The background of the entire page is a photograph showing the silhouettes of soldiers in a desert environment. The soldiers are wearing helmets and carrying rifles, standing in a line that recedes into the distance. The lighting is warm and golden, suggesting the sun is low on the horizon, creating a hazy, atmospheric effect.

# Learning from the War: “Who Lost Afghanistan?” versus Learning “Why We Lost”

By Anthony H. Cordesman

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Please provide comments to [acordesman@gmail.com](mailto:acordesman@gmail.com)

## Learning from the War: “Who Lost Afghanistan?” versus Learning “Why We Lost”

### Anthony H. Cordesman

It does not take much vision to predict that the collapse of the present Afghan government is now all too likely, and that if the current Afghan central government collapses, a partisan U.S. political battle over who lost Afghanistan will follow. It is also nearly certain that any such partisan battle will become part of a bitter mid-term 2022 election. It takes equally little vision to foresee that any such partisan political debate will be largely dishonest and focus on blaming the opposing party. “Dishonesty” seems to be the growing definition of American political dialogue.

It is possible that neither party will really want to debate the collapse and the loss of the war. However, it seems all too likely that the debate will focus on Democrats blaming President Trump and Republicans blaming President Biden.

The Democratic Party argument will be that the Trump administration mismanaged the initial peace agreement it signed on February 22, 2020. The argument will be that the February 2020 peace agreement traded withdrawal for negotiations, but that it never defined a possible peace and never created an effective peace process, and that – in doing so – it effectively “lost” Afghanistan by defining the following conditions for what amounted to complete U.S. withdrawal:<sup>1</sup>

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 fourteen (14) months following announcement of this agreement, and will take the following measures in this regard:

1. The United States, its allies, and the Coalition will take the following measures in the first one hundred thirty-five (135) days:
  1. 1) They will reduce the number of U.S. forces in Afghanistan to eight thousand six hundred (8,600) and proportionally bring reduction in the number of its allies and Coalition forces.
  2. 2) The United States, its allies, and the Coalition will withdraw all their forces from five (5) military bases.
2. With the commitment and action on the obligation of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban in Part Two of this agreement, the United States, its allies, and the Coalition will execute the following:
  1. 1) The United States, its allies, and the Coalition will complete withdrawal of all remaining forces from Afghanistan within the remaining nine and a half (9.5) months.
  2. 2) The United States, its allies, and the Coalition will withdraw all their forces from remaining bases.

Democrats will claim this agreement led to major U.S. withdrawals and Afghan political turmoil before the Biden Administration took office, making the “loss” of Afghanistan inevitable.

The Republican Party argument will reference the troop withdrawals that took place under the Obama Administration, skip over the withdrawal deadlines and actions of the Trump Administration, and focus on the withdrawals and closings that began after Biden’s inauguration on January 20, 2021. It will focus on President Biden’s statement on April 14, 2021 that the U.S. would withdraw from Afghanistan in September 2021:<sup>2</sup>

With the terror threat now in many places, keeping thousands of troops grounded and concentrated in just one country at a cost of billions each year makes little sense to me and to our leaders. We cannot continue

the cycle of extending or expanding our military presence in Afghanistan, hoping to create ideal conditions for the withdrawal, and expecting a different result...I'm now the fourth United States President to preside over American troop presence in Afghanistan: two Republicans, two Democrats. I will not pass this responsibility on to a fifth.

After consulting closely with our allies and partners, with our military leaders and intelligence personnel, with our diplomats and our development experts, with the Congress and the Vice President, as well as with Mr. Ghani and many others around the world, I have concluded that it's time to end America's longest war. It's time for American troops to come home.

When I came to office, I inherited a diplomatic agreement, duly negotiated between the government of the United States and the Taliban, that all U.S. forces would be out of Afghanistan by May 1, 2021, just three months after my inauguration. That's what we inherited — that commitment.

It is perhaps not what I would have negotiated myself, but it was an agreement made by the United States government, and that means something. So, in keeping with that agreement and with our national interests, the United States will begin our final withdrawal — begin it on May 1 of this year.

We will not conduct a hasty rush to the exit. We'll do it — we'll do it responsibly, deliberately, and safely. And we will do it in full coordination with our allies and partners, who now have more forces in Afghanistan than we do. And the Taliban should know that if they attack us as we draw down, we will defend ourselves and our partners with all the tools at our disposal.

Our allies and partners have stood beside us shoulder-to-shoulder in Afghanistan for almost 20 years, and we're deeply grateful for the contributions they have made to our shared mission and for the sacrifices they have borne...The plan has long been "in together, out together." U.S. troops, as well as forces deployed by our NATO Allies and operational partners, will be out of Afghanistan before we mark the 20th anniversary of that heinous attack on September 11th.

It will also focus on President Biden's other announcement on April 14, 2021 that, "We achieved those objectives. Bin Laden is dead and al-Qaida is degraded in Afghanistan, and it's time to end this forever war," as well as his announcement on July 8, 2021 that:<sup>3</sup>

Our military mission in Afghanistan will conclude on August 31st. The drawdown is proceeding in a secure and orderly way, prioritizing the safety of our troops as they depart...Our military commanders advised me that once I made the decision to end the war, we needed to move swiftly to conduct the main elements of the drawdown. And in this context, speed is safety.

It is difficult to impossible to believe that the Trump administration did not realize that announcing a deadline for a complete U.S. withdrawal as part of a peace agreement that had no peace plan and that would be executing major cuts in the U.S. role and presence in Afghanistan — like reducing the official total of U.S. troops from 4,500 to 2,500 — could be more than a prelude to full withdrawal. These cuts were coupled to reductions in basing facilities, contractors, intelligence personnel, and elite forces. They took place without any real progress towards peace, with only marginal cooperation of a hopelessly divided Afghan government whose term of office had expired, and in spite of all the problems in the Afghan forces and government described in detail in this report. The administration should have realized that its actions would most probably lead to a full U.S. withdrawal without peace and with the collapse of the Afghan central government.

The Biden administration may not have "inherited the wind," but the Trump Administration's legacy came so close that debating the details seems pointless. At the same time, it seems equally doubtful that a Biden administration that inherited the fully classified intelligence assessments of the Taliban's progress — as well as all of the public data on the Afghan government's weaknesses and the Taliban's gains described later in this analysis — also could not have realized that its

withdrawal announcement would likely catalyze the sudden collapse of much of the central government's defense efforts.

Both the Trump and Biden administrations seem to have used peace negotiations as a political cover for withdrawal, and they did so without ever advancing any credible peace plan and with no real peace negotiations taking place. Both administrations should clearly have seen the probable consequences and the likelihood of a "worst case" contingency. One can argue the wisdom of their choices to withdraw, but scarcely on a partisan basis.

Fortunately, it seems unlikely that any such "who lost the war" debate will go on much longer than the mid-term election or that it will come close to the low-level debate over "who lost Vietnam" that went on until Henry Kissinger suddenly found "red" China was a convenient strategic partner. Like Vietnam, it will be easier to forget, move on to other issues and potential successes, and quietly write the war off.

There should, however, be a far more serious effort to examine the history of the war and the lessons the U.S. and its allies should learn. This effort should examine the full range of civil lessons as well as the military lessons that emerged from the entire history of the war – and not simply focus on its end. It should address the fact that the losses in the war were driven as much by failures in nation building and the civil sectors as from the failures in combat. It should acknowledge that the Afghan War – like Vietnam and the two sequential wars the U.S. fought after 2003 in Iraq – were counterinsurgency campaigns and not wars against international terrorism.

And, it should consider the war's costs, and whether its strategic cost at any given point was worth prolonging it – and the lack of effective strategic triage that took two decades to cause the full U.S. withdrawal from the fighting.

This analysis explores these issues in depth, and it attempts to highlight the issues that must be addressed to learn the full range of lessons from the war. It is a thought piece, deliberately controversial, and written with the full understanding that many key aspects of the war remain classified or have not been addressed in open source reporting. It is also written with the understanding that "war fatigue" has set in at every level in the United States. At the same time, it does not take much vision to see how many troubled states – and fragile or failed governments – will shape America's strategic interests in the near future, and that much of the competition with China, Russia, and regional threats like Iran will occur in gray area conflicts and power struggles that are all too similar to the problems the U.S. has faced in Afghanistan.

It concludes by raising a different issue that may in many ways be more important than learning the lessons of the war. If one examines the cost of the war and the lack of any clear or consistent strategic rationale for continuing it, then it is far from clear that the U.S. should ever have committed the resources to the conflict that it did or that it had the grand strategic priority to justify two decades of conflict.

The key issue is not why the war was lost, it is whether letting it escalate and prolonging it was worth its cost. The examination of the civil and military challenges as well as the mistakes is the central focus of this analysis and, to some extent, a warning that the United States needs a far more realistic approach to "strategic triage." Like the Iraq War, the U.S. needs to be far more careful in deciding if a conflict is worth fighting, escalating, and continuing.

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## **Learning from Why the War Was Not Won**

In any case, trying to find some one person or group to blame for losing a twenty-year-long war is, at best, an exercise in political hypocrisy. The key issues have nothing to do with “who lost the war.” They are why the war ended with so many Taliban gains, what lessons need to be drawn, and how the U.S. can act more effectively in the future. A valid analysis will also have to look at the entire course of the war, each major decision or action that limited the chances of victory over a twenty-year period, and their cumulative consequences – rather than focusing on the final years and months of U.S. withdrawal.

An honest effort to examine why the war was lost must focus on the war’s entire history and not the period from the February 2020 peace agreement and its 14-month deadline for withdrawal; the Biden announcement on April 13, 2021; Biden’s later announcement of a full U.S. withdrawal by September 11, 2021; and the outcome of the U.S. force cuts, Taliban offensives, and the actions of the Afghan “Ghani” or central government that followed.

An honest effort will have to examine the full range of data and reporting from the start of the war to its end, and it will need to actively challenge the integrity of the open source data that shaped political and public opinion and of the full range of classified data and intelligence. It will have to examine the steady rise in the over-classification of key data that has already been flagged in SIGAR reporting to Congress. It will have to honestly assess the steady decline in the integrity and content of the reporting by U.S. official military spokespersons and the degree to which the State Department and USAID gradually ceased to provide any meaningful open source assessments of civil progress and problems.

At the same time, any such effort should consider the lack of any lasting impact from past U.S. efforts to act on the lessons of war. There is probably no worse way for a democracy to learn from the past than by assigning partisan blame; searching for individual scapegoats; or attempting to create “lessons” to advocate given projects, reforms, and spending efforts. The inability to actually recover all of the key data will also present critical problems – especially when a war is not going well and when more and more data are classified, other data cease to be gathered and analyzed, and certain key data are only circulated on a sensitive and perishable basis.

Far too many of the open source reporting during the last nine years of the war have been exercises in creating meaningless categories of reporting, making unsubstantiated claims, and lying by omission. In fact, the need for honesty and full transparency once things begin to go wrong may well be a key lesson of the war.

As the Quarterly Reports to Congress by the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR) and the Lead Inspector General (LIG) make all too clear, far too much of the reporting on the Afghan War became the equivalent of a public affairs liar’s contest from 2011 onwards, and especially after major troop cuts began in 2014. Worse, in the case of many of the reports on civil progress – or the lack of it – regularly detailed open source reporting by the State Department and USAID on civil developments simply stopped. As anyone who has served in government knows, lying by omission is not only easier, it is often more effective.

## **Looking at First (and Continuing) Causes: Blundering into the Wrong Kind of “Nation Building”**

*If such an analysis is to have meaning, it will also have to focus on both the civil and military reasons as to why the war was not won, rather than to focus only on the fighting and the military dimension. It will have to consider the full range of civil-military challenges the U.S., its allies, and the Afghan government face relative to the problems that the Taliban and hostile extremists faced, rather than focus on U.S. actions.*

As will be discussed shortly, there were many aspects of the security effort that helped to lead to failure. In retrospect, however, at least half the failures were “civil,” and many were the result of failures in nation building for which the U.S. must take responsibility. The U.S. played a critical role in two decades worth of failures in aid efforts and in shaping failures in Afghan civil governance that did as much to lose the war as from the flaws of outside military support and the erratic and ill-formed efforts to build effective Afghan forces.

### **Once the U.S. Arrived in Afghanistan, It Had to “Nation Build”**

Here, to put it bluntly, President Biden reached a Trumpian level of dishonesty in the explanation he gave for America’s withdrawal from Afghanistan on July 8, 2021:<sup>4</sup>

We did not go to Afghanistan to nation-build. And it’s the right and the responsibility of the Afghan people alone to decide their future and how they want to run their country.

Together, with our NATO Allies and partners, we have trained and equipped over three hu- — nearly 300,000 current serving members of the military — of the Afghan National Security Force, and many beyond that who are no longer serving. Add to that, hundreds of thousands more Afghan National Defense and Security Forces trained over the last two decades.

We provided our Afghan partners with all the tools — let me emphasize: all the tools, training, and equipment of any modern military. We provided advanced weaponry. And we’re going to continue to provide funding and equipment. And we’ll ensure they have the capacity to maintain their air force.

But most critically, as I stressed in my meeting just two weeks ago with President Ghani and Chairman Abdullah, Afghan leaders have to come together and drive toward a future that the Afghan people want and they deserve.

The U.S. was deeply involved in nation building from the start – in fact President Bush announced a Marshall Plan for Afghanistan at a speech at the Virginia Military Institute (VMI) in April 2002. America’s failures to effectively implement such a plan probably did as much to determine the outcome of the war as the failures of the Afghan civil government that the President does correctly highlight.

There also is no question that American military failures were also significant, and that the U.S. and its allies did not pursue a consistent or effective effort to create the Afghan national security forces that Afghans needed to stand on their own and win a growing counterinsurgency conflict with the Taliban. The U.S. focused on the Taliban as an extremist and terrorist group, rather than as a major political force and insurgency. Furthermore, the U.S. made far too optimistic claims about the Afghan government’s progress in governance, progress in warfighting and in creating effective Afghan security forces, and progress in creating a solid base for economic development. In focusing on terrorism, rather than insurgency, the U.S. fought the wrong war from at least 2003 onwards. In failing to address the real-world level of Afghan progress in governance, security, and



economics, it in many ways treated one symptom of a far broader disease, and in doing so, did much to defeat itself.

Both America's civil and military efforts – and their impact on the efforts of American's allies and Afghan national security efforts – failed in different ways over a period of two decades, and they failed consistently although in many different ways as time went on. No honest assessment of the war can ignore the fact that every U.S. Administration involved made serious mistakes.

Nation building began as soon as the Taliban suffered its major initial defeats in 2001. The U.S. played a critical role in helping to set up the Afghan Interim Administration or Authority (AIA) that governed the country from December 22, 2001 to July 13, 2002. The U.S. played a major indirect role in every Afghan election that followed; in shaping the aid to the Afghan budget that helped to shape its formation as a state; in advising on what might be described politely as its “failed” constitution in 2004; in pressuring President Karzai, and in the long series of crises between President Ghani, Abdullah Abdullah, and other Afghan leaders from Ghani's first election on September 20, 2014 to the present.

At the same time, there is little to be gained from debating whether the U.S. should have reacted to 9/11 with some form of civil intervention. Some form of effort to react to 9/11 by seeking to destroy al-Qaeda and defeat the Taliban once the Taliban refused to arrest and expel its leaders and members was almost inevitable. The initial cost of doing so was also limited. A small number of U.S. forces and intelligence personnel effectively shattered the Taliban and reduced al-Qaeda in Afghanistan into small, scattered cadres. U.S. and allied forces were able to easily occupy most of the country, and most of Afghanistan's neighbors were initially helpful or pressured into being supportive.

The moment the Taliban was largely driven from the field – from late 2001 onwards – the U.S. was confronted with the need for some form of nation building. There also were only very uncertain Afghan options at best. There was no clear political or governance alternative to the Taliban, other than the same divided warlords and power brokers that had led to the rise of the Taliban in the first place. There were no alternative national security forces; no alternative justice system; and no alternative civil structure that could create a stable pattern of civil government services, infrastructure, and economic development.

The U.S. was immediately confronted by the fact that any Afghan governance and power structures that emerged on its own would have massive problems in properly governing, providing security, and meeting the needs of the Afghan people. Accepting an Afghan solution to Afghanistan's problems in replacing the Taliban could easily have meant repeating all of the failures in governance and security, internal conflicts, and tragedies that had occurred in the eight years of fighting and turmoil between the overthrow of Najibullah in April 1992 and the fall of the Taliban's Islamic Emirate in December 2001.

In spite of some recent official denials, these realities – and to some extent the relative ease of the initial effort to “defeat” the Taliban and push it out of power in most of the country – led the U.S. to choose an aggressive form of “nation building” and attempt to remake Afghanistan. It also did so in a series of individual efforts that lacked overall coordination, any serious overall planning, and continuity of effort from late 2001 onwards. Real progress was made in many individual areas, but not on a national basis – and largely in the form of sporadic efforts whose problems and failures led to serious failures over time, and eventually did much to trigger the full U.S. withdrawal.

## **Failing to Create Effective Civil Systems**

In fairness, failures may have been nearly inevitable. Most peaceful nation building efforts since the end of World War II have had limited success and many have largely failed. Reassuring plans and rhetoric have generally gone unimplemented. More democracies and justice systems have collapsed than survived, and few “developing” nations have developed at anything like the pace they need. Various forms of more authoritarian rule have done no better, and many have done worse.

The U.S. was also poorly prepared for the task. It had comparatively little experience in real-world nation building since Vietnam, aside from some minor efforts in Latin America. Both in Afghanistan – and later in Iraq – it put idealism and good intentions before any serious effort at risk assessment and judging the probabilities of success in transforming one of the least developed and dysfunctional political structures in the world. In retrospect, openly trying to build a new regime around Afghanistan’s warlords and power brokers may have fit its society and culture better than efforts to transform the state, but nothing about their history before or after 2002 inspired much confidence.

This almost inevitably led the U.S. – and its allies into expanding into more aggressive forms of nation-building and into trying to remake many aspects of Afghanistan in a Western image as quickly as possible. In fairness, these efforts also had the initial and continued support of many educated, urban Afghans and exiles. They too attempted to achieve more democratic forms of government, more effective rules of law, and efforts to develop a more modern economy.

The practical problem was the lack of U.S., allied, and Afghan capacity to create practical systems that could actually implement such changes and reforms. While there were different cycles of failure over time, an objective analysis of Afghan civil development over the last twenty years is almost certain to reveal:

- A lack of competent and experienced political leadership as well as the existing factional differences by region, ethnicity, section, and tribe that made politics and governance a constant exercise in dealing with competing power brokers and warlords.
- Instituting a representative government without a functioning and honest electoral system, direct election of representatives from given Districts, and giving the President de facto control over spending and appointments.
- Creating a system of government and a civil economy whose funding depended largely on outside aid, without providing adequate fiscal controls and management or adequate planning and effectiveness measures, and that tolerated massive levels of corruption.
- Reliance on ineffective anti-corruption efforts instead of donor “conditionality” and willingness to halt funding when corruption or mismanagement/waste reached high levels, when money was used to support given political factions and power brokers, or when project/programs clearly lacked adequate planning.
- High levels of largely annual rotations of key foreign aid personnel and advisors.
- Splitting responsibilities for managing aid by region between donor countries, while assigning the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) an ambitious country-wide aid planning and coordination role it could not perform.
- Lack of coordination between the civil aid and military efforts that varied by country, coupled to a lack of integration of civil-military development plans and particularly plans that reflected the different interest of given regions, factions, and Districts.

- Creating a long series of ambitious economic, governance, and legal system reform plans that were not effectively implemented, substituting pledges of reform for performance.
- Wasting major resources on efforts to developing mining and pipelines as well as a ring road and “new Silk Road” without adequate security that were based on justifications and analyses that were grossly over-optimistic.
- Steadily shifting to “top down” central efforts at nation building, and failing to deal with the different priorities, tensions, and needs of given Districts and Provinces.
- Letting the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) linked to the military become largely a way of using aid money to obtain support for tactical military objectives.
- Steadily losing effective governance, law enforcement, and security at the District level and outside urban areas, along with security for roads and lines of communication after 2011. In many cases, the Taliban established check points and control points on roads supposedly under government control, and then they gradually and effectively took control.
- Reliance on expensive failed counter-drug programs as narcotics grew to become a key source of civil earnings in an economy that was otherwise heavily dependent on outside aid.
- Failing to tie claims of social progress to honest reporting systems and assessments of real-world progress, and steadily cutting back on open source reporting as the Taliban gained power and influence while the initial rates of progress slowed or reversed.
- Focusing on project aid, rather than political and economic stability.
- Training elements of a modern civil service with uncertain allocation to jobs, and salary levels that were often too low to avoid making officials dependent on some form of corruption.
- Failing to create enough market-oriented jobs and employment, particularly in urban areas, and creating major increases in poverty levels from 2011 onwards.
- Failing to create an effective system for appointing honest and effective officials at the District and Provincial level.

Many of these failures were beyond U.S. control and were driven by Afghanistan’s sheer backwardness in virtually every level of governance and overall national development, its lack of effective military and security forces tied to the government, its lack of effective police and justice systems at the local level, its reliance on surviving power brokers and warlords, its internal ethnic and tribal tensions, and its lack of any solid structure to build-upon.

In retrospect, some were also driven by the lack of Afghan, U.S., and other outside competence to draft an effective constitution in 2004, and to set meaningful aid goals for such a different society. As recent history has demonstrated all too often, the fact that a state has failed from within does not mean it is practical for foreigners and exiles to “fix it” and transform it from the outside.

At the same time, it is not clear what a less ambitious effort that accepted a far more “Afghan” form of government could have done. The years of civil war that broke out after the fall of Najibullah in April 1992 had after all led to the birth of the Taliban and given it control over most of the country by 2001. The warlords and power brokers that survive the Taliban’s fall were largely the same figures that had helped to create it.

### **“Turbulence:” Flooding in Aid Money and Then Slashing It**

It is also important to note that the United States did not begin its nation building efforts by focusing on the military. If the flow of aid money is examined in detail, it initially devoted substantial equal resources to both the need for effective civil governance and development as well

as the need to create effective Afghan security forces, and it poured steadily greater resources into these efforts through its FY2011 fiscal year – although usually with limited planning, fiscal controls, effectiveness measures, and continuity.

These patterns in the U.S. civil and military aid efforts – which had major additional support from America’s allies – are shown in **Figure One** and **Figure Two**. While such aid dropped precipitously after FY2012, serious spending continued through FY2021. As of March 31, 2021, the United States government had appropriated – or otherwise made available – approximately \$144.40 billion in funds for reconstruction and related activities in Afghanistan since FY 2002.

The U.S. did, however, steadily spend far more on Afghan military forces than civil development, and its aid efforts became steadily more military over time. SIGAR estimates that total Afghanistan reconstruction funding was allocated as follows by March 2021:

- \$88.32 billion for security (including \$4.60 billion for counternarcotic initiatives)
- \$36.03 billion for governance and development (including \$4.37 billion for counternarcotic initiatives)
- \$4.14 billion for humanitarian aid, and
- \$15.91 billion for agency operations

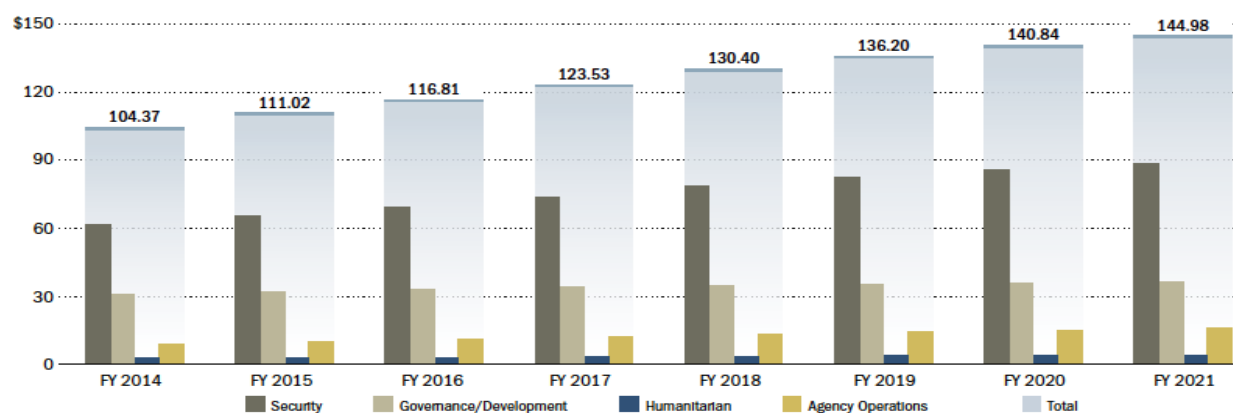
As **Figure Two** shows, total U.S. spending by major category was erratic, and it often suddenly swooped up and down from year to year. The overall spending patterns in each major category from 2002 to the present also resembled mountain ranges, rather than the steady flow that results from well-managed resource allocation. SIGAR’s more detailed Quarterly Reports to Congress, and other official open sources, show radical increases through 2021 – partly driven by the resurgence of the Taliban – but then reflect an erratic implosion of different spending cuts after that date. This level of turbulence makes it clear at the grossest possible level that there was no consistent plan or level of effort in any major category of aid – something that will become far more clear when the full range of U.S. and other documents that supposedly reflected integrated civil-military plans and efforts at effective planning, programming, and budgeting becomes publicly available.

As noted earlier, there was no serious U.S. effort at making the flow of aid conditional and to tie the flow of aid to honest and effective civil and military efforts. The Afghan government made repeated promises to improve its level of governance and fight corruption, but it failed to reign in levels of corruption and massive waste. The U.S., other states, and UNAMA exercised minimal financial control over the flow of aid, did not properly measure the effectiveness of spending and key projects, and demonstrated a growing U.S. tendency after 2011 to claim civil and military progress that did not take place.

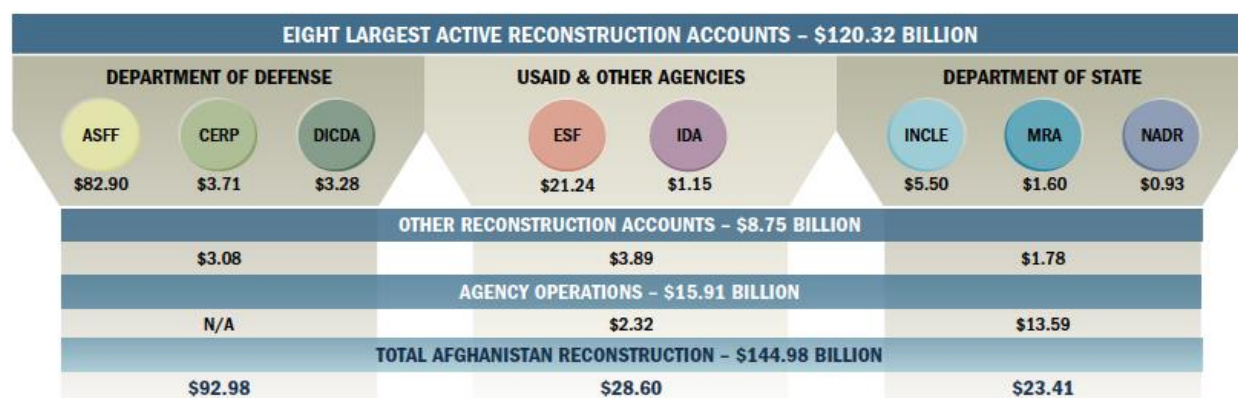
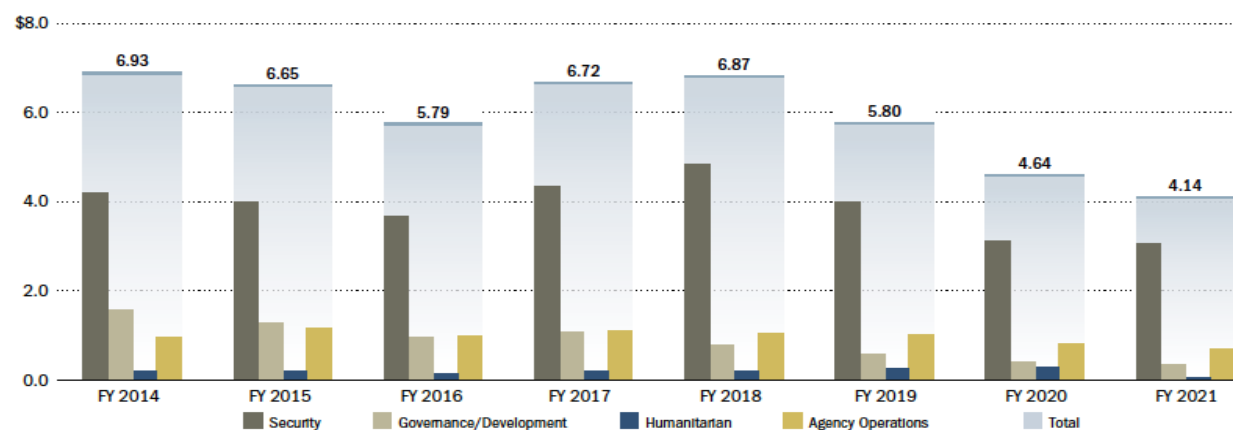
At the same time, the cuts in counter narcotics funding in **Figure Two** reflect the fact that efforts to control the Afghan narcotics industry effectively collapsed, and one ambitious aid conference after another made promises that were never kept – creating some elements of a narco-state that impacted heavily on both the civil and security sectors. In most countries, this would be a minor factor. In Afghanistan, narcotics are the one major export and “industry.”

**Figure One: SIGAR Estimate of U.S. Reconstruction Aid and Cost of the Afghan War from FY2002 to FY2022 in Current \$U.S. Billions**

CUMULATIVE APPROPRIATIONS BY FUNDING CATEGORY AS OF JUNE 30, 2021 (\$ BILLIONS)



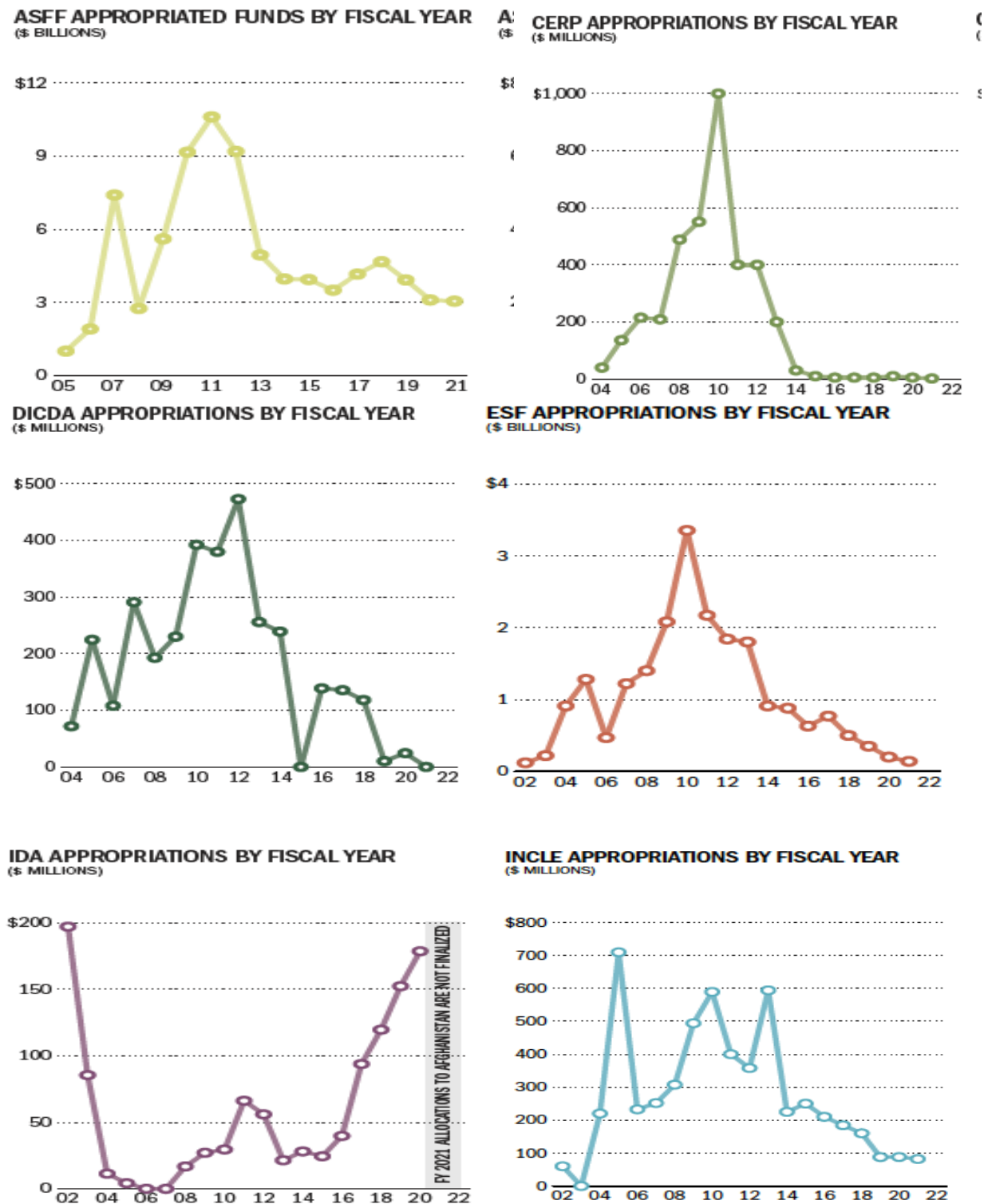
ANNUAL APPROPRIATIONS BY FUNDING CATEGORY (\$ BILLIONS)



ASFF: Afghanistan Security Forces Fund, CERP: Commanders' Emergency Response Program, DICDA: Drug Interdiction and Counter-Drug Activities, ESF: Economic Support Fund, IDA: International Disaster Assistance, INCLE: International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement, MRA: Migration and Refugee Assistance, NADR: Non-Proliferation, Antiterrorism, Demining, and Related Programs.

Source: SIGAR, Quarterly Report to Congress, Second Quarter 2021, pp. 25-27.

**Figure Two: SIGAR Estimate of U.S. Reconstruction Aid and Cost of the Afghan War from FY2002 to FY2022 in Current \$U.S. Billions**



Source: SIGAR, Quarterly Report to Congress, Second Quarter 2021, pp. 30-38.

### **The “Hole in Government;” Strategic Jingoism; and Lack of Planning, Effectiveness Measures, and Conditionality**

There also were major problems in the ways in which the U.S. approached both civil and military aid that became a steadily critical reason why the war was lost over a twenty-year period – although they are problems that cannot be blamed on any given U.S. Administration or political party. There was never any coherent U.S. or overall plan for civil or military development. The actual allocation and implementation of all forms of aid not only tended to vary sharply by year, but there was never even an administrative structure plan that could tie together all the elements of aid – especially civil aid.

Any realistic effort to assess the reasons for the failures in the U.S. effort in Afghanistan will require a detailed and objective analysis of these problems, and one with full access to both open source and classified data. It will show that there were U.S. exercises in creating coordinated civil-military plans, but they were hollow shells. They did set broad goals and describe good intentions, but they were not real plans in the sense they were tied to practical specifics or made into serious management tools. They did not provide a meaningful set of overall plans, programs, budgets, implementation schedules, and measures of effectiveness.

There was no mechanism for regular reviewing and updating, and there was no continuing staff to give them continuity and ensure they would have real impact. They also were never tied to effective tool for properly planning and administering most aid efforts, plans, and projects. They lacked proper fiscal controls and efforts to control waste and corruption, sometimes even lacking adequate supervision to ensure project and program completion, and more often lacking effective measurement of their success over time.

The actual aid efforts in the field that drove projects and programs were driven by staffs that largely operated on the basis of one-year assignments, and who were often judged more by their ability to spend money and claim success than spend it wisely and actually achieve it. There was no real “whole of government” approach. Just a series of “holes in government” approaches that were separately managed by given elements of State, USAID, and the Department of Defense as well as by separate and constantly rotating staffs in the embassy and the field. There was pressure to spend but limited pressure to manage money, make its allocation conditional on honest spending, and actually measure effectiveness.

Any detailed and objective study of the military aid effort – and of what was purchased with the spending shown in Figure Two – will reveal many key problems that were never solved over the course of two decades:

- Corruption and ineffective leadership crippled many aspects of the aid effort, as did constant shifts in goals, structure, and the interface between different military and security services. Promotion was often political rather than merit based, and both command functions and basic functions like logistics and resupply were constantly being reorganized with limited success and without adequate reductions in corruption and waste.
- It took years to finally properly staff the training effort with qualified advisors, but training was limited nor did it prepare officers and NCOs to manage complex operations or to train Afghan forces on how to operate and maintain equipment that was too sophisticated and complex for the forces that had to operate in combat. The force development effort was rushed to meet changing political goals and levels of outside support, and the provision of outside train and assist personnel in forward positions and at the combat level was erratic and varied over time. Possible solutions like the “Afghan hands” program to provide sustained advice were never really implemented. Effective solutions like the Security Force Assistance Brigades came later in the

war, and they were never properly implemented because of the fear of casualties and the timing of U.S. and allied force cuts.

- NATO made real efforts to integrate the training and combat missions, but key elements were divided by the caveats and limits enforced by different countries. The U.S. dominated the training and equipment of the regular army and air force, and often American air power and cadres of elite forces and intelligence personnel were substituted for effective development of Afghan capabilities to operate on their own. The military aid effort ultimately consisted of focusing on doing it the outside way, rather than finding an Afghan way that built on Afghan military experience and that could actually work.
- The central focus of U.S. and allied military assistance and the build-up of Afghan forces was the tactical defeat of the Taliban, rather than creating a mix of forces that could limit its growth in rural areas and capability for successful insurgent action. The focus on marginal terrorist threats, rather than the steady growth of Taliban influence and control through insurgency in rural districts opened up much of Afghanistan to Taliban success.
- These problems were compounded by focusing on a limited number of elite Afghan units that could defeat the Taliban in battle but that could not secure given areas over time. Repeated efforts to create paramilitary police, local security forces, and some real form of the rule of law had limited priority and all eventually failed, opening up wide areas of the country outside the major cities and Taliban to power broker control and successful Taliban control and insurgency.
- The growth of the Afghan forces led to the steady growth of dependence on contractors, and the ability to fight with U.S. combat support. These problems were then disguised by dishonest reporting claiming successful independent ANDSF operations. Public relations “spin” became an active threat to honest reporting and force development.
- The Commander’s Emergency Response Program (CERP) and Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) programs should have link military operations in the field to both the civil aid program and to the creation of safe areas in rural districts and towns. Many U.S. and allied civilians and military did make progress in using such aid productively areas, but such successes were limited and erratic, lacked consistent direction, and far too often led to the use of aid to support tactical operations or buy local influence and support for such operations. In many cases, it failed to understand the impact of aid in creating new sources of local tension and conflict, and once again, differences between the allied states in given areas presented problems.
- Recruitment of Afghans was driven as much by the lack of jobs in the civil economy as by patriotism. It did not end tribal, ethnic, and sectarian friction or even try to deal with it seriously. Power brokers, narcotraffickers, and war lords remained a major problem as did the often arbitrary assignments coming from Kabul.
- Over time, the growth of the Taliban in rural areas created a growing gap between these Districts and increasingly isolated larger urban areas. From roughly 2014 onwards, the war shifted to cities that had the most modern economy, active defenses, and highest security – as well as the Taliban insurgency in the field. The government’s presence became steadily more fragile in such areas over time – a fact partially disguised by reporting success in battles that did not prevent growing Taliban control in rural districts, and by the discontinuation of honest reporting on the level of Taliban gains and growing lack of security in such areas.

The same will be true of any detailed and objective study of the civil aid effort, and of what the spending shown in **Figure Two** actually bought. Civil aid planning and management – like the U.S. approaches to military aid planning – were also to some extent exercises in “strategic jingoism.” U.S. reviews of civil aid focused on U.S. aid efforts, and they often failed to mention the efforts of other countries. They did not properly integrate allied, international, and aid efforts into a planning, programming, and budgeting process (PPB), and they often did not consider what other countries were doing – although individual allied countries played a major role in shaping the aid activities in major regions of Afghanistan, UNAMA was supposed to coordinate all civil aid, and a long series of donor conferences with the Afghan government supposedly set key goals for aid and funding as well as ways to meet them.



- The U.S., allied countries, and UNAMA did not demonstrate an effective capability to plan credible aid efforts to reform Afghan governance and the Afghan economy. They did produce a wide range of goals while donor conferences sometimes reviewed the shell of plans, but the real-world aid efforts were largely programs and projects that had some individual value but could not address the broader problems of bringing stability and progress at the District level, particularly in the rural areas most threatened by the Taliban.
- In the case of the U.S. – and several key allied countries – these problems were compounded by aid structures focused on humanitarian and project aid, with no real capability to realistically analyzing and planning development on a nation-by-nation basis – particularly in a country as backward and unique as Afghanistan. The World Bank field teams were a partial exception – particularly in terms of diagnostics, but even the World Bank headquarters – as well as USAID, the IMF, and UN – focused on classic efforts to create GDP growth through nationwide programs that were decoupled in critical ways from the economic realities in Afghanistan, that avoided any real effort to deal with the corruption and internal divisions in the government, and that ignored the President’s misuse of his control over spending and appointments.
- The creation of more modern urban enclaves – and some aspects of aid and training – created an educated urban class that depended largely on outside aid but was not paid enough to meet its expected living standards. It helped to increase a pattern of corruption that had become endemic among senior officials and power brokers.
- Many aid personnel deliberately avoided dealing with the local and other security issues where aid could have been a critical tool in dealing with insurgency.
- Far too many of the efforts at nation-building relied on studies and individual plans based on extremely weak analyses and optimistic assumptions. The “new silk road” was a practical joke from a real-world planning viewpoint. So were a number of ambitious pipeline, rail, and mining programs. Optimism is no substitute for reality.
- Far too many civil efforts claimed far more success than they really had, disguising the need for better planning, programming, financial controls, as well as progress and effectiveness measures. As time went on, this helped to disguise the fact that less and less progress was being made – particularly in the rural areas where the Taliban operated as well as in drug areas and areas dominated by self-seeking power brokers and warlords. From roughly 2008 onwards – and far more sharply after 2014, the aid effort had steadily less impact in threatened areas.
- Aid has helped in agricultural areas, but it is far from clear how successful it has been in raising people out of poverty, dealing with that lack of processing and distribution capabilities, and competing with narcotics. The areas where the Taliban has made the most gains have been one where the level of aid benefits are far from clear, and climate change seems to be producing more issues because of drought.
- The International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE) and other narcotics programs came to focus far too much on destroying crops and preventing the growth of such crops without succeeding in creating lasting viable options for farmers and in reforming an economic structure of power brokers and Taliban-supported efforts that relied heavily on income from narcotics. The end result is that the executive summary for the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime’s (UNODC) 2020 Afghanistan Opium Survey: Cultivation estimates that Afghan opium-poppy cultivation in 2020 increased by 37% over the previous year and has saturated global markets to the point where total income did not increase with supply. As for interdiction, it at most covered some 8% of the opium crop, and it is unclear whether such efforts did anything other than alienate some of the growers. As a result, the counternarcotic efforts not only failed over time, it aided the Taliban in its insurgency efforts as they came to control more and more rural areas where grower traffickers were all too glad to resume growing narcotics.
- The Economic Support Fund (ESF) program proved to be a massive waste on money. It suddenly rose to high levels and then crashed to near zero before the funding could be used to achieve sustained results.
- The International Disaster Assistance (IDA) program needs a close audit to learn whether such aid actually produces lasting benefits and stable outcomes for those it aids or if it simply buys time for the underlying problems that caused the need for such aid to grow worse. Humanitarian aid that simply buys time is not a solution to anything.

- The data in **Figure Two** only show part of the aid cycle. The U.S. and other donors also provide massive additional aid to the Afghan civil and military budgets, and much of this aid was spent in a limited number of urban areas – and in ways that both led to massive corruption and that created urban enclaves of comparative wealth and security that became steadily more isolated from the realities in the rest of Afghanistan. The end result interacted with the problems in the military aid effort cited earlier. A few key urban areas increasingly became the center of government efforts in ways that isolated both the Afghan central government and many power brokers from the rural areas where the Taliban was gaining without creating a stable basis for transition to any form of self-sufficiency.

This dependence on outside aid not only raises critical questions about what kind of peace could be achieved that was not equally or more dependent on outside aid, but how much aid to a government would actually distort the economy and its effects would become negative. The SIGAR report to Congress for July 30, 2021 notes that,<sup>5</sup>

Afghanistan remains poor, aid-dependent, and conflict-affected, with any potential economic growth in the short term further limited by the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Donor grants totaling at least \$8.6 billion per year (covering both security and civilian assistance) currently finance over half of the government budget. That proportion climbs to almost 80% of Afghanistan's \$11 billion in total public expenditures when off-budget (U.S.-managed) assistance is counted along with on-budget (Afghan managed) aid.

Afghanistan consistently has insufficient domestic revenues to cover government expenditures, offsetting deficits with international grants. Figure (Three) demonstrates this trend in recent years, with sustainable domestic revenues covering on average only 43% of Afghan government expenditures. This problem has only worsened as domestic revenues have stagnated while government expenditures have steadily increased. Donor grants totaling \$8.5 billion per year (covering both security and civilian assistance) finance more than half the Afghan government budget and approximately 75–80% of total public expenditures (including funds not channeled through government ministries).

The pandemic has aggravated the Afghan government's inability to generate sufficient domestic revenue and its heavy dependence on international assistance—long-standing challenges stemming from extreme poverty, limited capacity, persistent corruption, tax evasion, and the strength of the untaxed informal and illicit economies. Amid increasing expenditures and declining revenues during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Asian Development Bank reported that the fiscal deficit, excluding grants, increased from the equivalent of 13.9% of GDP in 2019 to 20.8% in 2020.

In Afghanistan, approximately 90% of the economy is informal and, therefore, largely escapes taxation, hindering the government's financial Afghanistan consistently has insufficient domestic revenues to cover government expenditures, offsetting deficits with international grants. Figure (Three) demonstrates this trend in recent years, with sustainable domestic revenues covering on average only 43% of Afghan government expenditures. This problem has only worsened as domestic revenues have stagnated while government expenditures have steadily increased. Donor grants totaling \$8.5 billion per year (covering both security and civilian assistance) finance more than half the Afghan government budget and approximately 75–80% of total public expenditures (including funds not channeled through government ministries).

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...Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, Afghanistan's licit economic growth was too low to reduce the increasing poverty rates and improve living standards for most Afghans. Additionally, licit export levels stagnated in 2019, despite the Afghan government's providing a majority of the transit costs for exports through subsidized air corridors to incentivize regional trade. The pandemic intensified these economic

challenges, adding to existing uncertainties about Afghan peace talks, deteriorating security conditions, and the level of future donor support.

It also notes that,<sup>6</sup>

Members of parliament and cabinet ministers also assert that significant levels of government revenue are lost to corruption... The strength of the informal economy limits the Afghan government's ability to benefit from the extractives sector, which Afghan officials have highlighted as potentially a significant source of revenues. A large percentage of mining activity in Afghanistan is conducted by informal or illegal small-scale operations in both government-controlled and insurgent controlled territory, with their products smuggled out of the country.

In March 2021, the Afghanistan Precious Stones Association claimed that around \$1 billion in precious stones is smuggled out of Afghanistan each year. In contrast, illegal mining has increasingly become a key source of revenue for the Taliban. In areas under its control, the Taliban issues mining licenses, collects taxes and protection money from mining operations, and controls the smuggling of quarried minerals and gems abroad, in particular to Pakistan. In late January 2021, Minister of Mines and Petroleum Mohammad Haroon Chakhansuri stated, "The Taliban are currently mining in 750 areas. This group is using the money [made from] mining against the government." As a result, the formalized extractives sector has failed to materialize as a driver of economic growth and a source of sustainable domestic revenues for the Afghan government. For revenue derived from trade, such as customs, more than half of the total value of goods that crosses the international border flows to the informal economy. This is a substantial source of income for anti-state insurgents, other non-government groups, and corrupt officials, resulting in hundreds of millions of dollars in lost revenue for the Afghan government

One key tool was never used in practice. As is discussed later, the U.S., other donors, and UNAMA made no real effort to make military or civil aid conditional and to ensure that it only flowed when the Afghan government used it effectively, used it where it was supposed to be spend, and kept corruption to reasonable levels. As SIGAR has made all too clear in its reports to Congress, there was a similar lack of effective planning, programming, and budgeting – and effective fiscal management – in dealing with foreign and U.S. contractors – compounding the problems in ensuring that aid was used effectively and with minimal corruption.

This was compounded by the failure to fully integrate and assess non-U.S. aid levels and the impact of the different ways in which donor countries planned and managed their aid efforts. "Strategic jingoism" was applied as much to most aspects of the management and spending in aid as it did to planning and coordination of given aid efforts.

### **Peace Agreements without Real Plans or Negotiations but with Real U.S. Withdrawals**

All of these issues became critical once the U.S. coupled a so-called peace agreement to withdrawing its forces from Afghanistan. How the February 2020 peace agreement was reached and why it led to immediate deadlines for U.S. withdrawal will be another source of lessons, but it is one where there now are so little open source data on the details of the U.S. decision-making process that it is possible to do little more than speculate. Some of the sequence of events strongly indicates, however, that the decision to withdraw was made without any real peace plan, and certainly without fully consulting the Afghan government.

Here, reporting from the Chair of the UN Security Council Committee covering Afghanistan, and its Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, strongly implies that real planning efforts came long after the February agreement and withdrawal plan was announced. A UN Security Council Report issued on May 21, 2021 states that,<sup>7</sup>

The key development between May 2020 and April 2021 has been the evolution of the peace process in Afghanistan pursuant to the agreement signed in Doha in February 2020 and the stated intention of the United States of America and allied forces to complete their withdrawal from Afghanistan by September 2021. The international community, including a range of Member States, increased engagement during the period under review, with a view to promoting peace in Afghanistan.

The first round of intra-Afghan negotiations between Taliban and Islamic Republic delegations in Doha began on 12 September 2020, followed by several meetings seeking agreement on a code of conduct for the negotiation process. Talks resumed on 5 January 2021 following a break.

By late February, Taliban statements emphasized their full compliance with the agreement, while alleging non-compliance by the United States. On 28 February 2021, in a statement to mark the anniversary of the Doha agreement, the Taliban laid responsibility for implementation of the agreement with Qatar, the United Nations, other countries and international observers present at the signing ceremony. The statement provided no detail as to a way forward.

In response to the announcement by Washington, D.C., regarding a policy review and reappraisal of the Doha agreement, the Taliban issued several statements, ranging from appeals for the United States to abide by the withdrawal deadline, to threats of attacks should they remain beyond it. In February 2021, Taliban first deputy Sirajuddin Jallaloudine Haqqani (TAi.144) stated that failure to abide by the terms of the agreement would result in unprecedented Taliban offensives.

On 11 April, the Taliban insisted that any breach of the 1 May deadline would automatically lead to a resumption in attacks. The Taliban dismissed any notion of extending the deadline as having no benefit, reiterating that re-establishment of the “Islamic Emirate”, and not maintaining a democratic system, was the only option on the table.

The United States shared a draft peace plan calling for discussions between the parties regarding how a political solution to the conflict might unfold, including guiding principles for the future of Afghanistan and a political road map for a transitional peace government, pending elections under a new constitution. Talks complementary to those in Doha were slated for 16 April in Istanbul (later postponed to 24 April–4 May). On 12 April, the Taliban Political Commission stated that they were still to make a final decision on participation. Despite this, on 13 April, a joint statement by Turkey, Qatar and the United Nations officially announced the Istanbul conference on the Afghanistan peace process.

On 14 April, United States President Biden announced the withdrawal of all American and allied troops from Afghanistan by the twentieth anniversary of the 11 September 2001 attacks. One day earlier, following media reporting on the impending announcement, the Taliban issued a statement via Twitter that they would not take part in any conference intended to decide the future of Afghanistan until all foreign troops had departed. As of the writing of the present report, it is unclear when formal talks will resume.

This raises another critical potential lesson of the war. If President Trump’s decision to withdraw in February 2020 came months before the U.S. presented (and possibly had) any peace plan, and President Biden issued his revised September 2021 deadline without any serious progress in negotiations, both decisions had to have acted as a massive incentive to the Taliban to keep fighting, and it raised serious questions as to whether either administration ever really expected a meaningful peace negotiation to take place on terms that did not strongly favor the Taliban.

In fairness to the Biden administration, however, did inherit the Trump administration’s announcement of a withdrawal deadline before there was a peace agreement, which undermined U.S. leverage from the start that it was more a “war agreement” than a “peace agreement.” It raises serious questions as to whether the U.S. had decided to withdraw regardless of the outcome and was offering a largely cosmetic or face-saving cover for the withdrawal, rather than trying to create a real basis for negotiation. Here, the historical record, if one exists, should be fascinating.

## The Threat to Afghanistan from the Afghan Central Government

It is always tempting to focus on the military dimension of a war, but this all too often means that analysts do not place proper emphasis on the civil causes of victory or defeat. The U.S. did not spend twenty years fighting terrorism in Afghanistan. Even by the end of 2001, the war had ceased to be a war against terrorism and was becoming a struggle to create a viable state. By 2002, the fighting had ceased to be a fight against al-Qaeda and international terrorism, and it was becoming a fight against a Taliban insurgency, although the Taliban did not make serious gains for several more years.

### Civil Failures Became a Critical Part of War Fighting

This made civil failures a critical part of war fighting and also a critical aspect of counterinsurgency campaigns that the U.S. consistently tended to underestimate. Strong opposition movements and insurgencies do not arise or recover without cause. They are not the part of some mysterious process that shapes “hearts and minds,” but they are failures in politics, governance, and economics – often driven by ideology, religion, ethnicity, sect, and tribe.

It is a grim reality in far too many U.S. counterinsurgency campaigns the U.S. military is tasked with trying to support a failed leadership and system of governance that fails to properly support – and instead often abuses – a major part of the population. Even if one ignores the problems in dealing with outside powers, the U.S. faces at least three enemies in its counterinsurgency efforts, not just one. The first is the hostile force the U.S. attempts to defeat. The second enemy is the failures and weaknesses of the government the U.S. is seeking to aid. And, the third is the inability of the United States to fully understand these challenges in the context of another country’s culture and political system.

As has already been discussed, there are many causes of the Taliban’s recovery and its gradual defeat of the Afghan central government in much of the Afghan countryside. However, the key cause is probably the fact that the government in Kabul was in many ways its own worst enemy at both the civil and military levels – alongside its corruption, lack of focus on the needs of the Afghan people, factionalism, and power brokering.

The image of civil progress was always better than the reality in the field. There were many well-educated and well-intentioned Afghans that tried to serve their country, but this did not mean they were capable of becoming popular leaders, governing and developing the country, or dealing with the nation’s political realities. Moreover, the U.S. stopped open source reporting on progress by District in March 2010, as the rise in Taliban activity and problems in popular support for the District governments began to rise in way that could no longer be ignored. The data involved are not fully explained, but **Figure Three** shows the last detailed open source map of the trends by District – and no open source update was then provided.

SIGAR describes the history of this process as follows in its July 30, 2021 report to Congress,<sup>8</sup>

SIGAR tracked Afghan government population, district, and territorial control from November 2015 until October 2018, using unclassified data provided by Resolute Support. In March 2019, Resolute Support notified SIGAR that it no longer produced its district level stability assessment of Afghan government and insurgent control and influence, claiming they were “of limited decision-making value to the [RS] Commander.” The last time SIGAR published district control assessments was for its January 2019 Quarterly Report to the United States Congress. RS reported then that as of October 2018, of Afghanistan’s then-407 districts, 50 were under insurgent control or influence (12 controlled, 38 influenced).

In the conference report for the William M. (Mac) Thornberry National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021, Congress required DOD to include a section in their semiannual Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan report providing a district-level stability assessment displaying insurgent control versus Afghan government control and influence of districts to include district, population, and territorial control data. The next DOD report, covering the previous six months ending June 30, had not yet been issued as this report went to press. Whether the Afghan government or the insurgents had “control” of a district was a subjective determination based on a number of factors, such as degree of effective Afghan government local governance, security, infrastructure, economic control, and communications, that RS took into consideration (for more detail on metrics Resolute Support used to determine district, population and territorial control see the April 30, 2016, Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, p. 96).

Regardless of how Resolute Support once measured district control, that level of detailed, subjective analysis from on-the ground U.S. or Coalition soldiers no longer exists. The ongoing withdrawal of U.S. and Coalition forces has left open sources such as the Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN), the Long War Journal (LWJ), British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), and Gandhara (Radio Free Afghanistan) to fill the void on what is happening in Afghanistan’s districts, especially those furthest from Kabul. These organizations define and determine “district control” in various ways, including press reports, government agency statements, their own reporters and contacts, and the Taliban, often through social media.

Put more bluntly, the official reporting on the course of the war became a dangerous liar’s contest. The growth of the Taliban presence in rural areas was rarely addressed. Official reporting focused on ANDSF “defeats” of the Taliban that were tied almost exclusively to Taliban initiated attacks – and where winning the tactical engagement was not followed by the capability to “hold” or provide lasting security.

“Independent” ANDSF action actually involved massive U.S. intelligence and advisory support, often uncredited help from elite troops and intelligence personnel, dependence on contractors for sustainability and actual operations, and sometimes U.S. airpower. This help was almost always critical in dealing with any major Taliban operation.

It also seems likely that any independent study of the course of the war that is eventually given access to the full classified intelligence and other official reporting on District control will reveal that the ANDSF, U.S., and NATO steadily lost access to reliable data on Taliban gains in rural areas and its ability to generate selective and more serious attacks on urban areas – including Kabul. It is also far from clear that such analysis went beyond the tactical level to fully analyze why and how the Taliban was expanding its influence at the financial, civil, and political level. It may well have focused on the narrow tactical threat that it defined as “terrorism,” rather than the broader and all too real threat from insurgency.

It is equally unclear how well the ANDSF, U.S., and NATO focused on the role of power brokers, and on the Taliban’s sources of income from narcotics and its growing control over roads and checkpoints as well as its ability to extort funds from Afghans in more secure areas. They also do not seem to have recognized the growing Taliban threat to Northern Afghanistan and to the border crossings where duties and charges are one of the Afghan central government’s few real sources of income from within Afghanistan.

The status of this threat is still in flux, but SIGAR’s July 30, 2021 report to Congress notes that,<sup>9</sup>

In addition to capturing districts, the Taliban have taken at least six international border crossings and hold long stretches of highways throughout the country, according to the AAN. This not only denies the Afghan government significant revenue from taxes on international trade, but also provides far more opportunities for the Taliban to raise their own revenue by taxing traders and extorting travelers at checkpoints.

The Taliban seized six total border crossings this quarter, including four major border crossings, with the potential to deny the Afghan government significant customs revenue. On June 22, 2021, Taliban forces captured the U.S.-financed

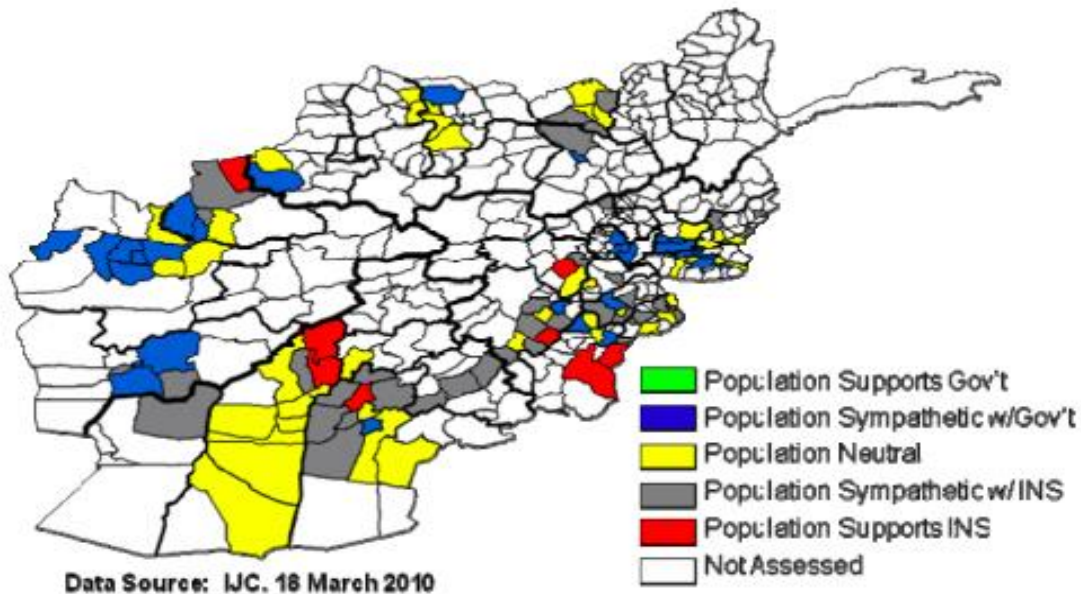
Sher Khan Bandar border crossing in Kunduz Province between Afghanistan and Tajikistan after 134 border guards and other Afghan troops fled into Tajikistan. According to a Taliban spokesperson, the Taliban have kept this crossing open to cross-border trade and have begun to collect customs revenue. In early July, Afghan officials acknowledged that the Taliban had captured the Torghundi border crossing with Turkmenistan and the Islam Qala border crossing in western Herat Province, a main gateway for trade with Iran. On July 14, there were also reports that Taliban forces seized the Spin Boldak crossing with Pakistan in Kandahar Province. This crossing is one of the busiest entry points into the country and a primary trade link between southern Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The Taliban's occupation of key border crossings could deny potentially significant levels of customs revenue to the Afghan government, further inhibiting its ability to generate sufficient domestic revenues. In FY 1399, the border crossings in Herat, Kandahar, and Kunduz Provinces generated 34.3% of the Afghan government's total customs revenues, according to Afghan government accounting data.

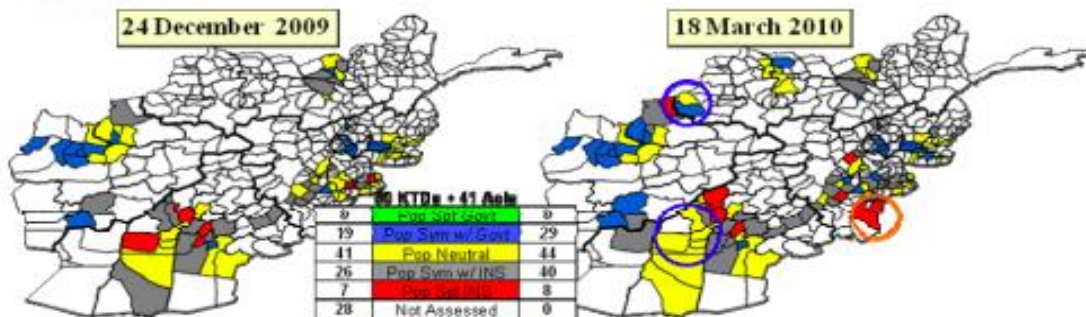
***Figure Three: When the Going Gets Tough, Stop Reporting. The Last Open Source Assessment of Support for the Afghan Government by Key District***

**Overall Assessment of Key Districts**

**Figure 5 - Overall Assessment of Key Districts, March 18, 2010**



**Figure 6 - Comparison of Overall Assessment of Key Districts, December 24, 2009 - March 18, 2010**



**(Reporting Halted Once Popular Support Declined. Population Only Sympathized or Supported the Afghan Central Government in 24% (29 of 121 Key Terrain and Area of Interest Districts))**

Source: Department of Defense, Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan, April 2010, p. 36, [https://archive.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/Report\\_Final\\_SecDef\\_04\\_26\\_10.pdf](https://archive.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/Report_Final_SecDef_04_26_10.pdf).



## Twenty-Five Years of Failed Governance in a Twenty-Year War

The world is filled with “fragile” or failed states, and the history of these states demonstrates all too clearly that having elites with good education and good intentions is no substitute for an effective structure of governance and for effective fiscal systems, effective planning and administration, practical political experience, and measures that really limit corruption and report on effectiveness.

Afghanistan has been one of those states ever since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, and a state that made remarkably little overall progress at a remarkably high cost. This is all too clear from **Figure Four**, which shows the World Bank’s ratings of key aspects of Afghan governance from 1995 to 2020, as well as other current rankings of the Afghan government by a range of international measures of the effectiveness of different governments and their ability to meet the needs of their people.

At the same time, the Afghan government did face deep structural pressures and challenges. One is geography and the comparative isolation of much of its rural population to District capitals. Another is ethnicity where the CIA *World Factbook* warns that “current statistical data on the sensitive subject of ethnicity in Afghanistan are not available, and ethnicity data from small samples of respondents to opinion polls are not a reliable alternative” but states that, “Afghanistan's 2004 constitution recognizes 14 ethnic groups: Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, Baloch, Turkmen, Nuristani, Pamiri, Arab, Gujar, Brahui, Qizilbash, Aimaq, and Pashai.” Language differences and religion are issues, and while the country is 99.7% Muslim, the CIA estimates that it is 84.7-89.7% Sunni and 10-15% Shiite – a critical issue given the Taliban’s past opposition to Shiite practices and its common border with Iran.

It is also critical to understand just how much pressure the civil structure of Afghanistan was under. It was not simply a matter of what became a nation-wide return of the Taliban and insurgency. There also are many civil reasons why most peaceful revolutions fail and why most so-called developing states do not develop at the rates necessary to meet popular needs.

## Population Growth and Urbanization

One reason is population growth. Afghanistan has a median age of only 19.1 years, and a dependency ratio as high as 88.8. It is worth noting that the World Bank projects that Afghanistan had a population of some 7.9 million in 1950, 11.2 million in 1970, 13.4 million in 1979, 14.5 million in 1992, 21.6 million in 2001, and some 39.8 million today after twenty years of war – with a projected total of 65.7 million in 2050.

This growth has pushed large numbers of Afghans into cities and urban life because Afghans in rural areas have fled as the Taliban threat has risen and urban birth rates have also been remarkably high. The World Bank estimates that Afghanistan’s urban population grew by almost 4.5 percent a year between 2000 and 2010. Within the region, only Bhutan and Maldives experienced faster growth rates of urban population. This means urbanization rose by 45% between 2000 and 2010, and the CIA estimates that urbanization has probably reached at least 26% of the total population, and that it is still increasing by at least 3.3% a year.

Urbanization has also created a large number of young Afghans seeking jobs in the cash economy and some form of a real career, while education has raised expectations in an economy with few of these jobs outside the military and civil government. These jobs, however, often only pay enough to fund a normal middle-class life if one had special influence or was corrupt.

Afghans seeking a more modern middle-class life have often had no option other than corruption, and more powerful Afghans found corruption could safely bring them serious wealth. From the start, this same corruption affected the security forces as well as the civil sector. There is no clear way to quantify the growth of such trends and problems, but far too often, corruption or the abuse of privilege became the only practical option, and this is reflected all too clearly in the World Bank assessments of the Afghan government and military shown in **Figure Four**.

Coupled to hyper urbanization, deep internal ethnic and tribal divisions, and major infrastructure and terrain issues, this has meant that the government has faced extraordinary challenges since 2002. As noted earlier, these problems were also immediately complicated by a constitution that left an extremely weak legislature with little real local representation or internal control over the nation's finances that could limit corruption from the local to national level.

### ***Figure Four: Afghanistan: A Failed Civil Government***

**Transparency International:** 16<sup>th</sup> most corrupt country in the world out of 180 countries rated.

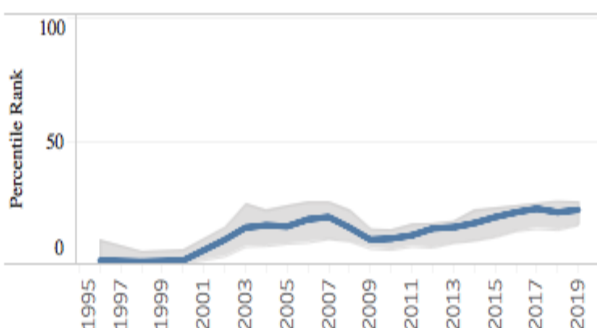
**Fragile State Index:** 9<sup>th</sup> worst ranked country in the world in 2021

**Freedom House:** Global score is only 27. Only 13 for political rights and 14 for civil liberty out of a top score of 100.

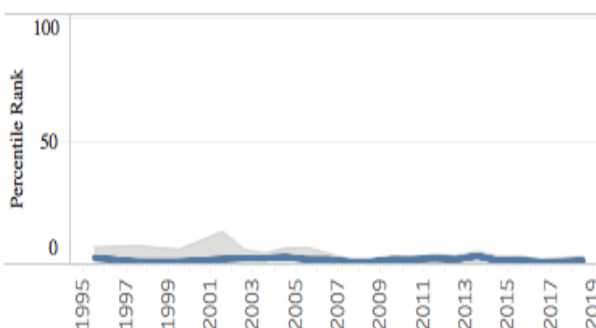
**UN Human Development Ranking:** Ranks only 169 out of 189 countries ranked.

**World Bank Governance Indicators: 1995-2019:** Towards the bottom of the worst ranked governments in the world. See below (<http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/Home/Reports>)

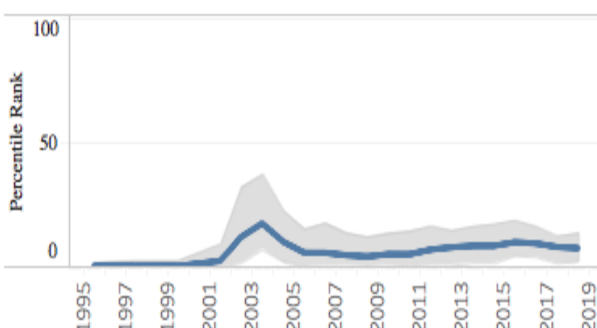
Voice and Accountability



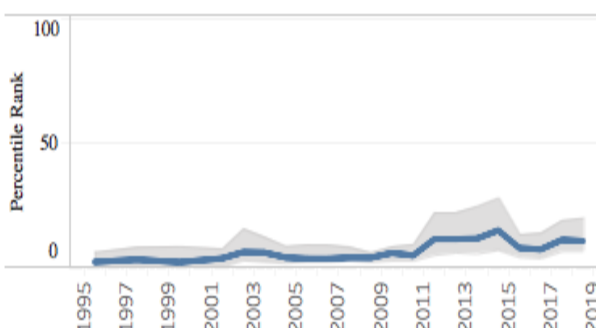
Political Stability and Absence of Violence/Terrorism



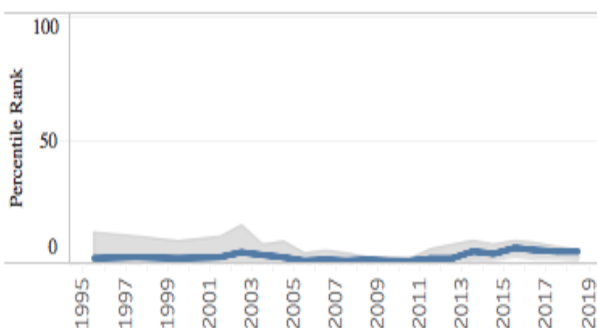
Government Effectiveness



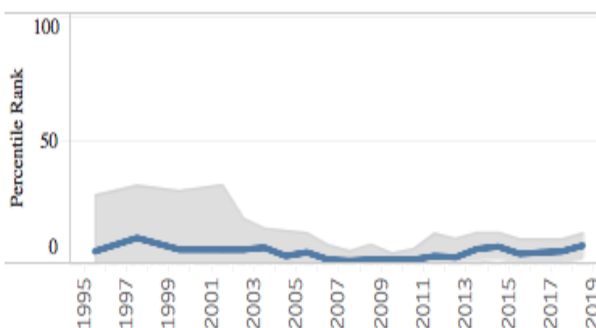
Regulatory Quality



Rule of Law



Control of Corruption



## Progress Claims and Lying by Omission

Overoptimistic plans and official claims of progress have consistently disguised these realities. Claims of rapid social progress from 2002 to roughly 2014 did reflect real progress especially in urban areas. Even today, there is considerable truth in the BBC estimate of progress shown in **Figure Five**, which was made in July 2021 – although work by SIGAR and other sources indicates that such data exaggerate the rate of progress in areas like the rights of women, overall education, and health care – and that nation-wide data understate the sharp differences between progress in cities like Kabul and in rural areas, as well as the level of decline in many areas after 2014.

Many past claims were based on estimates that were extremely optimistic and for which there were few serious data collection efforts and reliable data. Moreover, in many cases, the quality of reporting on gains by District was sharply reduced as the Taliban returned – particularly in rural areas – and this decline was coupled to the failure to properly develop more modern governance at the local level and growing corruption and security issues.

The problems may explain why the U.S. stopped public reporting on progress in governance and in the impact of aid by District after 2014. As SIGAR has documented, it also led to a growing reliance on general claims about improvement in education, health, and the rights of women which SIGAR and other outside analytic efforts found to be increasingly uncertain.

It is striking for example, SIGAR found some estimates of student levels that require a child to be absent for three years before being reported as having ended their education, that many Districts lacked any enforcement capability to protect women, that some estimates of increased longevity seem to lack a clear source, and that estimates of progress in some areas are in sharp contradiction with CIA estimates that Afghanistan has the highest infant mortality rate in the world: 106.75 per 1,000 versus 88.03 for Somalia and 84.22 for the Central African Republic.<sup>10</sup>

### *Figure Five: BBC Estimate of Progress in Afghanistan: 2001-2017*

- Number of children in school at all levels has increased from 0.9 million in 2001 to 9.2 million in 2017 - with 39% of them girls. (Human Rights Watch)
- By 2012, the figure for girls enrolled in primary education had grown to more than 40%, although it's come down slightly. (UN) Girls attending Secondary School rose from 6% in 2003 to 39% in 2017 (World Bank)
- In 2019, 5% of women went to college or university, 22% had jobs, 20% of civil servant were female, 27% of MPs were women, and 1,000 had businesses (UN/World Bank, Amnesty)
- 22% of the population had access to the Internet (UN)
- 69% had mobile phones (UN)
- 4.4 million used social media. (UN)
- 14% had bank accounts: 23% of men and 7% of women (World Bank)

“In numbers: Life in Afghanistan after America leaves,” *BBC*, July 12, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-57767067>, and “Afghanistan: What has happened to violence, poverty and women's education?,” *BBC*, July 9, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/56779160>.

### **From Afghanistan to “Kabulstan”**

While it is uncertain that sufficient data exist to track all the patterns involved in the growth of Taliban presence and control even if classified or other official data are fully made public, it also will be critical to estimate the rate at which the level of governance declined or failed to meet local needs and standards by District in rural areas over time. The government’s losses in the war did not simply consist of Taliban gains. They consisted of the failures to appoint honest and effective officials; ensuring that District officials, police, and security forces actually carried out their missions; and that money was used honestly and effectively.

Media reporting shows there are many cases in rural areas where District officials, police, and local security personnel were clearly appointed because of outside political influence, did not operate effectively, and created a power vacuum and probable lack of public support. These problems clearly increased over time as more and more focus was placed on securing populated areas and sources of government income.

It seems probable that if the data do exist and can be recovered, a full analysis would show that by 2014, many aspects of governance were local, controlled by power brokers, or simply allowed to decline. The end result was to effectively shift much of the focus of the central government to urban areas like Kabul, Kunduz, Herat, Lashkar Gah, and Kandahar – effectively making the central focus of both governance and security the equivalent of Kabul, rather than Afghanistan.

## A Failed State Created a Failed Economy

Current reporting on the Afghan civil economy also highlights the extent to which the Afghan government has failed to meet its people's needs and created the conditions that made a continuing U.S. effort problematic. There are many sources of data that illustrate the level of these Afghan economic failures, but SIGAR, the World Bank, and CIA can scarcely be accused of being pessimistic and biased – and their assessments at the end of spring 2021 are summarized in **Figure Six**.

These assessments also only tell part of the story, and they have major structural problems that limit their value in assessing the links between failed economies, stability, and the outcomes of civil conflict. Moreover, Covid-19, drought, and war all present major problems in assessing Afghanistan's current status and future prospects. However, some key problems are clear. The government's dependence on donor aid for some 80% of all public security and civil expenditures (\$11 billion in an economy that totals only some \$78 billion) – a dependence that donors seem unlikely to fund in the future even if the government does not collapse and that could lead to massive cuts if the Taliban does take over.

SIGAR estimates that Covid-19 has had a major impact in cutting the growth of the urban service and industrial sectors, although such estimates are now almost impossible to make because of the lack of adequate economic data and from the impact of Taliban gains in limiting commercial traffic along roads throughout the country.

The World Bank warns that,

The private sector is extremely narrow, with employment concentrated in low-productivity agriculture (44 percent of the total workforce works in agriculture and 60 percent of households derive some income from agriculture). Private sector development and diversification is constrained by insecurity, political instability, weak institutions, inadequate infrastructure, widespread corruption, and a difficult business environment (Afghanistan was ranked 173rd of 190 countries in the 2020 Doing Business Survey).

Weak institutions and property rights constrain financial inclusion and access to finance, with credit to the private sector equal to only three percent of GDP. Weak competitiveness drives a structural trade deficit, equal to around 30 percent of GDP, financed almost entirely from grant inflows. Grants continue to finance around 75 percent of public spending. Security expenditures (national security and police) are high at around 28 percent of GDP in 2019, compared to the low-income country average of around three percent of GDP, driving total public spending of around 57 percent of GDP. The illicit economy accounts for a significant share of production, exports, and employment, and includes opium production, smuggling, and illegal mining.

The CIA reports that,

... political instability, expiring international financial commitments, and the COVID-19 pandemic have wrought significant adversity on the Afghan economy, with a projected 5% contraction.

Current political parties' power-sharing agreement following the September 2019 presidential elections as well as ongoing Taliban attacks and peace talks have led to Afghan economic instability. This instability, coupled with expiring international grant and assistance, endangers recent fiscal gains and has led to more internally displaced persons. In November 2020, Afghanistan secured \$12 billion in additional international aid for 2021-2025, much of which is conditional upon Taliban peace progress. Additionally, Afghanistan continues to experience influxes of repatriating Afghans, mostly from Iran, significantly straining economic and security institutions.

SIGAR's July 30, 2021 report to Congress notes that,<sup>11</sup>

Increased government service provision, an economy fueled by donor funds, and artificially inflated demand produced by the large international presence rapidly improved many of Afghanistan's development outcomes until the 2014 drawdown of most international troops. After the Afghan government assumed responsibility for the fight against the Taliban insurgency, licit annual GDP growth of just under 10% dropped to low-single-digit rates. Since the transition to Afghan lead responsibility for security, the afghani (AFN) has depreciated against the U.S. dollar, from approximately 57 AFN to the dollar in 2014 to around 77 by the end of 2020.

Prior to the pandemic, an estimated 55% of Afghans lived below the poverty line (defined as 2,064 afghanis per person per month or around \$1 in daily income), according to household survey data, an increase from 34% in 2008. While the World Bank had projected that poverty levels would rise as high as 72% during 2020 due to the socioeconomic effects of the pandemic, it now estimates that overall poverty levels actually decreased to 47.1%, as the pandemic had a less severe economic impact in rural areas than originally projected. In urban areas, however, the Bank estimated that poverty levels rose from 41.6% to 45.5% in 2020.

SIGAR estimates that, "In early 2020, 55% of Afghans lived below the poverty line (defined as 2,064 Afghans per person per month or around \$1 in daily income), according to the most recent household survey data, an increase from 34% in 2008." Some other estimates put the percentage now at the poverty level closer to 70%. Here, the CIA estimates that the real Afghan GDP per capita was only \$2,178 in 2019 – before the impact of Covid-19 – and ranked 213 out of 228 countries, which is the fifth lowest per capita income in the world and one that illustrates the level of probable corruption in all too many Afghans that live by something approaching at least lower-middle class by Western standards.

Some of the economists and analysts involved in making these assessments also feel these assessments may actually understate the steady decline in the Afghan economy and its potential impact on the fighting, civil conflict, and Afghanistan's internal tensions that has helped the Taliban to make major gains. None of the current assessments of the Afghan economy address popular views of corruption, views of the role played by the central government versus the Taliban, and income distribution. They do not address differences in the economic situation by region, by group within Afghan society, or by the inequities in income distribution. None of the economic assessments are tied to the impact of economics on the fighting or perceptions of the peace process nor are they tied to the struggle for control of given Districts and rural areas.

### ***Figure Six: Afghanistan: A Failed Civil Economy***

#### **SIGAR Summary in Report to Congress, 1Q 2021 (p. 132-133)**

U.S. efforts to bolster private-sector investment to support sustainable economic growth are part of a broader strategy to transition Afghanistan from being predominately an assistance recipient to becoming a long-term and self-sufficient economic partner. Yet, Afghanistan remains poor, aid-dependent, and conflict-affected, with any potential economic growth in the short term further limited by the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Donor grants totaling at least \$8.6 billion per year (covering both security and civilian assistance) currently finance over half of the government budget—but almost 80% of Afghanistan's \$11 billion in total public expenditures when off-budget assistance is counted along with on-budget aid.

On February 22, 2021, following weeks of debate in which the draft budget was twice rejected, the Afghan parliament approved a 473 billion afghani (approximately \$6 billion) national budget for FY 1400 (December 2020–December 2021), comprising some \$4 billion for the regular budget covering government operations and \$2 billion for the development budget.

Only 46% of the FY 1400 budget is funded by domestic revenue sources. Increased government service provision and an economy fueled by donor funds rapidly improved many of Afghanistan's development outcomes through the 2014 drawdown of most international troops after which the Afghan government assumed responsibility for the fight against the Taliban insurgency. But licit annual GDP growth of just under 10% dropped to low-single-digit rates following that drawdown.

Lower GDP, population growth, and returnees from other countries have had an impact on Afghan poverty levels. In early 2020, 55% of Afghans lived below the poverty line (defined as 2,064 afghanis per person per month or around \$1 in daily income), according to the most recent household survey data, an increase from 34% in 2008.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) projected that Afghanistan's GDP would drop by 5% during 2020 in the midst of the pandemic, with country's unemployment rate rising to 37.9%, up from 23.9% in 2019. The World Bank estimated this quarter that the Afghan economy actually contracted by only 1.9% of GDP, based on preliminary data from Afghanistan's National Statistics and Information Authority. The World Bank explains that this is due to 5.3% growth in the agricultural sector as a result of COVID-19-related disruptions having a limited impact in rural areas and favorable weather conditions during 2020. However, the lockdowns and border closures severely contracted economic activity within urban and peri-urban areas, leading to a 4.2% contraction in the industry sector and 4.8% contraction in the service sector during 2020.

Additionally, while the World Bank had projected that poverty levels would rise as high as 72%, it now estimates that overall poverty levels actually decreased from 55% to 47.1% in 2020, due to a less severe economic impact of the pandemic in rural areas than originally projected. In urban areas, however, the Bank estimated that poverty levels rose from 41.6% to 45.5% in 2020.

If the current security and political conditions hold and international support remains at the levels pledged during the 2020 Geneva Conference, the World Bank projects that Afghanistan's economy will grow by only 1% of GDP during 2021, as a result of continued weak investor confidence and an anticipated contraction in the agricultural sector due to the effects of drought. Considering normal rates of population growth and the impact of returnees from other countries, the per capita GDP indicator of economic health could actually decline.

The pandemic also contributed to the Afghan government's inability to generate sufficient domestic revenue and its heavy dependence on international assistance—long-standing challenges stemming from limited capacity, persistent corruption, tax evasion, and the strength of the informal and illicit economies. In Afghanistan, approximately 90% of the economy is informal and, therefore, largely escapes taxation, further inhibiting the Afghan government's financial self-sufficiency.

As the Afghan economy has struggled to find sustainable economic growth, the country has increasingly relied in recent years on remittances from Afghans working abroad, especially in neighboring Iran. By 2019, remittances accounted for the equivalent of 4.3% of Afghanistan's annual GDP, an increase from 1.2% in 2014, according to World Bank data.

However, officials from the intergovernmental International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimate this figure could be as high as 15–20%, given that many remittances are sent through the informal hawala money-transfer system.

The COVID-19 pandemic has reduced remittances to Afghanistan by a World Bank-estimated 10% in 2020. Afghans in Iran, for instance, have struggled to find work due to COVID-19 and economic sanctions, forcing many to return to Afghanistan, where they face rising levels of unemployment, poverty, and insecurity. The need for humanitarian assistance



has been heightened by the record-breaking number of Afghan migrants returning to Afghanistan. In 2020, the IOM recorded the largest return of Afghan migrants in a single year, approximately one million—almost double the

count in 2019. Over 200,000 returned between January and March 2021, more than double the number from the same periods in 2019 and 2020.

**World Bank March 30, 2021,** <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/afghanistan/overview>

- Afghanistan's economy is shaped by fragility and aid dependence. The private sector is extremely narrow, with employment concentrated in low-productivity agriculture (44 percent of the total workforce works in agriculture and 60 percent of households derive some income from agriculture). Private sector development and diversification is constrained by insecurity, political instability, weak institutions, inadequate infrastructure, widespread corruption, and a difficult business environment (Afghanistan was ranked 173rd of 190 countries in the 2020 Doing Business Survey). Weak institutions and property rights constrain financial inclusion and access to finance, with credit to the private sector equal to only three percent of GDP. Weak competitiveness drives a structural trade deficit, equal to around 30 percent of GDP, financed almost entirely from grant inflows. Grants continue to finance around 75 percent of public spending. Security expenditures (national security and police) are high at around 28 percent of GDP in 2019, compared to the low-income country average of around three percent of GDP, driving total public spending of around 57 percent of GDP. The illicit economy accounts for a significant share of production, exports, and employment, and includes opium production, smuggling, and illegal mining.
- With an influx of aid since 2002, Afghanistan sustained rapid economic growth and improvements against important social indicators for more than a decade. Annual growth averaged 9.4 percent between 2003 and 2012, driven by a booming aid-driven services sector, and strong agricultural growth. A range of factors have since slowed economic and social progress, with the economy growing by only 2.5 percent per annum between 2015-2020, and gains against development indicators slowing or – in some cases – reversing. Aid flows decreased from around 100 percent of GDP in 2009 to 42.9 percent of GDP in 2020 (with the number of international troops declining from more than 130,000 in 2011, to around 15,000 by end-2014, to around 10,000 today). Declining grants led to a protracted contraction of the services sector, with an associated deterioration in employment and incomes. The security situation deteriorated, with the Taliban insurgency gaining control over increased territory and intensifying attacks on military and civilian targets, with civilian casualties totaling more than 10,000 per year between 2014 and 2019. The impacts of declining grants and worsening security were exacerbated by political instability following the disputed outcome of the 2014 presidential elections. The formation of the National Unity Government under an extra-constitutional power-sharing agreement led to administrative disruptions and slowed reform progress.
- Direct negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government officially began on September 12, 2020 following the Doha agreement signed between the US and the Taliban in February 2020. Under the terms of the US-Taliban agreement, US forces have scaled down offensive operations, large numbers of Taliban prisoners have been released, and Taliban mass civilian casualty bombings and attacks on international forces have ceased. Nonetheless, Taliban attacks on Afghan security forces have reached record levels, and more than 20 civil society activists and other prominent civilians have been killed in a campaign of targeted killings. In response to slow progress with Intra-Afghan negotiations and continued high levels of violence, the new US administration announced a review of the Doha agreement, including its commitment to withdraw all US troops by May 2021. The future of negotiations, and how the Taliban may respond to any delay in the US withdrawal remains unclear.
- At the Geneva conference held in November 2020, donors renewed their commitment to aid support to Afghanistan for 2021-2024. However, several major donors provided only single-year pledges, with future support made conditional upon the government achieving accelerated progress in efforts to combat corruption, reduce poverty, and advance ongoing peace talks. Aid support is now expected to decline by around 20 percent from the previous pledging period (US\$15.2 billion over 2016-2020) but could fall even lower if conditions are not met or if major donors further reduce commitment levels amid domestic fiscal pressures. Afghanistan now faces daunting challenges in sustaining recent development gains in the face of mounting political uncertainties, declining international grant support, and continued insecurity. Policy options are narrowed by the weak implementation capacity of government agencies, reflecting governance constraints, and tightly constrained macroeconomic policy options in the context of narrowing fiscal space and weak monetary transmission mechanisms.

- World Bank Group engagement pursues a programmatic approach to support the Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework (ANPDF II) that was presented by the Government of Afghanistan at the Geneva conference. Advisory work and operations focus on: macro-fiscal policy and management; finance, private investment, and job creation; public sector governance and anti-corruption; human capital development and service delivery; citizen engagement and social inclusion; urban development and infrastructure, connectivity and sustainability.

### **CIA World Factbook (July 5, 2021)**

Prior to 2001, Afghanistan was an extremely poor, landlocked, and foreign aid-dependent country. Increased domestic economic activity occurred following the US-led invasion, as well as significant international economic development assistance. This increased activity expanded access to water, electricity, sanitation, education, and health services, and fostered consistent growth in government revenues since 2014. While international security forces have been drawing down since 2012, with much higher U.S. forces' drawdowns occurring since 2017, economic progress continues, albeit uneven across sectors and key economic indicators. After recovering from the 2018 drought and growing 3.9% in 2019, political instability, expiring international financial commitments, and the COVID-19 pandemic have wrought significant adversity on the Afghan economy, with a projected 5% contraction.

Current political parties' power-sharing agreement following the September 2019 presidential elections as well as ongoing Taliban attacks and peace talks have led to Afghan economic instability. This instability, coupled with expiring international grant and assistance, endangers recent fiscal gains and has led to more internally displaced persons. In November 2020, Afghanistan secured \$12 billion in additional international aid for 2021-2025, much of which is conditional upon Taliban peace progress. Additionally, Afghanistan continues to experience influxes of repatriating Afghans, mostly from Iran, significantly straining economic and security institutions.

Afghanistan's trade deficit remains at approximately 31% of GDP and is highly dependent on financing through grants and aid. While Afghan agricultural growth remains consistent, recent industrial and services growth have been enormously impacted by COVID-19 lockdowns and trade cessations. While trade with the People's Republic of China has rapidly expanded in recent years, Afghanistan still relies heavily upon India and Pakistan as export partners but is more diverse in its import partners. Furthermore, Afghanistan still struggles to effectively enforce business contracts, facilitate easy tax collection, and enable greater international trade for domestic enterprises.

## Failing to Assess the Civil Side of Taliban Gains

Still another aspect of the civil dimension of the war merits special attention. There has been remarkably little open source effort to measure the extent to which the Taliban gained public support at the District and Provincial levels from 2002 onwards as well as the effectiveness of its ability to influence and control the population of the Districts it controls and is contesting.

Most of the military reporting on the war has focused on the fighting to control given Districts, rather than the reasons why the Taliban made gains establishing effective political and security control of some Districts and not others or how the population has viewed the rise in Taliban presence and its military and economic activity relative to the role of the government.

Few studies have examined the reasons why the Afghan government appointed governors and other officials that were not corrupt or ineffective, but often in the context of Afghan politics and not how they affected the course of the fighting. At least in recent years, there also have been no credible official open source reports as to whether the central government or Taliban give Districts or contest them, and a series of official U.S. metrics has been developed that only measures whether the Taliban wins major battles that it initiates – an absurd metric in a war where the real measure of victory and the reasons for its success is the expansion of Taliban influence and control.

### Why Does the Taliban Make Gains in Controlling Given Districts: Some Limited Polling Indicators

The rapid Taliban gains from June 2021 onwards have shown how important a rise of Taliban presence by District can be, but reports of Taliban gains generally only report on government losses, and not on the mix of civil and military reasons for Taliban success. One partial exception is the Asia Foundation. It has conducted detailed annual polls that do provide detailed assessments of popular views and expectations, although it must be stressed that these polls were not designed to measure attitudes towards the course of the fighting and were not designed to tie polling results to the factors driving the war on a national, regional, or factional level.

At the same time, the Asia Foundation polls do provide some insights that indicate that better polling – or reporting on civil attitudes by District and local area – might play a critical role in understanding the course of fighting. The detailed polling results do show sharp differences in popular attitudes on security; the economy; and governance by region, Province, urban and rural area as well as ethnicity.

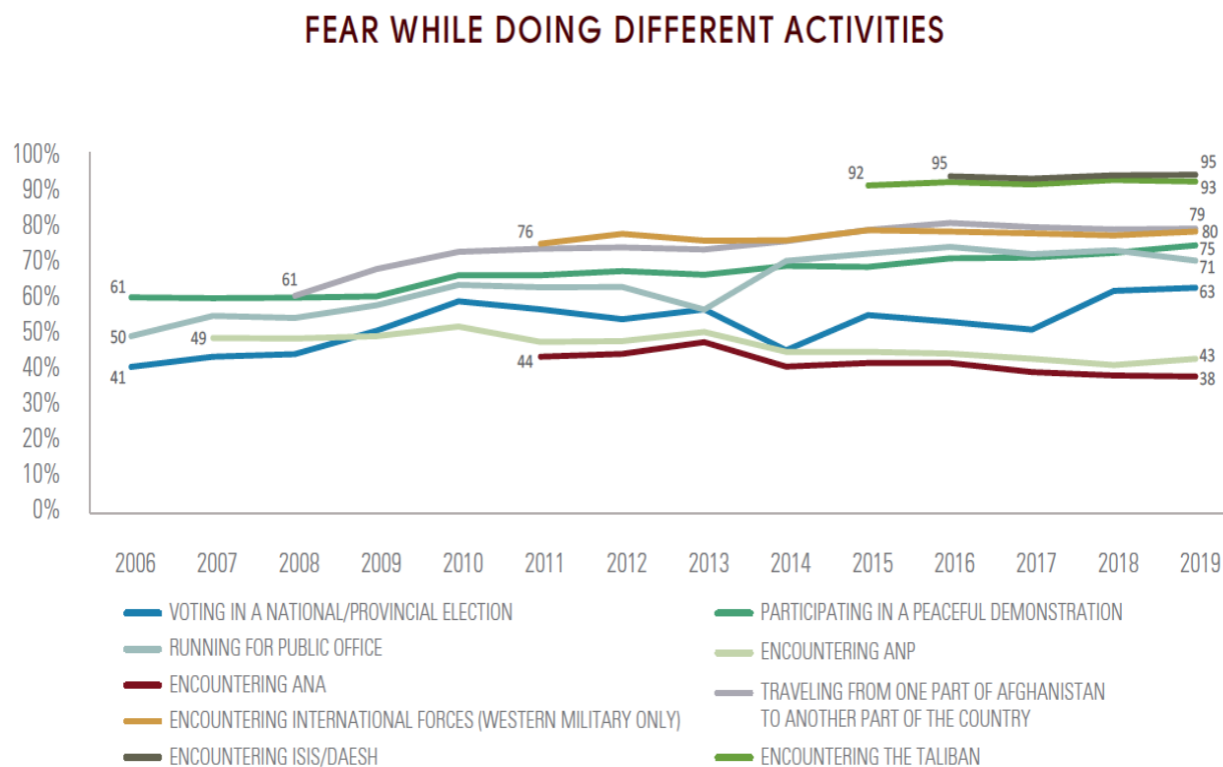
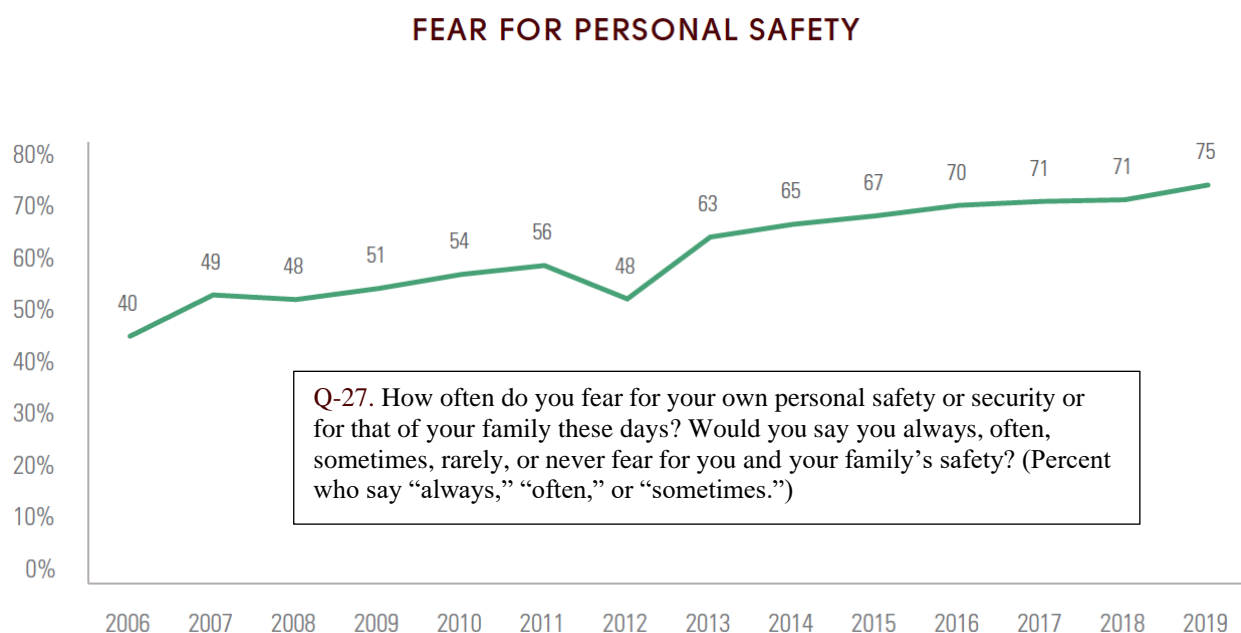
The Asia Foundation surveys have also provided some warning about possible future Taliban gains. Some of these results are shown in **Figure Seven**, and they are taken from the Asia Foundation's 2019 survey – the last year when the Foundation has so far been able to make a full survey – and it shows the rising popular concern with security and personal safety,<sup>12</sup>

... people remain deeply concerned about their household economy. A total 58.2% of Afghans surveyed said that the country was going in the wrong direction. A total of 26.6% cited unemployment, 12.8% cited the bad economy, and 4.2% cited high prices. More than three-quarters of respondents (77.7%) perceived economic difficulties to be the biggest problem facing youth, and this was consistent regardless of gender or place of residence.

Fear for personal safety is now at its highest recorded level, with 74.5% of respondents indicating that they fear for their personal safety. 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%). Interestingly, the number of respondents in Nimroz Province who report fear for personal safety has decreased approximately 40%, from 62.6% in 2018 to 39.0% this year. Another noticeable decrease in fear for personal safety, from 29.9% in 2018 to 21.4% this year, is seen in Badakhshan.

... Fear while participating in an election is also at its highest recorded level (63.3%), and this fear has increased by over 50% since the question was first asked, in 2006 (41.1%), and is representative of a longitudinal trend of rising fear and insecurity across much of the country. Respondents' increased fear of voting may be attributed to the 2018 parliamentary elections process, which, according to UNAMA, saw a deliberate Taliban campaign of "violence and intimidation" that resulted in record numbers of civilians killed and injured on election day<sup>29</sup>. This campaign included attacks by improvised explosive device, indirect fire, and small arms fire, along with abductions, threats, and intimidation of voters."

**Figure Seven: Rise in the Level of Popular Fear in Afghanistan**

Source: Asia Foundation, *Afghanistan in 2019, A Survey of the Afghan People*,  
<https://asiafoundation.org/2019/12/03/2019-survey-of-the-afghan-people-reveals-concerns-on-peace-deal/>.

## “Winning Hearts and Minds” versus Controlling the Population:

Interestingly enough, the polling results in **Figure Eight** do not show that the Taliban has gained in popularity over time, in spite of its gains in the number of Districts in controls. At the same time, a 2019 survey shows a surprising rise in popular belief that reconciliation with the Taliban is possible – perhaps more out of hope than actual belief. A different set of survey questions might explain this response, and some meaningful measurement of the causes driving “hearts and minds” may be possible in future conflicts,

The results of Asia Foundation Poll are similar to the results of polls in other conflict countries like Iraq, or of those that have had major upheavals such as the “Arab spring,” in ways that need further study. They have consistently shown relatively high overall support for the Afghan government, but they have also shown that large percentages of the population feel the government has critical failures. For example, the most recent full poll showed that,

Overall, 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).

By Province, respondents in Panjshir (96.8%), Helmand (95.0%), Nangarhar (93.1%), and Kabul (92.9%) are the most likely to say corruption is a major problem in Afghanistan, while respondents in Paktia (50.0%), Sar-e-Pul (56.3%), Ghor (57.0%), and Paktika (57.1%) are least likely. Urban respondents are more likely to say corruption is a major problem in Afghanistan (88.7%) than rural respondents (79.0%).

... 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. Perception of corruption as a major problem in daily life is highest in Helmand (93.7%), Badghis (85.2%), Uruzgan (83.4%), Nangarhar (83.2%), and Kabul (82.7%) and lowest in Paktika (30.4%), Panjshir (35.6%), Nimroz (42.0%), Kapisa (47.7%), and Paktia (50.1%).

Urban residents (75.6%) are more likely to see corruption as a major problem in their daily lives than rural residents (65.3%), and males (71.7%) are more likely than females (64.2%). This result for females represents a notable decline from 70.6% in 2018. The differences between urban and rural respondents may be attributable to the more frequent contact urbanites have with government officials and institutions (e.g., universities), which may result in higher expectations that bribes will be necessary simply to navigate an urban setting.

More recent efforts in 2020 to use phone polls to produce snapshot results also produced surprisingly optimistic results regarding hope for the peace process (44%-54%) and the ability of the Afghan National Army to provide security assistance without foreign technical assistance (78%), although 74% reported that employment opportunities had declined in the last year.<sup>13</sup>

The reasons why such polls in developing states reflect such serious popular concerns – over the role of the government in employment, corruption, the economy, and services – but do not reflect high rates of overall popular criticism of the government are unclear. One reason may be the people are more willing to make specific complaints but are afraid to openly criticize their governments – and police and security forces. What is clear, however, is that polling on the civil activities of both the government and on the threat in a war zone may now be possible in an era of cell phones, but it will require different questions and ones tailored to a given insurgency and country.

There also is a good reason to look beyond “hearts and minds.” “Winning hearts and minds” is a classic cliché in counterinsurgency campaigns, but it also, is to some extent, a fantasy. “Hearts and

minds” may shape behavior in a functioning democracy, but almost all actual counterinsurgency warfare is not a battle for popular perceptions.

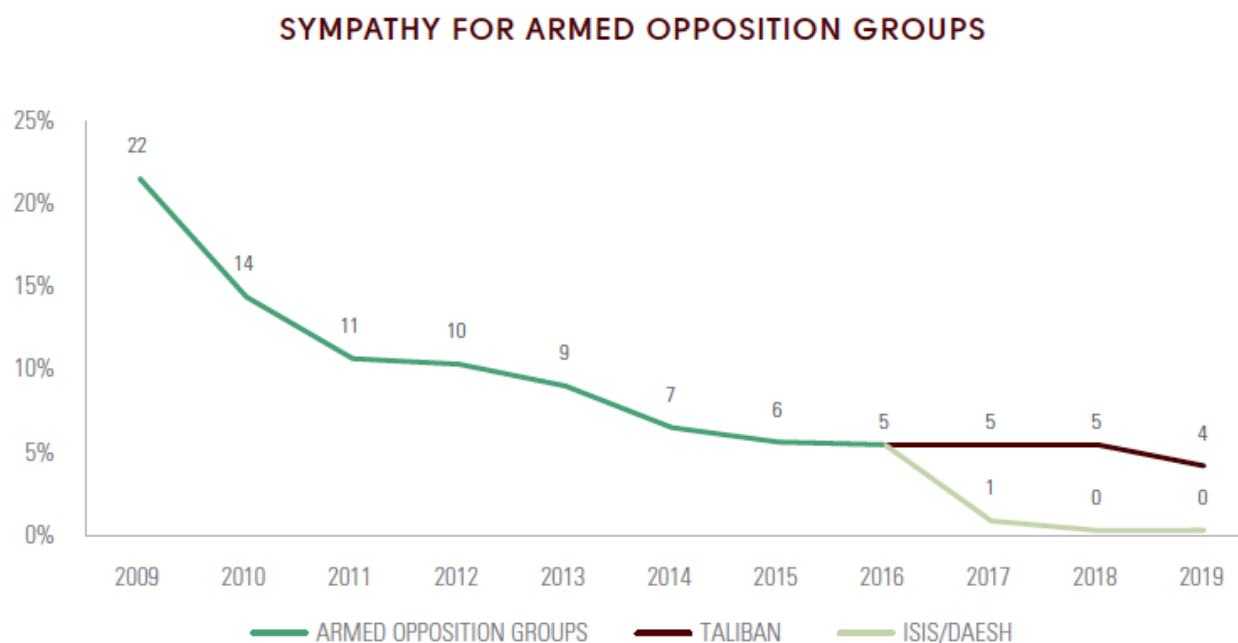
It instead is a battle for control of the population shaped by the use of intimidation, terror, extortion, and other uses of force – coupled to various economic and social incentives and disincentives. The ability to provide security is critical. So is the ability to directly reward fighters and supporter as well as to punish and penalize opponents. The end result is that the civil struggle at the local level is usually one between contesting authoritarian approaches, and certainly this has been the case in many areas in Afghanistan.

Put differently, this means comparing the civil tactics used by each side is as important as comparing their military tactics, particularly if the insurgency is concentrating on control of the population rather than winning tactical victories or seizing fixed objectives like District capitols. In practice, insurgencies often gain more from avoiding open battles with better armed outside or government forces until they have established a major presence in rural areas and have established networks that allow them to attack government officials or headquarters and to create an active presence in given cities or key populated areas.

It also explains why the ability of government forces to win a tactical victory or recover lost areas can be largely irrelevant. “Winning” is not meaningful unless the government can actually “hold” the area, and “build” some kind of enduring and superior civil presence and control. As will be discussed shortly, this is why U.S. and allied troops often could not exploit their tactical victories from 2002 onwards and why the later victories of Afghan elite ground troops supported by U.S. airpower had limited enduring impact. Far too often, there was no mix of governance, police, and local forces that could hold or consistently pursue the Taliban, and there was no civil capacity to govern that met popular needs.

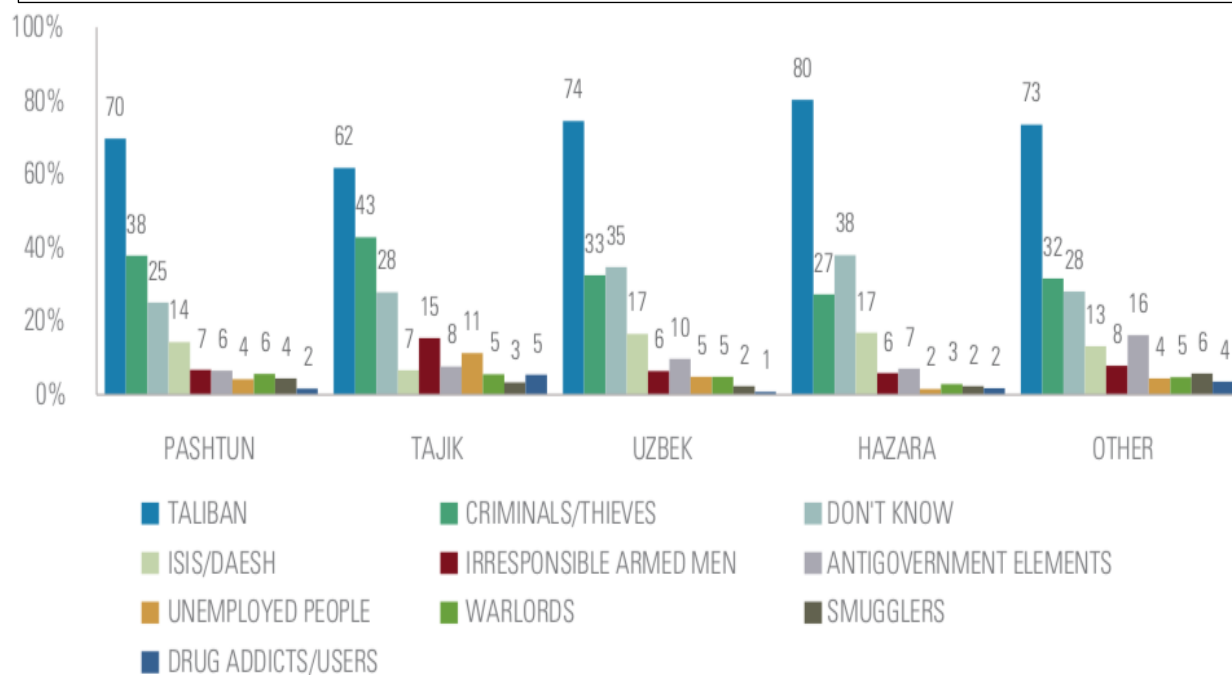
Here, it is worth remembering the classic exchange that Colonel Harry Summers reportedly had with a North Vietnamese officer during a break in the Paris Peace Talks in the early 1970s. Colonel Summers stated, “You know you never defeated us on the battlefield.” The North Vietnamese colonel replied, “That may be so, but it is also irrelevant.”

**Figure Eight: Popular Sympathy for Taliban and Armed Opposition Groups**



**GROUPS WHO POSE A SECURITY THREAT, BY ETHNICITY**

Who do you think poses a threat to the security of this local area? (Allow two mentions.)



Source: Asia Foundation, *Afghanistan in 2019, A Survey of the Afghan People*,  
<https://asiafoundation.org/2019/12/03/2019-survey-of-the-afghan-people-reveals-concerns-on-peace-deal/>



## Putting the U.S. Military Withdrawal in Context

It must be stressed that the military analysis which follows is not based on access to either classified data or the full record of what went wrong in the training and the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) formation and deployment process. It also is based on a highly uncertain picture of what role the U.S. will actually play in supporting Afghan forces in the future. There are many proposals for providing some kind of continuing support from outside Afghanistan – largely in the form of air power – and some form of covert forces on the ground are at least a possibility.

The closest thing to a detailed official statement of the future U.S. military role in Afghanistan at this writing seems to be the SIGAR report to Congress dated July 20, 2021,<sup>14</sup>

Testifying before the SASC on May 5, Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense Helvey said, “We will continue funding key capabilities such as the Afghan Air Force and Special Mission Wing, we will continue paying salaries for Afghan security forces, and we will continue delivering certain military supplies, and we are developing the mechanisms to provide appropriate oversight for the use of these funds most of which will continue to be executed through DOD contracts.”

On June 17, Secretary of Defense Austin testified to the Senate Appropriations Committee, “We will now transition to a new bilateral relationship with our Afghan partners ... but one that will not require a U.S. footprint larger than what’s necessary to protect our diplomats.” Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley added, “It’s the president’s intent to keep an embassy open, to keep our security forces around the embassy and to continue to work with the Afghan government to continue to fund the Afghan security forces and to keep that situation from devolving into the worst case and that’s what we’re planning on and that’s what we’re working toward. There are not guarantees in any of this.

U.S. military contractors are also being withdrawn from Afghanistan, as stipulated in the February 29, 2020, U.S.-Taliban agreement. These contractors provide an array of functions, including logistics, maintenance, and training support for ANDSF ground vehicles and aircraft; security; base support; and transportation services. Their loss could significantly impact ANDSF sustainability, in particular their ability to maintain aircraft and vehicles. Secretary Austin said in a June 23, 2021, House Armed Services Committee hearing that “Some of the [aircraft] maintenance is taking place in... one of the Gulf countries, one of our partners ... and we may be able to contract other types of capabilities going forward. That’s still a work in progress.”

Afghanistan, better connectivity with contacts in the continental United States, and potentially more personnel continuity due to longer tours of duty.

What is clear is that almost all openly reported U.S. military forces and contractors had been withdrawn by August, and media sources indicate major reductions have taken place in intelligence personnel, diplomats, and military personnel in classified assignments. SIGAR reports that,<sup>15</sup>

At the end of the drawdown an estimated 650 U.S. troops will remain to assist with security at U.S. Embassy Kabul. This is down from 2,500 last quarter... CENTCOM estimated it had completed more than half of the retrograde process by June 14, and more than 90% by July 5. This process included 984 C-17 transport aircraft loads out of Afghanistan, more than 17,000 pieces of equipment turned over to DLA for disposition, and 10 facilities, including Bagram Airfield, handed over to Afghanistan’s Ministry of Defense. Included in the retrograde are thousands of vehicles and other equipment, including over 400 pieces of rolling stock and more than 6,600 pieces of non-rolling stock. The two most expensive retrograded items were 14 air-defense artillery pieces valued at more than \$144 million, and five “Enhanced Sentinel FMTVs (Family of Medium Tactical Vehicles)” valued at more than \$16 million.

...As of early June 2021, there were 7,795 DOD contractor personnel supporting agency operations in Afghanistan. This includes 2,656 U.S. citizens, 2,491 third-country nationals, and 2,648 Afghan nationals. The contractor count last quarter was 16,832 (6,147 U.S., 6,399 third-country nationals, and 4,286 Afghans).

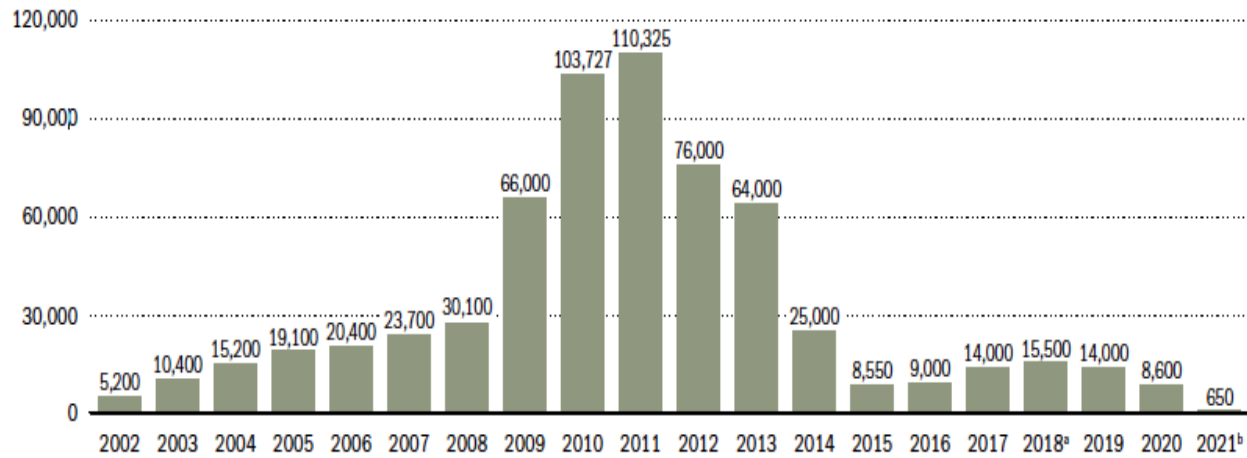
This represents a decrease of 9,037 total contractors (about 54%), including 3,491 U.S. contractors (about 57%) from the previous quarter.

However, DOD noted that since the numbers were taken from a census in early June, they “have since decreased due to ongoing redeployment and related drawdown activities in accordance with the President’s direction.”

SIGAR did report, however, that,<sup>16</sup>

Security assistance to Afghanistan is now conducted “over-the-horizon” from Qatar by the Defense Security Cooperation Management Office- Afghanistan (DSCMO-A). Resolute Support cautioned that “OTH does not equal over-the-shoulder” oversight, and acknowledged that the reduced presence of U.S. forces in Afghanistan will constrain DSCMO-A’s capacity to monitor ANDSF use of ASFF funds and procured materials. DSCMO-A now provides security assistance through videoconference meetings at both the senior-leader level and at the directorate and branch levels “to ensure sustained pay, maintenance, logistics, and Foreign Military Sales (FMS) support,” much as they did the past year under COVID-19 restrictions. In addition, DSCMO-A said they will mitigate misuse of ASFF funds through end-use monitoring (EUM) of critical equipment, using local national contractors as the “on-ground eyes and ears for the U.S. government,” and remote monitoring of pay and logistics databases. DSCMO-A explained that the local national contractors “send pictures and write-ups as deliverables to enable the projects to stay on schedule.” This was also standard procedure before the retrograde.

Over-the-horizon DSCMO-A support has some advantages despite the elimination of face-to-face contact with their Afghan counterparts, according to Resolute Support. RS claimed that in some cases they provide “the exact same level of support to the ANDSF from over-the-horizon that was provided while in Afghanistan.” For example, DSCMO-A Human Resources Management continues with the same scheduled meetings over the same communications platforms they used in Afghanistan, and still maintains system configuration control, management, and oversight of the Afghan Personnel and Pay System (APPS). RS claimed that some advantages of over-the-horizon support include a longer personnel transition time (seven to 10 days, as opposed to two to three days) between incumbent and replacement due to the elimination of transit time into Afghanistan, better connectivity with contacts in the continental United States, and potentially more personnel continuity due to longer tours of duty.

***Figure Nine U.S. Troop Levels in Afghanistan 2002-2021***

<sup>a</sup> Projected for 2018 based on public statements of NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg. According to USFOR-A, the publicly releasable U.S. troop level, as of March 1, 2018, remains 14,000.

<sup>b</sup> On January 15, 2021, the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan was 2,500; 650 is projected for the end of the drawdown.

Source: SIGAR, Quarterly Report to Congress, 2Q 2021, p. 61.

## **The Military Lessons of a Counterinsurgency, Rather Than a War Against Terrorism**

There are many military lessons to learn (and relearn) from the course of the Afghan War that led to these withdrawals. All of these lessons, however, must be based on a fundamental reappraisal of the basic character of the war. There has always been something absurd about calling the war in Afghanistan a “war against terrorism.” The key terrorist movement – al-Qaeda – was largely driven out of the country in the first few months of the war. Even the portion of the war against terrorism that did still focus on al-Qaeda then largely shifted its focus to al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and its spin-offs in Iraq and other areas.

Aside from a few short months in 2001, the war was a counterinsurgency campaign. It was fought against a Taliban that had been the de facto government of most of Afghanistan at the time the U.S. intervened after 9/11. It became a relatively ruthless war for control of the population, but all serious insurgency campaigns are. The Taliban did fight to regain power in Afghanistan using many of the same methods of irregular warfare that have characterized many other revolutionary and insurgent movements.

### **Learning from the Full History of Efforts to Generate Afghan Forces and Assess the Course of the Fighting**

If the U.S. is to really learn from the history of the war, it requires open and transparent historical analyses of all the available information. It also requires analysis of what might have happened if aid and support had been conditional and based on actual Afghan performance and if the flaws in Afghan forces and the ways they were supported have been openly and honestly reported in ways that might have created more pressure to actually address them.

If the U.S. is to learn from the military side of the Afghan conflict it must fully examine all of the classified and open source data that traces the resurgence of the Taliban from 2002 onwards, including sources of support such as the role Pakistan played in giving it some degree of sanctuary as well as the role power brokers and narcotics played in weakening government forces and funding the Taliban. It must analyze the impact of corruption and poor leadership in the Afghan government on the Taliban’s return to given portions of Afghanistan.

It also must fully and honestly assess the major mistakes the U.S. and its allies made in shaping Afghan security forces – many of which repeated mistakes the U.S. made in Vietnam. It also must look beyond the war in Afghanistan. Some of the delays in, and under-resourcing of, U.S. efforts to create effective Afghan security forces were driven to some extent by the growing U.S. focus on Iraq. This led to efforts to shift too much of the training and support mission to allied countries.

At the same time, a full historical analysis must be made of the extent to which the lack of focus on the growing insurgent threat helped lead to an excessive focus on creating regular and elite army forces, rather than including the kind of police and local security forces needed to defeat a growing insurgency. It must also examine why later efforts to create effective police and local security forces, at the District and local levels with the necessary paramilitary capabilities, were given erratic and then marginal priority after 2011 – and largely failed.

It must examine the gross initial shortfalls in equipment and trainers for the new force, and why the land and air equipment the U.S. eventually did provide Afghan forces still was either too complex for forces that had far less education and technical experience than the ARVN or why

those forces were not given the training and support systems to allow them to properly operate it through 2021 – problems later documented in great detail in the reports to Congress from SIGAR and the LIG.

It must examine the extent to which the problems in creating Afghan forces were compounded by the same failures to adopt proper fiscal controls, make aid conditional when corruption occurred, limit internal political divisions and frictions, and perpetuate the short annual rotation cycle for advisors and partners that helped to cause failures in many aspects of the civil effort – and to the extent to which Afghan force development efforts were limited by U.S. efforts to shift the burden of force generation to U.S. allies as well as the cycle of recurrent efforts to cut U.S. casualties from 2011 onwards by reducing forward support to Afghan forces in combat.

The U.S. also needs to fully assess the degree to which it failed to provide adequate open source reporting on Taliban gains and Afghan National Defense and Security Force (ANDSF) failures and limitations throughout the war, and especially why the U.S. steadily classified the real security situation after the formal end of U.S. and NATO combat operations in 2014. This largely disguised the growing dependence on a few elite and effective Afghan combat units – actively supported by U.S. cadres and air power as well as massive ANDSF dependence on U.S. funded contractors – although both SIGAR and the LIG reports did reflect these trends on an open source basis to the extent they were allowed to do so.

The U.S. also needs to look at the extent to which the real growth of the Taliban insurgency was disguised by the creation of metrics that focused on major clashes between the Taliban and the ANDSF in ways that grossly overstated the independence of Afghan combat units and the importance of apparent ANDSF victories which ignored the fact that Taliban “defeats” often resulted in lasting increases in the Taliban presence and control in the countryside.

While all effectiveness metrics tend to be controversial, far too many of the metrics on attacks and their outcome – along with the classification of data on Taliban versus government control of Afghan Districts as well as increased presence and attack activity – pushed public affairs “spin” to the point of dishonesty. It disguised the need for a forward presence, the potential value of efforts like the Afghan hands program, and the real gains made thanks to the continued presence of Special Forces and CIA personnel, other elite troops, and the new Security Force Assistance Brigades (SFABs).

### **2002-2011: From Counterterrorism to Insurgency Without an Effective Effort to Create Afghan Forces**

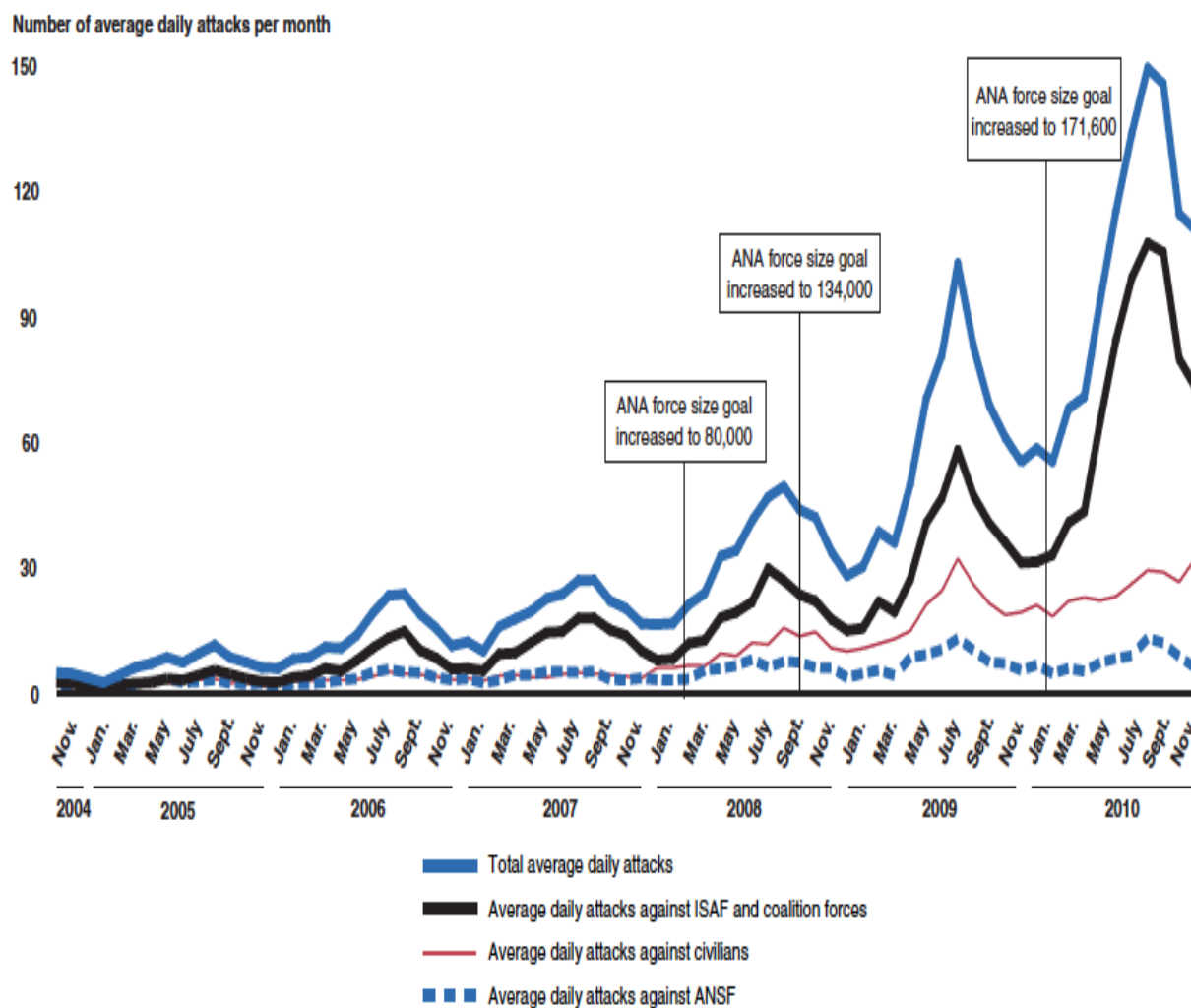
Some key trends are clear, and one is the extent to which the U.S. was slow to react to the return of the Taliban. In some ways, it overreacted to initial success.

The covert U.S. special forces and CIA campaign that began on September 26, 2001, and the public beginning of Operation Enduring Freedom that began with a supporting air campaign on October 7, 2001, led to almost immediate victories for the Northern Alliance ground forces the U.S. supported. The end result was that the Taliban left Kabul before any fighting took place on November 13, 2001 and it surrendered Kandahar on December 6 while al-Qaeda had to flee its stronghold in Tora Bora in December 2001. Bin Laden then fled to Pakistan – possibly with Pakistani aid – and al-Qaeda effectively relocated to the tribal area near Afghanistan’s northwest border with Pakistan. Arguably, al-Qaeda ceased to be an active military force in Afghanistan after

the battle of Operation Anaconda in Paktia in March 2002. In effect, the main U.S. war against international terrorism in Afghanistan lasted for all of five months.

In contrast, the counterinsurgency war against the Taliban went on, and it steadily grew for over 19 more years. There was nothing subtle about the rise in Taliban activity that followed as the failure in the Afghan civil government and the lack of a meaningful effort to create effective Afghan forces became clear from 2004 onwards.

**Figure Ten** shows the high rate of growth in the Taliban threat and the grindingly slow rate at which Afghan forces were developed and funded between 2004-2011, the reliance on divided U.S. and allied combat forces to respond, and the sudden and erratic increases in Afghan Army force goals. It is only one of the many clear open source warnings that the frequency of Taliban activity and attacks increased sharply after 2004, and that most attacks were directed at targets other than the Afghan military.

**Figure Ten: Afghan Force Development vs. Afghan Violence: 2004-2010**

Source: GAO analysis of DOD data.

**State and DoD Funding of ANA Training: 2002-2011**

Dollars in millions

Agency	Fiscal years										Total <sup>a</sup>
	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011 request	
DOD	\$2.0	\$165.0	\$283.2	\$1,317.5	\$766.1	\$4,883.1	\$1,786.2	\$4,073.6	\$5,604.1	\$7,532.9	\$26,413.6
State	\$74.7	\$191.6	\$434.4	\$413.3	\$1.0	\$1.2	\$1.7	\$1.4	\$1.5	\$1.5	\$1,122.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$76.7</b>	<b>\$356.6</b>	<b>\$717.5</b>	<b>\$1,730.8</b>	<b>\$767.1</b>	<b>\$4,884.3</b>	<b>\$1,787.9</b>	<b>\$4,075.0</b>	<b>\$5,605.6</b>	<b>\$7,534.4</b>	<b>\$27,535.7</b>

Adapted by the author from GAO, *Afghanistan Security: Afghan Army Growing, but Additional Trainers Needed; Long-term Costs Not Determined*, GAO 11-66, January 2011, pp. 4, 6.

It is equally clear that the U.S. and NATO were slow to react, and that their initial reaction was poorly resourced and ineffective. A GAO report, issued as late as 2011 and based on U.S. command reporting, provides the data summarized in **Figure Eleven**. It also provides the following insights into the failure to properly train and equip even Afghan Army forces – failures that followed on years of previous open source warnings by the U.S., as well as warnings about the lack of effective coordination in allied efforts and in building up police and local security forces.

In the case of Afghan NCOS,<sup>17</sup>

Despite some progress, the ANA is continuing to face shortfalls in non-commissioned officers (NCO) needed to provide leadership to ANA units in the field. As of October 2010, about one-quarter of NCO positions in ANA combat units were unfilled. This represents an improvement since our last report, when we found that, between November 2007 and February 2008, the proportion of unfilled NCO positions ranged as high as 50 percent. In spite of this improvement, NTM-A/CSTC-A stated that it considers the ongoing shortfall of NCOs to be a major challenge, noting that development of leaders is essential to improving ANA capability.

In the case of overall training efforts,<sup>18</sup>

NTM-A/CSTC-A documentation notes that, due to the presence of additional U.S. personnel, the ANA's average instructor-to-trainee ratio in basic training improved from about 1 instructor for every 79 trainees as of November 2009 to approximately 1 instructor for every 24 trainees as of November 2010—a key factor, according to NTM-A/CSTC-A, in improved marksmanship qualification rates among ANA trainees. (Fig. 11 shows one such U.S. soldier providing marksmanship training to ANA recruits.) However, according to NTM-A/CSTC-A, while U.S. forces on temporary deployment have improved the quality of ANA basic training, these personnel were not intended to provide instruction in the advanced skills that the ANA must acquire by the time it grows to 171,600.

Similarly, a November 2010 NTM-A/CSTC-A document noted a particularly serious shortage in the number of instructors needed to teach the ANA specialized skills and stated that unless critical instructor positions are filled between December 2010 and July 2011, the ability of the ANA to develop skills it needs to start assuming lead responsibility for Afghanistan's security may be delayed.

The ANA is also facing shortfalls in coalition training teams needed to develop the skills of new army units once they are fielded. According to NTM-A/CSTC-A, field-based training of the ANA is vital given that army forces completing unit training have limited capability. For example, NTM-A/CSTC-A data indicate that of the first 12 new ANA units fielded since the adoption of the new capability assessment system, 11 were assessed as either dependent on coalition forces for success or ineffective.

Given the generally low level of capability that ANA units have upon completing unit training, NTM-A/CSTC-A officials stated that they expect newly formed units to receive substantial training in the field from training teams and partner units. However, shortages exist in the number of training teams available to assist in ANA development. NTM-A/CSTC-A documentation specifies that a total of 205 training teams are needed to complete fielding of a 171,600-person ANA by October 2011. However, as of September 2010, the total number of training teams fielded or pledged by coalition nations was 164—41 fewer than the number needed. According to IJC, given the serious challenges that the ANA faces, the ability of army units to develop greater capability will be delayed if they lack training teams to provide field-based training.

In the case of major equipment shortfalls,<sup>19</sup>

As of November 2010, the ANA had less than half of the authorized equipment amount on hand for 17 of 48 equipment items (35 percent). This is a slight improvement since the GAO 2008 report, when it found that there were 21 of 55 equipment items (38 percent) for which army units had less than half of the required amount on hand.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, as of November 2010, the ANA had an average of about 72 percent of the authorized amount on hand per equipment item, as compared with an average of about 60 percent on hand per equipment item at the time of our last report. This improvement notwithstanding, shortages remain in weapons, vehicles, communications items, and protective equipment.



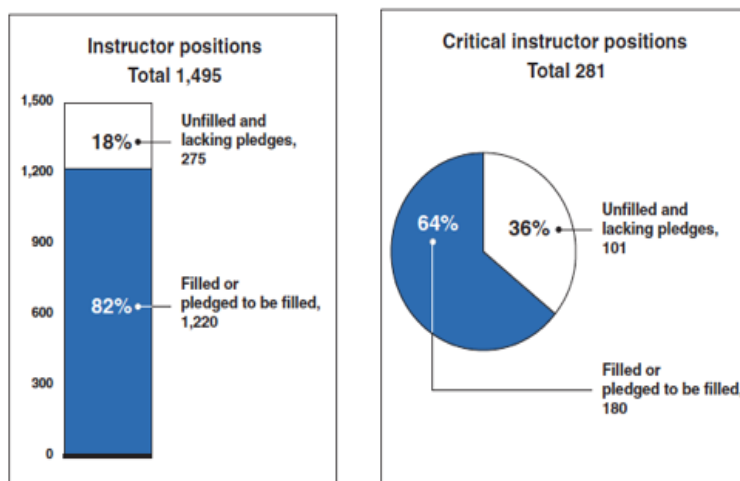
Although the ANA's equipping levels have slightly improved, IJC documentation indicates that not all pieces of equipment that the ANA has on hand are considered ready to be used in operations. According to IJC, while factors such as enemy action and normal wear and tear can lead to equipment being deemed unserviceable, an additional factor is that the ANA continues to lack responsibility for its equipment. In addition, a senior NTM-A/CSTC-A official stated that the ANA's nascent logistics system gives it limited ability to maintain or repair the equipment it receives. Similarly, IJC and SIGAR30 have both identified the ANA's weak logistics system as a significant challenge to development of capable army units. Consequently, although IJC and NTM-A/CSTC-A are working to institute programs to address these challenges, concerns exist about the extent to which the ANA will properly maintain the equipment items it receives.

Effort to develop ANDSF forces had critical shortfalls in trainers, major problems with attrition and desertion, and readiness ratings ranging from mediocre to bad. While much of the past open source reporting does not seem to be available at present, the NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan (NTM-A)/Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan (CSTC-A) also reported many of the programs that arose in the ANDSF training effort from 2002-2009, after Lt. General William Caldwell took command in November 2009, including major shortfalls in trainers who were publicly reported as serving even though they had only been assigned and their lack of background and experience.

Extensive open source reporting on the shortfalls in local security force and police development showed that problems and underfunding in these areas were still an issue at the time. SIGAR and other open source reporting on the history of these efforts, however, also demonstrates that the repeated failures, changes in leadership and organization, and inadequate priority – which were never corrected and made Afghanistan vulnerable to Taliban gains – allowed the Taliban to defeat the Afghan Army in many cases, and this only grew worse – not better – as the war progressed.

**Figure Eleven: Illustrative Shortfalls in Trainers and ANA NCOs in January 2011**

**Trainer Shortfalls in January 2011, even if Trainers pledged but absent are counted**



**NCO Shortfalls in January 2011, even if AWOLs and Missing are counted**

ANA unit	Number of NCO positions	Number of NCO positions unfilled	Percentage of NCO positions unfilled
111th Capital Division	2,016	756	38
201st Corps	5,654	1,376	24
203rd Corps	5,449	1,666	31
205th Corps	6,219	1,806	29
207th Corps	2,488	569	23
209th Corps	3,134	798	25
215th Corps	4,345	1,222	28
Special Operations Forces Division	2,570	220	9
<b>Total</b>	<b>31,875</b>	<b>8,413</b>	<b>26</b>

### Massive Equipment Shortfalls

Item	Number authorized	Number on hand	Percentage of authorized on hand
<b>Weapons</b>			
D-30 howitzer	210	99	47
SPG-9 recoilless gun	750	254	34
<b>Vehicles</b>			
Variable reach rough terrain forklift	238	117	49
M916 tractor	124	56	45
M870 trailer	131	52	40
M1151 Humvee	2,108	829	39
Motorcycle	300	110	37
Fire truck	50	10	20

Item	Number authorized	Number on hand	Percentage of authorized on hand
Maintenance van	219	13	6
Fuel trailer	97	5	5
Warehouse forklift	180	4	2
<b>Communications equipment</b>			
Programming kit	650	308	47
Very high-frequency handheld radio	31,209	14,767	47
High-frequency base station	1,497	685	46
Very high-frequency vehicle-mounted radio	13,055	4,440	34
Tactical telephone	14,749	2,089	14
<b>Protective equipment</b>			
Kevlar helmet	144,638	40,803	28

Adapted by the author from GAO, *Afghanistan Security: Afghan Army Growing, but Additional Trainers Needed; Long-term Costs Not Determined*, GAO 11-66, January 2011, pp. 23-31.

### **“Ending” the U.S. and Allied Combat Role in 2011? 2014?**

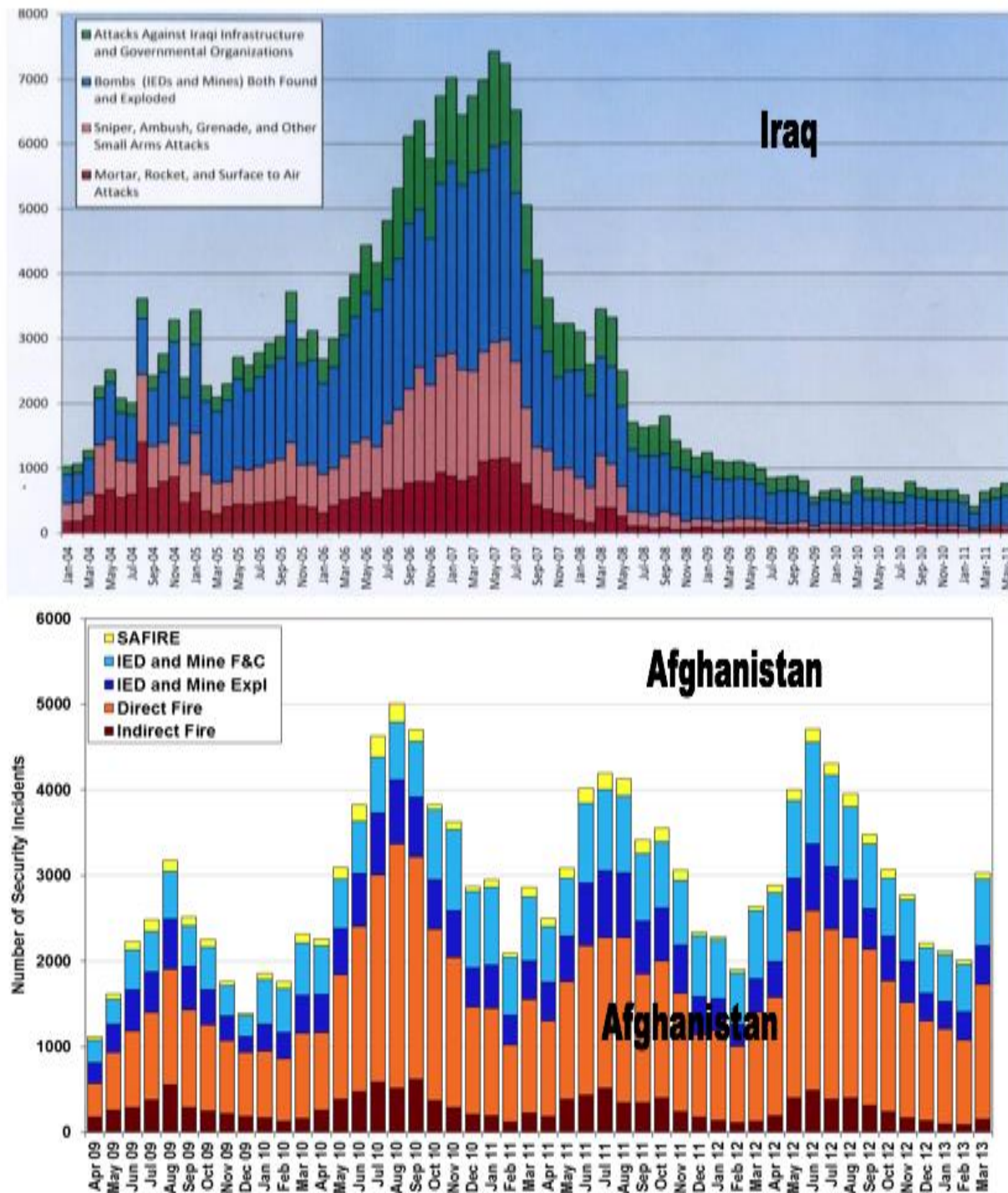
These basic failures in developing effective Afghan forces were followed by a failed surge and then by the “failed” end to U.S. and allied combat operations in Afghanistan. The full history of these developments will be another area where open source data will need to be supported by full access to classified and official data, but there is an unavoidable level of irony in the extent to which the current focus on U.S. withdrawals of military training and combat support ignores the extent to which the U.S. supposedly went through a similar cycle some ten years earlier, and that it did so without a serious effort to create Afghan forces.

Whatever one may think of the deadlines for the U.S. withdrawal set by President Trump and President Biden, no one should forget that Secretary Rumsfeld announced an end to all major combat on May 1, 2003, and President Bush announced that “major combat operations in Iraq have ended” the same day. This did not prevent President Obama from adding 17,000 more U.S. troops to the 36,000 in the country alongside the 32,000 NATO troops that were already there on February 17, 2009, or deciding to surge some 30,000 more in December 2009 – and this decision came with an announcement that U.S. and NATO forces would begin to withdraw in 2011.

In practice, **Figure Twelve** shows that the surge in Afghanistan did not produce anything like the benefits of the surge in Iraq. Much of it was wasted fighting a campaign in Helmand and the South that score tactical victories but was one more “win” where there was no real “hold” or “build,” and efforts to bring a new “government in box” did no better than previous efforts. It did nothing to reduce President Obama’s concerns over the Afghan war.

Moreover, the Obama administration scored a victory against an actual terrorist that helped to ease the public image of major cutbacks in U.S. troops, and a decision to limit U.S. combat operations. Bin Laden was killed on May 2, 2011. In June 2011, then Secretary of Defense Robert Gates announced the U.S. was holding talks with the Taliban, and on June 22, President Obama announced that the U.S. had achieved its main goals by killing many of al-Qaeda’s leaders and scattering its forces, and that U.S. troops would be reduced by 30,000 personnel within the next year and that there would be a complete withdrawal by the end of 2014. The U.S. and NATO did formally end their combat mission in Afghanistan on December 28, 2014, but this did not end actual combat support, their training role, the use of special forces and CIA personnel, or major air support.

**Figure Twelve: The Impact of the Surge in Afghanistan versus the Surge in Iraq**



2

Source: Department of Defense, Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan, p. A-2.

## The Failure to Create Effective Afghan Forces After 2011

Two additional figures provide a rough picture of the cycles in the war, and some of the factors that helped to shape the continued inability to create effective Afghan forces from 2011 through 2020. **Figure Thirteen** shows the slow U.S. build-up as the Taliban returned to the field during 2003-2009, the U.S. surge from 2009-2011, and the cuts in U.S. combat troop strength that followed. Part One of **Figure Thirteen** also shows, however, that U.S. and foreign contractors partly compensated such cuts – along with the development of several highly effective elite Afghan land forces and air combat elements that had direct U.S. support. The data here are critical because so many reports only count U.S. combat troops officially deployed to Afghanistan.

In actual practice, Afghan forces remained dependent on U.S. support for virtually all operations, and the total U.S. mix of troop and U.S. foreign contractors increasing total was still close to 40,000 as late as the second quarter of FY2020. It is clear from these data that many of the briefings and press reports on U.S. combat troops after 2015 that talked about some 8,000; 5,000; or 2,000 troops – and ignored the U.S. combat airpower and unreported elements of elite U.S. force – were little more than nonsense in showing the actual level of U.S. support and intervention.

**Figure Fourteen** shows the patterns in combat operations towards the end of the war, after U.S. and NATO land forces had phased out of direct combat operations, but at the point when the U.S. made a massive commitment of manned and unmanned combat aircraft and deployed the largest mix of tactical reconnaissance aircraft and drones in combat history.

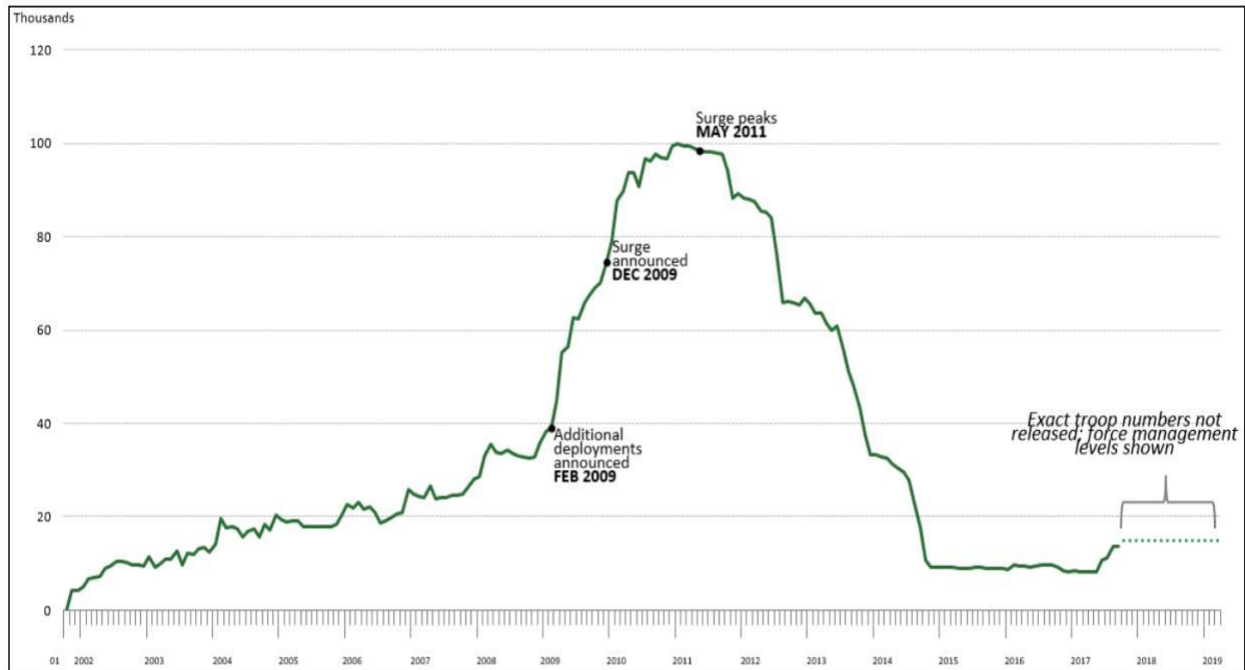
**Figure Fourteen** also shows that massive increase in air support from 2014 through early 2020, when the U.S. suddenly started to classify the data. It grossly understates the level of U.S. support needed to keep the Afghan forces from losing their more serious battles since the data provided on reconnaissance and IS&R missions only include manned sorties and not the major use of unmanned drones.

The official data on “Enemy Initiated Attacks” and “Effective Enemy Initiated Attacks,” in **Figure Fifteen** do provide a crude indication of the increases in Taliban attacks and how much they accelerated after the Peace Agreement was signed, but they are virtually meaningless as measures of Taliban counterinsurgency activity. They do not count the lower level operations that are critical aspects of insurgencies at the local level, do not bear any relation to the totals for Afghan National Army (ANA) operations shown in the same figure which do not reflect support from U.S. and other advisors, and do not indicate the level of support from air power.

It is also mildly ironic that the Resolute Support command notified SIGAR in transmitting these data that, “RS reported that due to the end of the Resolute Support Mission, the Casualty Mitigation Team retrograded and the remaining military personnel in Afghanistan will not be able to support the tracking and collection of civilian casualty data. Therefore, RS was able to provide final civilian casualty data for only April and May 2021.”

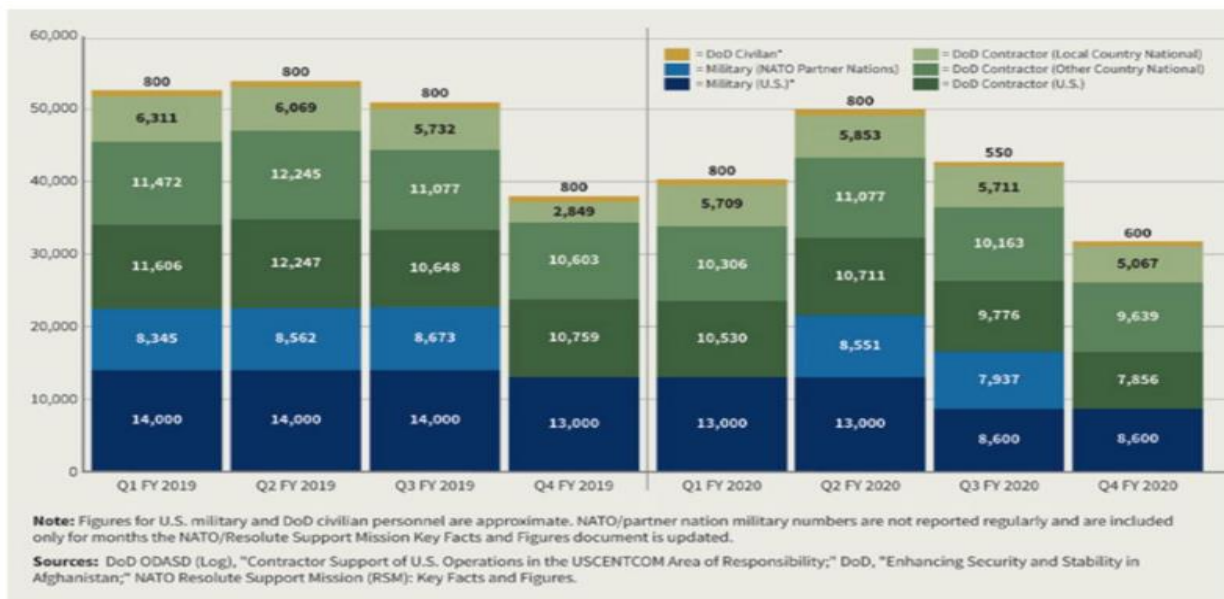
As for the casualty data, they are uncertain at best. They are based on combat data that often can do little more than guess, and insurgencies often involved major civilian losses as a result of violent efforts to control the civil population by bodies like the Taliban.

**Figure Thirteen: Drop in U.S. Military and Contractor Personnel in Afghanistan After the Shift to Reliance on Afghan Land Forces, Train and Assist Efforts**



**Source:** Department of Defense “Boots on the Ground” monthly reports to Congress, media reports.

**Notes:** Reported DOD figures through October 2017 include all active and reserve component personnel physically located in Afghanistan as of the first calendar day of each month.

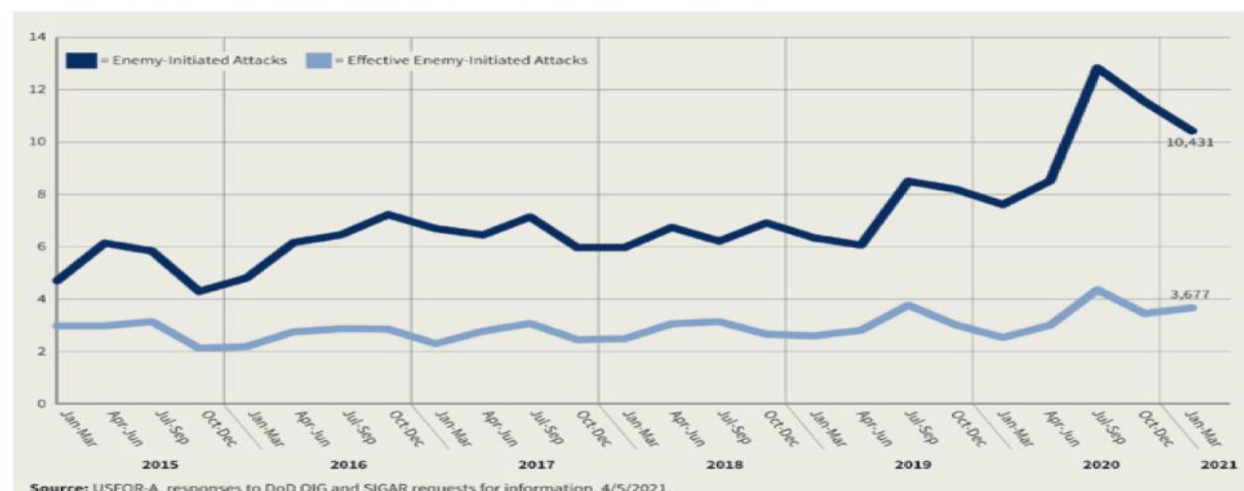


**Source:** Lead Inspector General (LIG), Report to Congress, Operation Freedom’s Sentinel, July 1-September 30, 2020, p. 37, <https://www.dodig.mil/reports.html/Article/2416225/lead-inspector-general-for-operation-freedoms-sentinel-i-quarterly-report-to-th/>.

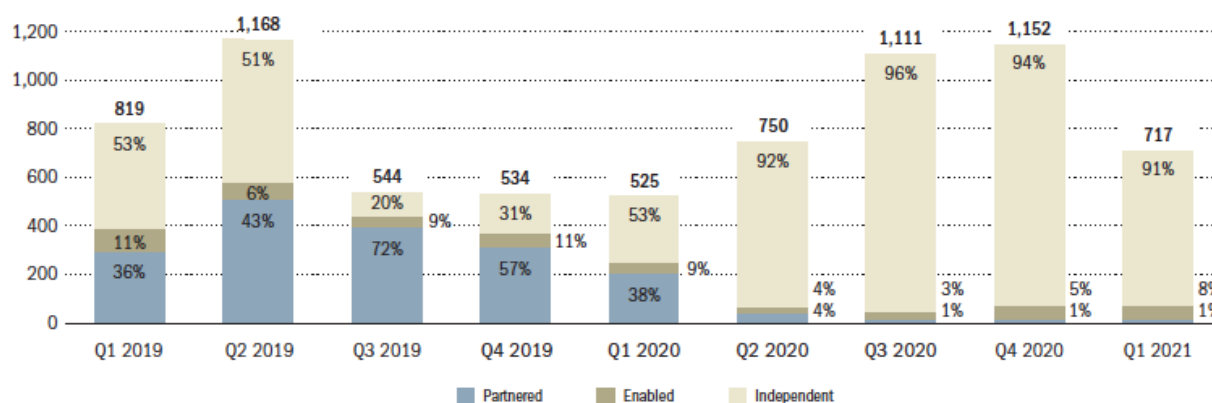


**Figure Fourteen: Shifts in Afghan Combat Operations and U.S. Combat Air Support**

**Enemy-Initiated Attacks, January 2015–March 2021, in Thousands**



**ASSF GROUND OPERATIONS BY QUARTER**



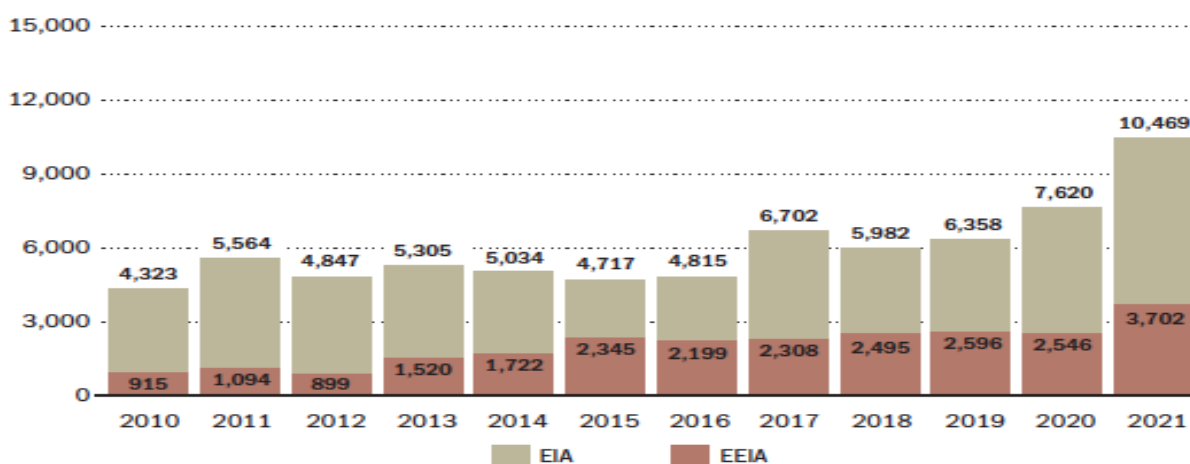
Note: Partnered = operations conducted by ASSF in which U.S./Coalition forces accompany ASSF to the target; Enabled = operations planned and executed by ASSF in which U.S./Coalition forces supply intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, or other support but do not accompany ASSF to the target; Independent = operations planned and executed by ASSF without any U.S./Coalition assistance. Percentages may sum to more than 100% due to rounding.

Source: NSOCC-A, response to SIGAR data call, 4/5/2021; SIGAR, analysis of NSOCC-A-provided data, 4/2021.

**Number of Weapons Released (Manned & RPA strike assets)**

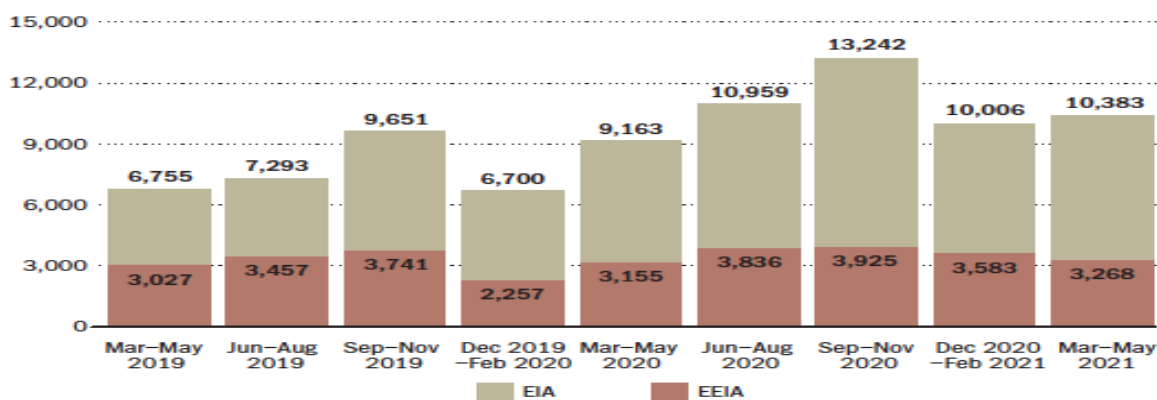
	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total
2014	92	114	95	115	164	272	205	437	441	217	87	126	2,365
2015	40	30	47	31	41	109	79	156	111	203	69	31	947
2016	127	115	58	62	89	94	160	108	162	205	92	65	1,337
2017	54	200	203	460	328	389	350	503	414	653	352	455	4,361
2018	378	469	339	562	591	572	746	715	841	769	841	539	7,362
2019	463	327	673	548	635	441	613	783	948	777	519	696	7,423
2020	415	360											775

AFCENT Airpower Survey, February 29, 2020, <https://www.afcent.af.mil/About/Airpower-Summaries/>.

*Figure Fifteen: Shifts in Afghan Combat Operations***FIRST-QUARTER ENEMY-INITIATED ATTACKS SINCE 2010**

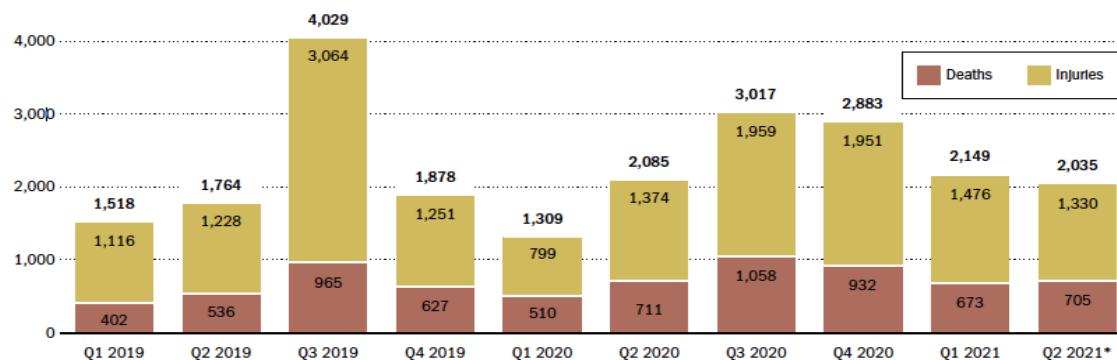
Note: EIA = Enemy-Initiated Attacks. EEIA = Effective Enemy-Initiated Attacks, referring to a subset of enemy-initiated attacks that produced casualties.

Source: RS, response to SIGAR data call 4/1/2021 and 6/10/2021; SIGAR, analysis of RS-provided data, 7/2021.

**ENEMY-INITIATED ATTACKS BY QUARTER FROM MARCH 2019–MAY 2021**

Note: EIA = Enemy-Initiated Attacks. EEIA = Effective Enemy-Initiated Attacks, referring to a subset of enemy-initiated attacks that produced casualties.

Source: RS, response to SIGAR data call 4/1/2021 and 6/12/2021; SIGAR, analysis of RS-provided data, 7/2021.

**RS-REPORTED CIVILIAN CASUALTIES BY QUARTER**

Source: SIGAR, Quarterly Report to Congress, July 30, 2021, p. 58-59



## Focusing on Tactical Clashes and Ignoring the Insurgency

As the growing crisis in Afghanistan show all too clearly, the progress the Taliban made in its insurgency campaign since 2011, and its sudden burst of military victories in 2021, may well have brought it to the edge of victory. Some aspects of the Taliban's recent development and success have been described in detail in open source official reporting. A letter dated 20 May 2021 from the Chair of the UN Security Council Committee to the President of the Security Council transmitting an analysis of the Taliban is a good example.<sup>20</sup>

The Taliban's sudden gains are also the product of all of the issues and problems that have just been discussed. However, there is no detailed open source official analysis as of yet for the reasons why the Taliban was able to return during 2002-2014; of its tactics in seeking to gain control of given Districts and other areas; and of its ability to exploit the civil and military weaknesses of the Afghan civil government, local power brokers and factions, the ANDSF, U.S. forces, and allied forces.

Aside from some solid critiques of the Afghan Army and Air Forces by SIGAR and the LIG, there is little official analysis of the growing inability of Afghan local security and police forces to respond in spite of a long series of failed efforts at reorganization and changes in leadership. Furthermore, even with the dependence on a few Afghan elite combat units – supported by U.S. airpower and an unreported number of U.S. special forces, SFAB forces, and intelligence personnel – there was an inability to check major Taliban attacks, with a majority ending in strengthening the Taliban presence in the area even when they were defeated.

From 2015 onwards, the U.S. command issued “creative” new metrics like those in **Figure Fifteen** whose purpose seems to have been showing that the Taliban was losing battles. Like their predecessors in the Vietnam War, these metrics were largely irrelevant from a strategic and grand strategic viewpoint. They did nothing to show the scale of Taliban gains in rural areas, targeted attacks, and money and manpower. Moreover, reporting by SIGAR and the LIG make it all too clear that none of the basic problems in the ANDSF's dependence on U.S. air power, elite ground elements, and contractors were being solved.

As the following **figures** show, reporting of the control of Districts and the level of the threat by area and Province has also been erratic, and there are major differences by source. The most consistent reporting has been by the *Long War Journal*, which was able to draw upon official reports district-level data by the Special Investigator General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), on assessments by Resolute Support, NATO's command in Afghanistan, beginning in January 2018.

However, the *Long War Journal* reports that Resolute Support Command gradually changed the assessments to be more favorable to the government. It then stopped issuing open source estimates of whether the Afghan Government controlled contested Districts in April 2019 – as the Taliban gained influence and control – and the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) stated that negotiations with the Taliban, and not the status of Afghanistan's districts, was the real metric of progress.<sup>21</sup>

This was scarcely the first time that official reporting was altered when the course of the war favored the Taliban. As the *Long War Journal* also notes,<sup>22</sup>

In Nov. 2017, General John W. Nicholson Jr., then commander of Resolute Support and U.S. Forces Afghanistan (USFOR-A), said the “most telling” metric for success is “population control” — that is, the

percentage of Afghan civilians living in districts dominated by the government, versus those controlled or contested by the jihadists.

Less than a year later, in Oct. 2018, the U.S. discontinued use of that same metric and related ones altogether, arguing it is “of limited decision-making value” to military leaders. Gen. Austin S. Miller, the current commander of Resolute Support and USFOR-A, has said that the goal is to bring about a “political settlement” to the war. And he is banking on the State Department’s diplomacy with the Taliban, even without any further territorial gains by the government.

The U.S. military’s decision to move the goal posts is discussed in the latest quarterly report by SIGAR, an oversight body that provides “independent and objective” assessments to Congress.

Prior to late 2018, NATO’s Resolute Support, which is led by the U.S. military, had produced “district-level stability” assessments. These analyses counted the number of Afghan districts under government or insurgent “control” and “influence,” while also factoring in the “total estimated population of the district[s]” and the “total estimated area of the districts.”

In mid-January, however, the Defense Department told SIGAR that the assessments “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 Zalmay Khalilzad.”

Throughout the war, treating the Taliban as an extremist or terrorist movement seems to have led the U.S. to ignore some of the key causes of what was happening in the field, the gains in the insurgency by district and Afghan location, the civil and military reasons for the Taliban’s growing success, and the reasons the Taliban could capitalize so well on the U.S. announcement that it was withdrawing after the start of 2020 and make such quick major gains in controlling and contesting new Districts.

Open source official reporting also systematically downplayed the continuing ANDSF dependence on U.S. airpower, small elite U.S. combat elements, forward deployed U.S. advisors and assistance forces, and the relatively small number of Afghan land combat units they could directly support in actual battles. While the open source reporting involved is largely from media sources, it also increasingly indicated that at least some of the problems were caused by cuts in U.S. and allied forces – and the many problems in the structure and leadership of Afghan forces – paralleled some aspects of the official U.S. Army description of the growing problems in the ARVN after the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam.

Media, SIGAR, and LIG reporting after 2019 increasingly indicated that U.S. cuts were creating steadily greater dependence on a small portion of the ANA and ANAF, more problems in allocating reinforcements and supplies, and increasingly isolated small deployments of ANA forces in ways that make them vulnerable. As for Afghan local security and police forces, they had virtually disappeared from much of the countryside after 2002 or became little more than force elements tied to local power brokers which might or may not challenge the Taliban.

### **Comparing Different Estimates of the Growth in Taliban Control and Indicators of the Progress of the Taliban Insurgency**

It is possible, however, to at least contrast different open source views of how the Taliban threat increased after 2011 and the rising scale of its major gains as of July 2021:

- **Figure Sixteen** shows a generic “terrorist view of the threat” dating back to 2011 – and which continued to be circulated in some form through 2013 – that shows percentages of “enemy initiated attacks” without showing a count of them, and it comes close to equating the Taliban with a number of small and relatively ineffective separate threats, some of which do have extremist and terrorist character.

- **Figure Seventeen** displays a set of goals for increases in Afghan army, police, and local force operations by District in 2012 that border on near fantasy. This was matched by detailed transition plans for the ANDSF to take responsibility for areas controlled by U.S. and allied forces that were issued during 2013 as Taliban coverage of the country and levels of activity increased. It also shows a similarly optimistic estimate of gains in Afghan governance by District in comparison with a steady rise in the threat at the Provincial level.
- **Figure Eighteen** compares an optimistic estimate of the relative Taliban and government control of Afghanistan based on U.S. command data in 2015 with the far more negative estimates made by the UN – which then ceased to be publicly reported.
- **Figure Nineteen** shows the differences when areas of both Taliban combat and support activity in 2015 are estimated and displayed.
- **Figure Twenty** provides a BBC estimate for 2017 that does not show the outside source of the BBC data.
- **Figure Twenty-One** shows some of the last official estimates before the official data were classified, and the Long War Journal data for 2018.<sup>23</sup>
- **Figure Twenty-Two** provides a set of directly comparable Long War Journal maps from November 2017 to late July 2021. A more detailed mapping and estimate of the trends in 2021 – which adds a category for “unconfirmed” Districts and shows control by province and major city – is available at <https://www.longwarjournal.org/mapping-taliban-control-in-afghanistan>. The LWJ web site noted – as of July 20, 2021 – that with rapid gains in recent days, the Taliban now threatens 16 of Afghanistan’s 34 provincial capitals, while 18 of the provinces in their entirety are under direct threat of falling under Taliban control, according to an ongoing assessment by *FDD’s Long War Journal*.

Since the Taliban began its offensive after President Joe Biden announced the withdrawal of U.S. forces on April 14, the Taliban has **more than tripled** the number of districts controlled by the group, from 73 to 221. Many of the districts lost to the Taliban are in the north and west, however the Taliban has continued to gain territory in the south and east. The Taliban offensive in the north is designed to undercut Afghan power brokers and warlords in their home districts and provinces. The map... shows an Afghanistan that is at risk of complete collapse if the government and military do not get a handle on the security situation, and quickly.

- **Figure Twenty-Three** provides a SIGAR graphic showing just how different the levels of gains on each side can appear given different sources and different graphics.
- **Figure Twenty-Four** shows a snapshot for August 6th from a Gandhara estimate of how much – and how quickly – the situation deteriorated from early 2021 to early August 2021, although it should be stressed that official command data remained classified.<sup>24</sup>
- **Figure Twenty-Five** is the BBC estimate for the same day as Figure Twenty-Four.

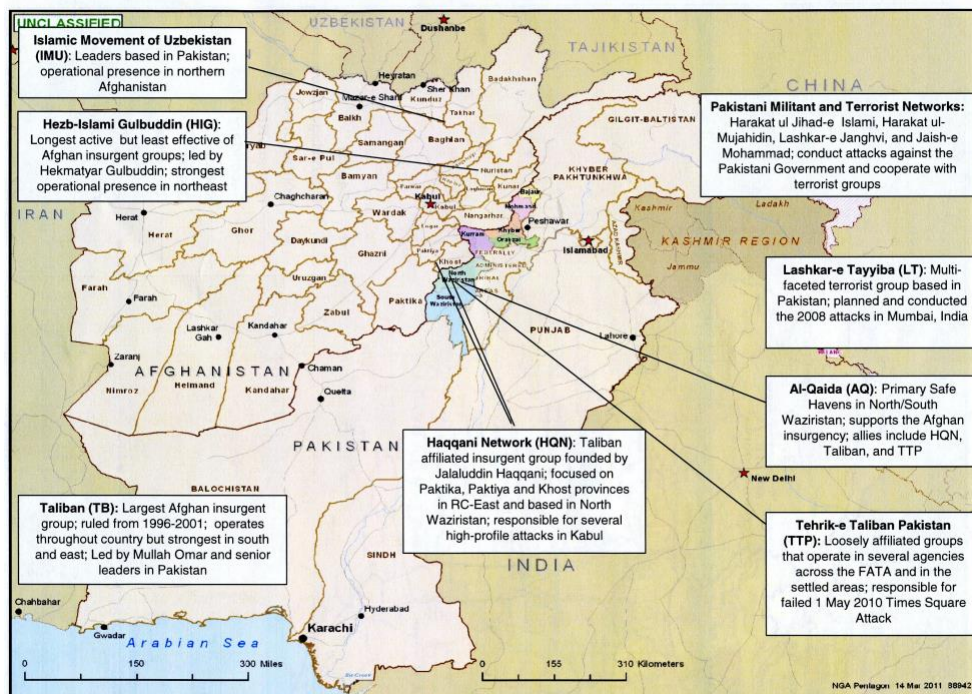
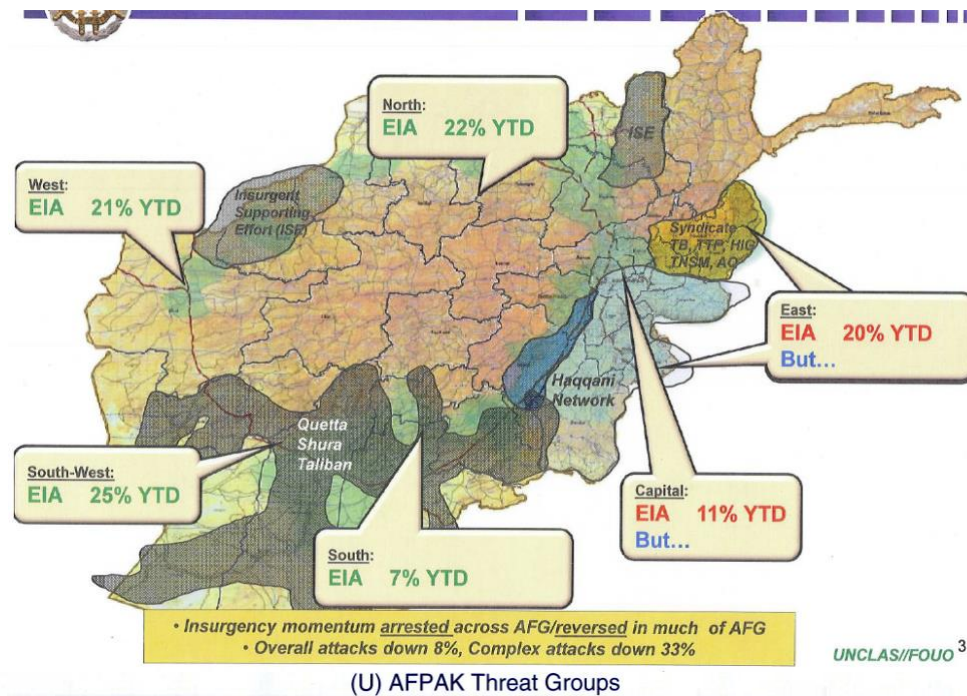
Any final assessment of the pace and nature of the Taliban’s gains from 2002 onwards will require full access to classified official data, and any assessment of whether the Taliban can win a full “victory” will have to be based on the actual outcome of the fighting and the actual political negotiations and settlements that follow.

It will also take full access to U.S., NATO/ISAF, and Afghan government classified data – as well as a careful study of Taliban claims – to determine the actual growth of Taliban forces, the military and civil measures the Taliban used to take control by District, and the reasons given Districts altered in vulnerability – if such data even exist.

The maps in **Figures Sixteen to Twenty-Five** do, however, show the steady rise of the insurgency after U.S. and allied land combat forces officially withdrew in 2014, the steady loss of government control of rural Districts, rise in contested Districts, and that the major losses in 2021 involved years of Taliban effort – rather than being sudden and precipitous following U.S. and allied withdrawal as is sometime portrayed.

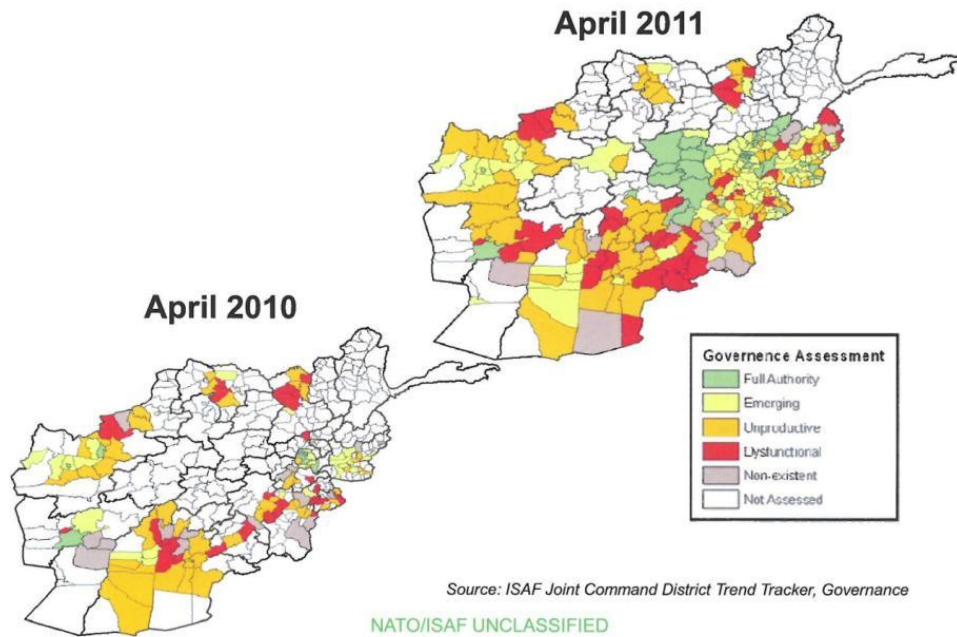
The work done by Bill Roggio and others for the *Long War Journal* (LWJ) deserves special attention and is often the uncredited source of media maps of Taliban and Afghan government controlled and contested areas. The LWJ maps are particularly useful because they properly define how they are reported, “controlled” and “contested,” and provide directly comparable maps from 2017 onwards, as well as highly detailed maps of the changes in control from November 2017 onwards. These data are available at <https://www.longwarjournal.org/mapping-taliban-control-in-afghanistan>.

It also seems likely that Taliban forces would have won well before 2021 without U.S. and allied combat support regardless of the theoretical ending of such support in 2014. The SIGAR and LIG reporting on Afghan force development raise critical questions as to whether the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) could have improved to the point where they could actually stand on their own at any point in the next five years unless the Taliban became divided or otherwise defeated itself.

**Figure Sixteen: A View of the “Terrorist” Threat in 2011**



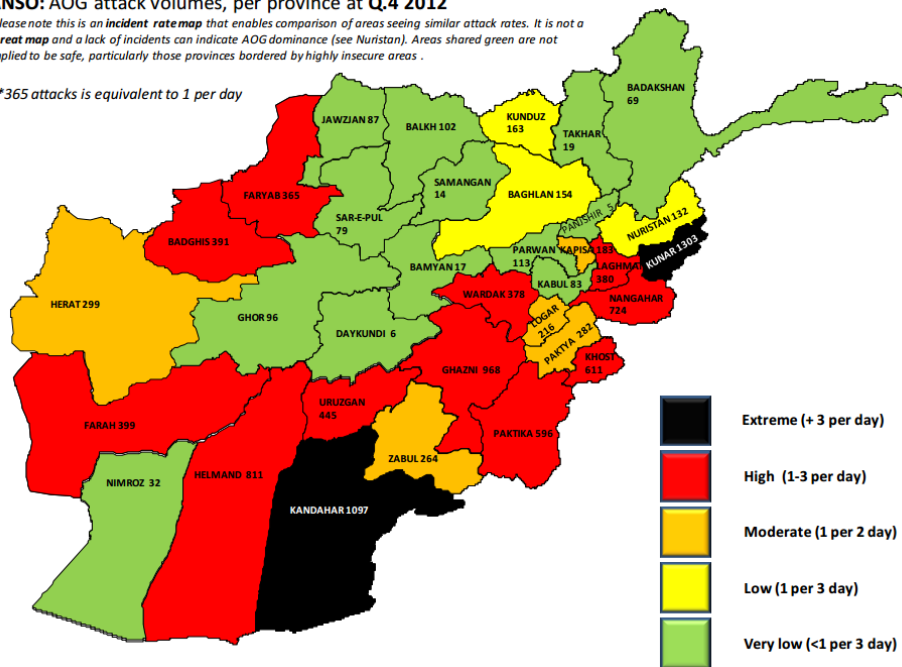
**Figure Seventeen: “Mission Impossible” Projected Gains in District Security and Governance vs Growing Taliban Activity in 2010-2012 – I**



**ANSO: AOG attack volumes, per province at Q.4 2012**

(Please note this is an **incident rate map** that enables comparison of areas seeing similar attack rates. It is not a **threat map** and a lack of incidents can indicate AOG dominance (see Nuristan). Areas shaded green are not implied to be safe, particularly those provinces bordered by highly insecure areas.

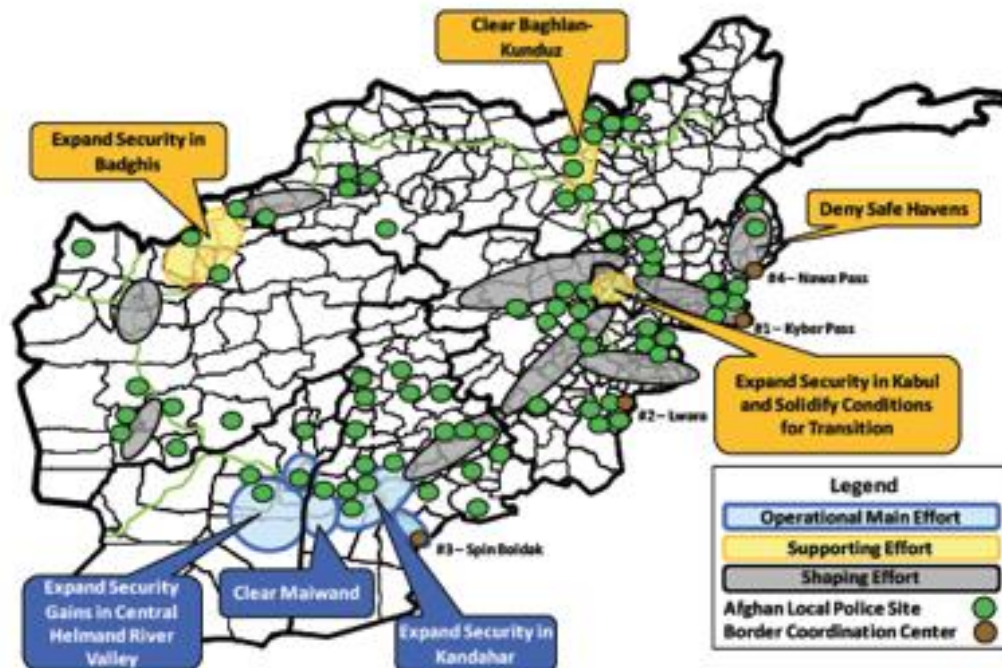
\*365 attacks is equivalent to 1 per day



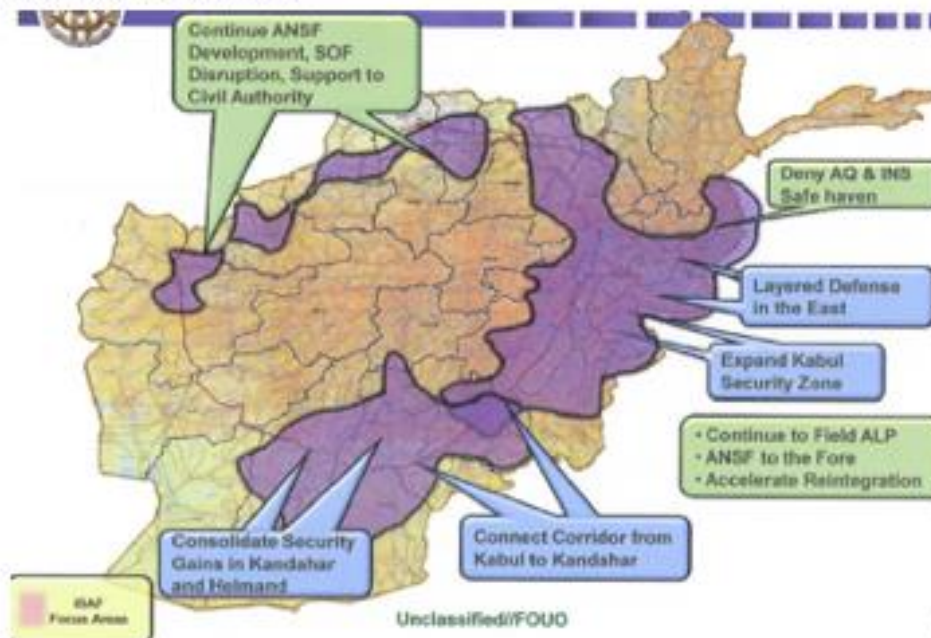
Source: NATO-ISAF handouts 2012.

***Figure Seventeen: “Mission Impossible” – NATO-U.S. Goals for Afghan Forces by District in 2011-2012 – II***

Concept of Operations at End 2011



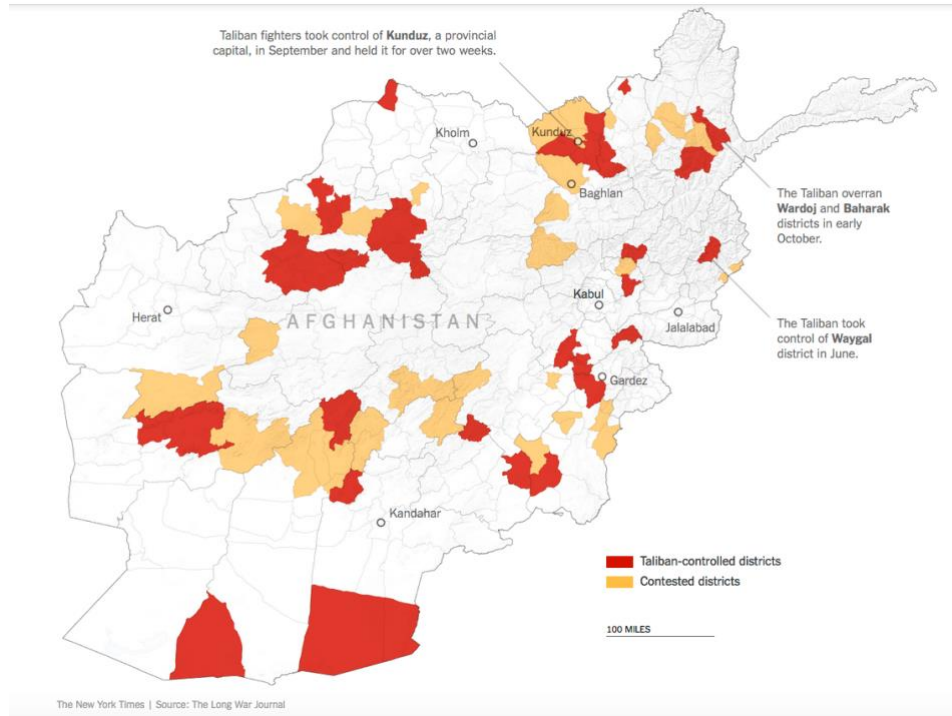
NATO-ISAF Goals for 2012



Source: NATO/ISAF End 2011

### *Figure Eighteen: Two Different Ways to Measure Taliban Influence in 2015*

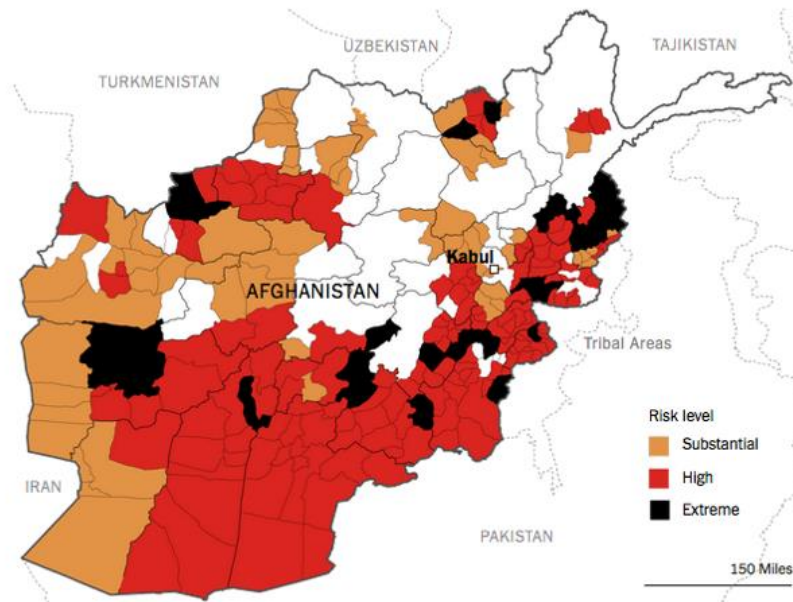
#### **Long War Journal Estimate on Taliban Control and Contested Districts: 29/9/2015**



#### **UN Estimate of Overall Risk from Taliban to Aid Workers 12/10/2015**

More than half of the districts in Afghanistan are rated by the United Nations as having either a substantial, high or extreme level of risk.

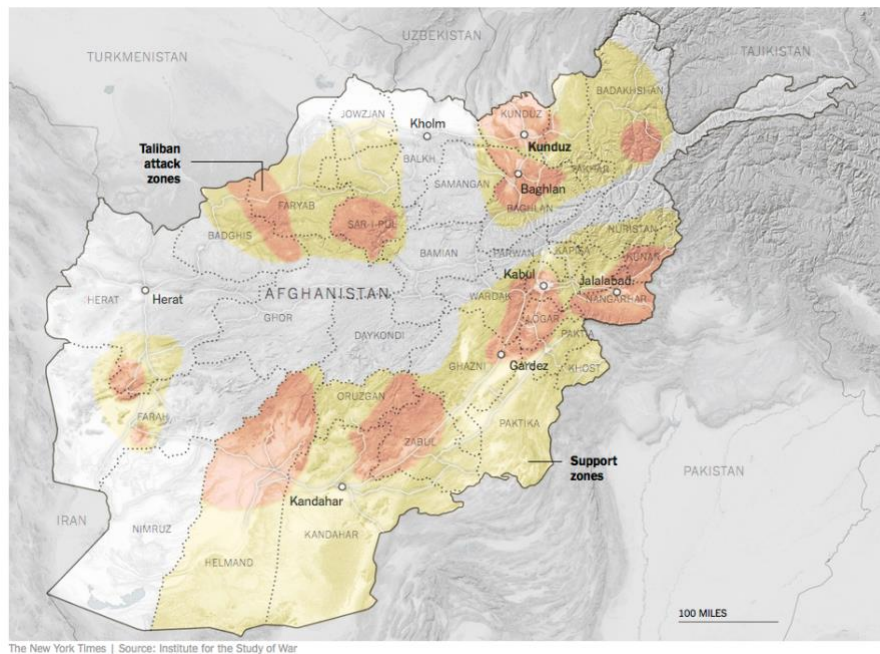
- Districts with extreme threat levels either have no government presence at all, or a government presence reduced to only the district capital; there were 38 such districts scattered through 14 of the country's 34 provinces.
- In all, 27 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces had some districts where the threat level was rated high or extreme.





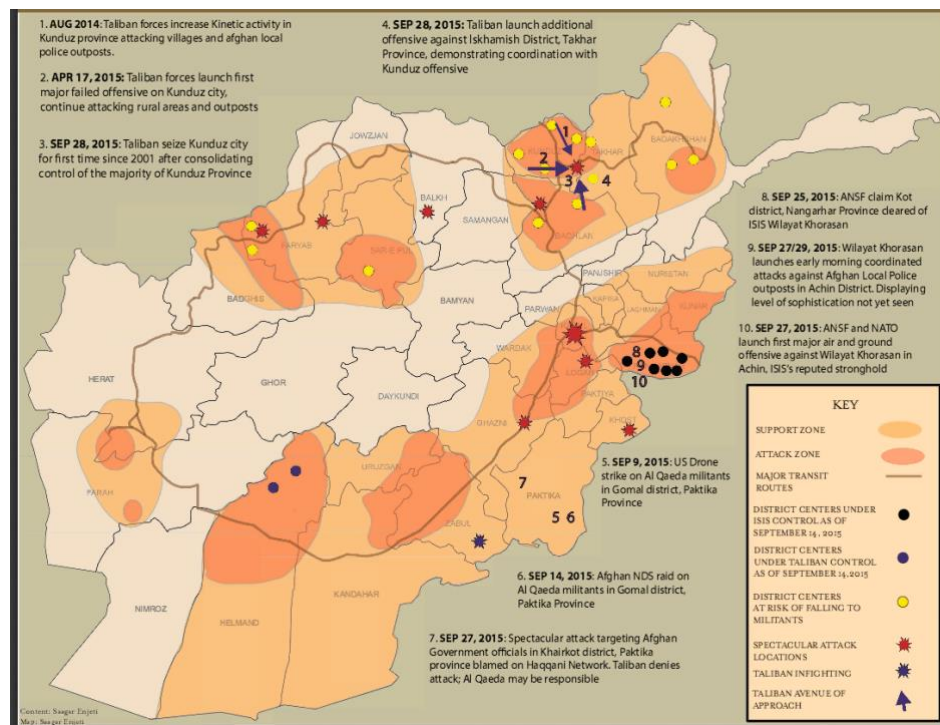
## Figure Nineteen: Contrasting Views of Taliban Influence in 2015

Institute for Study of War Map of “Zones”: 30/9/2015



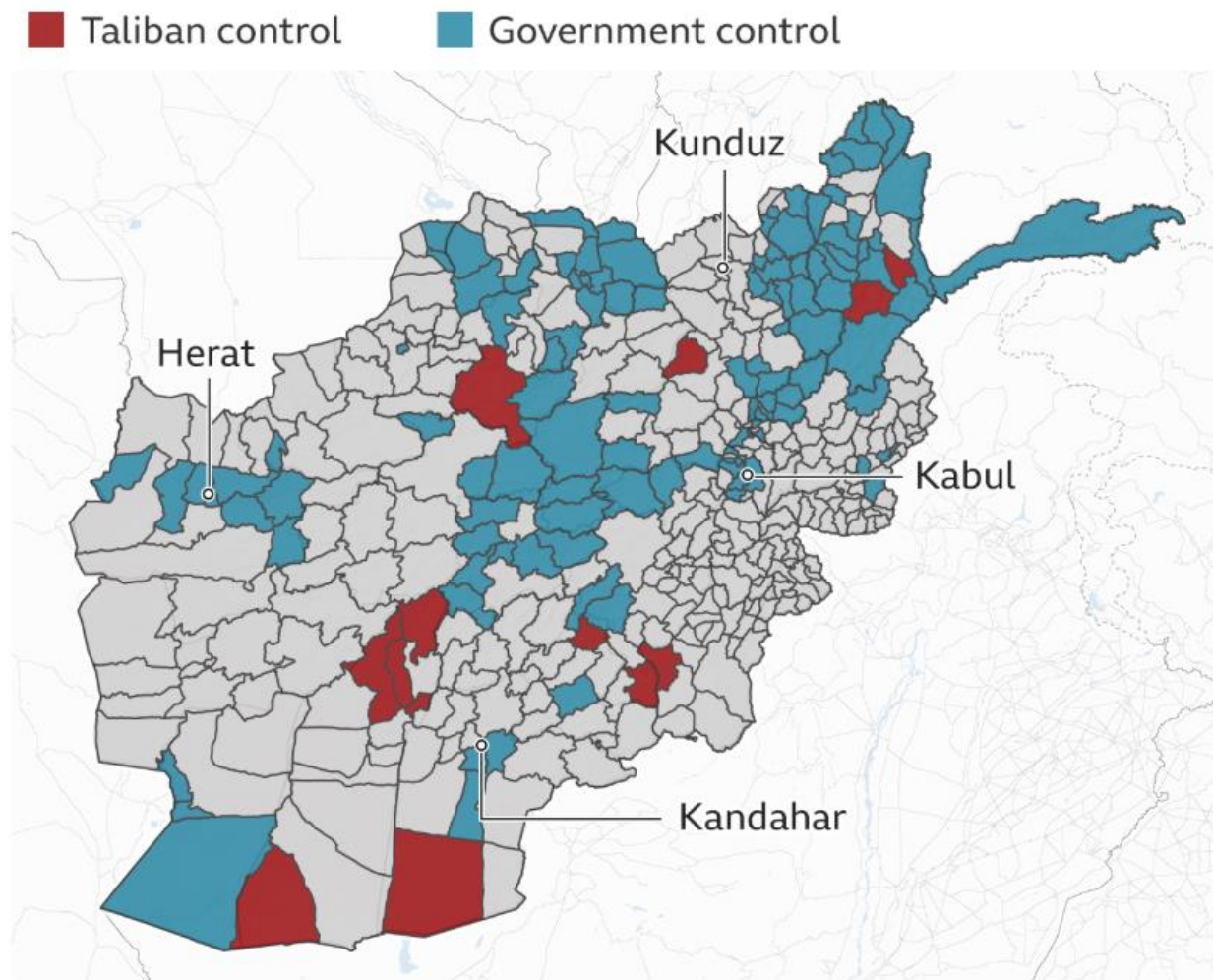
**Source:** Sarah Almukhtar, and Karen Yourish, “More than 14 Years After U.S. Invasion, the Taliban Control Large Parts of Afghanistan,” *New York Times*, April 19 2016,  
<http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/09/29/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-maps.html>.

Institute for Study of War Map of “Zones:” 4/2015-10/2015



Source: Saagar Enjeti and ISW Afghanistan Team -<https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/?shva=1#inbox/1501a28cd29bdf0e>.

**Figure Twenty: BBC Estimate of Control in 2017**



Districts according to 2005 Afghanistan government boundaries

Source: BBC research 2017



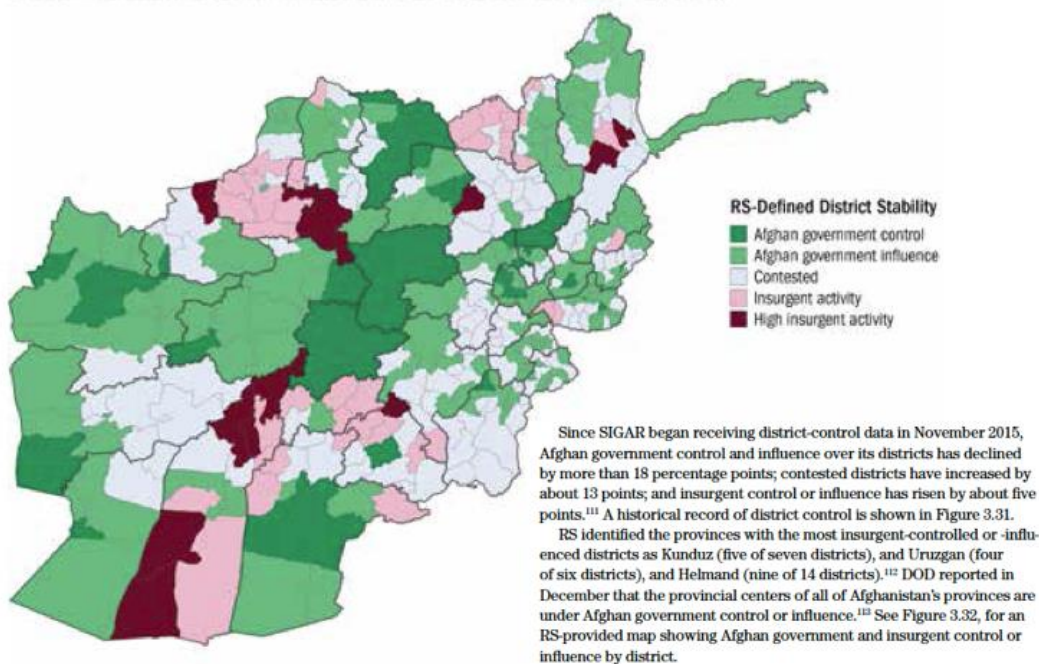
About 15 million people - half the population - were reported to be living in areas either controlled by the Taliban or where the Taliban were openly present and regularly mounted attacks against government forces.

Source: BBC, Mapping the advance of the Taliban in Afghanistan, The Visual Journalism Team, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-57933979>.



## Figure Twenty-One: Contrasting Views of Taliban Influence in 2018

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

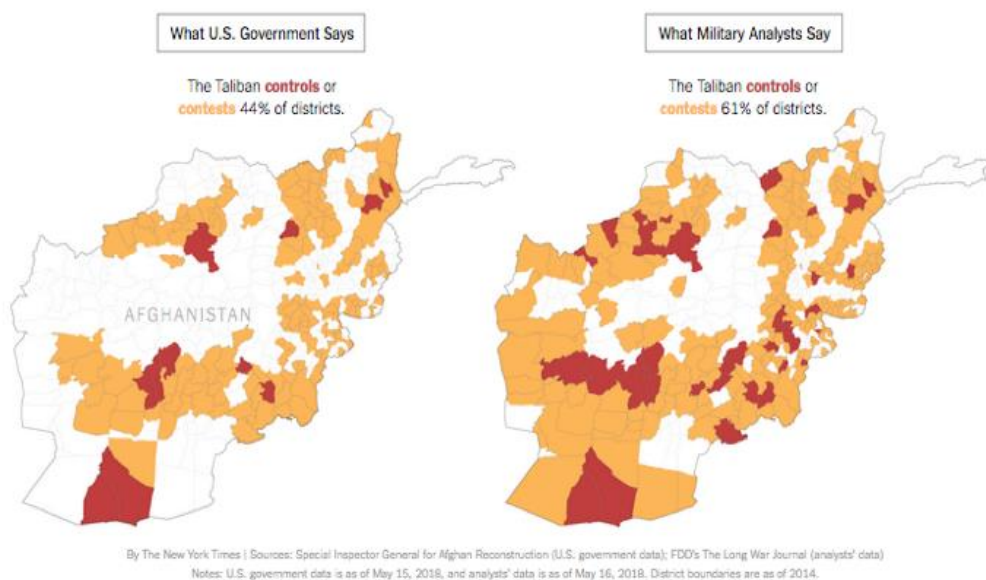


Note: A district is assigned its district-stability level based on the overall trend of land-area/population control of each district as a whole.

Source: RS, response to SIGAR data call, 12/20/2018.

Source: SIGAR, Quarterly Report to Congress, Reconstruction Update, January 30, 2019, p. 71.

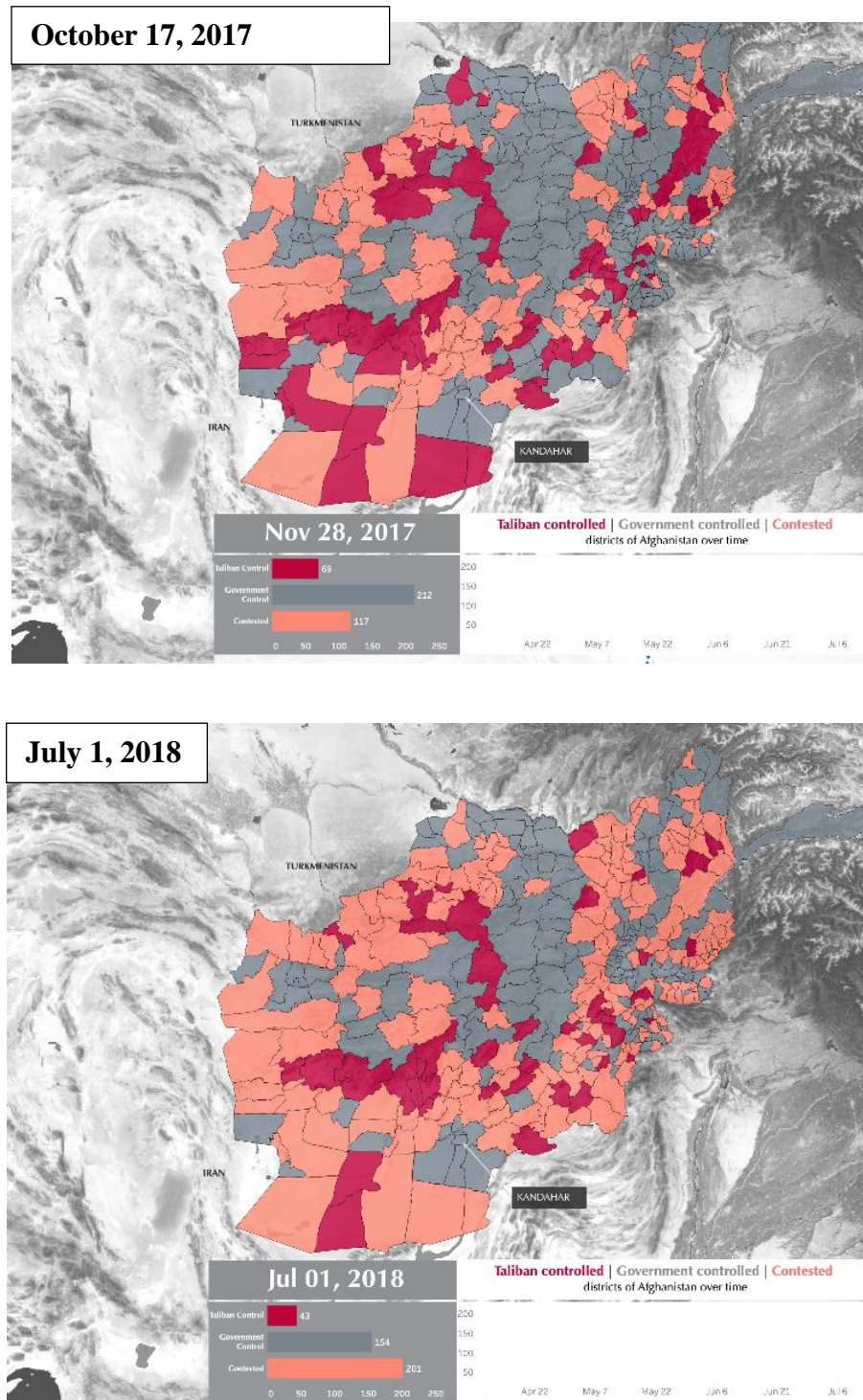
## SIGAR versus Long War Journal Estimates of Taliban Control: May 2018



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

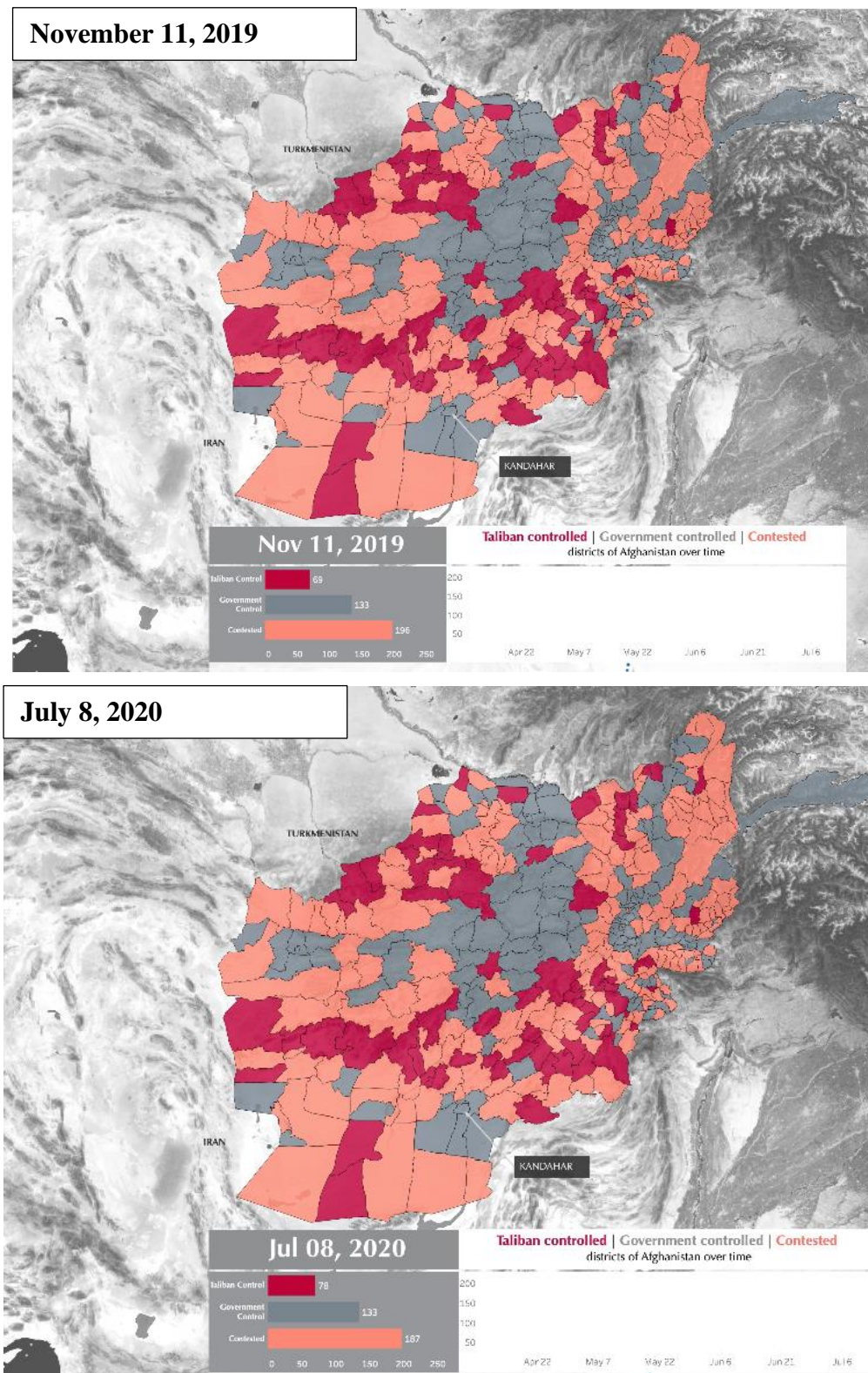
Source: ROD NORDLAND, ASH NGU and FAHIM ABED, **How the U.S. Government Misleads the Public on Afghanistan**, New York Times By SEPT. 8, 2018

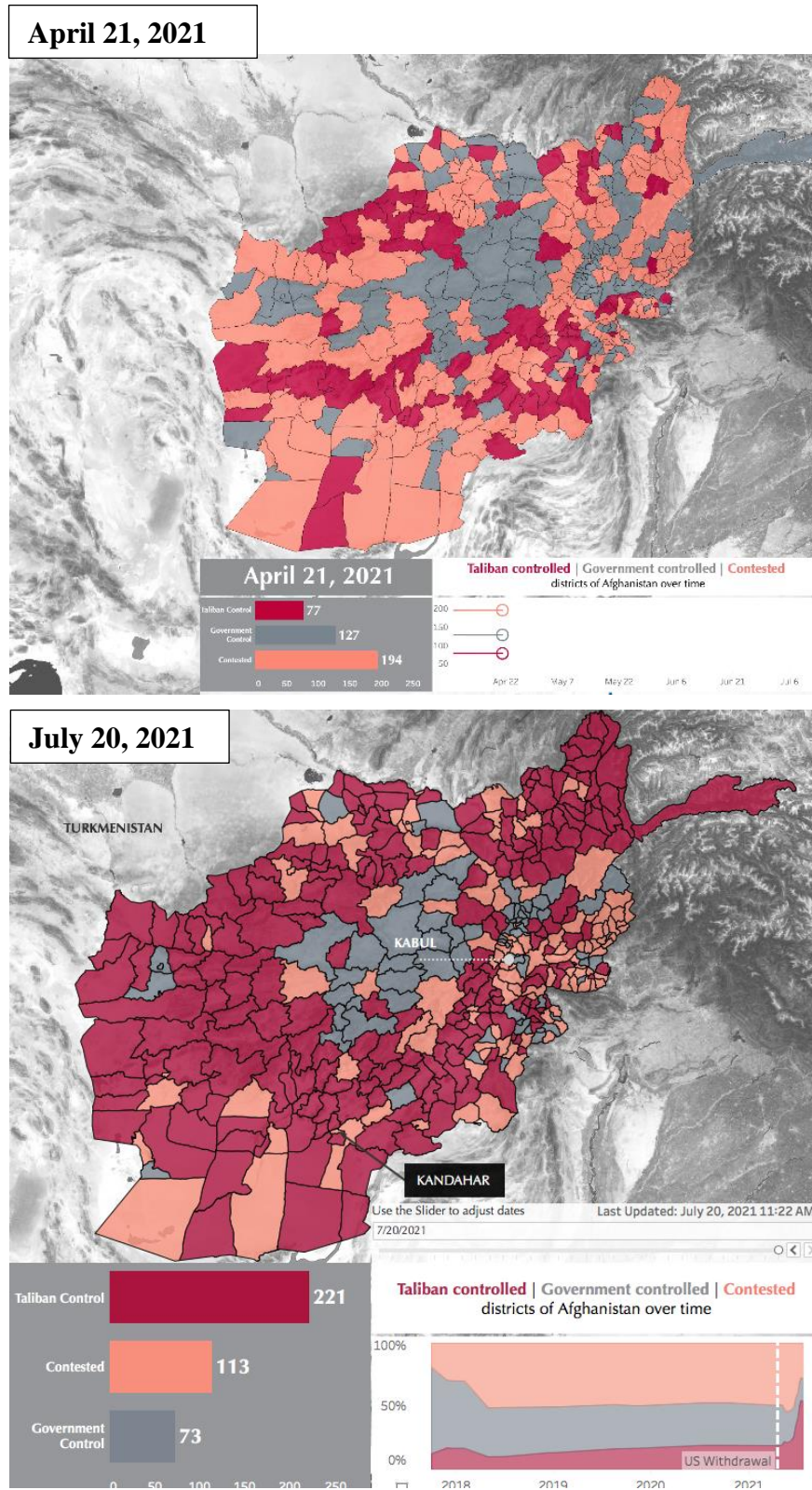
**Figure Twenty-Two: Long War Journal Maps from 2017 to 2021 – I**



Source: Bill Roggio, “Mapping Taliban Contested and Controlled Districts in Afghanistan,” July 2021, *Long War Journal*, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/mapping-taliban-control-in-afghanistan>

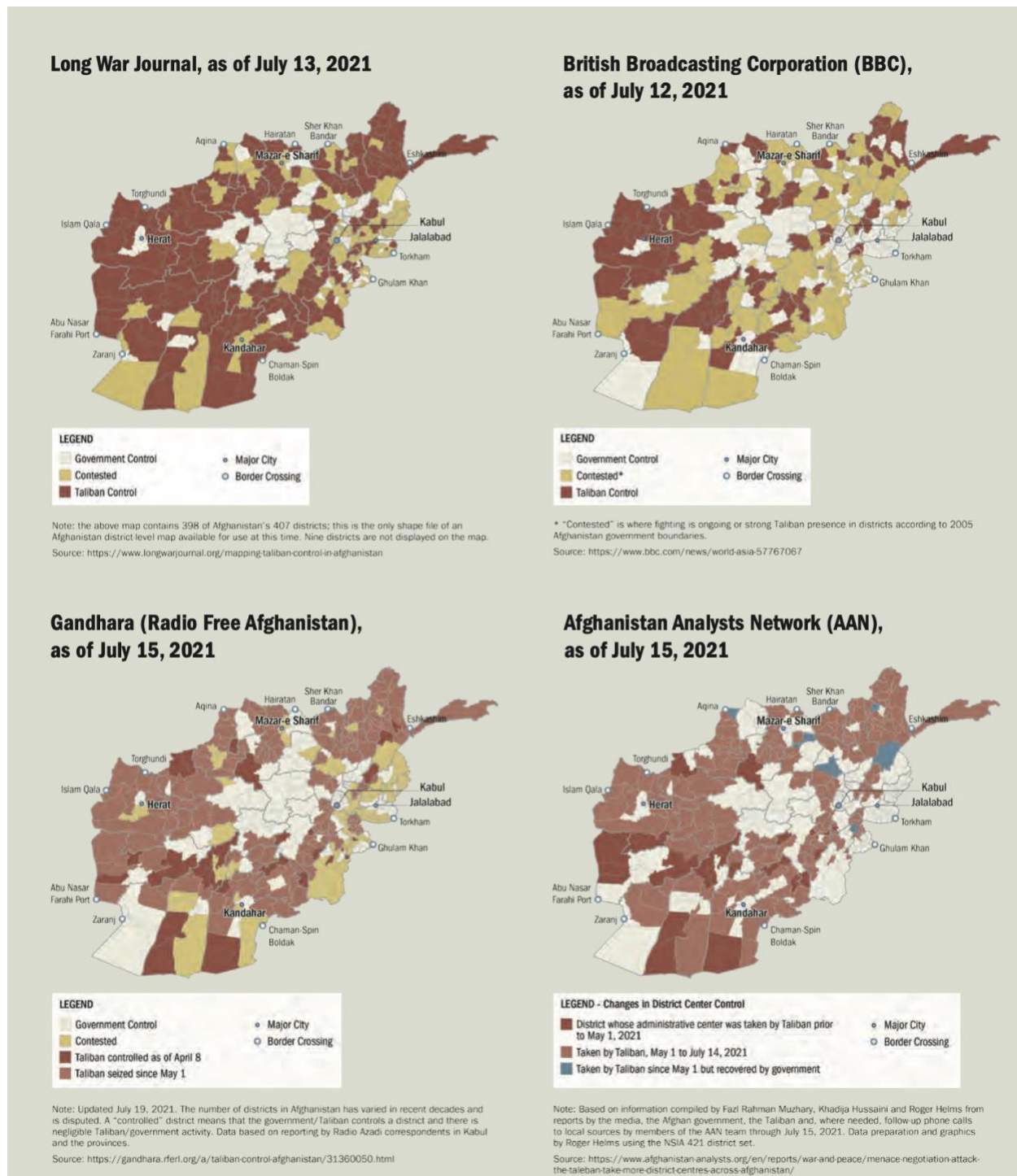


**Figure Twenty-Two: Long War Journal Maps from 2017 to 2021 – II**

**Figure Twenty-Two: Long War Journal Maps from 2017 to 2021– III**

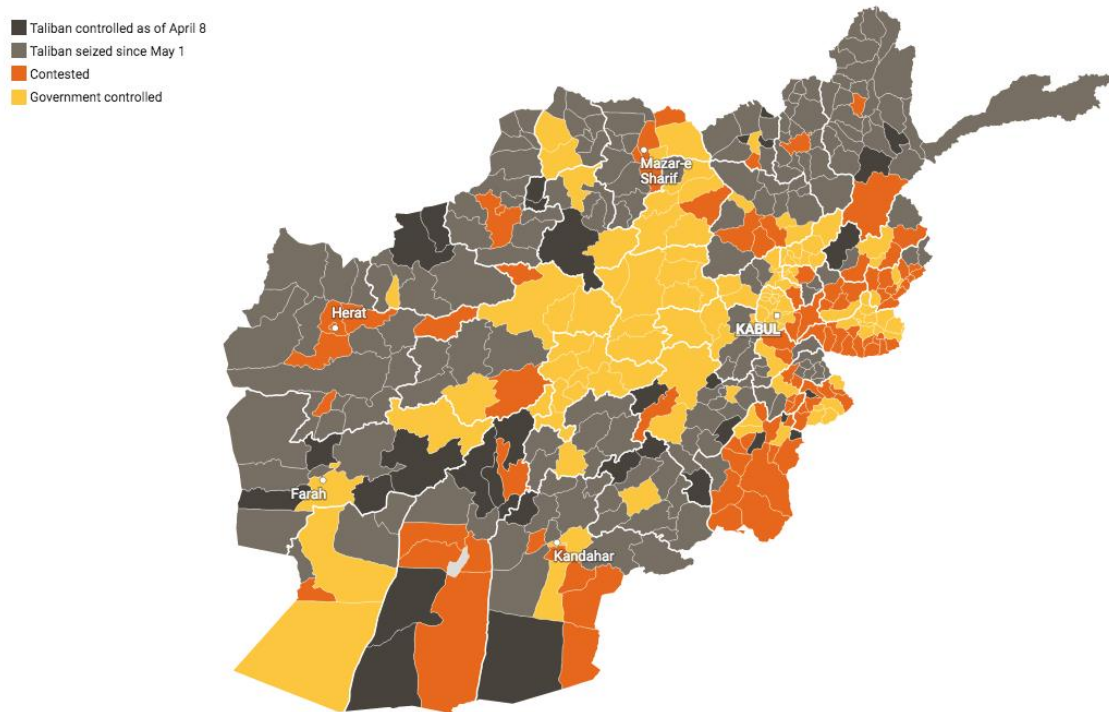


**Figure Twenty-Three: Different Estimates of Control in Mid- July 2021**



Source: SIGAR, 52nd Quarterly Report to Congress, June 30, 2021, p. 54.

***Figure Twenty-Four: Gandhara Estimate of the Growing Risk of a Taliban Victory in 2021 - August 6, 2021***



Updated August 6, 2021

The number of districts in Afghanistan has varied in recent decades and is disputed.

A "controlled" district means that the government/Taliban controls a district and there is negligible Taliban/government activity.

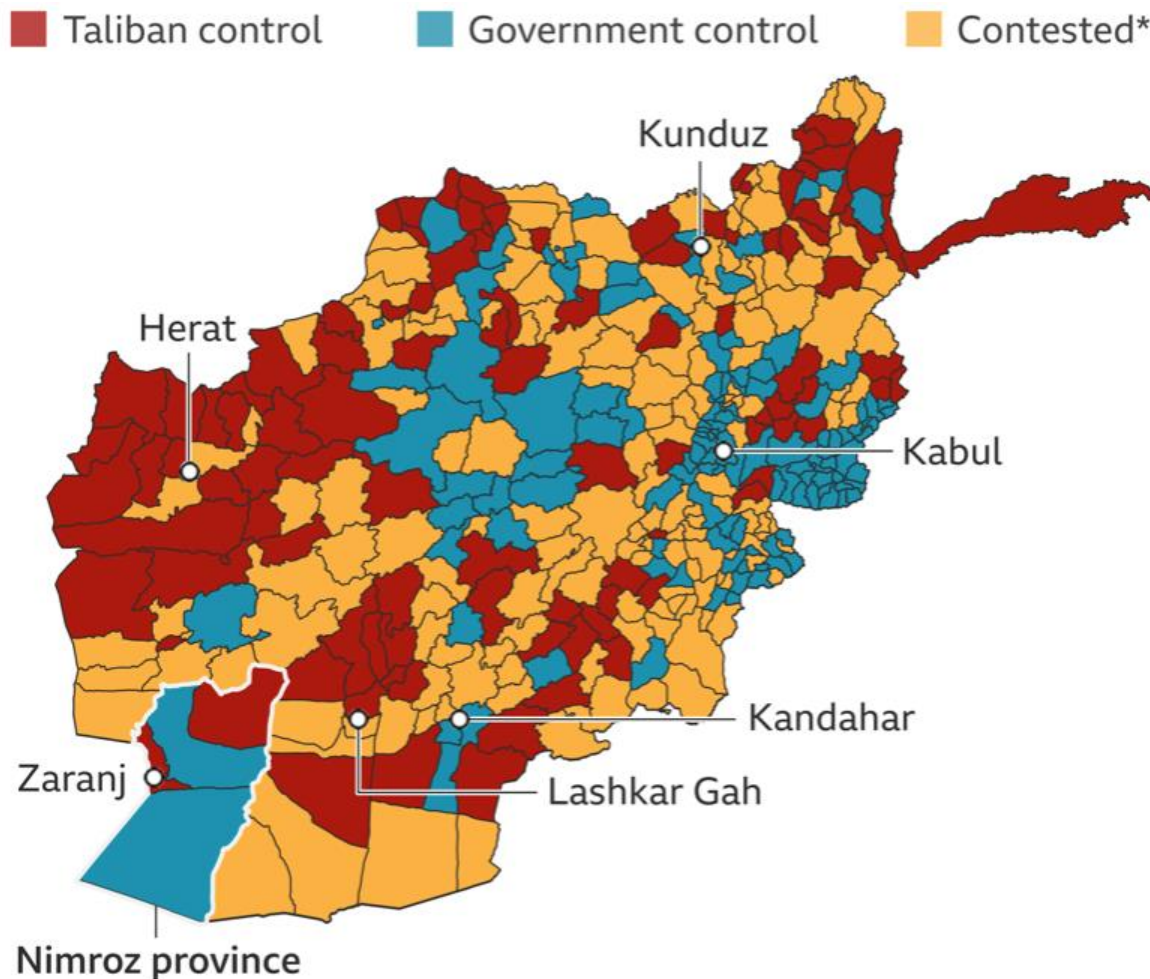
Data based on reporting by Radio Azadi correspondents in Kabul and the provinces.

Map: Carlos Coelho • Source: RFE/RL's Radio Azadi • Get the data • Embed • Download image • Created with Datawrapper

Source: "Interactive Map: Taliban Control In Afghanistan Then And Now," Gandhara, <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/taliban-control-afghanistan/31360050.html>, and <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/kandahar-afghanistan-taliban/31384305.html>.



**Figure Twenty-Five: BBC Estimate of the Growing Risk of a Taliban Victory in 2021 - August 6, 2021**



\*Contested is where fighting is ongoing or strong Taliban presence

Districts according to 2005 Afghanistan government boundaries

Source: BBC Afghan service 6 August 2021

**BBC**

By control, we mean districts where the administrative centre, police headquarters and all other government institutions are controlled by the Taliban.

Source: BBC, Mapping the advance of the Taliban in Afghanistan, The Visual Journalism Team, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-57933979>.

## The Battle for the Cities and Total Control of Afghanistan

It is far too soon to predict the final outcome of the fighting, although the Taliban is clearly in the ascendant and seems to have taken control of several provincial capitals at this writing. It is even harder to know what kind of Taliban government – if any – will be able to take total control, whether some compromise government will eventually be established, whether the country will be split, or whether the end result will be a divided regime and zones of control with an unstable government and new forms of civil conflict.

What is clear, is that the fighting now centers around the ability of the central government to control key cities, populated areas, and the borders. To win the campaign decisively, the Taliban must eventually take all of the major cities shown in **Figure Twenty-Six** and secure virtually all of the border posts shown in **Figure Twenty-Seven**.

Forging any kind of functioning state out of the end result of this campaign presents serious problems for the Taliban. The same is true, however, for the current central government if any partial Taliban victory leaves it in charge of some key cities and areas or if any compromise between the Taliban and the present central government creates a new divided or “federal government.”

As has been noted earlier, Afghanistan cannot fund its own government, security forces, or population on its own. It has seen a massive rise in urbanization since 2003 – particularly between 2000 and 2010. There are no reliable estimates of the rate of this urbanization, and the widespread number of current estimates in **Figure Twenty-Seven** illustrates this fact. However, all statistical data on Afghanistan’s population are very uncertain – as is almost all the other population dependent statistical data in a country, which has never had a real census or the ability to collect data in many Districts.

This urban growth has been partly driven by natural population growth and by the need for many Afghans to find an alternative to agriculture through creating a meaningful life in small towns, villages, and isolated area. It has also been driven by the search for security and higher incomes – and much of that growth has been shaped in ways that divide cities and larger towns by regional ethnicity, sect, language, and tribe.

The end result still leaves most Afghans in rural areas, in which many living in a near-subsistence agricultural economy where progress in modernization and development has only a limited impact. However, millions now live with a very different economy that is far more modern in economic and social terms and far more dependent on aid and trade. Some 25% or more of Afghanistan’s population is probably now concentrated in such urban areas, and securing them often involves very large areas outside the city proper – and most cities can only function if they have trade, resupply, and transit capabilities

One way or another, the current fighting now seems certain to change every aspect of these urban areas in ways that no one has planned or yet seems to have considered in talking about a peace settlement. At least so far, the Taliban has tried to push back the populations it comes to control into a mythical past form of Islamic religious life that cannot function politically or compete economically in the modern world.

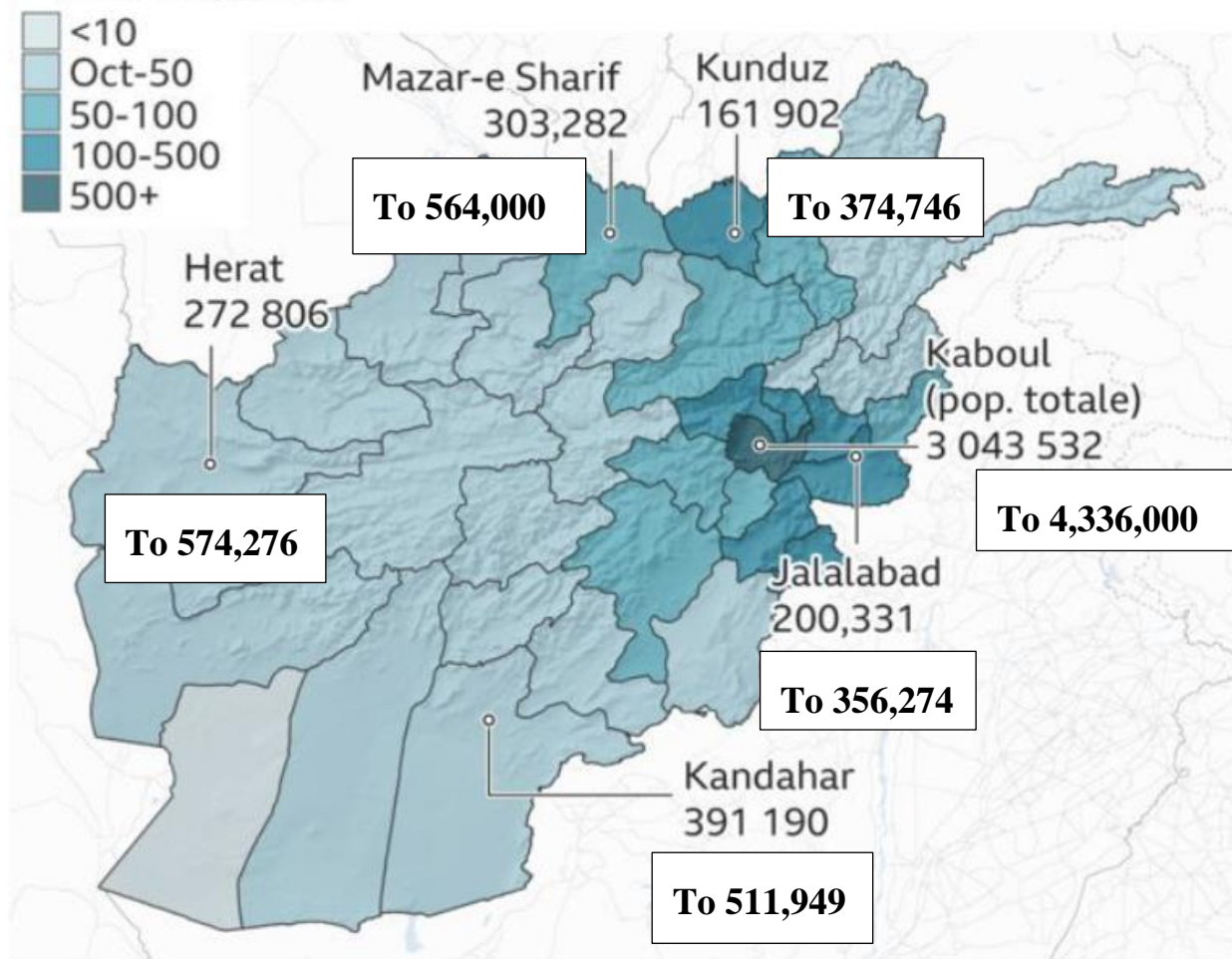
The central government lives in its own fantasy world. It talks about securing the bulk of the population in urban areas, but it cannot do so without massive continuing aid, far more effective security forces than now exist, or any relatively free access to roads, airports, and international,

trade. It cannot make the current structure work by securing the population in major cities if the Taliban controls the roads and countryside any more than the Taliban can try to regress to a world that no longer exists.

This makes it all too likely that the end result of U.S. and allied withdrawal will be a pyrrhic victory for a Taliban that cannot create the Afghanistan its ideology demands. The same outcome, however, is likely to come out of any peace agreement that tries to create a functional basis for cooperation between the Taliban and central government. The war is all too likely to end in an unstable mess for any post conflict government. It also is all too likely to be yet another version of the many other cases in the post war era where “peace” and “conflict resolution” has led to instability, economic decline, and lower civil living standards – often continuing for decades with new authoritarian regimes or new forms of war.

These problems are further complicated by the fact that so much of Afghan’s post 2003 progress has been centered around the central government in “Kabulstan.” The capital has become so important in international terms that it is unclear that any power can control the country without it, but it is equally unclear that any government or faction can survive unless Kabul has access to trade routes, airports, and transit. The main fight for Afghanistan may have begun in the Districts and rural areas, but the war (and any peace) must end in the cities – and no one as of yet seems to have fully considered how this could take place in a workable form.

This raises further questions about the lessons the U.S. should learn from such wars. Success must deal with conflict termination and the future, not just the fighting. How do you allocate aid as well as military and civil power to deal with the aftermath of conflict? Victory is not a matter of who wins given battles, takes the most territory, or controls the most population; it is a matter of creating – or defending – something approaching a viable state. It is far from clear that the U.S., the Taliban, or the Afghan government have ever given this goal the proper weight.

*Figure Twenty-Six: Key Afghan Population Centers and Cities*persons per km<sup>2</sup>

**Source:** Adapted from "The Advance of the Taliban in Afghanistan," New-in-24, July 29, 2021, <https://new.in-24.com/News/117652.html>.

Figures in boxes are taken from other estimates. The program does not allow the use of commas to show thousands.



**Figure Twenty-Seven: Key Afghan Border Posts**



Source: BBC research, IOM, 26 July 2021

BBC

Customs duty on goods entering the country via crossings they control is now collected by the Taliban - although exact amounts are unclear as the volume of trade has fallen as a result of the fighting.

But, Islam Qala on the border with Iran was, for example, capable of generating more than \$20m per month.

Disruption to the flow of imports and exports has affected prices of essential goods in the markets - fuel and foodstuffs in particular.

Source: BBC, Mapping the advance of the Taliban in Afghanistan, The Visual Journalism Team, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-57933979>

## The Future of the Taliban, and the Prospects for International Terrorism

It is still too early to be certain the Taliban can win decisively enough to govern on its own terms. It will potentially be very dependent on outside aid and trade and on its relations with neighboring states. The history of such movements is that more than half of them break-up, change character, or revert to some leader within two years. Most outside analysis has also focused on the Taliban as extremist or a threat, not how it might compromise or govern – an approach that may prove to be all too valid a prophecy of how it will act if it does gain power.

### Guessing at the Taliban

The UN Security Council Report issued on May 21, 2021 does provide useful background as to recent developments within the Taliban, and its internal stability:<sup>25</sup>

While the Taliban's central structure remained largely unaltered during the reporting period, one notable change from within the Office of the Leader of the Faithful (Amir al-Mu'minin) was the appointment in May 2020 of Mullah Mohammad Yaqub Omari to lead the Taliban Military Commission. Mullah Yaqub ranks second in line after first deputy Sirajuddin Haqqani to Taliban leader Haibatullah Akhundzada. Yaqub is the son of the late Taliban founder Mullah Mohammed Omar Ghulam Nabi (TAi.004) and is reported to harbour ambitions to become the group's leader.

The Taliban Leadership Council (Quetta Shura) has continued to pursue a diplomatic policy and military strategy to gain leverage for negotiations and raise the Taliban's international profile. The group has remained outwardly unified despite some reports of internal tensions or divisions. The Quetta Shura controls Taliban affairs in 11 provinces of the south, south-west and west of the country. Another wing, known as the Peshawar Shura, controls 19 provinces. Both Shuras have a presence in Kabul Province and work in tandem. They are also known to exchange fighters on occasion in order to reinforce their respective operations.

The independent operations and power wielded by Taliban field commanders have reportedly been a growing concern to the Leadership Council. As reported by the Monitoring Team in its previous report, tensions between the political leadership and some military commanders, such as Sadr Ibrahim (not listed) and Mullah Abdul Qayyum Zakir (not listed), reflect ongoing internal rivalries, tribal divisions and disagreements over Taliban revenue distribution...

In February 2021, an order from Akhundzada directed to all Taliban provincial officials instructed Taliban units belonging to commanders outside their own province to report, going forward, only to local shadow provincial governors of the province in which they were operating. The order announced that *mahaz* (splinter groups) were hereby banned and would no longer be recognized. Furthermore, commanders were not to link *dalgai* (units) operating in other provinces together with their own, or issue instructions to them.

Military commanders such as Sadr Ibrahim and Mullah Zakir have effectively built their own forces (*mahaz*), that traditionally operate across several provinces. While these forces have, in some cases, served to bolster larger Taliban operations, they have also on occasion failed to send forces in operations deemed likely to incur high casualties. With Sadr Ibrahim, Mullah Zakir and possibly other commanders proving too powerful and independent, there are leadership concerns that tensions will lead to vying for loyalties of certain groups, particularly in the south and south-west of the country. Given the timing of the order, it appears that the Leadership Council was attempting to ensure that commanders would not break ranks, accommodate local ceasefires, or take any action to contradict leadership guidelines and intent.

Taliban leadership has consistently maintained an outward facing image of unity, while obscuring internal dissent and tensions. Disputes have largely revolved around grievances such as tribal

rivalries, allocation of resources, revenues linked to narcotics and the autonomy of individual commanders. While unity within the movement remains strong, it has required more internal effort to enforce cohesion.

Prior to the launch of a new fighting season, the Taliban have regularly shuffled provincial shadow governors and military commanders. Reporting from January and March 2021, following offensives against Helmand and Kandahar in late 2020, revealed several new appointments in preparation for the 2021 fighting season. In January, the Taliban appointed Mullah Daoud Muzammil (not listed) as shadow governor for Kandahar Province. Former shadow governor for Helmand, Mullah Mohammadzai Baloch (not listed) was appointed shadow governor of Zabul Province, and former shadow governor of Kandahar Province, Mullah Hajji Yousaf Amin (not listed) became shadow governor for Helmand.

Leadership changes in January were followed by further reshuffling in early March of shadow government and military commanders in southern Afghanistan. These reportedly included the appointment of Mullah Ibrahim (alias Akhund Shahib) (not listed) as shadow governor for Zabul, Mawlawi Talib (not listed) and Mullah Mubarak (not listed) as shadow governor and military commander for Helmand, and Mullah Mehrullah Hamad (not listed) and Mullah Zarqavi (not listed) as shadow governor and military commander for Kandahar. Similar appointments were made in Farah, Faryab, Ghazni, Ghor, Herat, Jawzjan, Maidan Wardak, and in the eastern, north-eastern and south-eastern regions.

On 23 January 2021, the Taliban announced the death of Abdulhai Motmaen (TAi.051) due to a prolonged illness. Motmaen had been a member of the Taliban Supreme Council and had acted as spokesperson for Mullah Mohammed Omar.

In February 2021, negotiations were reported between Taliban loyal to Haibatullah Akhundzada and members of the Mullah Rasul Taliban splinter group (also known as the High Council of the Afghanistan Islamic Emirate) led by Mullah Niazi (not listed). Discussions resulted in at least three Rasul Taliban faction commanders rejoining the mainstream Taliban body. All three were stated to be relatives of the deceased Rasul faction commander, Mullah Nangalai. Local interlocutors credited the defections to internal disagreements combined with a calculated decision for realignment that was forward looking.

... Estimates of the current number of armed Taliban fighters range from approximately 58,000 to 100,000, with numbers fluctuating as forces are actively deployed on the battlefield or placed in reserve. Taliban numbers remain robust in spite of significant attrition rates incurred in the past few years.

Within the Taliban structure, the Haqqani Network remains the Taliban's most combat-ready forces, under the leadership of Sirajuddin Haqqani, first deputy to Taliban leader Haibatullah Akhundzada. The Haqqani Network, though integrated into the Taliban, retains semi-autonomous status while still reporting directly to the Taliban Supreme Council.

The Haqqani Network is reported to have a highly skilled core of members who specialize in complex attacks and provide technical skills, such as improvised explosive device and rocket construction. A wider force of between 3,000 to 10,000 traditional armed fighters operate in the so-called "P2K" region of Khost, Paktika and Paktiya Provinces. The Haqqani Network remains a hub for outreach and cooperation with regional foreign terrorist groups and is the primary liaison between the Taliban and Al-Qaida.

The problem with any such analysis is the sheer scale of rapid Taliban gains, the changing role of key fighters, the scale of changes in top leadership cadres that may take place as the Taliban shifts to governance, and the role that neighboring power like China, and Russia may come to play over time. The end result may well be years of instability, compounded by an ideology that will find it difficult to compromise and take the pragmatic attitudes necessary to move towards stability and sustained development.

## The Impact of al-Qaeda and ISIS

There are other key lessons to be learned from how the war ends. One of the key stated strategic goals of the U.S. involvement in Afghanistan was to prevent Afghanistan from becoming the center of terrorist threats outside the region. Here, however, there now is no practical way to estimate whether the rise of the Taliban will present a serious new threat from international terrorism to targets as far away as the United States or even to its immediate neighbors.

There are some indications that the Taliban's gains have strengthened the links between the Taliban and Islamist movements in the region, and UN and other reporting, by sources like the *Long War Journal*, make it clear that the Taliban still has links to al-Qaeda. The same UN Security Council Report quoted earlier notes that the ties between the Taliban and al-Qaeda continue, that al-Qaeda may gain from the Taliban's victories, and that ISIS still presents at least some form of threat:

A significant part of the leadership of Al-Qaida (QDe.004) resides in the Afghanistan and Pakistan border region, alongside Al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent. Large numbers of Al-Qaida fighters and other foreign extremist elements aligned with the Taliban are located in various parts of Afghanistan. Al-Qaida continued to suffer attrition during the period under review, with a number of senior figures killed, often alongside Taliban associates while co-located with them. The primary component of the Taliban in dealing with Al-Qaida is the Haqqani Network (TAe.012). Ties between the two groups remain close, based on ideological alignment, relationships forged through common struggle and intermarriage.

...The Taliban has begun to tighten its control over Al-Qaida by gathering information on foreign terrorist fighters and registering and restricting them. However, it has not made any concessions in this regard that it could not easily and quickly reverse, and it is impossible to assess with confidence that the Taliban will live up to its commitment to suppress any future international threat emanating from Al-Qaida in Afghanistan. Al-Qaida and like-minded militants continue to celebrate developments in Afghanistan as a victory for the Taliban's cause and thus for global radicalism.

The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan (ISIL-K) (QDe.161) remains diminished from its zenith, following successive military setbacks that began in Jowzjan in summer 2018. However, since June 2020, it has had an ambitious new leader, Shahab al-Muhajir (not listed), and it remains active and dangerous, particularly if it is able, by positioning itself as the sole pure rejectionist group in Afghanistan, to recruit disaffected Taliban and other militants to swell its ranks. Member States have varying assessments of the extent of ISIL-K and al-Muhajir's links with the Haqqani Network. Meanwhile, the Al-Sadiq office is co-located with ISIL-K in Afghanistan, pursuing a regional agenda in Central and South Asia on behalf of the ISIL core.

As reported by the Monitoring Team in its eleventh report, the Taliban and Al-Qaida remain closely aligned and show no indication of breaking ties. Member States report no material change to this relationship, which has grown deeper as a consequence of personal bonds of marriage and shared partnership in struggle, now cemented through second generational ties.

While the Doha agreement has set some expectations for a break in the long-standing relationship between the Taliban and Al-Qaida, the publicly available text of the agreement does not define expectations, and its annexes remain secret.

...led by Al-Qaida's Jabhat-al-Nasr wing under the direction of Sheikh Mahmood (not listed). Members of the group have been relocated to more remote areas by the Taliban to avoid potential exposure and targeting. According to Member States, Al-Qaida maintains contact with the Taliban but has minimized overt communications with Taliban leadership in an effort to "lay low" and not jeopardize the Taliban's diplomatic position vis-à-vis the Doha agreement.

Member States reported that a significant part of Al-Qaida leadership remains based in the border region of Afghanistan and Pakistan, where the core is joined by and works closely with Al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent.



Al-Qaida's own strategy in the near term is assessed as maintaining its traditional safe haven in Afghanistan for the Al-Qaida core leadership. The Monitoring Team takes note of assessments that have suggested a longer-term Al-Qaida core strategy of strategic patience for a period of time before it would seek to plan attacks against international targets again. This scenario is untested against stated Taliban commitments to prohibit such activities.

Al-Qaida, including Al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent, is reported to number in the range of several dozen to 500 persons. Al-Qaida core's membership is of non-Afghan origin, consisting mainly of nationals from North Africa and the Middle East. Although, as noted above, Member States assess that formal communication between senior Al-Qaida and Taliban officials is currently infrequent, one Member State reported that there is regular communication between the Taliban and Al-Qaida on issues related to the peace process. The group's leader, Aiman Muhammed Rabi al-Zawahiri (QDi.006), is believed to be located somewhere in the border region of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Previous reports of his death due to ill health have not been confirmed. One Member State reports that he is probably alive but too frail to be featured in propaganda. Another Egyptian national, Husam Abd Al-Rauf (alias Abu Mohsin al-Masri) was killed on 20 October 2020 in Andar district of Ghazni Province. Al-Rauf was thought to be both an Al-Qaida Shura Council member and its chief financier.

Al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent operates under the Taliban umbrella from Kandahar, Helmand (notably Baramcha) and Nimruz Provinces. The group reportedly consists of primarily Afghan and Pakistani nationals, but also individuals from Bangladesh, India and Myanmar. Its current leader is Osama Mahmood (not listed), who succeeded the late Asim Umar (not listed). The group is reported to be such an "organic" or essential part of the insurgency that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to separate it from its Taliban allies. Several Member States characterized this relationship by noting that the wife of the former leader of Al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent, Asim Umar...was among 5,000 Taliban prisoners freed by the Afghan Government in 2020 as part of the Doha agreement.

The killing of several Al-Qaida commanders in Taliban-controlled territory underscores the closeness of the two groups. Following the death of al-Rauf in October, the Al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent deputy, Mohammad Hanif (alias Abdullah), was killed on 10 November 2020 in Bakwa District of Farah Province. According to a Member State, he had been providing bomb-making training to Taliban insurgents in that location. Both individuals appear to have been given shelter and protection by the Taliban. On 30 March 2021, Afghan Forces led a raid in Gyan District of Paktika Province that killed a prominent Al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent commander, Dawlat Bek Tajiki (alias Abu Mohammad al-Tajiki), alongside Hazrat Ali, a Taliban commander from Waziristan.

Al-Qaida's presence in Afghanistan has also been confirmed by its own affiliated propaganda and media wings. Al-Qaida's weekly *Thabat* newsletter reported on Al-Qaida operations inside Afghanistan, listing Al-Qaida attacks since 2020 in 18 provinces.

In May 2020, Al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent released an Eid al-Fitr audio message in which it portrayed the Doha agreement as an example of divine victory and reward for pursuing jihad. While both organizations are expected to maintain a posture of distance and discretion for as long as such is required for the achievement of Taliban objectives, Al-Qaida nonetheless stands to benefit from renewed credibility on the back of Taliban gains. It will be important for the international community to monitor any sign of Afghanistan again becoming a destination for extremists with both regional and international agendas.

Once again, no one can deny the risk that the Taliban will come under leaders focused on exporting the Taliban's ideology through violent acts, or that it will tolerate and host an al-Qaeda or similar threat hostile to Muslim states where it operates – including ISIS and virtually every other violent Islamic movement. Attacks on the U.S., European targets, and other non-Muslim states do happen and are real, but the numbers are marginal compared to the levels of violence in Muslim states from most such movements – including the Taliban that was concentrated on winning and consolidating power in their own country.

Even al-Qaeda, however, seems far more concerned with taking power in largely Muslim states and areas, and it is important to remember that 9/11 was not part of some broad or coherent effort,

but a remarkably successful and well-focused attack by a fairly small faction. Key threats from terrorism may not be the result of some broad effort to create centers for training and operations, but the result of skill, actions by small groups of actors, or sheer luck. Attacks can come from any form of extremist movements anywhere in the world, as well as be more domestic than international.

Accordingly, the primary threat that a Taliban-dominated Afghanistan will pose in international terms – if any – may well be to the regimes of largely Muslim states. Its focus will be largely local, and most longer range attacks will continue to come with little warning from small elements in virtually all of the countries where there now are such violent extremist movement or from within small domestic cadres in non-Muslim states that have with ties to such movements.

Moreover, any war against “terrorism” that continues to target such threats, using airpower or ground troops and that also ignores the causes of instability and extremism in the states involved, will continue to treat the symptoms and not the disease.

## **Properly Assessing the Cost of War in Blood and Dollars**

Cost is another key aspect of the lessons of both the Afghan and Iraqi conflicts that deserves more attention. All of the issues that shaped the course of the war also shaped its cost to the Afghan people, the U.S., and its allies. It is striking that there are no official U.S. estimates of the total costs in blood and dollars of the war and civil and military aid to America’s allies or of Afghan casualties and refugees, and there are no credible estimates of such losses that emerged from a simple Internet search. It is yet another example of the American strategic jingoism described in the following section of this analysis.

There also are no reliable U.S. or other estimates of Afghan casualties and refugees, and there are no other reliable data on the total casualties in Afghan government and security forces, in Taliban and other hostile forces, and in non-U.S. military and governmental personnel. Most official and NGO estimates of humanitarian problems raise valid concerns, and some may be approximately correct – but the numbers often differ sharply from source to source, the sources of the data are often never stated, the methodology and its limitation are unclear, and estimates by category or cause disguise major differences in the quality of the data.

When it comes to current casualty estimates, the Watson Institute at Brown University estimates in April 2021, that some 241,000 people had been killed in the Afghan and Pakistani war zones between 2001 and April 2021, and that 71,000 were civilians.<sup>26</sup>

A BBC report in June 2021 noted that President Ghani said in 2019 that more than 45,000 members of the Afghan security forces had been killed since he became president five years earlier, and research by Brown University estimated that deaths in the Afghan national military and police were higher than 64,100 between October 2001 and 2019.<sup>27</sup> These estimates, however, are very uncertain and do not seem to include many local security forces.

UNAMA estimates that a total of 38,553 Afghans died and 72,311 were injured between the start of its estimates in 2009 through 2020, but many aspects of its estimates are disputed – including its estimates of casualties from U.S. and ANAF air strikes – and UNAMA does not have a credible capability to count low level Taliban killings and injuries of civilians in much of the country. The collection and estimation methods used by both UNAMA and the U.S. are limited and controversial. Estimates are lacking on injured and wounded, and estimates of refugees and

displaced periods are rounded guesstimates that often do not cover the entire country and do not count deaths that followed being displaced or that made refugees.<sup>28</sup>

The only detailed military casualty estimates that seem to be truly reliable – and that are broadly quoted in U.S. reporting – are the estimates of U.S. military casualties. The official Department of Defense estimates of the costs to the U.S. military in terms of killed and wounded seem to be highly reliable – although they do omit U.S. civilians and contractors.

Here, however, focusing on the total casualties during the entire war – or on very small numbers of recent U.S. casualties – illustrate the need to carefully examine how these casualties rose and fell as the U.S. first escalated its troop levels and the level of conflict only to then cut back sharply on its ground forces and then prolong the war by relying on airpower and limited cadres of train and assist personnel.

These Department of Defense estimates are divided into two periods which cover the different command structures in the war. The first period covers the length of Operation Enduring Freedom from its official start on October 7, 2001 until the official end of the U.S. role in combat on December 31, 2014. The totals are 1,833 killed in combat, 385 deaths from non-hostile causes and 20,093 wounded in action. The second period covers Resolute Support and shows that the total casualties from December 31, 2014 through July 12, 2021 were far smaller: 66 killed in combat, 30 deaths from non-hostile causes, and 573 wounded in action.

There are no reliable estimates of the dollar cost of total civil and military activity and aid to Afghanistan from all donors from 2001 onwards, although SIGAR reports that the ten top foreign donor countries of aid did spend at least 26.8 billion on civil and military aid between 2001 and 2021.<sup>29</sup>

The need for analysis of the lessons from the changing dollar cost of the war is equally important. It is critical here to note that the U.S. government has never been able to agree on stable and reliable ways to estimate the direct dollar costs of the war, and its official Cost of War took years to develop, has many gaps and uncertainties, and has never been broadly circulated. There are, however, some good indicators of the overall trends in spending. **Figure Twenty-Eight** does, however, provide a SIGAR estimate of the direct financial cost of the war to the U.S. alone through FY budget 2021, and **Figure Twenty-Nine** shows President Biden's request for future funding in his FY2022 budget request.

These U.S. estimates of direct annual dollar costs do, however, involve major uncertainties as to whether the Veteran's Administration (VA) and other longer-term costs should be included, as to accounting methods, and as to the way in which unrelated baseline and other costs outside Afghanistan should be allocated. They do, however, strongly indicated that the financial cost of the war (and cost in blood and lives) would have been far lower if the U.S. had made a major effort to create independent and self-sustaining Afghan forces from the start.

It is possible to make far higher cost estimates using different methodologies. SIGAR reported in presenting the data in **Figure Twenty-Eight** that,<sup>30</sup>

The Costs of War Project sponsored by the Watson Institute at Brown University recently issued U.S. Costs to Date for the War in Afghanistan, 2001–2021, putting total costs at \$2.26 trillion. The Watson Institute's independently produced report builds on DOD's \$933 billion Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) budgets and State's \$59 billion OCO budgets for Afghanistan and Pakistan. Unlike the DOD Cost of War Report, the Watson report adds what it considers to be Afghanistan related costs of \$433 billion above DOD baseline costs, \$296 billion in medical and disability costs for veterans, and \$530 billion in interest costs on

related Treasury borrowing. SIGAR takes no position on the reasonableness on the Watson report's assumptions or the accuracy of its calculations."

Total costs should have a major impact upon American strategic choices, but the detailed costs are critical to making choices about the allocation of forces, tactics, the structure of aid, and how to fight irregular wars and modern conflicts. Far too many recent assessments of the cost of the war to the U.S. have also focused on its total cost from 2001 to the present, and not on the radical shifts in annual costs reflected in **Figure Twenty-Eight** – which shows the slow U.S. reaction to a rising Taliban insurgency, the level of waste resulting from surging added U.S. forces in and then effectively surging them out, and the sharp drop in costs after 2014. They also have ignored the patterns in civil and military spending and the fact that the aid money that went to Afghan civil efforts and building the ANDSF only totaled \$131.3 billion –16% of the total of \$824.9 billion.

While SIGAR, the LIG, and the Government Accountability Office (GAO) have analyzed some individual aspects of spending, there has been no broad historical review of the patterns of spending on given types of U.S. forces or on the incredibly unstable levels of aid spending shown in **Figure Two**. While most military analysts note the shifts in producing and relying on Afghan ground troops, reducing U.S. and allied ground troops, and expanding the use of airpower and train and assist efforts like the Security Force Assistance Brigades which produced a far cheaper – and more effective – approach to war – the savings in cost and casualties have only had limited analysis at best.

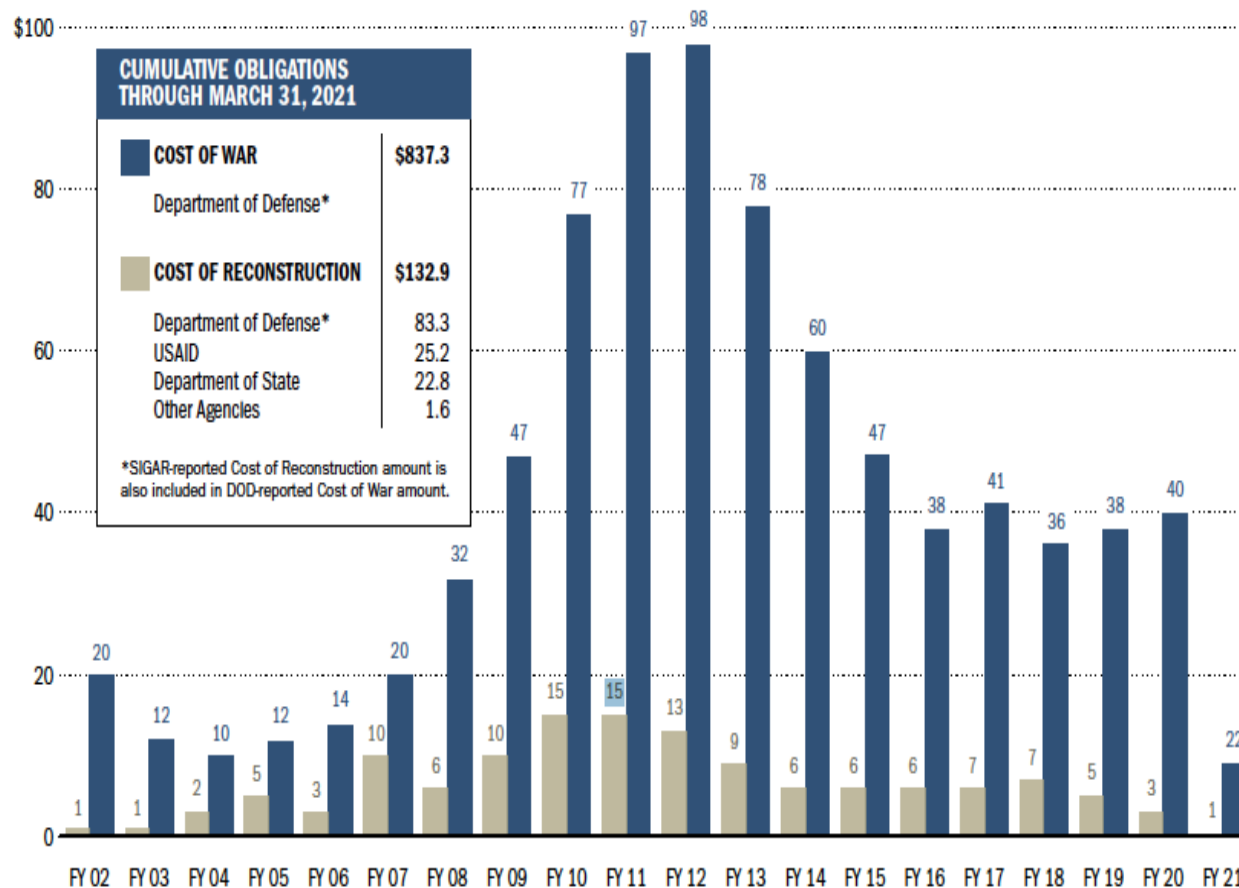
Analysts have often addressed the cost of military and civil aid, and some have addressed the impact of waste and corruption. Far too many of the individual programs and projects in **Figure Two**, however, were poorly planned, poorly chosen, poorly managed, and poorly executed. Good intentions are no substitute for competence or – as has already been discussed in detail – adequate conditionality and fiscal management systems.

One key lesson of the war's decisions is that the U.S. should seek from the start to fully and honestly estimate the costs of war in blood and dollars – not only to itself, but to its allies, the host country, and threat forces. It should address the adequacy of fiscal management systems and reporting on effectiveness. It should not ignore key issues like the real-world lifecycle costs of transferring military equipment that the ANDSF cannot operate, relying on contractors, or providing civil programs and project aid when the country is not implementing effective economic development plans. Cost-benefit analysis is a critical factor in modern war fighting, and assuming that war justifies rushing plans and spending is yet another recipe for strategic failure.

Another cost-relevant lesson is that decisions to continue and escalate conflicts should explicitly consider their costs. A third is the need to focus on building up host country forces and development from the start, to avoid any escalating combat commitments unless critical U.S. national strategic interests are involved, and to be ruthless in making aid conditional on host country governance and military performance.

The sharp declines in the cost of both the Afghan and Iraqi conflicts shown in **Figure Twenty-Nine** illustrate this point all too clearly. One can only speculate as to how much cheaper both wars would have been if the U.S. had focused on building up local forces "their way" from the start, rather than surging in its own forces and trying to build-up local forces "our way" with equipment and tactics they were not capable of rapidly adopting. The cost benefits of the later shift to allied force, U.S. and allied train and assist, and carefully targeted uses of air power are all too clear.

**Figure Twenty-Eight: The Cost of the War through December 31, 2020 and Projected Budget Through FY2021 Q2 in \$US Billions**

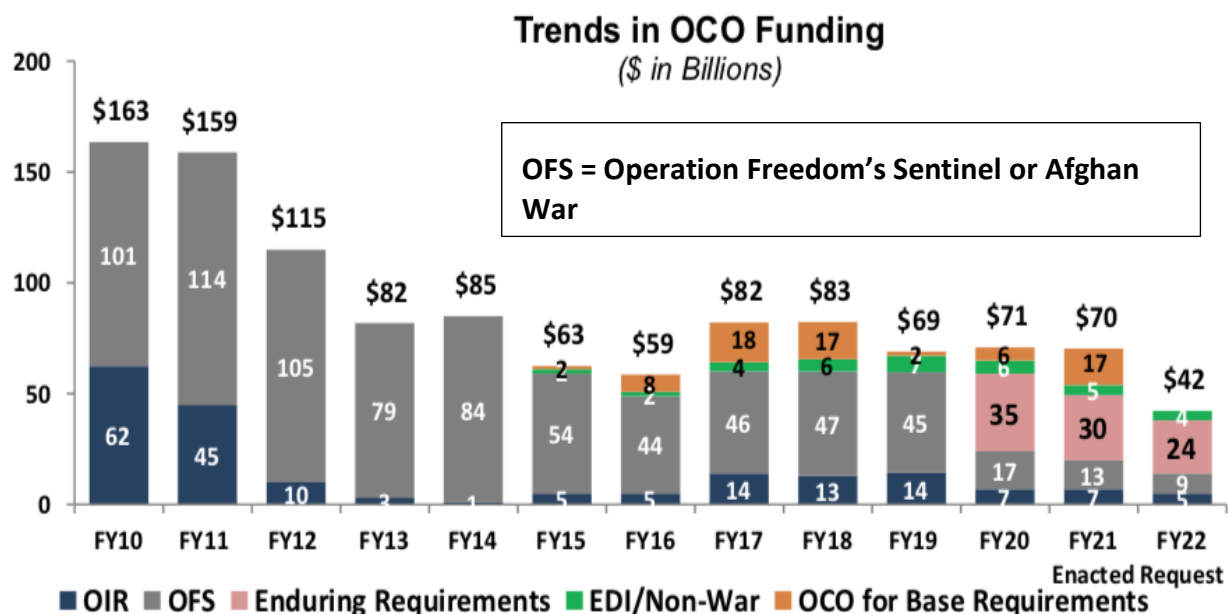


Note: Numbers have been rounded. Cumulative obligations reported by DOD for the Cost of War through March 31, 2021, differ markedly from cumulative appropriations through June 30, 2021, as presented elsewhere in the Status of Funds section, because the former figures do not include unobligated appropriations and DOD Cost of War reporting lags by one quarter.

Source: DOD, Cost of War Monthly Report, Total War-related Obligations by Year Incurred, data as of March 31, 2021. Obligation data shown against year funds obligated. SIGAR analysis of annual obligation of reconstruction accounts as presented in SIGAR, Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, 4/30/2021. Obligation data shown against year funds appropriated.

Source: SIGAR, Quarterly Report to Congress, Second Quarter 2021, p. 28-29.

**Figure Twenty-Nine: OCO Cost of the Afghan War in Terms of Budget Obligations from FY2010 to FY2022 in Current \$U.S. Billions**



### Trends in U.S. Funding of Afghan Forces: FY2020-FY2022

	FY 2020 Appropriated <sup>a</sup>	FY 2021 Appropriated <sup>b</sup>	FY 2022 Request
<b>Budget Activity 6, Afghan National Army (ANA)</b>			
Sustainment	1,132,526	963,565	1,053,668
Infrastructure	37,911	221	1,818
Equipment and Transportation	52,878	4,698	22,911
Training and Operations	33,862	25,663	31,837
<b>Total Afghan National Army</b>	<b>\$1,257,178</b>	<b>\$994,147</b>	<b>\$1,110,234</b>
<b>Budget Activity 7, Afghan National Police (ANP)</b>			
Sustainment	384,398	392,890	440,628
Infrastructure	6,135	448	0
Equipment and Transportation	13,440	28,028	38,551
Training and Operations	35,274	26,924	38,152
<b>Total Afghan National Police</b>	<b>\$439,248</b>	<b>\$448,380</b>	<b>\$517,331</b>
<b>Budget Activity 8, Afghan Air Force (AAF)</b>			
Sustainment	555,856	537,764	562,056
Infrastructure	3,439	--	0
Equipment and Transportation	56,275	45,983	26,600
Training and Operations	373,253	234,304	169,684
<b>Total Afghan Air Force</b>	<b>\$988,825</b>	<b>\$818,051</b>	<b>\$758,340</b>
<b>Budget Activity 9, Afghan Special Security Forces (ASSF)</b>			
Sustainment	305,677	597,904	685,176
Infrastructure	9,914	1,532	0
Equipment and Transportation	71,981	18,688	78,982
Training and Operations	27,153	168,909	177,767
<b>Total Afghan Special Security Forces</b>	<b>\$414,726</b>	<b>\$787,033</b>	<b>\$941,925</b>
<b>Total Afghan National Defense and Security Forces</b>	<b>\$3,099,978</b>	<b>\$3,047,612</b>	<b>\$3,327,830</b>

Source: OSD Comptroller, FY2022 Budget Justification Data,

[https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2022/FY2022\\_ASFF\\_Justification\\_Book.pdf](https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2022/FY2022_ASFF_Justification_Book.pdf).

## **The Military Side of the “Hole in Government,” Strategic Jingoism; and Lack of Planning, Effectiveness Measures, and Conditionality**

It should also be stressed that any adequate assessment of the war must fully assess the role of allied powers – and the cost to them in blood and dollars – and not just focus on the United States. The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) that existed from December 2001 to December 2014 and the NATO Resolute Support Mission (RSM) that followed from the end of 2014 to the present played a critical role in the war.

As **Figure Thirty** shows, ISAF had over 130,000 troops at its peak, including a total of 51 U.S. and NATO nations – and 43,000 of these troops were allied. Allies also provided their share of reducing forces after 2014: 42 allied countries provided over 32,700 troops. A total of 39 allied countries provided RSM with 6,372 personnel out of 13,199 when it replaces ISAF. A total of 38 allied countries provided RSM with 8,551 military personnel out of 16,551 in February 2020, when the Trump administration announced its deadline for withdrawal. And, 38 allied countries still provided over 8,000 military personnel in February 2021.

It is unclear exactly how many of these forces will withdraw, but the SIGAR report for the second quarter of 2021 notes that,<sup>31</sup>

NATO Resolute Support (RS) informed SIGAR this quarter that Coalition forces have been reducing their footprint in Afghanistan in concert with U.S. forces. As of June 12, 2021, some U.S. capabilities shifted to an “over-the- horizon location.” Other Coalition forces also withdrew, with Germany and Italy ending their Afghanistan missions in the last week of June, the United Kingdom announcing the end of their mission July 8, and Australia announcing on July 11 that their last personnel had left Afghanistan “in recent weeks.” At least 16 smaller contingents reportedly withdrew earlier in June or May.

Several allied and strategic partners played a significant independent role in ISAF regional commands and/or by providing major combat units. These allies included Britain, Canada, Denmark, France, Georgia, Germany, Italy, Poland, Romania, Spain, Turkey. As **Figure Thirty** also shows, allied countries also played a major role in providing Provincial Reconstruction Teams that were supposed to create a coordinated bridge between the civil and military aid efforts.

At the same time, ISAF and RSM also faced similar planning and coordination problems in the military sector to the problems that UNAMA did in the civil sector, and allies applied different constraints to the use of their forces, used different tactics, and dealt differently in coordinating with civil aid efforts between ANDSF forces and the Afghan civil government.

The U.S. military did do more to tie together U.S. and allied military efforts than U.S. civil departments agencies did to coordinate the civil efforts, but these efforts could not bridge over the different “national constraints” affecting individual ISAF and RSM national forces.

Most official U.S. open source reporting also has its own note of jingoism. It not only ignores allied casualties and costs, it ignores the role of allied forces and the problems that arose for many allied countries in trying to project power so far from their normal operational base, in dealing with governments that limited their operations, and in dealing with different factions of Afghans and the problems in local security and police forces.

In short, the U.S. not only needs to learn from its own military experience, it needs to learn from the experience of its allies and from the role played by NATO, ISAF, and RSM. At the most basic level, it is a form of diplomatic “jingoism” to ignore the roles and sacrifices of one’s allies. It also

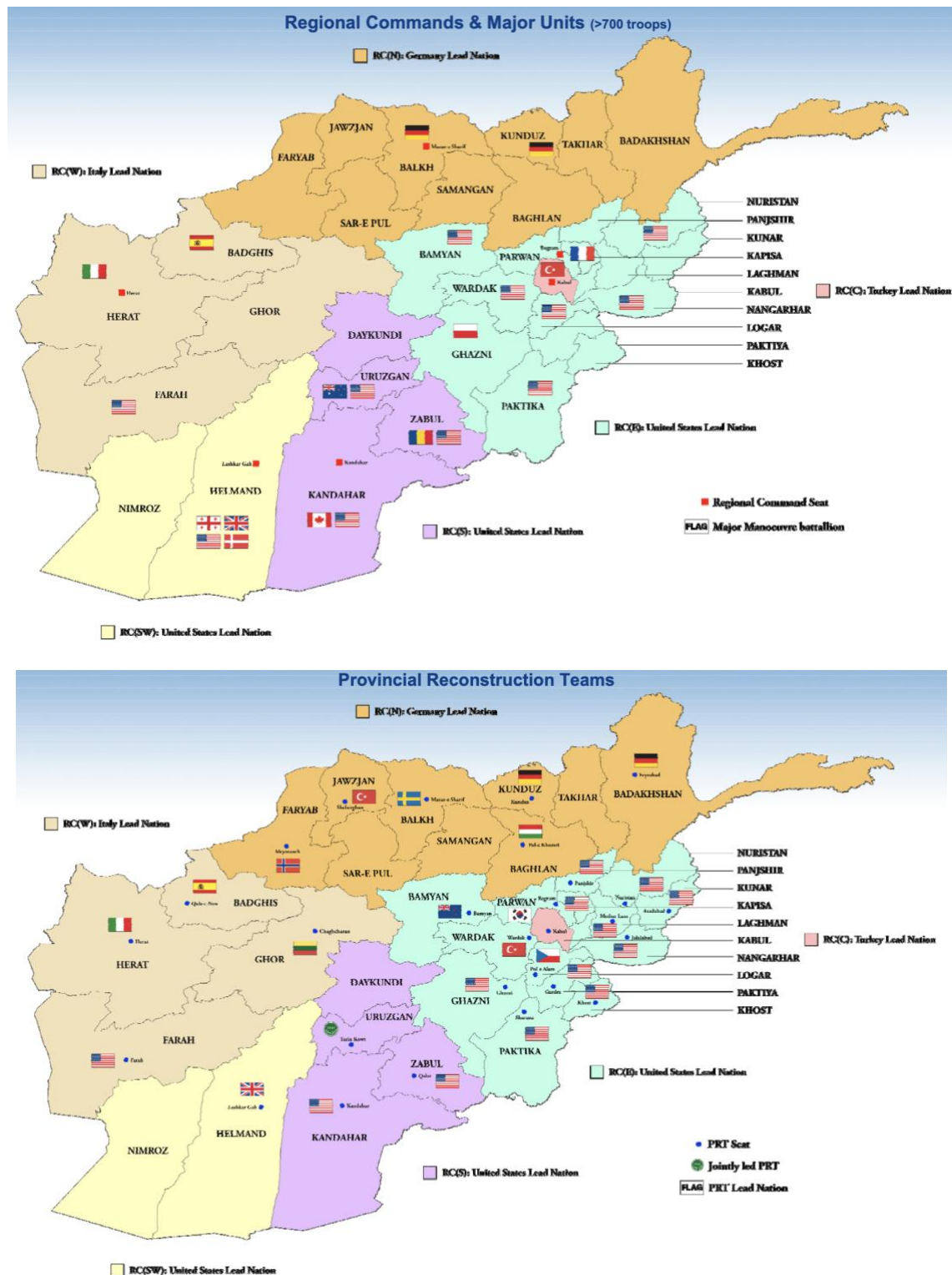
is a key way of limiting their effectiveness, understanding their limits, and understanding where allied experience and approaches to warfare may be superior.

***Figure Thirty: Allied Forces Contributing to ISAF Mission at Its Peak in January 2012 – I***

Troop Contributing Nations								
	Albania	286		Georgia	935		Norway	433
	Armenia	126		Germany	4,818		Poland	2,475
	Australia	1,550		Greece	154		Portugal	118
	Austria	3		Hungary	413		Romania	1,876
	Azerbaijan	94		Iceland	4		Singapore	39
	Bahrain	95		Ireland	7		Slovakia	329
	Belgium	520		Italy	3,952		Slovenia	79
	Bosnia & Herzegovina	55		Jordan	0		Spain	1,488
	Bulgaria	598		Republic of Korea	350		Sweden	500
	Canada*	556		Latvia	175		The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia**	163
	Croatia	312		Lithuania	237		Tonga	55
	Czech Republic	626		Luxembourg	11		Turkey	1,845
	Denmark	750		Malaysia	46		Ukraine	23
	El Salvador	24		Mongolia	114		United Arab Emirates	35
	Estonia	154		Montenegro	37		United Kingdom	9,500
	Finland	156		Netherlands	166		United States	90,000
	France	3,916		New Zealand	188		Total	130,386



***Figure Thirty: Allied Forces Contributing to ISAF Mission at Its Peak in January 2012 – II***



Source: NATO ISAF archive, [https://www.nato.int/isaf/placemats\\_archive/2012-01-06-ISAF-Placemat.pdf](https://www.nato.int/isaf/placemats_archive/2012-01-06-ISAF-Placemat.pdf); and NATO RSM, February 2021, [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2021/2/pdf/2021-02-RSM-Placemat.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2021/2/pdf/2021-02-RSM-Placemat.pdf).

## **The Lessons from Neighboring and Outside Powers**

At the same time, the analysis of the lessons of war should also focus far more on how the impact of the host country and U.S. military efforts are shaped by as well as effect neighboring and other outside states. In the case of Afghanistan, the U.S. needs to declassify enough data to allow a clear analysis of the role of Pakistan and the extent to which it did or did not cooperate with the Taliban – as well as what the effects were on the fighting. Various analysts have suggested that Pakistan provided such support and effectively hosted Taliban and other hostile forces while playing the role of any ally. Pakistan sharply denies this, and these uncertainties again illustrate the need for careful planning.

Similarly, the U.S. should analyze reports on Iran's initial cooperation with the U.S. but that this ended with President Bush's inclusion of Iran in the "axis of evil" in his 2002 State of the Union speech. The initial support of Russia as well as using bases in Central Asian states and in friendly Gulf states are equally important. The U.S. cannot project power efficiently and often effectively from continental United States. The lessons in projecting power to a host country and in using bases in other countries are another area which deserve key attention.

So does the need to create massive semi-permanent facilities like air and land bases, embassy compounds, and security zones. Doing it "our way" not only may not suit the host country, it may well lead to major unnecessary increases in cost.

In broader terms, the question also now arises as to how the U.S. should shape its strategic partnerships and major combatant commands to provide and preserve contingency capabilities for the future. Some of the emphasis on competing with China and Russia seems to ignore the possibility that they already are beginning to compete with the U.S. in many of the areas where it has dominated power projection options in the past – and that their focus on gray area, spoiler operations, arms transfers, and their use of "volunteers" and "third parties" may make it far more difficult for the U.S. to operate in key areas.

## **The Need for Strategic Triage**

All of the figures in this analysis cumulatively serve another purpose. It is not enough to examine why the war was lost; it is equally critical to examine whether it was worth winning. While no one can predict the ultimate judgments of history, it seems likely that if future historians are asked to judge the U.S. strategy in Afghanistan after the first few months needed to defeat and displace al-Qaeda, it will be that the U.S. "blundered in, blundered on, and blundered out." It never developed a coherent strategy, pursued different tactical paths with little coherence and consistency, and engaged in a long war without any clear commitment as to its goals.

The issue of whether the U.S. could have won with better strategies, tactics, and programs will almost certainly remain the subject of debate. Recognizing the rise of an insurgency from the start; dealing realistically and conditionally with the critical weaknesses in Afghan politics and governance; focusing from the start on creating self-sustainable Afghan security forces tailored to a counterinsurgency mission; and addressing popular security needs, civil hopes, and expectations at the local and District levels are all possible paths to victory.

They also, however, are uncertain paths as well, and so is the ultimate outcome of the war if any mix of these different paths was taken. U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam was followed by the defeat and collapse of South Vietnam, but then by a Vietnamese war with China and reversal that, to

some extent, made Vietnam an ally. The U.S. loss had little or no lasting impact on America's global strategic position on Cambodia and Laos – the two petty “dominos” that actually did fall along with South Vietnam – but did not produce lasting communist regimes in any real sense of the term.

Throughout the Afghan conflict, U.S. justified its role as a war against terrorism that focused largely on the possibility that a Taliban victory would make Afghanistan the center of some new form of international terrorism which would threaten the U.S., its allies and strategic partners, and its strategic interests. It is still far from clear that any such threat will emerge, or that the Taliban will support any such efforts that do not support its own local regional interests and the flow of outside support and aid.

The United States never clearly focused on the value of the objective – which is always a key element of grand strategy. Some regional experts did make cases at least through 2014 for a strong U.S. presence in Afghanistan as a way of winning a broad strategic presence in Central and South Asia and for triggering a new age of economic and political development. Claims were made about its value as a “new silk road,” route for pipelines, and the value of mining its minerals. All, however, had hopelessly positive estimates of cost-benefits, ignored key regional political and security issues, and were largely ignored or used as political cosmetics at the policy level.

Ironically, when it came to the “war” that was fought against actual terrorism, the U.S. and its allies and partners simultaneously engaged in a far broader battle against active extremist and terrorist threats from non-state actors in Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and elsewhere in the world that it largely “won.” Small amounts of U.S. civil and military aid and small cadres of special forces, intelligence personnel, and U.S. supported allied forces were able to either contain or defeat the threat. U.S. diplomatic efforts to create new international efforts to limit and defeat terrorism did produce major benefits, as did a focus on helping other states develop better civil and paramilitary approaches to defeating terrorism and extremism. To some extent, the U.S. was successful in fighting the real war against active terrorist and extremist non-state actors while it failed to win the counterinsurgency war against the Taliban.

At the same time, there were many other strategic objectives where the U.S. was not successful, and the resources used in the Afghan War might have produced real strategic benefits. The U.S. did a relatively poor job of coping with the political upheavals that occurred in the MENA region after 2011, both in military and civil terms. It invaded Iraq for all the wrong reasons, and while it was more successful (twice) in defeating a stronger set of threats from a mix of extreme Sunni resistance movements and then ISIS, it was no more successful in dealing with Iraq's civil, political, governance, and development problems than it was in Afghanistan. It never developed effective approaches to supporting reform elements in much of the Arab world, and it never had effective strategies for dealing with the civil wars in Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Somalia.

Elsewhere in the world, the U.S. had some success in dealing with different forms of terrorism in Columbia, but only marginal success in dealing with other “failed” states in Latin America, Africa, and Asia – many of which were far more important to the U.S. in strategic terms than Afghanistan. In many cases, the aid the U.S. provided to allied efforts to deal with these problems did have some value, but any review of the rankings the UN, World Bank, IMF, and a host of NGOs given on stability in the developing world in 2021 relative to 2020 is a warning that many such challenges are now far greater – again in areas of more direct strategic interest to the United States.

Accordingly, the key issue in learning from the Afghan War may not be whether the U.S. could have been far more effective in this war, but rather the fact that the U.S. never honestly came to grips with the strategic value of the mission, of Afghanistan, of its role in Central Asia, and of its other strategic interests. The U.S. engaged in a steadily growing conflict for a decade between 2001 and 2011, and then continued to fight for ten more years. During that time, it never really assessed the comparative value of the war – and its cost – relative to other uses of the same resources, its strategic alliances and partners, and the development and humanitarian impact other uses of the aid to other countries might have accomplished.

A global power must engage in analysis that Marc Genest and James Holmes have called strategic triage.<sup>32</sup> It must make hard choices in how it uses the resources it can devote to its global engagements in the ways that have the most productive results. As Hans Morgenthau pointed out nearly a decade ago, the U.S. cannot be engaged in crusades that ignore the real value of the objective and turn its international efforts into the equivalent of morality plays. There will always be more need than the U.S. can meet and more suffering than it can deal with. Like medical triage, the key objective in strategic triage is never where the wound is most serious, it is always where treatment can do the most good. Here, the judgment of history is likely to be far more predictable than any judgment as to whether the U.S. could have won. Like a poor gambler, the U.S. clearly committed far more resources than the war was worth.

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of State, “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 of America,” February 29, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> White House, “Remarks by President Biden on the Way Forward in Afghanistan,” April 14, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/04/14/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-way-forward-in-afghanistan/>.

<sup>3</sup> White House, “Remarks by President Biden on the Drawdown of U.S. Forces in Afghanistan,” July 8, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/07/08/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-drawdown-of-u-s-forces-in-afghanistan/>.

<sup>4</sup> White House, “Remarks by President Biden on the Drawdown of U.S. Forces in Afghanistan,” July 8, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/07/08/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-drawdown-of-u-s-forces-in-afghanistan/>.

<sup>5</sup> SIGAR, Quarterly Report to Congress, Second Quarter 2021, pp. 121, 130-131.

<sup>6</sup> SIGAR, Quarterly Report to Congress, Second Quarter 2021, pp. 130, 131.

<sup>7</sup> United Nations, “Letter dated 20 May 2021 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution 1988 (2011) addressed to the President of the Security Council,” *Security Council*, S/2021/486, May 20, 2021; See Secretary-General’s note to correspondents, 13 April 2021, available at <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/note-correspondents/2021-04-13/note-correspondents-joint-statement-co-conveners-of-the-istanbul-conference-the-afghanistan-peace-process>.

<sup>8</sup> SIGAR, Quarterly Report to Congress, Second Quarter 2021, pp. 54.

<sup>9</sup> SIGAR, Quarterly Report to Congress, Second Quarter 2021, pp. 56, 131.

<sup>10</sup> CIA, “Infant Mortality Rate,” *World Factbook*, 2021, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/field/infant-mortality-rate/>.

<sup>11</sup> SIGAR, Quarterly Report to Congress, Second Quarter 2021, pp. 122.

<sup>12</sup> Asia Foundation, *Afghanistan in 2019, A Survey of the Afghan People*, <https://asiafoundation.org/2019/12/03/2019-survey-of-the-afghan-people-reveals-concerns-on-peace-deal/>.

<sup>13</sup> Asia Foundation, “Afghanistan Flash Survey,” 2021, <https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Afghanistan-Flash-Survey-Report-2021-Wave-3-Infographics.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> SIGAR, Quarterly Report to Congress, Second Quarter 2021, pp. 51-52, 61.

<sup>15</sup> SIGAR, Quarterly Report to Congress, Second Quarter 2021, pp. 59-61.

<sup>16</sup> SIGAR, Quarterly Report to Congress, Second Quarter 2021, pp. 60-61.

<sup>17</sup> GAO, *Afghanistan Security: Afghan Army Growing, but Additional Trainers Needed; Long-term Costs Not Determined*, GAO 11-66, January 2011.

<sup>18</sup> GAO, *Afghanistan Security: Afghan Army Growing, but Additional Trainers Needed; Long-term Costs Not Determined*, GAO 11-66, January 2011.

<sup>19</sup> GAO, *Afghanistan Security: Afghan Army Growing, but Additional Trainers Needed; Long-term Costs Not Determined*, GAO 11-66, January 2011.

<sup>20</sup> United Nations, “Letter dated 20 May 2021 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution 1988 (2011) addressed to the President of the Security Council,” UN S/202/486, June 1, 2021.

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<sup>21</sup> Bill Roggio, “Analysis: US military assessment of Taliban control of Afghan districts is flawed” November 2016, *Long War Journal*, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/11/analysis-us-military-assessment-of-taliban-control-of-afghan-districts-is-flawed.php>.

<sup>22</sup> Bill Roggio, “Analysis: US military assessment of Taliban control of Afghan districts is flawed” November 2016, *Long War Journal*, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/11/analysis-us-military-assessment-of-taliban-control-of-afghan-districts-is-flawed.php>.

<sup>23</sup> Bill Roggio, “Mapping Taliban Contested and Controlled Districts in Afghanistan,” July 2021, *Long War Journal*, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/mapping-taliban-control-in-afghanistan>

<sup>24</sup> “Interactive Map: Taliban Control In Afghanistan Then And Now,” Gandhara, <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/taliban-control-afghanistan/31360050.html>.

<sup>25</sup> United Nations, “Letter dated 20 May 2021 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution 1988 (2011) addressed to the President of the Security Council,” UN S/202/486, June 1, 2021.

<sup>26</sup> “Afghan Civilians,” *Cost of War*, Watson Institute, Brown University, <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/costs/human/civilians/afghan>.

<sup>27</sup> “Afghanistan war: What has the conflict cost the US?” BBC, July 6, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-47391821>.

<sup>28</sup> SIGAR, Quarterly Report to Congress, Second Quarter 2021, pp. 62.

<sup>29</sup> SIGAR, Quarterly Report to Congress, Second Quarter 2021.

<sup>30</sup> SIGAR, Quarterly Report to Congress, Second Quarter 2021, pp. 29.

<sup>31</sup> (SIGAR, Quarterly Report to Congress, Second Quarter 2021, pp. 50.

<sup>32</sup> For two important additional analyses of this issue, see Marc Genest and James Holmes, “Welcome to the Age of Strategic Triage,” *The National Interest*, August 23, 2016, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/welcome-the-age-strategic-triage-17450?nopaging=1>; and James Holmes, “Time For Strategic Triage In Afghanistan,” *19FortyFive*, <https://www.19fortyfive.com/2021/04/time-for-strategic-triage-in-afghanistan/>.