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## The war in Afghanistan

# A bloody year of transition

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A resurgent Taliban is winning territory, but all is not lost

Jan 9th 2016 | KABUL AND ISLAMABAD | From the print edition



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Police patrol, Helmand-style

IT IS just over a year since NATO formally ended its combat mission in Afghanistan. It left behind 13,000-odd soldiers to “train, advise and assist” Afghan security forces taking the lead in the fight against the Taliban. Of the foreign troops, America has provided about half (with a further 3,000 deployed on counter-terrorism operations against what remains of al-Qaeda). Twelve months on, the results of the so-called “transition” look grim. Both Afghanistan’s political condition and its security have sharply deteriorated.

Determined to exploit the departure of Western forces, in 2015 the Taliban maintained their usual spring offensive much longer into the winter than in the past. The insurgents now control more territory than at any time since American forces kicked the Taliban out of power in 2001. Among recent blows were the short-lived but still shocking fall of the northern city of Kunduz to the Taliban in September; a raid last month on the south’s Kandahar airport, one of the most heavily defended bases in the country, that killed at

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least 50 people; and the deaths of six Americans near Bagram air base on December 21st.

Worst of all has been the steady erosion of government control in Helmand province in the south. It had been recaptured from the Taliban in 2009-11, at considerable cost, including American and British casualties. Recently the Taliban have closed in from the south and north towards the provincial capital, Lashkar Gah. Of 13 districts in Helmand, five, including the key districts of Musa Qala and Sangin, are now controlled by the Taliban, with another five or more being contested. This week American special forces in the Nad Ali district came under heavy fire; one man was killed. Retaking Helmand, the heart of Afghanistan's opium country, is a priority for the Taliban, who desperately want the money that drug-peddling generates. Out of nearly 400 districts across Afghanistan, the Taliban controls a tenth and contests another tenth.

The growing intensity of the fighting is taking its toll on the 352,000-strong Afghan army and police. Last year they sustained 28% more losses than in 2014: 16,000 casualties, about 7,000 of them fatal. Some 6,500 civilians are also thought to have died. Insurgent casualties have shot up, too. The current Taliban fighting strength is believed to be between 40,000 and 60,000.

The backdrop to the escalating violence is a largely dysfunctional government in Kabul, the failure of diplomatic attempts last year to start a peace process, splits within the Taliban and America's lack of a long-term strategy for Afghanistan.

The national-unity government that emerged 15 months ago has in many ways been an improvement on its predecessor, led by the erratic Hamid Karzai. President Ashraf Ghani and the "chief executive", Abdullah Abdullah, the runner-up in a disputed election, get on reasonably well. In security matters, they welcome Western support. At home they have taken useful steps to curb corruption. But the fight for key government posts among rival supporters and ethnic groups has meant rudderless ministries and provinces without governors. Not least, the post of permanent defence minister still remains vacant.

In government, a division appears to be opening up over Mr Ghani's attempts to engage Pakistan. Many Afghans have long considered their southern neighbour to be a destabilising force. Even today it plays host to Taliban leaders. Mr Ghani wants Pakistan to help push the Taliban to the negotiating table, thus paving the way for peace and economic reconstruction. But after he received red-carpet treatment in Islamabad, the Pakistani capital, in early December, his chief of the national security directorate resigned in disgust (though possibly before he was pushed out for a string of security failures). A new "Protection and Stability Council", headed by a former warlord, Abdul Rasoul Sayyaf, has been set up as a rallying point against Mr Ghani's emolence towards Pakistan.



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head of the army, General Raheel Sharif, that they will urge the Taliban to kill less and negotiate more, there is scant sign of progress. That may be because the spymasters of Pakistan's "deep state" still prefer a weak, chaotic Afghanistan, or because Pakistan, itself locked in an existential fight with the Taliban's sister outfit, the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, may not have the control it once had.

Meanwhile, a power struggle has been under way within the Afghan Taliban. When Mr Ghani's government declared last July that the Taliban's leader, Mullah Omar, had died in a Karachi hospital over two years earlier, it triggered a challenge to the authority of Mullah Omar's deputy and de facto successor, Mullah Akhtar Mansour. While Omar was believed to be still alive, Mullah Mansour was able to crush dissent, while reportedly earning a fortune from the opium trade. But his part in the cover-up of the leader's death, his perceived closeness to Pakistan and his interest in opening up a dialogue with the Afghan government before the news about Omar broke have all undermined his legitimacy. Others have challenged his leadership, while in some pockets Islamic State (IS) has been able to poach Taliban fighters and take root. To show that he is neither going soft on the government in Kabul nor a tool of Pakistan's military spy agency, Mullah Mansour has had to redouble the ferocity of the insurgency. And so long as the Taliban think they are winning, they have no incentive to talk peace.

Yet even after the departure in the past year of what Michael O'Hanlon of the Brookings Institution in Washington calls 100,000 of "the world's best soldiers", the Taliban have not made the breakthrough they were hoping for. Their recent victories in Helmand have been small. They rule over a mere 5% more of the country's population than before. They threaten few cities of any size. And despite heavy losses, Afghan forces are mostly holding their own. It is, says Mr O'Hanlon, a "stalemate with a slight edge to the insurgency".

Meanwhile, President Barack Obama has been forced to break his ill-considered promise to remove all American troops from Afghanistan by the end of the year. Yet, to the dismay of his military advisers, he is still talking about cutting the force there to 5,500 before he leaves office in January 2017. That decision too is quite likely to be reversed.

Mr Obama needs to consider how to help the Afghan government get through what is certain to be another tough year. He should give Afghan forces air support of the kind which, in Iraq, government forces are getting in the fight against IS. And, Mr O'Hanlon says, he should expand the training mission by providing another 3,000 mentors to work with the army. One reason for the setbacks in Helmand province is that there are too few trainers.

What America cannot do is to improve the atrocious local governance that creates the grievances the Taliban exploit. At best, stabilising the security situation will allow more time for the well-intentioned Mr Ghani and Mr Abdullah to get their act together. That may seem a faint hope, but it is much better than the alternatives.

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