

Modern Afghanistan: factors of instability

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Abstract. The article analyzes global, regional and internal factors that have a significant impact on socio-political fluctuations and destabilization in Afghanistan. A special attention is paid to the risks associated with regional security, including the problems of terrorism and drug threats. Among the stabilizing factors, a special place is given to the development of Afghanistan's transit potential (the opportunity to become a connecting bridge between Central Asia and South Asia). The author analyzes the activities of the Taliban during their seven months in power, puts forward a hypothesis about the causes of internal confrontation in the movement and pays attention to the problem of recognition of the new government by the international community. It is noted that a paradoxical phenomenon has developed when negotiations on economic and infrastructure projects are conducted with the illegitimate, unrecognized government of the Taliban (a terrorist organization banned in many countries), investment agreements are concluded, foreign policy relations are established, new diplomats are accepted. Perhaps, on the example of Afghanistan, the world will see a new mechanism for international legitimization of governments that seized power by force and were initially unrecognized by international partners.

Keywords: Afghanistan, stability, security in Central Asia, trans-Afghan projects, cross-border threats

For citation: Nessar M. Omar. Modern Afghanistan: Factors of Instability. Russia & World: Scientific Dialogue. 2022. No. 2(4). pp. 38-49. [https://doi.org/10.53658/RW2022-2-2\(4\)-38-49](https://doi.org/10.53658/RW2022-2-2(4)-38-49)

Introduction

The importance of Afghanistan in international politics is defined by a number of factors, connected with necessity to provide regional security (settlement of armed conflicts with participation of external and internal forces), economic development of Central Asia region (development of Afghanistan's transit potential, actualization of the opportunity to become a connecting link between Central Asia and South Asia); need for social and cultural development of Afghan society, provision of rights and liberties to all social groups,

including women, as well as necessity to combat terrorism and drug trafficking, which endanger not only regional, but also worldwide security.

Despite the efforts made by the international community and regional actors, the situation in Afghanistan keeps developing in an instable and uncertain way, Afghanistan being considered a source of threat both on international and regional arena. Therefore, the international community and the countries neighboring Afghanistan aim their efforts to search the ways of settling the situation. The article contains results of a study into the principal factors provoking Afghan instability and some suggestions as to the ways how to resolve the problem.

Materials and methods

The author's methodological stance got its shape under the influence of institutional and systemic approaches; besides, the author appeals to the theory of political realism. The theoretical basis of the study is rooted in the works of national scholars specialized in Afghanistan [6, 2], an Afghan historian [3], a Pakistani scholar [5]. The basic research methods applied are the following: dialectic method, comparative study, content analysis, invent analysis. The resources used include formal pronouncements, resolutions; normative legal acts issued by the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, foreign countries, international institutions, including quarterly and annual reports provided by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan; information obtained from original sources; materials provided by mass media and analytical organizations, including proceedings of research to practice conferences held by the Institute of Oriental Studies (the Russian Academy of Sciences)¹, analytical reports published by the Center for contemporary Afghanistan studies².

Results

Long-term observations and a comprehensive analysis into Afghanistan's development problems make it possible to identify a number of factors that substantially affect social and political fluctuations and provoke the country's unrest. The first two factors, associated with terrorism and drug dealing, form part of the global order factors and constitute a menace to the global stability. Other factors can be referred to as risk factors of regional and local scale. Nevertheless, under certain circumstances and together with the first two factors they may grow to become global order factors.

1 Proceedings of the international conference "New approach to the Taliban rule in Afghanistan: reasons, challenges prospects" [Novyi podkhod k vlasti talibov v Afganistane: prichiny, problemy, perspektivy] Moscow: IV RAN, 28.02.11

2 Peculiar characteristics of contemporary Afghan elites [Osobennosti sovremenoy afganskoy elity]: March, 2020. Moscow: Center for contemporary Afghanistan studies (CCAS), 2020:20. Available: https://afghanistan.ru/catalog/areport_29042020.pdf; CCAS analytical materials [Analiticheskie materialy TSISA]. Available: <https://afghanistan.ru/doc/category/editorial>.

The first factor is terrorism. Afghan unrest might be considered a source of risk and threat to the majority of countries inside the region, including Central Asia, Russia and the People's Republic of China. Should the extremists gain power and the state institutions get weak, Afghanistan is very likely to become a potential beachhead for establishing terrorist groups.

In accordance with the Global terrorism index, created by the Institute for Economics and Peace, between 2011 and 2022 Afghanistan was listed among the top five countries upon this criterion, ranking first in the index between 2019 and 2022.

In the six months of Taliban rule (between August, 15, 2021 and February, 15, 2022) the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan recorded the total of 1153 (397 casualties and 756 wounded) among civilian population³. All in all, it demonstrates a lower rate of casualties among Afghanistan's innocent population as compared to the same period last year. Nevertheless, this figure is still very high and cannot instill growing optimism as to the country's stability. The active status of IGIL-H causes special concern in a number of neighboring countries. According to the UN organization, it was this group's attacks that provoked a substantial fraction of casualties among civilian population in the period of the Taliban rule⁴.

The second factor is that of drug trafficking. The problem of illegal drug production and drug smuggling remains being a serious threat to the region. Drugs made up and still do make up one of Afghanistan's revenue items. According to the data provided by the United Nations office on drugs and crime, the country's income from drug dealing in 2021 was \$1.8-2.7 billion. It is worth noting, that major part of the income obtained through the supply chain remains outside Afghanistan⁵.

Despite the Taliban's promises to combat drug production and drug smuggling, there is no reason to assume that the amount of Afghan opiates will sharply decrease in the near future⁶.

One of the ways to fight drug trafficking and drug production might consist in developing alternative economy sectors, with the return rate approximately equivalent to that of drug production. However, currently there are no feasible projects of the sort underway.

The third factor is economic one. Deterioration of social and economic conditions, following the seize power and provoked among other matters by the sanctions imposed by the West, has become a formidable challenge for the Taliban. The USA froze Afghanistan Central Bank's assets and banned the use of dollar in the country which caused paralysis of the banking and financial system and a severe currency crisis. Banking system paralysis

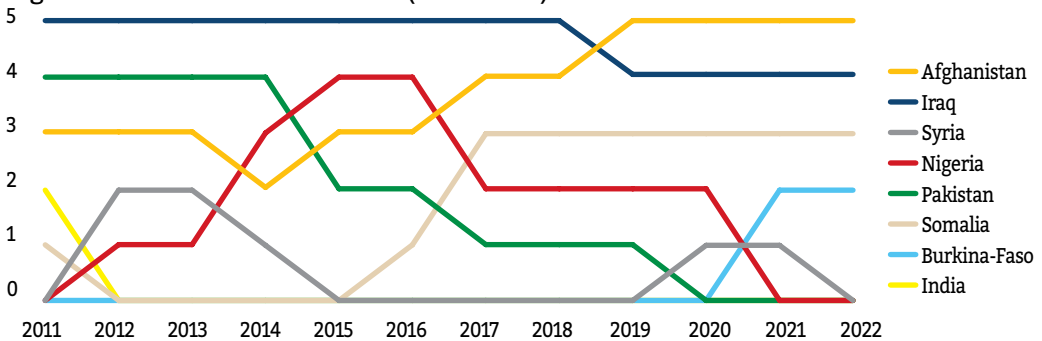
3 Interactive dialogue on the High Commissioner's report on Afghanistan. UN, 7.03.2022. Available: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2022/03/interactive-dialogue-high-commissioners-report-afghanistan?LangID=E&NewsID=28218>.

4 Afghanistan. Protection of civilians in armed conflict: 15 aug. 2021 to 15 feb 2022. UNAMA. Available: https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama_poc_midyear_report_2022_15a_feb.pdf (checked on 25.02.2022); The head of the US Committee on Armed Services declared IGIL to gain strength in Afghanistan [Glava Tsentskoma VS SSHA zayavil ob usilenii IGIL v Afganistane]. Афра-нистан.Ру, 16.03.2022. Available: <https://afghanistan.ru/doc/148497.html>.

5 Drug situation in Afghanistan 2021, UNODC – 2021.

6 Tajikistan reports an increase in drug trafficking from Afghanistan [V Tadzhiikistane zayavili o roste narkotrafika iz Afganistana]. Afghanistan.ru, 19.02.2022. Available: <https://afghanistan.ru/doc/148227.html>.

Figure 1. Global Terrorism Index (2011-2022)



together with the national currency cheapening led to an import curtailment and an increase in prices for basic needs and fuel. Another problem that has arisen is that of brain drain which led to increasing unemployment⁷.

In this context implementation of a number of ambitious transport and energetic projects gains special significance with regard to stabilization, the most outstanding being TAPI, CASA-1000, Trans-Afghan transport corridor⁸. Besides, there is mineral resources exploitation, such as Aynak copper-ore deposit⁹ etc.

Even partial implementation of these ambitious projects will not only provide new work places, so urgently wanted inside the country, but will also reduce the country's dependence on foreign economic aid. Large infrastructural projects are evidently able to consolidate Central and South Asian countries around Afghanistan, which in its turn will enhance global and regional prestige of Kabul, thus converting it from a troublesome neighbor into an attractive one. Nevertheless, the main obstacle which hindered implementation of these projects in the previous years was the ongoing armed conflict or unrest.

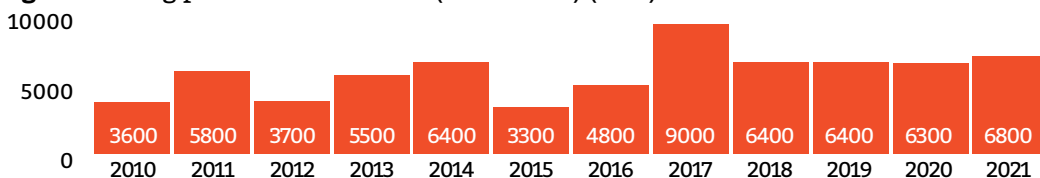
The fourth factor is associated with external control. In 2021 the Afghan turmoil entered a new stage in its development. In August 2021 after a 20 year-long military presence in Afghanistan the US-led coalition withdrew its troops from the country. This step was anteceded by a peace agreement concluded between Washington and the Taliban in February 2020, which gave grounds for optimistic forecasts as to the prospective development of the situation in the country. Amongst other things, the peace agreement presupposed establishment of a coalition government including Afghan legal political movements and the Taliban. Nevertheless, for a host of reasons things took a different turn and on August, 15, 2021 the Taliban seized the power in Kabul [1]¹⁰.

7 Sifton J. Averting Afghanistan's Economic and Food Crises. HRW, 06.10.2021. Available: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/10/06/averting-afghanistans-economic-and-food-crises>.

8 Among the trans-Afghan transport projects there is "Mazar-i-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar" railway line, a corridor passing through Afghanistan to connect Central Asia, and Pakistan as well as Middle East. Khaf-Herat rail line is designed to connect China's railway and Iran through Afghanistan.

9 One of the world's largest copper mines is located 35 km away from Kabul. In 2007 the winner of the tender for its exploitation and development became Chinese company MSS.

10 For more detailed information see: Konarovskiy M.A., Nessar M.O Afghanistan under the Taliban: what comes next? [Talibskiy Afganstan: chto dalshe]. Mezhdunarodnaya zhizn. 2022, January:14–28.

Figure 2. Drug production volumes (2010-2020) (tons)

During the 20 years, previous to the takeover of Kabul, the USA participated in the armed conflict as one of its principal actors. To assess the results, purpose and objectives of the military operation, conducted by the Western coalition in Afghanistan, we would need a more profound separate study. Nonetheless, we consider appropriate to provide some data regarding military presence of the Western countries. The US government spent over \$980 billion on war fighting and modernization of Afghanistan, including creation of State Institutions, Security Force training, economic development and civil society formation. The US and their allies lost 24253 persons (among them 3587 killed and 20666 wounded). Afghan side lost at the very least 66 thousand state military men, civilian casualties exceeding 123 thousand (48 thousand killed and 75 thousand wounded)¹¹. During the US military presence as part of the mission in Afghanistan, other countries were involved as well, both member states and not member states of the North Atlantic alliance. According to The Guardian diary¹², the total of 50 countries participated in the military and public missions under the military operation in Afghanistan¹³.

The US and the allies' withdrawal from Afghanistan and their distancing from the direct military conflict in 2021 gave grounds for optimistic forecasts as to the subsequent progress of the situation in the country. However, the external forces' attitude to the Taliban's ascension to power might be referred to as ambiguous. On the one hand, the neighboring countries did their best to establish rapport with Kabul, on the other hand, a radical group's ascension to power could not but give rise to concern¹⁴. For example, following the Taliban seize power, leaders of the CSTO member states issued statements of «profound concern about the events in Afghanistan and the potential threat» proceeding from the territory of this country¹⁵.

The fifth factor regards inter-ethnic and inter-tribal relations. The fact that the USA and their allies are directly involved into the armed conflict, may be considered one

11 What we need to learn: Lessons from twenty years of Afghanistan Reconstruction. SIGAR, 2021.

12 Afghanistan troop numbers data: how many does each country send to the NATO mission there? The Guardian. 22.06.2011. Available: <https://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2009/sep/21/afghanistan-troop-numbers-nato-data#data>.

13 Australia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Albania, Armenia, Belgium, Bulgaria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Great Britain, Hungary, Germany, Greece, Georgia, Denmark, Jordan, Ireland, Island, Spain, Italy, Canada, South Korea, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxemburg, Macedonia, Malaysia, Mongolia, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, the UAE, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Singapore, Slovakia, Slovenia, the USA, Tonga, Turkey, Ukraine, Finland, France, Croatia, Monte Negro, the Check republic, Sweden, Estonia.

14 Terrorists want to benefit from the Taliban's ascent to power, the Ministry of External Affairs claimed [Terroristy hotyat izvlech vygody iz Prihoda talibov k vlasti, zayavili v MID]. RIA Novosti, 22.12.2021. Available: <https://ria.ru/20211222/afganistan-1764865631.html>.

15 CSTO declaration. Available: <http://kremlin.ru/catalog/persons/119/events/66433/print>.

of the external factors that affect the situation. However, there are internal factors that keep affecting the region's stability, of high importance being the inter-ethnic discord. The significance of inter-ethnic confrontation in Afghanistan's political life has been increasing in the recent three decades, which made ethno-tribal nature of power acquire newfound relevance. As was demonstrated in one of our previous research works, ethno-tribal network is considered a constant value in Afghanistan's political life, its negligence causing adverse social and political consequences [4]. One of the ways to settle the conflict might become creation of an inclusive multi-ethnic and multi-tribal government, comprising members of various political movements. However, the Nepushtuns (the Tadjik and the Uzbek) who entered the Taliban cabinet, are actually members of the Taliban movement and manifest mainly pro-Taliban interests, rather than their own ethnic and tribal groups' ones. In other words, an inclusive Taliban government which consists in a down-sized version of an ethno-tribal government, in fact does not fulfill the function of coordinating positions and representing interests of various ethno-tribal groups in Afghanistan. As a result, it provokes a civil war.

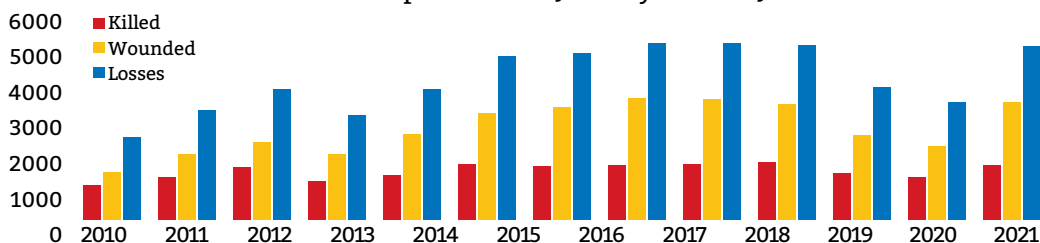
During the Taliban rule confrontation within Afghan civic society grew in strength, the women's movements being especially prominent. The Talibs (unsurprising for many experts and specialists in Afghanistan) introduced new bans and restrictions for women, which questioned the achievements in the sphere of women's rights over the last 20 years. Many Afghan girls were deprived of access to education, dozens of thousands of women dropped out of the labor force. The international community expressed strong disapproval at the decision of the new authorities ordering Afghan girls being denied access to secondary schools¹⁶.

Neither can we ignore the anti-Taliban armed groups, which were observed to get increasingly excited in March, 2022. In the same month the minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Sergey Lavrov focused special attention on one of them, namely, "National Resistance Front" (under the leadership of Ahmad Massoud)¹⁷.

The sixth factor consists in lack of consensus among the Taliban's governing elites. The seize power was followed by sharpening of the internal inter-tribal and inter-fractional discord (among other problems, it refers to the antagonism between the so-called radical wing (Khakkani tribe) and the moderate one (native from Kandagar)). An analysis of the Taliban's activities during the seven months of their rule makes it possible to infer existence of confrontation in two areas: 1) increasingly fierce customary inter-tribal rivalry between

16 The UN Security Council called on the Talib to open schools for girls [Sovbez OON prizval talibov otkryt shkoly dla devochek]. Афганистан.Ру, 28.03.2022. Available: <https://afghanistan.ru/doc/148626.html>; UN Security Council asks Taliban to allow Afghan girls to attend school // Reuters, 28.03.2022. URL: <https://www.yahoo.com/entertainment/un-security-council-asks-taliban-041700071.html>.

17 Speech delivered by the minister of External Affairs of the Russian Federation S.V. Lavrov during the plenary session at the meeting of Afghanistan's neighboring countries (Russia, China, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenia, Uzbekistan) [Vystuplenie ministra inostrannykh del Rossiyskoy Federatsii S.V. LAVrova v hode plenarnoy sessii na vstreche v formate cnran sosedy Afganistana (Rossia, Kitay, Iran, Pakistan, Tadzhiikistan, Turkmenia, Uzbekistan) Tunsii, March, 31, 2022. Available: https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1807302/?lang=ru.

Table 1. Civilian casualties in the period from January 2009 to June 2021

the Pashtun tribes Durrani and Ghilzay; 2) discord in viewpoints and methods between the executive organ in Kabul and the spiritual leader, assumingly dwelling in Kandahar. Influence of external factors cannot be neglected either, for example, attempts to maintain external control over certain decision-making centers, made by some foreign actors. The increasing discord seems to have been provoked by endeavors to centralize and hierarchize the terrorist nexus, turning into the Taliban political network.

Discussion

The unrest factors are both the reason and partly the consequence of the Taliban government being unrecognized by international institutions and foreign countries. The unrecognition the international community demonstrates towards the Taliban creates serious obstacles for the national financial and banking industry to work and trans-Afghan projects to be realized. There are several reasons that impede recognition. Firstly, in a number of countries the «Taliban» movement is recognized as a radical and terrorist one (including Russia). Secondly, some of the Taliban's actions discord with the principles created by the UN, their norms and morale. For instance, the ban on secondary education for girls, disapproved by Muslim countries as well. Thirdly, the Taliban government has not secured trust of foreign countries and international institutions, which remains very low. The Taliban government demonstrated itself to be incoherent whilst fulfilling a number of prerequisites for being recognized. One of these was to respect rights and freedoms of all social groups and form an inclusive government. Neither the first nor the second condition has been complied with. Thus, commenting on the Taliban's failure to keep the promises given with regard to women's rights and girls' access to secondary education, the UN Secretary General António Guterres said: "I strongly appeal to the Taliban to keep their promises"¹⁸. Neither has the Taliban accomplished the second condition, that of forming an inclusive government¹⁹. As

¹⁸ UN chief slams 'broken' Taliban promises made to women, girls. Aljazeera, 11.10.2021. Available: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/11/un-chief-slams-broken-taliban-promises-made-to-women-girls>.

¹⁹ UN's new Afghanistan mandate focuses on equality, inclusion. AP, 17.03.2022. Available: <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-afghanistan-business-norway-taliban-6e760c7ab971fe3cbb8db7e0f9cd23f>; Russia, China and India called for the creation of an inclusive government in Afghanistan [Rossia, Kitay y India prizvali k formirovaniyu inkluzivnogo pravitelstva v Afganistane]. Afghanistan.ru, 26.11.2021. Available: <https://afghanistan.ru/doc/147195.html>.

previously stated, it was formed as a reduced and rather specific version of such.

The Taliban movement has not been able to convince the international community so far that it has made a clean break with terrorist organizations. From time to time, information leak into press, regarding the Taliban's contacts with one or another terrorist group. Nevertheless, risks and threats posed by Afghanistan, the humanitarian crisis in the context of total immiseration and violation of the citizens' rights, make foreign countries and international institutions participate in settlement of the situation in Afghanistan. Paradoxical is the phenomenon that has arisen recently, when an illegitimate and unrecognized government of the Taliban (a terrorist organization prohibited in multiple countries) is addressed to negotiate economic, infrastructural projects, enter into agreements on investments, cultivate political relations, admit new diplomats. Maybe the example of Afghanistan will provide a precedent for creating new mechanisms of international legitimation for authorities seizing governmental power via armed conflicts and being considered unacceptable international partners and outsiders. Such a mechanism should be referred to as enforced, implemented in order to avoid a humanitarian crisis and provide geopolitical, economic, regional and international security.

Conclusions

The Taliban's seize power in August, 2021 may be considered a failure to fulfill the plans, undertaken by external actors, to settle the conflict in Afghanistan, with the following formation of a coalition government and a peaceful transition of power. External endeavors did not take effect and did not deliver the results anticipated and provisioned by the agreements.

The external peace plans having failed, foreign economic aid to Afghanistan reduced, although Afghanistan's dependence on international financial aid has been strong during the recent decades and remains being so. Keeping this fact in mind and understanding the difficulties that financial and banking sector faces as a result of the unrecognized status of the current political regime, we cannot become more optimistic as to the socio-economic and humanitarian situation in the country in the nearest future.

The influence of external factors on Afghan unrest remains strong. Nevertheless, the USA and their allies' withdrawal from direct participation in the hostilities on the territory of Afghanistan may be interpreted as removal of one of the main external factors. In our opinion, in the long-term and medium-term perspective this step might lead to an increase in the role of internal factors, such as ethno-tribal and religious ones, etc.

The Taliban are now facing a wide range of internal challenges: 1) the complicated internal process has intensified (including the confrontation between the so-called radical and moderate wings of the movement); 2) security challenges (Islamic State Khorasan, civilian pressure, anti-Taliban resistance movements); 3) economic challenges, provoked by curtailment of foreign aid, unwillingness of the international community to recognize the new regime in Kabul, decline in labor market and business activities' potential, outflow

of professional personnel. Of special complexity for the Taliban is the decision to make a clean break with terrorist organizations. Meanwhile, this issue will significantly affect the progress of relationships building between the Taliban and the external world.

The subsequent developments and stability of the regime will largely depend on the ability of the Taliban to get through the challenges specified, their ability to understand internal and external factors, as well as the way the Taliban will build their relationships with the outer world, taking into consideration the existing multi-level inter-regional competition and complicated relationships between the global players.

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Contribution of the author

The author declares no conflicts of interests.

Article info

Submitted: April 6, 2022. Approved after peer reviewing: April 11, 2022. Accepted for publication: April 25, 2022. Published: 27.06.2022

The authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Peer review info

«Russia & World: Scientific Dialogue» thanks the anonymous reviewer(s) for their contribution to the peer review of this work.