Afghanistan

(āfghanˈistān’, ˈæfɡərəˈɪstən’), officially Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, republic (2015 est. pop. 33,736,000), 249,999 sq mi (647,497 sq km), S central Asia. Afghanistan is bordered by Iran on the west, by Pakistan on the east and south, and by Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan on the north; a narrow strip, the Vakhan (Wakhan), extends in the northeast along Pakistan to the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region of China. The capital and largest city is Kabul.

Land and People

The great mass of the country is steep-sloped with mountains, the ranges fanning out from the towering Hindu Kush (reaching a height of more than 24,000 ft/7,315 m) across the center of the country. There are, however, within the mountain ranges and on their edges, many fertile valleys and plains. In the south, and particularly in the southwest, are great stretches of desert, including the regions of Seistan and Registan. To the north, between the central mountain chains (notably the Selseleh-ye Kuh-e Baba, or Koh-i-Baba, and the Paropamisus) and the Amu Darya (Oxus) River, which marks part of the northern boundary, are the highlands of Badakhshan (with the finest lapis lazuli in the world), Afghan Turkistan, the Amu Darya plain, and the rich valley of Herat on the Hari Rud (Arius) River in the northwest corner of the country (the heart of ancient Ariana). The regions thus vary widely, although most of the land is dry.

The rivers are mostly unnavigable; the longest is the Helmand, which flows generally southwest from the Hindu Kush to the Iranian border. Its water has been used since remote times for irrigation, as have the waters of the Hari Rud and of the Amu Darya. The Kabul River, beside which the capital stands, is particularly famous because it leads to the Khyber Pass and thus S to Pakistan.

Although warfare in Afghanistan during the late 20th cent. caused substantial population displacement, with millions of refugees fleeing into Pakistan and Iran, regional ethnicity remains generally the same as it had been before the unrest. Tajiks live around Herat and in the northeast; Uzbeks live in the north, and nomadic Turkmen live along the Turkmenistan border. In the central mountains are the Hazaras, of Mongolian origin. In the eastern and south central portions Afghans (or Pashtuns), who make up the country’s largest ethnic group, are dominant, and Baluchis live in the extreme south. Dari, also called Farsi (Afghan Persian), Pashto (Afghan), and various Turkic tongues (mainly Uzbek and Turkmen) are the country’s principal languages. A unifying factor is religion, almost all the inhabitants being Muslim; the large majority (about 80%) are Sunni, the minority Shiite. In addition to Kabul, important cities include Kandahar, Herat, and Jalalabad.

Economy

Agriculture is the main occupation, although less than 10% of the land is cultivated; a large percentage of the arable land was damaged by warfare during the 1980s and 90s. Largely subsistence crops include wheat and other grains, fruits, and nuts. The opium poppy, grown mainly for the international illegal drug trade, is the most important cash crop. The country is the world’s largest producer of opium (and morphine and heroin are increasingly produced in the country from opium as well), and of hashish, obtained from hemp (cannabis); both are produced especially in S Afghanistan. Grazing is also of great
importance in the economy. The fat-tailed sheep are a staple of Afghan life, supplying skins and wool for clothing and meat and fat for food.

Mineral wealth is virtually undeveloped, except for natural gas. There are significant deposits of iron, copper, niobium, cobalt, gold, and molydenum; other minerals include rare earths, asbestos, silver, potash, and aluminum. Oil fields are found in the north. Some small-scale manufactures produce cotton and other fabrics, furniture, shoes, fertilizer, and processed agricultural goods. Extremely high levels of unemployment—about 40% in 2005—have resulted from the general collapse of Afghanistan's industry.

Opium, fruits and nuts, handwoven carpets, wool, cotton, lambskins (Karakul), and gemstones are the main exports; capital goods, foodstuffs, textiles and other manufactured goods, and petroleum products are the main imports. As a result of civil war, exports have dwindled to a minimum, except for the illegal trade in opium, morphine, heroin, and hashish. The country has also become an important producer of heroin, which is derived from opium. Afghanistan is heavily dependent on international assistance. The main trading partners are Pakistan, the United States, and India.

Road communications throughout the country are poor, although existing roads have undergone reconstruction since the end of Taliban rule; pack animals are an important means of transport in the interior. A road and tunnel under the Salang pass, built (1964) by the Russians, provides a short, all-weather route between N and S Afghanistan. Significant railroad construction did not take place until the 21st cent., with the first major line opening in 2011.

**Government**

Afghanistan is governed under the constitution of 2004. The president, who is both head of state and of government, is popularly elected for a five-year term and may serve a second term. The president appoints a cabinet, the members of which must be approved by the legislature. The bicameral legislature is called the National Assembly. The lower house, the House of the People (Wolesi Jirga), consists of no more than 249 members, who are directly elected to five-year terms. The upper house, the House of Elders (Meshrano Jirga), consists of 102 members, a third elected by provincial councils to four-year terms, a third elected by district councils to three-year terms, and the rest (half of whom must be women) appointed by the president to five-year terms. No law passed by the Assembly may be contrary to Islam. Administratively, the country is divided into 34 provinces.

**History**

*Early History*

The location of Afghanistan astride the land routes between the Indian subcontinent, Iran, and central Asia has enticed conquerors throughout history. Its high mountains, although hindering unity, helped the hill tribes to preserve their independence. It is probable that there were well-developed civilizations in S Afghanistan in prehistoric times, but the archaeological record is not clear. Certainly cultures had flourished in the north and east before the Persian king Darius I (c.500 B.C.) conquered these areas. Later, Alexander the Great conquered (329–327 B.C.) them on his way to India.

After Alexander's death (323 B.C.) the region at first was part of the Seleucid empire. In the north, Bactria became independent, and the south was acquired by the Maurya dynasty. Bactria expanded southward but fell (mid-2d cent. B.C.) to the Parthians and rebellious tribes (notably the Saka). Buddhism was introduced from the east by the Yüechi, who founded the Kushan dynasty (early 2d cent. B.C.).
Their capital was Peshawar. The Kushans declined (3d cent. A.D.) and were supplanted by the Sassanids, the Ephthalites, and the Turkish Tu-Kuie.

The Muslim conquest of Afghanistan began in the 7th cent. Several short-lived Muslim dynasties were founded, the most powerful of them having its capital at Ghazna (see Ghazni). Mahmud of Ghazna, who conquered the lands from Khorasan in Iran to the Punjab in India early in the 11th cent., was the greatest of Afghanistan's rulers. Jenghiz Khan (c.1220) and Timur (late 14th cent.) were subsequent conquerors of renown. Babur, a descendant of Timur, used Kabul as the base for his conquest of India and the establishment of the Mughal empire in the 16th cent. In the 18th cent. the Persian Nadir Shah extended his rule to N of the Hindu Kush. After his death (1747) his lieutenant, Ahmad Shah, an Afghan tribal leader, established a united state covering most of present-day Afghanistan. His dynasty, the Durrani, gave the Afghans the name (Durrani) that they themselves frequently use.

The Afghan Wars and Independence

The reign of the Durrani line ended in 1818, and no predominant ruler emerged until Dost Muhammad became emir in 1826. During his rule the status of Afghanistan became an international problem, as Britain and Russia contested for influence in central Asia. Aiming to control access to the northern approaches to India, the British tried to replace Dost Muhammad with a former emir, subordinate to them. This policy caused the first Afghan War (1838–42) between the British and the Afghans. Dost Muhammad was at first deposed but, after an Afghan revolt in Kabul, was restored. In 1857, Dost Muhammad signed an alliance with the British. He died in 1863 and was succeeded, after familial fighting, by his third son, Sher Ali.

As the Russians acquired territory bordering on the Amu Darya, Sher Ali and the British quarreled, and the second Afghan War began (1878). Sher Ali died in 1879. His successor, Yakub Khan, ceded the Khyber Pass and other areas to the British, and after a British envoy was murdered the British occupied Kabul. Eventually Abd ar-Rahman Khan was recognized (1880) as emir. In the following years Afghanistan's borders were more precisely defined. Border agreements were reached with Russia (1885 and 1895), British India (the Durand Agreement, 1893), and Persia (1905). The Anglo-Russian agreement of 1907 guaranteed the independence of Afghanistan under British influence in foreign affairs. Abd ar-Rahman Khan died in 1901 and was succeeded by his son Habibullah. Despite British pressure, Afghanistan remained neutral in World War I. Habibullah was assassinated in 1919. His successor, Amanullah, attempting to free himself of British influence, invaded India (1919). This third Afghan War was ended by the Treaty of Rawalpindi, which gave Afghanistan full control over its foreign relations.

Attempts at Modernization and Reform

The attempts of Amanullah (who, after 1926, styled himself king) at Westernization—including reducing the power of the country's religious leaders and increasing the freedom of its women—provoked opposition that led to his deposition in 1929. A Tajik tribal leader, Bacha-i-Saqqao, or Habibullah Kalakani, held Kabul for a few months until defeated by Amanullah's cousin, Muhammad Nadir Khan, who became King Nadir Shah. The new king pursued cautious modernization efforts until he was assassinated in 1933. His son Muhammad Zahir Shah succeeded him. Afghanistan was neutral in World War II; it joined the United Nations in 1946.

When British India was partitioned (1947), Afghanistan wanted the Pathans of the North-West Frontier Province (now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan), who had been separated from Afghan's Pashtuns by the
Durand Agreement of 1893, to be able to choose whether to join Afghanistan, join Pakistan, or be independent. The Pathans were only offered the choice of joining Pakistan or joining India; they chose the former. In 1955, Afghanistan urged the creation of an autonomous Pathan state, Pushtunistan (Pakhtunistan). The issue subsided in the late 1960s but was revived by Afghanistan in 1972 when Pakistan was weakened by the loss of its eastern wing (now Bangladesh) and the war with India.

In great-power relations, Afghanistan was neutral until the late 1970s, receiving aid from both the United States and the Soviet Union. In the early 1970s the country was beset by serious economic problems, particularly a severe long-term drought in the center and north. Maintaining that King Muhammad Zahir Shah had mishandled the economic crisis and in addition was stifling political reform, a group of young military officers deposed (July, 1973) the king and proclaimed a republic. Lt. Gen. Sardar Muhammad Daud Khan, the king's cousin, became president and prime minister. In 1978, Daud was deposed by a group led by Noor Mohammed Taraki, who instituted Marxist reforms and aligned the country more closely with the Soviet Union. In Sept., 1979, Taraki was killed and Hafizullah Amin took power. Shortly thereafter, the USSR sent troops into Afghanistan, Amin was executed, and the Soviet-supported Babrak Karmal became president.

The Afghanistan War and Islamic Fundamentalism

In the late 1970s the government faced increasing popular opposition to its social policies. By 1979 guerrilla opposition forces, popularly called mujahidin ("Islamic warriors"), were active in much of the country, fighting both Soviet forces and the Soviet-backed Afghan government. In 1986, Karmal resigned and was replaced by Mohammad Najibullah. The country was devastated by the Afghanistan War (1979–89), which took an enormous human and economic toll. After the Soviet withdrawal, the government steadily lost ground to the guerrilla forces. In early 1992, Kabul was captured, and the guerrilla alliance set up a new government consisting of a 50-member ruling council. Burhanuddin Rabbani was named interim president.

The victorious guerrillas proved unable to unite, however, and the forces of guerrilla leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar launched attacks on the new government. As fighting among various factions continued, Afghanistan was in effect divided into several independent zones, each with its own ruler. Beginning in late 1994 a militia of Pashtun Islamic fundamentalist students, the Taliban, emerged as an increasingly powerful force. In early 1996, as the Taliban continued its attempt to gain control of Afghanistan, Rabbani and Hekmatyar signed a power-sharing accord that made Hekmatyar premier. In September, however, the Taliban, under the leadership of Mullah Muhammad Omar, captured Kabul and declared themselves the legitimate government of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan; they imposed a particularly puritanical form of Islamic law in the two thirds of the country they controlled.

In Aug., 1998, as the Taliban appeared on the verge of taking over the whole country, U.S. missiles destroyed what was described by the Pentagon as an extensive terrorist training complex near Kabul run by Osama bin Laden, a Saudi-born militant accused of masterminding the 1998 bombings of the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. In Mar., 1999, a UN-brokered peace agreement was reached between the Taliban and their major remaining foe, the forces of the Northern Alliance, under Ahmed Shah Massoud, an ethnic Tajik and former mujahidin leader, but fighting broke out again in July. In November, the United Nations imposed economic sanctions on Afghanistan; this action and the 1998 U.S. missile attacks were related to the Afghan refusal to turn over bin Laden. Additional UN sanctions, including a ban on arms sales to Taliban forces, were imposed in Dec., 2000.
The Taliban controlled some 90% of the country by 2000, but their government was not generally recognized by the international community (the United Nations recognized President Burhanuddin Rabbani and the Northern Alliance). Continued warfare had caused over a million deaths, while 3 million Afghans remained in Pakistan and Iran as refugees. Adding to the nation's woe, a drought in W and central Asia that began in the late 1990s was most severe in Afghanistan.

In early 2001 the Taliban militia destroyed all statues in the nation, including two ancient giant Buddhas in Bamian, outside Kabul. The destruction was ordered by religious leaders, who regarded the figures as idolatrous and un-Islamic; the action was met with widespread international dismay and condemnation, even from other Islamic nations. In September, in a severe blow to the Northern Alliance, Massoud died as a result of a suicide bomb attack by assassins posing as Arab journalists. Two days after that attack, devastating terrorist assaults on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, which bin Laden had sanctioned, prompted new demands by U.S. President Bush for his arrest.

When the Taliban refused to hand bin Laden over, the United States launched (Oct., 2001) attacks against Taliban and Al Qaeda (bin Laden's organization) positions and forces. The United States also began providing financial aid and other assistance to the Northern Alliance and other opposition groups. Assisted by U.S. air strikes, opposition forces ousted Taliban and Al Qaeda forces from Afghanistan's major urban areas in November and December, often aided by the defection of forces allied with the Taliban. Several thousand U.S. troops began entering the country in November, mainly to concentrate on the search for bin Laden and Omar and to deal with the remaining pockets of their forces.

In early December a pan-Afghan conference in Bonn, Germany, appointed Hamid Karzai, a Pashtun with ties to the former king, as the nation's interim leader, replacing President Rabbani. By Jan., 2002, the Taliban and Al Qaeda had largely lost control of the country, although most of their leaders and unknown numbers of their forces remained at large. Fighting continued on a sporadic basis, with occasional larger battles, as occurred near Gardez in Mar., 2002. Control of the country largely reverted to the regional warlords who held power before the Taliban, and those warlords remained a powerful in subsequent years; other forces, such as that led by Hekmatyar, opposed the new regime. Britain, Canada, and other NATO nations provided forces for various military, peacekeeping, and humanitarian operations, and many other nations also agreed to contribute humanitarian aid.

The former king, Muhammad Zahir Shah, returned to the country from exile to convene (June, 2002) a loya jirga (a traditional Afghan grand council) to establish a transitional government. Karzai was elected president (for a two-year term), and the king was declared the “father of the nation.” That Karzai and his cabinet faced many challenges was confirmed violently in the following months when one of his vice presidents was assassinated and an attempt was made on Karzai's life. Nonetheless, by the end of 2002 the country had achieved a measure of stability.

Sporadic, generally small-scale fighting with various guerrillas continued, particularly in the southeast, with the Taliban regaining some strength and even control in certain districts. There also was fighting between rival factions in various parts of the country. Reconstruction proceeded slowly, and central governmental control outside Kabul was limited. A return to economic health also was hindered by a persistent drought that continued through 2004.

In Aug., 2003, NATO assumed command of the international security force in the Kabul area. A new constitution was approved in Jan., 2004, by a loya jirga. It provided for a strong executive presidency and contained some concessions to minorities, but tensions between the dominant Pashtuns and other
ethnic groups were evident during the loya jirga. In early 2004 the United States and NATO both announced increases in the number of troops deployed in the country. The U.S. move coincided with new operations against the Taliban and Al Qaeda, while the NATO forces were slated to be used to provide security and in reconstruction efforts. Further increases in NATO forces, to nearly 9,000, were announced in early 2005.

By mid-2004 little of the aid that the United Nations had estimated the country would need had reached Afghanistan, while a new, Afghani-proposed development plan called for $28.5 billion over seven years. Although foreign nations pledged to provide substantial monies for three years, sufficient forces and funding for Afghan security were not included.

Karzai was elected to the presidency in Oct., 2004, in the country’s first democratic elections. The vote, which generally split along ethnic lines, was peaceful, but it was marred by some minor difficulties. Several losing candidates accused Karzai of fraud, but an international review panel said the irregularities that had occurred were not significant enough to have affected the outcome. Karzai’s new cabinet consisted largely of technocrats and was ethnically balanced, although Pashtuns generally held the more important posts.

The spring of 2005 was marked by an increase in attacks by the Taliban and their allies. Reports of the possible desecration of the Qur’an by U.S. interrogators at Guantánamo, when Afghan prisoners were held by the United States, provoked protests and riots in a number of Afghan cities and towns in May, 2005. The protests were largely in the country’s south and east, where U.S. forces were operating, and were believed to reflect frustration with the U.S. presence there as much as anger over the alleged desecration.

National and provincial legislative elections were held in Sept., 2005; in some locales the balloting was marred by fraud. Supporters of Karzai won a substantial number of seats in the lower house (Wolesi Jirga); religious conservatives, former mujahidin and Taliban, women, and Pashtuns (which are overlapping groups) were all elected in significant numbers to the body. Tensions with Pakistan increased in early 2006, as members of the Afghan government increasingly accused Pakistan of failing to control Taliban and Al Qaeda camps in areas bordering Afghanistan; by the end of the year President Karzai had accused elements of the Pakistani government of directly supporting the Taliban. In Jan., 2006, a U.S. air strike destroyed several houses in E Pakistan where Al Qaeda leaders were believed to be meeting.

May, 2006, saw the U.S.-led coalition launch its largest campaign against Taliban forces since 2001; some 11,000 troops undertook a summer offensive in four S Afghan provinces, where the Taliban had become increasingly stronger and entrenched. Also in May a deadly traffic accident in Kabul involving a U.S. convoy sparked anti-American and antigovernment demonstrations and riots in the city. In July, NATO assumed responsibility for peacekeeping in S Afghanistan, taking over from the coalition. NATO troops subsequently found themselves engaged in significant battles with the Taliban, particularly in Kandahar prov. NATO took command of all peacekeeping forces in the country, including some 11,000 U.S. troops, in October; some 8,000 U.S. troops remained part of Operation Enduring Freedom, assigned to fighting Taliban and Al Qaeda forces in mountainous areas bordering Pakistan.

In the second half of 2006, as casualties mounted, NATO commanders encountered difficulties when their call for reinforcements failed to raise the necessary number of troops and matériel. NATO leaders also joined Afghan leaders in criticizing Pakistan for failing to end the Taliban’s use of areas bordering
Afghanistan, especially in Baluchistan, as safe havens. In Mar., 2007, NATO forces launched a new offensive in Helmand prov. against the Taliban and Al Qaeda. The same month the National Assembly passed a law granting many Afghans amnesty for human-rights violations committed during the past two-and-a-half decades of civil war.

In the spring of 2007, Pakistan's construction of a fence along the border with Afghanistan led to protests from Afghanistan, and sparked several border clashes between the forces of the two countries. (Afghanistan does not officially recognize the modern Pakistan-Afghanistan border.) In May NATO forces killed the top Taliban field commander, Mullah Dadullah, but Taliban forces mounted some guerrilla attacks on the outskirts of the capital and in the north during 2007. Also in 2007, Afghan civilian casualties during military operations became a source of anger and concern among Afghans.

Afghan civilian casualties continued from U.S. air strikes continued to be a problem in 2008, straining relations between Afghanistan and the United States. Significant, if sporadic, fighting with insurgents also continued through 2008, as the Taliban mounted some of their most serious attacks since 2002. As the year progressed, U.S. forces mounted strikes against insurgent sanctuaries across the Pakistan border, leading to tensions with Pakistan. In Apr., 2008, President Karzai escaped an assassination attempt unhurt. In July, Karzai accused Pakistani agents of being behind insurgent attacks in Afghanistan, among them a suicide bombing of the Indian embassy in Kabul.

Although the majority of the Afghan refugees abroad repatriated in the years following the overthrow of the Taliban, it was estimated in 2008 that some 3 million Afghans were still refugees, with most of those in Pakistan and Iran, and those numbers did not significantly diminish in subsequent years. Afghanistan continued to suffer from a weak central government and weak economy, which exacerbated the insurgency and led to an increase in illegal drug production. Government corruption also has been a major problem. The weak government contributed to shortfalls in international development aid to Afghanistan. By early 2008, some $25 billion had been pledged, and three fifths of that actually spent. The effectiveness of the aid was greatly reduced by government corruption, spending on foreign consultants and companies (sometimes required under the terms of the aid), wasteful spending practices, and sharp imbalances nationally in the distribution of the aid.

In Jan., 2009, the Afghan election commission postponed the presidential election until August. President Karzai, whose term constitutionally would expire in May, subsequently called for a April election, in part because opposition leaders called for an interim government after his term ended, but an earlier election was impractical. A major U.S. and Afghan offensive against the Taliban in Helmand prov. was launched in July, 2009; at the same time, U.S. forces began a wider use of counterinsurgency tactics in their attempts to secure the Afghan countryside.

The Aug., 2009, presidential election was marred by extensive fraud. Preliminary results gave Karzai 55% of the vote, but a review discounted so many ballots that a runoff was required. The runoff election was canceled, however, and Karzai declared the winner when Abdullah Abdullah, his opponent, withdrew in November in protest, asserting that the runoff would also be subject to fraud. In late 2009, U.S. President Obama announced that U.S. forces would increase by 30,000 combat and training troops, and NATO allies pledged an additional 7,000 troops. The 2010 increase brought the foreign forces supporting the Afghan government to nearly 120,000, with Americans constituting roughly two thirds of the troops. The escalation was designed to counteract Taliban gains, and led to increased fighting and increased American casualties.

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In Jan., 2010, the election commission postponed the May parliamentary elections to September, because of a lack of funding and concerns with security and logistics. In February NATO and Afghan forces mounted an offensive in Helmand prov. that won control over the strategic town of Marjah by March; later that month more gradual efforts began to reestablish government control over Kandahar. Early 2010 was also marked by increased tensions between the president and the United States, NATO, and the United Nations, with the president making a number of anti-Western remarks, including accusations of foreign interference in Afghan elections. During the same period, he had difficulty in winning parliamentary support for his cabinet nominees.

In June, 2010, a three-day national peace jirga [assembly] involving some 1,600 delegates supported Karzai's plans for peace talks with the Taliban, but the Taliban and other Islamist rebels publicly denounced the jirga. In the Sept., 2010, election for the Wolesi Jirga, roughly 40% of the electorate voted, and the election was marred by political violence and fraud. Almost one quarter of the votes were subsequently ruled invalid, and the final results were delayed by numerous challenges. The results for all the seats were only finalized in December by the election commission. Karzai's government subsequently launched its own investigation into the results, though its legal standing to do so was questionable. In June, 2011, that investigation overturned the results of a quarter of the seats, provoking a crisis with the Wolesa Jirga, where many members rejected the decisions and raised (July) the possibility of impeaching Karzai. Karzai disbanded his tribunal in August, and the election commission then overturned nine results it had previously finalized, but many lower house members also rejected that decision.

Meanwhile, in 2010 the Kabul Bank, the country's largest private bank, with executives and major shareholders who had government connections, came to the brink of collapse due to mismanagement, fraud, and a run on the bank; some $860 million was lost to fraudulent loan schemes. In September the central bank was forced to take control of the bank. In 2011 the unresolved situation with the bank led the World Bank to delay disbursing funds to the country, and the governor of the central bank resigned and fled Afghanistan (June), saying that his life had been threatened in connection with the Kabul Bank investigation.

In June, 2011, after the killing of Osama bin Laden in Pakistan, U.S. President Obama announced that American forces would be withdrawn at a quickened pace, with some 30,000 troops to leave within a year's time. The troops, which had some success against the Taliban in parts of the south, were increasingly turning their focus toward E Afghanistan. At about the same time, NATO forces began the lengthy process of turning responsibility for security in the country to Afghan forces. In July the head of Kandahar's provincial council, who was Karzai's half-brother and a powerful and controversial figure, was assassinated. In September ex-president Burhanuddin Rabbani, who had been leading peace talks with the Taliban, was also assassinated, but subsequently talks between the government and Taliban continued to occur at intervals.

In Sept., 2011, and Apr., 2012, there were intense but relatively limited insurgent assaults on prominent targets in Kabul that seem intended to call into question the idea that NATO and Afghan forces were in control; the attacks were linked to the Haqqani network, a Pashtun group with ties to Al Qaeda. A NATO summit in May, 2012, approved the withdrawal of all foreign combat forces from Afghanistan by the end of 2014. Relations between the president and NATO forces in the subsequent months were at times strained and complicated, but in June, 2013, Afghan forces assumed overall responsibility for the country's security. As NATO troops were withdrawn from many areas, the Taliban responded with
increased attacks, and Afghan forces were stretched and forced to cede control some territory. There also was an increase in civilian deaths and injuries from 2013 after a drop in 2012, and that continued in subsequent years. In some cases Taliban forces succeeding in seizing control (if only for a time) of strategic locations, most notably Kunduz in N Afghanistan in 2015 (also contested in 2016) and in S Afghanistan in 2015–16, and in 2016 Taliban forces were as successful as they had been since they were overthrown. Among other Islamic fundamentalist forces in Afghanistan, the Islamic State in Khorasan, formed in 2015 mainly from members of the Pakistani Taliban and not aligned with the Taliban, has been somewhat successful in securing a foothold in E Afghanistan; it also has mounted attacks on Afghanistan Shiites.

In Nov., 2013, the United States and Afghanistan negotiated an agreement covering the continued operations of U.S. troops in the country after 2014, but Karzai subsequently refused to sign it until after the Afghan presidential election in 2014. In the election’s first round in April, Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani, a former finance minister, placed first with 45% and second with 32% of the vote, respectively. After the runoff in June, Abdullah accused Ghani’s supporters of fraud after initial reports suggested Ghani had a million vote lead; Ghani also alleged fraud on the part of his opponent’s supporters. The preliminary results, released in July, showed Ghani winning with 56% of the vote, but Abdullah asserted he had won. An international audit of the vote failed to resolve the charges of fraud, but both sides agreed in September to establish a power-sharing government with Ghani as president.

Ghani’s government subsequently signed the security agreement with the United States, and in Oct., 2015, the United States announced plans to slow the withdrawal of the remaining U.S. forces, so that some troops would remain in the country until at least 2017. In Sept., 2016, Ghani’s government signed a peace accord with Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, whose forces, although much less significant than the Taliban, had opposed the government since 2002. In 2017 a number of especially deadly terror attacks were mounted in the capital and other parts of the country; the Taliban controlled roughly half the country by mid-2017 but increasingly appeared to be mounting attacks designed to inflict casualties on the police and army. The United States, under the new Trump administration, announced that it would increase U.S. forces by several thousand in support of the Afghan military and abandon any timetable for withdrawal, leading to expectations that U.S. forces would remain into the 2020s.

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