DISPLACEMENT AND ACCESS IN AFGHANISTAN: SCENARIOS

Possible developments in the profile of the displaced population and humanitarian access over the next 18 months

June 2019

Any questions? Please contact info@acaps.org

Scenario 1 Central government strengthens; reduced violence

President elected in September receives broad support from all Afghans, a substantive US-Taliban peace deal is reached, and GoA and Taliban agree to negotiate a form of shared governance. International forces begin a phased withdrawal. Splinter elements of the Taliban, the ISK, and others disrupt security, but this is localised. International support for state building and counterterrorism increases as part of a post-peace economic package while overall humanitarian funding decreases. China and India begin large-scale investment.

Scenario 2 Limited central governance; increased non-state actor influence

GoA continues to exert limited political control beyond major urban centres. Presidential elections change little. Coalition forces withdraw, with or without a substantive peace deal, reducing GoA's security reach and leading to increased conflict as Taliban and other groups seek to maximise control. Increasing numbers of higher-educated Afghans seek to emigrate while urban migration and unemployment continue to rise. There is limited, predominantly forced, return movement to Afghanistan and continued economic migration to Iran and Pakistan.

Scenario 3 Central government weakens; regions strengthen

Following inconclusive elections, none of the parties have the power to extend territorial control significantly but seek to consolidate their positions by exerting increasing control over the population, including in major urban areas. The GoA is largely symbolic and provides only specific, limited support to the regions. Conflict intensifies in many areas, predominantly the north, east, and southeast, as faction leaders seek to maximise areas under their control. Foreign funding reduces.

Scenario 4 Ineffective central governance; widespread conflict

A major shock renders the central government ineffective and unable to govern beyond Kabul. With central government focused almost entirely internally and on re-establishing security in Kabul, provincial power brokers seize the opportunity to establish de facto control over the provinces. The balance of power moves from Kabul and the country becomes increasingly unstable. The country fragments along ethnic lines and the official rule of law breaks down outside the capital.

Scenario 5 Urban earthquake

High magnitude earthquake strikes a major city, destroying most of the buildings and infrastructure and seriously reducing the local governance and emergency services' capacity. International assistance is slow to arrive.

Introduction

Problem statement

Afghanistan has been in a state of protracted conflict for over 40 years. Efforts to establish a central government which is acceptable and supported by all parties have faced many challenges and the country is fragmented. The Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GoA) has been heavily dependent on international financial and military support to exert authority. Meanwhile, the conflict with the Taliban has taken a significant toll on the national security forces (ANSF).

The forthcoming presidential elections and potential withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan have the potential to disrupt the political and military balance of power, thereby destabilising at least part of the country.

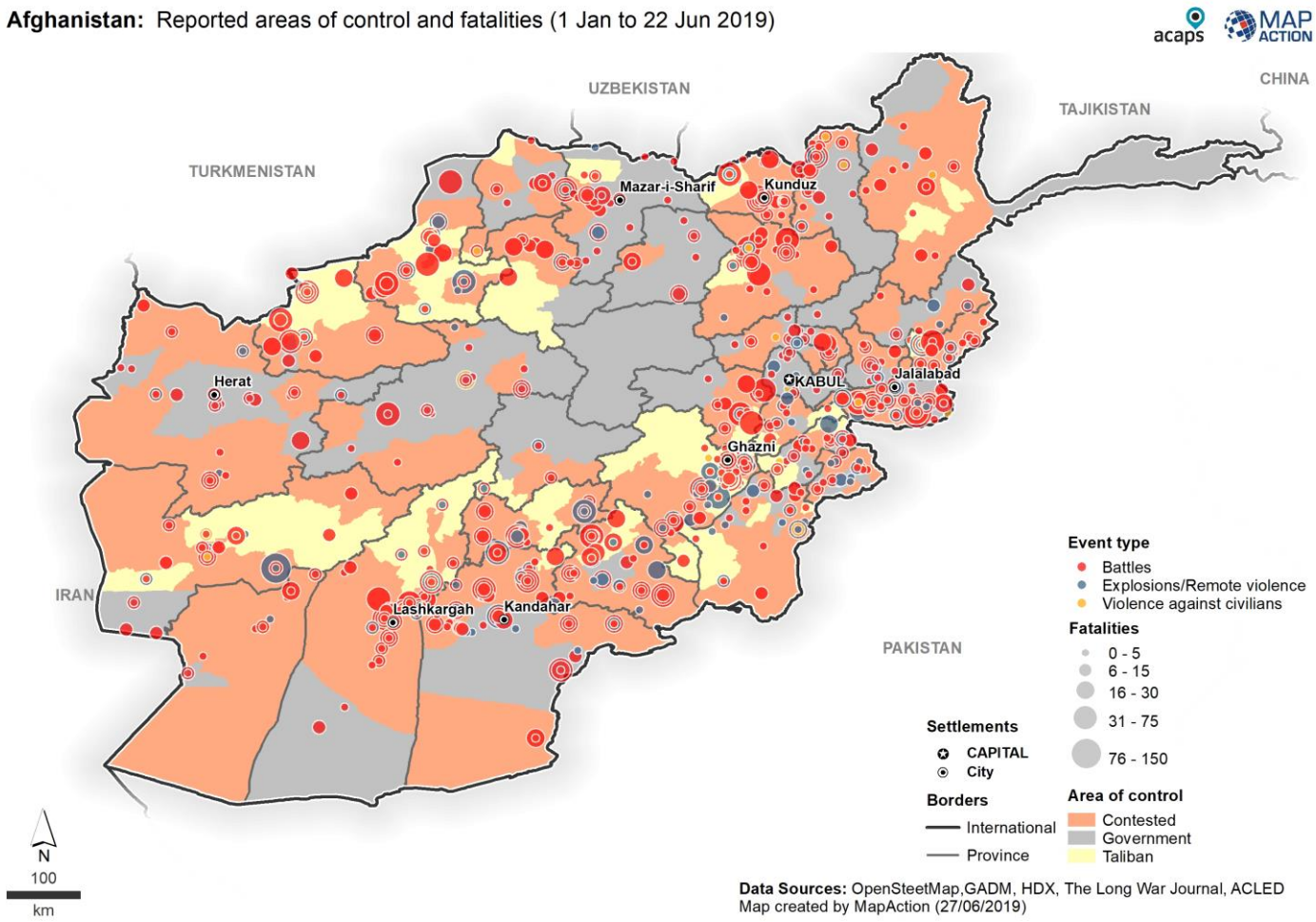
Taking into account a range of variables that affect Afghans' decisions to move, these scenarios consider how displacement and humanitarian access within Afghanistan might evolve during the second half of 2019 and throughout 2020, and the potential humanitarian consequences.

Scenarios for July 2019 – December 2020

These scenarios are not attempts to predict the future. Rather, they describe situations that could occur in the coming 18 months and are designed to highlight the possible impacts and humanitarian consequences associated with each scenario. The aim is to support strategic planning, create awareness, and promote preparedness activities for policymakers and other actors working in Afghanistan. The time frame is until December 2020 although the scenarios may remain valid some months longer. See the Methodology section for more information on how these scenarios were developed.

Limitations

Scenarios can seem to oversimplify an issue as the analysis balances details against broader assumptions. Scenario-building is not an end in itself; it is a process for generating new ideas that should, in turn, lead to changes in project design or decision-making. These scenarios focus primarily on the potential movement of people within, to, and from Afghanistan and the impact and humanitarian consequences for those moving.



How to use this report

The five scenarios are summarised on page 2. Pages 6–10 provide more detail on the scenarios, including potential humanitarian consequences. Page 11 lists five factors that could compound the humanitarian consequences of any of the scenarios. Annexed is a summary of the trigger events that could lead towards the situations described in the scenarios.

Current situation

Security and Conflict

Measuring the security situation in Afghanistan is challenging. There was a 5% decline in overall security incidents in 2018 compared to 2017 (the first decline since 2012), but this was not reflected in casualties figures for the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANSF), Taliban, and civilians. Additionally, while the number of armed clashes decreased by 8%, the number of airstrikes increased by 42%. The latter represents a shift towards more targeted attacks to defeat the Taliban leadership and more considered offensives by the Taliban. While the number of civilian casualties reported between January and March 2019 was lower than during the same period in 2016, 2017, and 2018, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) observed a rise in the proportion of civilians killed by IEDs from non-state armed groups and airstrikes from pro-government forces. Furthermore, many consider the civilian casualty figures to be significantly underreported. (UNAMA 24/02/18, WHO 30/04/2019, OCHA 03/05/2019)

The year 2018 saw the highest number of District Administrative Centres taken by the Taliban since 2015. Most were temporary take-overs and the control of provincial capitals has not been significantly challenged. On the ground, Taliban fighters still prove to be assertive, but this has not necessarily translated to military success with fewer than expected gains in spring 2019. After more than 20 years of conflict, recruitment is also more difficult. With limited external support, taxation at the local level is still crucial to the Taliban's strategy, as the group is seeking to strengthen its control over rural populations. (Washington Post 13/03/2019, US Institute of Peace 29/05/2019)

In Eastern Afghanistan, ANSF and coalition forces stepped up hostilities to defeat non-state armed groups, including Islamic State –Khorasan Province (ISKP). Conflict between ISKP and the Taliban also intensified. ANSF has adopted a much more aggressive posture in the east in 2019 although this has also resulted in higher casualties, while consolidating its defence of major urban areas. (Politico 19/04/2019, IFEAC 18/01/2019, The Independent 03/09/2018)

Peace Process

The peace process between the US and the Taliban (Doha talks) has progressed in 2019; most notably, according to the Taliban, a draft agreement on the timeline for US troop withdrawal (denied by US Secretary of State Pompeo) and the Taliban's commitment to prevent militants from using Afghanistan as a base from which to launch attacks on US interests. However, the strength of these commitments or assurances is still questionable.

Despite some attempts, intra-Afghan talks remain challenging, with neither the Taliban nor the GoA ready to enter negotiations. The Afghan government is often seen as a reluctant partner, has not been invited to the talks in Doha, and has been slow to select a credible negotiating team. Despite its exclusion, the GoA continues to insist that it is most in tune with the Afghan population in their overall demands for peace.

A mechanism for the inclusion of women or civil society has not been established in the peace process, sparking fear that progress made on women's rights in particular will be sacrificed during the talks. (Reuters 26/02/2019, DW 13/03/2019, US Institute of Peace 29/05/2019, Reuters 19/08/2018, ICG 19/06/2018, Al Jazeera 25/04/2018, New York Times 18/07/2018, Afghanistan Analysts Network 25/06/2018)

In parallel, Russia has provided a platform for Intra-Afghan dialogue during the Moscow talks, including diplomatic observers, a Taliban delegation, opposition leaders, and the High Peace Council members in their personal capacities but without officially representing the GoA. (ECP 2019)

2019 Presidential Elections

Long-delayed presidential elections are due to be held on 28 September, although the US has indicated a willingness to suspend them if the Taliban start direct negotiations with the GoA. There is limited consensus on which candidate is most likely to secure election. While opposition candidates are largely united in their desire to remove President Ghani, there is a strong incumbent bias held by the electorate and a paucity of clear, viable alternatives being presented. The tension between ethnicity and Afghan identity is likely to be a critical point during the elections. Fears that meddling from foreign stakeholders might also disrupt the process are high (ECP 04/06/2019, Al Jazeera 11/05/2019, US Institute of Peace 29/05/2019).

Nevertheless, the elections are inspiring some enthusiasm from parts of the Afghan population despite some scepticism whether the 2019 elections will be any better than in 2014, which sparked electoral violence, deepened ethnical divisions, and – after a run-off which was rejected and the ensuing crisis – a US-mediated deal. Most recent figures show no significant erosion of voter registration, except in Ghazni, and nothing really suggests a lower turnout than during the 2018 parliamentary elections. As in the 2018 parliamentary elections, violence during the election period is anticipated, particularly centred on voter registration and polling centres, as the Taliban consider the elections invalid and are expected to disrupt the elections. (The Asia Foundation 2017, BBC 31/01/2018)

Socioeconomic Factors

The Afghan economy's growth rate has fallen from a 9.3% average in 2002-2013, to a 2.3% average from 2014-2017, in part due to the NATO withdrawal in 2014, rising only slightly in 2018.

Some 55% of Afghans lived below the national poverty line in 2016-2017, up from 34% in 2007-2008. Employment is no guarantee against poverty with 49.3% of those fully employed still falling below the poverty line. The situation is feared to have further deteriorated as a result of the 2018 drought and increased violence. Poverty is mainly rural (58.3% of the population) but has doubled in urban areas since 2011 (to 41.6%). The

increased rural-urban divide is a direct result of insecurity and the breakdown of countrywide supply chains. The majority of employment opportunities are in the agricultural sector, employing 75% of the workforce yet accounting for only 25% of GDP; lack of investment in infrastructure and value chain areas have hindered its development. Urban migration is high at just under 1% per annum. Coupled with the high population growth rate (2.5% in 2017), this is leading to a rapid growth of cities, especially Kabul (ALCS 2016-17, UNFPA).

Remittances from abroad play a large part in macroeconomic stability yet have decreased markedly in recent years due to the deteriorating economic situations in Iran and Pakistan. Meanwhile, much of the money made inside Afghanistan does not stay in the country (World Bank 05/02/2018).

Despite improvements in the macroeconomic performance and consistently meeting the IMF's benchmarks, the government has struggled to tackle the economic problems (i.e., corruption, failure to collect taxes efficiently, high security bill), and over half of government expenditure is dependent on foreign aid. While potential international investors exist, a peaceful, stable country is a prerequisite (AAN 17/05/2018).

Demographics and displacement

Afghanistan is composed of about 14 officially recognised ethnic groups and more that have yet to achieve recognition. According to the 2018 Survey of the Afghan People from the Asia Foundation, the majority are Pashtun or Tajik (around 37% of the population each), followed by Hazara (10%) and Uzbek (9%) (Asia Foundation 2018). Pashtuns have traditionally dominated Afghan power structures, although post-2001, many Tajik and other ethnic power brokers were supported during the US-led intervention, increasing their prominence. However, since 2001 the Presidency has been filled by a Pashtun. In recent years ethnic minorities, particularly Hazaras, have faced systematic discrimination and targeted violence leading to displacement and they have been specifically targeted in recent attacks by ISKP. (Minority Rights Group, Al Jazeera 26/02/2019)

Current displacement is driven by a mix of conflict, environmental, and economic issues (such as chronic poverty, reduced coping capacities, lack of investment in rural communities and agriculture and value-adding industry such as fruit processing plants).

Over 630,000 people were newly internally displaced in 2018, both due to conflict and drought, an increase from 512,000 in 2017. Overall, conflict-induced displacement in 2018 was lower than 2017, but an increasing number of people unable to return home are remaining in a protected state of displacement. The influx of IDPs and returnees to Herat, Jalalabad, and Kabul has put a strain on resources and public services (many people have extremely limited access to basic services) while increasing the number of unemployed (WHO 30/04/2019, OCHA 03/05/2019, IOM 29/05/2019).

The mobility of the Afghan population has evolved rapidly in recent years: fewer opportunities in rural areas, combined with increased education and communication fuelling aspirations which drive urban migration while the restricted domestic economy, high urban unemployment, and continued insecurity drive emigration which is countered by declining neighbouring economies and increasing immigration restrictions further afield. (IOM 2014).

Climate vulnerability

Conflict remains the main driver of displacement (almost 400,000 IDPs in 2018 according to OCHA), however, natural hazards (both slow and sudden onset) also contribute to, and trigger, population movements. Afghanistan is highly prone to natural hazards, whose frequency and intensity are exacerbated by the effects of climate change, increasing humanitarian needs. The 2018 drought was described as 'the worst in a lifetime', and led to the displacement of some 275,000 Afghans across the Northern and Western regions, some of whom have returned, other that will not. An El Niño episode confirmed in February 2019 affected the March rainy season, bringing heavy rains and floods that displaced over 40,000 people (for the most part temporarily). Additionally, due to recurring drought, below average precipitation water mismanagement, and increased consumption, the groundwater level in Kabul is estimated to have decreased by 20 metres over the last few years. As the water crisis deepens and access to clean water becomes increasingly challenging, many rely on unsafe sources of water, posing serious health threats. Another consequence of water scarcity is the increased risk of conflict, not only within the country, but also with some of its regional neighbours. The interplay between conflict and the environment is an important dynamic to consider. Conflict leads to environmental degradation (overuse of natural resources, land degradation, etc.) and, reciprocally, natural hazards can exacerbate land and water conflict at the local level, leading to food crises and displacement (IOM 26/04/2019, WHO 30/04/2019, OCHA 03/05/2019, IOM 29/05/2019)

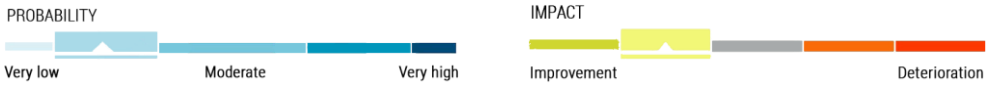
Humanitarian access

Widespread insecurity, mine contamination, and difficult terrain are the main impediments to humanitarian access. Although access varies from district to district and is still very dependent on the type of intervention and organisation, it has improved since the beginning of 2019. Humanitarian actors have been able to secure access to areas under non-government control, as Taliban-held areas often require a one-time negotiated access. On the other hand, taxation asked by the Taliban has increased, and the issue of access has become extremely politicised. Access to contested territory remains a challenge (OCHA 03/04/2019, SWN 02/12/2018, Mine Action Review 2018).

Local NGOs and national staff have been particularly exposed to protection risks. All of the 35 humanitarian aid workers killed, wounded, or kidnapped in Afghanistan between January 2018 and January 2019 were Afghan nationals. Poor road conditions, remoteness, and mountainous terrain also restrict access. (Arab News 04/03/2019, OCHA 14/01/2019, OCHA 02/04/2019, Logistics Cluster 04/06/2018).

Scenarios

1 Strengthened central governance; reduced violence



Following successful elections in which the President-elect receives broad support from both the Afghan public and key faction leaders, a substantive US-Taliban peace deal is reached, leading to an agreement to negotiate a form of shared governance via a consultative and inclusive process. International forces begin a phased withdrawal. While splinter elements of the Taliban, the ISK, and some other disenfranchised groups continue to disrupt security, funded by foreign states, they are contained by the ANSF. International support for state building and counterterrorism increases as part of a post-peace economic package. China and India begin large-scale investment.

Possible indicators/triggers

- Some or all of the following occur:
- Presidential elections are perceived as successful by majority of Afghans
- President-elect receives support from all major groups
- Substantive peace deal agreed between US and Taliban
- International forces begin a phased withdrawal
- Talks on future governance between GoA and Taliban announced
- International community have confidence in President elect
- Taliban appetite for conflict reduces
- Increase in localised ceasefires indicating an increased appetite for peace.

Estimated additional caseload

Up to 200,000 people displaced over 18 months, while many currently displaced will return and still require some level of assistance.

Geographic areas of most concern

East/SE (Kunar, Nuristan, Nangarhar, Paktya, Paktika)

Impact

A general optimism within and beyond the country results in increased private sector investment and a short-term increase in international development funding. Afghan capital increasingly remains in-country with greater reinvestment of profit and reduced brain-drain, except among well-educated women, for whom opportunities reduce. This increased resource mobilisation results in disproportionate development of some areas, while those continuing to suffer significant conflict lose out. Investment in and development of urban areas outpaces rural areas, widening the standard of living gap and fuelling urban migration. Increasing numbers of refugees and IDPs return, especially to major urban centres but also to stable rural areas.

Conflict increases in the east and southeast where splinter elements of the Taliban, ISK, and some other disenfranchised groups seek to destabilise the government. As a result, these areas receive less investment and economic disparity increases. Criminality by groups not benefiting from the peace increases in some northern areas.

Corruption increases at both central and local levels as control of more government money is devolved to provincial and district levels and local authorities take more control over development and humanitarian projects.

Humanitarian consequences

The need for social integration and immediate basic services (especially health, WASH, and education) for returnees in rural and urban areas increases. Land allocation and subsidised housing become priorities as people seek to reinvest in the future. Increased access and stability reveals unmet humanitarian needs in some previously inaccessible areas. In other areas development interventions are needed, including support to the peace and reconciliation process, reintegration of former combatants into society, reinstating traditional justice systems, developing the agriculture and manufacturing sectors, and improving water solutions for both domestic and agricultural use. International NGOs need to prioritise capacity building of national partners as GoA push for significant reduction in international staff and national control of humanitarian funds.

Operational constraints

Humanitarian and development access increase in the south, and decrease in the east and southeast, due to decreased security and donor counter-terrorism policies. As a result, humanitarian organisations focus on newly accessible areas. Increased control by provincial and district authorities increases bureaucracy, 'taxation', and various other attempts to influence or direct humanitarian activities. Humanitarian aid becomes increasingly politicised.

There is a possible reduction in overall humanitarian funding, despite continuing needs, especially in the south and southeast.

2 Limited GoA control; increasing non-state actor influence

Central government continues to exert limited political control beyond major urban centres, following elections that return a president without broad support, but one tolerated by key faction leaders. The start of coalition forces withdrawal undermines confidence in the ANSF to maintain security (possibly creating a power vacuum) which, coupled with increased funding to the non-state actors, leads to increased conflict as Taliban and other groups seek to maximise control. Increasing numbers of higher educated Afghans seek to emigrate. Urban migration and unemployment continue to rise, fuelled by poor investment in rural areas and increasing poppy cultivation. There is limited, predominantly forced, return movement to Afghanistan and continued economic migration to Iran and Pakistan.

Possible indicators/triggers

- Presidential elections are inconclusive; President elect is tolerated rather than supported
- US – Taliban talks fail
- US forces begin phased withdrawal
- US-Iran relations deteriorate significantly
- Iran significantly increases funding to Taliban
- Increased foreign recruitment for ISK
- Reduced ANSF recruitment levels
- Increased poppy yield increases funding for Taliban
- Assassination or removal of key local power brokers
- Splintering of Taliban following peace deal
- US lifts aid freeze on Pakistan
- Increased tensions: India – Pakistan
- Significant and sudden forced returns
- Increasing unemployment
- Increasing oppression of Muslim population in neighbouring central Asian countries fuels recruitment for fundamentalist factions in Afghanistan.

Estimated additional caseload

500,000 displaced + over 18 months

Geographic areas of most concern

East, southeast, and northeast

Impact

Conflict and general insecurity increase although the country is not substantially destabilised. The number and intensity of conflicts increase in major urban centres and key routes where ANSF is predominantly located. Civilian, ANSF, and Taliban casualties increase, leading to lower levels of recruitment for the ANSF and further undermining their ability to maintain security. Increased attacks on ethnic minorities leads to self-segregation in some areas, especially Kabul. ISK expands territorial control while Taliban-ISK fighting intensifies. Increased possibility of a significant attack on a major provincial city causing a sudden spike in displacement. Women's rights in areas beyond GoA control decrease. Internal displacement increases in east and southeast. Limited return to the more stable rural areas under Taliban control. Urban migration continues.

GoA authority beyond the cities gradually degrades, restricting government spending to cities while key government employees (teachers, medical staff, etc.) experience disruption in salary payments. The ability of Taliban to provide basic services and pay salaries encourages low-levels of migration into stable rural areas under Taliban control, further legitimising their authority. Localised price increases in some minor urban centres due to increased unofficial 'taxation'.

Humanitarian consequences

Access to basic services reduces outside GoA-held areas. Food insecurity increases in areas of conflict. Basic needs of newly displaced increase. Malnutrition increases due to reduced access to healthcare in Taliban-held (despite access to food) and contested areas. Polio increases as the vaccination campaign is further restricted and trauma cases increase as conflict expands and intensifies in east and southeast. The rate of loss of traditional livelihoods increases as populations continue to displace towards the perceived safety of urban areas.

Operational constraints

Access decreases in areas of conflict and inconsistent control while access to other rural areas is increasingly dependent on locally negotiated agreements. The number of locations to which access is sector- or gender-specific increases. The cost of humanitarian operations increases, especially in the east/southeast while funding decreases and becomes more restricted. Monitoring capacity reduces while bureaucracy increases.

3 Central government weakens; regions strengthen

The central government lacks the capacity to impose its power across the country as a whole but the provincial power brokers are content to not directly challenge and overthrow the central government. This results in a fragile stability in which, strong faction leaders throughout the country exert increasing control over the population, including in major urban areas, paying lip service to a largely figurehead government which in turn provides only specific, limited support. Conflict intensifies in many areas, predominantly the north, east, and southeast, as faction leaders seek to expand their control. The ANSF's ability to project the GoA's authority beyond Kabul is undermined by the start of coalition forces withdrawal. Foreign funding reduces.

Possible indicators/triggers

- Presidential election result is deemed illegitimate by faction leaders
- US decides not to intervene in the election result
- US forces withdraw in a controlled manner following a nominal US-Taliban peace deal
- Election of a weak president unable to project power beyond Kabul
- Indefinite postponement of the presidential elections
- GoA Taliban negotiations on interim governance fail
- International funding to the government reduces significantly
- Central government overreaches when seeking to assert power and fails
- Funding for key faction leaders and non-state armed groups, increases, increasing their autonomy
- US lifts aid freeze on Pakistan
- ANSF fractures due to ethnic loyalties

Estimated additional caseload

Up to 750,000 newly displaced over 6-12 months; in addition to needs in previously inaccessible areas.

Geographic areas of most concern

North, east, and southeast

Impact

As the authority of the central government is seen to decrease and subnational leaders vie for control of the regions, discrimination against minority populations within the various provinces increases, triggering displacement. Conflict over resources, predominantly in urban areas, increases. Increased local bureaucracy and taxation increases import-export costs and the costs of living, especially outside major cities. Rural areas become increasingly self-reliant with rising poverty. Urban migration increases triggered both by increasing poverty, rights violations, and, in the east and southeast, increased conflict. Opportunities for women reduce in most areas outside Kabul, especially in east and south, fuelling significant emigration of educated women. Areas with more stable governance in the north and west see increased urban investment as local leaders reassert control and gain confidence of foreign investors, including China and India.

Humanitarian consequences

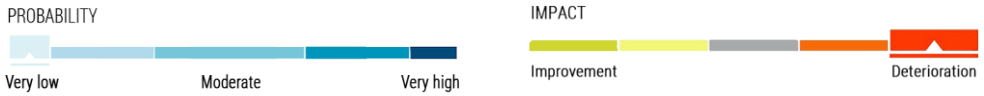
Human rights violations, including forced evictions, increase. Access to justice reduces for women and children, especially in the east, south. Increased localised conflicts leads to a spike in displacement and associated family separation. Some displaced receive significant assistance from faction leaders, while others are increasingly marginalised with rising basic needs. Poverty and unemployment increase, especially in urban areas not benefitting from increased investment. Decreasing access and lack of central administration of health services disrupts services and vaccination campaigns.

Operational constraints

Humanitarian access increases in some areas and decreases in others, highly dependent on regional power-holders and local commanders and spikes in conflict. Access negotiation is no longer possible in Kabul but requires negotiation at a local level.

Scope for interference in humanitarian operations increases as provinces exercise greater control and response becomes politicised.

4 Ineffective central governance; widespread conflict



A major shock renders the central government ineffective and unable to govern beyond Kabul. With central government focused almost entirely internally and on re-establishing security in Kabul, provincial power brokers seize the opportunity to establish de facto control over the provinces. As the balance of power is seen to move from Kabul, the country becomes increasingly unstable; allegiances are contested and pan-ethnic or pan-regional alliances are formed. The country fragments along ethnic lines and the official rule of law breaks down outside the capital.

Possible indicators/triggers

- Massive attack that cripples the government
- Sudden, unilateral withdrawal of US troops
- Sudden withdrawal of most international support and funding to the GoA
- Highly disputed election results resulting in large demonstrations and violence

Estimated additional caseload

Up to 20 million people

Geographic areas of most concern

Rural areas and main roads see increasingly intense conflict. Fortification of cities becomes tighter.

Impact

The sudden loss of central governance and authority precipitates the fragmentation of the country. Major cities become more militarised by prevailing militia with ANSF fracturing to support the strongest local leaders. Conflict intensifies, including in parts of Kabul, sparking large-scale displacement. Human rights abuses are widespread as increased numbers of combatants extort 'taxes' and abuse local communities. As more fundamental views come to the fore across much of the country, including major cities, large numbers of the more educated population flee the country. Provision of state services gradually reduces as staff leave the country, salaries cease to be paid by the central government, and supplies run short. The narco-economy expands and conflict over natural resources, including water sources, increases. Development funding reduces. The international community evacuate. The country sees rapid inflation and expansion of the black economy.

Humanitarian consequences

Massive waves of displacement around the country increase the number of IDPs and refugees, and the intensity of basic needs. As basic services collapse, schools close, health services cease to provide sufficient healthcare and morbidity increases. Incidence of polio and other communicable diseases increase as vaccination programmes break down. Access to water is compromised, increasing conflict over water sources. Human rights violations are widespread.

Operational constraints

Humanitarian actors withdraw and set up cross-border operations from Central Asia, severely restricting access beyond the north. Exodus of educated Afghans severely reduces national staffing of NGOs; recruitment of replacement staff is challenging; recruitment along ethnic lines is needed. Access negotiation becomes increasingly difficult as the number of armed factions multiplies. Fuel prices rises and operational costs increase. Registration challenges in Iran and Pakistan force NGOs to operate from Central Asia.

5 Urban earthquake

High magnitude earthquake strikes a major city, destroying most of the buildings and infrastructure and seriously reducing the local governance and emergency services' capacity. Large-scale loss of life and injuries result and emergency services and ANSF are overwhelmed. Lack of preparedness, at both national and local level, and lack of clarity on leadership delay the official response which is highly dependent on international assistance, itself significantly slow. Lack of heavy machinery delays road clearance and rescue operations. The political and military focus on the disaster response permits some opposition groups to strengthen control elsewhere in the country. Taliban seek political capital by publicly providing support to the response.

Estimated additional caseload

Up to 350,000 (Jalalabad) or 3 million (Kabul)

Geographic areas of most concern

Kabul / Jalalabad

Impact

Large-scale loss of life and injuries quickly overwhelm health systems. Major hospitals are severely damaged and largely inaccessible due to debris blocking main roads. Large-scale displacement to outskirts of city; those who can, move further away. Damage to water and sewage systems combined with open defaecation in and around informal IDP settlements presents high risk of waterborne disease. Criminality rises as police struggle with priorities. Destruction of mobile phone masts leads to communications blackout in and beyond the city. If Kabul is hit, the dam bursts.

International humanitarian funding surges and international civil protection teams arrive, adding pressure on ANSF to maintain security. ANSF relocate resources from regions to affected area in an attempt to improve security.

Humanitarian consequences

Large numbers of displaced people require shelter, food, WASH, and protection immediately. Health services are immediately overwhelmed and communicable disease spreads fast. Protection needs are widespread as crime rises, women no longer have privacy to bathe or sleep, and the number of unaccompanied minors increases. Access to fresh water and food reduces dramatically. Schools cease functioning for at least six months. Removal and burial of dead bodies exceeds national capacity to cope.

Operational constraints

Insufficient healthcare specialists, trauma care specialists. The airport is destroyed as is most warehousing. Roads are damaged and blocked by debris and a lack of heavy machinery prevents timely reopening. The mobile phone network is disrupted. Aid diversion and corruption increases.

Compounding factors

The following developments can occur in parallel to any of the above scenarios and have the potential to significantly change the humanitarian situation.

US - Iran relations

Relations between Iran and the US have significantly deteriorated since the Trump administration withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal in May 2018. Since then, the US has attempted to undermine Iran's economy through a series of economic sanctions, labelled the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a 'foreign terrorist organisation', and deployed military assets and troops to the Middle East. In response, Iran has downgraded its compliance with the nuclear deal and stated it will retaliate against any attack. Neither country is interested in direct military confrontation, and fears of an escalation of proxy conflict between the US, Iran, and their allies in the Middle East are high. (Crisis Group 15/05/2019, New York Times 24/06/2019)

An escalation of proxy-conflict between the US and Iran could impact Afghanistan's security, politics, and economy. Both countries' increased involvement on opposite sides of the conflict could create further instability in Afghanistan.

Iranian and Pakistani economies

The majority of the Afghan diaspora lives in neighbouring countries. In Pakistan, 1.4 million Afghans are officially registered, and an estimated 1 million more are living there without proper documentation. Iran counts over 951,000 registered Afghan refugees, and around 2 million undocumented Afghans. Between 1 January and 22 June 2019, around 225,000 undocumented Afghans have returned from Iran and Pakistan (Foreign Policy 09/05/2019, IOM 09/02/2019; 22/06/2019). Most send money to support family members in Afghanistan. The deterioration of both countries' economies has had a significant effect on remittances. The economic decline in Iran (a direct result of US sanctions) has reduced remittances to a negligible amount and driven over 770,000 Afghan migrants to return home in 2018, a situation that is expected to deteriorate if the economic sanctions persist and Iran's economy continues to unravel. Many returnees struggle to find any economic opportunities once they are back in Afghanistan. (Crisis Group 16/06/2019, Reuters 25/04/2019, Gandhara 09/04/2019)

Urbanisation

Afghanistan's high urban migration rate, driven by population growth, refugee returns, and migration from rural areas, coupled with the high population growth rate (2.5% in 2017), is leading to a rapid growth of cities, especially Kabul, whose population has tripled in the last seven years. This has put increasing pressure on already overstretched basic services including housing, water, sewage systems, refuse collection, and health and education services. With a limited job market, unemployment is rising fast, contributing to increasing poverty and criminality. Thus urbanisation also risks fuelling the conflict as displaced and unemployed men are particularly vulnerable to recruitment to the insurgency.

Communicable disease outbreak

The outbreak of a major health emergency, such as polio or cholera, risks compounding the severity of humanitarian needs in areas where there is a large population of IDPs or refugees. In addition to increased morbidity and mortality, an outbreak results in additional healthcare costs at the national/local authority levels and diverts much of the international health assistance resources.

Natural disasters

In 2018, a severe drought left up to 13.5 million people severely food insecure (IPC 3 and 4) and displaced 245,000 people. Although drought is a common occurrence in Afghanistan, it is unlikely the country will experience another one over the next 18 months (FAO 03/2019, FEWS NET 01/2019). Flooding, however, is the most frequently occurring natural hazard in Afghanistan. Steep slopes in headwaters cause rivers to overflow when there is heavy rainfall, whether or not in combination with rapid snow melt during spring. Deforestation of mountain areas and the general lack of vegetation contribute to the flooding risk. Despite the high risk of flooding, the country has poorly built flood protection infrastructure and a lack of early warning systems (GFDRR 2017). Heavy rainfalls and flash flooding between the months of March and May are likely to create additional shelter, WASH, food, and livelihoods needs as well as lead to limited, short-term displacement.

Stakeholders

The following actors are present in Afghanistan:

Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANSF) were 11% under strength at the end of 2018, their lowest since 2015,. As of January 2019, some 45,000 members of the security forces had died since President Ghani took office in 2014, outpacing recruitment. Since 2017, their strategy has been to focus on highly populated areas and strategic locations, allowing the Taliban increased control of rural areas (Responsibility to Protect, 15/05/2019, New York Times 28/07/2018, ACAPS Humanitarian Overview 2018; SIGAR 30/10/2017).

Taliban are a predominantly Pashtun, ultraconservative Islamic group that emerged after the collapse of the country's communist regime among Afghan refugee students in Islamic religious schools (Madrasas) in Northern Pakistan in the 1980s. They ruled much of Afghanistan from 1996 until 2001. They were overthrown by a US-led military coalition in reaction to hosting Al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden. Since then, they have conducted an insurgency against the US-established Afghan government. Since the withdrawal of most foreign forces from the country in 2014, they have expanded their influence from South and Southeastern areas to Northern provinces (including Kunduz, Balkh, and Faryab), launching high-casualty attacks against military and government targets. It is estimated that half of the Afghanistan is currently either under their control or influence. (CFR 04/06/2014,.Responsibility to Protect, 15/05/2019, Crisis Group 31/01/2018; AFP 08/09/2016).

Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan Province (ISKP) has been present in Afghanistan since 2015, when the group established a presence in nearly half of Nangarhar province, including areas previously under Taliban influence or control. It is a rival to the Taliban and Al Qaeda. ISKP's radical position and brutality means that it has not been able to attract many Afghans, recruiting predominantly disaffected Taliban and some of the most extremist Afghan rebel groups, in addition to foreign fighters. For now, ISKP seems to be largely focused on Afghanistan. The number of ISKP members is currently unclear, but estimations vary from 2,500 to 7,000/11,500 fighters. (IFEAC 18/01/2019, Long War Journal 27/01/2015, Politico 19/04/2019, The Independent 03/09/2018).

Al Qaeda: Since 2014, a new regional subgroup emerged, Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, composed of local members, more active than the senior Al Qaeda members currently in hiding. Allegedly, their focus is on training Taliban members (Long War Journal 21/05/2019, Politico 19/04/2019).

US-led coalition Since 2001, the US has spent over USD 840 billion to fight the Taliban insurgency and invest in relief and reconstruction, resulting in over 2,200 soldiers killed. There are currently around 14,000 US troops in Afghanistan. In December 2014, security leadership transitioned from NATO to Afghan security forces, and Afghanistan centred its strategy on the Bilateral Security Agreement with the US. Withdrawal of the US troops would seriously reduce the aerial targeting of senior Taliban. It is also unclear what would replace the Bilateral Security Agreement (New York Times 08/09/2018, Responsibility to Protect, 15/05/2019, Foreign Policy 11/03/2019).

How scenarios can be used

Scenarios are a set of different ways that a situation may develop. The aim of scenario building is not to try and accurately predict the future, but rather to understand the range of possible futures and then select a few that result in distinct situations with, usually, differing humanitarian outcomes that can:

- Support strategic planning for agencies and NGOs
- Identify assumptions underlying anticipated needs and related interventions
- Enhance the adaptability and design of detailed assessments
- Influence monitoring and surveillance systems
- Create awareness, provide early warning and promote preparedness activities among stakeholders

For more information on how to build scenarios, please see the ACAPS Technical Brief on Scenario Development.

Methodology

These scenarios were developed in June 2019, during a one-day workshop in Kabul, Afghanistan. Staff from 20 humanitarian, academic, diplomatic, military, or policy organisations contributed to these scenarios through participation in the workshop or bilateral meetings.

Many variables that could cause change were mapped during the workshop. By making assumptions as to how these variables might plausibly change, five scenarios were identified. These scenarios were then expanded and the major impact of each scenario and its humanitarian consequences identified.

Scenarios 1 to 4 are mutually exclusive. Scenario 5, an earthquake, could occur in conjunction with any of the others and was included as the probability of a large earthquake striking Kabul is far from remote. A list of individual indicators/triggers is given on pages 13–15. It should be noted that a combination, but not necessarily all, of the triggers are required to reach any given scenario.

The estimated caseload for each scenario is an estimate of the additional caseload that could result should that scenario unfold. They are designed to give an order of magnitude only and are based on the current displacement and refugee return trends.

Thank you

These scenarios were produced by ACAPS in partnership with NRC. ACAPS and NRC would like to thank all organisations that provided input to these scenarios: both those that attended the workshop in Kabul and those that contributed via bilateral meetings.

For additional information or to comment please email: info@acaps.org.

Scenario indicators/triggers

Scenario 1 = Central governance strengthens; reduced violence
Scenario 2 = Limited central governance; increased non-state actor influence
Scenario 3 = Central government weakens; regions strengthen
Scenario 4 = Ineffective central governance; widespread conflict

It should be noted that individual triggers are rarely sufficient to cause the unfolding of a scenario (or to affect humanitarian access). In practice, a combination of indicators is usually required. By monitoring the indicators below, it is possible to determine the direction the crisis is moving and which scenario or scenarios are increasingly likely.

Scenarios	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	Background information
Humanitarian access is likely to increase significantly if:					
Presidential elections are perceived as successful by majority of Afghans	X				President Ghani's mandate ended on 22 May, but was extended until 28 September to allow reforms to the voting system (Tolo News).
President elect receives support from all major groups	X				The issue of ethnicity in the context of elections in a sensitive one. In the post-Taliban era, the presidency has always been filled by a Pashtun. In 2014, a US-mediated power-sharing agreement was put in place to end dispute between the candidates over widespread claims of fraud. While divisions along ethnic lines were not apparent during the run up to the elections, but due to electoral violence, ethnic and tribal groups became more salient (The Asia Foundation 2017).
Substantive peace deal agreed between US and Taliban	X				Since 2007, several attempts have been made to hold peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghanistan government. For various reasons (political transitions, change in Taliban's leadership, international involvement, etc.), attempts so far have not been sucessful (The Asia Foundation 2017, Huffington Post 31/05/2017).
International forces begin a phased withdrawal	X	X			
Talks on future governance between GoA and Taliban announced	X				
International community have confidence in President elect	X				
Taliban appetite for conflict reduces	X				
Increase in localised ceasefires indicating an increased appetite for peace	X				
Humanitarian access is likely to remain uneven if:					
Presidential elections are inconclusive; President elect is tolerated rather than supported		X			There is a history of contentious elections in the post-Taliban era, which previously have been marred with electoral violence, fraud, and corruption, and often resulting in political deadlock (The Asia Foundation 2017, International Crisis Group 16/10/2014).
US – Taliban talks fail		X			
US-Iran relations deteriorate significantly		X			Relations between Iran and the US have significantly deteriorated since the Trump administration withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal in May 2018 (Crisis Group 27/06/2019).
Iran significantly increases funding to Taliban		X			Iran has been maintaining diplomatic relations with the Taliban, and in recent years, has been suspected of providing increasing support as its relations with the US have grown more tense (Al Jazeera 04/02/2019, Foreign Policy 11/03/2019).
Increased foreign recruitment for ISK		X			ISK have been able to recruit among some of the most extremist Afghan rebel groups, as well as fighters from Tehrik Khilafat Pakistan (TKP), militants fleeing Iraq and Syria, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), and Uyghur and Hui militants (Politico 19/04/2019, IFEAC 18/01/2019, The Independent 03/09/2018).
Reduced ANSF recruitment levels		X			

Increased poppy yield increases funding for Taliban		X			The Taliban is profiting from poppy cultivation and the drug trade. In 2018, poppy cultivation decreased by 20% compared to 2017, but remained at high levels, with an estimated 263,000 hectares (UNODC 01/11/2018).
Assassination or removal of key local power brokers		X			
Splintering of Taliban following peace deal		X			
US lifts aid freeze on Pakistan		X	X		In January 2018, the US announced the suspension of security assistance. By the end of 2018, Pakistan had lost about USD 1.66 billion in security assistance from the US (Hindustan Times 21/11/2018).
Increased tensions: India – Pakistan		X			Pakistan supported the Taliban while they were in power, and maintained ties after the US expelled them from Afghanistan. India is the largest regional donor to Afghanistan. There are no Indian troops in Afghanistan, but according to Pakistan, Indian aid and diplomatic missions provide cover for intelligence operations. (Foreign Policy 11/03/2019).
Significant and sudden forced returns		X			Since the beginning of 2019, 10,720 Afghans returned from Pakistan, including 480 undocumented returnees (IOM 22/06/2019).
Increasing unemployment		X			25% of the Afghan labour force is unemployed, and 80% of employment is vulnerable and insecure. The unemployment rate for young people (aged 15 – 24) is 31% (The World Bank 02/04/2019).
Increasing oppression of Muslim population in neighbouring central Asian countries fuels recruitment for fundamental factions in Afghanistan		X			
Presidential election result is deemed illegitimate by faction leaders			X		
US decides not to intervene in the election result			X		After the last presidential elections of 2014, a US-mediated deal was put in place to end dispute between the candidates (The Asia Foundation 2017, BBC 31/01/2018).
US forces withdraw in a controlled manner following a nominal US-Taliban peace deal			X		
Election of a weak president unable to project power beyond Kabul			X		
Indefinite postponement of the presidential elections			X		Originally planned for April 2019, presidential elections were delayed until 20 July due to winter conditions and security concerns. In March, they were further delayed until 28 September to allow for reforms to the voting system (Reuters 20/03/2019).
GoA Taliban negotiations on interim governance fail			X		
International funding to the government reduces significantly			X		International funding to Afghanistan reported in 2018 was USD 539.6 million (Financial Tracking Services).
Central government overreaches when seeking to assert power and fails			X		
Funding for key faction leaders and non-state armed groups, increases, increasing their autonomy			X		
ANSF fractures due to ethnic loyalties			X		
Humanitarian access is likely to decrease significantly if:					
Massive attack that cripples the government				X	
Sudden, unilateral withdrawal of US troops				X	
Sudden withdrawal of most international support and funding to the GoA				X	
Highly disputed election results resulting in large demonstrations and violence				X	