused by IEDs. Overall, IEDs and ground engagements remained the most frequent cause of civilian casualties during the quarter. UNAMA concluded that the Taliban was responsible for the largest share of civilian casualties (39 percent), followed by the ANDSF (17 percent), international military forces (13 percent), and ISIS-K (12 percent).

By comparison, UNAMA reported that during the same period in 2018, the Taliban was responsible for a much larger share of civilian casualties (55 percent), followed by ISIS-K (11 percent), ANDSF (11 percent), and international military forces (2 percent).

DoD on U.S. vs. UN Estimates of Civilian Casualties: June 2019
(The vast majority of the civilian casualties (81 percent killed and 89 percent wounded) can be attributed to the Taliban, ISIS-K, and other insurgent groups)

Preventing civilian casualties remains a top priority for U.S. forces. USFOR-A takes extraordinary measures to reduce and mitigate civilian casualties. USFOR-A recognizes and respects its moral, ethical, and professional imperative to reduce and mitigate these casualties, consistent with the law of war. USFOR-A uses reports of civilian casualties to determine if and how such losses of life could have been averted and to evaluate and improve upon its ability to protect civilians in the future.

On May 1, 2019, DoD submitted to the Congress the report, entitled “Annual Report on Civilian Casualties in Connection With United States Military Operations,” pursuant to Section 1057 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2018. In this report, DoD informed Congress that USFOR-A was responsible for 76 civilians killed and 58 civilians wounded in Afghanistan from January 1 to December 31, 2018. Although DoD does not enumerate child casualties in its official reports to the Congress, the Commander, USFOR-A, confirmed that out of the total 134 civilian deaths and injuries in 2018 for which USFOR-A was responsible, 42 were children, including 31 killed and 11 injured.

RS and UNAMA Reporting Differences During 1st Quarter of 2019

The RS Civilian Casualty Mitigation Team (CCMT), which collects civilian casualty data for the coalition, documented 1,512 total civilian casualties during the first quarter of 2019 (January 1 – March 31, 2019), of which 401 were killed and 1,111 were injured. The CCMT relies primarily upon operational reports from the TAACs and the ANDSF. During the first quarter of 2019, the CCMT attributed 1,299 casualties (363 killed and 936 injured) to insurgents and terrorists; 64 casualties (36 killed and 48 injured) to the ANDSF; and 70 casualties (47 killed and 23 injured) to U.S.-led Coalition forces. The CCMT attributed the rest of the 69 casualties (15 killed and 54 injured) to other parties of the conflict.

In contrast, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan’s (UNAMA) latest report claimed that there were 1,773 civilian casualties for the same period in 2019, of which 581 were killed and 1,192 were injured. UNAMA reported that insurgents and terrorists were responsible for 963 casualties (227 killed and 736 injured). UNAMA also reported that the ANDSF were responsible for 305 casualties (115 killed and 190 injured); and that international military forces were responsible for 232 casualties (146 killed and 86 injured). UNAMA attributed the remaining 273 casualties (93 killed and 180 injured) to other parties to the conflict.

The difference in the reported numbers of civilian casualties between the CCMT and UNAMA is primarily due to different sources of information and different standards of evidence collection methodology. CCMT has access to a wider range of forensic data than such civilian organizations, including full-motion video, operational summaries, aircraft mission reports, intelligence reports, digital and other imagery, open-source media, social media, and other sources. CCMT’s civilian casualty assessment process requires that all reports of civilian casualties be initially assessed within 24 hours of receipt to identify quickly whether additional assessment will be necessary to determine whether the report is likely accurate. Allegations for which there is sufficient, reliable information are forwarded to the responsible operational command for additional review. These procedures allow USFOR-A to assess with a relatively high degree of confidence the circumstances of each report of civilian casualties. By contrast, the UNAMA reports rely primarily on human sources that may have only limited relevant information about an event, or, at times, may provide false information, including even about whether a casualty was a noncombatant civilian or a combatant.

Resolute Support Civilian Casualty Data from December 1, 2018, to May 31, 2019

The CCMT documented 3,163 civilian casualties from December 1, 2018, to May 31, 2019, of which 950 were killed and 2,213 were injured. Of the 3,163 civilian casualties, CCMT attributed 115 (60 killed and 55 injured) to the U.S. led Coalition, 158 (68 killed and 90 injured) to the ANDSF, 2,749 (778 killed and 1,971 injured) to insurgents and terrorists, and 141 (44 killed and 97 injured) to unknown parties to the conflict.

Figure 6: CCMT Reported Civilian Casualties During Reporting Period7

SIGAR: UNAMA vs. Resolute Support Estimates of Casualties: April 2019

UNAMA: Civilian Casualties in Early 2019 Decline Sharply
In a stark change from the final months of 2018, UNAMA documented 1,773 civilian casualties from January 1 through March 31, 2019, a 23% decrease in casualties compared to the same period in 2017 and the lowest number of civilian casualties in the first three months of the year since 2013. The casualties included 581 deaths and 1,192 injuries.103

UNAMA noted that the significant decrease in civilian casualties so far this year was primarily driven by a 76% decrease in casualties caused by suicide IED attacks. Last year’s figures were higher due to many more suicide attacks in early 2018, including the January 27, 2018, attack in Kabul, which was the deadliest incident UNAMA had ever recorded. UNAMA also said the particularly harsh winter conditions during the first three months of this year may have contributed to the decline in civilian casualties, and that it is unclear whether the trend was influenced by any measures undertaken by parties to the conflict to better protect civilians, or by the ongoing talks between some of the parties. UNAMA expressed continued concern about the increase in civilian casualties from the use of nonsuicide IEDs by antigovernment elements (up 21% compared to last year).104

UNAMA reported that progovernment elements caused more civilian deaths than antigovernment elements thus far in 2019 (605 casualties, 305 deaths and 303 injuries). This was attributed to substantial increases in civilian casualties caused by progovernment aerial (41%) and search operations (85%) compared to last year. UNAMA attributed 17% of all civilian casualties to the ANDSF, 13% to international military forces, 2% to progovernment armed groups, and 2% to multiple progovernment forces. As in previous years, antigovernment elements were responsible for the majority of overall civilian casualties during the first quarter of 2019 (963 casualties, 227 deaths and 736 injuries).105

The decrease UNAMA reported for the first three months of 2019 is offset by the high number of civilian casualties seen from October through December 2018 (2,943). Civilian casualties from October 2018–March 2019 were at roughly the same level they were from October 2017–March 2018.106

RS Civilian Casualties Data
RS reported 9,214 civilian casualties in 2018 (2,845 killed and 6,369 wounded). As reported last quarter, September and October were the deadliest months, with 950 and 1,274 civilian casualties respectively. RS’s and UNAMA’s data aligned in that Kabul, Nangarhar, and Helmand Provinces experienced the most civilian casualties in 2018. According to RS, about 21% of 2018’s civilian casualties occurred in Kabul Province (1,976 casualties), 17% in Nangarhar (1,590), and 5% in Helmand (477). As seen in Figure 3.35 on the previous page, RS said the majority of the civilian casualties reported in 2018 were caused by IEDs (50%), followed by direct fire (22%), and indirect fire (7%).107

UNAMA Collection Methodology
According to UNAMA, data on civilian casualties are collected through “direct site visits, physical examination of victims and evidence gathered at the scene of incidents, visits to hospital and medical facilities, still and video images,” reports by UN entities, and primary, secondary, and third-party accounts. Information is obtained directly from primary accounts where possible. Civilians whose noncombatant status is under “significant doubt,” based on international humanitarian law, are not included in the figures. Ground-engagement casualties that cannot be definitively attributed to either side, such as those incurred during crossfire, are jointly attributed to both parties. UNAMA includes an “other” category to distinguish between these jointly attributed casualties and those caused by other events, such as unexploded ordnance or cross-border shelling by Pakistani forces. UNAMA’s methodology has remained largely unchanged since 2008.

RS Collection Methodology
According to DOD, the RS Civilian Casualty Management Team relies primarily upon operational reporting from RS’s Train, Advise, and Assist Commands (TAACs), other coalition forces headquarters, and ANDSF reports from the Afghan Presidential Information Command Centre to collect civilian-casualty data.


Source: DOO, Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan, 12/2017, p. 27.
UNAMA: Civilian Casualties

No UNAMA civilian casualty update was available this quarter before this report went to press. For SIGAR’s latest reporting on UNAMA’s civilian casualty data, see SIGAR’s April 2019 Quarterly Report to the United States Congress.

RS Collection Methodology

According to DOD, the RS Civilian Casualty Management Team relies primarily upon operational reporting from RS’s Train, Advise, and Assist Commands (TAACs), other Coalition force headquarters, and ANDSF reports from the Afghan Presidential Information Command Centre to collect civilian-casualty data. DOD says that RS’s civilian-casualty data collection differs from UNAMA’s in that RS “has access to a wider range of forensic data than such civilian organizations, including full-motion video, operational summaries, aircraft mission reports, intelligence reports, digital and other imagery ... and other sources.”

RS Civilian Casualties Data

RS reported 2,706 civilian casualties from January 1 through May 31, 2019, (757 killed and 1,949 wounded), a 32% decrease in the number reported during the same period last year. March and May were the most violent months, which saw 631 and 722 civilian casualties, respectively. Of the three provinces with the most civilian casualties during this period, about 15% of total casualties occurred in Kabul Province (402 casualties), 11% in Nangarhar (309), and 8% in Helmand (221), following 2018 trends. As seen in Table 3.7, Helmand Province was the most dangerous for civilians per capita.

RS reported that the majority of the civilian casualties in the first five months of 2019 have been caused by IEDs (43%), followed by direct fire (25%), and indirect fire (13%), also in line with 2018 trends. However, some shifts have occurred in 2019: the percentage of total casualties caused by IEDs was down by seven percentage points thus far in 2019 compared to the IED percentage of all attacks in 2018, while casualties caused by direct fire and indirect fire were up by three points and six points, respectively. These changes are likely due to recent Coalition and Afghan efforts to limit the Islamic State affiliate in Afghanistan’s (IS-K) ability to conduct mass-casualty attacks with IEDs, but they could also be the result of an uptick in ground operations between the parties to the conflict.

RS attributed 87% of this year’s civilian casualties (through May) to antigovernment elements (57% to unknown insurgents, 29% to the Taliban, and 1% to IS-K). The remaining 8% were attributed to progovernment forces (5% to the ANDSF and 3% to Coalition forces) and 5% to other or unknown forces.
SIGAR: Resolute Support Estimates of Casualties: July 2019 - II

U.S. Force Casualties

According to DOD, five U.S. military personnel were killed and 35 were wounded in action (WIA) in Afghanistan this reporting period (April 17 to July 15, 2019). As of July 15, 2019, a total of 72 U.S. military personnel have died in Afghanistan (53 from hostilities and 19 in non-hostile circumstances) and 427 military personnel were WIA since the start of Operation Freedom’s Sentinel on January 1, 2015. Since the beginning of U.S. operations in Afghanistan in October 2001, 2,419 U.S. military personnel have died (1,898 from hostilities and 521 in non-hostile circumstances) and 20,530 have been WIA.

Insider Attacks on U.S. and Coalition Forces

USFOR-A reported that there was one confirmed insider attack on U.S. and Coalition forces this quarter (data through May 31, 2019) that wounded two military personnel. There were no reported insider attacks from roughly the same period in 2018 (January 1 to May 16, 2018), but there were two such attacks during the same period in 2017 that wounded three personnel.

ANDSF Casualties – Data Classified

USFOR-A continued to classify most ANDSF casualty data this quarter at the request of the Afghan government. SIGAR’s questions about ANDSF casualties can be found in Appendix E of this report. Detailed information about ANDSF casualties is reported in the classified annex of this report. SIGAR also reports USFOR-A’s estimates of insurgent casualties in the classified annex.

RS provided a general, unclassified assessment of ANDSF casualties this quarter. Though RS reported that effective (casualty producing) enemy-initiated attacks declined by about 7% this reporting period compared to the same period last year, RS also said that ANDSF casualties “are the same this quarter [March through May 2019] as they were in the same quarter one year ago.”

DOD also reported in June on ANDSF casualty trends from December 2018 through May 2019. According to DOD, the majority of ANDSF casual- ties continue to be the result of direct-fire attacks, with IED attacks and mine strikes contributing to overall casualties at a much lower level. While the number of ANDSF casualties incurred from conducting local patrols was at the same level as the same period last year, those suffered while conducting checkpoint operations were 7% higher than the same reporting period last year, and casualties incurred during offensive operations has increased by 17% over the same period.
UNAMA Estimates of Civilian Casualties: 2nd Quarter 2019 - I

(Highest recorded civilian deaths from conflict at mid-year point)

KABUL - Latest figures released today by the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) show continuing record high casualty rates being inflicted on the Afghan civilian population by the warring parties. Covering the period 1 January to 30 June 2018, findings include the killing of more civilians in the first six months of this year – 1,692 deaths – than at any comparable time over the last ten years since records have been kept.

UNAMA renews its call on parties to the conflict to increase efforts to protect the civilian population and encourages parties to work towards reaching a peaceful settlement.

UNAMA’s latest update documents 5,122 civilian casualties (1,692 deaths and 3,430 injured) - a three percent overall decrease from last year – with civilian deaths up by one percent, the most recorded in the same time period, since UNAMA began systematic documentation of civilian casualties in 2009. The number of civilians injured decreased by five percent.

Civilian casualty figures remain at record highs despite the unprecedented unilateral ceasefires by Government and Taliban that occurred over the three-day period 15-17 June 2018. Aside from casualties resulting from two Daesh/Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP)-claimed suicide attacks in Nangarhar during the ceasefires, UNAMA documented almost no other civilian casualties during the break in fighting.

“The brief ceasefire demonstrated that the fighting can be stopped and that Afghan civilians no longer need to bear the brunt of the war,” said Tadamichi Yamamoto, the UN Secretary-General’s Special Representative for Afghanistan. “We urge parties to seize all opportunities to find a peaceful settlement – this is the best way that they can protect all civilians,” said Yamamoto, who is also head of UNAMA.

The use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in attacks by Anti-Government Elements remained the leading cause of civilian casualties. The combined use of suicide and non-suicide IEDs caused nearly half of all civilian casualties. Continuing trends first documented last year by UNAMA, the majority of IED casualties were caused by suicide and complex attacks, which again were responsible for record high civilian casualties, resulting in 1,413 civilian casualties (427 deaths and 986 injured), a 22 percent increase.

UNAMA attributed 52 percent of civilian casualties from suicide and complex attacks to Daesh/ISKP, mainly in Kabul and Nangarhar province. The Taliban were responsible for 40 percent, the remainder were attributed to unidentified Anti-Government Elements.

Ground engagements were the second leading cause of civilian casualties, followed by targeted and deliberate killings, aerial operations, and explosive remnants of war. Civilians living in the provinces of Kabul, Nangarhar, Faryab, Helmand and Kandahar were most impacted by the conflict.

While the mission documented decreases in civilian casualties from some incident types, notably an 18 percent reduction in casualties caused by ground engagements, UNAMA documented a disturbing increase in the number of civilian casualties from suicide and complex attacks by Anti-Government Elements, with more than half attributed to Daesh/ISKP. The mission also documented a sharp increase in civilian casualties from aerial attacks by Pro-Government Forces.

The armed conflict caused 544 women casualties (157 deaths and 387 injured), with almost half from ground engagements. While overall women casualties decreased by 15 percent compared to the same period in 2017, women casualties remain a matter of grave concern.

UNAMA recorded 1,355 child casualties (363 deaths and 992 injured), a 15 percent drop compared to the same period in 2017. Though UNAMA recorded decreases in child casualties from explosive remnants of war, 89 percent of civilian casualties from explosive remnants of war were children.

“UNAMA continued to document the toxic consequences of this conflict, with Afghan boys and girls killed, maimed, sexually assaulted, abused, recruited and used by parties to the conflict,” said Danielle Bell, UNAMA’s Human Rights Chief. “Conflict related violence continued to erode the rights of children to education, healthcare, freedom of movement and other fundamental rights, as well as family life, playing outdoors and simply enjoying a childhood free of the brutal effects of war,” said Bell.

The mission is concerned by the emerging trend of targeting of education facilities by Anti-Government Elements as a reaction to operations by Pro-Government Forces. In Nangarhar province alone, through the month of June, the mission recorded 13 related incidents attributed to Daesh/ISKP.

UNAMA recorded 341 civilian casualties (117 deaths and 224 injured) from election-related violence. Such violence began with the start of voter registration on 14 April, after which UNAMA documented attacks on tazkira (national ID) distribution centres and voter registration sites, as well as election-related personnel, through the use of IEDs, suicide attacks and targeted killings.

UNAMA is concerned that the number of civilian casualties attributed to Anti-Government Elements continued at record high levels, including increased civilian casualties from attacks targeting civilians. Anti-Government Elements caused 3,413 civilian casualties (1,127 deaths and 2,286 injured). UNAMA attributed 67 percent of all civilian casualties to Anti-Government Elements, with 42 percent attributed to the Taliban, 18 percent to Daesh/ISKP, and seven percent to unidentified others.

The continued use of indiscriminate and unlawful pressure-plate IEDs by Anti-Government Elements caused 314 civilian casualties (114 deaths and 200 injured), mostly attributed to the Taliban. This represents a 43 percent reduction compared to the same period last year. The mission also recorded a 23 percent decrease in civilian casualties caused by Anti-Government Elements (mainly Taliban) during ground engagements. UNAMA has engaged in extensive advocacy efforts with parties to the conflict on civilian casualties caused by pressure-plate IEDs and ground engagements over the past several years.

UNAMA attributed 1,047 civilian casualties to Pro-Government Forces, approximately the same as during the corresponding period in 2017. Pro-Government Forces caused 20 percent of all civilian casualties in the first half of 2018 (17 percent by Afghan national security forces, two percent by international military forces, and one percent by pro-Government armed groups).

The mission documented a 21 percent reduction in ground engagement civilian casualties attributed to Pro-Government Forces (mainly Afghan national security forces), though this was offset by a significant increase in civilian casualties from aerial attacks.

Amidst continued reports of expanded airstrike operations, during the first six months of 2018, the mission documented 353 civilian casualties (149 deaths and 204 injured) from aerial attacks, a 52 percent increase from the same period in 2017. The mission attributed 52 percent of all civilian casualties from aerial attacks to the Afghan Air Force, 45 percent to international military forces, and the remaining three percent to unidentified Pro-Government Forces. The report urges forces to uphold their commitments to take continuous steps to improve civilian protection in their aerial operations.

Actions by the Government of Afghanistan to prevent civilian casualties continued, resulting in a reduction of civilian deaths and injuries from their operations, particularly from ground fighting, an area that UNAMA has consistently focused its advocacy with parties to the conflict in recent years.

UNAMA Estimates of Civilian Casualties: 2nd Quarter 2019 - III

Pro-Government Forces

From 1 January to 30 June 2019, UNAMA attributed 1,397 civilian casualties (717 deaths and 680 injured) to Pro-Government Forces, a 31 percent increase from the corresponding period in 2018. Pro-Government Forces caused 37 percent of all civilian casualties in the first half of 2019 (18 percent by Afghan national security forces, 12 percent by International Military Forces, 2 percent by pro-Government armed groups and the remainder to undetermined or multiple Pro-Government Forces). This compares to 20 percent of all civilian casualties caused by Pro-Government Forces in the first half of 2018. The mission documented an increase in civilian casualties from ground engagements, mainly attributed to Afghan national security forces; aerial attacks, mainly attributed to International Military Forces; and search operations, mainly attributed to National Directorate of Security (NDS) Special Forces, the Khost Protection Force and Paktika-based Shaheen Forces, which are supported by International Military Forces.

Aerial operations

Amidst reports of increasing airstrikes as part of the United States’ strategy to target Taliban leaders and “set the conditions for a political settlement”, 17 civilian casualties from aerial operations continued to increase throughout the first half of 2019 as compared to the same period in 2018. The number of airstrike incidents and civilian casualties resulting from this tactic also increased in the second quarter of 2019 as compared to the first quarter. From 1 January to 30 June 2019, aerial operations caused 519 civilian casualties (363 deaths and 156 injured), 150 of which were child casualties (89 deaths and 61 injured). This represents a 39 percent increase in overall civilian casualties from this tactic in comparison to the first half of 2018. While the number of injured decreased, the number of civilians killed more than doubled in comparison to the first six months of 2018, highlighting the lethal character of this tactic. UNAMA attributed 83 percent of the civilian casualties resulting from aerial operations to International Military Forces, nine percent to the Afghan Air Force, and the remaining eight percent to undetermined Pro-Government Forces.

UNAMA continues to express serious concern about the rising level of civilian harm as a result of aerial operations, particularly those conducted in support of Afghan forces on the ground and strikes on civilian structures. For instance, on 25 March at around 2200 hrs in Surobi district, Kabul, Afghan National Army and United States military forces conducted a search operation in a residential area of a local Taliban commander, which led to an exchange of fire with Taliban. Air support was called in, resulting in five civilians killed (including three women and one boy) and four injured (including three women). Resolute Support acknowledged in a media statement shortly after the incident that four women and one child were killed. In another incident on 23 May in Shib Koh district, Farah province, International Military Forces carried out an airstrike reportedly targeting a Taliban location, which caused the deaths of two male employees of a local NGO delivering hygiene services. The airstrike also destroyed the NGO compound and damaged a project vehicle.

The high level of civilian harm resulting from these aerial operations reflects the risks inherent in conducting strikes in civilian-populated areas, or on homes or other civilian structures. UNAMA has in recent years consistently raised its concern about the increasing numbers of civilian casualties arising from airstrikes, and the need for continuous review of targeting criteria and pre-engagement precautionary measures, particularly considering the likelihood of civilians being present in the same buildings and locations as Anti-Government Elements. UNAMA reiterates its calls on Pro-Government Forces to strengthen efforts to review incidents with allegations of civilian casualties, particularly in the context of partnered operations, conduct effective battle damage assessments, and increase engagements with affected communities on incidents in which civilian casualties have occurred.

Airstrikes on drug manufacturing facilities.

Following the announcement of the United States’ South Asia strategy in August 2017, and a relaxation of the rules of engagement for United States Forces-Afghanistan (USFOR-A), USFOR-A began to target “revenue streams” of Anti-Government Elements, including drug manufacturing facilities (commonly known as “labs”).

UNAMA Estimates of Civilian Casualties: 2nd Quarter 2019 - IV

UNAMA documented a number of airstrikes thereafter on civilian structures reported to be used as drug labs, often conducted at night and in support of counternarcotic operations on the ground. USFOR-A indicated after the first quarter of 2019 that it had ended its campaign against drug processing labs and warehouses. However, on 5 May, during the daytime, USFOR-A carried out a series of airstrikes against what it reported to be more than 60 drug manufacturing “labs” in Bakwa district, Farah province, extending into Delaram district, Nimroz province. According to USFOR-A, it targeted methamphetamine labs that were controlled and operated by Taliban, and it considered all personnel inside of the laboratories to be Taliban combatants. USFOR-A assessed that there were no civilian casualties resulting from the operation.

However, UNAMA received multiple reports of significant numbers of civilian casualties resulting from this operation. It carried out a mission to Bakwa District, which is under Taliban control. UNAMA is continuing its verification of civilian casualties stemming from this incident. UNAMA intends to publish a separate report on this incident.

Search operations

Between 1 January and 30 June 2019, UNAMA recorded 218 civilian casualties (159 deaths and 59 injured) as a result of search operations, more than half of which were caused by NDS Special Forces. This represents a 79 percent increase from the first half of 2018, when UNAMA documented 122 civilian casualties (99 deaths and 23 injured).

UNAMA has increasingly raised concern in recent reports about the rising level of civilian harm caused during search operations, particularly those carried out by the NDS Special Forces and the Khost Protection Force. In 2019, UNAMA has also started to document civilian casualties resulting from search operations in Paktika province carried out by a pro-Government armed group referred to locally as “Shaheen Force,” which is reported to be supported by United States Forces. UNAMA has documented that search operations carried out by these forces have significantly higher civilian casualty figures as well as higher death rates in comparison to operations carried out by the Afghan National Army. In addition to the rising numbers of civilian casualties, UNAMA has also documented alarming human rights abuses by these forces, including intentional killings, torture and ill-treatment, arbitrary arrests, intentional property damage, and other abuses.

For example, on the night from 22 to 23 February, NDS Special Forces, with International Military Forces’ support, conducted a search operation on Taliban locations in multiple villages of Daimardad district of Maidan Wardak province. During the operation, ground forces used explosive material to destroy the door of a house. They pulled a couple and their children and relatives out of their rooms, blindfolded the father and adult son, and moved the rest of the family to a neighboring house. The father was shot and killed by NDS Special Forces in the garage of the house and the son was arrested and transferred to Kabul. During the operation, another civilian man was shot and killed in his home in the same village.

UNAMA reiterates that the killing, by any party to the conflict, of persons taking no active part in hostilities is explicitly prohibited by Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions at any time and any place, and may amount to a war crime. UNAMA also reiterates that under international human rights law, the unlawful killing of a person constitutes a violation of the right to life. States must investigate the use of lethal force by their agents in the context of law enforcement operations and situations of alleged violations of the right to life committed during armed conflict.

As it has done several times previously, UNAMA calls on the Afghan authorities to immediately disband and disarm all illegal armed groups and militias, including the Khost Protection Force and Shaheen forces, or formally incorporate members into the Afghan national security forces following a robust vetting procedure; increase transparency and accountability concerning operations of NDS Special Forces, which fall outside of the official Afghan national security forces’ chain of command; and investigate all allegations of human rights abuses and international humanitarian law violations with a view to ensuring accountability.

UNAMA Estimates of Civilian Casualties: 2nd Quarter 2019 - V

Estimates of Terrorism in Afghanistan Are Uncertain But Seem to Reflect Steady Increases
Terrorism in Afghanistan: Uncertain to Dubious Reporting

Reporting on terrorism in Afghanistan, as distinguished from insurgency and counterinsurgency, is erratic and uncertain. Only the LIG reporting provides useful declassified details on the estimated size of the threat, although the Long War Journal provides useful outside analysis and maps of centers of terrorist activity.

As a result, the metrics and summary assessments in this section are more a warning of the problems in distinguishing between terrorism and insurgency/counterinsurgency, than a source of useful data and insights. The continued level of insurgent conflict in Afghanistan makes it difficult to impossible to distinguish between terrorism and insurgent action, a problem compounded in many areas by a high level of social and tribal violence. START does estimate that the Taliban accounted for some 60% of terrorism between 2011 and 2016, but such counts seem to be extremely uncertain.

IHS Janes and START make very different estimates of the level of terrorist attacks/incidents in 2017, and IHS Janes and UNAMA make very different estimates of civilian casualties – a category where there seem to be no clear criteria for separating out casualties from terrorism from casualties caused by insurgent fighting.

Many terrorist attacks are also estimated to have been directed against the Army and the Police, and it is not clear that there is a basis for distinguishing between terrorism and warfare in many such cases. The fact that guns and explosives are used in so many “terrorist” incidents is a further indication of the difficulty in distinguishing between insurgency and terrorism.

What is clear is that Daesh/ISIS – which has not been a major player in the insurgency – has become a more significant player in terrorism. UN reporting indicates that ISIL strongholds exist in the eastern provinces of Nangarhar, Kunar, Nuristan and Laghman. The UN estimates the total strength of ISIL in Afghanistan at between 2,500 and 4,000 militants.

The UN also notes, however, that the Taliban attacked ISIS forces in 2018, and inflicted serious casualties on at least one occasion.

Total 1970-2017: 12,731 Incidents

Total 2011-2016: 10,116 Incidents

Taliban 2011-2016: 6,030 Incidents

SOURCE; START ADVANCED DATABASE, https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/search/Results.aspx?chart=perpetrator&casualties_type=b&casualties_max=&start_yearonly=2011&end_yearonly=2017 &dtp2=all&country=4&perpetrator=652,20529&weapon=1,2,6,7,5,8,9,4,12,3,11,13,10, Accessed 29.4.2019
START: Taliban Attack Patterns: 2011-2017

Casualties: Killed & Injured Per Incident – 6,030 Incidents

Weapon Type – 6,030 Incidents

Years: (between 2011 and 2017). All incidents regardless of doubt.

Comparative START, HIS Janes, and UNAMA Estimates of Terrorist Attacks and Total Civilian Casualties: 2017-2018

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Attacks/Incidents</th>
<th>Non-Militant Fatalities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IHS Janes</td>
<td>661</td>
<td>869</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>START</td>
<td>1,414</td>
<td>ND</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNAMA Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Anti-Government Elements (AGEs)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Taliban</td>
<td>1,574</td>
<td>1,348</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Daesh/ISKP</td>
<td>399</td>
<td>681</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

UN Assessment of Daesh/ISIS Threat: 2/2019

...while ISIL has transformed into a covert network, including in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic, it remains a threat as a global organization with centralized leadership. This threat is increased by returning, relocating or released foreign terrorist fighters

At present, ISIL strongholds in Afghanistan are in the eastern provinces of Nangarhar, Kunar, Nuristan and Laghman. The total strength of ISIL in Afghanistan is estimated at between 2,500 and 4,000 militants... ISIL is also reported to control some training camps in Afghanistan, and to have created a network of cells in various Afghan cities, including Kabul. The local ISIL leadership maintains close contacts with the group’s core in the Syrian Arab Republic and Iraq. Important personnel appointments are made through the central leadership, and the publication of propaganda videos is coordinated. Following the killing of ISIL leader Abu Sayed Bajauri on 14 July 2018, the leadership council of ISIL in Afghanistan appointed Mawlawi Ziya ul-Haq (aka Abu Omar Al-Khorasani) as the fourth “emir” of the group since its establishment.

...Throughout 2018, ISIL is assessed to have carried out 38 terrorist attacks in Afghanistan, many of them high profile, including some in Kabul... ISIL targets have included Afghan security forces, the Taliban, North Atlantic Treaty Organization military personnel, diplomats, employees of the United Nations and non-governmental organizations, journalists and medical institutions, as well as religious minorities viewed by ISIL as soft targets.

...ISIL suffered a severe setback in northern Afghanistan during the reporting period. In July 2018, 1,000 Taliban attacked ISIL positions in Jowzjan province, killing 200 ISIL fighters, while 254 ISIL fighters surrendered to government forces and 25 foreign terrorist fighters surrendered to the Taliban. One Member State assesses that the ISIL presence in Jowzjan has been eliminated while, elsewhere in the north, a minority of Taliban – approximately 170 fighters in Faryab, 100 in Sari Pul and 50 in Balkh – retain sympathies for ISIL...

...ISIL is seeking to expand its area of activity in Central Asia and has called for terrorist attacks targeting public gatherings, primarily in the Ferghana Valley of the Central Asian region. On 30 July 2018, ISIL claimed responsibility for the killing of four foreign cyclists in Tajikistan. In November, ISIL stated that one of its fighters was responsible for the attack that had sparked the riot in a high-security prison in Khujand, Tajikistan.

...ISIL killed 24 and injured 60 people in the Islamic Republic of Iran in the 22 September 2018 Ahvaz attack...

Al Qaeda is operating “across the country” and not confined to one region, the commander of US and NATO forces in Afghanistan confirmed.

General Austin Miller, the commander of Resolute Support Mission and US Forces – Afghanistan, confirmed several analyses by FDD’s Long War Journal, which has noted for years that al Qaeda’s footprint spans all regions of Afghanistan.

“We have seen al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. Yes, in different parts of Afghanistan,” Miller said, according to TOLONews. “In different parts of Afghanistan, we can find them, so it’s not one particular region, it’s across the country.”

FDD’s Long War Journal has tracked al Qaeda’s presence in Afghanistan for well over a decade, using press releases and public statements from the US military, NATO’s command in Afghanistan, and Afghan security services, as well as the jihadist groups’ own martyrdom statements. This data was then geotagged to a map (above) which tracks the terrorist group’s operations and movement, as well as the US and Afghan military’s operations against them. [See Taliban continues to host foreign terrorist groups, despite assurances to the contrary.]

The data clearly show that al Qaeda and allied terrorist groups have been operating on Afghan soil for the past two decades with the approval of the Taliban. These terrorist organizations often operate in areas controlled by the Taliban – and the jihadists killed in coalition or Afghan raids often die alongside members of the Afghan Taliban.

Since 2007, NATO, US, and Afghan forces, have launched at least 373 operations against these foreign terror groups in 27 of Afghanistan’s 34 provinces.
FDD’s Long War Journal has also created a map, seen above, of al Qaeda’s and the Islamic State’s presence in Afghanistan based primarily on the last two United Nations Security Council reports on al Qaeda and the Islamic State’s presence in Afghanistan. In its latest report, the UNSC warned that both groups maintain a significant presence in Afghanistan. [See UN: Al Qaeda continues to view Afghanistan as a ‘safe haven’.]

The data was supplemented with operational reporting from the US military and Afghan security forces in recent years. The map above shows the presence of al Qaeda and al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), as well as the Islamic State, across 13 Afghan provinces. Al Qaeda and its regional branch, Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, are present in all 13 of the shaded provinces. The Islamic State’s Khorasan Province is present in five of the shaded provinces.

The US government, led by Zalmay Khalilzad – the Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation – is currently negotiating with the Taliban and has said the terror organization can be an effective counterterrorism partner and prevent Afghanistan from being used as a launchpad for international terrorist attacks. However, Al Qaeda and the Taliban remain steadfast allies, and Khalilzad is well aware of that fact. While testifying before the House Foreign Affairs Committee in July 2016, he personally described the Taliban as an “extremist organization” with enduring ties to al Qaeda, and said the two would not part ways. [See Khalilzad flip flops on Pakistan, Taliban’s relationship with al Qaeda.]

Miller’s comments about al Qaeda’s presence throughout Afghanistan should call into question the US efforts to negotiate a peace deal with the Taliban. The Taliban is clearly supporting al Qaeda to this day, because al Qaeda would not be able to operate “across the country” without the explicit support and approval of the Taliban.

Bill Roggio is a Senior Fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies and the Editor of FDD’s Long War Journal.
**DoD Reporting on Terrorist and Extremist Threat: July 4, 2019**

**ISIS-K**

During this reporting period, ISIS-K maintained the ability to defend itself and conduct attacks, and made territorial gains in its strongholds in eastern Afghanistan despite pressure from the Coalition, ANDSF, and the Taliban. The detention of ISIS-K militants in Kabul temporarily degraded the attack tempo and denied propaganda victories. Over the past few years ISIS Khorasan continues to take a more active role in the management of regional ISIS networks in India, Bangladesh, and other areas assigned by ISIS-core, but its progress in enabling or inspiring attacks outside of Afghanistan and Pakistan very likely has been limited. ISIS-K maintains the capability to conduct mass casualty attacks with the intent to weaken public support for the Afghan Government and the Taliban. During this reporting period, it conducted attacks primarily against Afghan Government and security forces and election targets of opportunity. ISIS-K also conducted several attacks in December and again in February and March against Taliban forces and ANDSF in Kunar Province aimed at expanding their territory. In March 2019, ISIS-K launched a rocket attack against a political gathering in Kabul and a suicide attack near Jalalabad Airfield killing at least 11 and 16 people, respectively. ISIS-K has fewer than 2,000 fighters operating in its safe haven in eastern Afghanistan. In this period, ISIS-K remained consolidated in pockets of its primary safe haven in Nangarhar, but did make territorial gains against the Taliban in Kunar Province. Social media remains the primary method for ISIS affiliates to communicate, and it is also a medium through which ISIS propaganda influences online.

Regionally, the group continues to evade, counter, and recover from sustained CT and combat pressure to maintain its territorial safe haven in eastern Afghanistan, from which it plans attacks and spreads its ideology to displace al-Qa’ida and the Taliban as the predominant regional militant group. Although ISIS-K continues to develop connections to other networks outside of Afghanistan, it remains operationally limited to South and Central Asia.

**Al-Qa’ida**

Al-Qa’ida poses a very limited threat to U.S. personnel and our partners in Afghanistan. Al-Qa’ida’s affiliate—al-Qa’ida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS)—poses a greater threat to those elements. AQIS routinely supports and works with low-level Taliban in its efforts to undermine the Afghan Government, and maintains an enduring interest in attacking U.S. forces and Western targets in the region. AQIS faces continuous Coalition CT pressure and will focus on ensuring its safe haven remains viable. Additionally, AQIS assists local Taliban in some attacks, according to al-Qa’ida statements.

The few remaining al-Qa’ida personnel focus largely on survival, while ceding al-Qa’ida’s regional presence to AQIS. AQIS continues to work toward its stated goals of freeing occupied Muslim lands, establishing an Islamic caliphate, and implementing Shar’ia law. AQIS’s interest in attacking U.S. forces and other Western targets in Afghanistan and the region persists, however, continuing Coalition CT pressure has reduced AQIS’s ability to conduct operations in Afghanistan.
LIG: ISIS-K Makes Tactical Gains – March 2019

ISIS-K claimed responsibility for multiple attacks in Afghanistan during the quarter, particularly in Kabul, Nangarhar, and Kunar provinces. Many ISIS-K attacks targeted the country’s Shia minority, but they also targeted Taliban fighters, the Afghan government, and civilian organizations. For example, on March 6, ISIS-K suicide bombers attacked a construction company in Nangarhar province, killing 16 civilians. The following day, ISIS-K launched a mortar attack on a Shia memorial service in Kabul attended by several political leaders, killing 11 people.

The DIA reported to the DoD OIG that ISIS-K “made tactical gains” against the Taliban and the ANDSF during the quarter. While the ANDSF conducted operations against ISIS-K in eastern Afghanistan, the group expanded the territory it holds in Kunar province. USFOR-A reported to the DoD OIG that ISIS-K is operating in Kabul, as well as Nangarhar and Kunar provinces. USFOR-A said that it is likely that ISIS-K operates in additional provinces of northeastern Afghanistan and that it is “highly likely” that smaller ISIS-K cells operate in Afghan government-controlled and Taliban-controlled areas of Afghanistan.

USFOR-A assessed that ISIS-K will likely focus future attacks on “targets of opportunity” and high-profile attacks that garner media attention and increase public perception of the group’s capability.

U.S. forces continued unilateral counterterrorism operations against ISIS-K and also supported Afghan special forces as they targeted ISIS-K fighters. NSOCC-A told the DoD OIG that successful counterterrorism operations during the quarter included the detention of ISIS-K recruiters and financiers. NSOCC-A told the DoD OIG that as a result of these operations, ISIS-K has been changing its tactics to focus more on defensive operations and IED emplacement.

The presence of terrorist groups in Afghanistan, particularly al Qaeda and ISIS-K, remains a central focus of the OFS mission and has emerged as one of the key concerns in the ongoing peace negotiations. As the peace talks continue, the questions of whether the Taliban can help influence and deny sanctuary to these groups, and the extent to which an ongoing U.S. counterterrorism presence may be required, have become more prominent.

U.S. and Afghan officials have stated that there are at least 20 terrorist organizations operating in Afghanistan and Pakistan. USFOR-A provided the DoD OIG estimates of how many fighters these groups have in the region, shown in Table 2. Like its estimates of Taliban force size, it makes these assessments with low confidence. As discussed in the Lead IG quarterly report for October 1 to December 31, 2017, most of these groups do not have global aspirations or reach. For example, Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan, one of the larger groups, focuses on fighting the Pakistani government.

The DoD identified the Haqqani Network, the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), and Laskhar-e Tayyiba as groups that present the greatest threat to U.S. and allied forces in Afghanistan. ETIM, which aims to establish a so-called “East Turkistan” within China, maintains close ties with the Taliban, al Qaeda, and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. The DoS disagreed with the characterization of ETIM as a comparable threat to the Haqqani Network and Laskhar-e Tayyiba but did not provide a separate assessment of the group.

Al Qaeda, the group that organized the September 11, 2001 attacks, precipitating U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan, is among the smaller terrorist groups in Afghanistan. Al Qaeda did not claim any attacks against U.S. or allied forces during the quarter. USFOR-A assessed that al Qaeda poses “a limited, indirect threat” to U.S. and allied forces through the support it provides for Taliban and Haqqani Network attacks. Specifically, al Qaeda runs training camps, helps plan and fund attacks, and creates and disseminates propaganda highlighting attacks by other groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Terrorist Group</th>
<th>Estimated Number of Fighters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ISIS-K</td>
<td>3,000-5,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Haqqani Network</td>
<td>3,000-5,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan</td>
<td>3,000-5,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islamic Emirate High Council</td>
<td>1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>al Qaeda</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lashkar-e Tayyiba</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tariq Qidar Group</td>
<td>100-300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamaat ul-Ahrar</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islamic Jihad Union</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamaat Dawa Quran</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

No Credible Information Available for the Following Terrorist Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Iranian Revolutionary Guard-Quds Force</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hizbul Mujahidin</td>
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<tr>
<td>Commander Nazir Group</td>
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<td>Jundullah</td>
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<tr>
<td>Harakat-ul Jihad Islami/Bangladesh</td>
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<td>Lashkar-I Jhangvi</td>
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<tr>
<td>Harakat-ul Mujahidin</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jaish-e- Mohammad</td>
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<td>Source: USFOR-A</td>
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