Afghanistan: The Prospects for a Real Peace

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Anthony H. Cordesman

Afghanistan is sometimes referred to as the “graveyard of empires.” In practice, it has been the “graveyard of Afghans” – a nation where outside powers have always found it more costly to remain in Afghanistan than their presence there was worth. Russia – like so many of Afghanistan’s past conquerors – has survived and has prospered from leaving. Today, the United States does not have a critical strategic interest in Afghanistan, and the country does not currently pose a more critical threat in terms of international terrorism than do the situations in many other states pose. The U.S. too now has the option of leaving – regardless of the success or failure of its efforts to leave as part of a fully negotiated peace.

It is the Afghan people that face the risks and costs of failure, just as they have in the past. Afghanistan has had long periods of peace – and even had its own empires – but time after time the nation has divided, become a regional backwater, or succumbed to civil war. Today, Afghanistan’s leaders and factions have divided the nation, served their own interests at the expense of their peoples, and plunged the country into civil war. The end result has undermined Afghanistan’s development and capability to defend its own national interests and has converted the country into a power vacuum that other states or non-state actors attempt to fill.

History repeats itself, whether it is forgotten or not, and the current search for peace in Afghanistan bears a grim resemblance to what happened in Vietnam. As this analysis shows, the current peace effort seems to be as much the result of a U.S. effort to leave the country, as it is to find a real peace. More broadly, it shows that there are many other barriers to a successful peace than the fighting with the Taliban, and many are the result of the Afghan central government’s divisive politics, and its failures in governance, economics, and ability to create effective security forces.

Unless both the key issues in negotiating with the Taliban and the failures of the central government can be addressed, even a successful peace agreement is likely to fail, and the U.S. must consider a full withdrawal. Like all forms of triage, strategic triage will be painful, but it may also become all too necessary.

A Taliban and Central Government that Fail the Afghan People

The Afghan people do want peace. Public opinion polls by the Asia Foundation demonstrate how the Afghan people want peace, progress, reform, and an honest government. In its summary of its 2019 poll of the Afghan people, the Asia Foundation states that, “A key indicator for the Survey over time has been whether Afghans are optimistic or pessimistic about the country’s direction. Findings reveal the impact that peace talks have had on optimism in the country. While optimism in 2018, at 32.8%, was effectively unchanged from 2017, Afghans this year report a slightly higher level of optimism, with 36.1% of respondents saying the country is going in the right direction, and in explaining reasons for their optimism, those who say “peace / end of war” has increased notably from 16.4% to 26.3% this year.”

The poll explored Afghan attitudes towards peace in depth, and the results indicate how much the Afghan people want a peace that could move Afghanistan forward. It found that, 2

Some 64.0% of those surveyed say reconciliation with the Taliban is possible, a 10 percentage point increase over 2018 (53.5%). Males (69.6%) are more optimistic than females (58.5%) by more than 10 points. Increased media coverage of the U.S.-Taliban peace talks have raised public awareness of the talks, as reflected in a new question this year that shows 77.4% of respondents overall are aware of efforts to negotiate
with the Taliban. A new question in 2019 gauges Afghan support for efforts to negotiate peace with the Taliban. This year, the proportion of people who strongly or somewhat support these efforts stands at 88.7%.

The number of Afghans who say that a group poses a threat to the security of their local area (36.4%) is almost identical to 2018 (35.8%). In an open-ended follow-up asking which group poses a threat, the Taliban continue to be the top response, at 68.9%. The Taliban are seen as more of a threat in rural areas (75.9%) than urban (37.2%) … The number of respondents who cite Daesh/ISIS as a local security threat has decreased by 4 percentage points, to 12.4%, which reflects the diminished capabilities of that group.

It also found that Afghans did not want peace at any price. The Survey found that, the majority of Afghans say they would not vote for a president who accepted a peace agreement with the Taliban, which jeopardize women’s education (65.6%), women’s ability to work outside the home (65.0%), or if the central government lost territory (65.8%).

Much of the world, and certainly most Americans, want that peace for Afghanistan as well. That does not, however, mean that those who want peace are going to get it. It is one thing to dream of the peace you want, and quite another to have to live with the reality you can actually obtain.

**Key Challenges to Peace**

This analysis examines the political, governance, security, and economic factors that shape the prospects for such a real peace. It finds some reasons for hope, but more problems than solutions. It also finds that there is a serious risk that the U.S. may leave without having created a peace that can offer lasting stability and security.

The peace agreements to date do more to expedite a U.S. and Allied withdrawal than they do to create the conditions that can lead to a lasting and secure peace. It finds that the Taliban remains committed to its ideology. And, that the Taliban has good reasons to negotiate, but those reasons are more for achieving their ulterior motives through negotiations, rather than seeking a real peace. Its ongoing military progress, its rising hopes for a U.S. withdrawal, and its commitment to its ideology are all key indicators.

A wide range of sources – including two major sources of official U.S. reporting on Afghanistan – indicate that the leaders of the Afghan central government, President Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, are both a major threat to the ability to create a lasting peace and a state than can meet the needs and hopes of the Afghan people. More broadly, sources like the World Bank, IMF, and different reports from two U.S. inspector generals provide data that indicate that the portions of Afghanistan under the central government’s control are a “failed state” by any standard.

Security remains a critical issue, and one that seriously threatens the ability to negotiate and enforce a real peace. There are substantial official sources that show that Afghanistan was not winning against the Taliban before the peace agreements, even with the massive U.S. combat air and intelligence support alongside the extensive support from Allied forces and cadres of U.S. special forces, elite units, train and assist forces, and intelligence operators.

The Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) are making progress, but reporting by the two U.S. inspector generals – the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR) and the Lead Inspector General (LIG) – show that the ground forces are years away from being able to stand on their own with any confidence and also that there are no current plans to create an Afghan Air Force (AAF) that could provide the level of combat capability the U.S. and its Allies have provided since 2013.
The civil development of the country poses equally pressing challenges to any effort to create a secure and stable peace. Afghanistan has steadily fallen behind the pace of development compared to other poor regional states. It has regressed in many ways since the Afghan monarchy began to collapse in a mix of internal power struggles in the 1970s. It continued to do so during the periods from 1972 to 1989, in spite of a massive Soviet effort; under the Taliban before 2001; and after a massive U.S. and international aid effort since 2001.

Afghan elections have not produced either a working political system or effective governance in the areas controlled by the central government. Afghanistan has also not moved towards effective economic development, and the current economy does not adequately meet the basic needs of its people. Rather, the Afghan economy can only function if it is supported indefinitely by massive outside aid, and it still remains heavily dependent on the country being the world’s major source of opiates.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the current peace efforts in Afghanistan are uncertain at best. So far, the peace agreements simply layout a possible schedule for negotiations and U.S. withdrawals, rather than define a real peace. It is far from clear that the Afghan central government and the Taliban can reach a stable, workable peace agreement. The Afghan government has critical military weaknesses and civil flaws, creating serious questions as to whether it can lay the groundwork for some compromise with the Taliban or survive on its own. Most of these Afghan problems are the fault of Afghan politicians and leaders, and it is unclear that Afghanistan’s politics and governance can improve to the point where the central government either wins a peace or wins a war.

Moreover, it is unclear that the United States will continue to support the Afghan government if a peace settlement fails. The U.S. is already cutting its forces and has not made any public commitments to enforce a peace or stay if the negotiations fail. Furthermore, U.S. strategy has changed to focus on competition with China and Russia, the United States faces major new resource constraints because of the Coronavirus crisis, and Afghanistan is no longer a main center of terrorist threats to the United States.

**Structure of the Analysis**

The analysis begins by examining the challenges the United States faces in leaving Afghanistan and the new pressures the Coronavirus crisis has put on U.S. spending – a crisis that could affect both the negotiations and U.S. willingness to remain in Afghanistan if the peace process falters or fails. It describes both the cuts the United States is already making in Afghan forces and the impact of phasing out all U.S. forces in time to meet the 14-month deadline set in the peace agreements.

The analysis then addresses the risk of the current peace efforts devolving into an extension of war by other means, the challenges posed by Afghanistan’s internal weaknesses, and the efforts to create effective Afghan security forces that can stand on their own. It shows that both the Afghan central government and the Taliban pose serious problems. This is made clear in the next three sections of the analysis, which address the critical problems in Afghan governance, in the development of Afghan national security forces, and in the Afghan economy – summarizing the key quantitative data in each area.

Finally, the assessment concludes with a brief analysis of whether the United States should withdraw from Afghanistan if the Afghan central government continues to be a failed state or if the current peace agreement breaks down because of all the failures listed above.
**Sources and Methods**

This analysis examines each of these issues in depth, and it makes extensive use of other official and non-governmental reporting. It provides maps, statistics, trend analyses, and quantitative data to address both the prospects for a real peace as well as the ability to create a stable and secure Afghanistan.

It draws on a wide range of reporting, including U.S. government, NATO, World Bank, CIA, UN, and IMF sources, to address the data now available in order to show the probability that the current peace agreement can bring a real peace, lasting security, and enduring stability. It presents a wide range of analysis, data, and graphics to address the key problems in creating a lasting peace and the many factors that can “implode” the current peace process.

It also focuses on recent reports to the U.S. Congress by two sources that have exceptional access to U.S. military data and intelligence – the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR) and the Lead Inspector General for Operation Freedom Sentinel (LIG). Their reports had extensive access to Afghan, NATO, and U.S. senior officers and officials, which are quoted in depth.

**Detailed Contents**

The report’s *Table of Contents* follows. It should be noted that the pace of change in all of these areas covered in this analysis is so rapid that it has become a working document that is steadily updated over time. Outside comments and suggestions are welcome and should be sent to Anthony H. Cordesman at acordesman@gmail.com.
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The Uncertain Terms of an Uncertain Peace

The United States signed a broad peace agreement with the Taliban in Doha on February 29, 2020, and another with the Afghan central government that same day. The May 2020 Quarterly Report to Congress by the Lead Inspector General on Operation Freedom’s Sentinel (LIG) notes that, \(^4\)

On February 29, U.S. and Taliban representatives signed an agreement in which the Taliban agreed to prevent terrorists from using Afghanistan to threaten the United States or its allies. The same day, Secretary of Defense Mark Esper and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani announced a U.S.-Afghanistan joint declaration echoing the agreement between the United States and the Taliban...According to the agreement and the joint declaration, the United States agreed to first reduce its forces from roughly 13,000 to 8,600 within 135 days, and then fully withdraw all remaining forces within the following 9 and a half months, conditioned on the Taliban adhering to the agreement.

These two agreements indicate that the U.S. is seeking to end its military role in Afghanistan within the following 14 months – or by no later than the end of May 2021.\(^5\) They also show that the United States is doing so by attempting to negotiate a peace, although it is clear from the statements of senior U.S. officials and officers that it is also planning to do so while slashing its funding to Afghanistan.

However, it is far from clear what kind of peace the United States is seeking or whether the ongoing U.S. withdrawal of U.S. forces will be tied to a successful or enduring peace that will keep the present Afghan central government in place. There evidently are two classified annexes to U.S peace plans, but so far, no details have leaked as to what kind of enduring commitments – if any – the United States will make in terms of aid or commitments to reintroduce the use of U.S. forces in the case of an emergency.\(^6\)

The public details of the peace agreements the United States reached with the Taliban and with the Afghan central government on February 29, 2020, have not received the attention they deserve. However, they set a firm 14-month deadline for U.S. and allied withdrawals while only making general statements about the nature of a peace that really do not firmly commit the United States to any given level of effort to enforce a peace or provide the aid necessary to make that peace workable:\(^7\)

To address this continuing terrorist threat, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States will continue to take the following steps to defeat al-Qa’ida, its affiliates, and other international terrorist groups or individuals:

1. The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan reaffirms its continued commitment not to cooperate with or permit international terrorist groups or individuals to recruit, train, raise funds (including through the production or distribution of narcotics), transit Afghanistan or misuse its internationally-recognized travel documents, or conduct other support activities in Afghanistan, and will not host them.

2. The United States re-affirms its commitments regarding support for the Afghan security forces and other government institutions, including through ongoing efforts to enhance the ability of Afghan security forces to deter and respond to internal and external threats, consistent with its commitments under existing security agreements between the two governments. This commitment includes support to Afghan security forces to prevent al-Qa’ida, ISIS-K, and other international terrorist groups or individuals from using Afghan soil to threaten the United States and its allies.

3. The United States re-affirms its readiness to continue to conduct military operations in Afghanistan with the consent of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in order to disrupt and degrade efforts by al-Qa’ida, ISIS-K, and other international terrorist groups or individuals to carry out attacks against the United States or its allies, consistent with its commitments under existing security agreements between the two governments and with the existing understanding that U.S. counterterrorism operations are intended to complement and
support Afghan security forces’ counterterrorism operations, with full respect for Afghan sovereignty and full regard for the safety and security of the Afghan people and the protection of civilians.

4. The United States commits to facilitate discussions between Afghanistan and Pakistan to work out arrangements to ensure neither country’s security is threatened by actions from the territory of the other side.

...Subject to the Taliban’s fulfillment of its commitments under the U.S.-Taliban agreement, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, the United States, and the Coalition jointly assess that the current levels of military forces are no longer necessary to achieve security objectives; since 2014, Afghan security forces have been in the lead for providing security and have increased their effectiveness. As such, the parties commit to take the following measures:

1. The United States will reduce the number of U.S. military forces in Afghanistan to 8,600 and implement other commitments in the U.S.-Taliban agreement within 135 days of the announcement of this joint declaration and the U.S.-Taliban agreement, and will work with its allies and the Coalition to reduce proportionally the number of Coalition forces in Afghanistan over an equivalent period, subject to the Taliban’s fulfillment of its commitments under the U.S.-Taliban agreement.

2. Consistent with the joint assessment and determination between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, the United States, its allies, and the Coalition will complete the withdrawal of their remaining forces from Afghanistan within 14 months following the announcement of this joint declaration and the U.S.-Taliban agreement, and will withdraw all their forces from remaining bases, subject to the Taliban’s fulfillment of its commitments under the U.S.-Taliban agreement.

3. The United States reaffirms its commitment to seek funds on a yearly basis that support the training, equipping, advising and sustaining of Afghan security forces, so that Afghanistan can independently secure and defend itself against internal and external threats.

4. To create the conditions for reaching a political settlement and achieving a permanent, sustainable ceasefire, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan will participate in a U.S.-facilitated discussion with Taliban representatives on confidence building measures, to include determining the feasibility of releasing significant numbers of prisoners on both sides. The United States and Islamic Republic of Afghanistan will seek the assistance of the ICRC to support this discussion.

5. With the start of intra-Afghan negotiations, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan commits to start diplomatic engagement with members of the UN Security Council to remove members of the Taliban from the sanctions list with the aim of achieving this objective by May 29, 2020, and in any case no later than 30 days after finalizing a framework agreement and a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire.

As an analysis by the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR) shows, the key aspects that directly affect the U.S. posture in Afghanistan and U.S. security are that, as the agreement provides for the withdrawal of all U.S. troops and associated nondiplomatic personnel from Afghanistan within 14 months, provided that the Taliban meets a number of conditions. The agreement commits the Taliban to prevent its members and other individuals or groups from using Afghan soil “to threaten the security of the United States or its allies,” and to enter into negotiations with the Afghan government to determine “the date and modalities of a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire” and to reach “agreement over the future political roadmap of Afghanistan.” The joint declaration of the United States and the Afghan government reaffirms U.S. support for the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) and for continued military cooperation against international terrorist groups.

It also goes on to provide a more detailed view of the agreements as seen by the U.S. government, according to the “Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States,”
The United States will reduce its military forces from the level of approximately 13,000 personnel at the time of the signing to 8,600, a reduction of approximately 34 percent, in the first 135 days following the agreement. The coalition will also proportionally reduce its forces in the same timeframe. Also during the first 135 days, the U.S. forces and the coalition will withdraw from five bases. The U.S. Government also agreed to review sanctions currently in place against members of the Taliban at the start of intra-Afghan negotiations. Provided that the Taliban upholds its parts of the agreement, the United States and its coalition allies commit to completely withdraw from Afghanistan within 14 months of the signing of the agreement.

The agreement stipulates that the Taliban will prevent any group or individual, including al Qaeda, from using the territory of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States or its allies. Specifically, among the counterterrorism commitments, the agreement provides that Taliban members will not cooperate in any way with individuals or groups threatening the security of the United States and its allies, will not provide these individuals with asylum in Afghanistan, and will not issue these individuals any legal documents such as visas, passports, or travel permits.

Is Half a Peace Plan Better than None?

It should be clear from the text of the peace agreements that they do not implement a full ceasefire or define a real peace. They are attempts, rather, to find ways for the Afghan central government and the Taliban to negotiate directly, to fully conduct a promised prisoner exchange that was part of the initial ceasefire agreement, and to negotiate a clearer Taliban agreement to prevent future acts of terrorism outside Afghanistan.

So far, there is no public indication of any real progress in negotiating ways to create a meaningful central government that includes participation from both the present government and the Taliban. Some reports do indicate that the United States may have more detailed peace plans in the form of two classified annexes to these agreements, but the U.S. government has done little to date to indicate that it will stay in Afghanistan unless the Taliban becomes so aggressive that even the image of a peace process collapses.

The United States has failed to publicly define the peace it wants beyond the broad terms of the February 2020 agreements, to advance any detailed plans to define and secure a peace, and to make it clear that it will actually provide the aid and military contingency plans to secure a peace.

The United States also negotiated the February 2020 agreements with Taliban leaders while informing – rather than fully consulting – the acting Afghan government. This has led to significant tensions between the U.S. and senior Afghan officials like “President” Ghani, particularly over near-term efforts to reduce violence and the exchange of some 5,000 prisoners – measures unilaterally advanced by the United States.

It is clear from the broad nature of these agreements that there are many areas they fail to address. It is also clear that these negotiations did not reflect any explicit decisions on either the nature or the level of “peace” that would be established – as distinguished from the timing of U.S. force withdrawals – or on any agreement about how Afghanistan’s government, politics, economy, and security forces would be structured once a peace was actually implemented. A real peace cannot really be defined until the Afghan central government and the Taliban have negotiated an actual agreement, and then actually implementing any such agreement will have to confront a long series of challenges.

The LIG Quarterly Report issued in May 2020 stated that, 

... the agreement does not explicitly require the Taliban to renounce or sever ties with the terrorist group. It only requires that the Taliban not provide active support or permit al Qaeda to use Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States or its allies. Additionally, the agreement requires the Taliban not to host any
such terrorist groups; to send a clear message that those who pose a threat to the security of the United States and its allies have no place in Afghanistan; and prevent these groups from recruiting, training, and fundraising on Afghan soil.

… the agreement focuses on withdrawing foreign forces from Afghanistan, ensuring the Taliban does not allow international threats to emanate from within the country, and securing the Taliban’s commitment to enter into intra-Afghan negotiations.

The agreement does not specifically reference the current constitutional government, nor does the agreement assume that the same government will remain in place after an eventual settlement. The agreement states that the U.S. Government will seek positive relations with “the new post-settlement Afghan Islamic government as determined by the intra-Afghan dialogue and negotiations.” DoS officials stated that the structure of a future Afghan government was an issue that must be decided by Afghans during the intra-Afghan negotiations.

Taliban leaders condemn the current Afghan constitution and, by extension, the current Afghan government. In April 2019, a high-ranking Taliban leader characterized Afghanistan’s constitution as an imposition of the West and stated that an Afghan constitution should be written by Islamic scholars in an “atmosphere of freedom.”

Another critical area that was left unclear was how the peace process and the actual peace itself would be secured. The LIG Quarterly Report addressed this issue as follows:

The agreement stipulates that the intra-Afghan negotiations should begin by March 10, 2020, but this was delayed (see page 36). Specifically, the agreement states that the participants of intra-Afghan negotiations will discuss the terms for a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire, including joint implementation mechanisms to be announced concurrently with the agreement on the post-settlement political configuration of Afghanistan. The agreement does not stipulate who will represent the non-Taliban side of the negotiations. However, a joint declaration of the U.S. and Afghan governments issued on the same day as the U.S.-Taliban agreement recognizes the same four elements of a comprehensive peace agreement and states that the intra-Afghan negotiations will be conducted between the Taliban and “an inclusive negotiating team of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.”

According to the DoS, implementation of the U.S.-Taliban agreement will require extensive long-term monitoring to ensure Taliban compliance as the group’s leadership has been reluctant to publicly break with al Qaeda. A January 2020 report from the UN’s Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team stated that the relations between al Qaeda and the Taliban “continue to be close and mutually beneficial, with al Qaeda supplying resources and training in exchange for protection.” In an op-ed published by the New York Times on February 20, 2020, Sirjuddin Haqqani, the Taliban Deputy Leader and a U.S. Specially Designated Global Terrorist, downplayed terrorist groups like al Qaeda as “disruptive groups” whose significance was enhanced by “politically motivated exaggerations” made by “warmongers.” According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Haqqani “maintains close ties to al Qaeda.”

DoS officials stated that under the agreement, the Taliban committed to several significant actions that would prevent any group or individual, including al Qaeda, from using Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States and its allies. Specifically, the Taliban committed not to host any individuals or groups—including al Qaeda—that threaten the United States or its allies, and not to allow these groups to train, recruit, or fundraise on Afghan soil. The agreement also requires the Taliban to block their members from cooperating with terrorist groups, among other actions. According to the DoS, the U.S. Government established a monitoring and verification mechanism to judge Taliban compliance with its commitments. The details regarding the implementation arrangements for the agreement are classified and will be reported on in a future report’s classified appendix.

DoS officials reported that the U.S. Government is carefully monitoring and tracking the Taliban’s progress, and that the pace and phasing of the U.S. troop withdrawal is conditions-based and contingent on the Taliban meeting its obligations. According to the DoS, the United States has the will and capacity to enforce the terms of this agreement and respond to violations. Secretary Esper echoed these stipulations in his February 29 joint statement with President Ghani and NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg, stating that “the United States will watch the Taliban’s actions closely to judge whether their efforts towards peace are in good faith.”
One does not have to be an international lawyer to realize the peace agreements do not provide security guarantees, instead only uncertain statements of good intentions.

**Time Pressures and the Afghan Government**

The peace agreements also add to these problems by setting demanding time schedules. The pressure created by the timeline of negotiations keeps rising with every slip in progress. The LIG report notes that,13

The U.S.-Taliban agreement provided that the intra-Afghan negotiations were to begin on March 10, 2020. However, the talks were delayed by disagreements regarding prisoner releases, the slow development of an inclusive Afghan government negotiating team, and ongoing violence in the country.

On March 26, more than two weeks after the negotiation start date included in the U.S.-Taliban agreement, the Afghan Minister of Peace announced he had established a 21-member team to negotiate with the Taliban during the intra-Afghan negotiation. As announced, the team would be headed by Masoom Stanekzai, a former National Directorate of Security chief and a supporter of President Ashraf Ghani. The team includes Afghan politicians, former Afghan government officials, and representatives of civil society. Five members of the negotiating team are women.

Shortly after the quarter ended, the Taliban issued a statement accusing the U.S. Government of violating the agreement by conducting air strikes and the Afghan government of delaying the release of Taliban prisoners. According to media reports, the statement threatened an increase in Taliban violence if the group is not satisfied with what it views as U.S. and Afghan government compliance.

Since that time, the central government has reached a power sharing agreement between its two major leaders and made Abdullah Abdullah its leader for the Afghan government’s side of negotiations. As of the beginning of June 2020, however, the Afghan central government and the Taliban have only made slow joint progress in dealing with the other obstacles facing the peace talks on a time-sensitive schedule: carrying out part of the planned prisoner release and taking some steps to reduce the level of ongoing violence.

Progress was also made in creating a coordinated central government approach to the peace negotiations when President Ghani and his opponent, Abdullah Abdullah, agreed to a powersharing agreement on May 17, 2020. Abdullah became the head of the peace-process agreements and will be leading the body named the High Council for National Reconciliation, however – as is noted later in the assessment – the exact details of the central government’s delegation are vague at best.

As for prisoner releases, the agreement made on February 29th called for the release of 5,000 Taliban prisoners from the central government and 1,000 government prisoners from the Taliban. On March 26, 2020, the Afghan government announced that it would release up to 10,000 prisoners that did not present an immediate threat including women, children, and the elderly. It did so, however, more to slow the spread of the Coronavirus rather than to appease the Taliban. The February agreement did not just call for the release of any prisoner associated with the Taliban, but the Taliban had provided the central government with a specific list of people that the group wanted released.14

A month later, on May 26, 2020, the Afghan central government carried out its single largest prisoner release of 900 Taliban prisoners. Later that same day, a Taliban political spokesman Suhail Shaheen tweeted that, “the Taliban is also planning on releasing a “remarkable number” of government prisoners at a later date.”15 As of May 27, 2020, the Taliban claimed that they have
released 240 captives with ties to the central government, and the Afghan government has released a total of 2,000 Taliban prisoners.

Meanwhile, violence against civilians has continued. The Taliban did agree to a three-day ceasefire on May 26, 2020. As the analysis that follows shows, however, the Taliban has not halted attacks on central government officials and leaders or on civilians. The Taliban has also accused the government of continuing the fighting, and on April 11, 2020, General Scott Miller, the commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, met the Taliban leadership in Doha after the group threatened to walk-out because their fighters were still being attacked. ISIS-K has meanwhile continued to attack both government and Taliban targets.

This slow progress may only be a warning of the broader problems that will occur in the following months, a period when the central government and the Taliban will have to have to deal with more complex and challenging issues.

**Multiple Threats to a Real Peace**

Several additional sets of issues pose critical threats to the ability of creating a real peace that will produce a stable and secure Afghanistan – and/or may lead to a full or major U.S. withdrawal with or without a real peace settlement:

- **The Taliban may well feel it is winning of war of attrition and negotiate accordingly.** The fighting has generally favored the Taliban since the withdrawal of most U.S. and allied combat troops. U.S. airpower, Special Forces and other elite troops, Security Force Assistance Brigades, and CIA forces kept the Taliban from seizing major populated areas, but only barely as seen in the case of Kunduz. So far, the fighting has not ended, and the limited cuts in the level of violence warn that “peace” may not become a real peace.

- **The United States commitment to the central government is increasingly uncertain.** The U.S. has made it clear that it is considering major cuts in its support of the Afghan government and Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) regardless of the outcome of any peace negotiations. The United States may not make a firm commitment to come to the military assistance of the Afghan central government if the Taliban fails to support a real peace, or to provide the aid necessary to make even a successful peace agreement function.

- **Any ceasefire or peace can become a power struggle between factions of the Afghan Central Government,** and that the end result of such a struggle is far more likely to produce a divided country in a state of civil war or some form of limited Taliban victory, rather than a victory by the central government.

- **The Afghan central government is already too weak and too deeply divided to function properly,** and it may not be able to compete with the Taliban in implementing a peace, in leading some new structure of government, or even be able to achieve of political unity once a peace agreement is in place.

- **Afghan security forces seem to be too weak to survive a unified attack by Taliban forces once U.S. forces and advisors leave,** or when U.S. combat air support is no longer available – giving the Taliban added leverage with each cut in U.S. support.

- **Finally, even the best peace agreement will be threatened by the weaknesses, and corruption in the Afghan economy.** Any peace agreement will leave the government that
result dependent on massive outside aid, and the Afghan economy continues to see steady increase in poverty and face economic challenges that go far beyond the current power struggles between the Ghani and the Abdullah Abdullah factions.

These factors make it all too possible that the peace efforts will fail, or that both sides might initially agree to a peace, but then see those negotiations implode when the full peace agreement is put into practice. It is also now clear from both the deadlines in the agreements and from ongoing U.S. actions that the United States may withdraw without leaving a stable Afghanistan behind.
The State of the War Before – and After – the Peace Agreement

There are many reasons to question whether these peace agreements can be made to work and whether any actual peace agreement will produce a stable and secure Afghanistan. One such reason is the fact that the Afghan central government may not have been losing the war before the agreement, but it was clearly not winning it – even with the U.S. land and air combat support that will now be withdrawn. The Afghan government has continued to hold the major population centers, but it only did so because of major combat air support from U.S. and Allied air forces, U.S. military advisory groups and combat elements, and other essential Allied support.

Unfortunately, there are major problems in finding enough reliable data on the levels of fighting and corresponding trends during the year before the peace agreements started in order to make a reliable assessment. Since 2011, the United States, NATO, and the Afghan government have steadily reduced availability of classified data that shows negative trends or could be politically embarrassing.

Classification or non-reporting now includes performance assessments of Afghan Ministry of Defense (MOD) and Ministry of the Interior (MOI), basic Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) strength data and almost all effectiveness data, estimates of central government versus Taliban control of given districts, Afghan military casualties, and now Enemy Initiated Attack (EIA) data. SIGAR’s April 30, 2020 Quarterly Report states that,\(^\text{16}\)

This quarter RS restricted from public release its data on enemy-initiated attacks (EIA), an important metric the command uses to track the levels and locations of violence across Afghanistan. This is the first time RS has restricted the release of this data since it began providing it to SIGAR in September 2018. RS explained its decision by saying “EIA are now a critical part of deliberative interagency discussions regarding ongoing political negotiations between the U.S. and the Taliban.” The Pentagon’s Afghanistan policy office added that after the deliberative process ends, the data could again become releasable to the public.

Nevertheless, unclassified reporting to the Congress by the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR) and the Lead Inspector General (LIG) do still highlight trends in the fighting as well as the problems within the Afghan forces, although some of their data may also be classified in the future and cease to be reported in the open source reports.\(^\text{17}\)

There also are other sources of reporting from analysts outside the U.S. government, particularly by the Long War Journal (LWJ) and the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). The issues involved are complex, but even a brief overview of some key data illustrates just how uncertain the prospects for a real peace are, and how serious the lack of data on the growing threat from the Taliban was before the peace agreements were even reached.

Central Government vs. Taliban Control of the Country

In the past, official sources provided a wide range of reporting on the changes in the patterns of conflict, central government versus Taliban control, the readiness and effectiveness of Afghan forces, maps of areas where aid workers could safely operate, the effectiveness of the central government in given districts, levels of violence, and the nature of the anti-regime forces. The steady cancellation or over-classification of these data has been a warning that the war has not going been well.

From 2010 onwards, it was clear from official reporting that the Afghan government was not becoming more effective in taking control, and that a steadily growing number of Afghan Districts
were now under Taliban control or became areas where control was actively disputed. These negative trends became clear by 2016-2017, and unclassified official reporting on who controlled given parts of the countryside – reports like United States Forces Afghanistan (USFOR-A) maps showing which Afghan districts were under government control – ceased to be available, were said to be misleading, or were classified for “security” purposes.

Given the near certain leakage of such data to the Taliban, such classification efforts were clearly more of an effort to “spin” the war by eliminating negative reporting than an effort to classify information for real-world security purposes. In the case of one of the simplest indicators of relative control – maps of central government controlled districts, Taliban controlled districts, and disputed districts – SIGAR published its latest Quarterly Report showing such data in January 30, 2019. It noted in the report that both the Department of Defense (DoD) and the Resolute Support Command in Afghanistan (RS) had now indicated such reporting was not reliable. It quoted them as follows:

DOD: In response to SIGAR’s analysis of RS’s control data this quarter, DOD said “Measures of population control are not indicative of effectiveness of the South Asia strategy or of progress toward security and stability in Afghanistan, particularly in the wake of the appointment of U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation (SRAR) Zalmay Khalilzad. According to DOD, the [population control] percentages have varied little since the implementation of the South Asia strategy, which over the last 18 months has slowed Taliban gains made during U.S. drawdowns between 2011 and 2016.

Moreover, typical quarter to quarter variations in these metrics may be due to, among other things, uncertainty in the models that produce them and the assessments that underlie them to a degree subjective. DOD considers it more important to instead focus on the principal goal of the strategy of concluding the war in Afghanistan on terms favorable to Afghanistan and the United States. More aggressive combat operations by Afghan forces, increased authorities for U.S. forces to conduct supporting strikes, international calls for peace, and the new SRAR’s engagements appear to be driving the Taliban to substantive negotiations. Taliban participation in these talks suggests that the Taliban recognize that they cannot advance their interests militarily.”

… RS … commented that “The [South Asia] strategy aims to set conditions for a political resolution to the conflict. One necessary condition is the perception by both sides that the conflict is in a military stalemate. Alternatively, they cannot believe they will attain their goals with continued fighting. Multiple years with little variation in district stability data support multiple years of assessments that the conflict is in a stalemate. Taliban participation in various talks (Russia, U.S. [SRAR], etc.) suggests they have a similar assessment. There is no explanation for Taliban behavior if they are advancing their interest militarily.”

SIGAR also reported, however, that.

Resolute Support (RS)-reported district-stability data show that as of October 22, 2018, control of Afghanistan’s districts, population, and territory became somewhat more contested, Afghan government control or influence continued to decline, and insurgent control or influence increased slightly since July 2018. The percentage of the population in districts under Afghan government control or influence—largely stagnant from May 2017 through July 2018 at around 65%—decreased in October to 63.5%. The Afghan government’s control or influence of its districts in October decreased by nearly two percentage points since July to 53.8%. As shown in the box on the left, this quarter, DOD and RS said RS’s district-stability data is “not indicative of effectiveness of the South Asia strategy.” and reiterated that there is some “uncertainty in models that produce [the data]” and subjectivity in the assessments that underlie it. For more information on how RS assesses government and insurgent control and influence, please see SIGAR’s April 2016 Quarterly Report to the United States Congress.

… The Afghan government’s control or influence over the population declined this quarter. According to RS, as of October 22, 2018, 63.5% of the population (21.2 millions of an estimated 33.3 million total) lived in areas under Afghan government control or influence, down roughly 500,000 people (1.7 percentage points) since the previous quarter. However, this quarter’s figure represents a slightly smaller decline (0.6
percentage points) in population under government control or influence compared to the same period in 2017… The insurgency slightly increased its control or influence over area where 10.8% of the population (3.6 million people) lived, a 0.3 percentage point increase since last quarter but a decrease from the 12% reported in October 2017. The population living in contested areas increased to 8.5 million people (25.6% of the population), a nearly two percentage-point increase compared to the same period in 2017.

…According to RS, as of October 22, 2018, there were 219 districts under Afghan government control (74) or influence (145), 53.8% of the total number of districts. This represents a decrease of seven government-controlled or influenced districts compared to last quarter and eight since the same period in 2017. Insurgent control or influence of Afghanistan’s districts increased marginally: there were 50 districts under insurgent control (12) or influence (38) this quarter. This is an increase of one district since last quarter, but a decrease of eight compared to the same period in 2017. Therefore, 12.3% of Afghanistan’s districts are now reportedly under insurgent control or influence. The number of contested districts—controlled or influenced by neither the Afghan government nor the insurgency—increased by six since last quarter to 138 districts, meaning that 33.9% of Afghanistan’s districts are now contested.

Chart One shows the trends in this last report. It demonstrates that the central government could keep control of the main population centers, which were becoming the location of a steadily larger percentage of the population as Afghans fled to the best protected areas. At the same time, it shows a slow but steady loss of control by district, in spite of massive U.S. aid to Afghan forces, sharp increases in U.S. air strikes in support of the government, and the creation of new Security Force Train and Assist Brigades to help Afghan forces in the field.

It is not clear that the central government is decisively losing. But, it is clear that it definitely is not winning – in spite of steadily increasing U.S. and allied air strikes and IS&R support, quiet support from elite U.S. combat forces, and the return of train and assist personnel to forward deployed Afghan combat units.

As for popular attitudes, the Asia Foundation public opinion survey for 2019 found that,20

The Global Peace Index now lists Afghanistan as the least peaceful country in the world, replacing Syria…Afghans continue to bear the brunt of the violence, and both ANDSF and civilian casualties continue to be high: Afghan national security advisor…President Ashraf Ghani indicated 45,000 ANDSF had made “the ultimate sacrifice” since he took office in September 2014.3 The Uppsala Conflict Data Program reported 14,000 battle-related deaths in the first half of 2019…and United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) documented a 27% increase in civilian deaths from the first to the second quarter of 2019…

This grim landscape is reflected by the 74.5% of respondents who say in this year’s Survey they often fear for their personal safety, the highest rate since the Survey began and almost 50% higher than the rate for the same question in 2006 (39.6%). This represents an increase of over 3 percentage points since 2018 (71.1%). Fear for personal safety has risen every year since 2012, when it was 48.2%. Aside from recent year-on-year increases, the 2019 figure represents an almost 100% increase from the first time the question was asked, in 2006 (39.6%), and a sizeable increase from 2012, when fear for personal safety was at its third-lowest point (48.2%).

Fear when encountering the Taliban (93.1%) is nearly the same as in 2018 (93.6%), as is fear when encountering ISIS/Daesh 95.0% in 2019 compared with 94.9% in 2018. The changes, while marginal, speak to the Taliban’s nationwide reach and increased activity on the one hand, and the more geographically and numerically limited presence of ISIS on the other. The Taliban’s ability to close highways and roads,34,35 and incidents involving improvised explosive devices,36 continue to be reflected in this year’s Survey, with 79.9% of respondents reporting some or a lot of fear when traveling from one part of the country to another.

… In an opened ended follow-up, respondents are asked which group poses a threat, the Taliban continue to be the number one response, at 68.9%. The Taliban appear more of a threat in rural areas (75.8%) than urban (37.2%). Disaggregating by ethnicity, the Taliban are most identified as a threat by Hazaras (80.2%) and,
while still high, least by Tajiks (61.7%). Interestingly, the percentage of Uzbeks who consider the Taliban a threat is down by almost 6 points from 2018, to 74.4%.

For all of the Taliban’s claims to have popular support, the survey also found that,21

This year, the proportion of respondents who have a lot or a little sympathy with the Taliban is 13.4%, similar to 2018 (15.9%). Respondents who say they have no sympathy with the Taliban have increased almost 3 percentage points, to 85.1%, since 2018 (82.4%). Urban respondents (88.6%) are more inclined than rural respondents (83.9%) to claim to have no sympathy at all. Respondents from Zabul (56.1%) and Uruzgan (50.5%) express the highest levels of sympathy with the Taliban. Despite being the highest, however, sympathy for the Taliban among Zabul respondents is still 20 percentage points lower than the 2018 level of 65.9%.

HISTORICAL POPULATION CONTROL OR INFLUENCE IN AFGHANISTAN

Note: Component numbers may not add to 100 due to rounding. Afghan government and insurgent figures include control and influence.


HISTORICAL DISTRICT CONTROL OR INFLUENCE IN AFGHANISTAN

Note: Component numbers may not add to 100 due to rounding. Afghan government and insurgent figures include control and influence.


Source: SIGAR, Quarterly Report to Congress, January 30, 2019, p. 70.
Chart One - Part Two: The Last Major Unclassified Report on Central Government vs. Taliban Control: District Control as of October 22, 2018

STABILITY LEVEL OF AFGHANISTAN’S 407 DISTRICTS AS OF OCTOBER 22, 2018

Note: A district is assigned its district-stability level based on the overall trend of land-area/population control of each district as a whole.
Source: RS, response to SIGAR data call, 12/20/2018.

GOVERNMENT AND INSURGENT CONTROL WITHIN AFGHANISTAN AS OF OCTOBER 2018

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Control Status</th>
<th>Districts</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Territory</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>In Millions</td>
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<td>GOVERNMENT</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Control</td>
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<td>18%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Influence</td>
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<td>34%</td>
<td>8.5</td>
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<td>INSURGENT</td>
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<tr>
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<td>3%</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>9%</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>407</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Sq Km – square kilometers. Component numbers may not add to 100 because of rounding. Territory figures have been rounded by RS.

Removing these data from future open source reporting also removed a source of embarrassment regarding the trends in the fighting – although few in Afghanistan and in the media were unaware of the fact that Afghan forces were slowly losing the battle in the countryside. And, the process of over-classification continued – as did efforts to find open source metrics that would be more reassuring and positive.

As noted earlier, SIGAR stated in its April 30, 2020 Report to Congress that the Resolute Support command classified yet another indicator of which side was winning, and it still continues to classify many other data on ANSF manning and effectiveness. SIGAR also noted that other reports did show growing Taliban activity continued in a number of areas, stating,

\[\text{…Between March 1 and 31, the Taliban refrained from attacks against Coalition forces; however they increased attacks against ANSF to levels above seasonal norms. The Afghan Government maintains control of Kabul, provincial capitals, major population centers, most district centers, and most portions of major ground lines of communications (GLOCs). The Taliban contest several portions of main GLOCs, contest district centers in vicinity of Taliban strongholds, and in late March overtook Yamgan District, Badakhshan. Since the [RIV] period, the Taliban reduced violence against ANSF in provincial capitals, likely to avoid risking the United States-Taliban agreement…}\]

Outside media and analytic reporting during 2019 also generally indicated that the Taliban continued to gain control of territory relative to the ANSF and the Afghan central government. In some ways, such reporting indicates that the central government is becoming a government whose forces increasingly concentrate on controlling major population centers – and they were becoming more of a government of “Kabulstan” than a government of Afghanistan.

At the same time, both SIGAR and Long War Journal (LWJ) reporting continues to indicate that the past trends in the various metrics that compared the Afghan central government’s level of control with that of the Taliban’s have favored the Taliban since the withdrawal of most U.S. combat troops at the end of 2014.

Moreover, the term “government control” has always been all too relative. There are many areas that have been under the effective control of power brokers, drug lords, and warlords rather than the central government – and where it is unclear that any compromise of a political agreement at the top between the Ghani and the Abdullah Abdullah factions would necessarily affect areas under local power brokers if they opposed the terms of a peace.

The LWJ continued to track and estimate the current patterns in central government versus Taliban control of the districts in Afghanistan in spite of the fact that the official version of such data had become classified. This LWJ mapping effort is illustrated in Chart Two, which presents the map shown on the LWJ website in April 2020. This LWJ map found that the Afghan central government controlled some 15.2 million people – largely in urban areas – while the Taliban controlled 4.6 million Afghans and contested control of 13.3 million. It shows that the central government controlled 133 districts, while the Taliban controlled 75 districts and contested control of 189.

It should be noted that the LWJ map does not have an “as of date” – and that the LWJ no longer can draw on official sources – but the LWJ methodology and its limits are well described, and the map seems to provide as good a picture of the balance just before the peace agreements that is available in open sources. It also tracks closely with the unsourced map of Taliban control shown in Chart Three, which is taken from a New York Times article dated December 9, 2020. Both also reflect major Taliban gains relative to 2016 as shown in the third map in Chart One, which shows a much more favorable estimate for the Afghan central government.
FDD’s Long War Journal has been tracking the Taliban’s attempts to gain control of territory since NATO ended its military mission in Afghanistan and switched to an “advise and assist” role in June 2014. Districts have been retaken (by both sides) only to be lost shortly thereafter, largely resulting in the conflict’s current relative stalemate. However, since the U.S. drawdown of peak forces in 2011, the Taliban has unquestionably been resurgent.

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 cannot 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.

Chart Three: New York Times Map of Government vs. Taliban Control of Afghanistan as of December 2019

Enemy Initiated Attacks (EIA): A Nearly Meaningless and Now Classified Metric

Somewhat ironically, another metric that was originally generated to show positive trends has also recently been classified. This is the number of Enemy Initiated attacks (EIA) and Effective Enemy Initiated attacks (EEIA), which are significant attacks initiated by insurgents and significant attacks initiated by insurgents that result in casualties, respectively.

Issuing such reports became typical of the post-2016 efforts to find ways of providing more positive reports regardless of their analytic merit – but only as long as they seemed to show the Taliban was not winning, SIGAR reports that the U.S., NATO, and the Afghan government classified such reporting on enemy initiated attacks (EIA) after January 1, 2020, and explains that, 26

This quarter RS restricted from public release its data on enemy-initiated attacks (EIA), an important metric the command uses to track the levels and locations of violence across Afghanistan. This is the first time RS has restricted the release of this data since it began providing it to SIGAR in September 2018. RS explained its decision by saying “EIA are now a critical part of deliberative interagency discussions regarding ongoing political negotiations between the U.S. and the Taliban.” The Pentagon’s Afghanistan policy office added that after the deliberative process ends, the data could again become releasable to the public. RS did provide the following unclassified narrative about enemy-initiated attacks during the month of March:

Between March 1 and 31, the Taliban refrained from attacks against Coalition forces; however they increased attacks against ANDSF to levels above seasonal norms. The Afghan Government maintains control of Kabul, provincial capitals, major population centers, most district centers, and most portions of major ground lines of communications (GLOCs). The Taliban contest several portions of main GLOCs, contest district centers in vicinity of Taliban strongholds, and in late March overtook Yamgan District, Badakhshan. Since the [RIV] period, the Taliban reduced violence against ANDSF in provincial capitals, likely to avoid risking the United States-Taliban agreement.

From an analytic viewpoint, this is not much of a loss. To be blunt, it is unclear that these EIA and EEIA metrics ever meant anything without far more supporting data and detailed trend mapping than was ever provided in issuing it initially. Moreover, the LIG Quarterly Report was still able to provide data on enemy initiated attacks from 2015 through the end of 2019. These data are shown in Chart Four, along with recent data patterns in civilian casualties.

The LIG reported that.

USFOR-A defines enemy-initiated attacks as attacks by the Taliban, ISIS-K, or other enemy groups. An enemy-initiated attack is labeled as effective if it results in a casualty (a person killed or wounded) there were 8,204 enemy-initiated attacks last quarter, and 3,027 of those were effective enemy-initiated attacks. While the number of attacks in the last 3 months of 2019 decreased from the prior quarter, as is typical for the winter months, it was still the second-highest number since OFS began in 2015.27

Previous Lead IG reports have included USFOR-A data on the number of “enemy-initiated attacks” and “effective” enemy-initiated attacks in Afghanistan…However, this quarter USFOR-A withheld this data from public release, stating the information on enemy-initiated attacks is “now a critical part of deliberative interagency discussions regarding ongoing political negotiations between the U.S. and the Taliban.” The DoD told the DoD OIG in early May that the U.S. Government was using the data in its deliberations over whether the Taliban is abiding by the terms of the agreement. The DoD stated that once the deliberations are complete, the attack data can be released to the public. 28

In addition, SIGAR reported that, 29

Enemy attacks in Afghanistan increased considerably in late 2019, according to data from RS. September 2019, the month of the Afghan presidential election, saw the highest number of enemy-initiated attacks in any month since June 2012 and the highest number of effective enemy-initiated attacks since recording began
in January 2010. This level of violence continued after the presidential election. October 2019 had the second highest number of enemy-initiated attacks in any month since July 2013... both overall enemy-initiated attacks and effective enemy-initiated attacks during the fourth quarter of 2019 exceeded same-period levels in every year since recording began in 2010. However... while the number of overall and effective attacks increased this quarter, the proportion of overall attacks that were effective was similar to the same period in 2018... When looking at 2019 as a whole, enemy attacks appeared to decline early in the year while peace talks were ongoing. But a turbulent last six months resulted in increases in overall enemy attacks (6%) and effective attacks (4%) in 2019 compared to the already high levels reported in 2018... The geographic distribution of enemy activity remained largely consistent from 2018 to 2019....in 2019 heavy fighting continued in southern and western Afghanistan. However, enemy activity increased and spread into larger areas of the north and east.

The SIGAR maps in Chart Five also do provide a more useful form of EIA/EEIA reporting than simply showing total numbers by mapping growth in Taliban activity. They also bear a close resemblance to the Long War Journal (LWJ) map in Chart Two. The practical problem is that there is no indication of what the impact of successful or unsuccessful enemy-initiated attacks were on control of the country, the peace process, or the Taliban’s perceptions of who is winning the war. There are no reports on other attacks, actual Taliban defeats, Afghan National Defense Security Force initiated attacks, and whether any of these attacks were successful or what they accomplished.

EIA and EEIA statistics have never really measured who is winning or losing. They seem to have been issued because, on the surface level, they implied the central government was more successful, which can be “spun” to give a more favorable picture of the war.

Finally, a third set of maps by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) is shown in Chart Six. These maps are taken from an ACLED analysis entitled The World According to the Taliban: New Data on Afghanistan. They have an “as of” date of December 19, 2019.

They compare the claims made regarding acts of violence by the Taliban’s news service, The Voice of Jihad, with the independent estimates of ACLED. They do not focus on control of territory, or total EIAs/EEIAs, but rather on levels of Taliban violence in a given area. As such, they provide considerable insight into the level of Taliban activity in many areas of the country before the peace agreements were signed. They also show patterns that roughly correlate to the areas of control shown in Chart Two and Chart Three, and they highlight the practical problems throughout Afghanistan in negotiating and enforcing a peace settlement once (and if) such a settlement is reached.

They also illustrate the challenges in making such estimates. SIGAR shifted to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) reporting in its April 2019 Quarterly Report and substituted maps and other data from ACLED for the previous data it had gotten from DoD and the Resolute Support Command (RS).

It described ACLED’s effort as “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 events 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 “violent events,” “demonstrations,” or “nonviolent actions. Within these categories, ACLED codes their events as: (1) Battles, (2) Explosions/Remote Violence, (3) Protests, (4) Riots (5) Strategic Developments, and (6) Violence against Civilians.”
The data in Chart Six, however, show that ACLED found that there were major differences between its estimates of levels of violence and the Taliban’s estimates. It describes its new analysis as follows, and this raises additional issues about the value of the EIA/EEIA data shown earlier:

Taliban forces maintain control in some areas of Afghanistan, while other armed groups – such as the Islamic State – are increasingly complicating the conflict landscape and making inroads across the country (ACLED, 2018).

To better represent the ground reality of this complex and enormous conflict, the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) has supplemented coverage of Afghanistan with over 21,000 additional events sourced from Voice of Jihad (VOJ), a website and news service run by the Taliban. The addition of VOJ as a source for Afghanistan more than doubles the number of political violence and protest events in ACLED’s Afghanistan dataset (see map below), offering more nuanced insight into the conflict landscape.

… Being run by one of the parties to the conflict, VOJ is obviously not a neutral source of information. What makes the source particularly useful in the Afghan context, however, is that information provided by VOJ is often not reported elsewhere. The combination of the conflict’s complexity with the country’s rough terrain makes coverage in certain areas by traditional media largely impossible — which is why many of the journalists active in Afghanistan also rely on VOJ for information (for example: Pajhwok, 7 May 2019; Afghan Islamic Press, 19 April 2019; New York Times, 15 May 2018; Pajhwok, 3 September 2019; RFERL, 7 June 2013; Washington Post, 9 September 2019; Long War Journal, 23 August 2018).

Analytically, VOJ data give a more complete picture of the Taliban’s situational circumstances, in particular lending unique awareness of where the group may operate support zones and maintain areas of strength and lower-scale activity. Such insight increases both the scope and the quality of the ACLED situational overview of Afghanistan. Given the Taliban is a conflict party, and reports from a conflict party come with many biases, additional steps are taken in ACLED’s coding process to ensure the reliability of these data… The addition of information from VOJ has more than doubled ACLED’s Afghanistan dataset, from fewer than 20,000 events to over 40,000 (see diagram below). Coverage extends from 1 January 2017 through the present.

VOJ’s coverage expands beyond events in which the Taliban were directly involved, though a large majority involve the Taliban as either a primary or secondary actor. Of the more than 34,000 events which involve the Taliban since the start of 2017, nearly two-thirds come from VOJ. Unsurprisingly, the top authority on the Taliban is the Taliban itself.

Similar to other sources covering the conflict in Afghanistan, VOJ reports a majority (roughly two-thirds) of events as battles, especially those with no exchange of territory. Where VOJ varies is in its emphasis on coverage of remote violence involving explosives (see figure below), as well as its coverage of events it claims are perpetrated by the Taliban. This is unsurprising: conflict actors typically have an incentive to appear strong and will emphasize reporting which corroborates this image. Relatedly, VOJ reports zero events in which the government retook territory, while other sources (including the Afghan Ministry of Defense [MOD]) report over 250 such events. This again indicates a reluctance on the part of the Taliban to report losses.

The full text of the ACLED analysis – entitled The World According to the Taliban: New Data on Afghanistan is available at https://acleddata.com/2019/12/19/the-world-according-to-the-taliban-new-data-on-afghanistan/. This ACLED reporting provides some of the best-sourced and defined descriptions of such data available, as well as descriptions of some of the key differences between sources and methods of analysis. It also provides a very tangible picture of how difficult it may be to secure a peace – given the dispersal of Taliban attacks and forces.

Most importantly, the data in Chart Six again warn that the Afghan forces were in serious trouble even with the massive U.S. air and ground support that will now be withdrawn as part of the peace process.
Chart Four: Enemy-Initiated Attacks, January 2015 through December 2019

LIG Estimates of Enemy Initiated Attacks

SIGAR Estimates of Enemy Initiated Attacks (EIAs) and Effective Enemy Initiated Attacks (EEIAs)

FOURTH-QUARTER ENEMY-INITIATED ATTACKS SINCE 2010

Source: LIG, pp. 20-21; SIGAR, p. 68.
Chart Five: SIGAR Map of Enemy Initiated Attacks: 2018 versus 2019

The total number of enemy-initiated attacks in 2018 was 27,417

The total number of enemy-initiated attacks in 2019 was 29,083

Source: RS, response to SIGAR data call, 1/7/2020; SIGAR analysis of RS-provided data, 1/2020; SIGAR, Quarterly Report to Congress, April 30, 2020, p. 69.
Chart Six: ACLED vs. Taliban Estimate of Violent Events in Afghanistan

Combat with the Taliban Does Continue

There has been some reduction in these levels of violence since the peace agreements were signed, but so far, the peace agreements with the Taliban and the efforts to reduce violence have only had a mixed impact. USFOR-A sources report civilian casualties are down, but UN reports and other media reports indicate that civilian casualties may not have declined – while Afghan military casualties are still classified. Taliban attacks also continued in April 2020, in spite of the steady rise in Coronavirus cases and the efforts to strengthen the agreement to reduce violence.

Part of this continuing Taliban violence may be a reaction to the Afghan central government’s failure to fully implement the prisoner exchange program called for in the February 29, 2020 peace agreements, but another part seems to be the result of an ongoing effort to preserve the Taliban’s military options and keep military pressure up on the Afghan forces.

In any case, the April 2020 SIGAR Quarterly Report sounded a clear warning that the fighting is not over.

This quarter RS restricted from public release its data on enemy-initiated attacks (EIA), an important metric the command uses to track the levels and locations of violence across Afghanistan. This is the first time RS has restricted the release of this data since it began providing it to SIGAR in September 2018. RS explained its decision by saying “EIA are now a critical part of deliberative interagency discussions regarding ongoing political negotiations between the U.S. and the Taliban.” The Pentagon’s Afghanistan policy office added that after the deliberative process ends, the data could again become releasable to the public...

RS’s statement about the violence level from March 1–31 corresponds with the publicly available data from open sources. The New York Times reported on March 4 that Taliban violence against the ANDSF had increased after the signing of the U.S.-Taliban agreement, as they conducted 76 attacks across 24 Afghan provinces in four days. The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), partly funded by the State Department, attributed 538 violent incidents to the Taliban from March 1–31, a 42% increase in incidents compared to February 2020 (which included the RIV week), and an 11% increase compared to March 2019. TOLO news also reported an increase in Taliban attacks following the signing of the U.S.-Taliban agreement (31–96 attacks per day between March 3 and April 7 versus around 70 attacks per day before the RIV), though they did not indicate the source of their data...

After concluding that there had been no post-agreement reduction in Taliban attacks, on March 19, Afghanistan’s Acting Minister of Defense Asadullah Khalid ordered MOD forces “to return to [an] active defense position from [a] defensive position,” meaning they had “the right to attack the enemy where they are preparing to attack.”…As Taliban attacks on the ANDSF continued into early April, a USFOR-A spokesperson reported that General Miller met with Taliban leadership in Doha on April 10 and 13 “as part of the military channel established in the agreement … about the need to reduce the violence.”

So did the LIG report for the first quarter of 2020:

Violence in Afghanistan at the beginning of the quarter was high, in part because U.S. forces exerted “military pressure” on the Taliban “to create the conditions for a political settlement,” according to U.S. Forces–Afghanistan (USFOR-A) … According to media reports, the Taliban similarly increased its activity to strengthen its negotiating position… The United States and Taliban agreed to a 1-week reduction in violence as a precondition of the signing of the agreement…

However, both during the reduction in violence and after the signing of the agreement, the Taliban continued attacks against Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF). In the final 2 weeks of the quarter alone, the Taliban launched more than 300 attacks, with major assaults in several provinces, with the insurgents seizing territory and inflicting heavy ANDSF casualties, according to media sources. USFOR-A told the DoD OIG that U.S. military operations remained focused on defending the ANDSF throughout the quarter.

Insider attacks by ANDSF personnel—or Taliban infiltrators—targeting the ANDSF continued this quarter, following the growing trend since 2008.11 USFOR-A reported that there were 17 insider attacks that targeted
the ANDSF, killing 48 ANDSF members and wounding 6.12 USFOR-A reported that there was one insider attack this quarter that resulted in the death of U.S. service members. On February 8, a gunman wearing an ANDSF uniform opened fire, killing two U.S. personnel and one Afghan in Nangarhar province.

…the Taliban ramped up attacks against the ANDSF almost immediately after signing this agreement. The Taliban declared that ANDSF forces were not off-limits, and Taliban levels of violence escalated throughout Afghanistan, raising questions as to the future of the agreement…In addition, as the quarter ended, the Afghan government and the Taliban remained in dispute regarding the speed and size of prisoner releases, as well as the levels of violence in the country, and the intra-Afghan negotiations were on hold. Further complicating the intra-Afghan negotiations was the political impasse and the coronavirus disease–2019 (COVID-19) pandemic.

…General Austin Miller, commander of USFOR-A and Resolute Support, stated in a Twitter message posted by his spokesman at the beginning of March that the “United States has been very clear about our expectations—the violence must remain low.”…The Taliban stated that the reduction in violence was not a ceasefire and continued some attacks against the ANDSF.

News media reports stated that the Taliban said it would not attack major military facilities or cities, but it would attack convoys and rural areas….On March 2, Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid stated to the media that the “reduction in violence…has ended now and our operations will continue as normal,” and, according to media reports, Taliban attacks on Afghan government targets resumed.

On March 23, Secretary Pompeo stated that “the reduction in violence is real [albeit] not perfect,” and that there had been no attacks on U.S. forces since the agreement was signed. U.S. officials stated that the violence levels were too high and that they could jeopardize the U.S.-Taliban agreement if they continued. DoS officials did not state to the DoS OIG what level of violence would jeopardize the agreement…

A U.S. official quoted in the media stated that the Taliban leadership had sufficient command and control of their fighters to implement a ceasefire if they chose to do so….Taliban attacks continued even amid international appeals for a ceasefire on humanitarian grounds to slow the spread of COVID-19 across the country….According to media reporting, in the final 2 weeks of March, the Taliban launched more than 300 attacks, with major assaults in the provinces of Kunduz, Faryab, and Badakhshan, where the insurgents seized territory and inflicted heavy ANDSF casualties.

The LIG also reported that the Taliban has kept up a pattern of high-profile attacks in Kabul, again demonstrating that it remains a major threat in a highly visible way without necessarily violating the peace agreements while also creating a major incentive for the U.S. to slow its withdrawals.34

Resolute Support defines a high-profile attack as an incident that involves a suicide bomber or vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED). According to the DoD’s December 2019 semiannual report to Congress on Afghanistan, Afghan and international forces have prioritized preventing high-profile attacks in Kabul, particularly after a truck bomb attack in May 2017 that killed approximately 150 people. The DoD stated that the Taliban and ISIS-K conduct high-profile attacks in Kabul because they “attract media attention, create the perception of widespread insecurity, and undermine the legitimacy of the Afghan government.”

USFOR-A reported two high-profile attacks in Kabul during the quarter. On February 11, a suicide bomber detonated outside of a military academy in Kabul, killing 6 and wounding 12, according to news sources. Two of those killed in the attack were civilians and the other four were military personnel. No group claimed responsibility for the attack. According to USFOR-A, the second high-profile attack occurred March 6. News sources reported that ISIS-K conducted a coordinated attack on a Shia gathering, killing 32 and wounding at least 80. Former Chief Executive Abdullah was one of those in attendance at the gathering but escaped unharmed.

Another notable attack occurred in Kabul on March 25, but it did not qualify as a high-profile attack under Resolute Support’s criteria. According to news sources, ISIS-K took responsibility for a single gunman’s attack on a Sikh and Hindu temple in Kabul during a morning worship ceremony. The attack killed 25 civilians and wounded 8; Afghan security forces successfully rescued 80 additional civilians from the temple after an hours-long battle.
A letter from the UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team to the Chair of the UN Security Council Committee dated April 30, 2020, sounded similar warnings about the peace agreements and made it clear that the Taliban did see their side to be winning. Several key passages make this clear:

…Early indications are that many, if not all, of these objectives will prove challenging. While the Taliban remain internally disciplined enough to be a formidable fighting force, there are divisions within the group, which make compromise with its adversaries difficult, and its messaging remains hardline. The group also appears well prepared for the 2020 fighting season and raising the tempo of its attacks on Afghan government targets while trying to avoid provoking the United States. Differences in interpretation of the agreement could lead to periodic crises in its implementation. Hard-line Taliban believe that they can and will still achieve their aims by force.35

…A key Taliban member of the Political Office in Doha, Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanekzai Padshah Khan (TAi.067), explained to the media on 29 February that, as from the end of March, the war between the Taliban and the United States would cease. There was no mention of the Taliban war against Afghan Forces or the Government of Afghanistan. This message from the Taliban leadership was echoed by Taliban commanders in the field who informed civilian populations that, following the “victory of the Islamic Emirate”, the “Afghan Government would be toppled within three months”.8 Hopes for a continuation of the reduction in violence were dampened shortly after the signing ceremony as Taliban forces increased attacks against Afghan Forces countrywide.36

…The Taliban remain confident that they can take power by force. The risk exists that they will continue to find reasons to delay intra-Afghan negotiations as international forces supporting the Government of Afghanistan continue to leave. Delaying tactics would include the argument that the authorities in Kabul are not abiding by the agreement regarding prisoner releases or refusing to acknowledge any negotiating team put forward by Kabul. The Taliban have already begun accusing the United States of bad faith when it provides close air support to Afghan Forces while under Taliban attack. Similarly, the delay in the formation of the Government in Kabul, after a prolonged election process, also presented a challenge for the implementation of the agreement. Despite the challenges, Member States continue to believe that a negotiated settlement is the only solution to the long-protracted conflict in Afghanistan37

…the Taliban leaders have steered the movement through negotiations with the United States to conclude an agreement. The process has increased their political leverage and access to some Member States and international media, while they were simultaneously carrying out increased levels of attacks.9 Throughout, the Taliban have managed to stay unified, despite internal divergences of view38

… The Taliban have issued no announcement of a spring offensive for 2020 yet, possibly indicating that the group wishes to display some moderation in the face of international and national pressure to reach a peace agreement with the Government of Afghanistan. It is possible that the decision has been affected by the current COVID-19 pandemic, whose eventual effects on military operations are not yet clear.39

Unlike the U.S. and NATO command, the UN team also found that counting the control of districts was another key indicator, although its count did reflect at least one positive trend,40

The Monitoring Team was informed that control of 50 to 60 per cent of Afghan territory was contested between the Taliban and government forces during the reporting period. There are 21 districts currently reported to be under full Taliban control, down from between 25 and 30 districts in the previous reporting period (see S/2019/481, para. 16). The continued goal of the Taliban over consecutive fighting seasons to capture and hold a provincial capital remains difficult for the group given the continued presence of international military close air support. The sudden or unexpected withdrawal of such support would endanger several provinces and leave them susceptible to falling to the Taliban.

All this considered, the Taliban has demonstrated that it is attempting to uphold “red-lines” designated by the negotiations with the United States. At the same time, it has found loopholes in the agreement. It is still carrying attacks outside of the pre-agreed 34 major cities, especially on civilians. The attacks are measures utilized by the Taliban to put an increased pressure on the
Afghan government, that can be used to induce demands such as the full execution of a prisoner swap.

At the same time, lack of reliable information from the Afghan central government on Taliban attacks has become an issue. It seems to be deliberately exaggerating some aspects of the Taliban threat to gain leverage in the negotiations and put pressure on the United States. President Ghani and officials of the central government have charged that the Taliban was responsible for the large-scale attacks that took place on May 12, 2020, that included a massacre of the mothers in a maternity ward and an attack on a funeral.

The Taliban denied such responsibility and blamed ISIS-K for the attack on the maternity ward. The U.S. government also blamed ISIS-K – but the central government was still quick to blame the Taliban. President Ghani even relaunched a military operation recently against the Taliban, which once again setback the peace negotiations. The Washington Post reported that, 41

U.S. officials issued an emphatic, public rejection of the Afghan government claims. U.S. special representative Zalmay Khalilzad tweeted the United States blamed the Islamic State for the bloodshed. The U.S. military command in Kabul’s “initial assessment” also implicated the Islamic State, according to spokesman, Col. Sonny Leggett.

…The acting director of Afghanistan’s main intelligence agency reinforced the government’s claims after the maternity ward attack, saying that the Taliban is working with the Islamic State and that “relations between the Taliban and other terrorist groups have expanded.” Speaking at a news conference, Ahmad Zia Saraj said his agency had fingerprints of captured Islamic State fighters that match those of suspected Taliban militants, suggesting links between the two factions.

There have been some positive signs. The May 26, 2020 prisoner exchange by the Afghan government did occur at the end of a 3-day ceasefire with the Taliban. The ceasefire coincided with the Muslim festival Eid al-Fitr, which began the evening of May 23, 2020, and marks the end of the month-long fasting of Ramadan. Not including the religious symbolism that the ceasefire may hold, it is significant for being the Taliban’s second ceasefire since the 2001 U.S. invasion.42

One reason the Taliban may have agreed to the ceasefire could be attributed to the increase in surge of attacks committed by ISIS-K in the previous few weeks. With U.S., coalition, and Afghan forces all agreeing to uphold the ceasefire and the Taliban also agreeing to halt its offensive forces against the government – although the group did stipulate that it might continue defensive attacks against any threatening foreign forces – only ISIS-K would be conducting attacks during the three-day ceasefire. It is clear that both Afghan government forces and the Taliban have conducted attacks recently; however, there have been deadly attacks, most likely committed by ISIS-K, which the central government has accused the Taliban for conducting.

However, offering a temporary ceasefire does not mean the Taliban will not continue to intentionally control the rate of attacks to benefit its position. The attacks following the ceasefire may have been used as a “stick” to put pressure on the Afghan central government, but the reduction of attacks controlled and organized by the Taliban can just as easily be used as a “carrot” to win support for the Taliban’s positions.

Moreover, as is shown later, ISIS-K, is a third player that is adding pressure to already tense relations between the central government and the Taliban. It was ISIS-K that claimed responsibility for the attack at the funeral, and – although no one has come forward to claim responsibility for the massacre at the maternity ward and the Taliban did condemn the event – U.S. intelligence agencies do believe ISIS-K was also responsible.
It is all too clear that all sides can now exploit violence in different ways. ISIS-K can use anonymous attacks, the central government can manipulate charges against the Taliban, and the Taliban can just as easily exploit any mistakes committed by the central government.

**Civilian Casualties**

It is too early, and there is not enough data to even guesstimate how much the peace agreements will reduce violence and casualties over time. The LIG Quarterly Report does note, however, that the UN and NATO/USFOR-A data on civilian casualties now largely agree that there are some positive trends in civilian deaths, and only seven U.S. soldiers died in the first quarter of 2020. (Reporting on Afghan military and security force casualties is classified.)

This quarter, Resolute Support reported that civilian casualties continued to decrease from the previous two quarters—in part due to the signing of the U.S.-Taliban agreement. Resolute Support reported that it verified 1,268 civilian casualties (486 killed and 782 wounded) during the January to March period, compared to 1,878 the previous quarter...

There were 783 fewer casualties this quarter than during the same quarter last year. The most common cause of civilian casualties this quarter was direct fire, causing 590 civilian casualties, followed by improvised explosive devices, accounting for 404 civilian casualties. The provinces with the greatest numbers of civilian casualties were Kabul, Kunduz, Helmand, Nangarhar, and Herat.

The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) also provides a quarterly report of civilian casualties in Afghanistan. UNAMA reported 1,293 civilian casualties this quarter (533 killed and 760 injured). This was the lowest civilian casualty total recorded by UNAMA for a January through March quarter since 2012…UNAMA reported a significant decrease of civilian casualties attributed to the Taliban during the first 2 months of the year in comparison to the same period in 2019. However, in the month of March, following the reduction in violence week and the signing of the February 29 agreement between the United States and the Taliban, civilian casualties attributed to the Taliban increased in comparison to March 2019. In its report, UNAMA stated that it was “gravely concerned with the acceleration of violence observed in March,” which it said was mainly a function of Taliban attacks on the ANDSF and could result in additional civilian casualties.

On February 22, UNAMA issued its annual report of civilian casualties in Afghanistan for 2019. UNAMA documented 10,392 civilian casualties (3,403 killed and 6,989 injured) in 2019, representing a 5 percent decrease as compared to 2018 (10,994 with 3,803 killed and 7,191 injured) and the lowest overall number of civilian casualties since 2013. UNAMA reported that the reduction was driven by a decrease in civilian casualties caused by ISIS-K. However, civilian casualties caused by other parties, especially the Taliban, increased, with significant fluctuations coinciding with gains and setbacks made during peace negotiations between the United States and the Taliban.

While Resolute Support and UNAMA often report similar overall trends in civilian casualties, their data also expose differences in total numbers and attribution of responsibility. This is due, in large part, to differences in methodology. 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. UNAMA investigates reports of civilian casualties using witness accounts and statements from Afghan officials. In addition, the two organizations use different definitions of “civilian,” which UNAMA defines more broadly than Resolute Support.

These trends, however, are mixed. Casualties are normally lower in the winter and early spring, and the drop in civilian casualties shown in the LIG data for January-March in Part One of Chart Seven is small, and the comparative drop in the UN data in Chart Seven for 2020 versus 2019 may not reflect a peace agreement-driven trend.

Any attack on the civilian population, regardless of who initiated it, will add increased pressure on the peace process and increase hostility between the central government and the Taliban – further
threatening peace negotiations and encouraging more violence. According to a report by the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) civilian causalities increased by more than a quarter in April compared to the corresponding months in 2019 – 172 were caused by the Afghan central government’s operations and 208 by the Taliban.\footnote{44}

Moreover, **Part Two of Chart Seven** warns that UN data show a steady increase in Afghan government-inflicted civilian casualties as U.S. forces became less active – potentially undermining Afghan popular trust in the Afghan forces. The United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA) quarterly report on the *Protection of Civilians in Armed Combat* for 1 January-31 March 2020 is also notably less positive than the LIG report, and it provides a grim picture of the realities behind the numbers:\footnote{45}

UNAMA is gravely concerned with the acceleration in violence observed in March, mainly by the Taliban against Afghan national security forces, and the consequent increase in the number of civilian casualties and harm caused, particularly in the northern and north-eastern regions. This concerning trend was all the more notable as it followed a ‘reduction in violence’ week - 22 February to 28 February – between the Pro-Government Forces and the Taliban that then led to the agreement signed between the United States and the Taliban on 29 February.

Throughout the first quarter, ground engagements were the leading cause of civilian casualties causing almost one-third of the overall total, followed by targeted killings and non-suicide IEDs. Targeted killings were the leading cause of civilian deaths. Civilians living in Kabul, Balkh and Faryab provinces were most affected (in that order).

The number of civilian deaths attributed to Anti-Government Elements – particularly the Taliban – increased by 22 per cent in the first quarter of 2020 as compared to the same time period in 2019, mainly due to a disturbing increase in targeted killings and summary executions. Although UNAMA documented an overall reduction in civilian casualties caused by the Afghan national security forces for the quarter, it is concerned that their operations led to an uptick particularly from the use of indirect fire, and airstrikes.

…Anti-Government Elements continued to be responsible for the majority of civilian casualties – 55 per cent - during the first quarter, causing 710 civilian casualties (282 killed and 428 injured). UNAMA attributed 39 per cent to Taliban3, 13 per cent to Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant – Khorasan Province (ISIL-KP)4 and the remainder to undetermined Anti-Government Elements.

UNAMA verified a significant decrease of civilian casualties attributed to the Taliban during the first two months of the year in comparison to the same period in 2019, particularly from a drastic reduction in suicide and complex attacks. However, in the month of March, following the reduction in violence week and the signing of the 29 February agreement between the US and the Taliban, civilian casualties attributed to the Taliban increased in comparison to March 2019, mainly due to a notable increase in civilian deaths resulting from non-suicide IEDs and ground engagements.

UNAMA is specifically concerned about an increase in civilian deaths from intentional targeting of civilians during the first quarter of 2020, as compared to 2019. Two of the most egregious incidents were mass shootings claimed by ISIL-KP in March: an attack on 6 March at a commemoration for a Hazara leader in Kabul, which killed 34 civilians and injured 78 more, and an attack on 25 March on worshippers at a Sikh-Hindu temple in Kabul, which killed 26 civilians and injured 11 more. Targeted killings of civilians by the Taliban included the killing of a health worker in Zazi Aryoub district of Paktya province on 20 January; a judge in Injil district of Herat province on 17 February; and a teacher in Khogyani district of Nangarhar province on 13 March.

UNAMA documented a disturbing increase in abductions of civilians carried out by the Taliban in the first quarter of 2020 as compared to 2019, with a spike occurring during the reduction in violence period at the end of February and the subsequent month of March. UNAMA is gravely concerned by abduction cases that have led to summary executions, including an incident on 6 March in Kushk district of Herat province in which seven adult men, including a teacher, were abducted and killed by Taliban a few kilometers from their village.
Furthermore, UNAMA documented an increase in civilian deaths from pressure-plate IEDs, which function as improvised anti-personnel landmines. During the first quarter, UNAMA documented 100 civilian casualties (47 killed and 53 injured) from pressure-plate IEDs, all of which were attributed to the Taliban.

One key issue that will become steadily more important if the peace process does more forward is the potential shift away from killing and combat to kidnappings, extortion, displacements, beatings, and other forms of intimidation that do not show up in casualty data or get the same media reporting. Past insurgencies show there are many different ways to keep fighting without actually fighting.
Chart Seven – Part One: LIG and UNAMA Civilian Casualty Estimates

LIG Civilian Casualty Numbers 2015-2020

UNAMA Civilian Casualty Numbers 2009-2020

Chart Seven – Part Two: LIG and UNAMA Civilian Casualty Timeline and Incident Type

Civilian Casualty Timeline by Party to the Conflict
1 January to 31 March 2020

**The Taliban’s Unknown Strategy**

Given all these trends, it is clear that the peace agreements have not brought an end to the certain aspects of the fighting, which lead the Taliban to make gains before the peace agreements. This does not mean, however, that the Taliban feels that it cannot continue the war. It may well mean that the Taliban feels it cannot gain control of Afghanistan’s major population centers until U.S. forces leave, and that it can either win the peace politically or defeat the central government once the U.S. leaves.

There is no clear indication as of yet to what the Taliban’s longer-term strategy will be, or that it has even united around a given strategy. So far, it seems to have concluded that its best approach to gaining some form of victory is to avoid or severely limit attacks on U.S. forces and facilities as the U.S. withdraws, to limit major attacks on Afghan forces and population centers, and to keep up a low level war of attrition that demonstrates its continued strength, which can be used to gain leverage in the negotiations, to resume the war if the negotiations break down, or to put pressure on the new government once a peace is reached. The Taliban also understands the forces behind the accelerated timeline that the Trump administration has for Afghanistan, particularly as a political victory before the November elections, and may use this timeline to its advantage throughout the negotiations.

Here, it is important to note that the peace agreements do not address disarming Taliban forces or absorbing them into the central government security forces, but rather call for them to cooperate in defeating other rebel and extremist groups like affiliates of ISIS. Yet, although the Taliban negotiated a peace deal that was dependent on the stipulation that it would actively suppress terrorist movements like al Qaeda and ISIS, the Taliban has long treated other extremist groups like its radical offshoot, the Haqqani Network, as allies. It also issued an eulogy praising Mullah Mohammed Omar’s “historical statement” that marked the seventh anniversary of his death. A report in the *Long War Journal* noted that this statement, entitled “A legendary leader, the Omar of our time,” was placed on the Taliban’s official website, Voice of Jihad, on April 23, 2020.46

The peace agreements also did not reflect any change in the Taliban’s goals and policies or address what kind of bargain – if any – the Taliban would make that would allow the group to compromise its stated ideology or to reconcile its inherent contradictions with the policies followed by both the central government and the larger blocs of the regional populations and power brokers.

The Taliban has not sent clear signals as to how it now views any changes in its approach to governance, the rule of law, or the enforcement of its social policies. Since 2001, the Taliban has only had to act as a shadow government – by providing services and resolving disputes. It has created a highly decentralized structure of fighters in Afghanistan, placed many of its leaders in Pakistan or outside the immediate zones of fighting, and the powers and authority of its central leadership is far less clear than it was at the time of Omar’s rule.

The Taliban does also not have to pay the costs of governance or economic development. It has been able to take indirect advantage of the goods and services provided by an Afghan central government that have been funded and supported by the massive aid from the United States and its Allies. The Taliban must now agree on a peace that either involves some common concept of how to approach the future, or effectively agree to not address the real issues involved in forging a peace until some new form of government is created – an approach which could easily lead to the revival of its power struggles with the central government.
While issues like the role and education of women get the most Western media attention, they are only part of the ideological issues involved. The Taliban’s overall approach to human rights, tolerance of other faiths, tolerance of modern education for both men and women, the rule of law, and willingness to accept the creation of a modern economy linked to global trade and investment standards all present issues that have not yet been addressed in the peace process, along with the future role of Taliban fighters and officials.

The Taliban’s ability to finance itself after a peace has not been addressed, although the Taliban would then have to finance itself as government. This presents major political problems because the entire financing structure of the Afghan government, and its acceptance of outside economic and military aid, are equally critical issues in defining a peace as the government is currently dependent on outside aid for some 70% of its funding. A final peace negotiation must address the issue of whether the Taliban can work with – or share power with – a central government that is backed, funded, and reliant on Western support.

What happens to Taliban leaders and fighters is another a key challenge. Financing and living conditions are never casual issues in any power struggle. Since 2001, the Taliban has succeeded by inspiring young men to keep joining and fighting, but it has also paid them and given them status. The Taliban has been able to pay for their services and the war by profiting from the equivalent of zakat – Islamic levies that are essentially glorified taxes – from Afghan families – as well from extortion and participating in the drug trade. The issue is not simply just financing a government that has Taliban participation, a real peace will require decisions as to how the Taliban will continue to pay its fighters and supporters in an official manner as part of the Afghan government.

Equally serious questions arise as to how the Taliban will deal with a broader population that does not seem to broadly support its rule, and how well it can exploit the many failures in Afghanistan’s present levels of governance and economy. How does a final peace agreement reconcile the Taliban with the different social and economic goals desired by most Afghans? How does the Taliban compromise on the wide range of reforms, and deal with future Afghan dependence on the export of narcotics trade and the potential need for serious tax-collection and reduction in corruption – particularly if it takes positions that sharply limit foreign aid, investment, and loans?

**Peace as an Extension of War by Other Means**

More broadly, there is a serious danger that peace negotiations – or whatever government and political system that emerges out of a full peace agreement – will become an extension of war by other means. Peace efforts, like all forms of politics, can easily become a new form of struggle between warring parties. Many peace negotiations fail even under the best of conditions – even when the sides negotiating actually want a peace supported by terms that the other sides can accept. As cases as diverse as Cambodia and Nepal show, however, even an apparently successful peace negotiation can end in a “peace” that becomes a new form of war – ranging from efforts that exploit an actual peace agreement in order to achieve the goals a given side set during the war to efforts that exploit the negotiation process to undermine or defeat the other side.

As the collapse of South Vietnam showed, a weak and divided government can lose a peace even when it has apparently won a military victory. In the case of the Afghan central government, there are all too many reasons to doubt its ability to achieve enough unity and leadership to actually negotiate successfully. The Afghan central government is now too divided to actually govern, and it is brutally clear that there is no current leader that can quickly unify it.
The ISIS-K Threat and Extremist Groups Affecting the Peace Process

As noted earlier, the Taliban also is not the only source of extremism the peace process must handle— as noted earlier. The peace accords may commit the Taliban to countering any violence from terrorist groups, but it has been allied in the past with the Haqqani network and Al Qaeda— as well as movements like the Caucasus Emirate, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohamadi. It also faces extremist rivals. These include a number of small movements, but they also include a more serious threat from ISIS-K.

Experts disagree over the threat that ISIS-K— and other smaller extremist factions— poses in Afghanistan to the central government forces, the Taliban, and the peace process. The LIG report, which draws upon command and declassified U.S. intelligence, summarized the threat as follows— as of the end of March 2020:

Last quarter, the DoD reported that ISIS-K suffered significant losses in Nangarhar province, where the terrorist group was headquartered, due to ANDSF operations and mass surrenders. U.S., coalition, and ANDSF forces continued operations in Nangarhar and Kundar provinces during the quarter to target the remaining fighters. The Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) estimated that as of mid-March, approximately 300 to 2,500 ISIS-K members remained in Afghanistan. This estimate is a lower figure than published media estimates that ISIS-K members numbered roughly 3,000 members as of January 2020. According to a January UN report, only 50 to 100 ISIS-K members remained in Nangarhar after largely being expelled in November 2019.

Last quarter, USFOR-A reported to the DoD OIG that Taliban ground operations contributed to the reduction of ISIS-K fighters in Afghanistan. In March, General Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr., Commander of U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM), stated to Congress that the Taliban had proven “very effective” against ISIS-K in Nangarhar province, and that U.S. forces suspended airstrikes against Taliban engaged in fighting with ISIS-K and used “some” air strikes against known ISIS-K locations during that fighting—but the United States did not coordinate any actions with the Taliban. The DoD OIG did not receive any publicly releasable responses to questions about further Taliban actions against ISIS-K this quarter.

According to the DIA, ISIS-K’s loss of Nangarhar last quarter diminished its planning and recruitment efforts. The DIA reported that the loss of key territory also diminished ISIS-K’s ability to conduct high-profile attacks. The DIA and experts quoted in the media assessed that ISIS-K would continue to lose territory and members in the coming year.

The DIA assessed that while the loss of key territory caused ISIS-K to change how it operates, it continues to pose a threat to U.S., coalition, and Afghan forces inside Afghanistan. According to media reporting, ISIS-K is attempting to consolidate its forces in Kunar province. From there, ISIS-K has shifted to clandestine operations in case the group is expelled from Kunar, according to a media report. The DIA cited open source news reports stating that as of early March, ISIS-K clandestine cells were continuing to plan and conduct operations against U.S. and Afghan forces.

NATO Special Operations Component Command–Afghanistan (NSOCC-A) reported to the DoD OIG that there had been no changes to U.S. counterterrorism strategy or operations this quarter.

More broadly, the LIG report described ISIS-K’s opposition to the peace progress:

The U.S.-Taliban agreement and planned subsequent U.S. withdrawal of forces raised concerns that the circumstances could motivate other terrorist groups operating in Afghanistan—especially those who haven’t seen the peace process as in their interest—to further the conflict and upend the deal…For example, in February, ISIS-K was portraying itself as an alternative to the Taliban to recruit members who oppose the agreement, according to open-source reporting. During the quarter, senior U.S. Government officials expressed concern about groups attempting to disrupt the agreement, particularly during the reduction in violence period…
According to the DIA, ISIS-K strongly opposed the peace agreement and continued to conduct terrorist operations... The DIA stated that, as of the end of the quarter, it was not possible to determine the extent to which ISIS-K was benefiting from or using the agreement...

In February, al Qaeda released a statement endorsing the U.S.-Taliban peace agreement, calling it a “great victory” over the United States and its allies... The statement offered its congratulations to the Taliban’s leader Hibatullah Akhundzada and advised Afghans to unite under the “Islamic Emirate”—the name of the former Taliban government in Afghanistan. While al Qaeda called for all sides to honor the agreement, it also encouraged Muslims to “join the training camps under the leadership of the Islamic Emirate.” According to open-source reporting cited by the DIA, al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent was concerned about the peace talks but continued to maintain a close relationship with the Taliban...

The DIA told the DoD OIG that the Haqqani Network supports the U.S.-Taliban agreement, which represents tangible progress toward the network’s primary goal of removing foreign forces from Afghanistan... The DIA assessed that the Haqqani Network was following Taliban senior leadership guidance regarding the Taliban’s overall strategy for advancing the peace process... However, the Haqqani Network likely will continue participating in military operations against the Afghan government to support the Taliban’s “fight-and-talk” strategy moving into intra-Afghan negotiations... According to the DIA, the Taliban almost certainly sees maintaining a viable military campaign as being critical to securing leverage for advancing its goal of reestablishing a government grounded in Islamic law in Afghanistan.

The UN report issued in late May 2020 covers the ISIS-K threat in exceptional depth. It seems that the ISIS-K threat is now perceived as being relatively limited. Key portions of the UN analysis state that:

... the Monitoring Team noted setbacks to ISIL-K that included continued loss of territory and high attrition rates for the senior leadership. Between September and November 2019, those setbacks turned into more existentially threatening blows as ISIL-K was forced out of its traditional stronghold of Nangarhar Province by successive military operations carried out by coordinated Afghan and United States forces. Likely seeing an opportunity to retake key smuggling routes lost to ISIL-K over the previous two years, Taliban forces also joined in the attacks.

... Whereas Afghan Forces had previously been able to clear territory of ISIL-K for only brief periods of time, operations since November 2019 have so far managed to hold these areas and prevent the return of ISIL-K fighters. This has had the added effect of curtailing ISIL-K revenues connected to the export of illicit timber and pine nuts that had previously been smuggled over the Spin Ghar mountains and into Orakzai, Pakistan.

... Officials reported that, from September to November 2019, the number of ISIL-K operatives in Nangarhar was reduced from 1,750 armed fighters and a leadership council of 22 senior members spread over seven districts, to fewer than 200 fighters who were under siege in the Takhto area of Achin District. Interlocutors of the Monitoring Team reported that, in the final assault upon the headquarters of ISIL-K at the foot of the Spin Ghar mountains in Bandar Valley alone, over 300 home-made improvised explosive devices had been encountered along the route into the area.

... Debriefing of military aged men who surrendered suggested that many recruits to ISIL-K had been coerced, either through the use of force or the threat of violence, to join. Others stated they were lured by wages initially offered by the group that never materialized. Local interlocutors stated that ISIL-K propaganda tactics of advertising high salaries for their fighters had been “nothing more than a false narrative to attract recruits and support”. They added that this “lie” could only be told once and further attraction of new local fighters then relied more and more on force or persecution for not joining.

... Prior to its forced retreat from Nangarhar, ISIL-K in Afghanistan had been viewed as arguably the most resilient and successful ISIL affiliate outside ISIL core. By the spring of 2020, key Afghan security officials were describing the security situation in Nangarhar Province as having seen “a complete reversal of events”, with Afghan Forces operations hailed as “a turning point” for the dismantling of the ISIL-K network.

... Interlocutors of the Monitoring Team maintained that ISIL-K has no permanent organized presence in the north of Afghanistan, although the Team has received reports of small groups of foreign fighters believed to be members of ISIL-K operating in Taliban-controlled areas of the north. The same interlocutors consistently
highlighted that the ideology of the group was viewed sympathetically by some in the north, particularly among certain local ethnic Tajik and Uzbek populations. Sources had indicated in 2019 that two former Taliban commanders of ethnic Tajik and Uzbek origin from Kunduz Province, Mawlawi Satar (from Imam Sahib District) and Mawlawi Abdullah Majid (from Khanabad District) had gone to fight for ISIL-K in Achin District of Nangarhar. Both were also reported as actively involved in the recruitment of ethnic Tajik and Uzbek men from Kunduz Province. More recently, ISIL-K suffered a further blow when its leader, Aslam Farooqi, senior ISIL-K military commanders, Qari Zahid and Saifullah, and 19 others were captured by Afghan Forces in Kundahar.

... ISIL-K is assessed to retain financial reserves estimated in the “tens of thousands of dollars”. The group continued to generate income at the local level through extortion, taxation and likely timber and mineral exploitation, but its recent reduction in territorial control suggests that these sources of income are now greatly diminished. Some financing from ISIL core was reported still to be forthcoming, but the amounts are not known.

... While Member State estimates of ISIL-K strength in Afghanistan continue to vary, the Monitoring Team assesses their strength at approximately 2,200 armed fighters, most of them in Kunar Province. Within Kunar, the group was stated to be located in remote areas of Tstownkey District 33 that are largely inaccessible by vehicle and provide large degrees of concealment from aerial observation owing to dense forestation. From its remote locations in Kunar Province, ISIL-K reportedly still maintains limited communications with ISIL core via satellite links...

While operations in Nangarhar and Kunar have weakened the ability of ISIL-K to conduct high-profile attacks, debate continues as to how many operations were genuinely carried out by ISIL-K during the reporting period. Member States have commented that most attacks claimed by ISIL-K demonstrated some degree of “involvement, facilitation, or the provision of technical assistance” by the Haqqani Network. Furthermore, they have stated that ISIL-K “lacked the capability to launch complex attacks in Kabul on its own” while taking responsibility for operations that had, in all likelihood, been carried out by the Haqqani Network. Notably, the tactical autonomy of the Haqqani Network in pursuing Taliban goals enables them to support operations, which undermined the control and credibility of the Government of Afghanistan. Likewise, operations resulting in civilian casualties allow Taliban deniability whereas ISIL-K is willing to claim responsibility to demonstrate capability and relevance.

... While ISIL-K currently appears to have only limited strategic capability in Afghanistan, the ideology of the group still occupies a “virtual space” online and within militant madrasas that endorse the ISIL belief set. The threat that the group poses within universities and madrasas related to continued recruitment remains a concern for many interlocutors. Member States also remain concerned about the global agenda of ISIL-K and its ability to recruit from other countries in the region.

On 2 April, a full month after the agreement between the United States and the Taliban was signed, al-Naba, the digital newsletter of ISIL, published an article citing the event as an admission of defeat by the United States, but was also critical of the Taliban. In the article, it was stated that foreign troops were still present in Afghanistan and that the Taliban had sold out to the “disbelievers and polytheists”. Judging from this one example, the group appears to be setting up a narrative that places ISIL as the only defiant terror group in an effort to gain recruitment from potentially dissident Taliban or Al-Qaida members who oppose any agreement with the United States or the Government of Afghanistan.

The UN report also identifies the following smaller extremist threats:

... Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, Jaish-i-Mohammed, and Lashkar-e-Tayyiba groups on which the Monitoring Team has written in previous reports. The presence of these groups is centered in the eastern provinces of Kunar, Nangarhar and Nuristan, where they operate under the umbrella of the Afghan Taliban.

Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan is led by Noor Wali Mehsud and his deputy, Qari Amjad. The group is thought to have approximately 500 fighters in Kunar and about 180 in Nangarhar. One Member State reported that the total number of Pakistani nationals fighting with terrorist groups in Afghanistan may be as high as 6,000 to 6,500.

Other foreign terrorist groups identified as presenting a significant threat were Central Asian and Uighur militant groups that have long been present in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. Their gravitation to northern
Afghanistan is partly attributable to its geographical proximity to their native countries but is also driven by sharing a common language with ethnic Uzbek, Tajik and Turkmen communities… Foremost among these foreign terrorist groups are the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Jamaat Ansarullah Tajikistan, Lashkar-e-Islam and the Salafist Group.

These groups now seem to offer relatively limited threats, but past experience with such extremist groups like the Taliban indicates that hardline elements often split off from the larger group during peace negotiations, and the offshoots then ally themselves with other such splinter groups. These emerging threats cannot be disregarded.

**Afghanistan’s Neighbors and the Peace Process**

The reactions of Afghanistan’s neighbors to the peace process have also been mixed. Russia has issued a joint statement with the U.S. welcoming the signing and is also reportedly to accept some form of Taliban presence as inevitable. China has focused on the Uighurs in its own territory and its economic interests. Pakistan is focused on securing its own borders and competing with India. The LIG report summarizes DIA’s views on Iran as follows:51

Iran’s strategic objectives relative to Iran continue to be maintaining a stable Afghan central government and security along Iran’s eastern border. According to the DIA, Iran’s objectives also include protecting Shia populations, eliminating ISIS-K, opposing the U.S. presence in the region, and securing Iranian economic interests. Iran seeks to manipulate any future Afghan government by trying to influence elections and politics and by endeavoring to secure a central role in Taliban reconciliation talks. The DIA reported to the DoD OIG that during the quarter Iran pursued its objectives by engaging the Afghan government politically and economically while providing support to regional power brokers and lethal aid to the Taliban…

According to the DIA, nothing in Iran’s March statements suggested Iran will actively oppose the deal, because it has previously voiced support for a U.S. withdrawal from the region…The DIA reported to the DoD OIG that Iran blames the United States for the lack of a clear victor in the presidential election and at the same time calls for forming an inclusive government. Iran did not publicly support either presidential candidate and did not send representatives to President Ghani’s inauguration or to former Chief Executive Abdullah’s competing ceremony…

Although U.S.-Iran tensions escalated in January following the U.S. airstrike in Baghdad that killed Major General Qassem Soleimani, commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Qods Force, according to the media reports, there were no credible increased security threats in Afghanistan due to those tensions. Soleimani is considered responsible for the formation of the Fatemiyoun Brigade, a mostly Afghan militia of Shia Hazara men that Iran deployed to Syria in support of the Syrian regime in that country’s civil war…

Media reports speculated that the thousands of Fatemiyoun Brigade members that have returned to Afghanistan from the fight in Syria could pose a threat to stability if they establish a functional command structure…

According to the DIA, fewer than 3,000 Fatemiyoun fighters have returned to Afghanistan. The DIA assessed that, as of early 2020, returned Fatemiyoun fighters had not significantly affected the security environment in Afghanistan. The DIA told the DoD OIG that it assessed there are no indications that Iran continues to support the returned fighters, or that Iran intends to keep them organized as a militia in Afghanistan. However, Iran is likely able to re-contact fighters for additional deployments to Syria. The lack of Iranian support on the ground, the pro-Afghan government stance of most Hazaras, and the risk of backlash from the Taliban and Afghan government reduce the appeal to Tehran of using these fighters to further their interest in Afghanistan…

It is Pakistan, however, that may pose the most serious problem. It has kept up its ties to the Taliban in spite of its ties to the United States, and it is clearly committed to preserving its border with Afghanistan and keeping India from having any major influence in the country. It is all too likely that Pakistan will take a divide and conquer approach to any Afghan peace, and at least covertly take the side of the Taliban if it takes a pro-Pakistani position.
All of Afghanistan’s neighbors and Russia can be counted on to seek their own advantage and preserve their own interest. Iran dealing with trade, Afghan Shi’ites, and border security. China seeking trade and potential trade routes, as well as help in containing groups like the Uighurs. Russia attempting to secure its interest in Central Asia and counter extremist groups, and each Central Asian state doing the same. In the real world, regional “cooperation” following the development of peace is likely to consist of neighbor-by-neighbor efforts at exploitation.
Cutting the Cost to the U.S. – With or Without a Real Peace

The U.S. sees the Afghan peace process as well as the Afghan central government as a significant challenge. As was the case in Vietnam, the Afghan war has gone on to the point where the United States increasingly seems ready to leave Afghanistan even if peace negotiations fail or if the end result does not bind both sides to a real peace. As this analysis shows, the Afghan central government has given the U.S. good reasons to do so, with few reasons to assume that staying the course will have a happier end result. One such reason is the cost of continuing to support an Afghan government that has failed in so many ways.

The Total Cost of the Afghan War

Estimates of the total cost of the Afghan war to the United States differ sharply while some estimates further increase the cost by adding categories for future spending, interest, and baseline spending. At the same time, the U.S. Congress has never attempted to make realistic estimates of the real cost of the war, and the Department of Defense (DoD) has not continued to issue its Cost of War Report in 2020.

The last official U.S. Cost of War Report does estimate the costs of the Afghan War until the end of September 2019, and it puts the total war-related obligations between September 11, 2001 and September 30, 2019 at $780 billion – with the Department of Defense (DoD) obligations at $776 billion. The same Cost of War Report indicated, however, that the annual cost of the Afghan War has dropped massively since a peak of $115 billion a year – of which $97 billion was appropriations for the DoD in FY2011 – to $40 billion in FY2019 – of which $38 billion went to the DoD.

The Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR) reported in April 2020 that the United States had appropriated $137.05 billion for civil and military aid since FY2002, of which 118.54 billion was in the largest account and $90.75 billion had gone to Afghan forces. Out of this total, $107.3 billion had been obligated, $103.5 billion had been disbursed, and $9.24 billion was remaining. These estimates are shown in Chart Eight.

Other estimates of the cost of the war are much higher, but they apply uncertain calculation methods that would raise the cost of all federal expenditures. They include adding federal interest payments on the national debt, Veteran retirement and medical costs, and baseline expenditures based on estimate of costs not directly assigned to combat – a set of additional costs that can be derived and added to many other areas of federal spending.

The human casualty costs include more than 2,400 dead U.S. military personnel, and more than 38,000 Afghan civilians, but no clear totals exist for U.S. civilian civilians, Afghan and Allied military and security personnel, or Taliban and other anti-government forces. The DoD reports that the human cost to the U.S. military between October 7, 2001 and April 20, 2020 reached 2,445 dead; 1,913 killed in action; and 20,719 wounded in action. Casualty levels have remained minimal since 2015. This is partly because the U.S. land combat role has been sharply limited and focused on the train and assist missions, and partly because the U.S. combat role has shifted to an emphasis on manned and unmanned air strikes and intelligence.
Aid and the Impact of the FY2021 Presidential Budget Request

There are no reliable budget data on U.S. plans for future spending on the war or on continued support to Afghanistan if a peace settlement is reached, although it clear that the U.S. is seeking to cut such spending as much as possible. The President’s FY2021 budget request was formulated before the peace agreements, and it only provides the equivalent of place holder numbers for FY2020 and future years spending.

The figures in the DoD’s FY2021 Budget Summary called for cuts in the total Overseas Contingency Costs of the Afghan war from a peak of $114 billion in FY2011, to $45 billion in FY2019, to only $17 billion in FY2020, and to $14 billion in FY2021. A total of $4.2 billion of these funds was requested to aid Afghan security forces in FY2020, and $4.0 billion in FY2021.57

Presumably, the withdrawal of all U.S. forces would lead to major cuts in these costs, although some contingency costs would probably still be incurred outside Afghanistan. The project cuts in civil aid and aid to any new form of Afghan security forces are less clear, but they are probably planned to be significant.
SIGAR graphs of annual aid efforts by each program show astounding sudden rises and cuts in aid efforts that have made effective management, fiscal control, and implementation nearly impossible in many cases. They also, however, represent a consistent pattern of major cuts before the peace agreements were signed.

FY2020 and FY2021 data are missing for many major categories of aid. The April 2020 SIGAR report does shows that:

- The appropriations for the Afghan Security Forces Fund (ASFF) had been cut from a peak of close to $11 billion FY2011 to $4.92 billion by FY2020. This does not count funds for the NATO Afghan National Army (ANA) Trust Fund. The Commander’s Emergency Response Program (CERP) had been cut from a peak of $1.0 billion to nearly zero in FY2016.
- Drug Interdiction and Counter-Drug Activities (DICDA) had been cut from a peak of over $480 million in FY2012 to nearly zero in FY2019.
- The appropriations for the Economic Support Fund (ESF) had been cut from a peak of some $3.4 billion in FY2012 to $350 million in FY2019. Title II appropriations had been cut from a peak of $160 million in FY2002 to nearly zero in FY2019.
- Foreign Disaster Assistance (FDA) had been cut from a peak of $200 million in FY2002 to nearly zero in FY2006, only to rise back to around $150 million in FY2019. International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE) had been cut from a peak of $700 million in FY2005 to $87.8 million in FY2019 – roughly half of its FY2018 total.
- Migration and Refugee Assistance (MRA) was cut from a peak of over $130 million in FY2005 to under $90 million in FY2019. Appropriations for the Nonproliferation, Anti-Terrorism Demining and other related programs swing widely from year-to-year, but they ended at $38.8 million in FY2019.

There is no way to know how much U.S. aid would go to any new form of the Afghan government created by a peace settlement, what the combined elements the Afghan central government and the Taliban produced by such a settlement would receive by way of aid, or what the total budget costs of spending on Afghanistan will be.

As is discussed in more detail later, however, the present central government’s current needs for aid are now high, and the government and Afghan forces cannot survive if the peace effort fails without massive U.S. spending. Furthermore, the IMF estimates that any real progress in development would raise these costs significantly. While expert estimates differ, the total near-term annual cost of aid necessary to sustain even the existing form of the Afghan government would probably be at least some $6 billion to $8 billion a year in constant U.S. dollars through FY2025.

The same uncertainties apply to international funding – with or without a successful peace settlement – and SIGAR reports that the cumulative totals for the four major aid programs totaled $30.92 billion between FY2002 and December 2019. The end of 2019 to April 2020 totals for the four main multilateral trust funds are $12.16 billion for the World Bank-managed Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF), $5.98 billion for the United Nations Development Program (UNDP)-managed Law and Order Trust Fund for Afghanistan (LOTFA), $3.12 billion for the NATO-managed Afghan National Army (ANA) Trust Fund (NATO ANA Trust Fund or NATF), and $12.16 billion for the Asian Development Bank-administered Afghanistan Infrastructure Trust Fund (AITF).

One of the main vehicles for donors to fund government projects in Afghanistan is the World Bank’s Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF). SIGAR, however, notes the lack of
oversight and evaluation of the use of funds and program effectiveness, especially by the World Bank, which has contributed to corruption and waste of aid money. For example, the National Solidarity Program (NSP) is the flagship program of ARTF, and it has attempted to provide services and infrastructure in the rural areas of Afghanistan. On paper, the program mobilized women’s participation in projects and garnered community support for the national government. But in reality, NSP did not take major steps to improve the economy, improve local governance, or substantially change the role of women in society. The program’s failure can be attributed to the lack of security, specifically caused by the disputed control with the Taliban – and the aid money was too limited to have a serious impact.

The German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development released a meta-review of these aid efforts in March 2020, assessing the development assistance to Afghanistan. The review finds that, 60

[On Education]... Most reports agree that substantial progress has been made regarding better access for boys and girls to primary education. Well-targeted projects did improve outcomes in primary education. However, the quality of education remains problematic, a large demand for infrastructure remains, and many gains may not be sustainable given the enduring insecurity and the lacking financial and bureaucratic capacities of the Afghan government. 61

[On Health]... The available studies point to a tangible increase in access to basic health care and to a massive improvement in such health indicators as child and maternal mortality. Interventions in the health sector were usually effective. The reviewed reports suggest that successful interventions took place in midwifery training, antenatal care visits, deliveries attended by health workers, conditional cash transfers for women and community health workers, and improved family planning. 62

[On Gender]... Evaluations suggest that improvements in access to services for women and girls – mainly in health and education – have been made. Progress, however, is attributable to the rehabilitation of infrastructure and the end of Taliban rule rather than the success of the gender projects themselves. 63

Regarding programming for gender, donors typically reported outputs only, but remained skeptical about outcomes or impacts. Donors noted that both the capacity and the political will of the Afghan government and political elites for gender equality programming remained very limited as prevailing cultural norms made progress difficult. Despite sustained support, the capacities of the Ministry of Women’s Affairs (MoWA) remained weak. SIGAR noted that gender programs were not adequately monitored and evaluated, which made it impossible to identify any possible impact. Insecurity, limited government capacity, and cultural norms also impeded any US efforts to advance women’s rights.

Overall, the effectiveness of gender programming appears to be low. There are, however, pockets of modest success. Examples include rural literacy, increased access to health and education, and better livelihoods in women-specific activities within agriculture, such as mushroom farming and kitchen gardening. In sum, small, modest projects embedded in traditional structures helped to increase access to health, education, and modestly improved livelihoods for women. By contrast, larger, more ambitious projects aimed directly at changing gender norms and relations had no discernible impact.

The analysis of the Afghan economy made later in this report warns that the World Bank, IMF, CIA, and other sources see critical weaknesses in the Afghan economy, a lack of progress and often regression in recent years, exaggerated claims of success, acute dependence on outside aid, and critical levels of corruption.

This is not to say that outside aid has not created some useful infrastructure or improved some government services, such as healthcare and education, in Afghanistan. However, such aid has only had a limited “micro” impact on major nationwide “macro” problems. There is a critical lack of overall progress and reform, and effective planning and management of aid efforts. Far too
much money has been siphoned away by corrupt officials or wasted on programs that have little meaningful impact.

If the central government and the Taliban are able to reach a peace deal, Afghanistan will still continue to rely on massive foreign aid and outside funding. However, instead of wasting the millions of dollars that was spent in the past, monetary support should be more aptly distributed moving forward. The Afghan people are greatly suffering, and they are not for want of needs that do require financial aid. If a real peace agreement is reached, donor countries must consider which programs will really address the nation’s broader needs and have a high likelihood of being successful.

**The Fiscal Impact of the Coronavirus on U.S. Funding**

What is clear – and is discussed in more depth in the section of this analysis dealing with Afghanistan’s economy – is that these future Afghan funding needs will emerge in a very difficult and different world from the one that existed in formulating the President’s FY2021 budget request. So far, it is not possible to accurately estimate even the pressure on most countries grappling with the Coronavirus. Some preliminary estimates are possible for the United States. As of late April 2020, the United States had added some $3 trillion to the Federal budget to deal with impacts of the Coronavirus.

Preliminary Congressional Budget Office (CBO) and other budget projections indicate a major drop in the projected size of the U.S. gross national product (GNP) and federal revenues in future years because of the Coronavirus crisis, and it is all too likely that these projections will prove to be far more favorable than the reality: 64

- For second quarter of FY2020
  - Inflation-adjusted gross domestic product (real GDP) is expected to decline by about 12 percent during the second quarter, equivalent to a decline at an annual rate of 40 percent for that quarter. The total drop in GDP for the calendar year will be -5.6% and
  - The unemployment rate is expected to average close to 14 percent during the second quarter, and 11.4% for the calendar year.
  - Interest rates on 3-month Treasury bills and 10-year Treasury notes are expected to average 0.1 percent and 0.6 percent, respectively, during that quarter.

- For entire year of FY 2020, CBO’s early look at the fiscal outlook shows the following:
  - The federal budget deficit is projected to be $3.7 trillion.
  - Federal debt held by the public is projected to be 101 percent of GDP by the end of the fiscal year vs. 79% in 2019.

While the U.S. has not made any official announcements, it is clear that the United States has been planning major further cuts in U.S. spending and aid since at least the start of 2020, when the size of the U.S. defense budget was a relatively minor issue. The United States and its key security partners now face critical financial challenges because of the Coronavirus. By late May 2020, the U.S. has already agreed to provide some $3.7 trillion in public financial aid. NBC also reported in late April 2020 that President Trump was seeking to remove U.S. troops as quickly as possible to minimize their exposure to the Coronavirus. 65
Making Aid Conditional and Pushing the Implementation of the Peace Plan

These funding pressures may well mean much sharper cuts in U.S. funds for Afghanistan than were originally planned in formulating both the FY2021 budget request and Future Year Defense Plan (FYDP), and even the February peace agreements. Moreover, the increasing willingness of the United States to put financial pressure on the Afghan central government is already clear from recent trends in aid to Afghanistan.

Current U.S. aid has been reduced to $4.2 billion for direct support of the ANSF, and economic aid has been reduced to $532.8 million. In September 2019, the United States also finally made good on its last threat to make U.S. aid “conditional” and to cut U.S. aid in cases involving major Afghan corruption. It cut aid by $100 million in reaction to the Afghan central government’s failures in carrying out a hydroelectric power project for Kandahar and Ghazni.66

The U.S. has also made it clear that the continued flow of aid is tied to Afghan central government support of the peace process. Secretary of State Pompeo announced on March 23, 2020, that the United States would cut U.S. military aid to Afghanistan by $1 billion in 2020. The United States also threatened to cut such aid by another $1 billion in FY2021, if the Afghan government did not reach a political consensus over its national leadership.67

While the direct cause of this cut was the feuding over the presidency between Ghani and Abdullah that finally did lead to a new compromise on a joint Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah government that is discussed in detail in the next section of this analysis, it was also driven by the lack of Afghan central government support for the peace agreements. The fact that the threat was made is a warning that the United States will push hard for any peace agreement that allows it to leave or that it may leave even if the peace process fails.

The SIGAR report for April 30, 2020 provides a grim summary of the events that led to these U.S. threats as well as warnings about the problems in Afghan governance described later in this report.68

Despite U.S. efforts to negotiate a last-minute deal, Kabul hosted the spectacle of two presidential inaugurations on March 9. The New York Times observed that senior U.S. officials, including Ambassador Khalilzad and U.S. Forces-Afghanistan (USFOR-A) Commander General Austin Scott Miller, attended Ghani’s inauguration, and snubbed Abdullah’s ceremony…Ghani and Abdullah continued their row, to the increased dismay of senior U.S. officials.

On March 11, President Ghani’s spokesperson announced that Ghani had dissolved the office of chief executive, eliminating Abdullah’s government position and nullifying the power-sharing arrangement that had ended the 2014 presidential election dispute between Ghani and Abdullah… On March 18, 11 days after the dueling inaugurations, State’s Senior Bureau Official for South and Central Asian Affairs, Alice G. Wells, called on Afghan leaders to “prioritize and protect unity of the nation” and to end the governance impasse brought on by parallel governments.

… Following Secretary of State Pompeo’s visit to Kabul on March 23, State issued a statement that President Ghani and former Chief Executive Abdullah were unable to agree on an inclusive government despite Secretary Pompeo’s direct plea for compromise. This failure to compromise, disappointed in the two Afghan leaders. Describing this as “a direct threat to U.S. national interests,” Pompeo announced that the United States would immediately reduce U.S. assistance to Afghanistan by $1 billion in 2020 (with further cuts of $1 billion possible in 2021).

Secretary Pompeo initially declined to specify which funds would be affected, suggesting, at least initially, that the U.S. would continue to provide support to the Afghan security forces. On March 25, however, Secretary Pompeo told reporters that the United States “is prepared to reduce security assistance” to
Afghanistan. (In a January 2018 interview, President Ghani said that Afghanistan could not support its army for more than six months without U.S. funding support and assistance.)

In addition to funding cuts, State said it would:

- initiate a review of all programs and projects to identify additional reductions;
- reconsider pledges to future donor conferences for Afghanistan; and
- not back security operations that are politically motivated, nor support political leaders who order such operations or those who advocate for or support parallel government.

Despite these dramatic threats, State offered to revisit its measures should Afghan leaders form an inclusive government that would participate in the peace process.

Soon after, President Ghani announced in a televised speech that a reduction in U.S. assistance “would not have a direct impact on our key sectors.” The World Bank estimates that international grants finance 75% of Afghanistan’s public expenditures. The United States is the largest source of those grants. State continued to call for an inclusive government and governing arrangement, with Senior Bureau Official for South and Central Asian Affairs, Alice Wells, saying on April 6, “donors are frustrated and fed up by [Afghan political leaders’] personal agendas being advanced ahead of the welfare of the Afghan people.”

The LIG Quarterly report stated that,69

On March 9, both Ghani and Abdullah took separate oaths of office as president, and both subsequently declared each other’s office and directives invalid.16 Secretary of State Michael Pompeo traveled to Kabul at the time of the dispute, and on March 23 issued a statement expressing the United States’ “disappointment” in both leaders’ role in the political impasse.17 Secretary Pompeo said in the statement that the United States would immediately reduce U.S. assistance to Afghanistan by $1 billion and would potentially reduce by another $1 billion in 2021 if Afghan leaders did not form an inclusive government…

Moving U.S. and Allied Forces Towards the Exits

The savings the United States is seeking go far beyond money. They focus heavily on reallocating military manpower and forces – reallocations that are driven in part by the impact of the Coronavirus. The U.S. is already making real force reductions to meet the 14-month deadline, and it is doing so before there is a real peace agreement and plan to implement it.

**Cutting U.S. Military Manpower**

As noted earlier, the February 2020 U.S.-Taliban agreement states that the United States will reduce the number of its forces in Afghanistan from approximately 13,000 to 8,600; and the coalition will withdraw from five unspecified military bases by July 13, 2020. It also states that United States is committed to withdrawing all military forces of the United States, its Allies, and Coalition partners, including all non-diplomatic civilian personnel, private security contractors, trainers, advisors, and supporting services personnel, from Afghanistan within 14 months following the announcement of this agreement.70

The United States has also announced that it has reduced its officially reported military and defense civilian manning from 102,077 in September 2011; to 43,082 in June 2014; and to 13,333 in June 2017.71 The United States has classified its military manning levels in Afghanistan since 2017 but has made it clear that it is seeking to cut its publicly-stated troop levels from some 12,000 at the start of 2020 to 8,600 as soon as possible.72

This effort will evidently include a large number of forward-deployed train and assist personnel. It also is reducing the U.S. military presence in the field, as the U.S. has “worked to ‘optimize’ its force, including U.S. military personnel, civilians, and contractors in Afghanistan, between
November 15, 2019, and March 18, 2020. According to CSTC-A, this optimization was achieved by using multifunctional advisors: single individuals who train, advise, and assist multiple ANDSF personnel and units which had previously had multiple advisors.”

Press reports indicate that the Trump Administration has considered five different options for withdrawal – one involving major or “total” withdrawals before the November election. None of these options have been made public, but the U.S. is currently on track for an accelerated timeline of its troop withdrawal and may reach the 8,600 goal by early June 2020. According to an anonymous U.S. official based in Kabul, “the drawdown by the U.S. was expected to be done in 135 days but it’s clear that they have almost completed the process in just about 90 days.”

The Coronavirus crisis has also become an added incentive for the U.S. to withdraw non-essential personnel or those that are high-risk of contracting the virus. According to another anonymous U.S. officials based in Kabul, “Due to COVID-19 concerns, we are moving towards that planned drawdown faster than anticipated.”

The ongoing cuts will have a critical impact on Afghan force development because it is the U.S. “train and assist” units that are deployed in the forward support with Afghan land combat units that have been critical in enabling Afghan forces to defend or successfully counterattack Taliban units. Moreover, additional forward deployed Special Forces, other elite forces, and CIA elements have played a key role in supporting Afghan counterterrorism forces.

**Cutting Allied Military Manpower**

It is not clear how quickly these cuts will affect the size of the U.S. commitment to NATO or the projected future size of allied force commitments – although all allied forces are currently planned to have left by the same 14-month deadline applied to U.S. forces. U.S. officials have not taken a public position on these issues, but NATO reported in February 2020 that it had 16,551 military personnel from 38 countries in Afghanistan. The United States was reported to have 8,000 or 48% of the NATO total – although this was only part of the U.S. total in the country and did not include contractors and civilian intelligence personnel – and this total also did not include air warfare and support personnel outside Afghanistan. Other major contributors included Australia (200), the Czech Republic (309), Georgia (871), Germany (1,300), Italy (895), Mongolia (233), Poland (350), Romania (797), Turkey (60), and the United Kingdom (1,100). The peace agreements call for all of these forces, and those of other U.S. Allies to be gone by May 2021.

The SIGAR *Quarterly Report for April 30, 2020* provides the following additional information:

> The United States committed to a conditional withdrawal of “all military forces of the United States, its allies, and Coalition partners, including all non-diplomatic civilian personnel, private security contractors, trainers, advisors, and supporting services personnel” from Afghanistan within 14 months (ending April 29/30, 2021).

> …As the first step, the United States pledged without any stated conditions to reduce its forces to 8,600 personnel (with proportional reductions from other Coalition forces) and completely withdraw from five military bases within the first 135 days (ending July 13–14, 2020). Contingent upon the Taliban fulfilling their counterterrorism commitments, the United States, its allies, and other Coalition forces would complete the withdrawal of the remaining forces and depart from all remaining bases within the remaining nine and a half months.

> According to State, the agreement expressly commits the Taliban to enter intra-Afghan negotiations to determine the date and modalities of a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire and reach an agreement over the future political roadmap of Afghanistan. Senior U.S. administration officials clarified that the timeline in
the U.S.-Taliban agreement for the withdrawal of international military forces is not conditioned on the Taliban’s achievement of any particular political outcomes associated with Afghanistan’s negotiated future (such as status of women’s rights), as ultimately it is up to the Afghan parties to determine in intra-Afghan negotiations what the political roadmap should look like.

Rather, the withdrawal timeline depends on whether the Taliban fulfill their counterterrorism commitments under the agreement to prevent any group or individual, including al-Qaeda, from using Afghan soil to attack or threaten the security of the United States and its allies, and their good-faith participation in intra-Afghan negotiations commitments...These officials further clarified that the timeline for the withdrawal of international forces is “aspirational,” dryly observing that “nothing [in Afghanistan] happens on schedule.”

All of these considerations also involve the other NATO and allied countries that now support the Afghan central government. Some reports indicate that the command has examined options for retaining or even increasing non-U.S. troops, but the realities seem likely to be very different. Nations that have supported the international command and forces because of political ties to the U.S. are very unlikely to stay any longer than the United States, and may well withdraw more quickly on their own schedules – particularly given the financial pressures created by the Coronavirus crisis and the political blow back of staying longer than the United States with the risks of taking any casualties.

Moreover, the history of past peace agreements warns that both the U.S. and other donors rarely actually meet their military and civil aid commitments once they no longer actively participate in a conflict and/or see a conflict which loses its strategic priority. In the past, USAID has developed and quietly circulated graphs tracing the speed with which aid goes down once a crisis is over, and they serve as an important warning. Many pledges and commitments may not be met – particularly if the new Afghan government proves to be as corrupt or ineffective as the present government or the Taliban can impose its own ideology – either politically or by force.

**Cutting U.S. Defense Contractors**

The United States is also now cutting 1,000 defense contractors with U.S. citizenship out of a total of more than 26,000 defense contractors in Afghanistan. These defense contractors have long outnumbered the uniformed U.S. military, and they have included more than 10,500 U.S. citizens at the start of 2020.78

The SIGAR *Quarterly Report* stated that,79

…DOD contractors...provide essential in-country support to U.S. forces and the ANDSF. As of April 2020, 27,641 contractors were serving in Afghanistan, about 40% (11,077) of whom were third-country nationals, 39% (10,711) were U.S. citizens, and 21% (5,853) were local nationals, or more than twice the number of U.S. troops currently in country. These contractors fulfill an array of important responsibilities, with most providing logistics and maintenance support (34%), security (19%), and support for U.S. military bases (14%), and the rest providing construction, translation and interpretation, transportation, training, and other services.

The LIG *Quarterly Report* gave the same total for contractors as SIGAR, and provided the data shown in Chart Nine. It did not provide details on the cuts in contractors beyond the Chart, but reported that,80

CSTC-A stated... that it had worked to “optimize” its force, including U.S. military personnel, civilians, and contractors in Afghanistan, between November 15, 2019, and March 18, 2020. According to CSTC-A, this optimization was achieved by using multifunctional advisors: single individuals who train, advise, and assist multiple ANDSF personnel and units which had previously had multiple advisors.344 CSTC-A stated that this enabled it to reduce 50 military personnel, 12 civilians, and 31 contractor positions. However, the contractor
numbers remain in flux due to contract structures and the processes by which the scopes of the contracts are reduced.

The United States has now set the goal of totally eliminating all such defense contractors in the 14 months it will take to remove U.S. military personnel. While no clear numbers have been announced, it is also making major cuts in its diplomatic and civilian staffs, and also evidently in CIA personnel.

**Chart Nine: Personnel Supporting DoD Efforts in Afghanistan, March 2019 Through March 2020**

Cutting U.S. Combat Air Support

What the United States has not publicly addressed are its plans to cut air support of Afghan forces from bases inside and outside of Afghanistan. While most commentary focuses on the number of U.S. military personnel in Afghanistan, it is the use of manned and unmanned U.S. combat airpower to support Afghan forces that has been the most critical element of direct U.S. combat action since 2015.

Chart Ten shows that the number of U.S. strike sorties that actually released a weapon climbed from 411 in 2015; to 1,248 in 2017; and to 2,434 in 2019. Open source data only cover the first two months of 2020, but the sortie numbers were just as high in the correlating months of 2019. The United States has also continued to fly high numbers of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (IS&R) sorties as well. It has flown some 13,000 to 21,000 such sorties a year since 2015, and it flew nearly 2,600 in the first two months of 2020.81

These strikes have been targeted using one of the most sophisticated IS&R networks in the world, alongside large numbers of unmanned and persistent vehicle systems that are not counted in Chart Ten, as well as the fusion of other U.S. intelligence assets, including satellites – capabilities that will not be available to the ANDSF in anything approaching the same form. Their effectiveness is shown in the UN report issued in May 2020,82

Monitoring Team interlocutors also confirmed the killing of Mullah Nangalai in a United States drone strike, along with 15 other Taliban from the Mullah Rasul splinter group, also known as the High Council of the Afghanistan Islamic Emirate. Mullah Nangalai had been fighting against mainstream Taliban forces under Mullah Abdul Samad in the contested area of Zerkoh Valley of Shindand District, Herat Province, since late 2015.

As is the case with land forces, the United States would have to close all of its air bases by some point in May 2021 to meet the 14-month deadline if the peace agreements are actually implemented. The United States could potentially still fly strike sorties and use cruise missiles from carriers or from bases like Al Udeid in Qatar, but any such actions would place major operational limits on U.S. capabilities and imply the collapse of key elements of the peace process. Like land forces, projecting U.S. airpower back into Afghanistan once U.S. bases, support capabilities, contract support, and logistic supply routes are closed would be a major and time-consuming effort.

Afghan Politics: Making Peace Efforts a Self-Inflicted Wound?

The United States may be driving towards withdrawal before the Afghan government is ready to negotiate and uphold a peace, but it is also dealing with a partner in the Afghan central government that is weak, divided, corrupt, and incompetent. It is unclear that giving the central government more time will do anything other than prolong the agony.

The U.S. is also dealing with an Afghan government with a long history of dysfunctional divisions. Afghanistan’s first post-Taliban President, Hamid Karzai, served from December 22, 2001 to September 29, 2014. He succeeded in staying in power largely because of his constant effort to juggle one set of power brokers against another in a country where multiple factions were divided by tribe, sect, ethnicity, family, region, city, and even valley.

After 2014, the situation grew far worse. As a result of the rapid withdrawal of most U.S. forces in 2014, the central government has steadily lost the ability to govern outside of Afghanistan’s major population centers; provide even limited steps to control the growth of a narcoeconomy; control power brokers and warlords; administrate programs in the field; and provide key services like policing, education, medical care, and ensuring the rights of women.

Karzai’s departure in 2014 led to an election where two figures – Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah – both claimed to have been elected President in a dubious and partly rigged election. They only agreed to cooperate after a U.S. negotiated settlement between the two leaders determined that Ghani would be made president and Abdullah Abdullah would be the equivalent of a CEO.

This system has repeatedly come close to collapse in the years that followed. Loyalties within the separate Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah factions have proved uncertain, and compromises – over the control of territory, government funds, or major political appointments that did not have the support of outside power brokers – have failed or been fragile at best. The Afghan legislature has had little meaningful control over state funds, and little real effectiveness.

Public Opinion versus Political Reality

These problems – and the analysis that follows – needs to be kept in perspective. Public opinion polling indicates that the Afghan people may still have a level of faith in their political system and government in spite of its failures. This polling result is not that unusual. One of the oddities in public opinion polling in failed states is the degree to which a large percentage of the population preserves its hopes for the future and its support of the government. The Asia Foundation poll was taken in 2019, before the full impact of the Presidential election crisis – and the split between Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah – became apparent. It was also taken in one of the least developed countries in the world, nearly 50 years after the collapse of the monarchy, and in a country where the vast majority of the living population had never known any form of an effective government.

The poll did find that the Afghan people were not optimistic about the future, but were somewhat hopeful about a peace settlement: 84

Optimism about the nation’s direction was at its highest in 2013, before declining, year by year, to an all-time low in 2016 over concerns about the economy, difficult elections, and the effects of radical reductions in foreign troops. This year, 36.1% of respondents say the country is going in the right direction, up from 32.8% last year, while 58.2% say the country is going in the wrong direction, down slightly from 61.3% in 2018.

Findings reveal the impact that peace talks have had on optimism in the country. While optimism in 2018, at 32.8%, was effectively unchanged from 2017, Afghans this year report a slightly higher level of optimism,
with 36.1% of respondents saying the country is going in the right direction, and in explaining reasons for their optimism, those who say “peace / end of war” has increased notably from 16.4% to 26.3% this year.

It also found that the Afghan people already saw the problems in their electoral system, A majority of Afghans (50.4%) say that fraud undermines free and fair elections, followed by corruption (14.9%) and insecurity (9.0%). Public expressions of concern over electoral fraud, corruption, and mismanagement, however, do not seem to have altered Afghans’ assessment of elections: there has been no change over the last year in the number of Afghans who believe that the next elections will be free and fair — 52.4% in 2018; 52.3% in 2019.

Nevertheless, the poll found that the people still had hope that their political system and government would become more effective: More than half of Afghans, 65.1%, are either very or somewhat satisfied with the way democracy works in Afghanistan. This represents a 3.7 percentage point increase over 2018. It should be noted that presidential elections had not taken place yet before the 2019 Survey, and in 2018 parliamentary elections had not taken place, however, for 2019, respondents have the parliamentary elections to refer back to when considering if they feel democracy works. A majority of Afghans (57.9%) continue to believe that it is safe to publicly criticize the government, up from 55.6% in 2018.

There is no way to know how the perceptions of the Afghan people have changed since the poll was taken, but there are all too many reasons to believe that – despite all of the elements of pessimism in these polling results – they were more optimistic than the performance of either Afghan politicians or the Afghan government can justify.

**An Afghan Central Government Political Leadership that Would Rather Be Hanged Separately than Hang Together**

As has been touched upon earlier, a new presidential crisis then occurred in the second-round contest between Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah over an election held on September 28, 2019. The resulting divisions within the Afghan central government had an almost immediate impact on the peace process. Both the SIGAR and LIG Quarterly Reports for January 1-March 30, 2020 highlight the lack of unity within the Afghan government during one of the most critical periods of the U.S. negotiations with the Taliban, and the lack of even a cosmetic unity in the Afghan central government at the time when the peace agreements were signed.

The LIG report summarized this situation as follows, and it has made it clear that the U.S. government knew how fragile and tentative the peace agreements were: As the United States and Taliban were negotiating the agreement, the Afghan Independent Election Commission (IEC) on February 18 declared incumbent president Ashraf Ghani the winner of the September 2019 presidential election. Ghani’s primary challenger, former Chief Executive Officer Abdullah Abdullah, immediately disputed the results, asserting that the IEC was corrupt and had not properly counted all of the ballots...
On March 9th, both Ghani and Abdullah took separate oaths of office as president, and both subsequently declared each other’s office and directives invalid. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo traveled to Kabul at the time of the dispute, and on March 23 issued a statement expressing the United States’ “disappointment” in both leaders’ role in the political impasse. Secretary Pompeo said in the statement that the United States would immediately reduce U.S. assistance to Afghanistan by $1 billion and would potentially reduce by another $1 billion in 2021 if Afghan leaders did not form an inclusive government.

The United States and the Taliban agreed that following the signing of their agreement, the Taliban would begin negotiations with the Afghan government to resolve the ongoing conflict… However, the Taliban and the Afghan government made little progress during the quarter due to disputes between the parties over the negotiating teams and then over prisoner releases. The political infighting between Afghan government leaders, the Taliban history of rejecting the legitimacy of the Afghan government, and the Taliban’s surge in violence against Afghan forces in March, raise questions about the prospects for Taliban and Afghan government to come to of rejecting the legitimacy of the Afghan government, and the Taliban’s surge in violence against Afghan forces in March, raise questions about the prospects for Taliban and Afghan government to come to agreement.

This time, the United States could not persuade the two rivals to reach a relatively quick compromise. As the LIG also reports, this led to both a lack of any consensus over the central government’s leadership and a crisis that led Secretary Pompeo to make the major aid cuts referred to earlier.88

On February 19, the Independent Election Committee (IEC) declared incumbent Afghan President Ashraf Ghani the winner of the September 2019 presidential election… The IEC made the announcement after a lengthy recount and complaint resolution process administered by another election management body, the Electoral Complaints Commission. Despite the IEC’s declaration of Ghani’s victory, the election’s second-place finisher, Abdullah Abdullah, who served as Chief Executive Officer of the Afghan government under President Ghani during the Government of National Unity from 2014 to 2020, declared that he had actually won the election and would form a parallel government. Abdullah stated that the announced election results were the result of fraud, which his campaign had attempted to redress via electoral complaints filed with the Electoral Complaints Commission. Abdullah supporters also blocked IEC recounts in several provinces in late 2019 based upon the same complaints before agreeing to permit their completion. On March 9, both Abdullah and Ghani held rival swearing-in ceremonies in Kabul. Ghani’s ceremony came under attack by ISIS-K rockets….

The political impasse complicates the Afghan government’s efforts to prepare for peace negotiations with the Taliban. The DoS stated that U.S. officials urged all presidential candidates to eschew violence or threats of violence during and after the election. The DoS stated that the U.S. Government is strongly opposed to the formation of a parallel Afghan government and urged all parties to compromise and form an inclusive government that can meet the challenges of governance, peace, and security, and provide for the health and welfare of Afghan citizens. According to the DoS, Secretary Pompeo, Ambassador Khalilzad, and other senior U.S. officials have emphasized to Ghani and Abdullah that the United States expects them to resolve the impasse between themselves, without U.S. intervention.

On March 23, Secretary Pompeo released a press statement announcing the reduction of U.S. assistance to Afghanistan by $1 billion as a result of the impasse, describing the failure of Ghani and Abdullah to come to an agreement as “disappointing.” Secretary Pompeo’s statement added that the U.S. Government could reduce assistance in 2021 by another $1 billion if the Afghans prove unable to find a political resolution.

An Uncertain Compromise and a New Form of Divided Afghan Government

Political pressure – and the U.S. aid cuts – did eventually lead President Ashraf Ghani and his rival Dr. Abdullah Abdullah to agree on a power-sharing agreement on May 17, 2020. The agreement allowed Abdullah and Ghani to each nominate half the cabinet, including key ministries and provincial governors, based on a rule agreed upon by the two sides. Ghani remained president while Abdullah became the head of the peace-process agreements – the body named the High
Council for National Reconciliation – alongside a number of other major government reforms including the ability to pick half of Ghani’s cabinet.89

The High Council of National Reconciliation was said to have been established to create national, regional, and international consensus on peace affairs; to attract international assistance and support for better coordination of the peace effort; and to attract international assistance for post-peace reconstruction efforts. Abdullah was not given any key role like the office of the chief executive that he held in the previous government. His role was to focus on the reconciliation process.

An article in TOLO news – that later seemed to be broadly accurate – stated that,90

High Council of National Reconciliation led by Abdullah Abdullah, from which he can issue executive orders. The council will have five deputies from the two teams. The council members will be selected by the director in consultation with the president, political leaders, people from the two sides, speakers of the parliament houses and the civil society and elites, according to the agreement.

Based on the agreement, Abdullah will lead the peace process, the meetings of the reconciliation council, and he will appoint its members and employees, including the employees of the State Ministry for Peace Affairs. . . . The council itself has been given the authority to specify, approve and lead all affairs related to the peace process, the agreement says. The decisions and enactments at the council will be made by a majority of votes of its members.

The decisions and enactments made by the High Council of National Reconciliation are final and they should be implemented, the agreement said. The agreement says that the council will provide guidance to the negotiation team through its leadership committee. The duty of the council is to create national, regional and international consensus on peace, attract international support for peace, and attract international support and assistance for post-peace reconstruction efforts.

According to the agreement, Abdullah will lead the council and he will receive the same security and protocol privileges as the number two person in the country. The council will be an independent budgetary unit, based on the agreement, and will be funded by the government, but it will also receive financial support from the international community. The head of the council, Abdullah Abdullah, will have the full authority over the spending of the budget of the reconciliation council and the expenses are not exempted from assessment, the agreement says.

The council will be comprised of political leaders, national figures, representatives of the houses of the parliament, representatives of different political and community layers, the civil society, and women and youth, the agreement says. The High Council of National Reconciliation will have two sections: (1) The general assembly, and (2) the leadership committee.

The agreement also mentions reforms in the electoral process, which include changing the system of the elections, the holding of provincial council and district council elections, the use of the biometric system, and amending the law on political parties in accordance with electoral reforms.

The agreement says a five-member monitoring team will be established to oversee the implementation of the agreement and prevent any violations. If the team finds a violation, it will solve it through understanding and will report its findings to the president and the head of the reconciliation council.

A key part of the agreement is the participation of Abdullah’s team in the government. This matter has been one of the main topics of the discussions between the two sides. Based on the agreement, Abdullah will have the authority to appoint 50 percent of the cabinet, including key ministries.

Sources said the ministries of Interior Affairs; Justice, Labor and Social Affairs; Refugees and Repatriation; Transportation; Economy; Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock; Higher Education; Borders and Tribal Affairs; Industry and Commerce; and the Ministry of Telecommunication and Information Technology have been offered to Abdullah by President Ghani. The agreement says that the rank of marshal should be given to the former vice president Gen. Abdul Rashid Dostum. He should also be given the membership of the High Council of Government and the National Security Council, said the plan.
The agreement mentions that the provincial governors will be appointed based on a rule agreed upon by both sides. And appointments and removals should be made based on justifiable reasons, and new appointees should be made based on merit and legal conditions.

Part of the agreement mentions that those political leaders who have been engaged in the peace process should be appreciated. These leaders include former High Peace Council (HPC) chief and former president Burhanuddin Rabbani who was killed in a suicide attack in 2011, his son, Salahuddin Rabbani, who also served as HPC chief and foreign affairs minister, the former head of HPC, Sayed Ahmad Gailani, who died in 2017, and the incumbent HPC chief Mohammad Karim Khalili.

Abdullah issued a statement saying that the agreement, 91

“…comes at a very difficult time when we face serious threats. It’s meant to ensure a path to peace, improve governance, protect rights, respect laws and values,” he said in a series of tweets…As we commit to form a more inclusive, accountable and competent administration, we are also reminded of the hard lessons to respect laws, fight the Coronavirus, fraud, injustice and corruption. We now need to come together as a nation, strive to seek solutions that are practical…”

U.S. special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad issued an equally reassuring agreement that welcomed what he called a compromise and wished the new government success. 92

“The US is prepared to partner with the new govt in a peace process that ends the war. That process must be based on timely implementation of commitments made to date. Both leaders should not repeat mistakes in governing that existed under NUG, as Afghans negotiated this govt,” Khalilzad tweeted. He said it is high time to take seriously the resolve of the Afghan people, and the world, to finally see an end to this conflict, urging Abdullah to move forward with full speed and urgency, and be sincerely supported therein by the current Afghan government. Pakistan on Sunday welcomed the signing of the agreement between political leaders regarding formation of inclusive government and High Council of National Reconciliation.”

Reassuring platitudes aside, this power sharing agreement seems uncertain at best. The U.S. has pushed for political reconciliation within the central government to speed up peace negotiations with the Taliban, and it has used cuts in aid to force the compromise. Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah are now open rivals and head the equivalent of two different governments where each has given positions to their supporters to gain leverage and power at the expense of more capable and honest choices.

Abdullah Abdullah, for example, has promoted Uzbek leader, Abdul Rashid Dostum, a former general and Vice President, to Field Marshall and has given him membership to both the High Council of Government and the National Security Council, in spite of rape charges and a past which is questionable at best. It seems clear that a number of appointments were made more to reward each leader’s support rather than to choose the best appointee. At the same time, it is unclear how long the two rivals will be able to keep up the appearance of peace after the U.S. backing ceases.

If elections are the benchmark of legitimacy, the Afghan central government has not met that test for more than half a decade, and post-Taliban Afghanistan has never really been a truly functioning democracy. Worse, post-Taliban Afghanistan has never had a truly functional government. While it does have honest and capable officials, it also has had all too many that are not. It has been led by a government divided into factions at every level – from capital, to province, to district, and even at the level of town or city – each with its own mix of power brokers and warlords.

The end result is that there are all too many reasons to doubt the Afghan central government’s ability to achieve enough real unity and leadership to actually negotiate successfully. It is brutally clear that there is no current leader that can quickly unify even the support of the central government. Loyalties even within the present Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah factions are
uncertain. Any compromise – over territory, government funds, or major political appointments that brought the Taliban to power or that did not have the support of such power brokers – could break down or trigger new power struggles within the new form of government. Such disputes are more the rule in divided developing states than the exception.

The new version of a Ghani-Abdullah Abdullah government seems no better than the old one, and it may be even less likely to fully control Afghan power brokers. The fact that Abdullah Abdullah’s side will take the lead in negotiating with the Taliban could split the government’s approach to a peace agreement, and the awkward compromises between the two rivals could mean that any new government would be composed of rival factions on the central government side. In many ways, the new agreement is all too close to the divisions that empowered the rise of the Taliban in the first place.

**A Divided Taliban that Will Create Problems of Its Own**

The other side of these uncertainties is the Taliban. A successful peace agreement will almost certainly require the Taliban to actively participate in both the political process and the government. So far, there has been little indication of how this would occur, what changes would result, and how the resulting new structure of politics and government would operate – although there now is roughly a year left of the 14 month deadline, and some form of structure is supposed to be operational by May 2021.

As cases like South Sudan show, creating such a government is difficult even if the only issue concerns divisions over power and wealth. A joint Afghan central-Taliban government would have to combine two elements with different values on issue after issue. The past election problems would be minor if elections were held. Any major territorial divisions or forms of “federalism” would be an invitation to dividing the country and resuming the war. Combining a relatively modern structure of central government values focused on secular governance with a neo-Salafi set of religious and ideological values would have to take place in a nation dependent on outside aid, income from narcotics exports, and its own regional, tribal, ethnic, sectarian, and power broker divisions.

In the case of the Taliban, there is no longer a single charismatic leader. The Taliban is now a divided and scattered movement where it is unclear how many Taliban fighters (and fighters of other factions) support a leadership with divisions of its own. As is noted earlier in this assessment, it is also a movement that has continued to attack Afghan central government forces outside of negotiated areas agreed upon with the United States, and whose public statements raise serious question about any real commitment to joining in a fight against terrorist movements.

The current leadership council is still composed of the older members that established the movement after the 2001 U.S. invasion. However, the Taliban’s militant off-shoot, the Haqqani Network, has created a separation between the old political wing and the younger military wing of the Taliban.

The Taliban also no longer has a charismatic leader like Mullah Mohammed Omar. The current leader of the Taliban is Mullah Haibatullah Akhunzada, but his functions as Amir are focused more on the spiritual and political role rather than on a role as an operational commander. He operates alongside two deputies and the leadership council, called the Rahbari Shura or Quetta Shura, which appoints provincial governors and commissions.
However, there are smaller equivalents of “Shuras” for some provinces, and the Taliban’s organization in each district – whether it actually controls or disputes control over the area – varies depending on the level of control and support by the locals, which leads to a significant degree of autonomy for each provincial commander. This decentralized nature of the current Taliban’s leadership structure will prove problematic if a peace is agreed upon, forcing each branch of the Taliban’s operational commander to reorganize into a more formalized chain of command.

The divided structure of the Taliban is apparent in the way the Taliban has been holding peace negotiations. Although Mullah Baradar is the face and leader of the Taliban’s negotiations, he has struggled to control the various cells of the movement, even issuing ultimatums to the military wing. The negotiations themselves are painstaking for Taliban commanders who must ensure the terms of the peace negotiations do not cause a rebellion among their ranks.

Here again, recent UN reporting provides major insights into the Taliban’s structure and its links to Al Qaeda, and the report explains further how these relationships may affect both the peace process and prospects for future fighting. The following excepts highlight key portions of the UN analysis:

The Taliban leaders have steered the movement through negotiations with the United States to conclude an agreement. The process has increased their political leverage and access to some Member States and international media, while they were simultaneously carrying out increased levels of attacks. Throughout, the Taliban have managed to stay unified, despite internal divergences of view.

Some Monitoring Team interlocutors maintain that the great majority of Taliban will follow orders from their leadership relating to the recently signed agreement with the United States, whatever those orders or directives may be. The Taliban leadership proved capable of maintaining the discipline of their fighters during the reduction in violence period and is likely to maintain the same discipline during any ramping-up of fighting in 2020, while seeking to gain political leverage.

The Taliban reshuffled their shadow government structure over the winter in preparation for the 2020 fighting season. Taliban members gathered in February to discuss the reorganization of the shadow governance and military structure in the eastern region. Key new appointments were made in the provinces of Khost, Kunar, Laghman, Logar, Wardak, Nangarhar, Nuristan and Paktiya, as well as for other provincial appointments in Badakhshan, Baghlan, Bamiyan, Kabul, Kapisa, Kunduz, Samangan and Takhar Provinces. Abdul Aziz Abbasin, a senior member of the Haqqani Network and brother of Taliban deputy, Sirajuddin Haqqani, ordered increased supplies of ammunition and explosive materials for Taliban forces in Ghazni, Wardak, Paktiya and Parwan Provinces.

… According to Member States, continued internal disagreements within the Taliban leadership grew more pronounced as a result of ongoing talks with the United States. However, the Taliban leadership has been able to maintain the unity and discipline of its rank and file. Several Taliban factions emerged in the aftermath of the announcement of the death of Mullah Mohammad Omar Ghulam Nabi, as previously reported by the Monitoring Team. Despite the public appearance of greater Taliban unity more recently, existing fault lines have deepened as a consequence of the negotiations with the United States and aspects of the agreement.

There are also reported divisions within the Taliban’s Political Office, including among the delegation team between those aligned with Abdul Ghani Baradar Abdul Ahmad Turk and a more hardline group close to Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanezkai. Those at the Political Office in Doha understood the need for the Taliban to interact with the international community and show moderation, while rank-and-file fighters were reported not to share that view. Consequently, interlocutors believed that the Taliban leadership had not fully disclosed the details of the agreement, particularly any commitment to cut ties with Al-Qa’ida and foreign terrorist fighters, for fear of a backlash – a matter that had surfaced repeatedly as a topic of acrimonious internal debate.

Al-Qa’ida has been operating covertly in Afghanistan while still maintaining close relations with the Taliban. Should conditions of the agreement with the United States become binding for the Taliban, it may prompt a split between pro- and anti-Al-Qa’ida camps. The Monitoring Team learned that at least one group of senior
Taliban had already formed a new group in opposition to any possible peace agreement, purportedly known as Hizb-i Vilayet Islami11 and composed mainly of dissident senior Taliban members residing outside Afghanistan. Other interlocutors believed that the successful implementation of the agreement could lead foreign terrorist fighters to give up fighting or relocate outside Afghanistan. Alternatively, should the peace process fail, there could be a surge in violence and chaos in Afghanistan.

… Divisions within the Taliban’s Political and Military Commissions after the death of Mullah Mohammad Omar also reflect older rivalries, for example, between the Alizai and Nurzai tribes. Long-standing Alizai military commanders in the field, Sadr Ibrahim and Mullah Abdul Qayyum Zakir, lead a faction Ibrahim and Zakir adopt a hard line, along with senior members of the Haqqani Network, who favour continued fighting. This group is set against a larger faction of Nurzai Taliban loyal to Haibatullah Akhundzada.

… Interlocutors of the Monitoring Team, including reconciled Taliban, have reported that resentment exists among Taliban fighters towards the senior leadership who are considered to be out of touch with battlefield hardships. There is discontent with senior Taliban living comfortably abroad with their families. Some interlocutors assessed that a peace brokered by representatives from the Taliban’s Political Office, who were considered aloof to the rest of the movement and thought to be “on salaries of $10,000 monthly”, might prove fragile; and that the dialogue would have been better approached by influential Taliban commanders on the ground, such as Ibrahim.

Interlocutors reported that some Taliban fighters had left the group after hearing accounts of the comfortable lifestyle of Taliban leaders living abroad. The reports were supposedly relayed by a local Taliban commander in Helmand Province, Mullah Abdul Bari, who had spent time with Mawlawi Sardar, the brother of prominent Quetta Shura member Mullah Amir Khan Motaqi. One source stated that, upon his return to Helmand, Mullah Bari had raised “the issue of the dire conditions in which Taliban fighters were residing compared with members of the Quetta Shura.” The Taliban later claimed that Bari had maintained ties with the Government of Afghanistan, and he was summarily killed.

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Continuing Links to Al Qaeda and the Haqqani Network

There are some divisions among experts as to both the extent of Taliban ties to Al Qaeda and its ties to the Haqqani networks, as well as to the threats they pose. The UN report provides considerable detail on these links, and it casts further doubt on how serious any split between the Taliban and Al Qaeda will be:94

The Monitoring Team has frequently highlighted the link between Al-Qa’ida and the Taliban in its reports, links that it assesses have remained strong since the removal of the Taliban regime 18 years ago and which have been continually reinforced by pledges of allegiance from Al-Qa’ida to the Taliban Amir al Mu’minin, or “leader of the faithful”. Information provided to the Monitoring Team since its previous report has
indicated that Al-Qaida is quietly gaining strength in Afghanistan while continuing to operate with the Taliban under their protection.

Member States report that Al-Qaida and the Taliban held meetings over the course of 2019 and in early 2020 to discuss cooperation related to planning, training and the provision by the Taliban of safe havens for Al-Qaida members inside Afghanistan. Al-Qaida is covertly active in 12 Afghan provinces: Badakhshan, Ghazni, Helmand, Khost, Kunar, Kunduz, Logar, Nangarhar, Nimruz, Nuristan, Paktiya and Zabul. While it is difficult to be certain of the exact number of Al-Qaida fighters in Afghanistan, the Monitoring Team’s estimate is between 400 and 600 armed operatives.

... According to interlocutors, al-Zawahiri met with members of the Haqqani Network in February 2020. Hafiz Azizuddin Haqqani and Yahya Haqqani consulted al-Zawahiri over the agreement with the United States and the peace process. Yahya Haqqani has been the primary Haqqani Network focal point for liaison with Al-Qaida since mid-2009.

The presence in Afghanistan of Al-Qaida, particularly in the form of Al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent, was demonstrated most clearly on 22 September when a joint United States-Afghan operation targeted a suspected Taliban and Al-Qaida gathering in the Shabaroz area of Musa Qal’ah District, Helmand Province. It was later confirmed that the leader of Al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent, Asim Umar, had been killed in the attack, along with several foreign nationals, including the group’s deputy, its “courier” to al-Zawahiri and several foreign female members. Umar and his followers were being sheltered by local Taliban forces, some of whom had also been killed in the raid. Earlier, in June, an Al-Qaida in the Indian Ocean...

Additional information suggested that discussions were held among senior Haqqani Network figures to form a new joint unit of 2,000 armed fighters in cooperation with and funded by Al-Qaida. The newly established unit would be split into two operational zones with Hafiz Azizuddin Haqqani in overall command and leading forces in the Loya Paktiya area (Khost, Logar, Paktika and Paktiya), while the remaining force would be deployed to Kunar and Nuristan under Shir Khan Manga, the head of intelligence for the Haqqani Network. Separate information provided by another Member State had indicated that Al-Qaida was establishing new training camps in the east of the country.

... Possibly prompted by the killing of Asim Umar, the Taliban head of intelligence, Mawlawi Hamidullah Akhundzada, has reportedly instructed Taliban fighters to facilitate the movement of Al-Qaida fighters under the command of Mufti Mahmood from the south to the eastern region of Afghanistan.

Some Member States reported that the Taliban appear to have strengthened their relationship with Al-Qaida rather than the opposite. One Member State reported that the regularity of meetings between Al-Qaida seniors and the Taliban “made any notion of a break between the two mere fiction”. The link was described not in simple terms of group-to-group, but rather as “one of deep personal ties (including through marriage) and long-term sense of brotherhood”. Al-Qaida capitalizes on this through its network of mentors and advisers who are embedded with the Taliban, providing advice, guidance and financial support. The Taliban offensive against Ghazni City in August 2018 was a prime example of the effective deployment of Al-Qaida support.

The UN report notes that Secretary Pompeo stated after the February 29th agreement that a U.S. withdrawal of military forces would be conditions-based that “the Taliban must respect the agreement, specifically regarding their promises of severing ties with terrorists,” and that the United States was “not required to leave unless they can demonstrate they are fulfilling every element of their end of the bargain.” So far, U.S. willingness to act on conditions-based agreements has not proved reassuring even when the U.S. is dealing with issues like the Afghan central government’s misuse of aid.

**How Real is the Taliban’s Search for Peace?**

The Taliban also will have to decide whether it supports a full peace or not, and how much of its ideology it will insist on preserving. So far, the Taliban seems to speak with one voice from its leadership and another from its negotiators. The Taliban’s formal leadership has made it clear that the Taliban remains committed to its ideology. An article by Bill Roggio in the Long War Journal
notes that the Taliban’s Emir – Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada – released an Eid-ul-Fitr statement on May 20, 2020 that scarcely implied a change in Taliban goals.95

The objectives of our Jihad are to gain the pleasure of Allah (SwT), freedom of our country and to establish an Islamic system. The sacrifices, hardships and tribulations endured by the people and Mujahideen in this great cause (Jihad) are not hidden from anyone … We are offering general amnesty to all those standing in the opposition ranks if they choose to renounce their enmity. We urge everyone to take full advantage of this amnesty by ending their opposition and not becoming an impediment for the establishment of an Islamic government which is the aspiration of millions of martyred, wounded, disabled, orphaned, widowed and suffering Afghans…

Haibatullah did strike a note of compromise: 96

… [T]he Islamic Emirate once again assures everyone that it does not have a monopolist policy, every male and female member of society shall be given their due rights, none shall feel any sense of deprivation or injustice and all work necessary for the welfare, durability and development of society will be addressed in the light of divine Shariah law…

However, the Taliban’s official position is still that it “has not readily embraced this death and destruction for the sake of some silly ministerial posts or a share of the power.” Roggio notes that a week after the February 29 agreements, the Taliban issues a Fatwa that still called for an Islamic government headed by Emir Haibatullah, who is described as Afghanistan’s “lawful ruler” and the Fatwa stated the Taliban “shall continue waging armed jihad” until this goal was achieved.97

As this 19-year jihad against the foreign occupation was waged under the command of a legal emir, the termination of occupation agreement does not mean that his [Haibatullah’s] rule is absolved. The mujahideen must work to establish an Islamic government ruled by an emir. That obligation is the next step after U.S. and its allies troops leave. Until the occupation is completely severed from its roots and an Islamic government formed, the mujahideen [Taliban] shall continue waging armed jihad and exerting

Given all these uncertainties, it is not clear how the Taliban will react. The peace process might create a Taliban that is so divided against itself that it could actually weaken itself even compared to the already divided and weak central government – a number of rebel movements have done so even at moments of success in the post war era. However, it is not clear how a strong enough Afghan central government coalition can emerge that could then define and negotiate an even more effective peace agreement, much less implement one.

It also is all too possible that it will be far easier for the Taliban to play a spoiler role, to weaken and divide the Afghan government effort, and/or to exploit the implementation of a peace agreement; than it will be for the central government to agree on a peace and then cooperate to make it work. Nothing about Afghan leadership from the mid-1970s to the present is particularly reassuring.
Failed Governance as well as Failed Politics

Afghan politics are only part of the problem. A successful peace requires a successful government at every level of governance that can find and actually implement working compromises between the existing central government and the Taliban. It also requires a government that can win the loyalty and support of the Afghan people.

As is the case with Afghan politics, public opinion was mixed in a poll taken before the Presidential election’s failure became fully apparent, and the details of the February peace agreements became known:

Satisfaction with the performance of different levels of the Afghan government has increased continuously over the last five years. Around two-thirds of Afghans in 2019 (65.7%) believe that the National Unity Government (NUG) is doing a good job (20.1% very good, 45.6% somewhat good), a 6-point increase from 2018 (59.6%) and a 9.5-point increase from 2017 (56.2%). Satisfaction with the performance of provincial governments (64.5%) is also higher than 2018 (61.3%).

On a related matter, the Survey asks Afghans how successful they think the government has been in improving the living conditions of people in their area. More than half of respondents, 69.3%, say a little or a lot, the highest level of confidence reported so far.

The relationship between confidence in one’s member of parliament and satisfaction with provincial government and the relationship between level of fear and satisfaction with provincial government remain consistent in 2019. Respondents who express “some” or “a lot” of confidence in their MPs are more likely to say the provincial government is doing a good job (76.3%) than those who report “not much” or “no confidence at all” (51.3%). And conversely, respondents who fear for their safety are less likely to express satisfaction with provincial government.

Overall, confidence in governmental and nongovernmental organizations has increased, with the exception of the Independent Election Commission, which has seen confidence drop from 43.3% in 2018 to 42.3% in 2019. As in previous years, Afghans have the most confidence in religious leaders (71.2%). Compared to 2018, confidence in MPs has gone up by 10.2 percentage points, from 42.3% in 2018 to 52.6% in 2019, the highest level so far. Confidence in the following organizations has improved since last year: government ministers (up 6.1 percentage points, to 44.4%), national NGOs (up 4.0 percentage points, to 53.3%), provincial councils (up 4.7 percentage points, to 55.6%) and international NGOs (up 4.9 percentage points, to 47.3%)

Once again, these results – for all their pessimistic elements – were more favorable than the real level of Afghan governance justifies.

A Warning from SIGAR

Quite aside from its politics and divided leadership, the Afghan central government must pursue peace efforts with one of the worst levels of governance in the world. Few Americans have as much experience in dealing with the Afghan government as John Sopko, the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR), and he has raised these issues numerous times in his testimony to Congress. In March 2020, he summed up the problems in Afghan governance in a lecture at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs.

Sopko noted that, “the 600-pound gorilla in the room is of course, the peace agreement that was signed during my latest trip to Kabul on February 29th and the potential withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan within the next 14 months.” He warned that,

... Afghanistan is one of the most corrupt and insecure countries in the world. Afghan security force and civilian casualties are at or near all-time highs, and to date, over 2,300 service members have lost their lives.
In addition to the Taliban threat, there may be as many as 20 terrorist groups operating in the Afghanistan/Pakistan region, the most notable of which is the so-called Islamic State.

Because of the widespread security threats, for the past several years all U.S. civilian personnel arriving in Afghanistan have been required to fly via government helicopter between the international airport and the U.S. Embassy – a distance of just three kilometers, because that stretch of road has been deemed too dangerous for routine vehicle travel.

And as if the daily threat of violent attack isn’t enough to deal with, SIGAR and other agencies also face the challenge of working in one of the most corrupt countries on the planet. Afghanistan ranks 173rd out of 180 countries on Transparency International’s most recent Corruption Perception Index, and 91 percent of Afghans surveyed state that corruption is a problem in their daily lives.

Reconstruction is a large, lengthy, and difficult undertaking for any country. But the pervasive insecurity and corruption plaguing Afghanistan have severely inhibited U.S. reconstruction efforts, and have made oversight of these efforts incredibly difficult...

Sopko summed up the lessons that SIGAR had learned from years of inspecting the level of Afghan governance as follows:

- Our first lessons learned report, Corruption in Conflict, published in 2016, found that corruption substantially undermined the U.S. mission in Afghanistan from the very beginning. The lesson is that anticorruption efforts need to be at the center of planning and policymaking for contingencies like Afghanistan.
- Our second report, published in 2017, entitled Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, revealed that the U.S. government was ill-prepared to help build an Afghan army and police force capable of protecting Afghanistan from internal or external threats. We found that the U.S. government lacked a comprehensive approach and coordinating body to successfully implement the whole-government programs necessary to develop capable and self-sustaining Afghan security forces.
- In April 2018, we published our third report, Private Sector Development and Economic Growth, which found that early economic successes in Afghanistan were undermined by ongoing physical insecurity and political instability, which discouraged investment and other economic activity.
- Our fourth report, Stabilization, was published in May 2018 and revealed that we greatly overestimated our ability to build and reform government institutions in Afghanistan, and that reconstruction programs were not tailored to Afghanistan’s operating environment, were hampered by unrealistic timelines, and successes rarely lasted longer than the physical presence of coalition troops.
- Counternarcotics was the subject of our fifth report, published in June 2018. We found that no program led to lasting reductions in poppy cultivation or opium production—and, without a willing Afghan partner and stable security environment, there was little possibility of future success.
- In 2019, our sixth report, Divided Responsibility, highlighted the difficulty of coordinating security sector assistance during active combat and under the umbrella of a 39-member NATO coalition when no specific DOD organization or military service was assigned ultimate responsibility for U.S. efforts.
- And last Fall, our seventh report, Reintegration of Ex-Combatants, examined the five main post-2001 efforts to reintegrate former combatants into Afghan society. We found that successful reintegration was a key to peace but that our prior efforts did not help any significant number of former fighters to reintegrate, did not weaken the insurgency, and did not reduce violence.

**Good or Bad: Afghan Governance Is – and Will Continue to Be – Dependent on Outside Financing**

Financing is an equally critical issue. The Afghan central government cannot function in any area without massive outside aid. As noted earlier, “the World Bank estimates that international grants finance 75% of Afghanistan’s public expenditures. The United States is the largest source of those grants.”

The Afghan central government’s total civil and security budget now totals around $11
billion annually while Afghan domestic revenues are only about $2.5 billion.\textsuperscript{102} The World Bank also notes that this dependence reflects,\textsuperscript{103}

“the wide gap between revenues and expenditures…Total grants are equal to around US$8.5 billion per year. This is equal to around 45 percent of GDP, compared to an average of around 10 percent for low income countries.”

There is no reliable way to estimate Afghanistan’s future needs if the central government and the Taliban can agree on a peace. The World Bank has done a preliminary study, which warns that the Afghan government is likely to be at least as dependent on outside aid as it is now, and it would need more additional aid for real development. Any warfighting savings in security would be offset by the need to absorb and fund Taliban fighters while also keeping ANSF personnel employed long enough to make a transition into the civil economy.

Chart Seven shows the key bottom lines in these World Bank estimates. The World Bank study also makes key points that will apply to any real peace, regardless of its specific terms:\textsuperscript{104}

- Public expenditure in Afghanistan is already at high and unsustainable levels. Total public expenditure is equal to around 58 percent of GDP, much higher than average for a low-income country. Revenues have grown rapidly over recent years, but still fall far short of what would be required to support expenditure at current levels. Total revenues are currently equal to only around US $2.5 billion dollars per year, while total expenditures are equal to around US$11 billion per year.

- Total financing needs are likely to remain at close to current levels. Aggregate future financing needs are driven by expenditures on: i) security; ii) core government services and infrastructure; iii) new public investments required to support accelerated economic growth; and iv) post-settlement programming initiatives to consolidate and sustain a political settlement, such as community development and job creation schemes. Aggregate financing needs are expected to remain close to current levels. Declines in security sector expenditure will be offset by the need for increased civilian spending to support a rapidly-growing population and facilitate faster economic growth.

- Under a baseline scenario of continued slow economic growth and moderate improvement in revenues, grant needs would range between US$5.8 billion and US$7.6 billion per year. US$5.8 billion per year would be sufficient to finance maintenance of existing services and gradual expansion of infrastructure in line with population growth. US$7 billion per year would be sufficient to finance current services and infrastructure with additional investments to support more-rapid growth (including human capital and infrastructure improvements). US$7.6 billion per year would be sufficient to meet current infrastructure and service costs, finance growth-enhancing investments, and provide resources for additional programs to sustain and consolidate peace, including through expanded community development and job creation programs.

- A precipitous decline in grant resources, however, would force very difficult trade-offs between important policy objectives. A precipitous reduction in either security or civilian grants would force a choice between: i) sustaining security spending; ii) maintaining the delivery of basic government functions (such as social services and infrastructure); iii) undertaking required public investments to support faster economic growth and poverty reduction; and iv) delivering short-term benefits to Afghans following a political settlement to help to sustain and consolidate peace.

- Benefits of short-term post settlement programming are likely to be short-lived if they come at the cost of continued investment in the basic functions of government and the core service delivery mechanisms that have been built up since 2001.

- Expectations should be realistic regarding the capacity of new grant-financed programs to deliver a substantial peace dividend. Resources available for delivering a post settlement dividend are likely to remain limited under any scenario, relative to the extent of grant support already being provided. The most significant benefits of a political settlement are likely to be realized if such a settlement leads to improvements in security, political stability, and freedom of movement. Increased private sector investment, job creation, and access to services resulting from such improvements is likely to deliver much more significant and
sustainable benefits than grant-financed interventions. This is especially the case given the current context of already-un sustainably high public expenditure and likely declines in grant support over the medium-term.

- Under a baseline (pre-Corona) scenario, revenue growth would be minimal. Under a baseline scenario, conflict continues at current levels. Limited progress is made with policy and institutional reforms. No major new revenue-generating projects are realized. Economic growth accelerates only slightly to around three percent per annum over the period. Under this scenario, revenues increased only slightly from around US$2.5 billion in 2019 to around US$2.8 billion by 2024.

- A downside (Corona-like) scenario could see revenues collapsing. Under a downside scenario, conflict intensifies, and governance and institutions are weakened. No progress is made with policy and institutional reforms. No major new revenue-generating projects are realized. Economic growth remains stagnant at around 1.5 percent per annum. Revenue performance weakens to a similar extent observed over the 2014 election period (revenue as a percentage of GDP collapses to around 8.5 percent in 2020 before recovering gradually to current levels by the end of the period). Under this scenario, revenues fall quickly from around US$2.5 billion in 2019 to just US$1.7 billion in 2020, before recovering to around current levels by 2024.

- Economic growth in Afghanistan is currently too slow to reduce poverty and increase living standards. The economy is currently growing by around two percent per year, while the population is growing at around 2.3 percent per year. This equates to declining per capita incomes. Poverty rates are rapidly increasing, with the number of Afghans living below the basic needs poverty line (of around US$1 per day) increasing from around 39 percent in 2012 to around 55 percent today. The number of jobs available to Afghans is currently declining, while 300,000 young people enter the labor force every year. While a reduction in violence may facilitate improvements in growth, employment, and living standards, substantial public investments to improve services and expand infrastructure are likely to be needed to mobilize new growth sources that could drive a step-change in economic growth.

The present trends in government-raised revenues are far from good and are likely to be hit hard by the Coronavirus crisis as well as by related cuts in donor funding. The SIGAR Quarterly Report for April 30, 2020 notes that,105

Afghanistan’s sustainable domestic revenues contracted by 7.8% over the first three months of FY 1399 (December 22, 2019, to December 21, 2020), year-on-year, SIGAR analysis showed. Because no one-off revenues were recorded in the first quarter, aggregate domestic revenues declined by the same amount. In the first three months of FY 1399, the Afghan government collected $494.4 million (compared to $536.2 million in the first three months of FY 1398)... In recent years, aggregate annual revenues have been approximately $2.5 billion.

It was not possible to ascertain what drove the decline in the first quarter (nearly half of revenues collected had not yet been reconciled). However, a spokesman for the Ministry of Finance (MOF) attributed the contraction to “political issues” (a presumed reference to the disputed presidential election) and lower customs taxes...Because the Afghan government relies so heavily on customs duties and taxes—which make up approximately one-fifth of all revenues—increased border closures due to the spread of COVID-19 could adversely affect Afghanistan’s fiscal position in 2020.

The Afghan government signaled it would continue the recent trend of supplementing lagging core revenue collections (i.e. taxes) with large one-off transfers of foreign exchange profits from the central bank (DAB)... In the fourth month of FY 1399, the MOF received a $163.6 million transfer from DAB, constituting 68.0% of revenues collected in the month, as of April 12, 2020... While central bank profits are not an illegitimate source of revenue, they are not considered to be a sustainable source of government funding...

The LIG Quarterly Report for January 1-March 31, 2020 adds the following details,106

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic hit Afghanistan, experts were expressing concern about Afghanistan’s economic health. Afghan government revenue is both an important fiscal indicator and critical to stability in a post-conflict environment, according to a report published by the U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP) in August 2019. To counter the expected sharp decline in external assistance, the Afghan government will need an increase in revenue to supplement foreign assistance, fund its defense, deliver services to its citizens, and transition toward self-reliance. The World Bank noted that without revenue growth, an increase in the
percentage of security spending funded by the Afghan government would come at the cost of other services. DoS and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) staff have expressed concern that the Afghan government has limited opportunities to compensate for reductions in donor assistance.

USAID projects that anticipated appropriations for USAID non-humanitarian assistance funding in Afghanistan will fall 46 percent from FY 2018 to FY 2021, from $500 million to $270 million. Meanwhile, funding remaining from prior appropriations decreased from $2.6 billion in October 2019 to $2 billion in March 2020.

International grants finance 75 percent of public expenditures and nearly 90 percent of security expenditures in Afghanistan, according to the World Bank. The Afghan government experienced a decline in international grants equivalent to more than 1 percent of GDP in 2019, and the World Bank expects this trend to continue as grants decline from an estimated $8.2 billion in 2020 to $6.9 billion in 2024...

The Afghan government’s ability to offset reductions in foreign assistance is in question, and several indicators point to slowing growth in revenues. Although the World Bank reported that Afghan revenues increased to a new high of 14.1 percent of GDP in 2019 from 13.2 percent in 2018, much of this increase reflected large, one-off non-tax revenues, such as central bank operating profits and currency depreciation that would not be sustainable over the long-term. Overall, the rate of revenue growth has slowed from a 22 percent increase in 2015 to a 12 percent increase in 2018, according to a report published by the USIP…Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak in Afghanistan, the World Bank projected that domestic revenue growth would be flat in 2020. The pandemic will likely impose further strain on the Afghan economy.

To increase revenue, the Afghan government has relied on high levels of non-tax revenue that it may not be able to count on as a future source of growth. The growth in Afghan government revenue from 2015 to 2019 was largely driven by non-tax revenues, according to the World Bank. In 2019, non-tax revenues increased by more than 31 percent from the year before to 88.5 billion Afghani (approximately $1.1 billion) and accounted for 42.4 percent of all revenue…Non-tax revenues in Afghanistan, between 4 and 6 percent of GDP, are high compared to other fragility-, conflict-, and violence-affected developing countries that collect an average of 3.5 percent of GDP in non-tax revenues…This reliance on non-tax revenues can be less sustainable compared to tax revenues and may be sensitive to political interference, according to the World Bank…

While the average annual growth of tax revenue was 12.5 percent between 2015 and 2018, revenue from taxes in 2019 remained approximately the same as in 2018. According to the U.S. Embassy in Kabul, the Afghan government is placing an onerous tax burden on the private sector with a 70 percent tax rate. For example, taxes have limited the telecommunications sector’s resources to invest in expansion, increase profitability, or upgrade equipment, according to the embassy…In addition, the government collects an advance tax on business receipts, meaning that it has already collected taxes for 2020.

...In an effort to increase domestic revenue mobilization and meet its commitments under a World Trade Organization agreement, Afghanistan is scheduled to begin implementing a value-added tax in January 2021…According to a report published by the USIP, the institution of a value added tax may contribute to broadening the tax base…The World Bank estimates that this will produce additional revenue (an estimated 0.8 percent of GDP) in 2021, increasing over time to 1.8 percent in 2023. However, even if fully realized, this would only partially offset the expected reduction in international grants.

...According to a report published by the USIP, economic expansion will be necessary to broaden the narrow tax base and generate sustainable revenue growth. Policy and administrative reforms will only produce limited improvements in tax revenues, according to the World Bank. However, decades of violence, high rates of civilian casualties, and political instability all present significant challenges to private sector investment in Afghanistan.
Chart Eleven: Peace is Dependent on Massive Outside Aid to Governance and Government Activity

Figure: Total financing needs remain roughly constant over the projection period
Total projected financing needs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Security expenditures</th>
<th>Base civilian expenditure</th>
<th>Expenditure for growth</th>
<th>Expenditure for accelerated self-reliance under peace</th>
<th>Expenditure to sustain and consolidate peace</th>
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<tr>
<td>2020</td>
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Table: Grant needs remain substantial under all likely scenarios
Annual grant needs by scenario and expenditure category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Growth and revenue scenario</th>
<th>Downside</th>
<th>Baseline</th>
<th>Mid-case</th>
<th>Rapid growth</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average annual grant needs 2020-2024 (US$ billions)</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Base expenditures (security and civilian)</td>
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<td>5.8</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Base expenditures + Expenditures for accelerated growth</td>
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<td>7.0</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>5.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Base expenditures + Expenditures for accelerated growth + Expenditures to consolidate and sustain peace</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Development Plans and Aid That Produce Far Too Little Development

In retrospect, the efforts to promote a “New Silk Road,” an Afghan ring road, and mining as the solutions to all of Afghanistan’s financial problems have been little more than a sick joke – although the fault lies with Western analysts rather than the Afghan government. Development aid continues to be wasted on the central government. The LIG Quarterly Report states that,\textsuperscript{107}

USAID reported that due to a lack of political will and willing partners within the Afghan government, it has refocused programming to support collaboration between private industries and the associated government ministries that have the greatest potential for economic growth.\textsuperscript{291} While USAID has no current programs that directly support revenue generation, it reported that its activities focus on enabling private sector growth.

USAID reported that programs aimed at increasing revenue growth focus primarily on the mineral, civil aviation, health, and energy sectors, aiming to add value to the supply chains and increase exports. In these sectors, USAID staff noted the following opportunities to increase revenue:

- **Minerals:** USAID stated that the collection of government revenue from the mineral sector was less than $10 million last year…USAID reported that this sector could produce substantially more revenue if the Afghan government implemented reforms to attract foreign investment, such as revising the 2018 Mining Law to simplify the process for obtaining the right to develop minerals…USAID currently supports these efforts through its 5-year, $20 million Multi-Dimensional Economic Legal Reform Assistance Program by providing policy assistance to the Afghan government. USAID reported that it had provided legal and policy advice on the new mineral law, mining regulations, and a draft model contract, which USAID expects to facilitate private sector investment in the extractives sector.

- **Civil Aviation:** The Afghan government receives an estimated $820 per plane for overflight rights from foreign airlines, according to USAID, and the revenue stream from Kabul Airport alone could produce as much as $150 million per year.

- **Health:** The Afghan government collects between $2 million and $4 million per year in non-emergency hospital fees…USAID reported that it is working with the Afghan government on applying these funds into the health sector.

- **Energy:** USAID identified connecting more users to the main national electrical grid as a key component of increasing private sector economic growth. The cost of electricity for Afghan businesses is significantly lower when they are connected to the grid compared to when they must use diesel-generated electricity. USAID reported that it is working with the Afghan national electrical company, Da Afghanistan Breshna Sherkat, to expand access to the electrical grid…However, USAID also noted that a major challenge for Da Afghanistan Breshna Sherkat is the high level of debt it has incurred from government ministries not paying for their electricity.

The financing of the Taliban and various power brokers also will have to be addressed if there is to be a real peace plan. The Taliban now relies on donations, extortion, and narcotics. If it joins the government or has any form of separate regional control, it will now need government financing. The willingness of local, regional, and factional power brokers – and narcotraffickers generally – to accept a peace plan that denies them their current income will also be problematic.

**Corruption is a Key Challenge**

Poll after poll of Afghanistan and other similar developing countries shows that corruption is one of the most critical single factors that undermines faith in the government.\textsuperscript{108} The Asia Foundation poll for 2019 found that,\textsuperscript{109}

…81.5% of respondents in 2019 say corruption is a major problem in Afghanistan as a whole, identical with last year (81.5%). At the same time, 15.6% say corruption is a minor problem, and 2.5% say corruption is not a problem at all. Regionally, perceptions of corruption as a major problem in Afghanistan have risen in
the South West (from 73.3% in 2018 to 83.0% in 2019) and the East (from 78.7% in 2018 to 84.5% in 2019) and declined in the South East (from 78.1% in 2018 to 68.8% in 2019) and the North West (from 82.0% in 2018 to 77.2% in 2019)... Some 67.9% of Afghans surveyed say corruption is a major problem in their daily life, 2.7 percentage points lower than the 70.6% in 2018. More than one-fifth of respondents, 23.1%, call this a minor problem, and 8.3% say it is not a problem at all.

Transparency International still ranks Afghanistan’s government as the eighth most corrupt government in the world, and years of anti-corruption efforts have so far produced few – if any – effects. The SIGAR Quarterly Report for April 30, 2020 also makes it clear that that Afghan government is pursuing yet another series of anti-corruption measures that have had negligible or minimal impact at best.110

The World Bank’s broader assessments of Afghan corruption and all the other major aspect of Afghan governance are summed up all too clearly in its latest annual rankings of Afghan governance. These rankings are shown for the period from 1996 to 2018 in Chart Twelve. These are not the worst rankings in the world, but they come very close in all six of the key aspects of governance the World Bank uses. They also show remarkably little improvement – if any – from 1996 to 2018.111 If anything, the rise in corruption means that the current government is probably worse for many Afghans than what they experienced with the Taliban.

It is also critical to understand that these issues go far beyond the top levels of governance, and they affect virtually every civil and military activity of the Afghan central government while also linking various government officials to drug trafficking. The shell of modern governance applies to Kabul, several other cities, and scattered parts of the country. Critical weaknesses exist in Afghan governance at the urban, provincial, and district levels. They affect every aspect of the justice system, law enforcement, and internal security – as well as in most government jobs, contracting, major spending, infrastructure activity, and services. They shape the allocation and consumption of most outside aid as well as the many aspects of Afghanistan’s operations as the world’s dominant supplier of opium and natural opiates.

The real-world situation is also generally far worse than many of the claims which have been made about Afghan progress following the defeat of the Taliban government would indicate. As SIGAR and a wide range of media reporting shows, the level of data quality or transparency in reporting coming out of Afghanistan often exaggerates the actual progress in education, health, government services, and infrastructure. The same has been true of U.S. government reporting. Such favorable reporting often uses numbers that have no clear source, definition, and/or measures of uncertainty. They sometimes cover only a relatively small portion of the country and “islands of competence.” Sources like the World Bank field teams have also warned that the levels of progress in governance, such as those that occurred after 2001, have since seen steady cuts – triggered in part by the steady loss of areas where the government and aid workers can operate and collect data. These include key areas like fighting poverty and education.
Chart Twelve: Afghanistan’s Failed Levels of Governance at Every Level of World Bank Assessment: 1996-2018

Peace Expectations and Population Pressure

Afghans under the control of the central government have largely learned to live with these problems – in part because the standards of governance have been so low for such a long period of time and because the nation has been at war for decades. Afghans are far less likely to tolerate today’s conditions, however, if they are promised some form of peace. The same is almost certainly true of Taliban fighters and those Afghans that live under de facto Taliban control.

The need for better governance is also being driven by a sharply rising population. As the World Bank, IMF, and UN have all noted, Afghanistan is also under intense population pressure. The estimates of the U.S. Census Bureau – whose rankings track closely with UN data – are shown in Chart Thirteen. In spite of decades of warfare, these estimates indicate that Afghanistan has gone from a population of only 8.15 million in 1950, to 15.054 million in 1980, to 22.46 million in 2000, 29.12 million in 2010, and to 36.64 million in 2020 – 4.5 times the figure in 1950. The population is projected to increase by another 74% by 2050.

In spite of a near constant war, Afghanistan is still experiencing a major “youth bulge.” Its population reached 32.56 million in 2020, and it will increase by roughly a million a year to 45.67 million in 2030.112 This means there will be a need to create well over 300,000 new male jobs a year in a country that will increasingly need to create jobs for women as well. While current estimates of Afghan youth unemployment differ radically, some are well over 17% and would be significantly higher if service in the military – due to the lack of any civil job opportunities – and disguised unemployment were considered.113 It also means a steady increase in the already extraordinarily high dependency ratio of young Afghans that are dependent on income from other working Afghans.

Afghan expectations will be further increased by Afghanistan’s shift toward urbanization, which has been driven in part by the search for security and in part by the search for better living conditions. The CIA estimates the level of urbanization reached 26% in 2020, and this was estimated to be increasing at 3.4% per year. This urbanization has steadily increased the number of Afghans dependent on a market economy, urban prices, and government services.114
For forging a new structure of governance

All of these factors now drive the ability to create a new structure of governance in a peace agreement that includes the Taliban but excludes other extremist and terrorist movements. All require national, regional, and local compromises between the Taliban, the central government, and key power brokers in the way governance is shaped and functions. This does not have to be completed by May 2021 to meet the 14-month deadline, but the process of change must then be acceptable to both sides in spite of their major differences in goals and values.

As the previous sections of this analysis have shown, these problems involve broad areas of the country that are known to be under Taliban control or where the Taliban currently disputes control with the Afghan central government. There are no clear or easy lines of demarcation that lend themselves to a split between the central government and the Taliban’s systems, and there often are government controlled urban areas near Taliban controlled rural areas. They sometimes include key areas of drug production, areas with the same sect and ethnicity, and areas where pro-government power brokers and Taliban factions have their own goals and power. Once again, the deadlines for the peace pose serious questions as to whether this is feasible.
Afghan National Defense and Security Forces that Are Not ready to Stand Alone – In War or Peace

The peace process must now cope with the fact the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) have become more effective over time but are is still far too weak to stand on their own. The Afghan National Army (ANA) is the core of the force, but is still top heavy with mediocre senior officers; has serious corruption problems and ties to factions and power brokers; and has been dependent on U.S. and allied air power, elite forces, and train and assist units to keep the Taliban from seizing heavily populated areas.

The ANA has some effective elite units, but these are overcommitted and over trained, and many elements remain mediocre at best. It is not strong enough or well led and trained enough to face the Taliban without U.S. and allied aid, and it cannot possibly acquire such capabilities within the time period set for reaching a peace. It is unclear when, if ever, it can acquire such capabilities without a peace.

The Afghan Air Force (AAF) is making progress, but still has problems in operating its existing systems, and lack anything like the mix of air strike and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (IS&R) assets of U.S. air combat forces. No plans currently exist to give such capabilities to AAF, and if peace agreements result in an actual peace, then the U.S. will reduce and eliminate its air and IS&R capabilities in Afghanistan, along with the rest of its combat troops.

The Afghan National Police (ANP) is notably more corrupt than the Army, lacks the support of an effective judicial system and rule of law, and is not trained and equipped for the kind of paramilitary operations necessary to defend and “hold” against the Taliban. Nearly two decades of efforts to produce an effective form of Afghan local police have failed. The end result to date has been forces that are corrupt, back local power brokers or even become them, and are not effective against the Taliban.

This raises critical challenges in dealing with Taliban. If the peace effort fails, the Afghan central government will remain dependent on the U.S. and its Allies for military support indefinitely into the future. This is support which the U.S. has made clear that it would be willing to provide.

If the Taliban does reach a peace agreement, the question immediately arises as to what that agreement will say about the new structure of Afghan forces; the future of the central government, ANDSF forces, and the Taliban forces; how they will be funded; who will control them and how; and their interface with local security and legal forces. Key questions will arise about providing training and equipment for fighters leaving the security forces, and how the new government will be able to exercise control.

As of yet, there has been no meaningful open source official discussion of such issues. Afghanistan, however, has long been a country where the real “voters” have the guns. Accordingly, unless the Taliban and troops supporting given power brokers are disarmed and lose the automatic weapons and other systems they now have, it is all too possible that “power will grow out of the barrel of a gun.”

Afghan Perceptions of the Security Forces

The data that follow show that it will be years – if ever – before the Afghan security forces can stand on their own against the Taliban if a peace effort fails, and that the transition to some form of security that can actually control the Taliban if a peace settlement is eventually reached will be
challenging at best. Polling data also show that Afghans are not confident about their security at present, and they have mixed feeling about the police and their justice system. As has been noted earlier, the Asia Foundation public opinion survey for 2019 found that,115

This year, 74.5% of respondents say that they always, often, or sometimes fear for their personal safety. This represents an increase of over 3 percentage points since 2018 (71.1%) and a new high for the Survey. Fear for personal safety has risen every year since 2012, when it stood at 48.2%. Looking beyond the recent year-on-year increases, the 2019 figure represents an almost 100% increase from the first time the question was asked, in 2006 (39.6%), and a sizeable increase from 2012, when fear for personal safety was at its third-lowest point (48.2%).

Fear while participating in an election is also at its highest recorded level (63.3%). This fear has increased by more than 50% since the question was first asked, in 2006 (41.1%), and it is representative of a longitudinal trend of rising fear and insecurity across much of the country. Increased fear is not restricted to elections: the number of respondents who report some or a lot of fear while participating in a demonstration has also reached its highest level ever, 75.2%, roughly a 25% increase over 2006 (60.6%). Fear when encountering the Taliban (93.1%) is nearly the same as in 2018 (93.6%), as is fear when encountering ISIS/Daesh (95.0% in 2019, 94.9% in 2018).

Nevertheless, a significant portion of the Afghan people do have hopes for the central government’s security forces and do not find them to be repressive or a threat,116

When respondents consider who provides security in their local area, a majority of 58.4% cite the Afghan National Police (ANP), an 11-point decline from 2018 (68.9%). Respondents in urban areas (79.2%) are more likely to name the ANP than those in rural areas (51.3%). Respondents in Nimroz (91.1%) and Kabul (85.6%) are most likely to name the ANP as the local security provider, while respondents in Sar-e-Pul (30.5%) are least likely.

The number of respondents who strongly agree that the ANP helps improve security in Afghanistan is at its lowest recorded level, 36.4%, down from 39.3% in 2018 and approximately 25% lower than 2007, when the question was first asked. The number of respondents who would strongly or somewhat agree with a family member’s decision to join the ANP has risen by 3 percentage points, to 73.4%. Respondents in rural areas (74.4%) are marginally more likely to agree with such a decision than those in urban areas (70.3%).

Perceptions of the Afghan National Army (ANA) remain broadly similar to 2018, with a negligible increase in those saying the ANA is improving (57.5%, up from 56.9% in 2018). There are also minimal changes from 2018 in those saying the ANA helps to improve security (53.4% strongly agree), while the percentage who say the ANA protects civilians stands at 51.8%. A slight increase can be seen in those who say the ANA is honest and fair, from 58.3% in 2018 to 59.7% in 2019.

**Afghan Central Government Forces that Survive Because of U.S. and Allied Outside Aid**

Afghan government security forces only can fight and survive because of U.S. funding and aid. The Afghan central government budget cannot support these forces without external aid, and they have received massive amounts from the U.S. since 2002.

SIGAR reports that the United States appropriated approximately $137.05 billion for reconstruction and related activities in Afghanistan since FY 2002 as of March 30, 2020. Total U.S. support of Afghanistan reconstruction funding was allocated as follows:117

- $86.37 billion for security (including $4.59 billion for counternarcotics initiatives)
- $35.06 billion for governance and development ($4.36 billion for counternarcotics initiatives)
- $3.92 billion for humanitarian aid
- $11.70 billion for civilian operations
An additional $3.12 billion was provided by other NATO countries as part of the NATO-managed Afghan National Army (ANA) Trust Fund (NATO ANA Trust Fund or NATF). These figures show that 65% of all U.S. reconstruction aid has gone to security, although much of it has been misspent, wasted, or stolen. Chart Fourteen displays SIGAR graphs that tell part of this story. It provides graphs showing the massive turbulence and short terms peaks in security aid.

These peaks were driven in part by the action of the U.S. when it initially was far too optimistic about the lasting impact of its “defeat” of the Taliban in 2001-2002, began to fund new Afghan security forces, gave priority to Iraq, and then rushed funds to create a large Afghan force once it realized the size of the growing Taliban threat. Funding then dropped precipitously once President Obama decided in 2014 that U.S. troops would be withdrawn by 2016.

The full history of the efforts to create effective Afghan forces has yet to be written, but the efforts to build Afghan forces began slowly, were badly underfunded, and were constantly revised. Even the ANA did not have adequate trainers at even the basic training level until 2009-2010, and most were on short one year tours.

Many of the U.S. and Allied trainers assigned to training had no previous experience in the job until 2009-2010, and for several years, the system reported trainers as being active even if the donor country had only pledged them. Too much emphasis was put on basic and rear area training, and too little focus was put on “train and advise” at the combat unit level.

During 2014-2017 far too many of trainers who remained were removed from forward areas and brought back to the equivalent of the corps level. Help in developing combat skills and leadership was badly undercut in the ANA, and it was largely missing in the ANP and ALP. This situation was corrected to some degree in 2017 by redeploying forward area trainers and creating Security Force Assistance Brigades, but the peace agreements seem to imply that the forward area deployments will be sharply cut if the peace negotiation efforts continue on schedule.
Chart Fourteen: The Massive Turbulence in Major Afghan Security Aid Programs

Afghanistan Security Forces Fund (ASFF)

Commander’s Emergency Response Program (CERP)

Drug Interdiction and Counter-Drug Activities (DICDA),

Over-Classified Data Do Not Hide the Uncertain Capabilities of the ANDSF

The central government forces have now undergone nearly 20 years of plans to reorganize, improve training, remove incompetent officers, limit corruption in the form of claiming pay for ghost soldiers, stealing wages and equipment, hoarding equipment in the rear, failing to provide leave, and many other abuses. Both the SIGAR and LIG reports for the first quarter of 2020 describe each year another round of such reforms, but those reforms seem to do little to describe real-world improvements in Afghan readiness and combat forces.

The SIGAR report states that,

- This quarter, RS for the first time restricted from public release all data on enemy-initiated attacks (EIA) and effective enemy-initiated attacks (EEIA).
- USFOR-A continued to classify or otherwise restrict from public release the following types of data due to Afghan government classification guidelines or other restrictions (mostly since October 2017)
  - ANDSF casualties, by force element and total
  - most unit-level ANDSF authorized and assigned strengths
  - detailed Ministry of Defense (MOD), Ministry of Interior (MOI), and ANDSF performance assessments
  - information about the operational readiness of ANA and ANP equipment
  - some Special Mission Wing (SMW) information, including the number and type of airframes in the SMW inventory, the number of pilots and aircrew, and the operational readiness (and associated benchmarks) of SMW airframes
- USFOR-A classified all ANDSF casualty information this quarter because the Afghan government classifies it.
- USFOR-A continued to classify detailed assessments of ANDSF performance because the Afghan government classifies them.
- USFOR-A continued to classify most information about MOD and MOI performance because it was classified by the Afghan government.

The previous analysis of the fighting has shown that the central government forces have not been “winning,” but there are major problems in finding enough official data to make a full assessment. Since 2011, the United States, NATO, and the Afghan government have steadily reduced availability or classified data that shows negative trends or could be politically embarrassing. Classification or non-reporting includes performance assessments of Afghan Ministry of Defense (MOD) and Ministry of the Interior (MOI), basic ANDSF strength data and almost all effectiveness data, and estimates of central government versus Taliban control of given districts.

Nevertheless, unclassified reporting to the Congress by the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR) and the Lead Inspector General (LIG) do still highlight the instability and gaps within the Afghan forces, although it now seems likely that some of the few remnants of such reporting will now be classified and cease to be reported in the open source SIGAR and LIG reports.

Chart Fifteen shows that current manning estimates are now significantly lower than in 2017, although they rose by 3% in the first quarter of 2020. This drop comes partly from efforts to get more honest reporting and eliminate “ghost” soldiers from the totals reported. At the same time,
SIGAR reports that, “ANDSF personnel strength numbers sourced from APPS is 8% lower (roughly 25,000 personnel) than the Afghan-provided strength data reported during the same period in 2019 under the previous Afghan Human Resource Information Management System (AHRIMS).”

The net results reflect a significant shortfall in meeting the authorized personnel levels. As of December 2019, the ANDSF’s total authorized strength is roughly 352,000 (227,103 MOD and 124,626 MOI) plus 30,000 ALP funded by the United States and the Afghan government. The authorized strength includes 11,663 civilians (5,790 MOD and 5,873 MOI). This quarter’s ANDSF assigned strength stands at 80% (roughly 70,000 personnel short) of its 352,000 authorized strength.

The trends in Chart Fifteen also reflect the fact that attrition became a critical issue before the peace agreements were signed. SIGAR reports that, DOD and RS have identified attrition as one of the “Top 10 Challenges and Opportunities” for building the capacity of the ANDSF. According to DOD, personnel dropped from the rolls (DFR) account for the greatest portion of ANA and ANP attrition rates, but DFR rates for both have been improving. DOD said the most common reasons for DFRs are poor unit leadership (generally the biggest contributor), low pay or delays in pay, austere living conditions, denial of leave, and intimidation by insurgents. ANDSF advisors are tackling these problems by focusing on encouraging key reforms, leadership development, properly handling ANDSF pay, and reducing the use of checkpoints, which all have the secondary effect of improving care for soldiers and police, and reducing factors that negatively impact attrition…

CSTC-A reported last quarter that the ministers of defense and interior have ordered MOD and MOI personnel to improve attrition by reducing absence without leave and increasing the re-enlisting of personnel separated from the force. These efforts may take time to yield results. Both MOD and MOI elements usually self-report an average quarterly attrition of about 2–3% of the force.

The SIGAR and LIG reports on the level of fluctuation in manning levels are only one of the many ongoing warnings that there is not a stable build-up of experience and warfighting quality in the ANDSF as a whole – including ANDSF forces and internal security forces, and especially police and local forces. The promise of reform must also be considered in the light of similar promises that have not been made for more than the last decade.

Retention is a critical issue even though many young Afghan men have virtually no alternative employment. Moreover, the reports on force progress in readiness and training in the SIGAR and LIG reports do not reflect the kind of improvements in force quality that will allow ANDSF forces to substitute for U.S. and other NATO forces in 14 months if there are any serious challenges made by the Taliban to the peace process – or at any time in the next few years.

The role played by U.S. land elements like the Security Assistance Force Brigades, Special Forces and other elite land combat elements, and the CIA is also critical. The United States is committed to reducing its troop levels in Afghanistan to 8,600 within 135 days of the February 29, 2020 agreement – or all U.S. troops within 14 months if the Taliban fully meet their commitments. The pace and scale of such U.S. cuts remains unclear, but the SIGAR April 2020 Quarterly Report sounds a warning.

Defense Secretary Mark Esper and General Miller have said they believe that a force of 8,600 is adequate to undertake both U.S. missions in Afghanistan outlined under Operation Freedom’s Sentinel (OFS): the unilateral U.S. counterterrorism mission and the U.S. contribution to NATO’s Resolute Support (RS) mission to train, advise, and assist (TAA) the ANDSF. Defense officials have not yet articulated how an eventual drawdown below the 8,600 level might impact both missions.

Substantial and continued U.S. and international financial, military and contractor support is required to sustain the ANDSF as it is currently constituted. Without support, the ANDSF will struggle to maintain and
operate certain types of equipment, vehicles, and aircraft; provide consistent logistics support across the force; and root out fuel-related and other corruption across its ranks.125

... Secretary Esper said that once U.S. troops are at 8,600, “we’re going to stop, and we’ll assess the situation, not just tactically on the ground but also are all the parties living up to their obligations, their commitments? Are they acting in good faith and showing good effort?” The new troop-level target is a roughly 4,000-person reduction from the 2,000–13,000 personnel reported by DOD on December 7, 2019. For several months, Secretary Esper has said a force of 8,600 represents a force optimization, and can perform both U.S. missions in Afghanistan outlined under Operation Freedom’s Sentinel (OFS): the unilateral U.S. counterterrorism mission and the U.S. contribution to NATO’s RS mission to train, advise, and assist (TAA) the ANDSF… Defense officials have not yet articulated how an eventual drawdown below the 8,600 level could impact both missions. 126

NATO’s latest reported figure for the RS mission is 16,551 Coalition military personnel as of February 2020, including 8,000 U.S. personnel and 8,551 military personnel from NATO and non-NATO partner nations… Other U.S. troops in the OFS mission in Afghanistan serve in supporting roles, train Afghan special forces, or conduct air and counterterror operations…127

These figures were published before the U.S. troop drawdown began in earnest, as well as before the commensurate drawdown of other Coalition nations’ forces, meaning that the current RS mission is likely smaller. Referring to the RS mission’s size in a meeting of NATO foreign ministers in early April, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said “to support the peace efforts, we are reducing our presence to around 12,000 by the summer,” but “no decision for a further reduction has been taken and all of our steps will be conditions-based.”128

Separate from U.S. military personnel in Afghanistan are the DOD contractors who provide essential in-country support to U.S. forces and the ANDSF. As of April 2020, 27,641 contractors were serving in Afghanistan, about 40% (11,077) of whom were third-country nationals, 39% (10,711) were U.S. citizens, and 21% (5,853) were local nationals, or more than twice the number of U.S. troops currently in country. These contractors fulfill an array of important responsibilities, with most providing logistics and maintenance support (34%), security (19%), and support for U.S. military bases (14%), and the rest providing construction, translation and interpretation, transportation, training, and other services…129

The U.S.-Taliban agreement provides that “The United States is committed to withdraw from Afghanistan all military forces of the United States, its allies, and Coalition partners, including all non-diplomatic civilian personnel, private security contractors, trainers, advisors, and supporting service personnel” within 14 months. State declined to comment publicly on the issue of whether U.S.-funded contractors and other support personnel for the ANDSF are among those to be withdrawn…Contractors provide mission-essential support to the ANDSF in a number of areas, including some critical and costly U.S.-funded programs, such as Afghan Air Force (AAF)aircraft and ANDSF ground vehicles. 130

The forward deployed and combat elements of U.S. forces are small before the peace agreements, but they still underpinned the forward area training and combat support of the best ANDSF land forces, and even the current reductions in such forces may have a critical impact. ANDSF land forces are not ready to fight the Taliban without U.S. support if anything goes wrong with the peace process.

One key aspect of such cuts is that U.S. reductions are likely to cut both “persistent training” and “period training” of forward deployed ANA and ANP forces – a key command priority before the peace agreements that were signed. SIGAR noted that, “According to USFOR-A, the ANDSF this quarter continued to build capacity to self-sustain through persistent Coalition-force advising of the ANA and ANP,” with all the ANA corps and 30% of the ANP provincial chiefs of police (PCOPS) identified as the “targeted echelons for persistent advising ” and the other PCOPS and ANA brigades as the targeted echelon for “periodic advising.”131
The Afghan side of the training process has improved over time, but it is still weak and has serious problems with corruption. Moreover, the Afghan government has yet to show that it can even properly allocate the limited elite forces – like the Afghan Special Security Forces (ASSF) – it already has without U.S. help and guidance.\textsuperscript{132}

The same is true of the lack of progress in the Afghan Air Force. The Air Force is making progress, but that progress falls far short of the levels that would allow it to be a replacement for the U.S. airpower described earlier.
Chart Fifteen: Shifts in Afghan National Security Force Manning: 2016-2020

REPORTED ANDSF ASSIGNED STRENGTH SINCE 2016

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Note: This quarter’s data is as of January 26, 2020. ANA = Afghan National Army; AAF = Afghan Air Force; ANP = Afghan National Police; ANDSF = Afghan National Defense and Security Forces. No civilians are included in strength numbers. ANA strength numbers include the AAF and trainees, transfers, holdovers, and student personnel. ANP strength numbers do not include “standby” personnel, honorary reservists, or personnel not in service while completing training. The change in strength numbers from 2019 to 2020 is due to the transition of strength reporting from ANDSF-rereported figures to reporting from the Afghan Personnel and Pay System (APPS). The strength numbers reported here should not be viewed as exact: CSTC-A and SIGAR have long noted many data-consistency issues with ANDSF strength numbers, and CSTC-A always provides the caveat that it cannot validate ANDSF strength data for accuracy.


REPORTED ANDSF ASSIGNED STRENGTH FROM APPS

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<tr>
<td>1/2020</td>
<td>281,548</td>
<td>99,375</td>
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Note: This quarter’s data is as of January 26, 2020. The “as of” date of the data each quarter is between the 25th and 31st of the indicated month. ANA = Afghan National Army; AAF = Afghan Air Force; ANP = Afghan National Police; ANDSF = Afghan National Defense and Security Forces. No civilians are included in the strength numbers.


Other SIGAR and LIG Warnings of the Problems in the Afghan Security Forces

The problems in the ANDSF should not be exaggerated. However, they are serious enough so that CSTC-A has issued the following list of 10 improvement priorities – ones which cover virtually every element of force development.133

1. Leader development
2. Reducing the number of vulnerable checkpoints
3. Countering corruption
4. Improving logistics
5. Improving accountability of equipment
6. Reducing attrition through better care of soldiers and police
7. Standardization of training
8. Better MOD and MOI budget execution
9. Improving processes for paying soldier and police salaries
10. Improving ANDSF facilities

Both the SIGAR and LIG reports do document real progress. However, each Quarterly Report to date has raised a long list of troubling comments about the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF), and the most recent reports do the same. The SIGAR Quarterly Report for January 1, 2020 to March 31, 2020 raises the following issues, as well as flags yet another serious set of “reforms” – some of which reflect efforts to solve problems flagged in past reports with reform efforts that date back to 2003.

These details may seem a bit technical, but they provide a good warning of the many limits to Afghan forces, their dependence on outside aid, and the fact that a limited number of elite Afghan National Army units have often had to assume too much of the burden of demanding duties and heavy fighting and then have been dispersed to routine duties without time to recover and retrain.134

• Substantial and continued U.S. and international financial, military and contractor support is required to sustain the ANDSF as it is currently constituted. Without support, the ANDSF will struggle to maintain and operate certain types of equipment, vehicles, and aircraft; provide consistent logistics support across the force; and root out fuel-related and other corruption across its ranks. However, DOD reported that the ANDSF has made some recent, notable improvements in implementing systems such as the Afghan Personnel and Pay System (APPS), which accounts for ANDSF personnel and generates payroll calculations for the MOD, as well as the continuing growth and increasing capabilities of the Afghan Air Force (AAF) and the Afghan Special Security Forces (ASSF).135

• CSTC-A is adopting a new method for assessing, monitoring, and evaluating ANDSF performance to enable RS to “assess the people, places (units), and processes that are most vital to the viability of the ANDSF.” The new method, like the prior one, is built into the Advisor Network (ANET), the electronic system used by RS advisors to track engagements with and assess the performance and progress of their ANDSF counterparts…It is slated to become available for advisor inputs in April, with baseline assessments expected to be available to CSTC-A in May 2020…136

• CSTC-A told SIGAR this quarter that it believes the new evaluation method will be a significant improvement over the previous, narrative-only advisor evaluations. The old narrative assessments made it difficult for advisors and RS staff and leadership to use ANET in any meaningful way because the assessments were too subjective, or lacked historical context. …To increase rigor and reduce the possibility of arbitrary evaluations, the new method uses a Likert scale—a tool commonly used in surveys to measure
respondents’ attitudes, perceptions, or opinions, as in the common strongly agree/agree/neutral/disagree/strongly disagree rating questions…STC-A believes that using the Likert scale will generate quantifiable performance data that can reflect historical trend lines, making assessments useful for the command.  

- CSTC-A hopes this will improve U.S. and Coalition TAA efforts by objectives and efforts measured in the revamped ANET are not based solely on the Top 10 Challenges and Opportunities. For example, progress on ANDSF gender-related efforts are not specifically identified as one of the Top 10 Challenges and Opportunities, but are included in ANET because CSTC-A sees them as “important measures that help RS understand the overall progress of the ANDSF’s manner of governance.”

- This new method is the latest in a long history of DOD changing the methods it uses to assess ANDSF performance. Since 2010, U.S. and Coalition forces in Afghanistan have used at least four different methods, including the Commander’s Unit Assessment Tool (CUAT) from roughly 2010 to 2013, the Regional Command Assessment Report (RASR) from 2014 to 2015, the Monthly ANDSF Assessment Report (MAAR) from 2015 to 2016, and the security tracker for the Afghanistan Compact from late-2017 until recently. SIGAR has reported issues with each of these past systems, including that they did not provide a clear picture of ANDSF capabilities, had methodological inconsistencies that prevented identifying performance trend lines, or that data gathered on ANDSF performance using these systems became classified focusing them on the Top 10 Challenges and Opportunities that must be addressed in order for the ANDSF to become “institutionally viable,” meaning effective, affordable, and sustainable.

- …This quarter, DOD reported on RS efforts to optimize its TAA efforts and achieve unity of effort by empowering its Ministerial Advisory Groups for Defense (MAG-D) and Interior (MAG-I) and by realigning the 12 branches conducting ministerial advising under the direction and guidance of the MAGs. RS advisors who routinely engage with the MOD and MOI will now coordinate efforts through the MAGs to ensure consistency when communicating with Afghan officials.

- ANDSF personnel strength numbers sourced from APPS are 8% lower (roughly 25,000 personnel) than the Afghan-provided strength data reported during the same period in 2019 under the previous Afghan Human Resource Information Management System (AHRIMS). This is significant because assigned-strength numbers help inform CSTCA’s decision-making on how much money to provide for ANDSF salary and incentive payments, as well as for certain types of equipment.

- CSTC-A said it has deactivated 59,777 MOD and 6,539 MOI personnel records in APPS from July 1, 2018, through January 26, 2020. CSTC-A told SIGAR there are several reasons why ANDSF personnel records are retained in APPS after an individual is deactivated. First, it is very common for soldiers and police to return after long breaks in service. Retaining all personnel records within APPS makes it easier to reintegrate returning personnel. Second, if an individual is released for misconduct and tries to rejoin or join another service, the system can flag it. Third, as in the U.S. and other militaries around the world, retaining personnel records in the system allows for future verification of an individual’s service if needed.

- A key area of ANDSF performance improvement due to Coalition TAA this quarter was in checkpoint reduction, which RS has long identified as a priority. Dispersing troops among scattered checkpoints reduces overall combat power and offers targets for insurgent attacks. USFOR-A reported that the ANDSF is implementing its checkpoint-reduction plan based on intelligence estimates and analysis of enemy activity. USFOR-A says that the checkpoint-reduction plan has enhanced security in key districts while simultaneously reducing checkpoints that are less operationally important. They also said reducing the number of checkpoints has helped the ANDSF plan and execute operations to deny the enemy key terrain. These factors were “significant contributors” to higher ANDSF performance ratings.

- As of late March, MOD has reduced 220 checkpoints and repositioned its soldiers into 49 newly built patrol bases (the new standard fortified fighting structures for the MOD) or 19 checkpoints that were improved to become patrol bases. MOI has closed approximately 197 of the 200 checkpoints initially identified as the most dangerous for their personnel. While CSTC-A said checkpoint-reduction efforts have a long way to go—the ANDSF began with over 10,000 checkpoints locations across Afghanistan—CSTC-A assesses that its TAA efforts have “resulted in a marked improvement with respect to [its checkpoint] objectives.

- The creation of Regional Targeting Teams (RTTs), an effort supported by NATO Special Operations Component Command-Afghanistan (NSOCC-A) advisors, is another development that has led to better
ANDSF command and control capabilities at the regional level. RTTs now incorporate representatives from all regional ANDSF elements including the ANA, ANP, Afghan Special Security Forces (ASSF), and the National Directorate of Security. This has led to the ANDSF’s ability to coordinate and synchronize combat operations, increase the accuracy of operational reporting, and decrease decision-making times required to provide assets to an operation, improving their response to security crises across each region.145

- USFOR-A said the ANA corps are still working to fully develop their combined-arms capabilities, reduce static checkpoints, decrease response times to enemy activity, and protect areas of strategic value to the Afghan government.146

- Coalition force advisors assess that most ANA brigades demonstrated growth in “institutional viability” over the quarter, in (1) leadership development, (2) training, (3) personnel readiness, (4) attrition, and (5) sustainment. ANA brigades improved and are performing at or slightly above the “partially capable” rating in these categories.147

- DOD reported in December 2019 that ASSF elements are on track to double in size by the end of 2020, a reform goal laid out for developing the force in 2016 in President Ashraf Ghani’s four-year ANDSF Road Map.148

- 53% of this quarter’s ASSF operations were conducted independently by the ASSF and 47% were Coalition-partnered or -enabled, compared to last quarter’s 24% independent and 76% Coalition-partnered or -enabled operations. Prior to this quarter’s increase in independent ASSF ground operations, NSOCC-A said independent operations had declined due to a shift in advisor focus last summer from increasing ASSF’s independent operations to tackling issues with the misuse of the force.149

- While misuse is generally declining, it remains an important problem. For example, NSOCC-A, the element that advises the ANASOC, told SIGAR this quarter that, in one type of misuse, about 1,200 (6%) of roughly 19,000 ANASOC commandos are currently manning checkpoints instead of conducting offensive operations. (In June 2019, about 3,000 commandos were on checkpoint duty.) An additional 2,500 commandos are currently serving in other inappropriate conventional roles, meaning that a total of at least 3,700 ANASOC commandos (around 20% of the force) are being misused.150

- Similarly, the NSOCC-A continues to report problems with the misuse of the Special Mission Wing (SMW), the special-operations aviation unit that supports counterterror and counternarcotics ASSF missions. Because the SMW is designed and trained to have more specialized skills than the AAF, Afghan leaders frequently task the SMW with general support missions that the AAF are meant to conduct. The extent of the problem is apparent in the breakdown of mission sorties provided by NSOCC-A this quarter. In January and February 2020, the SMW conducted 321 stories, nearly half of which (155, or 48%) were general support missions for ASSF and non-ASSF units outside the SMW’s mission set, with the other166 sorties were appropriate (145 counterterror, 12 counternarcotics, and nine counternexus missions, which have both a counterterror and counternarcotics purpose).151

- In another change, MOD has merged its 13 branch schools into four “capability schools,” (which focus on combat arms, combat support, combat service support, and general service)...despite the growing numbers of soldiers attending these schools, DOD says the ANA still needs to provide soldiers with more advanced training and expertise in order to reduce casualties.152

- This quarter, CSTC-A’s Counter-Corruption Advisory Group (CCAG) found that previous reports in December 2019 that conditions were improving at the Kabul Military Training Center (KMTC), MOD’s troubled main training center, were based on inaccurate information provided to MAG-D by a corrupt senior MOD official...This senior official was actively attempting to cover up problems, having directed a fraudulent MOD IG investigation to obfuscate true KMTC conditions.153

- The Afghan National Army Territorial Force (ANA-TF) is the newest ANDSF force element and is responsible for holding terrain in permissive security environments. Falling directly under the command of the regular ANA corps, the ANA-TF is designed to be a lightly armed local security force that is more accountable to the government than local forces like the ALP. DOD says that some of the ANA-TF companies may replace conventional ANA companies, where authorizations exist, in areas where conditions are appropriate for the units to thrive. Following a final intra-Afghan peace deal...154
DOD assesses that the ANA-TF or similar construct may serve as a vehicle to reintegrate insurgent fighters. CSTC-A reported this quarter that the ANA-TF to lays largely struggled to gain full integration and acceptance from the ANA because the ANA-TF is a relatively new force element that is reliant on the regular ANA corps for leadership and supplies. CSTC-A said many ANA leaders fail to fully integrate the ANA-TF into their organizational hierarchy, but that CSTC-A’s TAA efforts and resultant focus on the growing ANA-TF by MOD leadership is beginning to yield increased integration and acceptance of the program. The recent reassignment of several ANA corps commanders has led to improved utilization and integration of the ANA-TF into ANA operations. Based on remaining integration concerns, RS recently placed a hold on the ANA-TF expansion to allow time and space for the ANA to focus on how integrating the ANA-TF impacts the ANA’s institutional viability.

According to DOD, the ANP are currently focused on transitioning from a semi-paramilitary security force to a more traditional police force that focuses on “community policing” and the rule of law. Over time, the Coalition has refocused its efforts away from combat training for the ANP towards community policing. As part of this transition, between June and December 2019, MOI replaced 27 out of 34 provincial chiefs of police. CSTC-A believes that while MOI has the institutional training capability to create professional police officers, “the combination of corrupt leadership within the ANP training pipeline and the ongoing conflict throughout the country hinders the MOI’s ability to transition from a paramilitary to a community policing force.”

The LIG Quarterly Report for the same period raises many of the same issues, and additional ones as well:

- Last quarter, CSTC-A reported that it changed the method by which advisors assess, monitor, and evaluate progress within the MoD and Ministry of Interior Affairs (MoI). This included standardizing metrics to assess the effectiveness of TAA efforts by incorporating the “assess, monitor, and evaluate” objectives that guide CSTC-A’s advising efforts.

- This quarter, CSTC-A reported to the DoD OIG that advisors now use “assess, monitor, and evaluate” functions in the ANET system as part of their daily TAA activities. CSTC-A stated that making the assessment part of the daily TAA activity improves the ability to monitor the performance as well as the ability to evaluate the overall progress of Afghan institutions. In this way, a more complete, consistent, and accurate understanding of ANSF abilities is possible over time.

- However, CSTC-A’s regular revision of the methodology for tracking ministerial progress and establishing a new baseline for its methodology and metrics makes it difficult to track progress over time. Previous Lead IG reports have stated that these changes make it difficult for the DoD OIG to assess progress of TAA efforts.

- For several years, USFOR-A has reported that the ANDSF relies too heavily on operating small checkpoints throughout the country. These checkpoints typically are temporary positions staffed by 10 to 20 soldiers and/or police without dependable logistics support or officer leadership. While checkpoints are intended to provide visible assurances to the local population that the government is providing security, the ANDSF assigned to static positions reduces the number of forces available to conduct offensive operations, and they often present easy targets. Furthermore, USFOR-A told the DoD OIG that attacks on checkpoints are a leading cause of ANDSF casualties.

- USFOR-A stated that it could not accurately estimate what percentage of ANDSF personnel were assigned to checkpoints. CSTC-A told the DoD OIG that the ANDSF had previously operated more than 10,000 known checkpoints across the country. The MoD and MoI, in compliance with an Afghan presidential decree to reduce and reinforce checkpoints, have developed plans to identify and mitigate the most vulnerable checkpoints, according to CSTC-A. According to CSTC-A, the ANDSF is in the process of identifying 400 of the most dangerous checkpoints so they can be removed or reinforced into more heavily fortified patrol bases if they have a high tactical value. CSTC-A has previously reported optimistic assessments to the DoD OIG of ANDSF efforts to reduce and reinforce checkpoints. For at least the last three quarters, CSTC-A has stated that “the ANDSF took steps” and “made great progress” toward this goal. However, Afghan government initiatives have struggled to achieve long-term gains since local Afghan officials want ANDSF checkpoints in their areas because they see checkpoints as evidence the government is providing security, according to CSTC-A.
• Previous Lead IG reporting raised questions about USFOR-A’s plans for the future of the ALP, the network of locally recruited security forces that were intended to provide security in Afghan villages and rural areas. This quarter, NSOCC-A confirmed plans to dissolve the ALP, which was staffed with about 18,000 members this quarter...163

• NSOCC-A reported to the DoD OIG that U.S. support for the ALP through the ASFF will end on September 30. NSOCC-A reported that to mitigate potential security risks associated with dissolving the program, the Afghan government developed a tentative plan for post-dissolution employment options and recovery of ALP weapons and equipment. The provincial headquarters will be responsible for collecting weapons and equipment from demobilized ALP personnel and will consolidate equipment at the Regional Logistics Centers for further disposition. DoS officials reported that implementing this strategy will be challenging, as ALP leadership has stated that they have limited ability to carry out the strategy and there is a lack of coordination with civilian public and private sector organizations that could help to find employment opportunities for former members of the ALP...164

• The demobilization plan, to be led primarily by the MoI, will dissolve ALP units by district, according to their assessed effectiveness and an estimated level of risk, and will include severance pay, depending on final MoD and MoI input, as well as CSTC-A approval... (p.25)... The MoI tasked provincial governors with finding civil employment for ALP members ineligible for recruitment. CSTC-A reported that it is encouraging the Afghan government to devise an Afghan solution to this issue...165

• The DoD OIG notes that unemployment in Afghanistan is extremely high, and the COVID-19 outbreak has exacerbated economic stresses in the country. It is unclear what employment opportunities the Afghan government will be able to create for demobilized ALP members who are not absorbed into other ANDSF units. Previous Lead IG reporting raised questions about whether well-armed but newly unemployed ALP members would join the ranks of violent extremist groups or local power brokers, who have previously used ALP units as their own private militias. 166

• USFOR-A did not provide additional details on how advisors assess ANA-TF effectiveness at the company level. At the ministerial level, the ANA-TF Coordination Cell continues to work toward creating more involvement from the Office of the National Security Council, which previously has not had a high level of involvement with the ANA-TF, according to CSTC-A...CSTC-A stated that the Office of the National Security Council is key in “identifying those districts deemed politically, socially, or economically important and providing the guidance and direction to the MoD in [the] employment of the ANA-TF.”167

• According to CSTC-A, the ANA failed to fully integrate the ANA-TF into its organizational hierarchy. USFOR-A reported that some among the ANA leadership do not consider the ANA-TF as a useful component of ANA operations... In addition, USFOR-A reported that some among the regular ANA forces believe that the ANA-TF, as an emerging unit, is somewhat “inferior.” Furthermore, some ANA regular commanders are confused with how to employ the ANA-TF, as well as how to equip them... According to CSTC-A, these perceptions have caused the ANA-TF to struggle with gaining full acceptance within the ANA...168

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• While Basic Warrior Training attendance and graduation rates remained relatively high, advanced specialty training school attendance remains low... The ANA currently has 11 schools divided among 4 specialty branches: Combat Arms Schools, Combat Support Schools, Combat Service Support Schools, and General Services Branch Schools. An MoD directive states that all ANA Basic Warrior Training graduates are
supposed to go directly to advanced training for their specialty role in the army. However, the ANA Chief of General Staff contradicted the MoD directive in 2017 when he directed that all basic training graduates be assigned immediately to their units, which then decide whether the soldiers should attend advanced training...

- Since 2017, the ANA has experienced low attendance rates at specialty schools and a commensurate low rate of soldiers proficient in their unique military occupational specialties... utilization rates at some ANA branch schools this quarter decreased while rates at others increased from last quarter. However, overall, attendance at specialty schools has increased since December 2018, when utilization rates at most ANA branch schools were below 25 percent...

- CSTC-A told the DoD OIG that it continued to advise the ANA that better trained soldiers are more effective and less likely to desert or become casualties, and that CSTC-A works with TAAC advisors to encourage corps-level commands to release personnel to attend the notionally mandatory advanced training... CSTC-A also told the DoD OIG that the ANA Chief of General Staff ordered a much higher proportion (52 percent) of the Basic Warrior Training class that graduated on February 24 to attend advanced training, and the MoD Universal Training Education Directorate Command continues to push the ANA General Staff to increase attendance rates at advanced training...

- This quarter, the ANA was short of meeting the current option year goal of a 70 percent work share of ground vehicle maintenance (see Table 2). The ANA performed 42 percent of tasks in January and increased to 53 percent in March. In the previous quarter, monthly performance ranged from 47 to 53 percent of tasks at maintenance sites. The ANP performed between 23 and 25 percent of its vehicle maintenance tasks per month, which was slightly higher than last quarter’s workshare, between 21 and 24 percent, but on average slightly below the current option year goal of 25 percent.

It is clear that the Afghan ground forces are not ready to stand on their own, particularly at the police and local levels. What is not clear is whether the reforms of the Ministries is reducing corruption and incompetence, how many ANA units are actually effective, what role U.S. elite forces and train and assist personnel played in recent fighting, what the level of morale is in afghan forces, and how they will view any actual peace plan and implementation. As the ARVN in Vietnam showed as well as the Iraqi forces that initially faced ISIS and its subsequent collapse also has shown, maintaining effective forces in a peace process or supposed state of peace can be far more difficult for new armies than official estimates and promises of reform indicate especially before they are actually tested by events.

Progress in a Limited Afghan Air Force/IS&R Force

The critical role that U.S. and Allied airpower have played in limiting Taliban gains has already been described, and the sortie rates involved have been shown in Chart Ten. These sortie rates do, however, understate the value of U.S. aid because they do not describe the number of unmanned IS&R sorties or the U.S. capability to carry out a massive targeting and persistent strike effort far outside the areas where Afghan ground forces operate. This involves a level of “fusion” between different intelligence sources, secure satellite collection and communication, and links between U.S. air and ground forces that will all depart along with the rest of U.S. forces.

The Afghan Air Force is just developing the capabilities to provide effective combat air support to Afghan ground forces, and there are no plans to give it anything like the persistent and deep strike capabilities of U.S. forces or similar IS&R capabilities. These forces are shown in Chart Sixteen. The LIG Quarterly Report for the first quarter of 2020 summarizes the current modernization plan as follows:

OUSD(P) reported to the DoD OIG that the DoD has not changed its strategy to transition the AAF from the Russian-made Mi-17 to U.S. rotary wing aircraft. However, the DoD has revised its procurement objectives for U.S. helicopters. According to its December 2019 semiannual report to Congress regarding security and stabilization in Afghanistan, the DoD approved the final phase of the Afghan aviation modernization plan,
under which CH-47 Chinook twin-engine, tandem rotor, medium-lift helicopters will replace the Special Mission Wing’s (SMW) Russian-made Mi-17 helicopters by 2023…

According to OUSD(P), CH-47s were not included in the original 2016 modernization plan because the DoD had not identified a feasible acquisition strategy. OUSD(P) stated that the DoD identified a strategy in 2018, which was approved as part of the overall aviation plan. Train Advise Assist Command–Air (TAAC-Air) reported that in order to sustain the aircraft, TAAC-Air calculated the amount of crews needed based on UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter deliveries and adjusted its plan has to ensure the AAF has the appropriate amount of crews for the amount of aircraft.

According to OUSD(P), the plan is to procure up to 20 CH-47s from the U.S. Army and transfer them to the SMW. The DoD also reduced the number of UH-60s provided to the AAF and SMW from a planned 159 to a total of 53. OUSD(P) told DoD OIG that the change was based on a 2019 review that determined Afghan requirements could be met with fewer UH-60s…. According to OUSD(P), the transition to the UH-60 is complete…

OUSD(P) reported that the SMW has identified pilot and maintainer candidates for the CH-47 program, and that these individuals were in English language training this quarter. Initial Entry Rotary Wing classes will expand from 20 to 25 students with the goal of providing for the additional pilots that the CH-47s will require. Afterward, prospective CH-47 pilots will attend a 9-month Aircraft Qualification Course conducted by contracted instructors at third country training locations using existing training contracts, after which they will attend 3 months of mission qualification training in Afghanistan, according to the DoD. OUSD(P) reported that it has planned a similar program to train CH-47 maintainers…

OUSD(P) officials stated that only the SMW will operate CH-47s to meet its requirement for a medium-lift aircraft capable of supporting special operations helicopter assault missions. OUSD(P) stated that it anticipates the CH-47 program will face the same challenges as any other aviation program, such as ensuring a sufficient quantity of qualified personnel entering the training program and synchronizing training and aircraft fielding timelines. In the case of the SMW, this will involve maintaining the required combat power as existing pilots undergo retraining for the CH-47. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has already caused delays in English language training for pilot candidates. According to OUSD(P), the FY 2021 ASFF request included $423 million for 10 CH-47s, parts, supplies, and equipment, which is a reasonable estimate and may vary slightly from the final appropriation.

TAAC-Air reported that the AAF had 194 aircraft as of the end of the quarter. Of the total AAF fleet of 194 aircraft, TAAC-Air reported that 154 aircraft were usable at the end of the quarter, which was a decrease from the previous quarter when the AAF had 167 usable aircraft out of a total of 193 … TAAC-Air defines a “usable” aircraft as an aircraft that is in the country and available for missions or in short-term maintenance. TAAC-Air reported that the AAF had two confirmed “Class A” incidents during the quarter, referring to events that cause a loss of life, serious injury, or more than $1 million in damage to the aircraft. The two incidents involved rotary wing (one Mi-17 and one Mi-35 aircraft) and occurred on January 8 in Balkh province.

This is limited progress in absorbing combat aircraft for a beginning air force, and the challenges involved are compounded by having to train most of the forces from the ground up while attempting to create effective operations and maintenance support in a country with limited literacy and commercial technical expertise.

The SIGAR Quarterly Report describes an Air Force that is still very much in transition in creating suitable readiness and operations capabilities, in spite of the relatively simple technical base for most of its assets,

…As of February 28, 2020, the United States had appropriated approximately $8.5 billion to support and develop the AAF (including the SMW) from FY 2010 to FY 2020. The main change since last quarter was to the FY 2019 funds allocated for the AAF. The initial appropriation budget for FY 2019 was $1.7 billion and is now $986.8 million, the lowest level of funding authorized for the AAF since 2016. The reduction is primarily related to a $191 million decrease for aircraft sustainment due to lower-than-projected costs of
contractor logistics support (aircraft maintenance) contracts and a $468 million decrease in equipment costs due largely to a reduction of the required number of UH-60 aircraft…

As in previous years, sustainment remains the costliest funding category for the AAF (65% of FY 2020 authorized funds). AAF sustainment costs primarily include contractor-provided maintenance, major and minor repairs, and procurement of parts and supplies for the AAF’s in-country inventory of seven air platforms: UH-60, MD-530, and Mi-17 helicopters; A-29, C-208, and AC-208 fixed-wing aircraft; and C-130 transport aircraft…

Given the significant investment, SIGAR is conducting an audit to assess the extent to which(1) the AAF and SMW developed and implemented vetting policies and procedures that help identify corruption and potentially corrupt individuals, and (2) DOD has taken steps to ensure that the AAF and SMW recruit, train, and retain qualified personnel intended to contribute to professional and sustainable Afghan air forces

… as of March 31, 2020, the AAF currently has 154 available aircraft and 177 aircraft in its inventory… TAAC-Air reported decrease of 12 available aircraft this quarter, and a decrease of seven aircraft in its total inventory. They said of the 12 aircraft to become unavailable for the AAF this quarter, one was a C-130 that went into depot-level maintenance; six Mi-17s became expired, were damaged, or were not returning from overhaul; one MD-530 was lost in combat; and four UH-60s were transferred to the SMW.

The AAF decreased flight hours considerably (by almost 26%), while the readiness of four of seven of its airframes increased this quarter (January–March 2020), compared to last quarter (October–December 2019). TAAC-Air said AAF flight hours decreased this quarter due to the reduction-in-violence period, which led to a decrease in strike missions; winter weather impeding flight operations (not out of the norm); and new flight rules due to the COVID-19 pandemic, under which the AAF only conducts combat sorties, not training sorties…

All airframes except the C-208 and the MD-530 met their readiness benchmarks, a slight decline from last quarter, when only one airframe (C-208) failed to meet its readiness benchmark…TAAC-Air explained that the C-208s had a large number of aircraft grounded this quarter due to a fuel-contamination issue at Kandahar Airfield at the end of January and the beginning of February, as well as long delays for repair parts, exacerbated by the pandemic conditions, which impacted several scheduled engine overhauls. The MD-530s had a safety issue that, until inspected and repaired, temporarily grounded the fleet…

The LIG Quarterly Report provides similar details, and it too warns how dependent the Afghan Air Force is on contractors – many foreign:177

Like the ANA and ANP, the AAF and the Special Mission Wing rely on contracted logistics support to provide most required maintenance on their growing fleet. Overall, Resolute Support aviation advisers are seeking to increase Afghan maintenance capacity so that Afghans can perform an increasing share of aviation maintenance tasks, with contractors continuing to perform the most complex tasks.

U.S. advisors organize Afghan aircraft maintenance in three levels of increasing complexity: launch and recovery, organizational, and intermediate, with three different skill levels within each category…

… Afghan aircraft maintenance personnel have traditionally performed a greater share of maintenance on the Russian-made Mi-17 helicopter, which is being phased out. Afghans still do not perform any maintenance on the UH-60 helicopters or C-130 aircraft. All maintenance tasks for the C-130 and UH-60 aircraft are provided by contracted, non-Afghan logistics support. However, TAAC-Air reported that UH-60 maintenance capability will improve as the first cadre of graduates of AAF Aircraft Maintenance Development.

Center and Aircraft Maintenance Training programs begin work… TAAC-Air reported that 40 UH-60 students graduated in mid-March. However, due to procedures implemented because of COVID-19, contracted logistics support personnel have been separated from their Afghan counterparts, significantly delaying their ability to report to work and meet training goals to the changing composition and complexity of AAF maintenance requirements from month to month.

It is all too clear that this is not a force that can compensate for the weaknesses in Afghan land forces, as U.S. and allied airpower have done to date. This will pose a major challenge in
structuring some kind of Afghan forces that can shape and maintain a peace in the face of Taliban and extremist challenges.

Afghan Air Force Useable Fleet, September 2018-March 2020

Percentage of AAF Maintenance Capability by Aircraft Type

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<td>C-130</td>
<td>0%</td>
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The Future Role of Taliban Forces

The Taliban’s forces present equally serious issues in creating a stable peace. The military branch of the Taliban is headed by the Amir’s two deputies, Mullah Omar’s son, Yaqoob, and Jalaluddin Haqqani’s son, Sirajuddin. Yaqoob Omar was appointed as the chief of the Taliban’s military commission, and Sirajuddin Haqqani leads the Taliban’s more hardline militant offshoot, the Haqqani Network.

While the leaders remain fairly consistent through a system based on bloodline, the actual fighters recruited by the Taliban are constantly changing. The Taliban has relied heavily on approximately two million Afghan refugees who are currently residing in Pakistan. With the constant influx of recruited members and the development of new commanders, the military branch of the Taliban operates its control through a decentralized structure.

A report by the UN Monitoring Team summarizes the Taliban’s strength as follows:178

Estimates by Member States of the number of Taliban fighters range from 55,000 to 85,000. As previously reported by the Monitoring Team, Taliban facilitators and non-combatants could bring the total figure to 100,000. Based on information available to the Monitoring Team, it is clear that the Taliban are not struggling with respect to recruitment, funding, weapons or ammunition.

Other open source estimates of the Taliban’s strength range from a core of 25,000 experienced fighters to levels well over 70,000 – with an unknown number of part time supporters and fighters. Senior U.S officers have said in the past that the Taliban definitely has over 60,000 fighters, but those estimates have not indicated the definition of fighters or a possible limit to the numbers above 60,000. They have made it clear that such fighters often change their allegiance from one group to another. These figures assume that the ties between the Taliban and the Haqqani network are now so close that they are virtually integrated.179

That said, there are no reliable “open source” estimates of the Taliban’s military organization and strength, and the quality and depth of ANDSF and USFOR-A classified intelligence and assessments of the Taliban is unknown. So is the ability of the central government to collect intelligence on Taliban forces if U.S. forces withdraw and/or if the Taliban forces transform as part of a peace settlement.

A peace settlement must find some mix of new roles for these forces, potentially creating them as separate units or absorbing them into the government’s forces. At the same time, they are supposed to assist in dealing with any extremist or terrorist forces that would “… use the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States and its allies.”

Finding such a radically different role for so many fighters would be difficult if there were sharp ideological divisions between the Taliban and the government forces, if a future Afghan government was likely to be united enough to easily compromise on how its forces were to be structured and used, and if the Afghan economy could create enough new job opportunities to absorb large numbers of fighters on both sides. Currently, none of these conditions apply.

At present, the Taliban forces are also highly decentralized, well disbursed throughout the country (See Chart Six) and have a high degree of local leadership whose motivation and commitment to ideology versus political power and status is unclear. Most combat units seem to be well armed with squad level as well as light and man-portable weapons. There are also many covert units in central government controlled areas that can gather intelligence, recruit, spread propaganda, and carry out target attacks and suicide attacks.
The level of control by the central Taliban’s leadership is uncertain, as is the authority and independence of each of the Taliban’s regional and political Shuras, and that of given local leaders. The number and nature of smaller units, loyalties to given Shura and factions, and the ability of the Taliban’s central leadership to shape strategy, control operations, and control levels and methods of engagement is unclear, but also untested compared to the new environment that a real peace settlement would require.

This fragmentation and decentralization now makes the Taliban forces difficult to target, but it may lead to splits over the peace process, over post-peace efforts to absorb and disarm Taliban forces, and over rivalries within given elements of the Taliban fighters and with outside local power brokers.

The Taliban’s leadership certainly faces a challenge in bringing all of the pieces of the military branch in a new role as part of some peacetime government – if a real peace is ever agreed upon. Reaching such an agreement will be no easy feat. The different radicalization of each branch and of the multiple commanders will not be conducive to form a consensus, and they will certainly be reluctant to disarm themselves after a “peace” is negotiated. Even during the current negotiations, different cells of the movement were still carrying out attacks and defying orders by the top political leadership.

**How Do You Create Afghan Forces for Peace?**

It should be noted that there are almost no reliable open source data on the organization, unity, combat leadership, and moral of the Taliban, ISIS-K, or Haqqani forces. They too have had nearly 20 years of stress and almost certainly have their own problems. At the same time, there are few reports of defectors, deserters, and internal clashes. Rebel forces can implode as well as government ones, but there is little evidence as of yet that this is likely to happen.

It is also all too clear that one of the key motives for joining the ANDSF has been the lack of any alternative jobs and the fact that the central government offers pay and the possibility of promotion and rises in status and pay. If a peace settlement is reached, the question will immediate arise as to how many men on each side will now be employed, what the incentives and disincentives are, and how each side – given factions, and power brokers – will try to exploit the situation.

Once again, a peace settlement may not change the fact that the real “voters” will be the men with the guns.
Afghanistan’s Critical Economic Challenges: Before and During the Coronavirus Crisis

Like the reporting on Afghan governance, most of the reporting on the Afghan economy precedes the impact of the Coronavirus crisis and the definitive failure of the Afghan Presidential election. This reporting also generally relies on uncertain sources, estimates rather than hard data, the future implementation of reform plans, and data that have been “spun” by the central government and sometimes aid donors to make the situation appear more favorable.

There has been real progress in some areas, but much of that progress slowed after 2008-2011, as the Taliban became more successful and the political turmoil in Afghanistan has since made reform plans even harder to implement. It has also become clear that the Coronavirus will have a critical impact on the Afghan economy, and that Afghanistan is already suffering as Afghans in Iran and Pakistan are now being pushed out of these countries.

For all the usual focus on growth in the GDP, this disguises critical problems that exist even if one ignores corruption and a pattern of income distribution that favors a comparatively small elite. Afghanistan has one of the lowest gross national incomes (GNIs) per capita in the world. The World Bank estimates are dated but show that Afghanistan’s GNI per capita in 2016 was only $570, a 5% decline from 2050. It was $550 in 2017 – a 3.51% decline – and $550 again in 2018. The CIA World Factbook indicates that Afghanistan has the 19th lowest per capita income in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms of any country in the world. While the figures again are dated, it estimates that 54.5% of the population lives below a very low poverty line in 2017, and unemployment was 23.9%.

The SIGAR April 2020 Appraisal

SIGAR provides a similar analysis in the economic profile in its April 30, 2020 Quarterly Report:

Afghanistan remains impoverished, conflict-affected, and heavily aid dependent. While the overall economic goal of the current U.S. strategy is to move Afghanistan from being a recipient of assistance to an enduring economic partner, donor grants totaling $8.5 billion per year (combined security and civilian assistance) currently finance approximately 75% of total public expenditures…Afghanistan’s real, licit GDP growth rate averaged just under 10% over the first decade of reconstruction, driven by donor funding and a large international troop presence. But the growth rate dropped substantially as the Afghan government assumed responsibility for the fight against the Taliban insurgency…

In more hopeful recent developments, the World Bank reported that the Afghan economy grew by 2.9% in 2019, catalyzed by the end of a prolonged drought and higher levels of snowfall and precipitation during the winter of 2018–2019…However, the Bank said that higher agricultural growth was partially offset by lower growth in the industrial and services sectors.

Despite the growth-rate increase, poverty likely worsened in 2019, the Bank added. Though favorable weather improved rural livelihoods for some Afghans, the effects were uneven, as continued internal displacement may have had adverse effects on the timing of agricultural planting. Overall, private-sector confidence remained weak in 2019, reflected in excess liquidity and stagnant loan-to-deposit ratios in the commercial banking sector.

While USAID says that, in the mid-term, its programs “will help accelerate private sector-driven and export-led economic growth,” slowing export growth in 2019, compounded by the global pandemic, challenges this expectation. The Bank expected that Afghanistan’s trade deficit would grow, with exports unable to keep pace with imports. Afghanistan’s poor licit trade situation is attributable to persistent conflict, the country’s landlocked geography (which significantly raises the costs of trade, relative to countries with direct access to
commercial sea routes), low levels of infrastructure and institutional capacity, and limited access to electricity and finance. However, these obstacles do not preclude Afghanistan from exporting large amounts of opium, which dwarf the country’s licit exports…

Although the Bank anticipated in late-January that growth would climb to 3.3% in 2020, that was before the emergence of COVID-19, which has since brought the global economy to a veritable standstill. The specter of significant economic disruption in Afghanistan due to the spread of the novel coronavirus looms large.

The Current IMF Country Report

Some of the best reporting on the Afghan economy comes from international organizations. The latest IMF country report on Afghanistan was issued on December 20, 2019 – and precedes the peace agreements and the arrival of the Coronavirus – but it is still grim. The summary states that,183

Afghanistan is a fragile, aid-dependent country where insecurity combined with episodes of political uncertainty and adverse weather events have kept real GDP growth below 3 percent in recent years. In early September, U.S.-Taliban talks on a U.S. troop withdrawal as a basis for peace negotiations were suspended, with uncertainty as to the timing of their resumption. Presidential elections were held at end-September, but results have yet to be announced. The international community continues to support Afghanistan with civilian and military assistance and is pressing for intra-Afghan peace talks and an immediate reduction in violence. The authorities have expressed an interest in a new financial arrangement to support reforms.

World Bank Cost of Peace Warnings

There is no way to know how either the real-world course of the peace effort or the impact of the Coronavirus will actually affect Afghanistan at this point in time. The World Bank has, however, issued a report called “Financing Peace,” which provides further data on the challenges Afghanistan faces.184

This analysis does not address key issues like narcotics, corruption, employment, trends in per capita income, inequities by region and faction, and distribution of wealth. Nevertheless, it makes key points that show Afghanistan still faces critical economic problems, and that the success of any peace effort is almost certain to be dependent on extremely high levels of external aid: 185

Under a baseline scenario of continued slow economic growth and moderate improvement in revenues, grant needs would range between US$5.8 billion and US$7.6 billion per year. US$5.8 billion per year would be sufficient to finance maintenance of existing services and gradual expansion of infrastructure in line with population growth. US$7 billion per year would be sufficient to finance current services and infrastructure with additional investments to support more-rapid growth (including human capital and infrastructure improvements). US$7.6 billion per year would be sufficient to meet current infrastructure and service costs, finance growth-enhancing investments, and provide resources for additional programs to sustain and consolidate peace, including through expanded community development and job creation programs.

A precipitous decline in grant resources, however, would force very difficult trade-offs between important policy objectives. A precipitous reduction in either security or civilian grants would force a choice between: i) sustaining security spending; ii) maintaining the delivery of basic government functions (such as social services and infrastructure); iii) undertaking required public investments to support faster economic growth and poverty reduction; and iv) delivering short-term benefits to Afghans following a political settlement to help to sustain and consolidate peace. Benefits of short-term post settlement programming are likely to be short-lived if they come at the cost of continued investment in the basic functions of government and the core service delivery mechanisms that have been built up since 2001.

Expectations should be realistic regarding the capacity of new grant-financed programs to deliver a substantial peace dividend. Resources available for delivering a post settlement dividend are likely to remain limited under any scenario, relative to the extent of grant support already being provided. The most significant benefits of a political settlement are likely to be realized if such a settlement leads to improvements
in security, political stability, and freedom of movement. Increased private sector investment, job creation, and access to services resulting from such improvements is likely to deliver much more significant and sustainable benefits than grant-financed interventions. This is especially the case given the current context of already-unsustainably high public expenditure and likely declines in grant support over the medium-term.

… Post-settlement programming is likely to occur in the context of tight resource constraints. Grant support to Afghanistan remains at extremely high levels. The future level of grant support is subject to substantial uncertainty, with current pledges extending only through 2020. Declines in grant support are expected over the medium-term.

… Public expenditure in Afghanistan is at high and unsustainable levels. Total public expenditure is equal to around 58 percent of GDP, much higher than average for a low income country. High total expenditure is driven by very substantial security sector expenditures. Security spending accounts for just over half of total expenditures. Security spending is equal to around 30 percent of GDP, compared to just three percent for the average low-income country.

… While revenue performance has improved significantly over recent years, total revenues fall far short of expenditures. Afghanistan has achieved remarkable progress in increasing revenues over recent years, with total government revenues increasing from around 8 percent of GDP in 2014 to around 13.5 percent today. Government revenues are currently comparable to those of other South Asian countries. However, total revenues are currently equal to only around US$2.5 billion dollars per year, while total on- and off-budget expenditures are equal to around US$11 billion per year.

Afghanistan therefore remains heavily reliant on grants. Reflecting the wide gap between revenues and expenditures, Afghanistan continues to rely on grants to finance 75 percent of total public expenditures. Total grants are equal to around US$8.5 billion per year. This is equal to around 45 percent of GDP, compared to an average of around 10 percent for low income countries.

… Economic growth in Afghanistan is currently too slow to reduce poverty and increase living standards. The economy is currently growing by around two percent per year, while the population is growing at around 2.3 percent per year. This equates to declining per capita incomes. Poverty rates are rapidly increasing, with the number of Afghans living below the basic needs poverty line (of around US$1 per day) increasing from around 39 percent in 2012 to around 55 percent today. The number of jobs available to Afghans is currently declining, while 300,000 young people enter the labor force every year. While a reduction in violence may facilitate improvements in growth, employment, and living standards, substantial public investments to improve services and expand infrastructure are likely to be needed to mobilize new growth sources that could drive a step-change in economic growth.

… Grant financing to both the civilian and security sectors is channeled through trust fund and bilateral mechanisms. The largest single source of on-budget civilian support to Afghanistan is through the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF), administered by the World Bank. The ARTF provides around US$800 million of on-budget grant support per year, complemented by around US$400 million of World Bank International Development Association (IDA) resources. Additional on-budget support is provided through the Asian Development Bank-administered Afghanistan Infrastructure Trust Fund (AITF).

… Current security sector expenditure in Afghanistan is approximately US$5.6 billion. Security expenditures are financed overwhelmingly through grants, with security grants equal to around US$4.9 billion per year… Under the assumption of an improvement in security conditions and realization of potential savings, security expenditures are projected to decline to around US$4 billion by 2024. This represents a US$1.6 billion reduction from current levels arising from both efficiency improvements and any potential change in force size and composition.

… The largest source of on-budget security support is the Combined Security Transition Command - Afghanistan (CSTC-A), which currently provides around US$900 million per year to the Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Interior. The UNDP-administered Law and Order Trust Fund for Afghanistan (LOTFA) provides an additional US$300 million per year of on-budget support.

Base civilian expenditure needs include the provision of basic services and infrastructure. Total on-budget base civilian expenditure is currently around US$3.6 billion per year. Of this amount, around US$1 billion is spent on salaries and wages, with the majority of salary expenditure allocated to social sectors. Other
operating costs are equal to around US$1 billion per year. Around US$1.2 billion a year is spent on capital acquisition, almost entirely through the development budget. These expenditures represent the core functions of government, including the delivery of health and education and key investments in roads, energy, and irrigation.

Base on-budget civilian expenditure needs are expected to grow over time. Base civilian expenditure needs are expected to grow over time for two primary reasons. Firstly, Afghanistan’s population is growing rapidly (at around 2.3 percent per year). Some level of expenditure growth is required simply to sustain the current level of services to an expanding population. Secondly, Afghanistan is currently significantly underinvesting in operations and maintenance (O&M) expenditures. GoIRA is taking on responsibility for operating and maintaining assets provided by donors. Previous analysis has shown that Afghanistan must increase investment in O&M expenditure to around seven percent of GDP to effectively sustain the current asset base and avoid a deterioration in services and infrastructure.

Based on conservative assumptions, base on-budget civilian expenditure needs are expected to increase to around US$4.2 billion by 2024. This represents an increase of around US$500 million per annum over current levels. This assumes: i) constant per capita on-budget expenditure on services and infrastructure (taking no account of potential expansion of services to new areas following a political settlement); and ii) Gradual increases in O&M expenditure to the equivalent of seven percent of GDP by 2024 (from a current level of around five percent of GDP).

The Asia Foundation Survey

The Asia Foundation Survey of the Afghan People summarized the state of Afghanistan’s economy in 2019 as follows: 186

Since Afghanistan’s 2014 transition, when Afghan forces assumed control of security from international forces, the Afghan economy has persistently experienced sluggish growth: 1.4% annual growth in 2015, 2.3% in 2016, 2.7% in 2017, and 1.0% in 2018, the slowest since 2001.1 International official aid, a main driver of this growth, dropped from USD 6.5 billion in 2010 to USD 4.3 billion in 2015 and has continued to fall since then.2 Nevertheless, the government remains dependent on grants, and a major part of its budget (51% of the budget for the fiscal year 2018/2019) is funded through donor assistance.

According to the World Bank, there are two major reasons for the economic downturn of 2018. First, in late 2017 and early 2018, Afghanistan experienced the worst drought in decades, which has caused a sharp decline in agricultural and livestock productivity. Second, the business environment and investor confidence deteriorated due to intensifying violence and ongoing political uncertainty…Poverty has grown deeper and more widespread due to drought conditions, internal displacement, and low economic growth. The bulk of the poor population lives in drought-affected rural areas, leading to a large increase in the number of the displaced, which has reached a record level of 298,000 individuals.

Roughly 54% of the population now lives below the national poverty line, compared to 38.3% in 2011–12. Poverty is inextricably linked with the quality and quantity of employment in the economy, especially when there is no social safety net for the unemployed. Nearly one-fourth of the labor force is unemployed in Afghanistan, and 20.5% of those who are working are underemployed, both staggeringly high numbers.

Unemployment is markedly higher for women than men across all age categories and education levels.6 Among all age groups, youth (15 to 24 years old) and senior citizens (age 65 and above) suffer from higher levels of unemployment than others.7 More than half of respondents, 55.0%, say the employment opportunities for their households have worsened. And, more than one-third, 31.1%, say that the financial situation of their household has worsened.

Despite the drought that brought reduced agricultural production and the threat of higher domestic food prices, inflation remained modest in 2018 due to lower food and vegetable prices in the greater region and increased imports of those items into the economy.8 The afghani depreciated 9.0% against the U.S. dollar in 2018, largely due to global strengthening of the dollar and to some extent to the outflow of U.S. dollars from Afghanistan to neighboring economies. The afghani’s rapid depreciation against the U.S. dollar continued through the first half of 2019, prompting concerns about rising price (especially for grain prices)...
Its survey of Afghan Public opinion found that, 187

...people remain deeply concerned about their household economy. Of the 58.2% of Afghans surveyed who say that the country is going in the wrong direction, 26.6% cite unemployment, 12.8% cite the bad economy, and 4.2% cite high prices. More than three-quarters of respondents (77.7%) perceive economic difficulties to be the biggest problem facing youth,1 and this is consistent regardless of gender or place of residence. This year, 54.9% of respondents say the employment opportunities for their households have worsened, similar to last year (57.2%).

It also found that there was no way to survey unemployment in a technical sense, but that, “Overall, 45.9% of respondents this year say they are involved in an activity that generates money, compared to 46.3% last year. Across all age groups, income earning is least common among 18- to 25-years-olds (36.2%)—presumably because they are students or lack job skills—and those of age 75 or above (33.1%). Generating an income is more common among respondents aged 26 to 65 years, more than half of whom (50.2%) say they do earn income. Lack of a social safety net in the country adds further pressure to the job market.”

The Limits of Outside Aid: Micro-Solutions Do Not Solve Macro-Problems

Both the SIGAR and LIG reports address the achievements and limits of economic aid, but the SIGAR report focuses heavily on critical details that warn that past and present aid efforts have had critical problems. SIGAR reports that the United States appropriated approximately $137.05 billion for reconstruction and related activities in Afghanistan since FY 2002 as of March 30, 2020. Total U.S. support of Afghanistan reconstruction funding was allocated as follows: 189

- $86.37 billion for security (including $4.59 billion for counternarcotics initiatives)
- $35.06 billion for governance and development ($4.36 billion for counternarcotics initiatives)
- $3.92 billion for humanitarian aid
- $11.70 billion for civilian operations

In addition, SIGAR reports that the United States has provided more than $15.89 billion in on-budget assistance to the government of Afghanistan since 2002. This includes nearly $10.30 billion provided to Afghan government ministries and institutions, and more than $5.59 billion to three multinational trust funds—the World Bank-managed Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF), the United Nations Development Program-managed Law and Order Trust Fund for Afghanistan (LOTFA), and the Asian Development Bank-managed Afghanistan Infrastructure Trust Fund (AITF). 190

SIGAR mentions, but does not analyze or assess, international funding of Afghanistan relief and reconstruction efforts through multilateral institutions. These institutions include multilateral trust funds; United Nations and nongovernmental humanitarian assistance organizations; and two multilateral development-finance institutions, the World Bank Group and the Asian Development Bank. The four main multilateral trust funds are the World Bank-managed Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP)-managed Law and Order Trust Fund for Afghanistan (LOTFA), the NATO-managed Afghan National Army (ANA) Trust Fund (NATO ANA Trust Fund or NATF), and the Asian Development Bank-administered Afghanistan Infrastructure Trust Fund (AITF). These trust funds have received $30.92 billion in total – $8.13 billions of which came from the United States. 191

Chart Seventeen shows that SIGAR reporting provides graph showing the massive turbulence and short terms peaks in economic aid. The SIGAR report also makes it clear that the ability to plan, execute, and monitor aid has declined steadily since the U.S. withdrew most of its combat
forces, and that most reconstruction aid programs have served only a tiny part of the Afghan population and economy – they have at best been “micro” solutions to the massive macroeconomic problems Afghanistan now faces. Some, like spending nearly $9 billion on counternarcotics, have proved to be little more than a waste of money.

Many individual programs did a great deal for the Afghans directly involved, and they were well shaped and managed by USAID officials that made considerable sacrifices to take the assignment, but a careful reading of the SIGAR Quarterly Report for the first quarter of 2020 shows that the same problems that affected military aid programs affected civil programs.192

The U.S. economic aid effort was far too small at the start, rose to erratic peaks, and then was generally cut to minimal levels. Annual tours of duty for U.S. personnel, constant changes in programs, a lack of control over spending and corruption, and a lack of proper monitoring of activity and effectiveness wasted much of the funding. Grandiose claims were often made for programs with token success – like the education and creation of job opportunities for women – and broader claims of progress in areas like health were countered by far less optimistic assessments by other U.S. government voices like the CIA.193

This is not an argument against aid. It is a warning that good intentions, pilot programs, and project aid do not change entire economies, and they do not win the support of large segments of the population. Scale, the quality and honesty of implementation, and honest reporting on effectiveness are critical.
Chart Seventeen: The Massive Fiscal Turbulence in Major Afghan Economic Aid Programs

Economic Support Fund (ESF)

USAID’s Office of Food for Peace (FFP) administers Public Law 480 Title II and International Disaster Assistance (IDA)

International Disaster Assistance (IDA) Funds

The “New Silk Road” is Actually the “Old Opium Road”

The Afghan economy also continues to rely on massive exports of narcotics, the country’s only major source of export income. Some current estimates indicate that Afghanistan now exports some 70% of the world’s traffic in natural opium, and a previous Burke Chair report notes that, ... the report can only make guesstimates about the economic impact of Afghan narcotrafficking. It seems clear, however, that narcotics have earned at least $2.0 billion in hard currency in recent years, and the total may well have been over $3 billion by 2017. The CIA World Factbook estimates that the total legal exports from Afghanistan only totaled $619 million in 2016. These legal exports would be only be 31% of the $2 billion figure for drugs and 21% of the $3 billion figure. This truly makes Afghanistan a narco-economy.

It is equally important to stress that narcotics are only part of Afghan criminal network activity and corruption – a critical issue in a country that Transparency International ranked as the sixth most corrupt country on the world in 2016, and whose rank had risen to fourth in 2017 – despite what were supposed to be major anti-corruption activities.

As Chart Eighteen shows, SIGAR’s April 30, 2020 report reinforces this analysis. It also states that, Afghanistan’s Economic Performance Is Highly Sensitive to Narcotics Trade: when illicit activity is included in Afghanistan’s gross domestic product (GDP), the success or failure of the opium trade is shown to have a greater impact on growth than any other factor. The country’s National Statistics and Information Authority (NSIA), which includes the opium economy in one version of its GDP figures, reported that when estimated opium production dropped by nearly 30% due to a supply surplus and a widespread drought in 2018, the Afghan economy contracted by 0.2%. That figure differs substantially from the NSIA’s licit-only growth rate figure of 2.7%.

By contrast, the NSIA reported that GDP growth including the opium economy in 2017 was 7.2%, due to a nearly 90% increase in opium production. Afghanistan’s licit GDP growth rate in 2017 was 2.7%, according to the Bank and IMF.

Unlike the NSIA, neither the IMF nor the World Bank consider the narcotics economy in their GDP growth estimates. However, there appears to be increasing interest from the Bank on this issue. In a March 2020 paper described by its authors as “the first … to consider impacts [of conflict] across formal, informal, and illicit activities simultaneously,” the Bank found that while violence in Afghanistan negatively impacted licit economic activity, conflict had little impact on aggregate economic activity due to the high prevalence of opium-poppy cultivation.

A later section of the SIGAR Report notes that, The IMF and the World Bank’s economic analysis ignores the most important factor to Afghanistan’s growth rate in recent years: the nourishing opium trade. Afghanistan’s National Statistics and Information Authority (NSIA), which includes the opium economy in one version of its GDP figures, reported that when estimated opium production dropped by nearly 30% due to a supply surplus and a widespread drought in 2018, Afghanistan’s economy contracted by 0.2%.

That figure differs substantially from the NSIA’s licit-only growth rate figure of 2.7%. Unlike the NSIA, neither the IMF nor the World Bank considers the narcotics economy in their GDP growth estimates.

By contrast, the NSIA reported that GDP growth including the opium economy in 2017 was 7.2%, due to a nearly 90% increase in opium production. Afghanistan’s licit GDP growth rate in 2017 was 2.7%, according to the Bank and IMF.

The impact the narcotics economy can have on Afghanistan’s economic growth rate is reflected by its size. According to the UNODC, the overall value of the opium economy in 2018 (between $1.2 billion and $2.2 billion) was equivalent to 6%–11% of the country’s licit GDP. As has become typical for Afghanistan, the value of opiates available for export in that year (between $1.1 billion and $2.1 billion) was much larger than the combined value of all licit exports ($875 million).
There is very little authoritative reporting on which elements of the central government or which power brokers support the illicit trade and are actively involved in narcotics trafficking, but the number has to substantially include actors in the government and some elements of the ANDSF. There also is little analysis of the extent to which in-country processing of the drug is replacing the export of raw opium, but this seems to be a logical development given the profit margins involved.

One thing that is clear is that the Taliban is deeply involved in the drug trade. **Chart Nineteen** shows that it did halt production for one year in 2001, but this was largely because previous exports had saturated the market and cut prices, alongside the fighting that preoccupied the Taliban. The UN report issued in May 2020 states that,197

> While heroin cultivation and production have provided the bulk of Taliban revenue for many years, the emergence of methamphetamine in Afghanistan is giving impetus to a major new drug industry with significant profit margins… Interdiction of methamphetamine was first recorded by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in 2014 (9 kilograms) and has continued on a sharp upward trajectory, with 650 kilograms interdicted in the first half of 2019. Methamphetamine was stated to be more profitable than heroin because its ingredients are low-cost and it does not require large laboratories. The Taliban were reported to be in control of 60 per cent of methamphetamine laboratories in the key producing provinces of Farah and Nimruz.

An essential precursor component for production, namely ephedrine, had previously been imported, but was now being sourced locally (in Afghanistan the plant is known as *Ephedra oxyphylla*). Interlocutors of the Monitoring Team had no estimate as to how much revenue the Taliban were deriving from it but UNODC observed that methamphetamine production was growing more quickly than could be monitored and had a profit margin that far exceeded that of heroin. Afghan-produced methamphetamine is being used by an estimated 95 per cent of heroin users in Kabul. Both UNODC and Combined Maritime Forces’ Combined Task Force 150 have recorded shipments of Afghan methamphetamine smuggled to Australia, Central Asia, the Gulf States, the Islamic Republic of Iran and South Africa.

In the period following the operations against ISIL-K in Nangarhar Province, evidence has emerged of how narcotics networks at the district and cross-border level drive financial flows to the Taliban. Over several years, the occupation by ISIL-K of key smuggling routes in Nangarhar blocked access to traditional growing areas and routes used by Taliban-affiliated networks. During that period, Taliban narcotics-related activity, based mainly in Hisarak and Sherzad Districts, were forced to use traditional road networks through government-held territory, increasing costs and the risk of interdiction for smugglers.

According to Member States, narcotic smuggling networks operate in Nangarhar and into Pakistan with the reported acquiescence of security officials who regulate and profit from the smuggling of heroin, hashish and other goods. Security officials reportedly allowed smuggling syndicates, known as *tanzeems*, to operate without fear of arrest in return for a portion of the profit. Revenues were ultimately shared between security officials, heads of the *tanzeems* and the Taliban. Interlocutors stated that this system was “a big source of revenue for the Taliban”.

53. Officials described a system of heroin smuggling and taxation organized by the Taliban that stretched across eight of Nangarhar’s southern districts from Hisarak to Dur Baba, on the border with Pakistan. Heroin produced in Hisarak in the westernmost area of Nangarhar was trafficked eastward through Sherzad, Khogyani, Pachir wa Agam, Deh Bala, Achin, Naziyan and Dur Baba. In each district smugglers paid a tax to district Taliban commanders of 200 Pakistan rupees (approximately $1.30), or its equivalent in afghanis, per kilogram of heroin. Smugglers were provided documentation by each Taliban commander certifying payment of tax before proceeding to the next district and repeating the same process. Afghan officials stated that the smuggling routes thus helped to financially empower each district Taliban commander…

So far, the peace negotiations have dodged around these realities, and the UN has conspicuously failed to provide the United Nations Offices on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) annual survey of the Afghan narcotics trade for 2019, and it only provides 2018 data on Afghanistan in its World Drug
Reports for 2019 – possibly because the U.S. has not provided the necessary data. As is the case with so many potentially embarrassing aspects of the peace agreement, withholding or classifying data and analysis seems to be a key tool in dodging critical issues.

The 2018 UNDOC report on Afghanistan warned, however, that the incentives for producing and exporting opium were growing and had long had a major impact on the rural part of Afghanistan’s economy. The continuing high levels of opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan create multiple challenges for the country, its neighbors and the many other countries that are transit for or destination of Afghan opiates. The significant levels of opium poppy cultivation and illicit trafficking of opiates will probably continue to fuel instability, insurgency and provide funding to terrorist groups in Afghanistan. More high quality, low cost heroin will reach consumer markets across the world, with increased consumption and related harms as a likely consequence.

Addressing the opiate problem in Afghanistan remains a shared responsibility. Only a small share of the revenues generated by the cultivation and trafficking of Afghan opiates remains in Afghanistan. This year’s decrease of the farm-gate value of opium means that less money is available for Afghan farmers to purchase food, have medical expenses, and purchase daily needs products. If no legal alternatives are made available to help Afghanistan and its impoverished rural population to cope with its economic and social challenges, the current negative consequences of the already existing large-scale production of opiates will be reinforced.

The illicit economy, which in many provinces has permeated rural societies and made many communities dependent on the income from opium poppy, will constrain the development of the licit economy and potentially further fuel corruption. If prices continue to decrease, the situation of already impoverished farmers will become even more precarious, with the potential consequence of further expansion of the area under cultivation at cost of other, licit crops. The continued availability of cheap opium and heroin in the country might affect opiate use and its social and economic costs for drug users, their families, and for society in general.

While opium production has fallen considerably compared to last year, it is still at a high level and billions of dollars will be made from converting opium into heroin and trafficking it into major consumer markets, mainly in Europe and Asia. Moreover, the transformation of opium into heroin is likely to bring increased trafficking of precursor substances. Tons of precursor chemicals will potentially be diverted from licit international markets and smuggled into Afghanistan to supply manufacturers of heroin.

To support the Afghan Government in its efforts to counter illicit crop cultivation, continuing analysis and monitoring of the links between the rule of law, illicit drug cultivation, production, and trafficking is required. In addition, more information would be needed about changes along opiate trafficking routes in transit and destination countries, including information about use and prices, to be able to determine possible consequences and policy considerations for Afghanistan and the international community of the continuing high opium production.

… The continuously decreasing prices point towards a market saturation. Even though supply of opium reduced compared to the last year, the still very high levels of production seem to overfull-fill the demand in the market, which reacts with decreasing prices for opium gum.

The UNDOC World Drug Report for 2018 reflects similar trends. Growing by some 37 per cent from the previous year, the total global area under opium poppy cultivation has doubled since 2006 to reach almost 418,000 hectares in 2017. This was primarily the result of a marked increase in opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan, which accounted for 86 per cent of global opium production in 2017. There is no single reason for the increase in opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan as many complex and geographically diverse elements influence farmers’ decisions to cultivate opium poppy. A combination of events, including political instability, corruption and a lack of government control and security may have exacerbated rule of law challenges. By shifting its focus to combatting anti-government elements in densely populated areas, the Afghan Government may have made the rural population more vulnerable. A reduction in the engagement of the international aid community may also have hindered socioeconomic development opportunities in rural areas.
The UNDOC World Drug Report for 2018 provided a further analysis stating that,\(^\text{200}\)

The surge in global production primarily reflects an 87 per cent increase in opium production in Afghanistan to a record high of 9,000 tons, equivalent to 86 per cent of estimated global opium production in 2017. The increase in production in Afghanistan was not only due to an increase in the area under poppy cultivation but also to improving opium yields.

There is no single reason for the massive increase in opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan in 2017 as the drivers are multiple, complex and geographically diverse, and many elements continue to influence farmers’ decisions regarding opium poppy cultivation. A combination of events may have exacerbated rule-of-law challenges, such as political instability, corruption, a lack of government control and security.

The shift in strategy by the Afghan Government — focusing its efforts on countering anti-government elements in densely populated areas — may have made the rural population more vulnerable to the influence of anti-government elements. A reduction in the engagement of the international aid community may also have hindered socioeconomic development opportunities in rural areas.

As a result of the massive increase in opium production in 2017, opium prices fell in Afghanistan by 47 per cent from December 2016 to December 2017. However, the price of high-quality Afghan heroin decreased by just 7 per cent over the same period, which may be an indication that heroin manufacture to date has increased far less than opium production.

Of the 10,500 tons of opium produced worldwide in 2017, it is estimated that some 1,100–1,400 tons remained unprocessed for consumption as opium, while the rest was processed into heroin, resulting in an estimate of between 700 and 1,050 tons of heroin manufactured worldwide (expressed at export purity), 550–900 tons of which were manufactured in Afghanistan.

The UNDOC survey for 2018 also makes it clear, however, that the only serious limits on narcotics production are rainfall disease and the fact that global oversupply limits the price. It provides the data shown in \textbf{Chart Nineteen}. It shows that the only successful counternarcotics effort was in 2001 – a major war year and one in which the Taliban restricted planting more because of oversupply relative to price than out of any ideological considerations – compared to production in the previous years of Taliban’s governance shows. As for production in the post-2001 period, it is clear that counternarcotics efforts have only had token impacts, and the maps of crop growth shown in the full UNDOC survey for 2018 show the Taliban has since tolerated and exploited narco-trafficking for its own benefit. If there is a major force affecting Afghan production, it is now the increase competition from cheaper and stronger synthetic opioids.

SIGAR’s \textit{Quarterly Report for January 1 - March 31, 2020} shows that the U.S. programs have lost virtually all of their funding, and reports that the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) is not able to confirm the claims made by the MOI’s Deputy Minister for Counter Narcotics, Mohammad Hashim Urtaq, who issued a report on April 7, 2020. SIGAR also reports that INL states,\(^\text{201}\)

“\textit{further reported that crop eradication has been on a long-term downward trend, in part due to opium-poppy cultivation in inaccessible or insecure areas. As of late February 2020, INL had no plans to provide direct financial support to MOI for crop eradication in 2020... According to INL, it was not planning to provide direct financial support because it cannot verify eradication performed under the MOI...}”

It seems clear from other reporting that the U.S. has virtually given up on this effort. The LIG report for 1 January – 31 March 2020 states that, “the 2019 staffing review at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul reduced the number of DoS Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) direct hire and contract support personnel in Afghanistan by 87 percent. With fewer INL
personnel and a largely unchanged work demand, INL reported that there were fewer hours available for oversight of INL programs and projects in Afghanistan.”
Chart Eighteen: Afghan Trade Relies on Staying a Narco-State: Afghan Legal Exports versus Estimate Opiate Exports in 2018

The estimated value of opiate exports in 2018 was nearly twice the value of licit exports. An estimate of 2019 opiate exports is not yet available.

Note: The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) publishes authoritative annual estimates of opiate exports. The UNODC expresses that value as a range. The bar representing the estimated value of opiate exports in 2018 represents the midpoint ($1.8 billion) of the 2018 range ($1.1 billion–2.1 billion) reported by the UNODC. While the UNODC figure is technically the “value of opiates potentially available for export” rather than an estimate of the value of actual exports, it is the best figure available to express the comparison with licit exports. Notably, while the value of licit exports, denominated in afghans, has gradually risen over the last several years, according to official figures, the estimated value of opiate exports is far more volatile. For example, in 2017, the value of opiates potentially available for export was $4 billion–6.5 billion, according to the UNODC.


SIGAR, Quarterly Report to Congress, April 30, 2020, p. 132.
**Chart Nineteen: Opium Production in Afghanistan: 1999-2018**

Farm-gate prices of dry opium at harvest time weighted by production and annual opium production, 1999-2018 (tons; US dollars per kilogram)

Source: UNDOC, *Opium Survey 2018*, p. 44.

**Coronavirus Warnings**

A range of sources highlight the growing impact of the Coronavirus on the Afghan economy and the peace process. The World Bank has made a preliminary review of the economic impact of the peace agreements and the Coronavirus in its April 2020 “overview” of the Afghan economy. Like many World Bank reports, much of the analysis is optimistic, but it still warns of the economic challenges that any effort to implement a peace plan will face:

Afghanistan’s economy grew by an estimated 2.9 percent in 2019, driven mainly by strong agricultural growth following recovery from drought, but lingering political uncertainty dampens private confidence and investment, with the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan recording 3,403 civilian casualties in 2019, and more than 1.1 million Afghans internally displaced due to conflict. The surge in returns by an estimated 1.7 million documented and undocumented Afghan refugees during 2016-2017 remains a pressure on the country’s economy and institutions. Internal displacement and large-scale return within a difficult economic and security context pose risks to welfare for the displaced and for host communities.

… Substantial improvements in development outcomes have been observed in Afghanistan since 2001, particularly in expanded access to water, sanitation and electricity, education, and health services. Macroeconomic management remains strong, government revenues have grown consistently since 2014, and the government has engaged in an impressive range of business environment and public financial management reforms. Expanded access to health, education, and infrastructure has seen rapid improvements in outcomes, with Afghanistan catching up with other low-income countries against key development
indicators. While progress has been uneven, increased access to services and infrastructure has driven huge development gains.

*At the same time, Afghanistan continues to experience insecurity and political uncertainty.* Presidential elections were held in September 2019, but the outcome remains contested. Afghanistan’s economy has been hard-hit by the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus, due to negative impacts on consumption, exports, and remittances. Conflict is ongoing, and 2019 was the sixth year in a row when civilian causalities in Afghanistan exceeded 10,000. The displacement crisis persists, driven by intensified government and Taliban operations in the context of political negotiations. The number of conflict-induced IDPs increased from 369,700 in 2018 to more than 400,000 in 2019. An additional 505,000 refugees returned to Afghanistan, mainly from Iran, during 2019.

Negotiations between the US and the Taliban have concluded by signing of the “Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan” on February 29, 2020, but the process of a political settlement is only beginning. *Meanwhile, the duration and extent of continued international security support is being questioned.* Current international security and civilian grant support pledges are due to expire in 2020, creating uncertainty regarding future aid levels and the sustainability of security and development expenditures. This has fundamental implications for the economy, with growth and investment constrained by weak confidence.

Afghanistan’s economy is estimated to have grown by 2.9 percent in 2019 driven by easing of drought conditions and rapid agricultural growth. Inflation remained modest at 2.3 percent. *The trade deficit remains extremely large, at around 31 percent of GDP, financed mostly by grant inflows. Fiscal performance continued to improve in 2019 despite the elections with domestic revenues reaching 14.1 percent of GDP. Political uncertainties, however, dampened private sector confidence and non-agriculture growth. The basic needs poverty rate was 55 percent at the time of the last household survey (2016/17) and is expected to have worsened since due to declining per capita incomes.*

*The economy is expected to contract by up to four percent in 2020 with the negative impacts of the COVID-19 virus overshadowing improvements in weather conditions. Additional substantial downside risks remain, including political instability, deterioration of security conditions, premature reduction in aid flows, and further adverse regional economic or political developments. Poverty is expected to remain high, driven by weak labor demand and security-related constraints on service delivery.*

Short-term priorities include continued implementation of business environment and anti-corruption reforms to improve private sector confidence, mobilize investment, and ensure confidence of the international community. Over the medium-term, reform efforts should focus on attracting additional investment in the agriculture and extractive sectors, which have the combined potential to deliver increased employment, exports, government revenues, and growth. To ensure that benefits of agriculture and extractives led growth are maximized and widely shared, continued investment is required in human capital, regional connectivity, expanded infrastructure, and an improved business regulatory environment.

The Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR) *Quarterly Report* for the first quarter of 2020 has a special introductory section on the Coronavirus, which maps its rapid growth as it spread from Iran, and it notes the severe limits in Afghan health capabilities to deal with the virus. It warns that the peace process must proceed in spite of the Coronavirus crisis, which had then been identified in 29 of Afghanistan’s 34 provinces as well as in all of the major populated areas controlled by the central government. The disease had forced the lockdown of many populated areas by March 14, 2020 – and Afghanistan was dealing with a flood of some 226,000 Afghans that had already come back from Iran.

The Lead Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction’s *Quarterly Report* for the same period also provided warnings about the uncertainties in the peace process, the impact of the Coronavirus, and the fact that the peace agreements were uncertain and have scarcely ended all of the fighting:

Afghanistan could be severely affected by the outbreak, according to the international assistance community…Mercy Corps, a global humanitarian organization that partners with the U.S. Government in Afghanistan, assessed that the COVID-19 pandemic will place significant strain on the Afghan economy,
overburden an already weak healthcare system, and potentially force millions of people deeper into poverty.45 Without sufficient action, the Afghanistan Ministry of Public Health estimated that 25.6 million Afghans would likely be infected with COVID-19 and 110,000 could die.207

… More than 200,000 Afghans returned from Iran this quarter, some because of the collapsing Iranian economy and others because of the COVID-19 outbreak there…. According to OCHA, Iran had 41,495 confirmed cases of the disease as of March 31, 2020…While flights to and from Iran were suspended, the border crossing at Herat remained open for individuals and commerce, and the border crossing at Nimroz remained open only for commerce and documented Afghans… The International Organization for Migration reported a surge in undocumented Afghans over a 2-week period in mid-March when a record 115,410 returned from Iran, although the large wave of returnees subsided in the following week…Overall, the number of returnees from Iran in the first 3 months of the year increased by 124 percent over the same time period in 2019 to approximately 215,400… According to media reports, health screening at the border was rudimentary for most returnees… On March 31, media reports stated that Afghanistan had reopened its border crossings with Iran to discourage returnees from entering the country through illegal routes…

… Testing in Afghanistan had only occurred on a small scale, which may explain the relatively low number of confirmed cases, according to OCHA, in spite of the increase in the number of individuals crossing into Afghanistan from Iran.324 According to OCHA, the WHO supported the government of Afghanistan in establishing four testing facilities, two in Kabul, one in Herat, and one in Nangarhar province, with plans to begin operation at an additional testing facility in Mazar-i-Sharif in early April and increasing to 15 test facilities across the country by the end of April…

Other reports indicated that Afghanistan had recorded 8,678 confirmed cases and 193 deaths as of May 21, 2020.210 With the already poor health of most of Afghan’s population due to Afghanistan’s lack of adequate healthcare infrastructure, the country is at a higher risk of spreading the disease. Furthermore, most Afghans depend on daily wages and cannot observe social distancing measures.

The central government and the Taliban must adjust to the significant setbacks that the Coronavirus crisis presents. Both entities are vying to provide an adequate response to the crisis. However, the Afghan government does not have the proper equipment to deal with the pandemic and multiple staff members of the presidential palace have already tested positive for COVID-19.

Meanwhile, the Taliban has deployed teams to hand out medical supplies, such as masks, gloves, and soap, in an attempt to promote its legitimacy. Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid said, “We can’t completely stop our attacks… because [the government is] compelling [these attacks]. God forbid, if the virus spreads in the country, then we could stop fighting to control the situation.”211

The Coronavirus may also be having serious effects on the negotiations. On June 1, 2020, Foreign Policy reported that the current Emir Mullah Haibatullah Akhunzada was facing serious health conditions after being infected with the virus, and it was also reported that Sirajuddin Haqqani, who is in charge of the Taliban’s militant offshoot, caught COVID-19 as well.212 The second military deputy and son of former Mullah Mohammed Omar, Yaqoob Omar, has taken the roles of administrative, operational, and military leadership. His consolidated command may only lead to his inevitable prominence as a spiritual leader, and he may resume the prominence his father held in the Taliban’s structure. The Coronavirus may effectively be shaping the leadership of the Taliban, but only time will tell.

### Barriers to Doing Business and creating an Effective Private Sector

Moreover, the Afghan government also still imposes numerous barriers to the development of its private sector. As Chart Twenty shows, the World Bank indicates that Afghanistan has the 17th worst “Ease of Doing Business” ranking in the world.
These are critical issues, given the low effectiveness of the Afghan government; the central government’s corruption; and the problems that will arise in dealing with the conflicting objectives of the central government, Taliban, and various power brokers if a peace is actually achieved. Token aid programs cannot create the momentum behind the major and consistent expansion of private sector financing and enterprise that Afghanistan needs.

The Cost of Peace and A New Taliban Threat

The economic data do more than reflect the economic challenges to Afghan development and any form of stable peace. They show that even a working peace will require a major restructuring of how Afghan governance deals with the economy, a far more effective approach to development, an agreement between two radically opposed ideological approaches to economics, an exceptional dependence on outside aid at a time when donor countries face major strains on their spending, and an almost immediate implementation of a comprehensive development and reform plan that both the factions within the central government and the Taliban will support.

Moreover, Taliban support of a modern economy is a critical issue. Afghanistan’s population growth alone means that the Taliban’s ideology will become a critical economic issue. Will the Taliban will support a modern economy in a world with little tolerance for ideologies that prevent effective competition for investment, economic growth, and trade?

The present peace process is in danger of falling apart by ignoring the fact that the Taliban has become a Mafia-like structure in terms of its real world financing while still pursuing an ideology that calls for it to live in a neo-Salafi past that never really existed. If a peace is implemented, the Taliban have no real plans or goals for a workable economic future. The UN reports that the Taliban’s “economy” is not only based on drugs, but upon extortion and the creation of smuggling networks that now control large portions of the trade into Central Asia and Pakistan:

Estimates by Member States and others of overall Taliban annual combined revenues range from $300 million to upwards of $1.5 billion per annum. While officials noted lower figures for 2019, they were careful to note that the Taliban used resources effectively and efficiently and were not experiencing a cash crisis. Lower sums were assessed to be the result of a combination of factors: reduction in poppy cultivation and revenue, less taxable income from aid and development projects, and increased spending on “governance” projects.

The group was thought to be expanding revenue streams through increased road taxation fees, now possible as the Taliban have expanded control over highways and many road networks in the north of Afghanistan. Ushr and zakat taxation has also increased in areas controlled by the Taliban close to urban populations. In addition, the retaking of large poppy-cultivating areas in Nangarhar was expected to counter financial losses incurred as a result of Afghan Forces regaining control over certain mineral mines in Badakhshan Province. Overall, the Taliban are currently able to levy taxes on almost all infrastructure, utilities, agriculture and social industry in areas under their control or influence. The Taliban have conducted notable extortion campaigns during the past year against mobile telephone providers and electrical supply companies.

… Interlocutors in the north-east of Afghanistan highlighted the role played by Tajik criminal networks in facilitating the movement of narcotics from Afghanistan into Central Asia … Officials described a system of heroin smuggling and taxation organized by the Taliban that stretched across eight of Nangarhar’s southern districts from Hisarak to Dur Baba, on the border with Pakistan…

Adding the Taliban to the many problems created by a corrupt and inadequate central government is yet another major challenge to a stable peace. And, a peace that makes the reform of Afghan governance and the Afghan economy even less probable or will come at an immense price to both the nation and its people.
## Chart Twenty: Afghanistan’s Dismal Performance in the World Bank Ease of Business Rating

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*Source: Doing Business database.*

Note: The rankings are benchmarked to May 1, 2019, and based on the average of each economy’s ease of doing business scores for the 10 topics included in the aggregate ranking. For the economies for which the data cover two cities, scores are a population-weighted average for the two cities. Rankings are calculated on the basis of the unrounded scores, while scores with only one digit are displayed in the table.

Strategic Triage: Supporting a Peace or Writing Off a Failed Security Partner?

No one can easily write off a nation because of its current sets of problems or the failures of its current leaders. If Afghanistan can move towards clear solutions to enough of these problems so that it can actually create even a credible springboard for a lasting peace, it will clearly be worth the cost of continuing U.S. support – particularly if any viable peace option can be developed.

The analysis also warns of many possible problems and that peace efforts often fail – even after a peace seems to be in place. At least half of these problems are created by the divisions and failures of the Afghan central government. They range from military, financial, and governance problems to a self-seeking political structure that is divided against itself, power hungry, and often has a character more suited to a kleptocracy than the needs of its people.

At the same time, both the United States and the Afghan government are now negotiating on the basis that the Taliban would be willing to share power for the sake of peace in Afghanistan. So far, the Taliban has demonstrated through its use of violence and its rejection of the need to change its policies and ideology, that these assumptions may well be false.

The Taliban’s ongoing violence, statements that indicate that it has not changed its ideology or goals, and its preoccupation with prisoner releases should raise some red flags. Not only did the Taliban leverage the rate it carried out attacks to encourage the prisoner release, they were also brought back to the negotiating table only when the Afghan government would release more prisoners. As the Taliban is reunited with its leaders who were formerly imprisoned, their willingness to compromise on their ideology with the central government may devolve into another reinvigorated campaign against the West.

If Afghanistan cannot move forward, this analysis warns that it is time for some grim decisions. It is one thing to help a country that helps itself, it is quite another thing to attempt to waste resources in trying to protect a state that suffers from so many self-inflicted wounds that it cannot move forward or use aid effectively.

Strategic triage is an unpleasant exercise at best – and the Afghan people deserve far more than their present government and warring leaders provide – but the United States now operates in a world where hard choices need to be made and one where many alternative countries and real strategic partners have shown that they can use aid effectively to help themselves.

To put it bluntly, the United States may well have to choose between getting out without a real peace and staying indefinitely in country without a real government – which is slowly losing the war and is also facing a massive economic crisis. If the United States stays in Afghanistan under the present conditions, it will be backing a government that will be indefinitely dependent on outside aid – whose strategic value has declined from being the center of international al Qaeda terrorist activity to being just one more center of extremist violence in a world where many other such countries can be similar potential sites for such terrorist activity.

The U.S. will also be spending resources on Afghanistan that would have more humanitarian value if they went to countries that could help themselves, had lower levels of corruption and waste, and actually served the interest of their people. Quite aside from the selfish merits of a “realist approach” to security, the grim reality is that every humanitarian action involves tradeoffs in resources that benefit one nation at the expense of another. This is far more true in the Covid-19
period than in the past. Nations already at peace that have proven to be strategic partners will need aid, and “triage” in aid will be just as important as “triage” in allocating military forces and choosing a strategy.

Moreover, the choices involved for the United States in making decisions about strategic triage are regional as well as national. It is one thing to work with a valid strategic partner where U.S. military and civil aid can provide regional advantages as well as offer limited advantages to a given partner country. In Afghanistan’s case, however, the U.S. has many higher priorities outside Central Asia, and it has every reason to burden many of Afghanistan’s neighbor with this problem. The United States might actually gain far more by focusing on other regions and by leaving neighbors like Russia, China, Iran, and Pakistan with the problem of dealing with Afghanistan on their own.

Additional data on the problems in the Afghan politics, governance, security, and economics are available in another Burke Chair report, *Afghanistan at Peace or Afghanistan in Pieces – Part One: The First Phase*.215
1. Asia Foundation, *A Survey of the Afghan People, Afghanistan in 2019*, p. 15, https://asiafoundation.org/where-work/afghanistan/survey/. Note that this poll is the Asia Foundation’s fifteenth annual public opinion survey in Afghanistan. The Asia Foundation states that, “It has gathered the views of more than 129,800 Afghans since 2004. A national sample of 17,812 Afghan respondents aged 18 years and above were surveyed face-to-face across all 34 provinces from July 11 to August 7, 2019. A team of 1,279 enumerators (604 females, 675 males) and 35 field supervisors conducted the fieldwork. The sample is 51% male and 49% female, 18% from urban households and 82% from rural households, and weighted to be gender balanced (50:50) and nationally representative (75.1% rural, 24.9% urban) using the most recent 2018–2019 population data from the National Statistics and Information Authority (NSIA). This year’s margin of error at the 95% confidence interval with p=.5 is 1.16% based on a design effect estimate of 2.475. Of the respondents, 15,930 (89%) were randomly selected, while 1,882 (11%) were the subject of “intercept” interviews, which are conducted with individuals who live in inaccessible areas but are not randomly selected. All data presented in the report represents the 15,930 randomly selected individuals unless otherwise indicated.”


5. The United States has signed three agreements. The first is an agreement for bringing peace to Afghanistan, which is not recognized by the United States as a states and is known to the Taliban, signed on February 29, 2020, https://www.state.gov/agreement-for-bringing-peace-to-afghanistan/. The second is a *Joint Declaration Between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States of America for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan*, signed on February 29, 2020, https://www.state.gov/joint-declaration-between-the-islamic-republic-of-afghanistan-and-the-united-states-of-america-for-bringing-peace-to-afghanistan/. The third is a joint statement agreed by Special Envoys and Special Representatives of the European Union, France, Germany, Italy, Norway, the United Kingdom, the United Nations and the United States of America on the occasion of the signing of the U.S.-Taliban Agreement on February 29 in Qatar, and issued on March 9, 2020, https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-the-signing-of-the-u-s-taliban-agreement-2/.


7. Texts taken from the drafts provide on the White House webpage.


12. The February 29 U.S.-Taliban agreement states that the United States will reduce the number of its forces in Afghanistan from approximately 13,000 to 8,600 and the coalition will withdraw from 5 unspecified military bases by July 13. The United States is committed to withdraw from Afghanistan all military forces of the United States, its
allies, and Coalition partners, including all non-diplomatic civilian personnel, private security contractors, trainers, advisors, and supporting services personnel within 14 months following announcement of this agreement.


Cordesman: Afghan Prospects for Peace


57 OSD Comptroller, “Defense Budget Overview FY2021,” pp. 6.3-6.4; “Justification for FY 2021 Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) Afghanistan Security Forces Fund,” February 2020, p. 5. The FY2019 data are not directly comparable with the FY2020 and FY2021 data. The FY2019 data includes major Baseline Expenditures which were included in the Afghan OCO costs to bypass the budget caps.


Many data are Afghan Government, UN, U.S. government, and NGO estimates without systematic collection of the necessary information that do not describe the estimation method, exact definition of the data, sampling method or source, and they do not provide any estimate of uncertainty or regression analysis to establish the validity of the data. Many estimates are contradictory and or based on dated sources. For a more realistic official picture of the current social and economic trends in Afghanistan, see SIGAR, Quarterly Report to Congress, April 30, 2020, pp. 123-149.


Cordesman: Afghan Prospects for Peace


A reported 281,548 ANDSF personnel (182,173 MOD and 99,375 MOI) biometrically enrolled and eligible for pay in APPS. This does not include 7,395 civilians (3,238 MOD and 4,157 MOI) or roughly 19,000 Afghan Local Police (ALP)...this is an increase of 8,741 personnel since last quarter’s APPS-reported strength (October 2019), mainly driven by 6,154 more personnel reported in the MOD elements (ANA, Afghan Air Force, and MOD special forces).

See the Asian Foundation series of polls entitled a Survey of the Afghan People, https://asiafoundation.org/where-we-work/afghanistan/survey/.


As of January 26, 2020, CSTC-A reported 281,548 ANDSF personnel (182,173 MOD and 99,375 MOI) biometrically enrolled and eligible for pay in APPS. This does not include 7,395 civilians (3,238 MOD and 4,157 MOI) or roughly 19,000 Afghan Local Police (ALP)...this is an increase of 8,741 personnel since last quarter’s APPS-reported strength (October 2019), mainly driven by 6,154 more personnel reported in the MOD elements (ANA, Afghan Air Force, and MOD special forces).


SIGAR, Quarterly Report to Congress, p. 72, April 30, 2020.

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SIGAR, Quarterly Report to Congress, p. 82, April 30, 2020.

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SIGAR, Quarterly Report to Congress, p. 72, April 30, 2020.

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SIGAR, Quarterly Report to Congress, p. 82, April 30, 2020.


Fiscal Challenges and Implications for a Post-Settlement Afghanistan.

GNI per capita (formerly GNP per capita) is the gross national income, converted to U.S. dollars using the World Bank Atlas method, divided by the midyear population. GNI is the sum of value added by all resident producers plus any product taxes (less subsidies) not included in the valuation of output plus net receipts of primary income (compensation of employees and property income) from abroad. GNI, calculated in national currency, is usually converted to U.S. dollars at official exchange rates for comparisons across economies, although an alternative rate is used when the official exchange rate is judged to diverge by an exceptionally large margin from the rate actually applied in international transactions. To smooth fluctuations in prices and exchange rates, a special Atl...


SIGAR, Quarterly Report to Congress, pp. 3-8, April 30, 2020.

SIGAR, Quarterly Report to Congress, pp. 4-6, April 30, 2020.


Danielle Paquette, Susannah George, and Sudarsan Raghavan, “Violence imperils coronavirus response in conflict zones around the world.” The Washington Post, April 4, 2020,

212 Lynne O’donnell and Mirwais Khan, “Leader of Afghan Taliban said to be gravely ill with the Coronavirus,” Foreign Policy, June 1, 2020, https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/06/01/afghan-taliban-coronavirus-pandemic-akhunzada/

