

COI Focus

AFGHANISTAN

Security Situation in Kabul City

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List of abbreviations/acronyms used

AAN	Afghanistan Analysts Network
ACAA	Afghan Civil Aviation Authority
ACLED	Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project
AGE	Anti-Government Element
AI	Amnesty International
AISS	Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies
ANA	Afghan National Army
ANDSF	Afghan National Defence and Security Forces
ANP	Afghan National Police
APPRO	Afghanistan Public Policy Research Organisation
CRU	Crisis Response Unit
DW	Deutsche Welle
EASO	European Asylum Support Office
FP	Foreign Policy
HNO	Humanitarian Needs Overview
HRW	Human Rights Watch
HLP-TF	Housing Land and Property Taskforce
IDMC	Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
IGC	International Growth Centre
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
ISKP	Islamic State Khorasan Province
Landinfo	Norwegian Country of Information Centre
LWJ	Long War Journal
MMC	Mixed Migration Centre
MSF	Médecins Sans Frontières
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NDS	National Directorate of Security
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
NSIA	National Statistic and Information Authority
NYT	(The) New York Times

PD	Police District
RFE/RL	Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty
RS	Resolute Support
SIGAR	Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction
SMW	Special Mission Wing
UN	United Nations
UNAMA	United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNOCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
UNSG	United Nations Secretary-General
US	United States
USDIA	United States Defence Intelligence Agency
USDOD	United States Department of Defence
USDOS	United States Department of State
USIP	United States Institute of Peace
VoA	Voice of America
WBG	World Bank Group

Introduction

This COI Focus aims to provide information on the security situation in Kabul City and is an update of both the *COI Focus Afghanistan. Security Situation in Kabul City* from 8 April 2020¹ and the Kabul City chapter taken from the *European Asylum Support Office (EASO) Country of Origin Information Report. Afghanistan: Security Situation*, published in June 2021.² This report presents information from 1 April 2020 until 15 May 2021. If any developments significantly change the security situation in Kabul, Cedoca will update this COI Focus as soon as possible. For a general introduction to the security situation in Afghanistan, reference is made to the EASO report listed above, published in June 2021.

This report follows the structure of the individual provincial chapters in the EASO Country of Origin Information Reports on Afghanistan. The general description of the city contains information on the geography and population. The chapter on the background of the conflict takes a longer-term look at the security situation in Kabul and includes descriptions of the actors active in the city. In the chapter on recent security trends, the nature and frequency of the violence, illustrative incidents as well as civilian casualties and the further impact on civilians in Kabul are described within a timeframe from 1 April 2020 until 15 May 2021. Lastly, a separate chapter is dedicated to population displacements caused by the conflict and the situation of internally displaced people (IDPs) and returnees in Kabul City.

For data on violent incidents, Cedoca consulted the publicly available curated dataset from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED). ACLED is an American non-profit organisation that collects, analyses and maps information on conflicts. Trained data experts collect the data using information from a wide range of local, regional and international sources. For Afghanistan, these include for example: The New York Times (NYT), Xinhua, Agence France Presse (AFP), Pajhwok Afghan News, Voice of Jihad, the Afghan Ministry of Defence, Bakhtar News Agency, Ariana TV, Khaama Press, Noor TV, Afghan Islamic Press News Agency and a few specifically selected Twitter accounts. ACLED's dataset is constantly updated when new information is made available. The ACLED data included in this COI Focus were downloaded on 26 May 2021.

ACLED's inventory provides information on the type of violence, the actors involved, a description of the incidents, the location and the number of deadly civilian casualties.³ ACLED indicates that since most of the data in their inventory are gathered based on publicly available secondary reports, they are in part 'a reflection of the coverage and reporting priorities of media and international organisations', and as such an under-estimation of the violence is possible.⁴ In its Codebook, ACLED provides an extensive explanation of its applied methodology for entering and monitoring the data in its dataset.⁵ Taking into account the methodology and sources as well as the entering and coding procedure of the data Cedoca considers that the figures provided by ACLED can be taken as an estimation and indication of the tendencies related to the violence in the Afghan conflict during a certain period of time. The ACLED data presented in this COI Focus should therefore be read together with other indicators and information on developing trends.

The list of incidents in this report is not exhaustive and does not pretend to be. Incidents are featured because of their relevance for assessing the security situation.

¹ Cedoca, COI Focus Afghanistan. Security Situation in Kabul City, 8 April 2020, [url](#)

² EASO, Country of Origin Information Report. Afghanistan: Security Situation, June 2021, [url](#)

³ ACLED, Codebook, 10 April 2019, [url](#)

⁴ ACLED, Guide for Media Users, 10 April 2019, [url](#)

⁵ ACLED, Codebook, 10 April 2019, [url](#)

Additionally, it should be noted that the reporting on the security situation in Afghanistan cannot be considered complete for a variety of reasons. According to Thomas Ruttig from the Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN), 'fact-based information has become scarcer', 'interpretations of what data there is has become politicized' and parties in the conflict have become less transparent - which has made tracking trends in security more difficult.⁶ In August 2020, analyst Kate Clark indicated a change in reporting on the Afghan conflict since the signing of the agreement between the United States (US) and the Taliban in February 2020 - 'with the Taliban and ANDSF now downplaying their attacks, minimising rather than exaggerating their actions'. According to Clark, the insurgent violence has become a little 'murkier', with more attacks remaining unclaimed.⁷ ACLED made a methodological note on its website concerning a shift in reporting depicting a reduction in violence and advises against drawing comparisons in violence/fatalities in Afghanistan between 2019 and 2020.⁸

In this COI Focus, Cedoca used data on civilian casualties from the reports on the protection of civilians in armed conflict by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA). Analyst Thomas Ruttig points out the possibility that civilian casualties are 'non- or underreported' by UNAMA,⁹ as its methodology requires that cases be verified through 'at least three different and independent types of sources' before being included in its reports.¹⁰ Data on civilian casualties in the Afghan conflict are also made available by the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)-led Resolute Support (RS) mission, and published in the quarterly reports of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR). However, the presentation of these data has not always been consistent as since the end of 2019 RS only offers a range of civilian casualty data on provincial level, and since the second half of 2020 RS data on civilian casualties per Afghan province have not been made available anymore by SIGAR.

For data on conflict-induced displacement, Cedoca consulted the database of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA). UNOCHA collects statistics on IDPs by conducting joint assessments throughout the country and logging these assessments into a database. The UNOCHA database is continuously and systematically updated and allows to discern patterns and trends or to enable comparisons. However, Cedoca is aware that these figures possibly do not include all IDPs, such as IDPs living in urban areas and therefore difficult to identify because they are dispersed among economic migrants and the urban poor or IDPs displaced in inaccessible areas¹¹. The UNOCHA conflict-induced displacement data included in this COI Focus range from 1 April 2020 to 15 May 2021.

Additional research was done by Cedoca through the search engine Google, in the database of Ecoi.net, in the analysis of independent research organisations such as Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN), in the reporting of the UN mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and on the websites of Afghan and international media sources as well as on Twitter.

This report was written according to the EASO COI Report Methodology (June 2019) and the EASO COI Referencing Guide (June 2019).¹²

⁶ Ruttig, T., More Violent, More Widespread: Trends in Afghan Security in 2017, AAN, 29 January 2018, [url](#)

⁷ Clark, K., War in Afghanistan in 2020: Just as Much Violence, but No One Wants to Talk about It, AAN, 16 August 2020, [url](#)

⁸ ACLED, Curated Data - Coverage Notices, n.d. (consulted on 27 May 2021), [url](#)

⁹ Ruttig, T., More Violent, More Widespread: Trends in Afghan Security in 2017, AAN, 29 January 2018, [url](#)

¹⁰ UNAMA, Afghanistan Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict - Annual Report 2020, 23 February 2021, [url](#), p. 8

¹¹ Bjelica, J., Over Half a Million Afghans Flee Conflict in 2016: A look at the IDP Statistics, AAN, 28 December 2016, [url](#)

¹² Both can be downloaded from the EASO website: [url](#)

1. General description of the city

Kabul City is the capital of Afghanistan and of Kabul province, of which it forms one of fifteen districts.¹³ Surrounded by mountains, the city is located at 1 800 metres above sea level¹⁴ in the Central Region of the country.¹⁵ Kabul City consists of 22 urban districts,¹⁶ which coincide with Kabul's 22 Police Districts (PDs).¹⁷

Kabul is by far Afghanistan's most populous and influential city, characterised by unprecedented demographic and urban growth.¹⁸ The City Mayors Statistics ranks Kabul as the fifth fastest growing city in the world, with an average annual growth rate of 4.74 %.¹⁹ According to UN Habitat, quoted by The Guardian, Kabul has seen a growth rate of 10 % during the last decade.²⁰ AAN analyst Fabrizio Foschini describes Kabul as a 'primate city', a city twice as large and important as the next largest city in the country.²¹ Kabul's urbanized area has tripled since the 1978 master plan of the capital, continuously expanding in almost all directions.²² According to estimates for 2020-2021 by Afghanistan's National Statistic and Information Authority (NSIA), Kabul City has a population of 4 434 550.²³ However, exact population figures are disputed and estimates range from 3.5 million up to a possible 6.5 million inhabitants in 2020,²⁴ with reportedly around 2 million new residents in the past 10 years.²⁵

Massive returnee populations, IDPs and economic migrants have spurred this rapid growth, with rural Afghans now outnumbering Kabuli natives.²⁶ However, the city's infrastructure has not followed at the same pace.²⁷ AAN analyst Foschini describes 'post 2001 Kabul as an ever-changing city, in terms of

¹³ UNOCHA, Afghanistan Kabul Province - District Atlas, April 2014, [url](#); UNOCHA, Afghanistan. Provincial Reference Map, 25 May 2015, [url](#), p. 14

¹⁴ REACH, Area Based Community Profile: Kabul, Afghanistan, December 2017, [url](#), p. 3

¹⁵ Humanitarian Response, Afghanistan - Central Region, n.d., [url](#)

¹⁶ Foschini, F., Kabul and the Challenge of Dwindling Foreign Aid, USIP, 10 April 2017, [url](#), p. 10; Foschini, F., Kabul Unpacked - A Geographical Guide to a Metropolis in the Making, AAN, 19 March 2019, [url](#), pp. 5-27

¹⁷ UNOCHA, Afghanistan: Kabul Informal Settlements, 4 January 2016, [url](#), p. 1; Foschini, F., Kabul Unpacked - A Geographical Guide to a Metropolis in the Making, AAN, 19 March 2019, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁸ Foschini, F., Kabul Unpacked - A Geographical Guide to a Metropolis in the Making, AAN, 19 March 2019, [url](#), p. 1; IGC, Urbanisation in Fragile Societies: Thinking about Kabul, 13 February 2020, [url](#); Foschini, F., Kabul's Expanding Crime Scene (Part 1): The Roots of Today's Underworld, AAN, 11 February 2020, [url](#); RFE/RL (Gandhara), Kabul Residents, Visitors Recall Capital's Golden Era before Conflict, 21 December 2020, [url](#); Washington Post (The), A Photo Tour of Kabul Shows How 20 Years of U.S. Military Presence Reshaped Afghanistan's Capital, 25 March 2021, [url](#); Jackson, A. & Sampaio, A., Afghan Cities Become Key Battlegrounds, War on the Rocks, 9 April 2021, [url](#)

¹⁹ City Mayors Statistics, The World's Fastest Growing Cities and Urban Areas from 2006 to 2020, [url](#)

²⁰ Guardian (The), 'There is Less Fear': Restoration of Kabul Repairs the Ravages of War, 13 May 2019, [url](#)

²¹ Foschini, F., Kabul and the Challenge of Dwindling Foreign Aid, USIP, 10 April 2017, [url](#), pp. 9-10; Foschini, F., Kabul Unpacked - A Geographical Guide to a Metropolis in the Making, AAN, 19 March 2019, [url](#), p. 1

²² Foschini, F., Kabul and the Challenge of Dwindling Foreign Aid, USIP, 10 April 2017, [url](#), p. 7; NRC and ACAPS, Displacement and Access in Afghanistan: Scenarios, June 2019, [url](#), p. 11

²³ Afghanistan, NSIA, Estimated Population of Afghanistan 2020-2021, June 2020, [url](#), p. 8

²⁴ Foschini, F., Kabul and the Challenge of Dwindling Foreign Aid, USIP, 10 April 2017, [url](#), pp. 9-10; Foschini, F., Kabul Unpacked - A Geographical Guide to a Metropolis in the Making, AAN, 19 March 2019, [url](#), p. 1; IGC, Urbanisation in Fragile Societies: Thinking about Kabul, 13 February 2020, [url](#); City Mayors Statistics, The World's Largest Cities and Urban Areas in 2020, n.d., [url](#); RFE/RL (Gandhara), Kabul Residents, Visitors Recall Capital's Golden Era before Conflict, 21 December 2020, [url](#); Telegraph (The), Kabul's Unquenchable Thirst: Crisis Looms in Afghan Capital as Groundwater Reserves Run Dry, 15 February 2021, [url](#)

²⁵ Washington Post (The), A Photo Tour of Kabul Shows How 20 Years of U.S. Military Presence Reshaped Afghanistan's Capital, 25 March 2021, [url](#)

²⁶ RFE/RL (Gandhara), Kabul Residents, Visitors Recall Capital's Golden Era before Conflict, 21 December 2020, [url](#)

²⁷ Ruttig, T., Alltag in Kabul. Referat von Thomas Ruttig (AAN) am 12. April 2017, 20 June 2017, [url](#), pp. 6-7; NRC and ACAPS, Displacement and Access in Afghanistan: Scenarios, June 2019, [url](#), p. 11; Foschini, F., Kabul's Expanding Crime Scene (Part 1): The Roots of Today's Underworld, AAN, 11 February 2020, [url](#)

boundaries and inhabitants, where many basic problems remain impossible to address'. According to Foschini, the Afghan capital's 'rapid and uncontrolled urbanisation has created new economic and security challenges inside the city', with the residual urban social fabric that helped to preserve a certain social order and guarantee some degree of security, now disappearing fast.²⁸ As described by several sources, apart from security incidents and insurgent attacks related to the conflict, the main problems afflicting the Afghan capital in recent years have been inadequate housing and sanitation,²⁹ overstretched basic services and resources,³⁰ unemployment,³¹ land grabbing,³² poverty,³³ traffic and limited accessibility,³⁴ drought,³⁵ severe air pollution³⁶ and criminality.³⁷

Kabul City is laid out as a circle consisting of three concentric rings: the first one includes the neighbourhoods of Shahr-e Kohna, the old city, Shahr-e Naw, the new city, as well as Shash Darak and Wazir Akbar Khan, where many foreign embassies, international organisations and offices are located. The second ring consists of neighbourhoods developed in the 1950s-1980s to host the growing urban population, like Taimani, Qala-e Fatullah, Kart-e Se, Kart-e Chahar, Kart-e Naw and the *microraisons* (Soviet-style residential districts). The outer, growing ring of the city expanded rapidly after 2001, mainly housing Afghans who have migrated to the capital since then and some high-profile residential compounds.³⁸

Kabul has historically been a majority Persian-speaking city with its own distinctive Dari dialect.³⁹ It is an ethnically diverse city, with communities from almost all Afghan ethnicities. Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, Turkmen, Baluch and people belonging to the religious minority group of Sikhs and Hindus all reside there, with no group clearly dominating.⁴⁰ According to analyst Foschini, central Kabul is 'cosmopolitan' and more mixed than in the past, with the constant movement of residents having a

²⁸ Foschini, F., Kabul's Expanding Crime Scene (Part 1): The Roots of Today's Underworld, AAN, 11 February 2020, [url](#)

²⁹ Foschini, F., Kabul Unpacked - A Geographical Guide to a Metropolis in the Making, AAN, 19 March 2019, [url](#), p. 1; Al Jazeera, Life in the City: Tackling Kabul's Urban Challenges, 11 July 2019, [url](#); Finland, FIS/Migrationsverket, Afghanistan: Fact-Finding Mission to Kabul in April 2019 - Situation of Returnees in Kabul, 15 October 2019, [url](#), pp. 1, 13-14; Telegraph (The), Kabul's Unquenchable Thirst: Crisis Looms in Afghan Capital as Groundwater Reserves Run Dry, 15 February 2021, [url](#)

³⁰ Al Jazeera, Life in the City: Tackling Kabul's Urban Challenges, 11 July 2019, [url](#); Finland, FIS/Migrationsverket, Afghanistan: Fact-Finding Mission to Kabul in April 2019 - Situation of Returnees in Kabul, 15 October 2019, [url](#), pp. 1, 10

³¹ Finland, FIS/Migrationsverket, Afghanistan: Fact-Finding Mission to Kabul in April 2019 - Situation of Returnees in Kabul, 15 October 2019, [url](#), pp. 4, 9

³² Foschini, F., Kabul Unpacked - A Geographical Guide to a Metropolis in the Making, AAN, 19 March 2019, [url](#), p. 1; Finland, FIS/Migrationsverket, Afghanistan: Fact-Finding Mission to Kabul in April 2019 - Situation of Returnees in Kabul, 15 October 2019, [url](#), p. 13

³³ Foschini, F., Kabul Unpacked - A Geographical Guide to a Metropolis in the Making, AAN, 19 March 2019, [url](#), p. 1; Finland, FIS/Migrationsverket, Afghanistan: Fact-Finding Mission to Kabul in April 2019 - Situation of Returnees in Kabul, 15 October 2019, [url](#), pp. 4, 8, 9

³⁴ Foschini, F., Kabul Unpacked - A Geographical Guide to a Metropolis in the Making, AAN, 19 March 2019, [url](#), p. 1; Al Jazeera, Life in the City: Tackling Kabul's Urban Challenges, 11 July 2019, [url](#)

³⁵ Telegraph (The), Kabul's Unquenchable Thirst: Crisis Looms in Afghan Capital as Groundwater Reserves Run Dry, 15 February 2021, [url](#)

³⁶ Foschini, F., Kabul Unpacked - A Geographical Guide to a Metropolis in the Making, AAN, 19 March 2019, [url](#), p. 1; DW, Kabul - Where Breathing Can Kill You, 6 December 2019, [url](#); RFE/RL (Gandhara), Air Pollution Claimed almost 5,000 Lives in Afghanistan Last Year, 13 January 2021, [url](#)

³⁷ Foschini, F., Kabul Unpacked - A Geographical Guide to a Metropolis in the Making, AAN, 19 March 2019, [url](#), p. 1; NYT, They Fight Suicide Bombers. But Can Afghan Police Fight Crime?, 8 February 2020, [url](#)

³⁸ Foschini, F., Kabul and the Challenge of Dwindling Foreign Aid, USIP, April 2017, [url](#), p. 6

³⁹ Foschini, F., Kabul and the Challenge of Dwindling Foreign Aid, USIP, April 2017, [url](#), p. 13

⁴⁰ Pajhwok Afghan News, Elections 2019: Kabul Province Background Profile, n.d., [url](#); Foschini, F., Kabul and the Challenge of Dwindling Foreign Aid, USIP, 10 April 2017, [url](#), p. 6; Foschini, F., Kabul Unpacked - A Geographical Guide to a Metropolis in the Making, AAN, 19 March 2019, [url](#), pp. 5-27

disruptive effect on social networks.⁴¹ Districts in Kabul's outskirts are ethnically more homogenous.⁴² As people tend to move to areas where they already have family or into particular districts as part of a larger group with the same ethnicity, different city neighbourhoods have become associated with different ethnic groups.⁴³ In these densely populated areas, a sort of village society has emerged, whose dwellers know each other and have more direct connections with their province of origin than with central Kabul.⁴⁴

Kabul City hosts Hamid Karzai Airport, served by international and domestic scheduled passenger flights.⁴⁵ Full responsibility for Afghanistan's four international airports (including the airport in Kabul City) will be handed over from NATO's RS mission to the Afghan Civil Aviation Authority (ACAA), as announced in August 2020. The precise timing remains under review,⁴⁶ but the handover will take place in 2021, according to SIGAR reporting.⁴⁷

2. Background on the conflict & actors in Kabul City

According to analysts Ashley Jackson and Antonio Sampaio, Afghanistan's cities have become 'a critically important and overlooked dimension of the country's armed conflict'. During the past decades, violence was often concentrated in rural areas and despite sporadic large-scale attacks, the country's larger cities were long considered 'relatively secure'. As stated by Jackson and Sampaio, this has changed and Afghanistan's urban areas have become stages for a competition among different actors such as the Afghan government, the Taliban, other militant groups, strongmen and their militias and criminal networks. According to Jackson and Sampaio, this is driven by several factors. Firstly, the Taliban's influence has rapidly expanded, with the group's presence reported at the doorstep of large cities (including Kabul) and the militants increasingly 'waging war inside urban areas'. Secondly, the ongoing Afghan peace talks have led the actors involved in the political settlement underpinning the post-2001 government to re-evaluate their allegiance to the central Afghan government, resulting in a disintegration of this settlement and the future of the Kabul administration being put into question. Thirdly, Afghanistan's rapid urbanization and the government's inability to maintain order and to keep up with the needs of a growing urban population have given rise to an increase in urban crime.⁴⁸

Although the Afghan capital is under government control,⁴⁹ armed opposition groups have shown they can infiltrate the city and Kabul remains a target for anti-government elements (AGEs) who continue

⁴¹ Foschini, F., Kabul Unpacked - A Geographical Guide to a Metropolis in the Making, AAN, 19 March 2019, [url](#), p. 3

⁴² Foschini, F., Kabul and the Challenge of Dwindling Foreign Aid, USIP, 10 April 2017, [url](#), pp. 6, 58

⁴³ APPRO, Migration and Urban Development in Kabul: Classification or Accommodation?, October 2012, [url](#), p. 8; IGC, Urbanisation in Fragile Societies: Thinking about Kabul, 13 February 2020, [url](#)

⁴⁴ Foschini, F., Kabul and the Challenge of Dwindling Foreign Aid, USIP, April 2017, [url](#), p. 7; Foschini, F., Kabul Unpacked - A Geographical Guide to a Metropolis in the Making, AAN, 19 March 2019, [url](#), p. 3

⁴⁵ CAPA - Centre for Aviation, Kabul Hamid Karzai International Airport, n.d., [url](#)

⁴⁶ Kandahar's international airport has been handed over to ACAA in January 2021, as reported by SIGAR. The transfer reportedly faced financial and operational hurdles. SIGAR, Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, 30 April 2021, [url](#), pp. 133-134

⁴⁷ SIGAR, Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, 30 October 2020, [url](#), p. 157; SIGAR, Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, 30 January 2021, [url](#), p. 130; SIGAR, Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, 30 April 2021, [url](#), pp. 133-134

⁴⁸ Jackson, A. & Sampaio, A., Afghan Cities Become Key Battlegrounds, War on the Rocks, 9 April 2021, [url](#)

⁴⁹ USDOD, Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan - June 2020, 1 July 2020, [url](#), pp. 2, 18; USIP, Afghanistan Study Group Final Report, February 2021, [url](#), p. 37; Pajhwok Afghan News, Govt, Taliban Make Exaggerated Claims of Territory They Control, 12 February 2021, [url](#); USDOD, Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan - December 2020, 23 April 2021, [url](#), p. 33; CNN, 'No One Can Dare Ask Why' What It's Like to Live in a Town Where Everything Is Controlled by the Taliban, 14 April 2021, [url](#); RFE/RL (Gandhara), Taliban Making 'Strategic' Military Gains in Afghanistan as Foreign Forces Pull Out, 1 June 2021, [url](#)

to carry out attacks in the city.⁵⁰ According to a January 2021 article from the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Kabul City could face a growing threat as the US is withdrawing its military forces from Afghanistan.⁵¹

2.1. Main actors in the city

2.2.1. Taliban

A diplomatic source cited by Landinfo in January 2020 referred to a significant distance between the political and military wing of the Taliban. The latter have been described as 'hardliners' who believe in the possibility to win the war militarily, while the political wing has been referred to as having more faith in a breakthrough in the peace negotiations.⁵² As in the second half of 2019, the Taliban strategy in 2020 was described as a mixture of 'fight and talk', with the militants reportedly seeking to gain leverage in the ongoing peace talks with the Afghan government through gains on the battlefield - including attacks against civilian targets in large urban areas.⁵³ An increase in Taliban attacks has been reported in Kabul City since the last quarter of 2020.⁵⁴ According to the Afghanistan Study Group Final Report, published by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) in February 2021, 'from late 2020, the steady rhythm of terror attacks in Kabul and across the country suggests a disinclination or inability on the group's part to restrain the use of terror, either by its own members or by others'.⁵⁵

According to analysts, the Taliban adopted a new approach in 2020. Refraining from high-profile and mass-casualty attacks in major cities, the militants have shifted their tactic to the targeted killing of civilians (government employees, journalists, human rights activists, moderate religious leaders and women in public roles) in urban areas such as Kabul. This new tactic is described as a response to the agreement the insurgency group signed with the US in February 2020, expecting the militants not to hit urban centres with suicide bombings and other mass-casualty attacks.⁵⁶ A Kabul-based political analyst cited by Gandhara described the new Taliban strategy as 'to win the support or submission of the population in government-controlled areas, particularly in urban centers, through intimidation and psychological warfare'.⁵⁷ The militants' drive to frighten and weaken Afghanistan's civil society and to silence critical voices is also mentioned.⁵⁸ According to Human Rights Watch (HRW), the Taliban have engaged in a pattern of threats, intimidation and violence against media workers in areas under their influence as well as in the capital Kabul. Commanders and fighters often use information on journalists'

⁵⁰ USDOD, Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan - December 2019, 23 January 2020, [url](#), p. 16; Ruttig, T., First Breakthrough Toward Peace? A Look at the Seven Day 'Reduction of Violence', AAN, 17 February 2020, [url](#); UNAMA, Afghanistan Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict - Annual Report 2020, 23 February 2021, [url](#), pp. 18, 24, 38, 43, 55-57, 74, 102-103

⁵¹ CSIS, Escaping the Graveyard of Empires? U.S. Options in Afghanistan, 26 January 2021, [url](#)

⁵² Norway, Landinfo, Afghanistan: Sikkerhetssituasjon og konfliktmonster i 2019, 22 January 2020, [url](#), p. 17

⁵³ Reuters, Fight and Talk: Facing Negotiations, Taliban almost Took Key Afghan City, 14 September 2020, [url](#); RFE/RL (Gandhara), Afghan Security Forces Hit by Surge of Taliban Suicide Car Bombings, 9 December 2020, [url](#)

⁵⁴ CSIS, Escaping the Graveyard of Empires? U.S. Options in Afghanistan, 26 January 2021, [url](#); SIGAR, Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, 30 January 2021, [url](#), p. 50

⁵⁵ USIP, Afghanistan Study Group Final Report, February 2021, [url](#), p. 39

⁵⁶ RFE/RL (Gandhara), 'Psychological Warfare': Taliban Adopts New Strategy in Afghanistan, 8 January 2021, [url](#); Clark, K., As US Troops Withdraw, What Next for War and Peace in Afghanistan?, AAN, 1 May 2021, [url](#)

⁵⁷ RFE/RL (Gandhara), 'Psychological Warfare': Taliban Adopts New Strategy in Afghanistan, 8 January 2021, [url](#)

⁵⁸ RFE/RL (Gandhara), Afghanistan Hit by Surge of Targeted Killings, Assassinations, 13 November 2020, [url](#); NYT, 'There Is No Safe Area': In Kabul, Fear Has Taken Over, 17 January 2021, [url](#); Telegraph (The), Afghanistan Faces a Brain Drain as Young and Educated Flee a Wave of Violence, 14 February 2021, [url](#); New Yorker (The), Last Exit from Afghanistan, 1 March 2021, [url](#); Guardian (The), Afghans Dread the 'Danger Hours' as Fragile Gains of 20 Years Slip Away, 7 March 2021, [url](#); Jackson, A. & Sampaio, A., Afghan Cities Become Key Battlegrounds, War on the Rocks, 9 April 2021, [url](#); Clark, K., As US Troops Withdraw, What Next for War and Peace in Afghanistan?, AAN, 1 May 2021, [url](#)

work, family and movements to pressure them to self-censor, quit their work or face violent consequences.⁵⁹ Reports also indicate that certain Taliban factions take advantage of the current insecurity as a cover to settle political scores.⁶⁰

Several sources in 2020 and 2021 reported a sharp rise in the use of magnetic bombs attached to vehicles (often referred to as 'sticky bombs') by the Taliban in Kabul. This tactic is described as a quick, cheap, simple and relatively unpredictable way for the Taliban to demonstrate their reach in the capital while avoiding mass civilian casualties.⁶¹ A government intelligence official described to The New York Times how these magnetic bombs, assembled with plastic high explosives and powerful magnets, are smuggled into the capital by the militants using an underground courier system called *belti*. The devices can be detonated remotely and are attached as close as possible to a vehicle's fuel tank to ensure a strong explosion. According to a retired Afghan general, these kinds of attacks leave the impression that the Taliban can operate in the Afghan capital with 'near impunity', adding that 'Kabul is an open city - these Taliban live here and make their bombs here'.⁶² An Afghan security official pointed to cooperation between criminal networks and the insurgency in Kabul, offering the Taliban a wider reach and the possibility to stock explosives around the city.⁶³

Although the Taliban are presumably the driving force behind several of the targeted killings in Kabul,⁶⁴ many have remained unclaimed, with the militant group often officially denying its involvement.⁶⁵ The New York Times reported on the Taliban's strategy of not claiming responsibility for attacks in Kabul and using the unclaimed attacks for propaganda purposes to spread fear, undermine the Afghan government's ability to keep the capital safe and weaken the Kabul administration's position in the peace negotiations.⁶⁶ In the first quarter of 2021, the American Defence Intelligence Agency (USDIA) indicated that 'the Taliban probably increased its campaign of targeted assassinations to create security vacuums in Afghanistan's major cities'.⁶⁷

According to International Crisis Group researcher Andrew Watkins, quoted by news agency NPR, 'the Taliban are not only at the gates of Kabul, but inside the city gates'. In December 2020, Taliban militants were reportedly openly preaching in the Kampany neighbourhood in the city.⁶⁸ In January

⁵⁹ HRW, Afghanistan: Taliban Target Journalists, Women in Media, 1 April 2021, [url](#)

⁶⁰ NYT, Targeted Killings Are Terrorizing Afghans. And No One Is Claiming Them, 2 January 2021, [url](#)

⁶¹ NYT, With Delay in Afghan Peace Talks, a Creeping Sense of 'Siege' Around Kabul, 23 August 2020 (updated 22 September 2020), [url](#); NYT, 'Sticky Bombs' Sow Terror and Chaos in a City on Edge, 16 December 2020, [url](#); VoA, Sticky Bomb Attacks Send Wave of Fear Through Kabul, 24 December 2020, [url](#); NYT, Targeted Killings Are Terrorizing Afghans. And No One Is Claiming Them, 2 January 2021, [url](#); RFE/RL (Gandhara), 'Psychological Warfare': Taliban Adopts New Strategy in Afghanistan, 8 January 2021, [url](#); SIGAR, Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, 30 January 2021, [url](#), p. 51

⁶² NYT, 'Sticky Bombs' Sow Terror and Chaos in a City on Edge, 16 December 2020, [url](#)

⁶³ NYT, With Delay in Afghan Peace Talks, a Creeping Sense of 'Siege' Around Kabul, 23 August 2020 (updated 22 September 2020), [url](#)

⁶⁴ Watkins, A., [Twitter], posted on: 21 January 2021, [url](#); New Yorker (The), Last Exit from Afghanistan, 1 March 2021, [url](#); Jackson, A. & Sampaio, A., Afghan Cities Become Key Battlegrounds, War on the Rocks, 9 April 2021, [url](#); Clark, K., As US Troops Withdraw, What Next for War and Peace in Afghanistan?, AAN, 1 May 2021, [url](#)

⁶⁵ RFE/RL (Gandhara), Afghanistan Hit by Surge of Targeted Killings, Assassinations, 13 November 2020, [url](#); RFE/RL (Gandhara), 'Psychological Warfare': Taliban Adopts New Strategy in Afghanistan, 8 January 2021, [url](#); NYT, 'There Is No Safe Area': In Kabul, Fear Has Taken Over, 17 January 2021, [url](#); UNAMA, Special Report: Killing of Human Rights Defenders, Journalists and Media Workers in Afghanistan 2018-2021, February 2021, [url](#), p. 8; Telegraph (The), Afghanistan Faces a Brain Drain as Young and Educated Flee a Wave of Violence, 14 February 2021, [url](#)

⁶⁶ NYT, An Afghan Mayor Expected to Die. Instead, She Lost Her Father, 6 November 2020 (updated 12 November 2020), [url](#); NYT, String of Attacks Have People in Kabul Pointing a Finger, at the Government, 7 November 2020 (updated 12 November 2020), [url](#); NYT, 'Sticky Bombs' Sow Terror and Chaos in a City on Edge, 16 December 2020, [url](#); NYT, Targeted Killings Are Terrorizing Afghans. And No One Is Claiming Them, 2 January 2021, [url](#)

⁶⁷ USDOD, Lead Inspector General (IC) for Overseas Contingency Operations, Operation Freedom's Sentinel - Report to the United States Congress 1 January - 31 March 2021, 18 May 2021, [url](#), pp. 18-19

⁶⁸ NPR, 'Our Houses Are Not Safe': Residents Fear Taliban in Afghanistan's Capital, 18 December 2020, [url](#)

2021, Taliban militants were seen strolling through the streets of the western Qalai Abdul Ali neighbourhood. Although not banned from the neighbourhood, the Afghan government and security services have reportedly been mostly in hiding in this city area. According to a local Taliban commander, cited by *The New Yorker*, the militants have been collecting taxes, providing security and patrolling the streets in Qalai Abdul Ali. The Taliban have allegedly moved into this neighbourhood from Wardak province, using the area to stage attacks in other parts of the city.⁶⁹ In April 2021, *The National* reported on a Taliban infiltration in several districts around the Afghan capital. Security forces' members and civilians declared that militants had encircled Kabul and begun infiltrating the outer suburbs of the city. According to a security official working at the Kabul-Jalalabad Highway entrance gate, the government checkpoints at the main city gates, controlling the major roads leading to the city, are set up to monitor movement and control who comes in and out of the capital, but are poorly equipped and regularly come under attack. Police and army officers working at the Arghandeh checkpoint (near Paghman district) indicated that the Taliban have snipers in the area, have set up their own checkpoints, planted bombs and blew up several bridges.⁷⁰ In May 2021, the presence of Taliban and Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) militants was reported in the Kohdaman area north of Kabul City by local elders, who referred to growing insecurity in the region.⁷¹ According to analysts, cited by Gandhara, the Taliban have seized several strategic districts near Kabul since the start of the international military withdrawal on 1 May 2021, maintaining pressure on the provinces surrounding the capital and securing a passage to the city.⁷²

2.2.2. Haqqani

The Haqqani Network is believed to have introduced suicide operations as a fighting method in Afghanistan, as stated by research from Stanford University.⁷³ According to UNAMA, the Haqqani Network has assumed an increasingly influential role in the Taliban's military operations and is believed to be responsible for complex attacks on government and international targets in heavily populated areas of Kabul City.⁷⁴ According to Taliban expert Antonio Giustozzi, the Haqqani Network is (at least partly) accountable for several recent attacks in the Afghan capital. Referring to a possible division within the Taliban, Giustozzi indicated that these attacks were carried out by the network without the authorisation of the Taliban's Quetta Shura, whose relations with the Haqqanis he described as 'poor'.⁷⁵ In May 2020, the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team reported to the UN Security Council on a 'tactical accommodation' between the Haqqani Network and ISKP in Kabul, referring to a certain degree of 'involvement, facilitation, or the provision of technical assistance' of the Haqqanis in ISKP-claimed attacks in the capital.⁷⁶ Joint Haqqani Network and ISKP cells operating in Kabul City were reported in May 2020 and February 2021.⁷⁷ In January 2021, the arrest of an alleged Chinese espionage ring operating in Kabul to hunt down Uighur Muslims with the help of the Haqqani Network was reported by Afghan officials.⁷⁸ In addition to its funding as part of the broader Afghan Taliban and

⁶⁹ *New Yorker* (The), Last Exit from Afghanistan, 1 March 2021, [url](#)

⁷⁰ *National* (The), Afghan Forces Keep Anxious Watch for Taliban at Kabul's Gates, 24 April 2021, [url](#)

⁷¹ Tolonews, Local Elders Report Militant Presence North of Kabul City, 18 May 2021, [url](#)

⁷² RFE/RL (Gandhara), Taliban Making 'Strategic' Military Gains in Afghanistan as Foreign Forces Pull Out, 1 June 2021, [url](#)

⁷³ Stanford University, Mapping Militant Organisations: Haqqani Network, 8 November 2017, [url](#)

⁷⁴ UNAMA, Afghanistan Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict - Annual Report 2020, 23 February 2021, [url](#), p. 102

⁷⁵ RFE/RL (Gandhara), Deadly Kabul Attacks Expose Possible Divisions within the Taliban, 7 November 2020, [url](#)

⁷⁶ UNSC, Eleventh Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2501 (2019) Concerning the Taliban and Other Associated Individuals and Entities Constituting a Threat to the Peace, Stability and Security of Afghanistan, 27 May 2020, [url](#), pp. 4, 18-19

⁷⁷ *Straits Times* (The), Afghan Forces bust 'ISIS-Haqqani' Cell Blamed for Deadly Attacks, 6 May 2020, [url](#);

Reuters, U.N. Decries Attacks on Afghan Media at Time when Dialogue Needed Most, 15 February 2021, [url](#)

⁷⁸ FP, Afghanistan Wanted Chinese Mining Investment. It Got a Chinese Spy Ring Instead, 27 January 2021, [url](#)

from donors in Pakistan and the Gulf, the Haqqani group has primarily turned to taxing local commerce, extortion, smuggling and other (il)licit business ventures, according to the US Department of State (USDOS).⁷⁹

2.2.3. Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP)

In 2016, ISKP emerged as a new actor in Kabul. This has resulted in a more fragmented picture as regards the conflict in the Afghan capital and a change in the profile of the attacks carried out in the city.⁸⁰ Researcher Amira Jadoon relates ISKP's interest in Kabul to various factors: Kabul City is the most densely populated region in the country, located quite close to ISKP's strongholds in the east, while also providing the group with greater opportunities to strike both state and civilian targets.⁸¹

After a period of no ISKP-claimed violence in Kabul at the end of 2019 and in the first months of 2020, several attacks have again been attributed to the group since March 2020 (see below).⁸² ISKP's activities were possibly disrupted at the end of 2019 and in the beginning of 2020 due to several raids on the militant group's hideouts in the capital region, according to reporting from the UN and the US Department of Defence (USDOD).⁸³ In 2020, ISKP retained its ability to conduct (high-profile and large-scale) attacks in Kabul, although the militant group's operational capacity was 'severely degraded', as stated by USDOD.⁸⁴ According to a report submitted to the UN Security Council, some of the attacks claimed by ISKP 'may have arisen wholly or partly from a tactical accommodation with the Haqqani Network'.⁸⁵ USDOD suggested the militants might be moving to smaller groups in urban areas, which are harder to locate and identify.⁸⁶ UNAMA reported a spike of high-impact attacks (mainly caused by improvised explosive devices (IEDs)) conducted by ISKP in Kabul and other cities in the final months of 2020.⁸⁷ Using its official messaging platforms and media outlets to draw attention to these attacks,⁸⁸ the militant group reportedly aimed at maintaining its credibility and bolstering its recruitment efforts.⁸⁹ In January and February 2021, the UN reported continued ISKP attacks targeting civilians in urban areas,⁹⁰ and expected the militant group to pursue future attacks in the capital.⁹¹ According to USDOD, ISKP regained strength in the first quarter of 2021, maintained a steady

⁷⁹ USDOS, Country Reports on Terrorism 2019, 24 June 2020, [url](#), p. 259

⁸⁰ Norway, Landinfo, Afghanistan: Sikkerhetssituasjonen i Kabul by - oppdatering, 9 May 2018, [url](#), p. 2; Norway, Landinfo, Afghanistan: Sikkerhetssituasjon og konfliktmonster i 2019, 22 January 2020, [url](#), p. 25

⁸¹ Jadoon, M., Allied & Lethal: Islamic State Khorasan's Network and Organisational Capacity in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Combating Terrorism Center, 3 December 2018, [url](#), p. 14

⁸² UNSG, The Situation in Afghanistan and Its Implications for International Peace and Security, 17 June 2020, [url](#), p. 6

⁸³ UNSC, Tenth Report of the Secretary-General on the Threat Posed by ISIL (Da'esh) to International Peace and Security and the Range of UN Efforts in Support of Member States in Countering the Threat, 4 February 2020, [url](#), pp. 6-7; USDOD, Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan - June 2020, 1 July 2020, [url](#), p. 9

⁸⁴ USDOD, Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan - December 2020, 23 April 2021, [url](#), p. 8

⁸⁵ UNSC, Eleventh Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2501 (2019) Concerning the Taliban and Other Associated Individuals and Entities Constituting a Threat to the Peace, Stability and Security of Afghanistan, 27 May 2020, [url](#), p. 4

⁸⁶ USDOD, Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan - June 2020, 1 July 2020, [url](#), p. 28

⁸⁷ UNAMA, Afghanistan Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict - Annual Report 2020, 23 February 2021, [url](#), pp. 24, 103

⁸⁸ USDOD, Lead Inspector General (IC) for Overseas Contingency Operations, Operation Freedom's Sentinel - Report to the United States Congress 1 April - 30 June 2020, 18 August 2020, [url](#), p. 16

⁸⁹ USIP, Afghanistan Study Group Final Report, February 2021, [url](#), p. 23

⁹⁰ UNSG, The Situation in Afghanistan and Its Implications for International Peace and Security, 12 March 2021, [url](#), pp. 5-6

⁹¹ UNSC, Twelfth Report of the Secretary-General on the Threat Posed by ISIL (Da'esh) to International Peace and Security and the Range of United Nations Efforts in Support of Member States in Countering the Threat, 29 January 2021, [url](#), p. 7; UNSC, Letter Dated 21 January 2021 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee Pursuant to Resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) Concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and Associated Individuals, Groups, Undertakings and Entities Addressed to the President of the Security Council, 3 February 2021, [url](#), p. 15

operational tempo and retained its ability to carry out attacks in Kabul and other major cities.⁹² In the first quarter of 2021, ISKP mostly engaged in low-level attacks targeting Afghan government members and civilians, as reported by USDIA.⁹³ According to sources, ISKP replenishes its ranks by appealing to disaffected members of the Taliban,⁹⁴ possibly attempting to recruit those who have been disillusioned with the ongoing peace process.⁹⁵

ISKP is said to have maintained active as well as sleeper cells in Afghan cities, including in Kabul.⁹⁶ These often coordinate on encrypted messaging applications⁹⁷ and reportedly work independently, avoiding the disclosure of other cells if one is discovered.⁹⁸ According to analyst Borhan Osman, ISKP's Kabul cell is an 'almost entirely Afghan phenomenon', recruiting urban youth from diverse socio-economic backgrounds (often from middle class-families) in the capital and in the surrounding provinces of Parwan, Panjsher and Kapisa. In contrast to the usual pattern of Pashtun recruitment into Afghanistan's militant extremist groups, a majority of ISKP's Kabul cell members and supporters reportedly come from predominantly Tajik areas.⁹⁹ Osman points at the scarcity of reliable information about the Kabul cell's operational methods. Instructions to organise and carry out attacks in the capital have reportedly often been relayed directly to the small circles in Kabul from the ISKP leadership in Nangarhar province. According to senior Afghan security officials, all the ISKP-claimed attacks in the capital have depended on the same supply and logistics chain from a single network, also used for attacks by the Taliban (including the Haqqani Network), likely relying on the support of corrupt government security figures.¹⁰⁰ In Kabul, ISKP relies on the *hawala* system to transfer funds.¹⁰¹ In June 2020, Shahab al-Muhajir, who is referred to as one of the 'urban lions' of ISKP in Kabul and is reportedly involved in the planning of suicide and complex attacks, was appointed as ISKP leader in the region.¹⁰² According to Afghan officials, cited by CBS News in January 2021, members of a joint Taliban-ISKP cell have been tasked with disguising themselves as social workers and vaccine administrators to assassinate journalists in Kabul.¹⁰³

⁹² USDOD, Lead Inspector General (IC) for Overseas Contingency Operations, Operation Freedom's Sentinel - Report to the United States Congress 1 January - 31 March 2021, 18 May 2021, [url](#), p. 22

⁹³ USDOD, Lead Inspector General (IC) for Overseas Contingency Operations, Operation Freedom's Sentinel - Report to the United States Congress 1 January - 31 March 2021, 18 May 2021, [url](#), p. 22

⁹⁴ VoA, Islamic State Poised for Possible Resurgence in Afghanistan, US Officials Warn, 9 February 2021, [url](#); USDOD, Lead Inspector General (IC) for Overseas Contingency Operations, Operation Freedom's Sentinel - Report to the United States Congress 1 January - 31 March 2021, 18 May 2021, [url](#), p. 22

⁹⁵ USDOD, Lead Inspector General (IC) for Overseas Contingency Operations, Operation Freedom's Sentinel - Report to the United States Congress 1 January - 31 March 2021, 18 May 2021, [url](#), p. 22

⁹⁶ BBC, Islamic State Group Claims Deadly Attack on Afghanistan Prison, 3 August 2020, [url](#); NYT, Afghan Journalist Is Killed in Latest Attack on Media Figures, 10 December 2020 (updated 11 December 2020), [url](#); UNSC, Letter Dated 21 January 2021 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee Pursuant to Resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) Concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and Associated Individuals, Groups, Undertakings and Entities Addressed to the President of the Security Council, 3 February 2021, [url](#), p. 15; VoA, Islamic State Poised for Possible Resurgence in Afghanistan, US Officials Warn, 9 February 2021, [url](#)

⁹⁷ NYT, As Pompeo Prepared to Meet Afghan Warring Parties, New Attack Struck Kabul, 21 November 2020 (updated 27 November 2020), [url](#)

⁹⁸ NYT, Foes in Afghan War See a Common Threat of Islamic State's Return, 22 March 2021 (updated 30 March 2021), [url](#)

⁹⁹ Osman, B., Bourgeois Jihad: Why Young, Middle-Class Afghans Join the Islamic State, USIP, June 2020, [url](#), pp. 3-4, 11-14

¹⁰⁰ Osman, B., Bourgeois Jihad: Why Young, Middle-Class Afghans Join the Islamic State, USIP, June 2020, [url](#), pp. 9-10; BBC, Afghanistan Conflict: IS Links to Kabul Student Killings Cause Outrage, 5 November 2020, [url](#)

¹⁰¹ LWJ, Al Qaeda 'Gaining Strength' in Afghanistan, U.S. Treasury Says, 25 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁰² UNSC, Letter Dated 21 January 2021 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee Pursuant to Resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) Concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and Associated Individuals, Groups, Undertakings and Entities Addressed to the President of the Security Council, 3 February 2021, [url](#), p. 15

¹⁰³ CBS News, Afghan Journalists Are Being Killed for Their Work, and They Just "Want to Stay Alive", 21 January 2021, [url](#)

ISKP has applied an effective recruitment strategy in the capital, conducting outreach activities in religious and academic institutions, including Kabul University.¹⁰⁴ University professors recruiting for ISKP and first-grade students joining their ranks have given the militant's group's cell in the capital an elite character, according to sources. Mid-career professionals, business owners and well-educated urbanites have been mostly recruited for logistical, financial or communication roles, often leading a double life.¹⁰⁵ According to a research paper from the Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies (AISS), ISKP's recruitment 'has also benefitted from prior Taliban relationships', with ISKP recruiters in universities in Kabul and Jalalabad openly recruiting for the Taliban.¹⁰⁶

As reported by USDOD, ISKP affiliates use social media as primary communication method and as a propaganda medium to exert influence online.¹⁰⁷ According to analyst Osman, the growing appeal of ISKP's Salafi-jihadist ideology among urban Afghan youth may explain the militant group's resilience. The search for ideological 'purity', commitment to rigidly practicing Islamic Law, support for an anti-Shia sectarian agenda, strong in-group solidarity and egalitarian behaviour, enthusiasm for a global jihad and the 'fantasy of living under the caliphate' are suggested as pull-factors attracting Kabul's youth to ISKP. A growing dissatisfaction with the current elite and the status quo of the Afghan political system are mentioned as push-factors driving urban youth to search for a radical alternative.¹⁰⁸

2.2.4. Unidentified armed groups

All parties to the conflict have been reporting their attacks much more sparingly since the signing of the Doha Agreement between the Taliban and the US in February 2020. This has resulted in a strong increase in unattributed insurgent attacks in urban areas.¹⁰⁹ According to AAN analyst Kate Clark, the war in Afghanistan became a little 'murkier' in 2020,¹¹⁰ with a significant increase in unclaimed attacks in Kabul City.¹¹¹ Clark suggested this 'may point to the Taleban carrying out attacks without wanting to appear to do so, or to an actual muddying of the waters, with elements within the Taleban operating without explicit permission from the leadership or with ISKP now carrying out attacks without claiming them'.¹¹²

Sources documented a climate of rising impunity, in which different parties to the conflict have been accusing each other. While the Afghan government has blamed the Taliban for several attacks in the

¹⁰⁴ VoA, Afghan University Teacher, Students among IS Operatives Arrested in Kabul, 8 July 2019, [url](#); UNSC, Tenth Report of the Secretary-General on the Threat Posed by ISIL (Da'esh) to International Peace and Security and the Range of UN Efforts in Support of Member States in Countering the Threat, 4 February 2020, [url](#), p. 7

¹⁰⁵ Osman, B., Bourgeois Jihad: Why Young, Middle-Class Afghans Join the Islamic State, USIP, June 2020, [url](#), pp. 11-14; Washington Post (The), Afghanistan Claims the Islamic State Was 'Obliterated'. But Fighters Who Got Away Could Stage a Resurgence, 9 February 2020, [url](#); Withington, S. & Ehsani, H., Islamic State Wilayat Khorasan: Phoney Caliphate or Bonafide Province, AISS, 5 March 2020, [url](#), p. 86

¹⁰⁶ Withington, S. & Ehsani, H., Islamic State Wilayat Khorasan: Phoney Caliphate or Bonafide Province, AISS, 5 March 2020, [url](#), p. 38

¹⁰⁷ USDOD, Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan - December 2019, 23 January 2020, [url](#), p. 26

¹⁰⁸ Osman, B., Bourgeois Jihad: Why Young, Middle-Class Afghans Join the Islamic State, USIP, June 2020, [url](#), pp. 4, 15-20

¹⁰⁹ Clark, K., Behind the Statistics: Drop in Civilian Casualties Masks Increased Taleban Violence, AAN, 27 October 2020, [url](#)

¹¹⁰ Clark, K., War in Afghanistan in 2020: Just as Much Violence, but No One Wants to Talk about It, AAN, 16 August 2020, [url](#)

¹¹¹ SIGAR, Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, 30 January 2021, [url](#), pp. 83, 85; UNAMA, Afghanistan Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict - Annual Report 2020, 23 February 2021, [url](#), pp. 18-19, 43-44; USDOD, Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan - December 2020, 23 April 2021, [url](#), pp. 9-10

¹¹² Clark, K., War in Afghanistan in 2020: Just as Much Violence, but No One Wants to Talk about It, AAN, 16 August 2020, [url](#)

capital, the militant group accused the Kabul administration of involvement.¹¹³ Analyst Thomas Ruttig describes how 'mutual accusations and possibly false flag attacks are part of [a] psychological warfare in the increasingly confusing war'.¹¹⁴ Some of these unclaimed attacks may be attributed to other militant groups than the Taliban or ISKP or might be the work of criminal gangs (see below), drug smugglers and land grabbers active in the capital, who often operate with political protection.¹¹⁵ Analysts mentioned that other actors might be able and willing to take advantage of the situation of growing lawlessness,¹¹⁶ such as political factions or corrupt officials hoping to capitalise on chaos and conflict or discredit the ongoing peace negotiations with the Taliban, or people inside the government possibly directing certain targeted assassinations.¹¹⁷ According to USDOD reporting published in May 2021, 'many of these [unclaimed] attacks involve a level of planning and coordination that exceeds those associated with random acts of violence'.¹¹⁸

According to analysts Jackson and Sampaio, Afghan cities (including the capital) 'are becoming battlegrounds for power struggles between well-armed and ambitious political actors'. Strongmen have had longstanding economic interests in urban areas, such as property, real estate businesses, lucrative development contracts, stakes in telecommunications and criminal activities. Many of these strongmen, who often occupy influential political posts, maintain and pay heavily armed militias who extort local businesses or illegally seize land for them. Their connections to the government protect them, although they undermine security and government legitimacy. This dynamic is reportedly increasingly common in Kabul.¹¹⁹

2.2. The Kabul security plan

Because of its high concentration of government buildings, international organisations, diplomatic and security forces' compounds, the capital faces distinct security challenges compared to most of Afghanistan's other districts and provinces.¹²⁰ Beginning in 2018, the approval of a new security plan for the Afghan capital was announced¹²¹ and the Kabul Enhanced Security Zone (ESZ) was established.¹²² New and improved security measures have been implemented since then, including: additional temporary checkpoints, security cameras and access surveillance, additional road blockades, blast walls and increased patrolling, enhanced reconnaissance and intelligence activities.¹²³

¹¹³ Ruttig, T., A Deal in the Mist: How Much of the US-Taliban Doha Agreement Has Been Implemented?, AAN, 25 February 2021, [url](#); Guardian (The), Afghans Dread the 'Danger Hours' as Fragile Gains of 20 Years Slip Away, 7 March 2021, [url](#)

¹¹⁴ Ruttig, T., Terrorist Attack in Kabul: School Bombing, Die Tageszeitung, 9 May 2021, [url](#)

¹¹⁵ Telegraph (The), Afghanistan Faces a Brain Drain as Young and Educated Flee a Wave of Violence, 14 February 2021, [url](#); NYT, Targeted Killings Are Terrorizing Afghans. And No One Is Claiming Them, 2 January 2021, [url](#)

¹¹⁶ Watkins, A., [Twitter], posted on: 21 January 2021, [url](#); Jackson, A. & Sampaio, A., Afghan Cities Become Key Battlegrounds, War on the Rocks, 9 April 2021, [url](#)

¹¹⁷ NYT, Targeted Killings Are Terrorizing Afghans. And No One Is Claiming Them, 2 January 2021, [url](#); Telegraph (The), Afghanistan Faces a Brain Drain as Young and Educated Flee a Wave of Violence, 14 February 2021, [url](#); New Yorker (The), Last Exit from Afghanistan, 1 March 2021, [url](#); Guardian (The), Afghans Dread the 'Danger Hours' as Fragile Gains of 20 Years Slip Away, 7 March 2021, [url](#)

¹¹⁸ USDOD, Lead Inspector General (IC) for Overseas Contingency Operations, Operation Freedom's Sentinel - Report to the United States Congress 1 January - 31 March 2021, 18 May 2021, [url](#), p. 18

¹¹⁹ Jackson, A. & Sampaio, A., Afghan Cities Become Key Battlegrounds, War on the Rocks, 9 April 2021, [url](#)

¹²⁰ Foschini, F., Kabul and the Challenge of Dwindling Foreign Aid, USIP, 10 April 2017, [url](#), p. 56; Osman, B., A Black Week in Kabul (2): Who Are the Most Likely Perpetrators?, AAN, 7 June 2017, [url](#)

¹²¹ RFE/RL, New Security Plan in Kabul after Deadly Attacks, 7 February 2018, [url](#)

¹²² USDOD, Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan - June 2018, 3 July 2018, [url](#), pp. 1, 15, 43, 46-47

¹²³ EFE, Kabul Implements New Security Plan Following Repeated Assaults on City, 18 February 2018, [url](#); Safer Edge, Safer Edge Insights: New Security Measures in Kabul, 20 February 2018, [url](#); USDOD, Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan - December 2018, 20 December 2018, [url](#), p. 36; Washington Post (The), A Photo Tour of Kabul Shows How 20 Years of U.S. Military Presence Reshaped Afghanistan's Capital, 25 March 2021, [url](#); SIGAR, Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, 30 April 2021, [url](#), p. 84

Kabul's new security measures were reported to have exacerbated the city's traffic problems,¹²⁴ and caused resentment and protests among residents.¹²⁵ In mid-2020, the implementation of a new 'Security Charter' for Kabul City was ordered by President Ghani.¹²⁶ This charter has been implemented in the second half of 2020 and further in 2021, with Vice President Amrullah Saleh taking charge of security in the capital. An increased police presence has been achieved by handing over responsibility for checkpoints surrounding Kabul City to the army.¹²⁷ In addition, a CCTV (closed-circuit television) surveillance system will be installed across the city.¹²⁸

In terms of the presence of government security forces, most of Kabul province was reported to be under the responsibility of the Train, Advise and Assist Command - Capital (TAAC-C), part of NATO's RS Mission in Afghanistan and led by Turkish forces.¹²⁹ Afghan National Police (ANP) forces have maintained responsibility for security within Kabul city, with the special Crisis Response Unit (CRU) 222 and Commando Force 333 providing crisis response and high-risk arrest support.¹³⁰ The capital has its own independent 111th Afghan National Army (ANA) Division.¹³¹ The Special Mission Wing (SMW), an Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) unit established in 2012, has several assault squadrons in Kabul to support counterterrorism and counternarcotic missions conducted by Afghan Special Forces. The unit also has an imagery, surveillance and reconnaissance squadron in Kabul.¹³²

ANDSF forces have begun a concerted effort to dismantle AGE groups active in and around the Kabul metropolitan area,¹³³ with a new command of the Joint Forces established in June 2020.¹³⁴ Examples of such military operations in 2020 and 2021 included: several raids on ISKP and Haqqani hideouts in May 2020 resulting in the arrest of three prominent ISKP figures and the killing of several other militants;¹³⁵ the arrest of two ISKP affiliates allegedly planning attacks on a hospital and media outlet in the city, in July 2020;¹³⁶ the arrest of a prominent ISKP leader, reportedly responsible for several attacks and the assassination of two religious scholars, in September 2020;¹³⁷ the arrest of the Taliban's shadow governor for Kabul in January 2021;¹³⁸ the dismantling of two joint ISKP-Haqqani

¹²⁴ Frontier Post (The), Kabul's New Security Plan Irks Residents, 23 February 2018, [url](#); Tolonews, WAK Residents Bear the Brunt of Tightened Security, 5 March 2018, [url](#); Washington Post (The), A Photo Tour of Kabul Shows How 20 Years of U.S. Military Presence Reshaped Afghanistan's Capital, 25 March 2021, [url](#)

¹²⁵ Reuters, Kabul's Expanding Foreigner 'Bubble' Trades Safety for Isolation, 19 March 2019, [url](#); NYT, After Bombing, Afghans Demand That Foreigners Leave Their Neighbourhood, 4 September 2019, [url](#); Washington Post (The), A Photo Tour of Kabul Shows How 20 Years of U.S. Military Presence Reshaped Afghanistan's Capital, 25 March 2021, [url](#)

¹²⁶ Tolonews, [Twitter], posted on: 30 June 2020, [url](#)

¹²⁷ Al Jazeera, At least Four Killed, Many Wounded in Afghanistan Attacks, 28 December 2020, [url](#); UNSG, The Situation in Afghanistan and Its Implications for International Peace and Security, 12 March 2021, [url](#), p. 5

¹²⁸ SIGAR, Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, 30 October 2020, [url](#), p. 99; SIGAR, Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, 30 April 2021, [url](#), p. 84

¹²⁹ USDOD, Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan - December 2020, 23 April 2021, [url](#), p. 5

¹³⁰ USDOD, Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan - December 2020, 23 April 2021, [url](#), p. 60

¹³¹ USDOD, Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan - June 2020, 1 July 2020, [url](#), pp. 13, 58; USDOD, Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan - December 2020, 23 April 2021, [url](#), p. 39

¹³² USDOD, Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan - June 2020, 1 July 2020, [url](#), p. 75; SIGAR, Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, 30 July 2020, [url](#), p. 122; SIGAR, Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, 30 October 2020, [url](#), p. 134

¹³³ UNSC, Eleventh Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2501 (2019) Concerning the Taliban and Other Associated Individuals and Entities Constituting a Threat to the Peace, Stability and Security of Afghanistan, 27 May 2020, [url](#), pp. 18-19; USDOD, Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan - June 2020, 1 July 2020, [url](#), p. 1

¹³⁴ Khaama Press, Command Joint Forces Established to Root Out Terror Cells, Criminal Gangs in Kabul, 4 June 2020, [url](#)

¹³⁵ BBC, IS Regional Leader Sheikh Khorasani 'Arrested in Afghanistan', 11 May 2020, [url](#); Tolonews, 'Key' Daesh Leaders Arrested in Kabul: NDS, 11 May 2020, [url](#)

¹³⁶ Tolonews, NDS Prevents Attacks Targeting Media Outlet, Hospital in Kabul, 7 July 2020, [url](#)

¹³⁷ Tolonews, NDS Arrests Daesh Leader Who 'Planned Killings of Kabul Imams', 10 September 2020, [url](#)

¹³⁸ Bakhtar News, Prominent Taliban Member Arrested in Kabul, 31 January 2021, [url](#)

Network cells, reportedly responsible for targeted killings in the capital, in February 2021;¹³⁹ and the arrest of a key ISKP/Taliban leader, reportedly involved in insurgency attacks, murder, kidnappings and other crimes, in April 2021.¹⁴⁰

2.3. Criminality

Security concerns in Kabul are not limited to AGE attacks alone, but include a rise in criminality, as documented by several sources.¹⁴¹ AAN analyst Fabrizio Foschini identified several aspects and current trends that have contributed to Kabul's rising crime scene. In the first place, a significant urban growth and population surge combined with declining economic opportunities and rising unemployment¹⁴² seem to have driven more people into illegal activities as a means of survival. Secondly, the influence and fearlessness of heavily armed and politically connected criminal networks in Kabul has grown. Thirdly, Foschini considers the impact of changing patterns in the social behaviour of Kabul's youth. Certain groups of young people, who are deprived of education and exposed to a tough life on the capital's streets, have developed a more rash and cynical attitude and have lost respect for traditional values. Foschini refers to the Khairkhana city neighbourhood where a kind of 'Afghan gangsta style' has emerged among youngsters, developing manners and a language typical of city gangs. These local youth gangs are likely to join the ranks of armed and criminal groups. According to Foschini, the spike in crime frequency in Kabul and the increased level of violence involved have changed the attitude of the city's residents. Having spoken to several crime witnesses, Foschini suggests that public response towards instances of criminality seems to have decreased and the capital's residents have adopted a more cautious attitude towards getting involved.¹⁴³

Foschini differentiates between targeted killings disguised as criminally motivated attacks and common criminality in the city.¹⁴⁴ He describes new typologies of crimes and worsening existing patterns. Home raids by armed burglars and personally driven murders have been happening in central city areas that used to be considered relatively safe (e.g. Kart-e Naw, Wazirabad and Khairkhana). Petty theft such as pickpocketing and robbery has become organised on public transport (especially shared taxis) and on the streets (e.g. in areas such as Mandawi Chawk, Kot-e Sangi, Chehel Sotun and the edge of PD 7, Kart-e Naw, Jalalabad Road, Taimani and Qala-ye Fatullah, Wazirabad, Khairkhana and PD 21). Robberies and carjacking often involve weapons and appear to have increasingly violent outcomes. Organised criminal gangs engage in kidnappings and extortion, targeting a range of businesses from petrol stations to factories (e.g. in neighbourhoods such as PD 3, 4 and 10, Kart-e Naw, Koh-e Asmai/TV Mountain and Aliabad Hill, Jalalabad Road, Taimani and Qala-ye Fathullah, Khairkhana,

¹³⁹ Reporterly, NDS Arrested Members of Haqqani-IS-K Joint Terror Cell in Kabul, 9 February 2021, [url](#);

Reporterly, NDS Busts Haqqani-IS-K Network Cell in Kabul, 21 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁴⁰ Khaama Press, NDS Detains Key 'Daeshi Taliban' Leader in Kabul: First VP's Office, 10 April 2021, [url](#)

¹⁴¹ Foschini, F., Kabul's Expanding Crime Scene (Part 1): The Roots of Today's Underworld, AAN, 11 February 2020, [url](#); UNSG, The Situation in Afghanistan and Its Implications for International Peace and Security, 18 August 2020, [url](#), p. 5; RFE/RL (Gandhara), Afghan Vice President Takes Charge of Capital Amid Rise in Crime, 17 October 2020, [url](#); NYT, String of Attacks Have People in Kabul Pointing a Finger, at the Government, 7 November 2020 (updated 12 November 2020), [url](#); Al Jazeera, A Day on the Job with Kabul's Crime Scene Investigators, 1 February 2021, [url](#); AP, Crime, Conflict, Chaos Crushing Afghan Hopes for Tomorrow, 4 February 2021, [url](#); NYT, In Kabul's Streets, Dogs Rule the Night, 21 March 2021 (updated 22 March 2021), [url](#); Jackson, A. & Sampaio, A., Afghan Cities Become Key Battlegrounds, War on the Rocks, 9 April 2021, [url](#); Pforzheimer, A. et al., "No Going Backward" Afghanistan's Post-Peace Accord Security Sector, March 2021, [url](#), pp. 14-15

¹⁴² See also: RFE/RL (Gandhara), Afghan Vice President Takes Charge of Capital Amid Rise in Crime, 17 October 2020, [url](#); Al Jazeera, A Day on the Job with Kabul's Crime Scene Investigators, 1 February 2021, [url](#);

Pforzheimer, A. et al., "No Going Backward" Afghanistan's Post-Peace Accord Security Sector, March 2021, [url](#), pp. 14-15; NYT, In Kabul's Streets, Dogs Rule the Night, 21 March 2021 (updated 22 March 2021), [url](#)

¹⁴³ Foschini, F., Kabul's Expanding Crime Scene (Part 1): The Roots of Today's Underworld, AAN, 11 February 2020, [url](#)

¹⁴⁴ Foschini, F., Kabul's Expanding Crime Scene (Part 1): The Roots of Today's Underworld, AAN, 11 February 2020, [url](#)

higher Paghman Valley, Qasaba and PD 17). An unprecedented expansion of the Kabul drug market has led to a significant increase in narco-trafficking and drug-related crimes in the city (e.g. in areas such as Shahrara and Pul-e Sukhta, Kot-e Sangi, Deh Afghanan, Quwa-ye Markaz, Bagh Ali Mardan and PD 1 and 2).¹⁴⁵

An increase in criminal activities in Kabul City was reported by several sources in 2020 and 2021 - including: home raids and murders,¹⁴⁶ organised petty crime on public transport,¹⁴⁷ violent theft, burglaries¹⁴⁸ and armed robberies,¹⁴⁹ carjacking, narco-trafficking and drug-related crimes¹⁵⁰ in several city areas, as well as kidnappings by organised criminal gangs.¹⁵¹ UNAMA states that abductions by armed groups/elements and criminal gangs in large cities such as Kabul are often under-reported, adding that it regularly received notice of such events in 2020, including incidents targeting NGO workers and UN staff members.¹⁵² Children as well as adults have reportedly been kidnapped from the streets for ransoms ranging from \$50 to \$5 000.¹⁵³

Several sources have documented difficulties faced by ANDSF forces in responding to Kabul's rapidly expanding crime scene,¹⁵⁴ with reports of bribery and of security officers themselves involved in crime.¹⁵⁵ According to Foschini, there is 'a *modus vivendi* between the police and criminals' in many city neighbourhoods, with powerful and deeply-rooted (political) interests often resulting in impunity.¹⁵⁶ Mid-July 2020, the 'Mobilizing the People in the Fight against Crime' program was launched by the Afghan government as part of the new 'Security Charter' for Kabul, intensifying operations against criminal gangs and armed robbers in the capital region.¹⁵⁷ The continuation of this program was reported in 2021,¹⁵⁸ including measures such as: street-to-street intelligence coverage,

¹⁴⁵ Foschini, F., Kabul Unpacked - A Geographical Guide to a Metropolis in the Making, AAN, 19 March 2019, [url](#), pp. 1, 5-13, 15-16, 19-20, 22, 26; Foschini, F., Kabul's Expanding Crime Scene (Part 2): Criminal Activities and the Police Response, AAN, 21 February 2020, [url](#)

¹⁴⁶ Tolonews, 4 Members of One Family Killed in Kabul, 19 January 2020, [url](#)

¹⁴⁷ Jackson, A. & Sampaio, A., Afghan Cities Become Key Battlegrounds, War on the Rocks, 9 April 2021, [url](#)

¹⁴⁸ UNSG, The Situation in Afghanistan and Its Implications for International Peace and Security, 18 August 2020, [url](#), p. 5; Jackson, A. & Sampaio, A., Afghan Cities Become Key Battlegrounds, War on the Rocks, 9 April 2021, [url](#)

¹⁴⁹ Tolonews, University Professor Wounded as Armed Robbery Increases in Kabul, 8 January 2020, [url](#); Khaama Press, KP Reporter Traumatized after Being Robbed at Gunpoint close to Kabul Police Station, 24 March 2020, [url](#); Tolonews, Crime Remains High in Kabul City, Ex-Police Official Killed, 21 October 2020, [url](#); Tolonews, Armed Robberies Persist, Kabul Residents Demand Action, 5 January 2021, [url](#); AP, Crime, Conflict, Chaos Crushing Afghan Hopes for Tomorrow, 4 February 2021, [url](#); Tolonews, 4 People Killed, 4 Wounded by Violent Crime in Kabul Since Sunday, 15 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁵⁰ Tolonews, Interior Ministry Pledges Crackdown on Drug Dealers, 7 February 2020, [url](#); Tolonews, Crime Remains High in Kabul City, Ex-Police Official Killed, 21 October 2020, [url](#)

¹⁵¹ Pajhwok Afghan News, Girl Rescued, 2 Suspected Abductors Held in Kabul, 14 June 2020, [url](#); UNSG, The Situation in Afghanistan and Its Implications for International Peace and Security, 18 August 2020, [url](#), p. 5; AP, Crime, Conflict, Chaos Crushing Afghan Hopes for Tomorrow, 4 February 2021, [url](#); Jackson, A. & Sampaio, A., Afghan Cities Become Key Battlegrounds, War on the Rocks, 9 April 2021, [url](#); Pforzheimer, A. et al., "No Going Backward" Afghanistan's Post-Peace Accord Security Sector, March 2021, [url](#), pp. 14-15

¹⁵² UNAMA, Afghanistan Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict - Annual Report 2020, 23 February 2021, [url](#), p. 58

¹⁵³ AP, Crime, Conflict, Chaos Crushing Afghan Hopes for Tomorrow, 4 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁵⁴ NYT, They Fight Suicide Bombers. But Can Afghan Police Fight Crime?, 8 February 2020, [url](#); Foschini, F., Kabul's Expanding Crime Scene (Part 2): Criminal Activities and the Police Response, AAN, 21 February 2020, [url](#); Tolonews, Armed Robberies Persist, Kabul Residents Demand Action, 5 January 2021, [url](#); Tolonews, Kabul: Calls for Security Mount as Violence Continues, 19 January 2021, [url](#); Pforzheimer, A. et al., "No Going Backward" Afghanistan's Post-Peace Accord Security Sector, March 2021, [url](#), pp. 14-15

¹⁵⁵ Al Jazeera, A Day on the Job with Kabul's Crime Scene Investigators, 1 February 2021, [url](#); AP, Analysis: NATO Faces Conundrum as It Mulls Afghan Pullout, 16 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁵⁶ Foschini, F., Kabul's Expanding Crime Scene (Part 2): Criminal Activities and the Police Response, AAN, 21 February 2020, [url](#)

¹⁵⁷ Tolonews, Police Target Paghman Gang Accused of Robbing Kabul Residents, 17 July 2020, [url](#)

¹⁵⁸ UNSG, The Situation in Afghanistan and Its Implications for International Peace and Security, 12 March 2021, [url](#), p. 5

registering undocumented vehicles, tracking down land grabbers, documenting thieves (with pictures of people accused of crimes posted across Kabul)¹⁵⁹ and digitalizing information, preventing the transfer of drugs inside schools and demolishing illegal buildings.¹⁶⁰ Additionally, hundreds of surveillance cameras are to be installed across Kabul to tackle street crime.¹⁶¹ However, according to analysts Jackson and Sampaio, this newly launched plan has failed to curb crime in the capital. Deeply entrenched corruption and the influence of powerful figures have protected criminals and undermined police investigations.¹⁶²

3. Recent security trends in Kabul City

In the first three quarters of 2020, few high-profile attacks were reported in Kabul City.¹⁶³ In the last quarter of 2020, SIGAR reported a 'much higher' number of enemy-initiated attacks in Kabul, compared to the same quarter in 2019.¹⁶⁴ Documenting the last quarter of 2020 and the first quarter of 2021, the UN Secretary-General reported continued countrywide high-profile attacks by AGEs, especially in the city of Kabul, in combination with a pattern of increased unclaimed targeted assassinations.¹⁶⁵ Documenting violence trends in the first quarter of 2021, SIGAR reported on the continuation of targeted killings of Afghan government officials and journalists, suspected to have been perpetrated by the Taliban, ISKP or other unidentified groups.¹⁶⁶

3.1. Civilian casualties and further impact on the civilian population

In 2020, UNAMA documented 817 civilian casualties (255 deaths and 562 injured) in Kabul province¹⁶⁷. Although this is a 48 % decrease compared to 2019, Kabul province remained the province with the highest number of civilian casualties countrywide. Leading causes of casualties were targeted killings, followed by non-suicide IEDs and suicide attacks.¹⁶⁸

Contrasted to previous years, when 'deaths were mainly caused by the proximity of individuals to mass casualty attacks by organised armed groups, mainly ISKP', as cited by analyst Kate Clark,¹⁶⁹ the most recent wave of civilian casualties shows the 'intentional, premeditated and deliberate targeting of individuals with perpetrators remaining anonymous', as reported by UNAMA.¹⁷⁰ In an October 2020 dispatch, AAN reported on 'a carefully calibrated campaign of violence using magnetic IEDs, suicide

¹⁵⁹ RFE/RL (Gandhara), Afghan Vice President Takes Charge of Capital Amid Rise in Crime, 17 October 2020, [url](#); NYT, String of Attacks Have People in Kabul Pointing a Finger, at the Government, 7 November 2020 (updated 12 November 2020), [url](#)

¹⁶⁰ Tolonews, Crime Remains High in Kabul City, Ex-Police Official Killed, 21 October 2020, [url](#)

¹⁶¹ RFE/RL (Gandhara), Afghan Vice President Takes Charge of Capital Amid Rise in Crime, 17 October 2020, [url](#); Reuters, Kabul to Install Surveillance Cameras to Combat Crime, 6 January 2021, [url](#); Tolonews, Kabul to be Covered by Security Cameras: Saleh, 6 January 2021 (edited 7 January 2021), [url](#)

¹⁶² Jackson, A. & Sampaio, A., Afghan Cities Become Key Battlegrounds, War on the Rocks, 9 April 2021, [url](#)

¹⁶³ USDOD, Lead Inspector General (IC) for Overseas Contingency Operations, Operation Freedom's Sentinel - Report to the United States Congress 1 April - 30 June 2020, 18 August 2020, [url](#), p. 14; USDOD, Lead Inspector General (IC) for Overseas Contingency Operations, Operation Freedom's Sentinel - Report to the United States Congress 1 July - 30 September 2020, 17 November 2020, [url](#), pp. 14-15

¹⁶⁴ SIGAR, Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, 30 January 2021, [url](#), pp. 23, 50-51

¹⁶⁵ UNSG, The Situation in Afghanistan and Its Implications for International Peace and Security, 12 March 2021, [url](#), p. 5

¹⁶⁶ SIGAR, Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, 30 April 2021, [url](#), p. 59

¹⁶⁷ In its annual report covering 2020, UNAMA does not provide specific civilian casualty data for Kabul City.

¹⁶⁸ UNAMA, Afghanistan Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict - Annual Report 2020, 23 February 2021, [url](#), p. 110

¹⁶⁹ Clark, K., [Twitter], posted on: 15 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁷⁰ UNAMA, Killing of Human Rights Defenders and Media Professionals in Afghanistan - New UN Report, 15 February 2021, [url](#)

bombers and small teams of gunmen in Kabul'.¹⁷¹ Throughout 2020, UNAMA documented an increase in civilian casualties in incidents attributed to 'undetermined anti-government elements'. The majority of these incidents were suicide and non-suicide IEDs, including incidents causing high numbers of civilian casualties in provincial capitals, followed by targeted killings. Several such incidents were documented in Kabul City (see below).¹⁷²

UNAMA expressed its concern about the continuing trend of AGE attacks deliberately targeting civilians in 2020, including attacks on members of the judiciary, healthcare workers and facilities, education-related personnel and facilities as well as civilians at educational institutions, aid workers, human rights defenders and civil society activists, journalists and civilians working for the civilian government administration. Assassinations, suicide and non-suicide IEDs, abductions and punishments under the guise of enforcing decisions of their parallel justice structures were reported as the main tactics of AGEs in targeting civilians. Several such incidents were documented in Kabul City (see below).¹⁷³ In its 2020 Annual Report, the Afghan Journalists Safety Committee (AJSC) registered 44 incidents involving violence against journalists in Kabul province, accounting for most cases (33 %) of violence and threats in the Kabul zone.¹⁷⁴ According to UNAMA data, eight human rights defenders, journalists and media workers were killed in Kabul province in 2020.¹⁷⁵ Additionally, civilian family members of ANSF forces were often killed as collateral damage in attacks targeting on- and off-duty police and army personnel in the capital.¹⁷⁶ In the first quarter of 2021, UNAMA expressed its continued concern about the deliberate targeting of civilians by AGEs, particularly through targeted killings and including a trend of targeting women.¹⁷⁷

Although UNAMA reported a countrywide decrease in the number of civilian casualties attributed to ISKP for the second year in row, the vast majority of casualties caused by ISKP in 2020 resulted from mass-casualty attacks and mass-shootings in the cities of Kabul and Jalalabad. The use of small arms fire inside buildings and during open-air gatherings, suicide and non-suicide IEDs and ground engagements (e.g. the firing of rockets into Kabul City), were reported as ISKP tactics causing the most civilian casualties. UNAMA expressed its concern that more than 80 % of civilian casualties attributed to ISKP were caused by attacks deliberately targeting civilians, such as civilians at educational facilities and civilians belonging to religious minority populations such as Shi'a Muslims and Sikhs, with several examples recorded in Kabul City (see below).¹⁷⁸

According to UNAMA, the deliberate targeting of civil society leaders, human rights defenders and journalists in many locations across the country (including Kabul City), and the absence of claims of responsibility by perpetrators, has generated a climate of fear among the civilian population¹⁷⁹ and has paralysed several parts of society.¹⁸⁰ A variety of sources in 2020 and 2021 referred to an

¹⁷¹ Quilty, A., Taleban Opportunism and ANSF Frustration: How the Afghan Conflict Has Changed since the Doha Agreement, AAN, 12 October 2020, [url](#)

¹⁷² UNAMA, Afghanistan Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict - Annual Report 2020, 23 February 2021, [url](#), pp. 18-19, 43-44, 56-57

¹⁷³ UNAMA, Afghanistan Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict - Annual Report 2020, 23 February 2021, [url](#), pp. 14, 18-19, 53, 54-55

¹⁷⁴ AJSC, Annual Report 2020, 2021, [url](#), pp. 4, 8

¹⁷⁵ UNAMA, Special Report: Killing of Human Rights Defenders, Journalists and Media Workers in Afghanistan 2018-2021, February 2021, [url](#), p. 22

¹⁷⁶ Clark, K., Civilian Casualties Worsened as Intra-Afghan Talks Began, Says UNAMA's 2020 Report on the Protection of Civilians, AAN, 23 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁷⁷ UNAMA, Afghanistan Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict - First Quarter Update: 1 January to 31 March 2021, 14 April 2021, [url](#), p. 3

¹⁷⁸ UNAMA, Afghanistan Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict - Annual Report 2020, 23 February 2021, [url](#), pp. 18, 24, 43, 54-56, 74, 103

¹⁷⁹ UNAMA, Special Report: Killing of Human Rights Defenders, Journalists and Media Workers in Afghanistan 2018-2021, February 2021, [url](#), pp. 3, 4, 9, 10, 15, 25

¹⁸⁰ UNAMA, Afghanistan Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict - Annual Report 2020, 23 February 2021, [url](#), p. 11

atmosphere of constant fear and an increased feeling of general insecurity gripping Kabul and its residents, caused by a wave of unclaimed 'sticky bomb' attacks and targeted assassinations by unknown gunmen.¹⁸¹ An executive from a leading communications firm in Kabul described to The New York Times how this sense of fear has become a 'state of being' in the Afghan capital.¹⁸² Some of the capital's residents have reportedly developed different coping strategies in an attempt to avoid the daily pattern of attacks, like changing routines/routes,¹⁸³ avoiding commuting during morning rush hour, when most incidents occur,¹⁸⁴ spending weeknights at the office,¹⁸⁵ or choosing to stay home.¹⁸⁶ Others carry pocket notes with personal information when leaving the house, to prevent an anonymous death.¹⁸⁷

The surge of violence and targeted killings in Kabul has reportedly fuelled a growing discontent with an Afghan government unable to protect its citizens,¹⁸⁸ causing a public outcry for better security in the capital.¹⁸⁹ Mid-February 2021, a protest of hundreds of city residents took place in front of the Lower House of Parliament, accusing the Afghan government of neglect in addressing the spike of unclaimed killings and calling for a thorough investigation.¹⁹⁰ Many young and educated middle-class urbanites are reportedly leaving the country to escape the wave of violence in the Afghan capital, causing fear of a brain drain.¹⁹¹

In the wake of several attacks in the Hazara-populated neighbourhood of Dasht-e Barchi in West Kabul in 2020 and 2021 (see below), sources reported on a growing number of Hazara inhabitants in the capital outraged by the government's inability to protect their community.¹⁹² According to several neighbourhood residents, including a Hazara member of parliament cited by The New York Times in May 2021, the Hazara community in Kabul is determined to mobilize and take its security into its own

¹⁸¹ Guardian (The), 'We Live in Constant Fear': Kabul Buries Its Dead after Isis Attack on University, 4 November 2020, [url](#); RFE/RL (Gandhara), Afghanistan Hit by Surge of Targeted Killings, Assassinations, 13 November 2020, [url](#); NYT, 'Sticky Bombs' Sow Terror and Chaos in a City on Edge, 16 December 2020, [url](#); Reuters, 'The fear is Intense': Afghan 'Sticky Bombs', Used by Taliban, On the Rise, 17 December 2020, [url](#); VoA, Sticky Bomb Attacks Send Wave of Fear Through Kabul, 24 December 2020, [url](#); NYT, 'There Is No Safe Area': In Kabul, Fear Has Taken Over, 17 January 2021, [url](#); Al Jazeera, 'Where is the security?': Brother of Slain Afghan Woman Judge, 19 January 2021, [url](#); USDOD, Lead Inspector General (IC) for Overseas Contingency Operations, Operation Freedom's Sentinel - Report to the United States Congress 1 January - 31 March 2021, 18 May 2021, [url](#), pp. 18-19; National (The), Afghans Face Eid Reflecting on Tragedy and Fearing for Future, 12 May 2021, [url](#)

¹⁸² NYT, 'There Is No Safe Area': In Kabul, Fear Has Taken Over, 17 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁸³ NYT, 'There Is No Safe Area': In Kabul, Fear Has Taken Over, 17 January 2021, [url](#)

¹⁸⁴ Al Jazeera, Gov't Employees, Police Officers among 8 Killed in Afghanistan, 9 February 2021, [url](#); Al Jazeera, Two More Killed as Afghan Capital Reels under Near-Daily Violence, 10 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁸⁵ UNAMA, Afghanistan Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict - Annual Report 2020, 23 February 2021, [url](#), p. 81

¹⁸⁶ FP, 'This is the Darkest Moment': Afghans Flee a Crumbling Country, 24 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁸⁷ NYT, 'I Could Just Vanish': In Kabul, Pocket Notes to Prevent Anonymous Death, 12 January 2021 (updated 15 January 2021), [url](#)

¹⁸⁸ NYT, String of Attacks Have People in Kabul Pointing a Finger, at the Government, 7 November 2020 (updated 12 November 2020), [url](#); USDOD, Lead Inspector General (IC) for Overseas Contingency Operations, Operation Freedom's Sentinel - Report to the United States Congress 1 January - 31 March 2021, 18 May 2021, [url](#), pp. 18-19

¹⁸⁹ NYT, An Afghan Mayor Expected to Die. Instead, She Lost Her Father, 6 November 2020 (updated 12 November 2020), [url](#); NYT, Three Women Working for a News Outlet Are Gunned Down in Afghanistan, 2 March 2021 (updated 4 March 2021), [url](#)

¹⁹⁰ Reportedly, Protesters in Kabul: Govt Neglecting in Investigation of Targeted Killings, 18 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁹¹ NPR, 'Our Houses Are Not Safe': Residents Fear Taliban in Afghanistan's Capital, 18 December 2020, [url](#); Telegraph (The), Afghanistan Faces a Brain Drain as Young and Educated Flee a Wave of Violence, 14 February 2021, [url](#); FP, 'This is the Darkest Moment': Afghans Flee a Crumbling Country, 24 February 2021, [url](#); National (The), Afghanistan Faces its Darkest Hour since 2001 as US Considers Pull-Out, 25 February 2021 (updated 3 March 2021), [url](#)

¹⁹² NYT, Bombing Outside Afghan School Kills at Least 90, With Girls as Targets, 8 May 2021 (updated 16 May 2021), [url](#); NYT, 'Why Do We Deserve to Die?' Kabul's Hazaras Bury Their Daughters, 9 May 2021 (17 May 2021), [url](#); Ruttig, T., Terrorist Attack in Kabul: School Bombing, Die Tageszeitung, 9 May 2021, [url](#); Channel 4 News, Afghanistan: Fears Schoolgirls Will Be First In Line of Fire after US Withdrawal, 19 May 2021, [url](#)

hands.¹⁹³ Also in May 2021, the Afghan Shiite Ulema Council issued a resolution calling on the Kabul government to take practical steps to ensure the security of the capital’s Hazara and Shiite community.¹⁹⁴

3.2. Incident numbers and illustrative incidents

ACLED collected data on 219 violent events in Kabul district¹⁹⁵ from 1 April 2020 to 15 May 2021 from reports in open sources, of which 55 were coded as ‘battles’, 121 as ‘explosions/remote violence’ and 43 as ‘violence against civilians’.¹⁹⁶

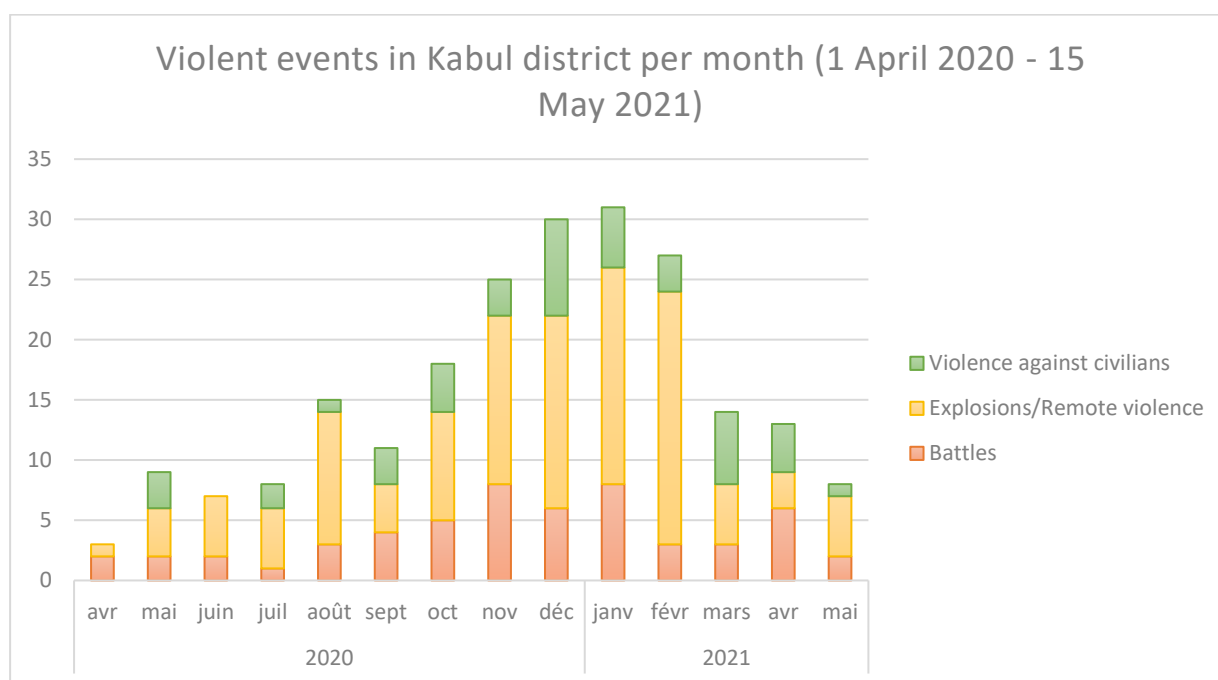


Figure 1: Kabul district - Evolution of security events coded as ‘battles’, ‘explosions/remote violence’ and ‘violence against civilians’ from 1 April 2020 to 15 May 2021 (data displayed in this graph for May 2021 only include incidents from 1 - 15 May 2021). Graphic made by Cedoca, based on ACLED data.

3.2.1. Remote explosives, landmines and IEDs

About 50 % of all recorded security incidents in Kabul district were coded as ‘remote explosives, landmines and IEDs’ by ACLED, thus representing the most prevalent incident type in Kabul during the reporting period.¹⁹⁷ The majority of these incidents were caused by unidentified armed groups,

¹⁹³ NYT, ‘Why Do We Deserve to Die?’ Kabul’s Hazaras Bury Their Daughters, 9 May 2021 (17 May 2021), [url](#)

¹⁹⁴ Reporterly, Afghan Shiite Ulema Council Tells Government to Pay Attention to Security of Hazara & Shiite Community, 27 May 2021, [url](#)

¹⁹⁵ ACLED does not differentiate between Kabul City and Kabul district.

¹⁹⁶ ACLED, update consulted via export tool: 26 May 2021, [url](#)

¹⁹⁷ ACLED, update consulted via export tool: 26 May 2021, [url](#)

targeting ANDSF forces (police,¹⁹⁸ military¹⁹⁹ and National Directorate of Security (NDS)²⁰⁰) as well as government officials²⁰¹/employees,²⁰² journalists/media workers,²⁰³ religious leaders/scholars,²⁰⁴ human rights defenders/activists,²⁰⁵ judicial personnel,²⁰⁶ foreign diplomatic personnel,²⁰⁷ health workers,²⁰⁸ educational personnel²⁰⁹ and religious minority members.²¹⁰ Some of the IED incidents in Kabul were attributed to the Taliban²¹¹ or ISKP.²¹² Many of the IED incidents in the Afghan capital caused several casualties among civilians.²¹³ Most civilian casualties were reported on 9 September

¹⁹⁸ Khaama Press, Back to Back Explosions Rock Kabul City, 12 April 2020, [url](#); Pajhwok Afghan News, 2 Wounded in Kabul Magnetic Bomb Explosion, 4 July 2020, [url](#); Khaama Press, Explosion in Kabul City Leaves at least 3 Dead, Wounded, 28 July 2020, [url](#); Khaama Press, Kabul Magnetic Bombs Rattle the City, 22 August 2020, [url](#); NYT, Afghan War Casualty Report: November 2020, 5 November 2020 (updated 26 November 2020), [url](#); NYT, Afghan War Casualty Report: December 2020, 10 December 2020 (updated 31 December 2020), [url](#); Pajhwok Afghan News, No Casualties as Bomb Blast Hits Police Vehicle, 12 January 2021, [url](#); NYT, Afghan War Casualty Report: February 2021, 4 February 2021 (updated 25 February 2021), [url](#)

¹⁹⁹ Pajhwok Afghan News, 4 Injured in Kabul Magnetic Bomb Explosion, 11 July 2020, [url](#); Tolonews, Kabul Attacks: 3 Security Force Members Killed in Past 24 Hours, 13 October 2020, [url](#); NYT, Afghan War Casualty Report: October 2020, 8 October 2020 (updated 29 October 2020), [url](#); Pajhwok Afghan News, 2 Security Personnel Injured in Kabul Explosion, 3 November 2020, [url](#); NYT, Afghan War Casualty Report: January 2021, 7 January 2021 (updated 28 January 2021), [url](#); NYT, Afghan War Casualty Report: February 2021, 4 February 2021 (updated 25 February 2021), [url](#)

²⁰⁰ NYT, Afghan War Casualty Report: April 2020, 2 April 2020 (updated 29 October 2020), [url](#); NYT, Afghan War Casualty Report: December 2020, 10 December 2020 (updated 31 December 2020), [url](#)

²⁰¹ Pajhwok Afghan News, Education Ministry Official Killed in Kabul Blast, 19 August 2020, [url](#); Pajhwok Afghan News, AIC Official's Driver Killed in Kabul Explosion, 4 October 2020, [url](#); Reuters, Bomb Blast Kills Deputy Governor of Afghanistan's Capital, 15 December 2020, [url](#); Tolonews, Govt Official's Vehicle Hit by Magnetic Bomb in Kabul, 18 January 2021, [url](#); Heart of Asia, Blast Hits Vehicle of State Ministry for Peace Affairs Official, 1 February 2021, [url](#); Tolonews, 3 Bombs Hit Kabul, 2 Bodies Found in Deh Sabz, 7 February 2021, [url](#); Tolonews, 2 Wounded in Blast Targeting Govt Official in Kabul, 8 February 2021, [url](#); UNAMA, Afghanistan Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict - First Quarter Update: 1 January to 31 March 2021, 14 April 2021, [url](#), p. 4

²⁰² Khaama Press, Second Explosion Close to Electricity Pylon in Kabul leaves 4 Wounded, 4 May 2020, [url](#); Tolonews, Blast Targets Govt Employees' Bus in Kabul, 28 December 2020, [url](#); RFE/RL (Gandhara), Employee of Afghan President's Office 'Critically Wounded,' Driver Killed in Bomb Blast, 31 December 2020, [url](#); Tolonews, Public Protection Force Spokesman Killed in Kabul IED Blast, 10 January 2021, [url](#); Pajhwok Afghan News, 3 Female Govt Servants Killed in Kabul Explosion, 16 March 2021, [url](#)

²⁰³ Pajhwok Afghan News, 2 Media Workers Killed, Several Injured in Kabul Blast, 30 May 2020, [url](#); Khaama Press, Renowned Journalist Killed in a 'Magnetic IED' Blast: Kabul, 7 November 2020, [url](#); RFE/RL (Gandhara), Former TV News Presenter Killed in Kabul Car Bombing, 7 November 2020, [url](#)

²⁰⁴ Pajhwok Afghan News, Prominent Cleric Killed in Kabul Mosque Bombing, 2 June 2020, [url](#); Tolonews, Four Killed in Mosque Blast in Western Kabul, Including Imam, 12 June 2020 (edited 13 June 2020), [url](#)

²⁰⁵ NYT, Afghan War Casualty Report: June 2020, 4 June 2020 (updated 25 June 2020), [url](#); Tolonews, Two Human Rights Workers Killed in Kabul, 27 June 2020 (edited 28 June 2020), [url](#)

²⁰⁶ Pajhwok Afghan News, Sticky Bomb Blast Leaves 4 Injured in Kabul, 13 July 2020, [url](#)

²⁰⁷ Pajhwok Afghan News, Russian Embassy Staffers Hurt in Kabul IED Blast, 2 December 2020, [url](#); DW, Afghanistan: Italian Embassy Vehicle Targeted in Kabul, 25 January 2021, [url](#)

²⁰⁸ NYT, Afghan War Casualty Report: December 2020, 10 December 2020 (updated 31 December 2020), [url](#); VoA, Doctors Killed in Afghanistan Explosion, 22 December 2020, [url](#)

²⁰⁹ Pajhwok Afghan News, University Teacher Killed in Kabul Explosion, 18 February 2021, [url](#)

²¹⁰ Pajhwok Afghan News, 3 Including a Hindu Killed in Kabul Explosions, 6 February 2021, [url](#)

²¹¹ RFE/RL (Gandhara), Roadside Bomb Kills Three in Kabul, Including Afghan Security Spokesman, 10 January 2021, [url](#)

²¹² Al Jazeera, Journalist Killed in Kabul Bomb Blast Targeting TV Workers, 31 May 2020, [url](#); Al Jazeera, Afghanistan: Two Killed in Bomb Attack inside Kabul Mosque, 2 June 2020, [url](#); NYT, Afghan War Casualty Report: December 2020, 10 December 2020 (updated 31 December 2020), [url](#); US News, Islamic State Claims Responsibility for Kabul Mosque Attack, 15 May 2021, [url](#)

²¹³ Pajhwok Afghan News, 2 Civilians Killed as Bomb Explosion Rocks Kabul, 11 June 2020, [url](#); NYT, Afghan War Casualty Report: August 2020, 6 August 2020 (updated 29 October 2020), [url](#); Pajhwok Afghan News, Kabul Blast Leaves 3 Dead, 10 Wounded, 27 October 2020, [url](#); NYT, Afghan War Casualty Report: November 2020, 5 November 2020 (updated 26 November 2020), [url](#); Tolonews, 2 Killed, 2 Wounded in Kabul Magnetic IED Blast, 13 December 2020, [url](#); NYT, Afghan War Casualty Report: February 2021, 4 February 2021 (updated 25 February 2021), [url](#); NYT, Afghan War Casualty Report: March 2021, 4 March 2021 (updated 1 April 2021), [url](#); Khaama Press, One Killed, Four Injured in Kabul Explosion, 7 March 2021, [url](#); Tolonews, 3 Civilians Killed in 2 Explosions in Kabul, 14 March 2021, [url](#); Xinhua, 4 Killed in Fuel Tanker Explosion in Afghanistan's Kabul: Media, 2 May 2021, [url](#)

2020, when a car bomb explosion targeting the convoy of Vice President Amrullah Saleh in the area of Taimani, killed 10 civilians and injured 15-31 more (including the Vice President);²¹⁴ and on 14 May 2021, when a bomb exploded in a mosque in the Qala-e Murad Bek area, killing 12 civilians (including a prayer leader) and wounding 20 more.²¹⁵

3.2.2. Battles (armed clashes)

ACLED recorded around 25 % of the violent incidents in Kabul district as 'battles', all of which were coded as 'armed clashes'.²¹⁶ The largest incident categorised as 'armed clash' causing most civilian casualties was an unclaimed attack targeting the maternity ward of a Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) hospital in the Hazara-populated Dasht-e Barchi neighbourhood on 12 May 2020, killing 23 civilians and injuring another 23, including mothers who had just given birth, new-born infants and health care personnel.²¹⁷ Other examples of these 'armed clashes' were attacks/ambushes by the Taliban or unidentified armed groups on the Afghan security forces, including military,²¹⁸ police²¹⁹ and NDSF personnel²²⁰ as well as members of pro-government militias or so-called *arbakis* (the term *arbaki* is often used locally to refer to members of the Afghan local police or other pro-government militias).²²¹ These incidents resulted in several casualties among the ANDSF forces. Some clashes between ANDSF forces and the insurgency in Kabul City resulted in casualties among Taliban militants.²²²

²¹⁴ NYT, Afghan War Casualty Report: September 2020, 3 September 2020 (updated 1 October 2020), [url](#); VoA, Afghan Vice President Survives Deadly Blast, 9 September 2020, [url](#); Reuters, Roadside Bomb Attack Misses Afghan Vice President, but Kills 10, 9 September 2020, [url](#); Pajhwok Afghan News, 10 Killed, 15 Injured in Attack on VP's Convoy, 9 September 2020, [url](#); DW, Kabul Bomb Attack Targets Afghanistan's VP Saleh, Kills 10 Civilians, 9 September 2020, [url](#)

²¹⁵ NYT, Afghan War Casualty Report: May 2021, 6 May 2021 (updated 16 May 2021), [url](#); BBC, Afghanistan War: Kabul Mosque Blast Shatters Calm for Eid, 14 May 2021, [url](#); Tolonews, 12 People, Including Imam, Killed in Blast at Kabul Mosque, 14 May 2021 (updated 15 May 2021), [url](#)

²¹⁶ ACLED, update consulted via export tool: 26 May 2021, [url](#)

²¹⁷ Civilian casualty data according to UNAMA. NYT, From Maternity Ward to Cemetery, a Morning of Murder in Afghanistan, 12 May 2020, [url](#); BBC, Afghan Attack: Maternity Ward Death Toll Climbs to 24, 13 May 2020, [url](#); UNAMA, Afghanistan Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict - Annual Report 2020, 23 February 2021, [url](#), p. 14

²¹⁸ Pajhwok Afghan News, 1 ANA Soldier Shot Dead, Another Wounded in Kabul, 17 May 2020, [url](#); NYT, Afghan War Casualty Report: November 2020, 5 November 2020 (updated 26 November 2020), [url](#); Pajhwok Afghan News, Military Officer Gunned down in Kabul, 8 November 2020, [url](#); Tolonews, Four Security Force Members Killed in Attacks in Kabul: Police, 11 November 2020, [url](#); Tolonews, Afghan Forces Pilot, Security Officer Killed in Kabul, 7 January 2021, [url](#); NYT, Afghan War Casualty Report: January 2021, 7 January 2021 (updated 28 January 2021), [url](#); Khaama Press, Unidentified Gunmen Killed ANA Officer in Kabul, 20 April 2021, [url](#)

²¹⁹ NYT, Afghan War Casualty Report: April 2020, 2 April 2020 (updated 29 October 2020), [url](#); Tolonews, Gunmen Kill Policeman, Wound 2 More in Kabul, 22 June 2020, [url](#); NYT, Afghan War Casualty Report: September 2020, 3 September 2020 (updated 1 October 2020), [url](#); Xinhua, Senior Police Officer Gunned down in Afghan Capital, 5 September 2020, [url](#); NYT, Afghan War Casualty Report: November 2020, 5 November 2020 (updated 26 November 2020), [url](#); NYT, Afghan War Casualty Report: December 2020, 10 December 2020 (updated 31 December 2020), [url](#); Tolonews, Police Attacked by Gunmen in Bagrami, Kabul, 1 Dead, 15 December 2020, [url](#); NYT, Afghan War Casualty Report: January 2021, 7 January 2021 (updated 28 January 2021), [url](#); Pajhwok Afghan News, Police Officer Shot Dead by Unidentified Gunmen in Kabul, 27 March 2021, [url](#); NYT, Afghan War Casualty Report: April 2021, 8 April 2021 (updated 30 April 2021), [url](#); Al Jazeera, Afghanistan: At Least 14 Civilians Killed across Three Provinces, 24 April 2021, [url](#); NYT, Afghan War Casualty Report: May 2021, 6 May 2021 (updated 16 May 2021), [url](#)

²²⁰ NYT, Afghan War Casualty Report: September 2020, 3 September 2020 (updated 1 October 2020), [url](#); NYT, Afghan War Casualty Report: January 2021, 7 January 2021 (updated 28 January 2021), [url](#); NYT, Afghan War Casualty Report: February 2021, 4 February 2021 (updated 25 February 2021), [url](#); Tolonews, Afghan Air Force Member Killed in Gunmen Attack in Kabul, 28 March 2021, [url](#); NYT, Afghan War Casualty Report: May 2021, 6 May 2021 (updated 16 May 2021), [url](#)

²²¹ According to Taliban reporting. ACLED, update consulted via export tool: 26 May 2021, [url](#)

²²² Khaama Press, 1 Killed, 3 Wounded during a Clash in Kabul City, 28 April 2020, [url](#); NYT, Afghan War Casualty Report: April 2021, 8 April 2021 (updated 30 April 2021), [url](#)

3.2.3. Suicide attacks

Five incidents were registered as 'suicide bombs' in Kabul district by ACLED; in four of these incidents civilian casualties were reported.²²³ On 24 October 2020, 40 civilians were killed and 79 injured, mainly students, in a suicide attack targeting the Kosar Danish Educational Centre in the Hazara-populated neighbourhood of Dasht-e Barchi. ISKP claimed responsibility for the attack.²²⁴ On 20 December 2020, at least nine civilians (including security guards) were killed and 52 wounded in a suicide car bomb targeting the convoy of member of parliament Khan Mohammad Wardak (who was also wounded) in the Spin Kalay area of PD 5. There was no claim of responsibility for the attack.²²⁵ On 20 April 2021, one civilian and one member of the NDS were killed, alongside several others injured, in a suicide car bombing targeting the NDS logistics department in PD 15. No group claimed responsibility for the attack.²²⁶ On 8 May 2021, a triple bomb attack targeted the Sayed ul-Shuhada High School in Dasht-e Barchi, reportedly killing about 90 civilians (including many young schoolgirls) and wounding 240 more. A car bomb went off at the entrance of the school as female students were leaving class in the afternoon, followed by two IED explosions nearby the school. There was no claim of responsibility for the attack. The Afghan government blamed the Taliban, but the militant group denied responsibility.²²⁷ This attack was described by Gandhara as 'the deadliest in the capital in more than a year'. According to observers, cited by the same source, this attack (together with a truck bomb attack targeting a guesthouse for students in Logar's provincial capital Pul-e Alam in April 2021) could signal the Taliban is abandoning the agreement made with the US to refrain from suicide bombings in urban areas.²²⁸

3.2.4. Shelling, artillery and missile attacks

Six of the violent incidents in Kabul district were coded as 'shelling, artillery and missile attacks' by ACLED.²²⁹ In August 2020,²³⁰ November 2020,²³¹ and December 2020,²³² dozens of rockets were fired by ISKP on several residential areas in Kabul City. In these incidents, 14 civilians were reportedly

²²³ ACLED, update consulted via export tool: 26 May 2021, [url](#)

²²⁴ Civilian casualty data according to UNAMA. NYT, Afghan War Casualty Report: October 2020, 8 October 2020 (updated 29 October 2020), [url](#); NYT, Deadly Explosion Hits Kabul Tutoring Center, 24 October 2020 (updated 27 October 2020), [url](#); BBC, Afghan Bombing: Kabul Education Centre Attack Kills at least 24, 25 October 2020, [url](#); UNAMA, Afghanistan Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict - Annual Report 2020, 23 February 2021, [url](#), pp. 54-55

²²⁵ NYT, Afghan War Casualty Report: December 2020, 10 December 2020 (updated 31 December 2020), [url](#); RFE/RL (Gandhara), Afghan Lawmaker Survives Deadly Car Bombing in Kabul, 20 December 2020, [url](#); Tolonews, Death Toll of Kabul's Attack on MP Rises to 10, 21 December 2020, [url](#)

²²⁶ NYT, Afghan War Casualty Report: April 2021, 8 April 2021 (updated 30 April 2021), [url](#); Pajhwok Afghan News, At Least 5 Wounded in Kabul Suicide Bombing, 21 April 2021, [url](#); Tolonews, Nine People Wounded in Kabul Car Bomb Attack, 21 April 2021, [url](#)

²²⁷ NYT, Afghan War Casualty Report: May 2021, 6 May 2021 (updated 16 May 2021), [url](#); NYT, Bombing Outside Afghan School Kills at Least 90, With Girls as Targets, 8 May 2021 (updated 16 May 2021), [url](#); RFE/RL (Gandhara), Afghans Bury Dead from School Attack That Killed At Least 50, 8 May 2021 (updated 9 May 2021), [url](#); BBC, Kabul Attack: Families Bury Schoolchildren of Blast That Killed Dozens, 9 May 2021, [url](#)

²²⁸ RFE/RL (Gandhara), Chances for Peace in Afghanistan Recede as Deadly Taliban Attacks Spiral, 12 May 2021, [url](#)

²²⁹ ACLED, update consulted via export tool: 26 May 2021, [url](#)

²³⁰ Al Jazeera, Rockets Hit near Main Diplomatic District in Kabul: Official, 18 August 2020, [url](#); Tolonews, 3 Killed, 16 Wounded in Kabul Rocket Attacks, 19 August 2020, [url](#)

²³¹ DW, Afghanistan: Several Dead as Barrage of Rockets Hits Kabul, 21 November 2020, [url](#); VoA, Islamic State Claims Deadly Kabul Rocket Attack, 22 November 2020, [url](#)

²³² Tolonews, Rockets Landed in Various Parts of Kabul; 1 Killed, 12 December 2020, [url](#); Al Jazeera, One Killed as Multiple Rockets Hit Afghan Capital, 12 December 2020, [url](#)

killed and dozens injured.²³³ In April 2021, a rocket launched by unidentified gunmen landed near Kabul University, with no casualties reported.²³⁴

3.2.5. Violence against civilians

ACLED categorised around 20 % of all reported violent incidents in Kabul district as 'violence against civilians'.²³⁵ The majority of these incidents were attacks by unidentified armed groups on government officials/employees,²³⁶ civil society members such as religious scholars,²³⁷ imams/prayer leaders,²³⁸ judicial personnel (lawyers,²³⁹ prosecutors,²⁴⁰ judges²⁴¹ and a court official²⁴²), civil society activists,²⁴³ health workers,²⁴⁴ educational personnel²⁴⁵ and former or off-duty security personnel.²⁴⁶ The largest attack coded by ACLED in this category and causing the highest number of civilian casualties happened on 2 November 2020, when gunmen stormed Kabul University, firing on students and teachers and holding several students hostage for hours. A joint operation by the Afghan and US military forces ended the assault, which resulted in the killing of at least 32 civilians and the injuring of dozens more. Although ISKP claimed responsibility for the attack, Afghan government officials blamed the Taliban.²⁴⁷

²³³ NYT, Afghan War Casualty Report: August 2020, 6 August 2020 (updated 29 October 2020), [url](#); NYT, Afghan War Casualty Report: November 2020, 5 November 2020 (updated 26 November 2020), [url](#); NYT, Afghan War Casualty Report: December 2020, 10 December 2020 (updated 31 December 2020), [url](#)

²³⁴ Pajhwok Afghan News, BM1 Rocket Lands Close to Kabul University, 20 April 2021, [url](#)

²³⁵ ACLED, update consulted via export tool: 26 May 2021, [url](#)

²³⁶ Pajhwok Afghan News, Atmar's Secretary Shot Injured in Kabul, 15 May 2020, [url](#); Pajhwok Afghan News, MoD Official Shot Dead along with Guard in Kabul, 22 August 2020, [url](#); Pajhwok Afghan News, Uruzgan Lawmaker Survives Gun Attack in Kabul, 20 September 2020, [url](#); Pajhwok Afghan News, Mayor Ghafari Survives Another Attempt on Her Life, 3 October 2020, [url](#); Khaama Press, 2 Gov't Employees Shot Dead in Kabul, 4 October 2020, [url](#); NYT, Afghan War Casualty Report: February 2021, 4 February 2021 (updated 25 February 2021), [url](#); Tolonews, Four Govt Employees Killed in Kabul, 9 February 2021, [url](#); NYT, Afghan War Casualty Report: March 2021, 4 March 2021 (updated 1 April 2021), [url](#); Tolonews, Logar Ex-District Governor Assassinated in Kabul, 17 March 2021, [url](#); Khaama Press, Gov't Employee Murdered in Kabul, 25 April 2021, [url](#); Al Jazeera, Afghanistan: At Least 14 Civilians Killed across Three Provinces, 24 April 2021, [url](#)

²³⁷ Pajhwok Afghan News, Religious Scholar, Former Cop Killed in Kabul, 10 December 2020, [url](#); Khaama Press, Cleric 'Murdered' in Kabul City, 3 March 2021, [url](#)

²³⁸ Pajhwok Afghan News, Prayer Leader Gunned Down in Kabul, Say Police, 10 May 2020, [url](#)

²³⁹ NYT, Afghan War Casualty Report: December 2020, 10 December 2020 (updated 31 December 2020), [url](#)

²⁴⁰ NYT, Afghan War Casualty Report: November 2020, 5 November 2020 (updated 26 November 2020), [url](#); Khaama Press, Gov't Prosecutor Murdered in Kabul, 6 December 2020, [url](#); Khaama Press, Local Prosecutor Shot Dead in Kabul, 13 December 2020, [url](#); Tolonews, Prosecutor Killed by Unknown Gunmen in Kabul, 13 December 2020, [url](#); NYT, Afghan War Casualty Report: March 2021, 4 March 2021 (updated 1 April 2021), [url](#)

²⁴¹ DW, Afghanistan: Gunmen Shoot Dead Two Female Judges, 17 January 2021, [url](#); Reuters, Gunmen Kill Two Female Supreme Court Judges in Afghanistan: Police, 17 January 2021, [url](#); UNAMA, Afghanistan Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict - First Quarter Update: 1 January to 31 March 2021, 14 April 2021, [url](#), p. 3

²⁴² NYT, Afghan War Casualty Report: December 2020, 10 December 2020 (updated 31 December 2020), [url](#)

²⁴³ RFE/RL (Gandhara), UN Expresses Alarm after Head of Afghan Election-Monitoring Group Killed, 23 December 2020, [url](#); Tolonews, Yousuf Rasheed, FEFA Head and Activist, Killed by Gunmen, 23 December 2020 (edited 24 December 2020), [url](#); Khaama Press, Two Separate Attacks Claim Civil Society Activist, Tribal Leader, 1 January 2021, [url](#); Tolonews, Baghlan Civil Society Activist Killed in Kabul: Police, 1 January 2021 (edited 2 January 2021), [url](#)

²⁴⁴ Tolonews, Tolonews 10pm News 19 January 2021, 20 January 2021, [url](#); Pajhwok Afghan News, Doctor Shot Dead in Kabul, 9 April 2021, [url](#)

²⁴⁵ NYT, Afghan War Casualty Report: April 2021, 8 April 2021 (updated 30 April 2021), [url](#); Al Jazeera, Afghanistan: At Least 14 Civilians Killed across Three Provinces, 24 April 2021, [url](#); NYT, Afghan War Casualty Report: May 2021, 6 May 2021 (updated 16 May 2021), [url](#)

²⁴⁶ Pajhwok Afghan News, Former Police Official Gunned Down in Kabul, 21 October 2020, [url](#); NYT, Afghan War Casualty Report: November 2020, 5 November 2020 (updated 26 November 2020), [url](#); Pajhwok Afghan News, Religious Scholar, Former Cop Killed in Kabul, 10 December 2020, [url](#); Tolonews, Afghan Forces Pilot, Security Officer Killed in Kabul, 7 January 2021, [url](#)

²⁴⁷ NYT, Gunmen Storm Kabul University, Killing at Least 19, 2 November 2020 (updated 21 November 2020), [url](#); BBC, Kabul University: 22 Dead, More Wounded as Gunmen Storm Campus, 2 November 2020, [url](#); Reuters, Gunmen Storm Kabul University, Killing 22, in Second Deadly Attack on Students in Just over a Week, 2 November 2020, [url](#)

Mid-November 2020, ANDSF forces detained the alleged 'mastermind' behind the attack, a former university student recruited by the Taliban-affiliated Haqqani Network.²⁴⁸

4. Displacement & the situation of IDPs and returnees in Kabul City

According to UNOCHA assessments, no conflict-induced displacement was reported from Kabul district²⁴⁹ between 1 April 2020 and 15 May 2021. During the same period, UNOCHA collected data on 1 841 persons (263 families) displaced to Kabul district.²⁵⁰ This number represents a decrease of around 40 % compared to the reporting period of the previous update of this COI Focus, from 1 April 2019 until 31 March 2020.²⁵¹ The IDPs arriving in Kabul district during the reporting period came from a range of different provinces, such as Badakhshan, Baghlan, Daykundi, Ghazni, Kapisa, Kunduz, Laghman, Logar, Nuristan, Samangan, Takhar and Wardak. The largest groups came from the province of Baghlan (483) (mainly from Dahan-e Ghorī district with a peak in April 2020, and smaller numbers from the districts of Doshi and Andarab) and the province of Wardak (294) (nearly all from Saydabad district in April 2020, and a small number from Jalrez district). Smaller groups of IDPs arriving in Kabul district came from the province of Logar (175) (mainly from Baraki Barak district, and a small number from Charkh district), the province of Daykundi (140) (all from Gizab/Patoo district), the province of Kunduz (133) (mainly from Dasht-e Archi district, and a small number from Khanabad district) and the province of Takhar (119) (from the districts of Chahab, Eshkashem and Khwajaghar). From the other provinces mentioned above less than 85 displaced persons found refuge in Kabul district.²⁵²

About two-thirds of all Afghans displaced outside their home province have reportedly moved to the five regional capitals.²⁵³ Kabul's growth has been particularly significant (see above).²⁵⁴ According to AAN analyst Foschini, 'more than half of the residents of Kabul were not born there'.²⁵⁵ The total number of IDPs in Kabul is not known, as movement to and within the city is constant and many return regularly to their area of origin during more peaceful periods.²⁵⁶ Based on data from the first half of 2020, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) ranked Kabul district fourth out of the

²⁴⁸ DW, Afghanistan: 'Mastermind' behind Kabul University Attack Arrested, 14 November 2020, [url](#); RFE/RL (Gandhara), Afghan Forces Report Capture of 'Mastermind' behind Deadly Attack on Kabul University, 14 November 2020, [url](#); Al Jazeera, Afghan Forces Capture 'Mastermind' of Kabul University Attack, 14 November 2020, [url](#)

²⁴⁹ UNOCHA does not differentiate between Kabul City and Kabul district.

²⁵⁰ UNOCHA, Afghanistan Conflict Induced Displacement in 2020, last updated: 30 March 2021, [url](#); UNOCHA, Afghanistan Conflict Induced Displacement in 2021, last updated: 30 May 2021, [url](#)

²⁵¹ Cedoca, COI Focus Afghanistan. Security Situation in Kabul City, 8 April 2020, [url](#), p. 31

²⁵² UNOCHA, Afghanistan Conflict Induced Displacement in 2020, last updated: 30 March 2021, [url](#); UNOCHA, Afghanistan Conflict Induced Displacement in 2021, last updated: 30 May 2021, [url](#)

²⁵³ NRC, Displaced: If You're a Thirteen Year Old Living in Afghanistan, 30 January 2019, [url](#)

²⁵⁴ Metcalfe, V. et al., Sanctuary in the City? Urban Displacement and Vulnerability in Kabul, June 2012, [url](#), p. 7; Foschini, F., Kabul Unpacked - A Geographical Guide to a Metropolis in the Making, AAN, 19 March 2019, [url](#), p. 1; Pforzheimer, A. et al., "No Going Backward" Afghanistan's Post-Peace Accord Security Sector, March 2021, [url](#), pp. 14-15; Jackson, A. & Sampaio, A., Afghan Cities Become Key Battlegrounds, War on the Rocks, 9 April 2021, [url](#)

²⁵⁵ Foschini, F., Kabul's Expanding Crime Scene (Part 1): The Roots of Today's Underworld, AAN, 11 February 2020, [url](#)

²⁵⁶ Metcalfe, V., Haysom, S. and Martin, E., Sanctuary in the City? Urban Displacement and Vulnerability in Kabul, June 2012, [url](#), p. 8; Foschini, F., Kabul Unpacked - A Geographical Guide to a Metropolis in the Making, AAN, 19 March 2019, [url](#), p. 3; Foschini, F., Kabul's Expanding Crime Scene (Part 1): The Roots of Today's Underworld, AAN, 11 February 2020, [url](#)

countrywide top 25 districts hosting the most IDPs and returnees.²⁵⁷ As violence has increased in several parts of the country, migration to Kabul rose by 30 % in 2020, according to the UN.²⁵⁸

A study on displacement in Kabul identified different categories of IDPs in the city: (1) those fleeing armed conflict and insecurity, (2) returnees who could not return to their area of origin and live in secondary displacement, (3) those displaced from rural areas because of natural disasters, localized conflicts or a shortage of work, essential services and food, and (4) migratory groups/nomads such as Kuchis and Jogis residing in the city because conflict disrupted their migration patterns and livelihood or because of increasing impoverishment.²⁵⁹

IDPs in Kabul have often settled in areas at the outskirts of the city, such as Bagrami and PDs 8, 12, 13, 16 and 21,²⁶⁰ mingling with other groups such as the urban poor, economic migrants and returnees.²⁶¹ The lack of adequate land and affordable housing in the urban area has forced most new and protracted IDPs in Kabul to reside in tents, mud brick and tarpaulin shelters in one of the 55 to 60 or so informal and illegal settlements near the city.²⁶² These are often referred to as 'Kabul Informal Settlements' (KIS), varying in size from dozens to hundreds of dwellings.²⁶³ According to UN Habitat, quoted by The New Humanitarian, 80 % of urban areas in Kabul are informal settlements.²⁶⁴ The IDPs arriving and residing in Kabul have added pressure on the community, basic services and social infrastructure, with an increasingly limited absorption capacity reported in the city.²⁶⁵ Afghanistan's capital has been facing a severe water shortage for some years now, affecting groups such as displaced people.²⁶⁶

With limited job opportunities,²⁶⁷ few or no social protection nets, poor shelter/housing conditions,²⁶⁸ high land tenure insecurity,²⁶⁹ impeded access to education, healthcare and sanitation,²⁷⁰ as well as a

²⁵⁷ IOM, DTM Afghanistan, Baseline Mobility Assessment: Summary Results Round 10 Jan-June 2020, 1 October 2020, [url](#), pp. 1, 6

²⁵⁸ Reuters, Afghans Fleeing Upsurge in Violence Face Cold Welcome in Kabul, 30 November 2020, [url](#)

²⁵⁹ Metcalfe, V. et al., Sanctuary in the City? Urban Displacement and Vulnerability in Kabul, June 2012, [url](#), p. 7

²⁶⁰ Afghanistan, Protection Cluster, Central Region Update, May 2017, 17 June 2017, [url](#), p. 1; EU Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection & ERM, IDP's Needs Assessment in Kabul Province, 25 February 2019, [url](#), p. 3

²⁶¹ Bjelica, J., Afghanistan's Returning Refugees: Why Are So Many Still Landless?, AAN, 29 March 2016, [url](#)

²⁶² NRC et al., Escaping War: Where to Next? A Research Study on the Challenges of IDP Protection in Afghanistan, January 2018, [url](#), pp. 25, 53; Guardian (The), Pressure Builds in 'Powderkeg' Kabul as Refugees Return Home, 15 March 2018, [url](#); NRC and IDMC, Stuck in the Mud: Urban Displacement and Tenure Security in Kabul's Informal Settlements, 2019, [url](#), p. 3; Reuters, Afghans Fleeing Upsurge in Violence Face Cold Welcome in Kabul, 30 November 2020, [url](#)

²⁶³ NRC and IDMC, Stuck in the Mud: Urban Displacement and Tenure Security in Kabul's Informal Settlements, 2019, [url](#), p. 3

²⁶⁴ New Humanitarian (The), As Afghanistan's Capital Grows, Its Residents Scramble for Clean Water, 19 February 2019, [url](#)

²⁶⁵ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview Afghanistan 2019, November 2018, [url](#), p. 15; WBG and UNHCR, Living Conditions and Settlement Decisions of Recent Afghan Returnees, June 2019, [url](#), pp. 5-6, 25; IDMC, A Different Kind of Pressure. The Cumulative Effects of Displacement and Return in Afghanistan, January 2020, [url](#), p. 5

²⁶⁶ New Humanitarian (The), As Afghanistan's Capital Grows, Its Residents Scramble for Clean Water, 19 February 2019, [url](#); Al Jazeera, War, Drought, Diplomatic Rifts Deepen Afghanistan's Water Crisis, 5 May 2019, [url](#); Telegraph (The), Kabul's Unquenchable Thirst: Crisis Looms in Afghan Capital as Groundwater Reserves Run Dry, 15 February 2021, [url](#); Jackson, A. & Sampaio, A., Afghan Cities Become Key Battlegrounds, War on the Rocks, 9 April 2021, [url](#)

²⁶⁷ WBG and UNHCR, Living Conditions and Settlement Decisions of Recent Afghan Returnees, June 2019, [url](#), pp. 5-6, 25; IOM, DTM Afghanistan, Community Based Needs Assessment: Summary Results Round 10 Jan-June 2020, 1 October 2020, [url](#), p. 1; UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview Afghanistan 2021, 19 December 2020, [url](#), p. 78

²⁶⁸ Reuters, Afghans Fleeing Upsurge in Violence Face Cold Welcome in Kabul, 30 November 2020, [url](#)

²⁶⁹ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Response Plan Afghanistan 2018 - 2021, 9 January 2021, [url](#), p. 98

²⁷⁰ UNOCHA, Central Region - Inter-Agency Cluster Coordination Team Meeting - Meeting Summary, 21 July 2020, [url](#), p. 3

lack of legitimate civil documentation²⁷¹ and the continuous fear of eviction,²⁷² displaced families in the KIS-sites must cope with a precarious living situation.²⁷³ They have faced the risk of being forced into secondary displacement²⁷⁴ or adopted negative coping strategies like child labour²⁷⁵ and early marriage.²⁷⁶ Child labour has been particularly prevalent among the urban displaced in Kabul, due to the greater economic vulnerability of IDPs in the capital and the fact that the city's relatively vibrant economy creates more demand for child labour.²⁷⁷ IDPs in Kabul have more likely than their counterparts in the general population been underemployed. Their lack of marketable skills in an urban area often restricts them to unstable work. They have mostly been employed as unskilled day labourers, competing for low paid and precarious jobs in the construction sector and to a lesser extent in agriculture.²⁷⁸

A 2019 Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) study described the situation in Kabul's informal settlements as a 'complex story of land ownership and private interests', challenging the already vulnerable displaced families. KIS residents are often forced to pay bribes to local police forces when arriving on a plot of land. Once settled, they are obliged to pay monthly rent to self-proclaimed landowners (often supported by the authorities), while living in sub-standard shelters. As the settlements are seen as temporary, landlords or the city have forbidden shelter improvements in most areas. Landowners often have other plans for future development of the sites and want to maintain the freedom and flexibility to evict residents at their will, pushing the settlements' inhabitants into another cycle of displacement.²⁷⁹ In March 2021, the Afghanistan Protection Cluster reported on continued land grabbing by powerful and influential people in Kabul.²⁸⁰ A growing frustration among residents of Kabul's IDP settlements has been reported in recent years, stemming from a steadily deteriorating situation and pressure on IDP camps not to expand further.²⁸¹

In 2019, the Afghan Land Authority Arazi, in cooperation with UN Habitat, started a registration project of Kabul's KIS-sites,²⁸² adding to a growing database of city areas being formalised. Residents from several of Kabul's informal settlements reported signs of change, with their living areas slowly becoming more developed and organised.²⁸³ In December 2020, a new digital land registry solution

²⁷¹ Pforzheimer, A. et al., "No Going Backward" Afghanistan's Post-Peace Accord Security Sector, March 2021, [url](#), pp. 14-15

²⁷² NRC and IDMC, Stuck in the Mud: Urban Displacement and Tenure Security in Kabul's Informal Settlements, 2019, [url](#), pp. 2-3, 8, 10-13, 16; NRC and IDMC, Global Report on Internal Displacement - Grid 2019, May 2019, [url](#), pp. 35, 94; IDMC, Contribution to the Upcoming Report of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing on COVID-19 and Housing, June 2020, [url](#), p. 2

²⁷³ NRC and IDMC, Stuck in the Mud: Urban Displacement and Tenure Security in Kabul's Informal Settlements, 2019, [url](#), p. 11

²⁷⁴ NRC and IDMC, Global Report on Internal Displacement - Grid 2019, May 2019, [url](#), pp. 35, 94; IDMC, Contribution to the Upcoming Report of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing on COVID-19 and Housing, June 2020, [url](#), p. 2

²⁷⁵ Reuters, Life in Kabul's Squatter Camps Highlights Challenge for Any Afghan Peace, 15 February 2019, [url](#); NRC and IDMC, Global Report on Internal Displacement - Grid 2019, May 2019, [url](#), p. 36

²⁷⁶ NRC and IDMC, Global Report on Internal Displacement - Grid 2019, May 2019, [url](#), p. 36

²⁷⁷ NRC et al., Going Home to Displacement: Afghanistan's Returnee-IDPs, December 2017, [url](#), pp. 6-7; NRC et al., Escaping War: Where to Next? A Research Study on the Challenges of IDP Protection in Afghanistan, January 2018, [url](#), pp. 32-33

²⁷⁸ NRC et al., Escaping War: Where to Next? A Research Study on the Challenges of IDP Protection in Afghanistan, January 2018, [url](#), pp. 27-28

²⁷⁹ NRC and IDMC, Stuck in the Mud: Urban Displacement and Tenure Security in Kabul's Informal Settlements, 2019, [url](#), pp. 11-12, 15-16

²⁸⁰ Afghanistan, Protection Cluster, Protection Brief - Afghanistan (Quarter 1), March 2021, [url](#), p. 7

²⁸¹ Al Jazeera, 'Poor People's Eid': How Kabul IDPs Welcomed Muslim Celebration, 12 August 2019, [url](#)

²⁸² According to an expert of Afghanistan, interviewed by the Finnish Immigration Service while on Fact Finding Mission in Kabul in April 2019. Finland, FIS/Migrationsverket, Afghanistan: Fact-Finding Mission to Kabul in April 2019 - Situation of Returnees in Kabul, 15 October 2019, [url](#), p. 14; see also: UN Habitat, Kabul Strengthening Municipal Nahias Programme (KSMNP) - Mid-Term Programme Evaluation, January 2019, [url](#), p. 27

²⁸³ Guardian (The), 'There is Less Fear': Restoration of Kabul Repairs the Ravages of War, 13 May 2019, [url](#)

for urban informal settlements was handed to the Afghan government by the UN Human Settlements Programme of UN Habitat to address access to secure land rights for the settlements' residents. This solution, referred to as 'goLandRegistry' will contain accurate property records, handling at least one million land parcels, individually registered on blockchain, and occupancy certificates.²⁸⁴ Data from the Housing Land and Property Taskforce (HLP-TF), published in UNOCHA's Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO) for 2021, suggest that in Kabul 'at least 50 per cent of people living in IDP and returnee settlements have resided in their settlements for 5 years or more'.²⁸⁵

Apart from internal displacement due to conflict, Kabul City has seen large flows of Afghan refugees returning from neighbouring countries (Pakistan and Iran) or from Turkey.²⁸⁶ Many returnees have ended up in the capital because of relatively higher security than in their regions of origin²⁸⁷ and because of expectations of more job opportunities, better support services and prospects of social acceptance.²⁸⁸ Few tensions have been reported, but increased pressure on local resources, jobs, services, and facilities that feeds fear among both returnees and host communities has been noted.²⁸⁹ AAN analyst Foschini points out the worsening situation of drug-addicted returnees from Iran in Kabul, due to a lack of access to medical services and the wide availability of drugs in the city.²⁹⁰

Most returnees in Kabul City depend on relatives for accommodation and other in-kind support.²⁹¹ The importance of social networks has been reported as vital. When originally not from Kabul and without a safety net or extended family in the capital, returnees have faced difficulties supporting themselves, finding jobs or renting accommodation. Hazara returnees coming to Kabul have reportedly been able to count on better support through a range of sophisticated social networks within their well-organised and cohesive community.²⁹²

²⁸⁴ UN Habitat, UN-Habitat, OICT and LTO Network Release First Open-Source Urban Land Registry Solution for the Government of Afghanistan, 2 December 2020, [url](#)

²⁸⁵ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview Afghanistan 2021, 19 December 2020, [url](#), pp. 98-99

²⁸⁶ IOM interviewed by the Finnish Immigration Service while on Fact Finding Mission in Kabul in April 2019.

Finland, FIS/Migrationsverket, Afghanistan: Fact-Finding Mission to Kabul in April 2019 - Situation of Returnees in Kabul, 15 October 2019, [url](#), p. 11; UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview Afghanistan 2020, 17 December 2019, [url](#), p. 82; Foschini, F., Kabul's Expanding Crime Scene (Part 1): The Roots of Today's Underworld, AAN, 11 February 2020, [url](#), p. 7; NYT, Fresh from Iran's Coronavirus Zone, Now Moving across Afghanistan, 26 March 2020, [url](#); New Humanitarian (The), As Deportations Soar, Afghan Returnees Struggle on Home Soil, 26 January 2021, [url](#)

²⁸⁷ WBG and UNHCR, Living Conditions and Settlement Decisions of Recent Afghan Returnees, June 2019, [url](#), p. 6; New Humanitarian (The), As Deportations Soar, Afghan Returnees Struggle on Home Soil, 26 January 2021, [url](#)

²⁸⁸ Oxfam, Returning to Fragility. Exploring the Link Between Conflict and Returnees in Afghanistan, January 2018, [url](#), p. 23; MMC, Distant Dreams. Understanding the Aspirations of Afghan Returnees, January 2019, [url](#), p. 31; Asia Foundation (The), A Survey of the Afghan Returnees - 2018, 14 May 2019, [url](#), p. 106; WBG and UNHCR, Living Conditions and Settlement Decisions of Recent Afghan Returnees, June 2019, [url](#), pp. 6, 16, 22

²⁸⁹ Oxfam, Returning to Fragility. Exploring the Link Between Conflict and Returnees in Afghanistan, January 2018, [url](#), pp. 21-24

²⁹⁰ Foschini, F., Kabul's Expanding Crime Scene (Part 1): The Roots of Today's Underworld, AAN, 11 February 2020, [url](#)

²⁹¹ Oxfam, Returning to Fragility. Exploring the Link Between Conflict and Returnees in Afghanistan, January 2018, [url](#), p. 23; MMC, Distant Dreams. Understanding the Aspirations of Afghan Returnees, January 2019, [url](#), pp. 33, 39-40

²⁹² Sources cited by the Finnish Immigration Service. Finland, FIS/Migrationsverket, Afghanistan: Fact-Finding Mission to Kabul in April 2019 - Situation of Returnees in Kabul, 15 October 2019, [url](#), pp. 12, 25-26

The risk of recruitment of IDPs or inhabitants of informal settlements in Kabul by AGEs²⁹³ and the possible radicalisation of returnees and people deported from Europe has been reported in recent years.²⁹⁴

According to UNOCHA and Amnesty International (AI), overcrowding, precarious living conditions and a lack of access to water and hygiene expose Kabul's informal settlements to a high health risk from COVID-19. Additionally, a rising trend in malnutrition has been reported in the settlements since the onset of the pandemic and the resulting economic downturn.²⁹⁵ According to respondents in an AI study on the impact of COVID-19 on Afghanistan's IDPs, many of them in Kabul displayed symptoms but were not able to seek treatment, get tested or contain the virus by social distancing or quarantine due to their poor living conditions. Lockdown measures resulted in a temporary closure of the city, an increased number of checkpoints and movement restrictions, thus impeding the delivery of humanitarian aid.²⁹⁶ Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has reportedly exacerbated the vulnerabilities of IDP women in informal settlements, exposing them to increased risk of infection as main caregivers (but limited access to health services due to societal restrictions) and increased risks of domestic violence (with limited access to protection services).²⁹⁷ According to UN Women, negative coping mechanisms often used by IDPs, such as child marriage, child labour and selling children are expected to worsen due to COVID-19 and to a lack of livelihoods, particularly in informal settlements. Rising tensions between host communities and IDPs are also put forward as possible side effects of COVID-19 and measures taken to curtail the pandemic.²⁹⁸

²⁹³ Guardian (The), 'There is Less Fear': Restoration of Kabul Repairs the Ravages of War, 13 May 2019, [url](#); NRC and ACAPS, Displacement and Access in Afghanistan: Scenarios, June 2019, [url](#), p. 11; Al Jazeera, 'Poor People's Eid': How Kabul IDPs Welcomed Muslim Celebration, 12 August 2019, [url](#)

²⁹⁴ Save the Children, From Europe to Afghanistan: Experiences of Child Returnees, 19 October 2018, [url](#), p. 37; DW, Deported Afghans at Risk of Radicalization: Study, 26 November 2019, [url](#)

²⁹⁵ AI, Afghanistan's Four Million Internally Displaced People - A Glance into Their Lives of Poverty and Displacement during the Pandemic, 19 August 2020, [url](#); UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview Afghanistan 2021, 19 December 2020, [url](#), p. 93; UNOCHA, Humanitarian Response Plan Afghanistan 2018 - 2021, 9 January 2021, [url](#), p. 36; AI, 'We Survived the Virus, but May Not Survive the Hunger': The Impact of COVID-19 on Afghanistan's Internally Displaced, 31 March 2021, [url](#), p. 16

²⁹⁶ AI, 'We Survived the Virus, but May Not Survive the Hunger': The Impact of COVID-19 on Afghanistan's Internally Displaced, 31 March 2021, [url](#), pp. 4, 15

²⁹⁷ UNOCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview Afghanistan 2020, 17 December 2019, [url](#), p. 24; USIP, Coronavirus Complicates an Already Dire Situation for Afghan Women, 10 June 2020, [url](#); Care Evaluations, Afghanistan COVID-19 RGA July 2020, 22 July 2020, [url](#); Afghanistan, Protection Cluster & UN Women, Gender Alert on COVID-19 Afghanistan, 11 June 2020, [url](#), p. 1

²⁹⁸ Afghanistan, Protection Cluster & UN Women, Gender Alert on COVID-19 Afghanistan, 11 June 2020, [url](#), p. 1

Summary

Kabul, Afghanistan's capital, is by far the country's most populous and influential city, characterized by unprecedented demographic and urban growth. Kabul's rapid expansion has complicated living conditions and created new economic and security challenges inside the city. Because of its high concentration of government buildings, international organisations, diplomatic and security forces' compounds, Kabul faces distinct security concerns. Although it is under government control, armed opposition groups have shown they can infiltrate the Afghan capital and Kabul remains a target for AGEs, who continue to carry out attacks in the city.

The Taliban strategy in 2020 was described as a mixture of 'fight and talk', with the militants reportedly seeking to secure leverage in the ongoing peace talks with the Afghan government through gains on the battlefield. In what was described as a new approach, the Taliban mostly refrained from high-profile and mass-casualty attacks in major cities, but shifted their tactic to the deliberate targeted killing of civilians (government employees, journalists, human rights activists, moderate religious leaders and women in public roles) in urban areas such as Kabul. A sharp rise in the use by the Taliban of magnetic bombs attached to vehicles was reported, a tactic described as a quick, cheap, simple and relatively unpredictable way for the militants to demonstrate their reach in the capital while avoiding mass civilian casualties.

Although ISKP's operational capacity was described as degraded in 2020, the militant group retained its ability to carry out attacks in Kabul and other major cities. A spike in high-impact attacks in Kabul was attributed to ISKP in the last quarter of 2020 and the militant group reportedly regained strength in the first quarter of 2021. ISKP has maintained an active cell in the Afghan capital, applying an effective recruitment strategy with outreach activities in religious and academic institutions in the city.

All parties to the Afghan conflict have been reporting their attacks much more sparingly after the signing of the Doha Agreement between the Taliban and the US in February 2020. This has resulted in a significant increase in unclaimed attacks in Kabul City. In a climate of rising impunity, several parties to the conflict have reportedly been blaming each other for violent incidents.

Mid-2020, a new security charter was ordered for Kabul City, with several new security measures implemented. ANDSF forces have also been engaged in a concerted effort to dismantle AGE groups active in and around the Kabul metropolitan area. Security concerns in Kabul, however, are not limited to insurgent attacks alone; they also include a rise in criminality. Incidents of murder, armed robbery, organised petty crime and violent theft, kidnappings and drug-related criminality were increasingly reported in 2020 and 2021 - with police forces struggling to respond effectively and reportedly often involved themselves in crime and corruption.

About 50 % of the security incidents recorded in Kabul district were coded as 'remote explosives, landmines and IEDs' by ACLED, representing the most prevalent incident type in Kabul during the reporting period. Despite a 48 % decrease compared to 2019, Kabul remained the province with the highest number of civilian casualties countrywide in 2020. Leading causes of casualties were targeted killings, followed by non-suicide IEDs and suicide attacks. The deliberate targeting of civil society leaders, human rights defenders and journalists as well as the absence of claims of responsibility by perpetrators has generated a climate of fear and increased general insecurity among the civilian population, paralysing several parts of society and fuelling growing discontent with an Afghan government unable to protect its citizens.

Although the number of IDPs finding refuge in Kabul district decreased by 40 % compared to the previous reporting period, Kabul remained the main gravitational centre for migrants in the country - putting further strain on the city's services and absorption capacity. The total number of IDPs and returnees in Kabul is not known, as movement to and within the city is constant and many return regularly to their area of origin. With limited job opportunities, few or no social protection nets, poor

shelter/housing conditions, impeded access to education, healthcare and sanitation and the continuous fear of eviction due to tenure insecurity or land grabbing, IDP's and returnees in the capital's numerous informal settlements face precarious living conditions and are often forced into secondary displacement as well as adopting negative coping strategies - with these conditions expected to worsen due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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