

Afghanistan in 2015

A Year of Fragmentation

ABSTRACT

Hopes for national unity and stability in Afghanistan were dashed in 2015 as the government lost control of significant territory to insurgents. Kunduz City fell briefly to the Taliban, the first major city to fall to them since 2001. The ANSF experienced heavy casualties, at a time when nearly one-fifth of the country's districts were either controlled or heavily contested by the Taliban.

KEYWORDS: Afghanistan, Ghani, Kunduz, Taliban, ISIS

INTRODUCTION

Hopes for national unity and stability in Afghanistan were dashed in 2015 as the government lost control of significant territory to insurgents. As 2014 came to an end, a new National Unity Government (NUG) had come to power bringing together staunch political rivals who both had contested the 2014 presidential election as the result of massive fraud.¹ One of the two main rivals for power, Ashraf Ghani, an anthropologist who spent decades outside of Afghanistan working in academia and the World Bank, was sworn in as president in September 2014. His rival, former Northern Alliance leader Abdullah Abdullah, became the Chief Executive Officer (CEO). The NUG sought to differentiate itself from the capriciousness of previous President Hamid Karzai and ring in a positive era of self-sufficiency and optimism. Central to this wish was the hope that the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) could withstand the end of NATO-supported

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1. See Jennifer Brick Murtaazashvili, "Afghanistan in 2014: Year of Transition," *Asian Survey* 55:1 (January/February 2015): 21–32.

Asian Survey, Vol. 56, Number 1, pp. 187–198. ISSN 0004-4687, electronic ISSN 1533-838X. © 2016 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, <http://www.ucpress.edu/journals.php?p=reprints>. DOI: 10.1525/AS.2016.56.1.187.

combat operations, which ceased at the end of 2014, and defend the country. By the end of 2015, the fragmentation of the security situation and the NUG were embodied in the fall of Kunduz City to the Taliban, who controlled it for several days in October, the first major city to fall to the Taliban since 2001. The ANSF experienced heavy casualties, at a time when nearly one-fifth of the country's districts were either controlled or heavily contested by the Taliban.

NATIONAL (DIS)UNITY GOVERNMENT

Upon coming to power, Ghani took symbolic first steps to show both domestic and international audiences how his style of leadership differed from the reclusiveness of Karzai. He sought to hit the ground running with a series of bold policy proposals, especially with regards to foreign policy (see below). He also sought to distinguish his own image from that of his predecessor by travelling frequently outside his security umbrella, walking through the streets, talking to average citizens, and most important, visiting wounded ANSF soldiers. These symbolic gestures did not translate into policy success. By September 2015, Ghani's approval rating showed a decline from 60% a year before to just below 20%.

Although Ghani claimed to be the winner in the fraudulent 2014 presidential run-off election between himself and Abdullah, most of his electoral success resulted from his ability to mobilize fellow Pashtuns in the east of Afghanistan. Although many Pashtuns, particularly his own Ghilzai Pashtuns, supported him, they did so because of fears that a non-Pashtun, such as Abdullah Abdullah, would win the election. Having spent decades overseas, Ghani did not have a loyal constituency. By the end of his first year in office, several mujahideen leaders were creating new political movements calling for Ghani to make good on promises he made when he created the NUG. These included holding a national Loya Jirga (council of notables) that would help redraft a new Afghan constitution, as well as the implementation of elections for district councils.

Ghani promised the international community and his citizens a capable government that would root out corruption. He said he would create a new cabinet, with cabinet members personally vetted by the president, within 45 days, but independent monitoring agencies showed the government had made little progress by the end of 2015 in improving budget transparency

and fighting corruption.² After firing the entire cabinet and all subnational government officials in 2014, Ghani could not fill important cabinet-level positions because his nominations had little support in parliament. These included three nominees for minister of defense. During a trip to Herat Province in late December, Ghani famously fired almost the entire provincial staff, including 15 district police chiefs and eight district governors. Ghani's stated purpose was to root out the corruption he said infected government agencies.³ But replacing these officials took time because all of the appointments had to be approved jointly by Ghani and Abdullah, resulting in a vacuum of government authority across the country. At the end of 2015, only 25 of 34 provinces had new governors.⁴

Problems in Kunduz Province served as an illustration of how the president's ambitious efforts backfired. In one of his first gubernatorial appointments, Ghani appointed Mohammad Omer Safi along with a handpicked team for most provincial-level offices, a model he sought to roll out in other provinces. Just a few weeks into office, Safi began copying Ghani's leadership style by making unannounced visits to government offices to check attendance and refusing demands from elders, believing that such actions would show he was free of corruption.⁵ The unpopularity of this new handpicked government in Kunduz Province was a major factor contributing to the government's loss of control of Kunduz City in November 2015 (see below). Although both domestic and international critics of Karzai chided his patronage, alleged corruption, and willingness to make informal political deals with opponents as well as allies, Ghani's inability to navigate personal relationships with political allies and foes alike, left him isolated. One of his own advisors admitted that he is known to "fire more people than he appoints" and also for a style as a micromanager that alienated many in the government.⁶

2. Paul Shinkman, "New President, Same Problems in Afghanistan," *US News & World Report*, October 23, 2015.

3. Ghafoor Saboori, "Ghani Sacks Officials in Herat Visit," *Tolo News*, December 28, 2014.

4. Christine Roehrs and Qayoom Soroush, "Young Technocrats Taking Over," *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, September 18, 2015, <<https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/young-technocrats-taking-over-who-are-the-new-afghan-governors-and-what-can-they-achieve/>>.

5. Margherita Stancati, "Afghan President Launches Effort to Overhaul Local Government," *Wall Street Journal*, January 6, 2015.

6. Nathan Hodge, "Afghan Policy-Wonk-Turned-President Visits U.S.," *Wall Street Journal*, March 20, 2015.

Kabul Bank, one of the country's largest commercial banks, which almost collapsed in 2010 as a result of a massive fraud that involved the theft by insiders close to President Karzai of USD 935 million, was another symbol of hopes dashed. At that time, the crisis almost crushed Afghanistan's financial sector as it sparked a run on most banks. As a candidate Ghani said he would reopen the Kabul Bank investigation to restore faith in the judiciary and other public institutions. Ghani kept his word; shortly after the president came to power, a judge tripled the sentences of two former heads of the bank, including increasing a five-year sentence to 15 years for former CEO Khalilullah Frozi, who was convicted of stealing at least USD 810 million. To the shock of the country, Frozi appeared at a November 2015 press conference in Kabul as a partner in a \$100 million development project sponsored by the Ministry of Urban Affairs. After public outrage, the government cancelled its partnership with Frozi. Several of Ghani's closest advisors continued to defend Frozi's participation in the business deal.⁷ The public was also shocked to learn that, despite promises of a crackdown on corruption, Frozi was only spending nights in prison.

President Ghani appeared to have little success in maintaining unity among his government officials. Early into his administration, he sought to centralize authority. He strengthened the Office of Administrative Affairs (which was the Politburo under the Afghan Communist government in the 1980s), an office he promised to eliminate during his election campaign, creating a parallel government within the executive branch and allowing him to sidestep his own CEO.⁸ The fragmentation of the NUG also manifested itself with First Vice President and ethnic Uzbek General Abdul Rashid Dostum, a former warlord. Leaked reports indicate that since joining Ghani's ticket—and bringing much of the coveted Uzbek vote—Dostum was left out of important decisions.⁹ In apparent response, Dostum raised his own militias in the north to fight the Taliban, as he felt Ghani's government was not doing enough there.

7. Mujib Mashal, "Afghan President Calls Off Business Deal With Banker Convicted of Fraud," *The New York Times*, November 7, 2015.

8. Azam Ahmed, "Afghan Leader Said to Be Centralizing Power as Unity Government Plan Stalls," *The New York Times*, March 20, 2015.

9. Azam Ahmed, "Afghan First Vice President, an Ex-Warlord, Fumes on the Sidelines," *The New York Times*, March 18, 2015.

THE TALIBAN, ISIS, AND DETERIORATING GOVERNMENT CONTROL

On September 28, 2015 the Taliban took control of Kunduz City in northern Afghanistan. Although the ANSF was able to retake the city a few days later, the city's fall illustrated the strength of the Taliban and the frailty of the government and the ANSF. To retake Kunduz, the ANSF received substantial support from U.S. Special Forces. This support led to one of the deadliest incidents of civilian casualties resulting from U.S. action in Afghanistan. On October 3, the U.S. launched a deadly airstrike on a Doctors Without Borders hospital in Kunduz, killing 30 medical staff and patients. The U.S. said the attack was a mistake and that it targeted the building, not knowing it was a hospital, at the behest of the ANSF, which did not deny the allegations. A senior Afghan official said the bombing made him "glad" because the hospital had treated hundreds of Taliban soldiers. It had previously been a target of ANSF assaults. Doctors Without Borders issued a scathing report detailing how it frantically telephoned to put a stop to the bombardment and insisted that no fighting was occurring in or around the hospital at the time of the attack. The U.S. military admitted the targeting of the hospital was an error but was conducting its own investigation to determine culpability for the tragedy.

The immediate causes of the fall of Kunduz appear to have been a new local government completely out of touch with its citizens (for reasons discussed above) along with failed government security policies that drove the population into the arms of the Taliban. Among these security policies were government support for local militias referred to as the Afghan Local Police (ALP) that consisted of informal groups formally sanctioned by the Afghan government to provide community security. The ALP model was based on the realization that government security forces were struggling to operate at the same level of legitimacy that some non-state militias had acquired in protecting their own communities. The ALP was based on an idealized notion of tribal or community self-policing: the *arbakai*. Historically, *arbakai* were small-scale militia groups that protected communities from intrusions by outsiders. They were particularly common in efforts to protect pasture land, forests or other natural resources. The ALP was a far cry from self-organized, spontaneously arising *arbakai*. Instead, the ALP fighters received stipends as high as USD 200/month to fight the Taliban, and became

notorious for human rights abuses, rape and even sexual abuse of children. Rather than protecting the rule of law or even custom, these groups emerged as above the law. In Kunduz, citizens had long complained about abuses by these militias.¹⁰ When Ghani came to power, he promised to disband them, but quickly retracted this policy, realizing that without them, the government would suffer heavy territorial losses.

The fall of Kunduz marked 2015 as a landmark year for the Taliban: they controlled an estimated 35 out of Afghanistan's 398 districts and seriously contested another 35.¹¹ Remarkably, Taliban gains emerged in unlikely provinces in the north outside traditional Taliban strongholds, such as Badakhshan, Baghlan, Kunduz and Takhar Provinces. The increased tempo of Taliban advances, along with the decline of U.S. forces in the country, yielded heavy ANSF and civilian losses. The U.N. reported a 24% increase in civilian casualties for the first half of the year, compared with 2014. At the end of the year, the ANSF sustained enormous casualties in a battle for control of Helmand Province in southern Afghanistan, the entirety of which appeared to be close to falling to the Taliban.

TALKING WITH THE TALIBAN?

In July 2015, Afghan officials announced that Mullah Mohammad Omar, the erstwhile leader of the Taliban movement, had died two years earlier in a hospital in the Pakistani city of Quetta. Omar was one of the founders of the Taliban movement and ran the government of Afghanistan (as *amir al-momenin*, "commander of the faithful") from 1996 until late 2001, when the U.S. forces, together with Afghan opposition commanders, toppled his government. His announced cause of death was tuberculosis. Omar had not been seen in public for more than a decade. The last known voice recording of him was allegedly produced in 2006, although the authenticity of the tape is debated.¹²

10. Anand Gopal, "America Failed Kunduz Long Before It Bombed a Hospital," *Vanity Fair*, October 16, 2015, <<http://www.vanityfair.com/news/2015/10/kunduz-hospital-bombing-militias-afghanistan>>.

11. Sarah Almukhtar and Karen Yourish, "14 Years After U.S. Invasion, the Taliban Are Back in Control of Large Parts of Afghanistan," *New York Times*, September 29, 2015. <<http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/09/29/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-maps.html>>.

12. Rod Nordland and Joseph Goldstein, "Taliban Leader Mullah Omar Died in 2013, Afghans Declare," *The New York Times*, July 29, 2015.

Although many Taliban field commanders had long suspected Omar's death, the official announcement sent shockwaves through Taliban circles as well as the international community. The fact that the Taliban leadership verified the Afghan government account confirmed long-held suspicions that the Pakistan government knew of Omar's whereabouts, despite Islamabad's official claims that it was not harboring Taliban leaders.

The announcement of his death derailed Taliban peace talks with the Afghan government, coming just days before Taliban and Afghan government leaders were preparing to have a second official meeting in Pakistan. The first formal introductory round of talks, held in early July just outside Islamabad, were endorsed by Omar's deputy, Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour and were to be followed up two weeks later after the conclusion of Ramadan. The legitimacy of the talks was contested by Taliban factions that held to Omar's stated position that the Taliban should never negotiate with the Afghan government while foreign troops were present in the country. Mansour was locked in a struggle for power with other Taliban commanders, but relied on his credentials as a confidant of Omar to cement his position within the movement.¹³ The revelations of Omar's death—combined with its long concealment by the Taliban leadership—exposed fractures among top Taliban leaders and led to the cancellation of scheduled dialogue.

Official Taliban channels announced Mansour as the new leader, intensifying internal power struggles between him and supporters of Omar's son Yaqub and other figures within the movement (Yaqub later announced his support for Mansour). The announcement also came at a crucial time for the Taliban: it was making important military strides in the south and in unexpected places in the north, but these were occurring when the strength was also growing in Afghanistan of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Although Omar declared himself to be an *amir* of all Muslims, ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared himself to be the caliph of all Muslims—meaning he outranked Omar.¹⁴

13. Mujib Mashal, "Taliban Were Authorized to Talk, Afghan Envoys Say," *The New York Times*, July 9, 2015.

14. Matthew Rosenberg, "Around an Invisible Leader, Taliban Power Shifts," *The New York Times*, December 28, 2014.

Very early in 2015, ISIS had begun to emerge in Afghanistan under the banner of the Islamic State in the Khorasan,¹⁵ not as a new group but as a splinter group of the Taliban among those concerned about the long absence of Mullah Omar.¹⁶ By the end of the year, commanders affiliated with ISIS contested several important districts in Nangarhar Province, along Afghanistan's border with Pakistan. ISIS brought with it its trademark brutality. In Nangarhar, members videotaped the execution of tribal elders who were placed in trenches and killed by igniting a long fuse of explosives around them.¹⁷

The death of Omar not only fueled the growth of ISIS in Afghanistan, but also created new splinter groups among the Taliban, an organization that had maintained extraordinary unity during the past fifteen years. One Taliban splinter faction, calling itself the High Council of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, chose Mullah Muhammad Rasul as its formal leader and held a series of brazen open-air rallies in November, including one of around 6,000 supporters in Shindad District, Herat Province. In these meetings, Rasul hinted that the splinter group might support ISIS.¹⁸ The second half of 2015 featured several deadly clashes between Mansour and Rasoul's factions that killed scores of Taliban fighters. As the Taliban fragmented, so too did possibilities for peace talks with the Afghan government.

The year also featured a rise in tensions between Sunnis and the Shia minority, the Hazaras. In southern Wardak Province, up to 45 Hazara soldiers were killed—many beheaded—as they defended Pashtun-dominated areas. Hazara politicians accused the government of failing to assist in their rescue when many Pashtun units were nearby. In November, a group of nine Hazara civilians were decapitated in the southern province of Zabul. Among them were a woman and a nine-year old girl, Shukria. The killings were carried out by Afghan groups linked to ISIS and intended to inflame sectarian violence. This violence mobilized Hazaras and other Afghans into some of the largest protests seen in recent years. Up to 30,000 people marched to the

15. The term Khorasan has significance as an early Islamic territory that constituted parts of present-day Iran, Central Asia and Afghanistan.

16. Taimoor Shah and Joseph Goldstein, "Taliban Fissures in Afghanistan Are Seen as an Opening for ISIS," *The New York Times*, January 21, 2015.

17. Mujib Mashal, "Afghan ISIS Branch Makes Inroads in Battle Against Taliban," *The New York Times*, October 13, 2015.

18. RFE/RL. "Afghan Taliban Splinter Group's New Chief Backs Islamic State 'Brothers' — But Only Abroad." *Radio Free Afghanistan*, November 8, 2015, sec. Afghanistan. <<http://www.rferl.org/content/afghanistan-taliban-faction-rasul-is-al-qaeda-islamic-state/27352225.html>>.

presidential palace in Kabul demanding justice and increased security. Simultaneous marches held around the country demanded changes in government and exposed its weakness and unpopularity.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS: THE LONG AMERICAN AFFAIR

Shortly after Afghan forces lost control of Kunduz, U.S. President Barack Obama—in a major policy reversal—said that he would keep up to 5,500 troops in Afghanistan into 2017, ending his earlier plans to bring all troops home by that January. The U.S. mission was unchanged: training and advising the ANSF. The U.S. would maintain counterterrorism assets, including drones and special forces, in the country. Obama used the opportunity to laud Ghani as a strong partner and praised the bravery of the ANSF. Under the plan, the U.S. would retain three long-term air bases in Afghanistan. Ghani welcomed Obama's decision.

Ghani's foreign policy seemed just as confused as his domestic policy. Just a month after coming to power, he boldly embarked on a process to create peace with Pakistan. In his first major foreign trip after being sworn in in 2014, Ghani travelled to Islamabad with hopes of resetting relations. For many years, Afghan officials blamed Islamabad for supporting the Taliban and other insurgent groups, while Islamabad blamed Kabul for supporting insurgents in Pakistan. Pakistan's resolve to fight the Taliban strengthened after a terrorist attack on a school in Peshawar in December 2014 killed 130 schoolchildren.

Ghani's initial outreach to Pakistan was a drastic change in strategy from that of Karzai, who deeply distrusted Pakistan. In exchange for assistance in achieving peace with the Taliban, Ghani promised Pakistan cooperation, which included suspending arms deals with India. Ghani believed that having peaceful relations with Pakistan was particularly important in light of Obama's initial promise to withdraw all U.S. troops.¹⁹ This outreach ended in humiliation. Talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban collapsed when it was revealed that Islamabad was likely aware of Mullah Omar's death. In August 2015, a wave of Taliban car bombs killed 57 people in Kabul. Ghani accused the Pakistani government of allowing the Taliban

19. Moeed Yusuf and Scott Smith, "Ashraf Ghani's Pakistan Outreach" (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, July 2015).

safe haven—including training camps for suicide bombers and bomb factories—in Pakistan from where they launched the attacks. Ghani also accused Pakistan of sending a “message of war” rather than peace. There was yet another reversal in December after Ghani again sought to revive relations by travelling to Islamabad for a peace conference. This visit triggered the immediate resignation of the head of Afghanistan’s main intelligence agency, Rahmatullah Nabil, who protested the outreach to Pakistan, which he believed was still heavily supporting the Taliban.

SOCIETY IN TATTERS: #IAMFARKHUNDA

Despite promises by the government that women’s rights would not back-track in the shadow of the end of NATO combat operations, several key events illustrated the fragility of women’s gains in Afghanistan. In March, a 27-year-old woman, Farkhunda Malikzada, studying Islamic law visited a shrine in central Kabul where she argued with a mullah about the selling of charms in the mosque, something she regarded as superstitious and un-Islamic. During the argument, the shrine caretaker accused Farkhunda of burning the Koran, causing a mob to gather. With police standing idly by, she was kicked and beaten, and run over by a car before being stoned and set on fire. Video of this attack went viral on social media. Many Afghan civil society activists were shocked, while some religious scholars initially defended her killing. Days later, thousands of women and men marched through Kabul chanting “We are all Farkhunda,” and demanded justice for her death. On Twitter, Afghan social activists showed solidarity by using the hashtag #IAMFARHKUNDA. Many of the street protesters painted their faces red—to mirror the widely broadcast image of Farhkhunda’s last bloody moments as she pleaded for her life.²⁰ Despite initial government support for the mullahs, the Ghani administration condemned the killing and charged 49 persons—including 11 police officers—as accomplices to murder. Four were sentenced to death. The government declared her a martyr.

In October, a group of Afghan men in central Ghor Province stoned to death a 19-year-old woman, Rukhshana, accusing her of adultery for allegedly

20. Zarghuna Kargar, “Farkhunda: The Making of a Martyr,” *BBC News*, August 11, 2015, <<http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-33810338>>.

trying to escape an arranged marriage and attempting to elope with another man. A video of the attack was posted on the Internet. In September, another young couple in Ghor was sentenced to 1,000 lashes for adultery. Unlike the attack on Rukhshana, whose stoning was blamed on the Taliban, the lashing was ordered and implemented by a government judge and even supported by the female governor of the province.²¹

VOTING WITH THEIR FEET

The end of the year was marked by a massive exodus of Afghans. The sheer number of Afghans seeking to leave the country is a true measure of the failure of efforts by both the government of Afghanistan and the international community to rebuild the country. Although there are enormous challenges in calculating the number of Afghans who have fled, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimated that over 120,000 Afghans left the country between January and October 2015,²² with more than 76,000 migrating to Europe. This made Afghans the second largest group, after Syrians, to arrive in Europe in 2015.²³ In response to the influx, the German government sent back thousands of Afghans, arguing that many Afghan migrants came from stable regions. Some German officials suggested that because the German government is supporting the development of Afghanistan, those fleeing should instead remain in Afghanistan and help rebuild the country.²⁴

A common land route out of Afghanistan is through neighboring Iran. In a shocking revelation, *Der Spiegel* reported that the Iranian government used Afghan migrants captured in Iran en route to Europe as mercenary fighters in Syria, under the supervision of Iranian military officers, to help prop up the

21. Sune Engel Rasmussen, "Afghan Woman Stoned to Death for Alleged Adultery," *The Guardian*, November 3, 2015.

22. Tamim Hamid, "120,000 Afghans Seek Asylum in 44 Countries: UNHCR." *Tolo News*, October 25, 2015. <<http://www.tolonews.com/en/afghanistan/22048-120000-afghans-seek-asylum-in-44-countries-unhcr>>.

23. Associated Press, "Afghanistan to Accept Its Citizens Deported From Germany," November 2, 2015.

24. RFE/RL, "Germany To Send Back Thousands Of Afghan, Balkans Migrants," October 29, 2015, <<http://www.rferl.org/content/germany-to-send-back-thousands-afghan-balkans-migrants/27332739.html>>.

government of Bashar Assad.²⁵ Thousands of Afghans, mainly Shia Hazaras, have been detained in Iran as they sought to transit through the country.

CONCLUSION

Afghans were enormously hopeful at the beginning of 2015, with many believing that a new unity government could unite political foes and bring prosperity and stability. Many international observers believed that as a technocrat, President Ghani would usher in a new era of political competence and management. The year ended with a sense of despair as the government struggled to maintain a grip on large swaths of territory, leading many of the country's best and brightest to leave Afghanistan. The NUG promised Afghans a Loya Jirga by 2016, which could lead to a new constitution. If this promise is not kept, the very thin political foundation upon which the current government sits may crumble.

25. Christoph Reuter, "Syria's Mercenaries: The Afghans Fighting Assad's War," *Spiegel Online*, May 11, 2015, <<http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/afghan-mercenaries-fighting-for-assad-and-stuck-in-syria-a-1032869.html>>.