

Monthly Analysis

February 2021

Monthly Analytical Report on the Situation in Afghanistan



QASED Strategic Research Center

Preface

This report looks at the situation in Afghanistan in February 2021. On the political front, one of the most important highlights of this month was the NATO Defense Ministers Meeting on the decision of NATO member states to end or continue the NATO mission in Afghanistan. This month, the decisions of the NATO member states, especially the United States, on the issue of Afghanistan had attracted a lot of attention. On the other hand, the continuation of the second round of intra-Afghan peace negotiations, and the passage of one year since the signing of the US-Taliban peace agreement, were the key topics of the peace process this month. Although the stalemate in the second round of intra-Afghan negotiations continued until late February, a meeting between Taliban representatives and the Afghan government's negotiation team was held in the last days of February, but after that meeting, until the end of the month, no significant progress had been seen in the process. On February 28, one year has passed since the signing of the Doha Agreement between the United States and the Taliban. However, there are still doubts about the agreement's full implementation due to taking office by the new US President. On the security front, this month was bloodier than last month (January), and in particular, targeted killings, which mostly killed civilians, peace activists, civil society activists and journalists, continued and provoked widespread reactions nationally and internationally. The details and analysis of these and other major issues of this month are discussed in this report.

Political Situation

NATO Defense Ministers Meeting and Afghanistan

The meetings of NATO Defense Ministers was held on February 17 and 18. NATO member states were to decide at the meeting whether to end or continue NATO's military mission in Afghanistan in May this year.

Before the meeting, some NATO members had stated that the situation in Afghanistan is not conducive to the full withdrawal of foreign troops from the country. The Afghanistan Study Group (ASG), established by the US Congress in December 2019 to examine the Afghan peace agreement, submitted a report to the US Congress on February 3, and warned that "withdrawing US troops irresponsibly would likely lead to a new civil war in Afghanistan" and could increase threats to the United States. The ASG, therefore, recommended that the US foreces' withdrawal should be conditioned on the progress of the peace process. The Afghan Foreign Ministry welcomed the report in a statement, saying the report findings confirmed the Afghan government's position that the Taliban had failed to meet their commitments to reduce violence, sever ties with terrorist groups and adhere to a peaceful solution to the war. Following the release of this report, the US Department of Defense also announced that future decisions on the number of US troops in Afghanistan would be made based on the situation in Afghanistan.

On February 17, simultaneously with the virtual meeting of NATO defense ministers, the German defense minister said that the Afghan peace talks had not progressed enough to allow foreign troops to leave the country.

A day before the NATO Meeting (February 16), Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, Taliban's deputy political leader and head of the Taliban's political office in Qatar, issued an open letter to the people of the United States saying that ending the war in Afghanistan is in the best interests of all, and full implementation of the Doha Agreement is the best way to end this war. In this letter, the Taliban reaffirmed their commitment to the International Community, including the success of intra-Afghan negotiations, women's rights and freedom of expression. They have stressed that the United States could not resolve the Afghan issue using power and force.

Although it was expected that the NATO Meeting would decide whether or not to withdraw troops from Afghanistan under the Doha Agreement, the NATO defense ministers did not make any decision in this regard, which was welcomed by both sides (the Afghan government and the Taliban). The Afghan government interpreted it as a non-withdrawal of foreign troops immediately, while the Taliban interpreted it as a commitment by the United States and NATO member states to the withdrawal of the foreign forces under the Doha Agreement. "We have not yet made a final decision on our future presence in Afghanistan, but as the May 1 deadline approaches, we as allies will continue to consult and coordinate," Stoltenberg said at the end of the meeting. It is noteworthy that about 9600 foreign troops, including 2500 US troops, are currently stationed within the NATO Resolute Support Mission framework in Afghanistan.

Nevertheless, US officials emphasize that they will not leave Afghanistan in a hasty and erratic manner. For this reason, during the month of February, the new US administration was engaged in consultations to find a suitable solution as an alternative to a hasty withdrawal (under the Doha agreement). It is believed that behind-the-scenes talks between the US and the Taliban are underway to extend foreign forces' withdrawal or find another political solution to end the war in Afghanistan. "We are committed to a responsible and lasting end to this war, and we want to ensure that this long-term conflict comes to a real and lasting end," the US Secretary of Defense said at his first press conference on February 19.

The new US president also spoke publicly about Afghanistan at the Munich Security Conference on February 20 for the first time since he was elected US president. He said the government under his leadership strongly supports the ongoing diplomatic process in Afghanistan and the end of the nearly 20-year war in this country. Therefore, it is believed that the US government is looking for a solution that both the Afghan government and the Taliban can agree on and end the longest US war in Afghanistan.



Peace Process

However, developments of the peace process had attracted the most attention nationally and internationally during this month. Still, hopes for the success of the ongoing intra-Afghan talks were dashed to a large extent. One year after the signing of the US-Taliban peace agreement in Doha, however, progress has been made towards a peaceful settlement of the Afghan issue, but with the new US administration in place, there are concerns, especially with the Taliban, about the US commitment to the withdrawal of its troops from Afghanistan, because considering the US officials statements, it does not seem that the Joe Biden government will withdraw all its troops from Afghanistan by May 2021.

One-Year Anniversary of the US-Taliban Peace Agreement

One year ago, on February 29, 2020, the peace agreement was signed between the United States and the Taliban in Doha, Qatar. Representatives of the United States and the Taliban bargained for about a year and a half to reach an agreement. The agreement was finally signed in the presence of representatives of many countries in Doha by the Taliban Deputy Political Leader and the US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation. It was later endorsed by the UN Security Council. Hence, this agreement is considered as a valid agreement.

In this agreement, both sides have made commitments to each other. The most important articles of the agreement, including the US commitment to a complete withdrawal of foreign troops within 14 months (until May 2021) and the Taliban's commitment not to use Afghan territory against US interests and those of its allies. Also, the exchange of prisoners, the reduction of violence and the commencement of intra-Afghan negotiations and a hint of a "new Islamic government" in the agreement were other significant points of the agreement.

One year later, the agreement has been implemented to a large extent but has not yet led to ending the ongoing war in Afghanistan. One of the most controversial parts of the agreement was the release of 5000 Taliban prisoners within ten days after the signing of the agreement, which also conditioned the commencement of intra-Afghan talks. The

release process took several months. At first, the Afghan government refused to release Taliban prisoners, especially what they called "dangerous prisoners," but eventually, under US pressure, 5000 prisoners, including 400 "dangerous" prisoners, were released by the Afghan government and 1000 government prisoners by the Taliban. Thus, intra-Afghan talks, scheduled to begin a few days after the agreement's signing, started about seven months later in September 2020 in Doha, Qatar.

In the beginning, both sides were optimistic about the outcome of the intra-Afghan talks. They were issuing joint declarations on the negotiations' developments, but over time, disagreements emerged between the two negotiation teams, with severe disagreements over non-essential issues (negotiation procedure). Negotiations on the procedure took about three months. The second round of talks also began a few days before Biden arrived at the White House, and several meetings between the two sides were held in a cold atmosphere, which did not lead to any conclusive results. Therefore, no fundamental issues have been discussed between them.

With the new US administration in place, there were concerns, especially on the Taliban side, that the new US administration might not abide by its commitment under the agreement to withdraw all foreign troops from Afghanistan. Under the agreement, the United States reduced its forces to 8600 and 4500, finally to 2500 troops in January this year, and evacuated several military bases in various parts of Afghanistan.

Continuation of the Second Round of Intra-Afghan Talks

The second round of intra-Afghan talks began on January 6, 2021. Still, after a few initial meetings on the negotiations' agenda, the process was once again delayed, mainly due to Joe Biden becoming president in the United States. In late January, members of the Afghan government's negotiating team announced that there are no developments in the negotiations due to the absence of Taliban's negotiators at the negotiation table.

During February, despair over the success of intra-Afghan talks increased, and some international bodies and officials expressed concern about the intra-Afghan talks. The US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) John Sopko wrote in a report that US efforts to reconcile the Afghan government and the Taliban had not yielded tangible results. "No ceasefire agreement has been reached so far, and large-



scale violence has continued in Afghanistan, despite repeated requests from senior US and international officials," SIGAR said.

With growing concerns about the failure of the intra-Afghan talks in Doha, some Afghan politicians also expressed concern about the future of the country. Mohammad Younus Qanooni, former First Vice President and Member of the Leadership Committee of the High Council for National Reconciliation (HCNR), told the media that if the ongoing talks in Doha fail, they will start a second resistance against the Taliban with the cooperation of countries opposed to the group.

After the new US administration has kept in place Zalmay Khalilzad, the US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, the Taliban's concerns eased somewhat, and the intra-Afghan negotiations resumed in late February. The government's peace negotiating team stated on February 23 saying, "Chief negotiators and several members of both negotiating teams met in a positive atmosphere this evening. In this meeting both sides insisted on the continuation of talks, and the designated groups for the agenda were assigned to continue their meetings on the agenda." But after this meeting, no progress was seen in this process until the end of February.



Security Situation

The country's overall security situation was bloody this month too, and along with Taliban fighters and Afghan forces, civilians have also fallen victims to the ongoing violence in the country.

UNAMA said in a report on February 23 that although civilian casualties had decreased in 2020, civilian casualties had risen again since September and the start of intra-Afghan talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government. According to UNAMA, in 2020, 3035 Afghan civilians were killed, and 5785 civilians were injured due to the war and violence. UNAMA says Afghanistan is still one of the deadliest places for civilians in the world.

Five UNAMA security personnel were also killed in an armed attack in the Sarobi district of Kabul province on February 12.

Targeted Killings

Targeted killings, for which no one or group take responsibility, continued this month. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) issued a report on February 15, expressing concern over the targeted killings and killings of human rights activists and journalists. UNAMA reports that from the beginning of 2018 to the end of January 2021, 65 human rights defenders and media workers were killed in Afghanistan.

On February 2, Dr. Mohammad Atif, Head of the Central Council of the non-governmental charity Jamiat-i-Islah, was killed in a roadside bomb blast that provoked widespread reactions. Although the Jamiat-i-Islah did not officially announce the responsible party for the incident, but they were more critical of the Afghan government in its statements. However, President Ghani, in a statement issued on the occasion, blamed the Taliban for the incident. The Taliban also issued a statement strongly condemning the incident, calling it an act of a "vicious circle".

In a similar incident on February 18, Mubasher Muslimyar, a Sharia Faculty professor at Kabul University, was killed along with a student. The incident took place near Kabul



University after a magnetic bomb attached to his car exploded. Minutes after the blast, along with some security sources, the High Council for National Reconciliation (HCNR) also announced the identities of the two victims of the explosion, Mawlawi Rasekh and Mawlawi Mubasher Muslimyar, but security officials later told the media that Mawlawi Abdul Maruf Rasekh was not among the victims. Mawlawi Rasekh and Mubasher Muslimyar were two professors who were arrested by the Afghan National Directorate of Security (NDS) last year on charges of collaborating with ISIS and spent several months in prison. The incident also provoked widespread reactions. Mawlawi Mujib-ur-Rahman Ansari, Mullah Imam of the Herat Province Guzargah Mosque, angered Afghan government officials by making controversial statements in response to the killing of Muslimyar.

In another incident, Mawlawi Faiz Mohammad Fayez, a religious scholar and lecturer at Dar-ul-Ulom Arabi (Arab Academy of Sciences), was shot dead by unknown gunmen in the 17th Police District of Kabul city.

Government officials, especially members of the Afghan security forces, were also targeted in the ongoing targeted killings this month. The killing of the commander of Kabul's fifth police district in a roadside bomb on February 10 was one such incident in which a high-ranking official was targeted, but other security personnel, especially members of the Afghan National Directorate of Security (NDS), were killed in several other similar incidents.

Targeted killings also occurred in other provinces during this month, killing soldiers and civilians. For example, Ghor province's security officials said on February 26 that gunmen attacked the home of Bismillah Adel Aimaq, a journalist who was assassinated about two months ago, and killed three members of his family.

The perpetrators of targeted killings, most of whose victims are civilians, have now become a mystery, with both warring sides blaming each other for the attacks. Taliban spokesman has vehemently denied any involvement in the targeted killings, saying "killing civilians is not in the group's military policy". Taliban says that it is the work of Afghan government backed circles, but the Afghan government has always blamed the Taliban for the attacks.

Bloody Security Incidents

However, there were no large-scale Taliban attacks in February, as in previous months, but some security incidents caused heavy casualties to the Taliban, Afghan forces and civilians.

On February 5, at least 18 Afghan soldiers were killed in a Taliban attack on a security outpost in Khan Abad district of Kunduz province. Three days after the incident, on February 8, 11 Afghan soldiers were killed in a Taliban attack on an Afghan military base in the Chamtal district of Balkh province. On February 18, a Taliban attack in the Pato district of Daikundi province killed about ten pro-government forces and wounded nine others. In a similar incident on February 22 in Logar province, nine pro-government militia soldiers were killed in Taliban attacks.

The Taliban also suffered heavy casualties in attacks by Afghan forces. However, the number of Taliban casualties released by government security agencies is in some cases considered exaggerated. For instance, the Ministry of Defense issued a statement on February 5 claiming that at least 62 Taliban fighters had been killed and 23 others wounded in Afghan forces' attacks in Kandahar province. On February 13, the ministry issued a statement claiming that 183 of Taliban fighters had been killed in clashes between Afghan forces and Taliban militants and a mine explosion among the group's fighters in Balkh province.

Casualties

According to the casualty figures compiled by Qased Strategic Research Center, 1120 people were killed or injured during February, including 801 killed and 319 others wounded. According to the report figures, the Taliban, government forces, and civilians have suffered more casualties, respectively. (Table 1).

The death toll from war in February shows that the casualty rate is once again higher than the previous month (January). In January 1017 people have been killed or injured (645 of them were killed, and 372 were wounded).

QASED Strategic Research Center, as a war casualties' monitoring organization in the country, reiterates and emphasizes that the current bloody war in the country has no



winner. Still, tens of Afghans are falling victim to this war every day. Therefore, we call again on the parties involved in the war to take a responsible approach to the current opportunity for peace in the country and to end this devastating war through negotiations.

Table-1: Total Casualties of War and Security Incidents

Name	Killed	Name	Wounded
Afghan Forces	272	Afghan Forces	149
Anti-government Militants	453	Anti-government Militants	98
Civilians	76	Civilians	72
Foreign Forces	-	Foreign Forces	-
Total	801	Total	319
Total Casualties		1120	

The end

