



ISSUE BRIEF

INSTITUTE OF STRATEGIC STUDIES ISLAMABAD

Web: www.issi.org.pk

Phone: +92-51-9204423, 24

Fax: +92-51-9204658

AFGHANISTAN AND COVID-19: OPPORTUNITY FOR AFGHANS TO WORK TOGETHER?

By
Amina Khan
Director

Centre for Middle East & Africa (CMEA), ISSI

Edited by
Najam Rafique

April 29, 2020

*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do
not represent those of ISSI)*



Like every other country in the world, Afghanistan has also been affected by the Corona virus also known as COVID-19. On March 22, Afghanistan reported its first fatality in the Balkh province.¹ This was followed by a second fatality in Herat. Within a span of a week, the total number of cases had reached 174, a majority among them individuals returning from Iran.² Moreover, there have been reports that around 40 members of President Ashraf Ghani's staff have been infected by the Corona virus.³

As of April 25, 2020, the total number of confirmed COVID-19 cases stands at 1,463.⁴ According to the Afghan Ministry of Health, 47 people have died due to the virus, while 188 have recovered.⁵ However, there are concerns that the number of actual cases is much higher, since there are limited testing available and poor health facilities including a lack of ventilators. The current state of affairs in Afghanistan is already marked by political uncertainty – there is the ongoing Ghani-Abdullah feud, the continuing hostility between the Taliban and Kabul despite the US-Taliban peace deal signed in

¹ "First Coronavirus Death Confirmed in Afghanistan," *Tolo News*, March 22, 2020, <https://tolonews.com/health/first-coronavirus-death-confirmed-afghanistan>

² "COVID-19 strikes its first victims in Afghanistan," *Globalvoices*, April 1 2020, <https://globalvoices.org/2020/04/01/covid-19-makes-first-victims-in-afghanistan/>

³ Mujib Mashal and Mashal and Fahim Abed, "Dozens test positive for coronavirus at Afghan's Presidential Palace," *New York Times*, April 19, 2020 <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/19/world/asia/coronavirus-afghanistan-president-palace.html>

⁴ "COVID-19 Cases Reach 1,463 in Afghanistan" *Tolo News*, April 25, 2020, <https://tolonews.com/health/covid-19-cases-reach-1463-afghanistan>

⁵ "Current cases of Covid -19" *Tolo News*, April 25, 2020, <https://tolonews.com>

February 2020, as well as weak institutions and an extremely fragile economy. This makes dealing with the virus all the more cumbersome. Afghanistan's already weak health ministry is struggling to deal with COVID-19, and even as the World Health Organization (WHO) has given 1,500 testing kits, the country possesses only two laboratories that can provide credible results.⁶ Moreover, decades of conflict have led to a neglect of the health sector, which is evident from the fact that according to official figures, only 300 ventilators are available in the country.⁷

President Ghani has allocated \$25 million to fight COVID-19, and the major portion of this would be spent on the worst hit province, namely Herat.⁸ However, the governor of Herat, Abdul Quayom Rahimi laments that only \$130,000 has been received.⁹ Hence, President Ghani needs to move away from vying for power, and instead focus on preventing the spread of the virus, as the Taliban have been doing. In fact the group has initiated an anti-corona virus campaign,¹⁰ raising public awareness, in particular by focusing on returnees from Iran, as well as distributing leaflets, soap bars, and hand sanitizers to the public.¹¹ Moreover, they agreed to a ceasefire in areas under their control hit by the outbreak, and guarantee the security of health and aid workers offering assistance to prevent the spread of the virus.¹²

Interestingly, the Taliban appear to have come out as the most responsible actor, be it towards addressing the Corona virus or their commitment to the peace agreement and future of Afghanistan. Recognizing the Taliban's commitment, Secretary Pompeo said that in contrast to the Afghan government, the Taliban were keeping their end of the peace deal by working towards the reduction of violence and delivering their team to the ultimate negotiations."¹³ Such a move by the Taliban adds credence to their repeated avowals that they are not interested in petty power politics or

⁶ Emran Feroz and Mohammad Zaman, "The coronavirus pandemic hasn't stopped the war in Afghanistan," *Vox Media*, April 16, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/covid-19-coronavirus-world-international-response/2020/4/16/21220611/coronavirus-afghanistan-war-taliban-covid-19-cases-deaths>

⁷ Zahra Rahimi "Only '300' Ventilators in Afghanistan to Treat COVID-19: MoPH," *Tolo News*, April 8, 2020, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/only-300-ventilators-afghanistan-treat-covid-19-moph>

⁸ Zaghona Salehi, "Ghani asks MoF to allocate \$25m for coronavirus fight" *Pajhwok News*, February 26, 2020, <https://www.pajhwok.com/en/2020/02/26/ghani-asks-mof-allocate-25m-coronavirus-fight>

⁹ Kimberly Dozier, "As Coronavirus Spreads, Washington's \$1 Billion Aid Cut Couldn't Have Come at a Worse Time for Afghanistan," *Time*, April 4, 2020, <https://time.com/5815473/coronavirus-afghanistan-aid/>

¹⁰ "Taliban launch awareness campaign on coronavirus" *The News*, March 30, 2020, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/636731-taliban-launch-awareness-campaign-on-coronavirus>

¹¹ Ben Farmer and Sami Yousafzai, "Protection or propaganda? Taliban swaps weapons for disinfectant in coronavirus public health video," *The Telegraph*, April 14, 2020,

¹² "Taliban to cease fire in areas only affected by coronavirus: Mujahid," *Khaama Press*, April 2020, <https://www.khaama.com/taliban-to-cease-fire-in-areas-only-affected-by-coronavirus-mujahid-04595/>

¹³ Julian Borger, "US to cut \$1bn of Afghanistan aid over failure to agree unity government" *The Guardian*, March 24, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/24/us-to-cut-1bn-of-afghanistan-aid-over-failure-to-agree-unity-government>

fighting for a position in power, but rather unlike the Afghan political leadership, they are only interested in helping the people of their country.

On March 9, 2020, Taliban spokesman, Zabiullah Mujahid stated that the group wanted both Ghani and Abdullah to move beyond internal disagreements, forgo their inaugurations and instead focus on peace and intra-Afghan talks. However, this clearly does not seem to be the case since the political vendetta continues.¹⁴ The COVID-19 pandemic could not have come at a worst time, since it finds a political setup that is neither prepared nor willing to work together to solve a national emergency of this extent.

The current uncertainty and ongoing pandemic has also led to a further delay in the highly anticipated intra-Afghan talks between Kabul and the Taliban. These were scheduled for March 10, 2020 before which both sides had to complete a prisoner swap as part of the US-Taliban peace deal signed on February 29, 2020. According to this treaty, Kabul had to release 5,000 Taliban prisoners, in return for the release of 1,000 government personnel by the Taliban. However, an initial delay in the release of prisoners due to new conditions set by Ghani has led to a delay in the intra-Afghan talks.¹⁵

Despite hurdles, in April 2020, both sides agreed to go ahead with a prisoner swap, in which Kabul released 100 Taliban prisoners, while 20 prisoners of the Afghan government were released.¹⁶ Since then, Kabul has released 432 Taliban prisoners while the Taliban have released 60 government personnel.¹⁷ This has paved the way for some optimism regarding intra-Afghan talks, but there is still a long way to go regarding a complete implementation of the peace deal. The ongoing clashes between the Taliban and Afghan forces could, for instance, jeopardize hopes for further steps towards peace. Since the signing of the peace deal, the Taliban have ceased attacks against international forces, but continued to attack Afghan security forces, under the premise that the deal was signed with the US, and hence, international forces would not be targeted. However, their logic or rationale for violence against government forces is flawed – all hostilities must be ceased, since violent attacks cannot be justified and Kabul has to be accepted as an equal partner. If the Taliban

¹⁴ Taliban reacts to parallel swearing-in ceremonies of Abdullah and Ghani,” *Khaama Press*, March 9, 2020, <https://www.khaama.com/taliban-reacts-to-parallel-swearing-in-ceremonies-of-abdullah-and-ghani-04484/>

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ “Taliban free 20 Afghan prisoners,” *The News*, April 13, 2020, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/643764-taliban-free-20-afghan-prisoners>

¹⁷ “Kabul Frees Dozens More Taliban Prisoners In Step Toward Peace Talk,” *Gandhara*, April 22, 2020, <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/afghan-government-releases-another-batch-of-taliban-prisoners/30569495.html>

can accept the US – the same country that invaded Afghanistan, they should also be ready to accept the Afghan government.

In this regard, the US being a major stakeholder also needs to intervene and put pressure on all sides to deliver their part of the agreement. For the Taliban, the cessation of all hostilities against every stakeholder needs to be the primary concern. This has however proven to be difficult. The US had initially tried to intervene and convince both Ghani and Abdullah to reach a political compromise and work towards a unified government. Its role has also not met with much success. Secretary Pompeo had stated that, “the US is disappointed in them and what their conduct means for Afghanistan and our shared interests....their failure has harmed U.-Afghan relations and, sadly, dishonors those Afghan, Americans, and coalition partners who have sacrificed their lives and treasure in the struggle to build a new future for this country.”¹⁸ He further said that the US would be cutting aid by \$1 billion in 2020, (which is about 20% of US aid for Afghanistan), and an additional \$1 billion in 2021,¹⁹ in addition to withdrawing all foreign forces.

Despite all this, the two political opponents in Afghanistan vying for the country’s top political job both seem to be adamant. In fact, President Ghani in a televised address stated that while his administration would try to satisfy the US through talks and negotiations, the cut in US funding, amounting to 5% of Afghanistan’s GDP, would not have a direct bearing on Afghanistan.²⁰ However, he conveniently fails to recall that in 2018, he categorically noted that without US support the Afghan government along with the Afghan National Army would collapse in six months.²¹ Hence, this is the time for Ghani to take ownership of the situation and assume the role of a true leader. In fact, he has a unique opportunity to showcase himself as a great and credible leader, take others on board and work together with his peers and other stakeholders for the future of the country, instead of indulging in bickering for personal gains.

The US must convince all sides to reach a workable compromise in which all are accommodated because if this political feud is not sorted out it could very well lead to civil unrest jeopardizing any hope of stability. It could also lead to widespread civil unrest, compromise the peace agreement,

¹⁸ “U.S. Disappointed in Afghan Leaders,” US Embassy in Afghanistan, March 24, 2020, <https://af.usembassy.gov/u-s-disappointed-in-afghan-leaders/>

¹⁹ “US cuts Afghan aid by \$1bn after Pompeo fails to end impasse,” *Al Jazeera*, March 24, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/03/cuts-afghan-aid-1bn-pompeo-fails-impasse-200324015906774.html>

²⁰ “US to cut \$1bn of Afghanistan aid over failure to agree unity government.”

²¹ Lara Logan, “Kabul under siege while America’s longest war rages on,” *CBS News*, January 14, 2018, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/kabul-afghanistan-capital-under-siege-while-americas-longest-war-rages-on/>

and allow terrorist groups to take advantage of the situation. One way to prevent such an eventuality is to push for a continuation of the previous Government of national unity, which despite its lack of unity could at least accommodate both men and hence possibly lead towards an implementation of the peace agreement with the Taliban. Another option could be an inclusive interim set up – a idea that was largely supported by all the different Afghan political factions in the Moscow talks (2018), including the Taliban, Ghani, Abdullah, and other prominent political leaders. The timeline of such a government could be determined by the stakeholders based on its performance.

Afghanistan has suffered for decades from war, political instability, and corruption. This new challenge of COVID-19 is a huge test for the political leadership of the country, and an opportunity for Afghans to come together, accommodate each other and take a chance on peace. Instead of indulging in petty politics, the Taliban and Kabul should work together to overcome the challenge of COVID-19 and serve the people of Afghanistan collectively. This is perhaps not a choice, but a necessity brought about by the pandemic.