

Securitas Intelligence Unit

SITREP: Afghanistan – UPDATE 1

23 August 2021

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Priority Intelligence

- The Taliban remain in control of Afghanistan, with co-founder Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar arriving in Kabul for talks to establish a new government, although formal transfer of power has yet to occur.
- Pockets of resistance have been reported in parts of Afghanistan, primarily in the Panjshir Valley region, and although these groups have reaffirmed calls for 'negotiation' with the Taliban, they have not shied away from conflict or the prospect of civil war.
- Evacuation of foreign nationals and Afghan citizens continues, with thousands being processed via the Hamid Karzai International airport, and refugees attempting land crossings into neighbouring countries.
- Coalition Forces have until 31 August to complete evacuations; the Taliban have warned of consequences if foreign military remain in Afghanistan beyond this date.
- While no other country has officially recognised the Taliban as the *de jure* government of Afghanistan to date, China, Russia, Pakistan, and Turkey have indicated they are prepared to recognise Taliban rule, effectively redrawing the geopolitical map.
- Various officials and agencies from around the world continue to warn that the situation have resulted in a heightened terror threat both in the long term and the immediate future, including in the UK.

Background

The Taliban have claimed victory in Afghanistan after seizing control of the capital Kabul on 15 August, effectively retaking control after nearly 20 years since being removed from power in 2001 by the US-led invasion. The Taliban has stated plans to form an 'open, inclusive Islamic government' indicating the potential for a more moderate stance. However, strict punishments for not observing Sharia law have been reported in parts of Afghanistan.

Officials and agencies from around the world have warned that the collapse of the Afghan government and return of Taliban rule could accelerate the threat of terrorist groups reforming in the country, intent on launching attacks overseas.

Recent developments

Rising tensions as evacuations running out of time

Coalition forces continue to evacuate foreign citizens and Afghani nationals via the Hamid Karzai International airport. All civilian air travel remains suspended. Only military flights are currently in operation. While evacuation numbers are ever-changing and have yet to be confirmed, it is estimated that:

- Up to 30,000~ people have left Afghanistan via Kabul airport in the last week,
- 14,000~ people are inside the airfield waiting to board evacuation flights
- 10,000~ people are waiting outside the airfield
- An unknown number of people are sheltering in place in Kabul, and other parts of Afghanistan

The US has activated stage 1 of the Civil Reserve Air Fleet (CRAF), ordering six commercial airlines to provide passenger planes to help evacuate people from US military bases across the Middle East. The planes will not fly in or out of Afghanistan, but will help transport Afghans and US citizens from bases in Bahrain, Qatar, and the UAE.

US military are focused on processing evacuations via the airport, however UK forces are reportedly conducting armed sorties into Kabul, to escort British nationals and Afghan nationals who have supported the Armed Forces to the airport.

The situation at the airport is growing increasingly desperate, with families becoming separated, and more and more people getting injured in the overcrowding. Dozens have been killed due to being crushed in the press, or during stampedes following security alarms.

While Coalition forces have secured the airport, the Taliban control checkpoints on all roads leading to the airfield, and are further agitating the situation. Despite assurances they would grant safe passage to anyone leaving via the airport, there have been reports of violence, including attempts to block the gates, and shooting at some who attempt to pass.

Tensions are increasing between the Coalition forces and the Taliban. On Monday (23 Aug) the two sides clashed at the airport. The US Central Command stated: *“No US or coalition forces were hurt during a brief exchange of gunfire [...] The incident appeared to begin when an unknown hostile actor fired upon Afghan security forces involved in monitoring access to the gate. The Afghans returned fire, and in keeping with their right of self-defense, so too did US and coalition troops. One member of the Afghan forces was killed by the hostile actor; several Afghans were wounded.”*

Warnings have been issued that ISIS may attempt to exploit the situation, by targeting the airport and crowds in a suicide bomb attack. This has further complicated the situation, raising tensions between Coalition forces and the Taliban.

Furthermore, there is a concern that terrorists may be exploiting the ongoing evacuations and refugee crisis, in an attempt to board flights or cross into neighbouring countries, and later carry out attacks elsewhere in the world. All departures at the Hamid Karzai International airport go through security checks and processes, however the system is not without fault due to concerns over information availability and reliability, and the pressures of the environment.

The US military is currently planning to withdraw from Afghanistan on 31 August, ending in-country evacuations. However, G7 world leaders are due to hold an emergency meeting on Tuesday (24 Aug), during which UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson is expected to ask US President Joe Biden for an extension to the deadline, in order to allow more flights.

However, the Taliban have warned they will not support a deadline extension. Taliban spokesperson Dr Suhail Shaheen stated: *“It’s a red line. President Biden announced that on 31 August they (US Forces) would withdraw all their military forces. So if they extend it that means they are extending occupation while there is no need for that. [...] If the US or UK were to seek additional time to continue evacuations – the answer is no. Or there would be consequences.”*

Foreign military forces are expected to establish new operations in neighbouring countries to continue evacuations, however this poses additional challenges of people having to travel across borders to reach the evacuation points.

Refugee crisis

The refugee crisis is not limited to the international airports. Refugees are attempting to cross into neighbouring countries; however, some have estimated this has been in lower volumes than expected. This may be due to fears over reprisal, as the Taliban control key border points, and Pakistan and Turkey have fortified their borders.

The United Nations (UN) refugee agency estimates 550,000~ Afghans have been internally displaced since January this year, 300,000 in the last week alone. This is in addition to the 3 million already deemed displaced as a result of the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan, in addition to COVID-19 and droughts.

Resistance to Taliban rule

Pockets of resistance have been reported in parts of Afghanistan, primarily in the Panjshir Valley region, and although these groups have reaffirmed calls for ‘negotiation’ with the Taliban, they have not shied away from conflict.

The National Resistance Front of Afghanistan (NRF) claims it has thousands of supporters willing to take up arms against the Taliban. The Taliban claims to have surrounded the group's Panjshir valley stronghold and put them under siege. The region - in particular the Panjshir Valley - is renowned for successfully defending and defeating invasions, including the Taliban in the 1990s. The NRF is also led by Ahmad Massoud, the son of Afghan resistance hero Ahmad Shah Massoud, who was the main opposition commander against the Taliban's rule in the 1990s.

International response

While no other country has officially recognised the Taliban as the ruling power, China, Russia, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey have indicated they are prepared to recognise Taliban rule, effectively redrawing the geopolitical map.

US President Joe Biden is coming under increased scrutiny over his decision to withdraw all forces from Afghanistan. The UK Central Government has also been criticised, including over accusations it could do more to support refugees.

Geopolitical division over the refugee crisis will almost certainly cause tensions in Europe. EU nations have so far presented a united front to mitigate another humanitarian crisis in the wake of the crisis, however some nations are already suggesting they will not provide the same level of support to refugees as other countries, or provide any support at all. Greece has extended its border fence with Turkey to deter migrants, and Hungary is considering similar measures.

Intelligence assessment

The impacts of the Taliban’s (re)claim of Afghanistan will continue to be felt around the world for years to come. However, the domestic and international situation is growing increasingly dire, and there is a risk of tensions escalating in the near term, both in-country and overseas, including in the UK.

While experts have assessed that the return of Taliban rule could accelerate the threat of terrorist groups reforming in Afghanistan, intent on launching attacks overseas, the terror threat could rear its head sooner rather than later.

- Evacuations will continue from Afghanistan until Coalition Forces are forced to withdraw. The Taliban have warned against an extension to 31 August, although some nations – including the UK – have called for the evacuations to continue until they are complete. Any extension to the deadline would be perceived by the Taliban as a ‘military occupation’ which could see hostilities between the Taliban and Coalition Forces in Afghanistan, and calls for terror attacks overseas.
- Other extremist Islamist terror groups have celebrated the Taliban’s victory. The Taliban’s success will likely inspire other extremist Islamist terror groups to advance their causes, including carrying out attacks against Western nations at a time when they are perceived to be vulnerable from their losses in Afghanistan.
- An increase in extremist Islamist terrorism as a result of the Taliban’s victory is the arguably the greatest direct driver to the global terror landscape, however the withdrawal by coalition forces, particularly the UK and US, may incite domestic extreme right wing (ERW) terrorists to launch attacks over the perception of being ‘betrayed’. ERW would likely target government institutions, Islamic landmarks, and any organisation(s) perceived to be supporting Afghan refugees. Last week a man in Washington D.C. was arrested after threatening to launch an IED attack targeting the US Government for multiple reasons, including the decision to pull out of Afghanistan, and providing support to refugees.
- The UK Terror Threat Level is currently set to SUBSTANTIAL meaning that an attack is likely. SUBSTANTIAL is level 3 of 5 on the Terror Threat Level. Terrorism remains one of the most direct and immediate risks to the UK’s National Security. SUBSTANTIAL continues to indicate a high level of threat.
- A number of officials and authorities have warned that the UK Terror Threat Level should be reviewed in light of events in Afghanistan. Colonel Richard Kemp, former UK Commander in Afghanistan, has urged officials to ‘consider raising the UK threat level and increasing counter-terrorist assets available to the intelligence services and police’.

Terror attacks are indiscriminate, and businesses can be directly and indirectly impacted as a result of an attack; it is impossible to rule out any impacts to staff, premises, property, or indeed customers. Businesses should review and maintain security plans and processes in context of the terror threat landscape, and maintain situational awareness.

Separate to the terror threat, the escalating humanitarian crisis will almost certainly inspire anti-war and or / refugee solidarity protests and marches in the near future, particularly in the UK and US.

- Demonstrations have been organised across the world to mark the anniversary of 9/11, and to call for an end to overseas military operations and support to conflicts.
- In the UK, demonstrations have been organised in early September, including in London, to protest against planned Arms events and conference in Q4.

LANGUAGE OF PROBABILITY							
Term:	Remote	Highly unlikely	Unlikely	Realistic / Possible	Likely / Probable	Highly likely	Almost certain
Probability:	0-4%	10-20%	25-35%	40-50%	55-75%	80-90%	95-99%

Intelligence Cut Off Date (ICOD):	1500hrs, 23 August 2021.
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