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Recent evolutions in Afghanistan (end of 2014 - early 2015)

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Ongoing evolutions in Afghanistan are a mix of some obviously positive trends and a set of more or less connected (or intertwined) problems, threats and risks. In some occasions, media reports presents with significant details this volatile mix. In February 2015, for example, *Stars and Stripes* published an article emphasizing the fact that situation in Afghanistan is, after the end of a long NATO-led international mission, mixing undeniably positive elements and really worrying and potentially dangerous realities. According to the open source we are quoting here from, “Some of the major achievements often cited by U.S. civilian and military leaders since 2001 are indeed significant, including improvements in women’s rights, education and medical care. Most notable is that the U.S.-led International Security Assistance Force built a 350,000-strong Afghan security force, which is largely fighting on its own”. On the other hand, the same source estimates, “with Afghan forces short on military equipment, air power and medevac capabilities, few analysts see any scenario wherein Afghan forces can defeat the Taliban on the battlefield. In addition, the drawdown of international forces and the parallel reduction in the number of foreign contractors and aid workers has dealt a further blow to an economy dependent almost entirely on foreign aid — the U.S. pays the salaries of the Afghan security forces”; and, even more worrying at political level, “the government is still struggling to get parliamentary approval for a full Cabinet nearly six months after President Ashraf Ghani and his election rival, Abdullah Abdullah, the government’s chief executive, took office after sparring bitterly over election fraud”².

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² Heath DRUZIN, “ANALYSIS: Experts dispute upbeat views on Afghan fight”, *Stars and Stripes*, February 19, 2015, at the Internet address <http://www.stripes.com/news/experts-dispute-upbeat-views-on-afghan-fight-1.330472>

At this very moment, in mid-March 2015, the general situation in Afghanistan (and mainly stability and security issues of all sorts) is so volatile and full of uncertainties and geo-strategically threatening possible consequences, that “the Obama administration is abandoning plans to cut the number of U.S. forces in Afghanistan to 5,500 by year's end, bowing to military leaders who want to keep more troops, including many into the 2016 fighting season, U.S. officials say”. Reliable open sources report that “while no final decision on numbers has been made, the officials said the administration is poised to slow withdrawal plans and probably will allow many of the 9,800 American troops to remain well into next year”, and that Republican Sen. John McCain, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, said a lack of a really robust and effective U.S. presence in Afghanistan “would create a vacuum” and “allow terrorists to foment the same disaster in Afghanistan as we have seen in Iraq — growing instability, terrorist safe havens and direct threats to the United States”³.

The present text lists and briefly comments, in the first chapter, *some of the positive realities in Afghanistan along the past few months* (the political and professional will, and the capabilities enabling the Afghan National Army / ANA to fight extensively – and in many occasions quite successfully – against various insurgent groups; top level efforts to boost effectiveness of governmental activity in the provinces which are threatened a lot by insurgents; and a significant presence of the First Lady Rula Ghani on the public arena, in a deliberate attempt to focus the public attention on women’s right and on the problem of large scale poverty), and, in the second chapter, *several important problems, threats and risks Afghanistan is confronted with* (Islamic State / ISIL started to operate in the country; a quite high level of violence in the country; increased presence of insurgent groups in the North, which had been quite stable for some years along the past decade; the extensive problem of the refugees, mainly in Pakistan; decreasing amount of international assistance, a topic present in some media reports; and some worrying trends within the armed forces, including a high desertion rate).

³ Lolita C. BALDOR (AP), “Officials: US to keep higher level of troops in Afghanistan”, *Stars and Stripes*, March 14, 2015, at the Internet address <http://www.stripes.com/news/middle-east/officials-us-to-keep-higher-level-of-troops-in-afghanistan-1.334550>

1. Some significant positive realities

One of the most important obviously positive trends in Afghan evolutions is the uninterrupted political will and combat capability enabling Afghan troops to actively fight, in various regions of the country, against insurgent of all sorts. U.S. open source are reporting that a major governmental offensive combat operation has started in the southern Helmand province. The acting Afghan President Ashraf Ghani “was personally involved in planning the operation, which is codenamed Zolfiqar – meaning double-edged sword – and which began on Feb. 10 [2015], according to Maj. Gen. Kurt Fuller, deputy chief of staff for U.S. and NATO operations in Afghanistan”, *Stars and Stripes* reports. The same open source is quoting “a Western diplomat who spoke on condition of anonymity in order to discuss the secret operation” in Helmand province. He said the ongoing governmental offensive “is an incredibly important operation”; basically it can be regarded as being “Ghani’s attempt to demonstrate to the U.S. and the U.S. Congress that Afghan ground forces are able to take the lead and conduct offensive operations if they have the right enablers to support them”. According to what we know at this very moment, Afghan governmental troops “have already cleared large areas where the insurgents had been entrenched for more than a decade”, and Taliban combat casualties are “higher than those of government forces”, by “a factor of 10 to one”, a senior Western military officials estimates. We also know that “U.S. military leaders have advised the troops in Helmand and helped plan the operation, but American troops are not involved in the fighting”, and also that ANA (Afghan National Army) forces “had found bunkers, tunnels, trench lines, and a giant slingshot apparently used to fling grenades at government forces”. Open sources are also reporting that ANA forces A had “met with heavy resistance that was more than they anticipated”. One very senior Afghan official, General Mohammad Salim Ahses, “the head of the national police, told The Associated Press by telephone from Sangin that 385 Taliban fighters had been killed there, including 31 commanders”, and the entire Sangin district, “which had seen months of heavy fighting, was declared clear” on February 27, more than two weeks after the moment when the massive governmental offensive started in the Helmand province. Local sources are also reporting that, immediately after pushing insurgents out of certain areas, “Afghan officials have begun meeting with local leaders to plan the building of new schools, clinics, police stations and courthouses”. A senior U.S. military

commander “said tribal elders [in Helmand province] are already helping to recruit residents for the local police and border guard”⁴.

In the last part of 2014, and also in early stages of 2015, media reports and other open sources indicate that the general situation in Afghanistan is influenced a lot, in a positive way, in some significant moments, by decisions and actions of some of the most senior leaders in Kabul. *For example, in order to boost the effectiveness of the government-led effort aimed at defeating (or at least containing) insurgency, the Afghan President decided, at the end of 2014, to replace several senior provincial officials, Al Jazeera reports.* The open source we are quoting from said that “facing an intensified Taliban insurgency, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani plans to fire senior civilian and military leaders in the country's most volatile provinces to reinvigorate the fight against insurgents, officials told The Associated Press”. The same source reports Ghani planned “to replace officials in the northern provinces of Kunduz and Baghdis, Ghazni and Nangahar provinces in the east bordering Pakistan and Helmand in the south”⁵, and the list of the provinces (placed in three strategically significant regions of the country) is a clear proof of the seriousness of the insurgent threat, aiming to destabilize the very fragile fabric of security and predictability in Afghanistan.

We are also mentioning that among the not so many recent really positive evolutions in Afghanistan we can legitimately list the significant efforts made by the wife of the acting Afghan President in order to promote women's rights and other socially sensitive topics. According to an open source, “Afghanistan's First Lady Rula Ghani has adopted a rare public profile since her husband, President Ashraf Ghani, took office in September [2014]. She is the first wife of an Afghan leader to routinely appear in public and has campaigned for women's issues and poverty alleviation”. The same open source reports that Rula Ghani said, in a speech delivered in order to mark International Women's Day that “women should be respected both inside and outside their homes and play an active role in society as doctors, engineers, soldiers, police officers”. Such a call my help a lot, we think, the consolidation of positive trends in a country

⁴ For all fragments quoted along this paragraph see Lynne O'DONNELL (Associated Press), “Afghan army takes on Taliban in first solo offensive”, *Stars and Stripes*, March 2, 2015, at the Internet address <http://www.stripes.com/news/middle-east/afghan-army-takes-on-taliban-in-first-solo-offensive-1.332268>

⁵ “Officials: Afghan president to fire leaders in volatile provinces”, *Al Jazeera America*, December 1, 2014, text available at the Internet address <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/12/1/afghanistan-suicideattackatfuneralkills9.html>

where “local authorities have been slow to adopt change, and outside major cities deeply conservative traditions prevail”, and where “women who step out of their homes unaccompanied by male relatives often face verbal and sometimes physical harassment”, and “domestic violence goes largely unpunished and girls are still married off against their will, often to much older men, as payment for debts or as swaps for property”⁶. Such a top level presence on the public arena – as Rula Ghani clearly is – might significantly enhance the success of public policies aimed at solving both women’s problems and large scale poverty.

2. Some major problems, threats and risks

One of the most worrying set of piece of news directly connected to quite recent and geo-strategically significant evolutions in Afghanistan is that the terrorist organization Islamic State (also called ISIL or ISIS) started to operate, most probably in January-February 2015, in several provinces of the country.

In early February 2015, the governor of the Kunduz (or Kundoz) province, in Northern Afghanistan, confirmed “that Islamic States of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) which also goes by ISIS or its Arabic name DAESH has started operation in Kundoz province”, Afghan open sources reported. At that very moment, estimated the senior Afghan official, there were “about 70 members of ISIS operating in Dasht Archi and Chahardara Districts of Kundoz province”. The governor also said “the group plans to expand to other northern provinces from Dasht Archi and Chahardara Districts”, and “he named Faryab, Baghlan, Takhar and Badakhshan provinces in northern Afghanistan where ISIS according to him eyes to move in from Dasht Archi and Chahardara districts”. The same open source indicates that, in early February 2015, “reports of ISIS operations in southern Zabul and Helmand provinces as well as Ghazni province have also surfaced”⁷

⁶ For all fragments quoted along this paragraph see Mustafa NAJAFIZADA and Lynne O'DONNELL, “Afghanistan’s only female taxi driver steers change”, last updated on March 12, 2015, text available at the Internet address <http://www.stuff.co.nz/world/middle-east/67283515/afghanistans-only-female-taxi-driver-steers-change>

⁷ “ISIS plans to expand in northern Afghanistan: Governor Kundoz”, on the *Khaama Press. News-Reports-Analysis* webpage, February 2, 2015, at the Internet address <http://www.khaama.com/isis-plans-to-expand-in-northern-afghanistan-governor-kundoz-29008>

Later on, in late February 2015, a *DPA* piece of news quoted the same Mohammad Omar Saafai, governor of the northern province of Kunduz, who said that “more than 50 members of Daesh (Islamic State in Arabic) terrorist group have come from Pakistan through Badakhshan and Takhar provinces and entered into Kunduz”. These ISIL fighters were clearly involved in several combat episodes fought against governmental forces which had been deployed to Kunduz province in order to push back recent Taliban gains in several districts. The reliable open source we are quoting here from also reports “other Afghan officials have also said that scores of Islamic State militants have attacked local forces in Afghanistan”⁸, in different provinces of the country.

Also in late February 2015, a senior Afghan police official, Jawzjan Province Police Chief General Faqir Mohammad Jawzjani told RFE/RL “ISIL in northern Afghanistan has about 600 members”, and also estimated that “those numbers are attributable to pre-existing Taliban militants switching allegiance rather than to new militants arriving”⁹

The general level of violence in Afghanistan is still high and reliable open sources quoting local Afghan authorities and specialist indicate, in quite many occasions, increasing levels of violence. For example, “the international charity Emergency said its hospitals in Lashkar Gah, Helmand’s capital, and the national capital Kabul had seen casualties almost double in February [2015] to 226 over the same month last year due to increased insurgent violence across the country, according to program coordinator Luca Radaelli”¹⁰.

Insurgency (involving the Talibans, but also other groups and organizations) is still a very potent reality in Afghanistan. On March 10, 2015, for example, “a series of bombings across Afghanistan, including one targeting a police checkpoint in the country’s south, killed at least 13 people, authorities said”. The deadliest attack took place “on the outskirts of Lashkar

⁸ DPA, “Afghan forces kill 100 militants in northern province, governor says”, *DPA International*, February 26, 2015, at the Internet address <http://www.dpa-international.com/news/asia/afghan-forces-kill-100-militants-in-northern-province-governor-says-a-44389617.html>

⁹ Dzhumaguly ANNAYEV, “Militants of various stripes assemble under ISIL flag in northern Afghanistan”, on the *Central Asia Online* webpage, February 26, 2015, at the Internet address http://centralasiaonline.com/en_GB/articles/caii/features/main/2015/02/26/feature-01

¹⁰ Lynne O’DONNELL (Associated Press), “Afghan army takes on Taliban in first solo offensive”, *Stars and Stripes*, March 2, 2015, at the Internet address <http://www.stripes.com/news/middle-east/afghan-army-takes-on-taliban-in-first-solo-offensive-1.332268>

Gah, the capital of Helmand province, killing eight people and wounding 23, said Omar Zwak, the spokesman for the provincial governor”, and “the dead included six civilians and two police officers”. Police authorities in the Helmand province said “a separate roadside bombing killed four people and wounded five”. On the same day, “in Baghlan province in northern Afghanistan, another bomb exploded near a hospital, killing one civilian and wounding 16, a senior police official said”, and “the official said that the target of the bomb in the provincial capital, Puli Khumri, was a police vehicle, though no police officer was wounded”. The open source we are quoting here from estimates that at least the attacks in Helmand might be part of the retaliatory tactics used by Taliban militants. Media sources indicate that “Afghanistan’s army has been fighting to clear large parts of Helmand of Taliban militants”, and that “the insurgents have retaliated in recent days with a series of suicide attacks in towns and villages across the province”¹¹. The episode clearly proves that, at least in some occasions, Afghan militants are able to plan and stage powerful attacks, against both civilian and military (or police) targets, enjoying a significant amount of tactically important freedom of movement and freedom of action.

When we analyze Afghan insurgency, we have to take into account that, *at least in some occasions, Taliban insurgents are able – and have the political will and military resources – to act not only in the southern provinces, but also in the Northern part of the country, in regions which have been almost completely pacified for several years.* For example, “an Afghan official says Taliban gunmen have killed seven policemen in an ambush in the northern Kunduz province”. A local official appointed by the central government in Kabul “said the policemen were travelling to a neighboring province to collect their salaries when they were ambushed by up to 30 militants”. In another incident, “in Parwan province, north of the capital Kabul, four policemen were killed while manning a security post on Wednesday [March 11, 2015] night in Syagurd district, Governor Mohammad Sayed Sediqi says”. The open source we are quoting here from reports that “in 2014, more than 5,000 policemen were killed by insurgents, raising concerns about the force’s sustainability”¹².

¹¹ For the fragments quoted along this paragraph see Mirwais KHAN (AP), “Officials say bombings across Afghanistan, including southern checkpoint attack, kill 13”, *U.S. News & World Report*, March 10, 2015, at the Internet address <http://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2015/03/10/official-says-suicide-car-bomber-kills-8-in-afghanistan>

¹² AP, Afghanistan: Taliban kill 7 police officials in ambush, *Hindustan Times*, March 12, 2015, at the Internet address <http://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/afghanistan-taliban-kill-7-police-officials-in-ambush/article1-1325492.aspx>

The increasing Taliban presence (generating intense fighting, but also political pressures of all sorts) in Northern provinces of Afghanistan was clearly obvious in the final months of 2014 and in the opening stages of 2015. In late October 2014, for example, *New York Times (NYT)* published a report saying “the last time Afghans in the northern province of Kunduz felt so threatened by the Taliban was in 2009, just before President Obama deployed thousands of troops to push the insurgents back from the outskirts of the province’s capital” and that “now the Taliban are back, but the cavalry will not be coming”. The same open source reported that, according to declarations made by Afghan officials, “in an area that has not been a primary front against the Taliban for years, there are now two districts almost entirely under Taliban rule”, and “the Taliban are administering legal cases and schools, and even allowing international aid operations to work there, the officials”. *NYT* also reported “the new Afghan government under President Ashraf Ghani has acknowledged the depth of the crisis, telling local officials in a videoconference that Kunduz’s situation was a priority on a par with major battle fronts in the Taliban-heavy south and east this year. Already, troop reinforcements have been sent from Mazar-i-Sharif, the main city in the north”¹³.

Later on, in February 2015, some successful governmental “cleanup operations” took started in the already mentioned Kunduz province. Along 15 days of heavy fighting, a local official declared, “Afghan security forces killed 100 Taliban militants”, while “60 others were injured”. The same Afghan officials declared that “14 Afghan troops were killed and 60 others were injured in the battles”, that “three civilians were also killed, and some 650 families were displaced from the district due to the heavy clashes”, and that military operations will go on “until the Taliban threat is minimized”¹⁴.

The unstable and clearly unpredictable general security situation easily offers an almost complete explanation for the really huge numbers of Afghan refugees, present mainly in Pakistan. According to United Nations official estimates quoted by reliable open sources, “there are 1.6 million registered refugees” of Afghan origin in Pakistan, “and about one million

¹³ Azam AHMED, “Taliban Are Rising Again in Afghanistan’s North”, *New York Times*, October 22, 2014, at the Internet address <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/23/world/asia/taliban-rise-again-in-afghanistans-north.html>

¹⁴ DPA, “Afghan forces kill 100 militants in northern province, governor says”, *DPA International*, February 26, 2015, at the Internet address <http://www.dpa-international.com/news/asia/afghan-forces-kill-100-militants-in-northern-province-governor-says-a-44389617.html>

who remain undocumented”¹⁵. 2.6 million refugees represents a significant percentage of the total Afghan population, estimated by CIA to be a quite large one – 31,822,848 persons in July 2014¹⁶, according to the *World Factbook* (Afghanistan page last updated on June 24, 2014). The same media source quoted here offers some grim extra details concerning this very situation. According to *VOA*, “the protracted Afghan refugee situation in Pakistan has become a major irritant in bilateral relations because Pakistani authorities are increasingly blaming the refugees for a rise in criminal and militant activity in parts of the country”, and “Islamabad’s renewed counterterrorism efforts include measures to repatriate both official and unofficial Afghan refugees from Pakistan. Over the past three months, police raids against Afghan-dominated neighborhoods and refugee camps have helped spur an exodus of more than 50,000 Afghans back into Afghanistan”. The same text is clearly stating that “most” of these repatriated Afghan refugees “are said to be undocumented Afghans whom Pakistani authorities consider a security threat”¹⁷.

Open sources indicate that *decreasing amount of international assistance is also a severe problem Afghanistan is more and more confronted with*. For example, in a context (already briefly commented by this text) in which “Pakistan wants all registered Afghan refugees to leave by the end of 2015”, open sources are estimating that “the sudden increase in returning Afghans has already worried the government in Kabul, which is facing severe budget and security problems at a time when there is less international assistance”¹⁸.

The long-term problem of decreased international assistance in Afghanistan after the end of the NATO-led ISAF mission was already obvious in 2013. Two years ago, an open source directly warned: “According to a recent USAID report on Afghanistan, if foreign governments treat development aid in Afghanistan anything like they did in Iraq, the government of Afghanistan would see development aid decrease by around 70% once troops withdraw. Such decreases are a significant cause for concern. Looking back over Afghanistan’s

¹⁵ Ayaz GUL, “Pakistan, Afghanistan Team Up to Document Refugees”, *Voice of America (VOA)*, March 12, 2015, at the Internet address <http://www.voanews.com/content/pakistan-afghanistan-team-up-to-document-refugees/2677147.html>

¹⁶ “People and Society”, in country presentation text “Afghanistan”, in *The World Factbook*, at the Internet address <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/af.html>

¹⁷ Ayaz GUL, *op. cit.*

¹⁸ Ayaz GUL, *op. cit.*

history, one finds that when the central government was well funded, it was at least able to maintain control of the country, if not govern it to some degree. Absent such funding, the situation deteriorated rapidly”¹⁹.

We are also to strongly underline that *uninterrupted foreign assistance is really vital for Afghanistan*. A Reuters piece of news published in late December 2014 clearly stated, quoting official figures, that “Afghanistan aims to raise around 30 percent of its 2014 budget internally, but it is off target and had to ask donors for an emergency bailout ... to pay salaries”, and that the situation is growing worse, as long “has collapsed from an average 9.4 percent growth between 2003-2012 to 1.5 percent this year [2014], according to the World Bank”²⁰

Another major problem Afghan authorities are confronted with is that of some worrying trends within the armed forces. In early March 2015, *Stars and Stripes* published a piece of military journalism reporting significant – or may be even increasing – levels of combat casualties of all sorts and desertions, emphasizing that these “have left the Afghan National Army the smallest it has been since 2011, even as the country’s security forces face their first fighting season without major international military support”. Between February and November 2014, “more than 15,000 personnel were dropped from ANA rolls for a variety of reasons, including deaths”, say “newly declassified data provided by the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan, Gen. John Campbell, to the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction” (SIGAR). Combat casualties of all sorts of the Afghan forces are high. The open source we are quoting here from say “at least 1,300 soldiers were killed in action and another 6,200 were injured between October 2013 and September 2014, according to U.S. military officials”, and “police forces are estimated to have sustained even higher casualty rates”. As a result of these trends, the total number of Afghan troops “dropped by 8.5 percent, from 184,839 in February 2014 to 169,203 personnel in November of that year, SIGAR investigators wrote”. Speaking about desertion, the same open source indicates that becoming AWOL “is a problem and that the most commonly cited reasons for soldiers and police leaving

¹⁹ William THOMSON, “The Impeding Funding Gap in Afghanistan”, *INTERNATIONAL POLICY DIGEST*, May 2, 2013, at the Internet address <http://www.internationalpolicydigest.org/2013/05/02/the-impeding-funding-gap-in-afghanistan/>

²⁰ Jessica DONATI, “A decade of Western aid in Afghanistan - mission unsustainable?”, *Reuters*, December 23, 2014, at the Internet address <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/12/24/us-afghanistan-aid-insight-idUSKBN0K11VO20141224>

without authorization were disagreements with leadership over issues like leave, and poor quality of life”²¹.

We strongly underline that a quite high desertion rate in ANA (Afghan National Army) and police forces is not at all a new problem in Afghanistan; on the contrary, it is present, more or less intensely, along quite many years. In October 2012, for example, the notoriously influential New York Times estimated, quoting officials’ opinions, that “the Afghan Army is so plagued with desertions and low re-enlistment rates that it has to replace a third of its entire force every year”. At that very moment, NYT reported, “the Afghan deserters complain of corruption among their officers, poor food and equipment, indifferent medical care, Taliban intimidation of their families and, probably most troublingly, a lack of belief in the army’s ability to fight the insurgents after the American military withdraws”²². In December 2012, General Olivier de Bavinchove, number three commander in the U.S.-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), “said around 50,000 soldiers, or around 26 percent, of the 190,000-strong Afghan army desert the force each year”, while General Zahir Azimi, spokesman for the Afghan defense ministry, said “the desertion rate is significantly lower but still 10 to 15 percent”, a figure 30 to 45 time lower than in the United States, where “the desertion rate is 0.3 percent”²³.

All these positive and worrying elements, put together, generate a broad picture of a country where security, stability and development are difficult to imagine without adequate (meaning really massive) and long-term international assistance in several vitally important sectors of the state activity, and in most of the regions / provinces.

²¹ Josh SMITH, “Casualties, desertions spike as Afghan forces take lead”, *Stars and Stripes*, March 3, 2015, at the Internet address <http://www.stripes.com/news/casualties-desertions-spike-as-afghan-forces-take-lead-1.332504>

²² Rod NORDLAND, “Afghan Army’s Turnover Threatens U.S. Strategy”, *New York Times*, October 15, 2012, at the Internet address http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/16/world/asia/afghan-armys-high-turnover-clouds-us-exit-plan.html?_r=0

²³ AFP, “Afghan Army Desertions Rise as NATO Pullout Looms”, on *Military.com News*, December 18, 2012, at the Internet address <http://www.military.com/daily-news/2012/12/18/afghan-army-desertions-rise-as-nato-pullout-looms.html>