

# Monthly Analysis

December 2020

Monthly Analytical Report on the Situation in Afghanistan



QASED Strategic Research Center

## Preface

This report looks at the situation in Afghanistan in December 2020. On the political front, corruption and internal disputes, and confrontation between the Wolesi Jirga and the government, along with others were the main topics of the month. Some high ranking cases of corruption were reported this month, which also caused tensions among politicians. Also in this month, the conclusion of the first round of intra-Afghan peace talks, preparations for the second round of talks, and the status of the US-Taliban agreement were the key topics in the peace process. The first round of intra-Afghan talks concluded after three-month bargaining and both sides agreed to resume the second round on January 5, 2021. On the security front, however, the overall level of violence and casualties was lower this month than in previous months, but the targeted killings and assassinations of journalists, civil society activists and other prominent figures have attracted national and international attention. The details and analysis of these and other important issues are discussed in this report.



## Political Situation

### Corruption and Internal Disputes

Since the 2019 presidential election were marred by controversy over allegations of fraud and the two leading electoral parties eventually agreed to form a coalition government like the National Unity Government, the way was paved for internal disputes in the country once again. The government was once again divided between President Ghani and Dr. Abdullah based on a political agreement. That is why, over the past few months, there have been occasional signs of internal disputes.

In late December, some corruption cases were reported, most of them politically motivated. The source of these cases was Balkh province. Balkh is a province still under the influence of the former powerful governor of the province, Atta Mohammad Noor. Although President Ghani has been able to replace him with another governor after years of efforts.

In the last days of the month, three senators in Balkh province, who had gone there to monitor the customs revenue, were arrested on corruption charges. The National Directorate of Security (NDS) and the Attorney General's Office (AGO) said in a joint statement that intelligence had led to the arrest of three senators in a joint operation for taking \$40000 in bribes. On December 28, Balkh Governor Farhad Azimi confirmed the case at a press conference. He said the senators had travelled to Balkh as part of a delegation from Kabul to assess customs revenue in the province.

Following the case, the Afghan Attorney General's Office announced the arrest of four employees of the Ministry of Public Health on corruption charges, including a relative of the Minister of Public Health. Public Health Minister Ahmad Jawad Osmani is politically affiliated with the former Balkh governor Atta Mohammad Noor, and was introduced to the ministry by him under the political agreement.

President Ashraf Ghani has fired the Minister of Public Health following the arrest of four employees of the ministry, but the minister said he had not resigned and was not ready to leave the office. Meanwhile, Former Balkh governor Atta Mohammad Noor issued a statement condemning the firing of the minister and warning the government that the removal of Mr. Osmani was "sensitive" and that he would respond "severely". Mr. Noor's warning reiterated that President Ghani has difficulties in cabinet reshuffle



and is still under the influence of power islands. Also, the issue has once again paved the way for a confrontation between President Ashraf Ghani and former Balkh governor Atta Mohammad Noor, which may have further deep roots, and might have once again turn into a headache for the central government.

However, this corruption scandal also had political dimensions, but on the whole, it once again exposes the involvement of senior government officials in corruption. In the recent cases of involving high-ranking officials in corruption, the Afghan Supreme Court has sentenced the former Minister of Mines to 13 months in prison and \$1.5 million for abuse of office. However, these cases are small compared to the level of corruption in the country. Afghanistan has witnessed several anti-corruption bodies and institutions over the past two decades and the government says its performance was beneficial, but corruption is still a major issue in Afghanistan. Corruption has also had a devastating effect on international aid to Afghanistan, and often the assistance of international donors is conditional on a successful fight against corruption. For instance, Last November, the Geneva Conference on Afghanistan was held, before which President Ashraf Ghani set up a new anti-corruption commission to gain international trust.

## Confrontation between the Parliament and the Government

The Wolesi Jirga (House of Representatives) of Afghanistan rejected the government's proposed budget for 1400 solar year on December 30. The 452 billion Afghanis budget for this year, half of which is paid by the international community, was declared unbalanced by the Wolesi Jirga and called for a change. However, the government's budget is usually rejected by the Wolesi Jirga every year and approved by the Jirga after changes, but one of the reasons for the rejection of the budget this year was non-acceptance of the budget of the ministries whose ministers have not received the vote of confidence from the Wolesi Jirga.

The Wolesi Jirga gave the vote of confidence to the ministers nominated by President Ashraf Ghani in late November and early December, with 19 ministers receiving the vote of confidence. However, the governor of the central bank of Afghanistan and the nominees for four ministries did not receive the vote of confidence. Two of the four ministers were women, one of them was nominated for the ministry of education and the other for the ministry of women's affairs. A few days after giving the vote of



confidence to the ministerial nominees, the first lady of Afghanistan, Mrs. Rula Ghani, reacted to the rejection of female ministers by the Wolesi Jirga, saying that the Wolesi Jirga has become a business ground. According to Ms. Ghani, women ministers will remain on office whether the Wolesi Jirga wants or not.

Ms. Ghani's remarks provoked a backlash from the Wolesi Jirga, which called her remarks an insult to the Wolesi Jirga. According to members of the Wolesi Jirga, the first lady has no special place in the Afghan law. Reacting to Ms. Ghani's remarks, Speaker of the Wolesi Jirga Mir Rehman Rahmani said: "They are not allowed to remain on office. No one can give them the right to continue in office, especially the first lady whose legal powers have not yet been disclosed in any official document in the country." He called on the president to nominate new ministers to replace the rejected ones. However, the Afghan president's office later said that the first lady's words had been misinterpreted and that the Afghan government respects the decisions of the Wolesi Jirga.



## Peace Process

### End of the First Round of the Intra-Afghan Talks

After nearly three months of haggling, the Afghan government and Taliban negotiations teams finally agreed on a procedure for the negotiations in early December. The delay was also accompanied by concerns that the procedure for the negotiations was not as important as the length of the negotiation process, which in a way showed a weak will for peace.

The main reason for the delay in the first round of talks was the disagreement between the two sides over the procedure for the negotiations. The point of contention was the acceptance of the US-Taliban agreement as the basis for intra-Afghan negotiations and the interpretation of Sharia texts based on Hanafi jurisprudence during the negotiations. In addition, the phase was protracted as the two sides came to the negotiating table after nearly two decades of war, and there was widespread mistrust between them.

On December 2, the negotiation teams from both sides announced that they had agreed on a procedure for the negotiations and had begun work on the main agenda of the negotiations. On December 12, the two sides concluded the first round of the negotiations and issued a statement saying that they would take a three-week break after initial discussions on the topics of agenda and that the second round of negotiations would begin on 5 January 2021.

Following the first round of negotiations, Taliban's delegation led by Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar travelled to Pakistan on December 15, where they met with Prime Minister Imran Khan and Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi. It is said that during these meetings, Mr. Imran Khan presented President Ghani's demands to the Taliban, which were raised during Imran Khan's recent visit to Kabul.

### Preparations for the Second Round of Talks

After agreeing on the procedure of the negotiations, the two negotiating teams also exchanged initial lists of the agenda topics and shared their views for future discussions. During the break, both sides started consultations with their respective leaders on key issues of the agenda. Following the return of the government's negotiating team to

Kabul, members of the team met with Afghan officials, members of civil society, and various other groups, including the President and the Chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation. In all these meetings, the emphasis was that the ceasefire should be at the top of the agenda. Meanwhile, a research by the Afghan Institute of War and Peace Studies (IWPS), released in mid-December, found that the majority of Afghans want a comprehensive ceasefire to be a priority in Doha peace talks.

Besides that, after the beginning of the break in the peace talks, Afghan officials said that the second round of talks should be held inside the country. For the first time, the National Security Council (NSC) adviser raised the issue, saying it is better to hold the remaining rounds of talks inside the country and for Afghans to be aware of the process. President Ghani also confirmed the National Security Adviser's statement. But the Taliban opposed the proposed change in the place of the negotiation. A Taliban spokesman told the media that the two sides should decide on the place of the talks, and that any statement from either side would be an impediment to peace talks. Finally, Dr. Abdullah, Chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation (HCNR), in a meeting with the government's negotiation team on December 9, said that the next round of talks would also take place in Qatar. Dr. Abdullah had previously said he would prefer intra-Afghan talks to take place inside the country. According to him, the place of the second round of talks will be agreed by both sides and the place should not be a hindrance to this process.

The remarks by Afghan officials about the place of the talks have raised concerns that the Afghan government's opposition to holding talks in Qatar could once again delay the process. Because the Taliban insist that intra-Afghan talks will also must take place in Qatar. On the other hand, the two sides are preparing for the second round of talks at a time when there is widespread negative propaganda between the two sides, which has further increased mistrust between them.

## Status of the US-Taliban Agreement

The escalation of the violence on the battlefield in October has provoked national and international reactions and pressures, which have led to the rise of analyses regarding the determination of the US-Taliban agreement. But in November and December, the level of violence on the battlefield by the Taliban gradually receded. However, targeted



killings have increased in these two months, but the Taliban has denied any involvement in such killings.

The violence on the battlefield is a matter that could lead to the failure of the ongoing peace process. Deborah Lyons, head of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), told the UN Security Council's quarterly meeting on Afghanistan that "significant progress has been made in the peace talks in Doha and these talks should be resumed on Jan 5 after the break." But Ms. Lyons also expressed concern that attacks on women, journalists and civil society activists have increased in Afghanistan over the past few months. "The current level of violence is a threat to peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban," she said. Meanwhile, Gen. Scott Miller, the US and NATO forces commander in Afghanistan, also has told the Associated Press: "the ongoing violence puts the peace process at risk — the higher the violence, the higher the risk."

At the same time, the violation of the agreement is another fact which might increase mistrust between the United States and the Taliban. In December, the Taliban issued several statements criticizing the United States for violating the agreement. The Taliban said in a statement on December 11 that US aircrafts have bombed a non-combat area in the Zherai district of Kandahar province, killing at least 10 civilians. On December 18, the Taliban said in a statement that the US forces have once again carried out airstrikes in non-combat areas in Kandahar and Khost provinces, killing and injuring scores of people.

On the other hand, regarding the implementation of the US-Taliban agreement, the issue of releasing the remaining Taliban prisoners came up again in December. The group expects their 7000 more prisoners to be released by mid-December according to the US-Taliban agreement, the US Charge d'Affaires in Kabul said in an online press conference on December 7. According to him, the release of prisoners is part of the agreement and it cannot be said that a part of the agreement will be implemented and another part of it will remain. A day before this, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the Taliban's political deputy leader and head of the group's Qatar office, met with the US Special Representative for Afghan Peace Zalmay Khalilzad in Doha. During the meeting, Mullah Baradar also demanded the release of the remaining prisoners as per the agreement.

Besides this, as the key part of the US-Taliban agreement is the withdrawal of all US troops from Afghanistan by May 2021, the process is still proceeding in accordance with the agreement, and the Pentagon also said in November that President Donald Trump has ordered that the number of US troops in Afghanistan should be reduced to 2500 by January 15, 2021. On December 24, President Trump also rejected a 740\$ billion defense budget plan approved by Congress which prevents US troop reduction in Europe and Afghanistan under certain provisions.

However, with the arrival of the new president to power in the United States, there is little clarity about the fate of the US-Taliban agreement and future US strategy towards Afghanistan, and there are analyses that the new president Biden may also make some changes to US strategy towards Afghanistan after taking the office. But now it seems that the new US president, Joe Biden, is also committed to the US peace deal with the Taliban, under which he will continue to withdraw his troops from Afghanistan and will continue to implement the agreement as a whole, because the general view in the United States is that this long US war in Afghanistan must be ended.



## Security Situation

The level of violence in December was lower than in previous months and there were no major attacks, especially by the Taliban. However, war was raging across the country during this month, and both sides were being requested to reduce the violence. The US Army Chief of Staff met with Taliban negotiators during a visit to Qatar on December 17 and called on them to reduce the ongoing violence. After meeting with Taliban representatives, the US Army Chief of Staff travelled to Kabul and met with President Ashraf Ghani. It is said the main purpose and focus of his visit and these meetings was calls for reduction in violence.

Overall, the ongoing violence is from both sides, however the Taliban are under more criticism than the Afghan government. The Watson Institute said in its recent research report that the number of civilian casualties in US and allied forces airstrikes in Afghanistan has risen to 330 percent in the past three years. The report says that since the agreement with the Taliban, US airstrikes have been decreased but Afghan airstrikes have been increased, claiming that Afghan forces have harmed more civilians than ever before. But the Afghan government has repeatedly denied such allegations and blamed the Taliban for civilian casualties.

## Targeted Killings

The month of December saw a spate of targeted killings of civil society activists and journalists, which have spread widespread fear in the country. The Afghan Interior Minister and the director of the National Directorate of Security (NDS) blamed the Taliban for the targeted killings and the explosions of sticky bombs. But the Taliban, on the other hand, have accused the Afghan government of being behind these killings. According to the group's spokesman, they do not target civilians or civil society activists and only target those who have taken up arms and fought against them.

As the number of targeted killings increased, the House of Elders (Meshrano Jirga) also summoned the heads of the three key security institutions to explain the increasing



number of the targeted killings and sticky bombs explosions. At the meeting, the interior minister claimed that security forces had captured a Taliban-linked group in Logar called "Obaida", which, after the agreement between the US and the Taliban, had been tasked to target journalists, civil society activists and government officials.

First Vice President Amrullah Saleh also blamed the Taliban for the increase in these incidents. "The bomb explosions, for which no one has claimed responsibility, and the targeted killing of civil society activists are two of the 11 tactics used by the Taliban to assassinate their targeted people, which are related to their policy of peace talks, and to break the political morale of the Afghan people and get impossible privileges. "What is true should be said, ambiguity does not help." He said. But a Taliban spokesman told the media in response to Mr. Saleh's tweet that they had no plans to attack civilians. He accused Afghanistan's National Directorate of Security (NDS) of issuing threats and warnings to many individuals. "Our enemy is known, who still insists on war and these incidents have no connection to the peace process," he added.

The National Directorate of Security (NDS) was quoted by the first vice president previously, saying that the Taliban had decided to target civil society members in Afghanistan's major cities. Also in late December, a list of 100 civil society activists was circulated in the social media, claiming that these people have been targeted in targeted killings. The situation has caused widespread concern and a large number of prominent figures and civil society activists who are unable to maintain their security are trying to leave the country.

The Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) also said in a statement that the recent targeted killings and threats to prominent figures have led to general fear and censorship of freedom of expression in the country. Other political parties have also expressed concern over the situation. For instance, Hezb-e-Islami leader Hekmatyar also told a news conference in Kabul that the security situation in Kabul is intolerable and that the people themselves should work to ensure their security. The US special representative for Afghan peace also said in a tweet on December 23 after the attack on the head of the Free and Fair Elections Forum of Afghanistan (FEFA), Yousuf Rashid, in which the Taliban denied any involvement: "The killing of Yousuf Rashid should be condemned. We condemn it. We also condemn the killing of the doctors who were working at Pul-e-Charkhi prison as well as the women's rights activist, Fereshta Kohistani. The people behind these terrorist attacks must be held accountable."



The targeted killings, in particular the killings of journalists, have drawn widespread reactions, in the recent incidents of which Rahmatullah Nekzad, head of the Ghazni Journalists' Association and former Al Jazeera journalist, and Fereshta Kohistani, a civil society activist, and Malala Maiwand, a presenter for Inkaas TV, have been killed. Before these killings, RFE's reporter in Helmand Mr. Elias Daiee and a former Tolo News presenter Yama Siavash were also killed.

## Major Security Incidents

Overall, there were no major security incidents during December. However, there were some security incidents with high casualties.

A car bomb attack on the convoy of Khan Mohammad Wardak, a member of the Wolesi Jirga, in the Khushal Khan area of Kabul city on December 20 killed at least 10 people and injured more than 50 others, including Mr. Wardak. No one has claimed responsibility for the attack, and the Taliban has denied any involvement in the attack.

On December 9, Taliban attacks in Ghazni and Balkh provinces killed 11 Afghan soldiers, the first of which was a car bomb attack in the Andar district of Ghazni, in which four ANA soldiers were killed and the second was also an incident of abduction and killing of seven policemen in Charbolak district of Balkh province.

Also on December 11, eight Afghan soldiers were killed and several others were injured in a Taliban attack on a security outpost in Delaram district of Nimroz province.

On December 13, at least 13 civilians, including eight children and three women, were killed in an explosion in the Arghandab district of Kandahar. According to Afghan officials, the incident was caused by an explosion of a Humvee tank full of explosives near a civilian house. However, the Taliban claimed that the house had been bombarded by the Afghan Air Force. On the same day in Takhar province, eight pro-government soldiers were killed in a Taliban attack in Bangi district of Takhar province.

A day later, on December 14, at least 10 Afghan soldiers were killed and four others were wounded in a bloody Taliban attack in the Imam Sahib district of Kunduz. On December 16, also 13 Afghan soldiers were killed in a Taliban attack on a military base in Pul-e-Khumri, Baghlan province.



An unexploded ordnance (UXO) blast in the Gilan district of Ghazni province on December 18 killed at least 15 children. The Afghan officials blamed the Taliban for the incident, but later revealed that the children were carrying the bullet among old irons for selling, which exploded on the way.

## Casualties

Although, the number of casualties in the last month of 2020 was lower than it was in the previous months, the year ended while the war was raging in almost all parts of the country, killing and injuring a large number of civilians as well as the warring parties' fighters. The Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) said on December 10 (International Human Rights Day) that more than 92 thousands Afghan civilians had fallen victim to the war in the past 11 years, 31 thousands of which have been killed and more than 61 thousand others have been injured. The commission said it had managed to register these casualties, but it believes the death toll was even higher.

According to casualty figures compiled by QASED Strategic Research Center, 837 people were killed or injured during December, in which 503 were killed and 334 were injured. According to the figures of the report, the Taliban, government forces and civilians, were witnessed more casualties respectively. (Table 1).

The death toll from war in December shows that the number of casualties has dropped compared to the previous month (November). In November, 1614 people had been killed or injured (745 of them were killed and 869 others were injured), but the figures in December show that the death toll has dropped by almost half. One of the main reasons for the drop in casualties was the national and international reactions to the escalation of violence in recent months, which has led to a sharp decline in Taliban attacks. Another reason is the onset of the cold season in the country, where the intensity of war usually decreases every year.

With the commencement of peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban, Afghans are looking forward to an end to the violence. QASED Strategic Research Center, as it monitors the war casualties in the country, emphasizes that the ongoing war in the country has no victorious side and calls on the warring parties to pave the way for a permanent ceasefire as soon as possible, and resolve their problems and differences through negotiations.



**Table-1: Total Casualties of War and Security Incidents**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Killed</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Wounded</b>
Afghan Forces	188	Afghan Forces	89
Anti-government Militants	206	Anti-government Militants	133
Civilians	109	Civilians	112
Foreign Forces	-	Foreign Forces	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>503</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>334</b>
<b>Total Casualties</b>		<b>837</b>	

The end

