



Afghanistan-in-Review: January 3 – January 25, 2022

Taliban Government Responds to Uzbek Taliban Revolt in Faryab Province

By Peter Mills

Uzbek Taliban units revolted, forcibly disarmed local Pashtun Taliban units, and briefly seized control of Maimana, the provincial capital of Faryab Province on January 13.¹ Local Taliban leadership, including the governor and police chief, fled the city while locals reported some shots fired.² The revolt occurred shortly after Taliban Deputy Defense Minister Mullah Fazel Mazloom arrested a senior Uzbek Taliban commander, Makhdoom Alem, in Mazar-i-Sharif on January 12.³ The Taliban central leadership responded quickly to the revolt in Faryab Province by deploying additional reinforcements January 14-16, which appears to have ended the revolt. Makhdoom Alem remains in custody in Kabul. If the Taliban exclude local elites from ethnic minority groups from power, it risks increasing inter-ethnic tensions in Afghanistan, and it may not have enough forces to forcibly stop every revolt.

Makhdoom Alem is the former head of the Taliban Military Commission for Faryab Province and commanded Taliban forces in Faryab, Jowzjan, and Sar-e-Pul Provinces.⁴ One of Makhdoom Alem's aides, Turkoglu, reportedly threatened the Taliban government, saying if Makhdoom Alem is not released, then his forces will "permanently lower the Taliban flag in Faryab Province."⁵ The Taliban governors of Faryab, Jowzjan, Sar-e-Pul, Samangan provinces, as well as the commander of the Taliban 209th Corps, Attaullah Omari, reportedly went to Balkh to deliberate over the revolt.⁶ During this

crisis, Taliban officials also reportedly arrested Qari Wakil, the senior-most Tajik Taliban military commander in Faryab Province, in Mazar-i-Sharif after he traveled there to negotiate the release of Makhdoom Alem on January 14.⁷ Omari reportedly told supporters of Qari Wakil and Makhdoom Alem that the two men will remain in Taliban custody and that the people who protest this will be repressed.⁸ Armed clashes between Pashtun and Uzbek Taliban units took place the following day and reportedly killed a local Taliban commander and wounded several other fighters.⁹

Shortly after the arrest of Qari Wakil, local Tajik Taliban commanders in Badghis Province—Noor Agha in Ab Kamari and Saleh Mohammad Pardel in Qadis District—reportedly both revolted and said they would no longer obey the Taliban provincial leadership.¹⁰ The Taliban response to their actions remains unclear, but the revolt indicates the difficulties the Taliban face in trying to preserve unity while simultaneously instituting more centralized command and control. If the Taliban fail to preserve unity within the movement and these inter-ethnic tensions worsen, the combined effect could seriously undermine Taliban governance in large parts of Afghanistan over time.

The Taliban central leadership responded quickly to the revolt in Faryab Province by deploying additional reinforcements, which appears to have calmed the situation. The convoy of reinforcements arrived in Maimana city on

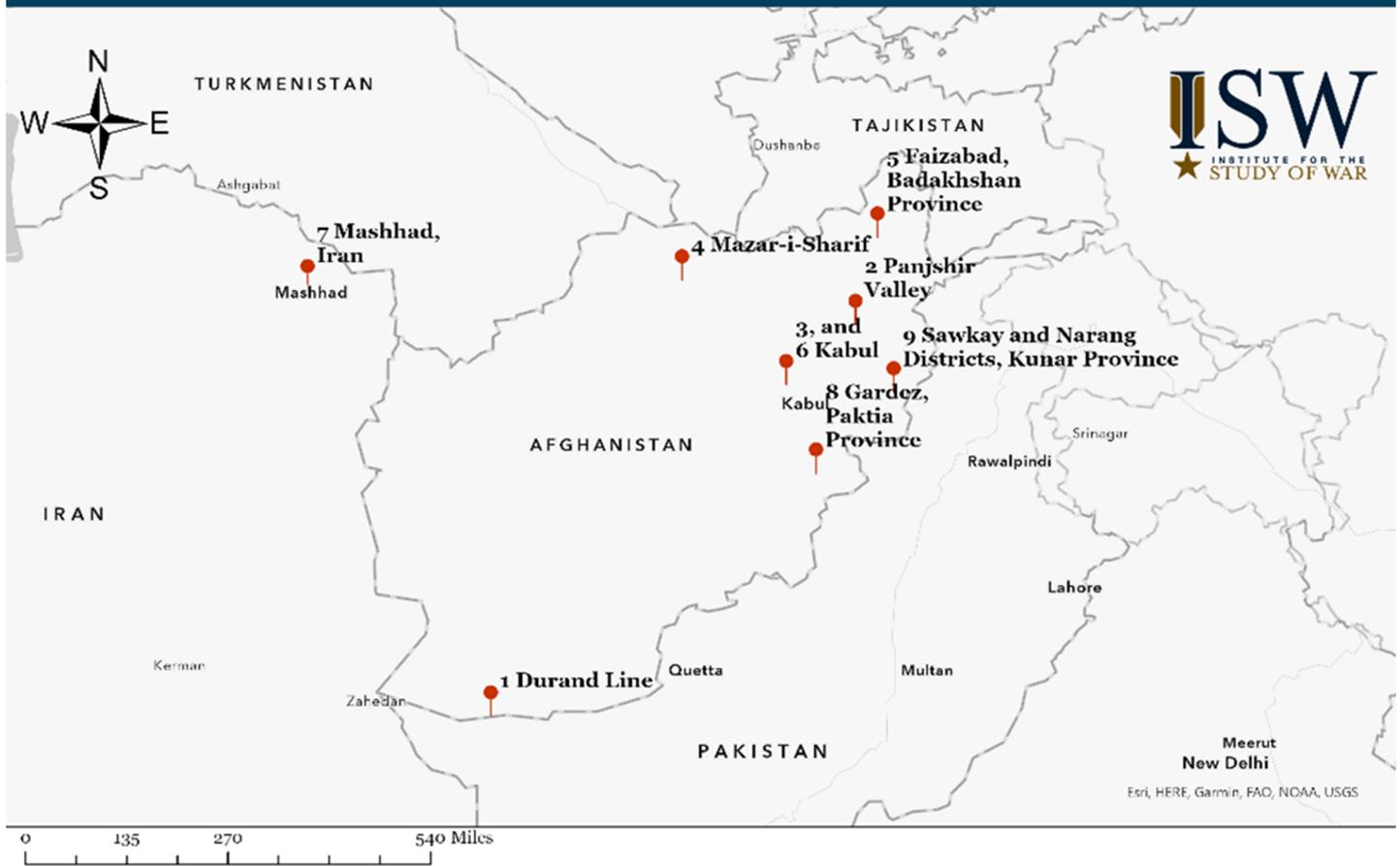
January 14 despite Uzbek Taliban units reportedly attempting to block Taliban reinforcements from Balkh Province.¹¹ Taliban-state media announced on January 17 that 110 Taliban soldiers had graduated from training and joined the 1st Brigade, 209th Corps, in Maimana city. It is unclear whether these were fresh troops or if they were part of additional reinforcements sent to Maimana on January 16.¹² Those troops, reportedly from the Taliban's "Martyrdom Units," marched in a military parade and engaged in a show of force when they arrived, the day prior to this reported graduation.¹³ ISW did not observe disturbances in Sar-e-Pul Province, but the Taliban 209th Corps deployed 2,500 troops there as well to increase security in the area.¹⁴ This deployment may have been because Makhdoom Alem was briefly deputy governor of Sar-e-Pul Province after the fall of the Afghan government and therefore may still have supporters and fighters loyal to him in Sar-e-Pul.¹⁵

Makhdoom Alem's detention may be related to internal Taliban factional politics. Taliban Deputy Foreign Minister Fazl Mazloom reportedly holds a special grudge against Uzbeks due to his experience as a captive of prominent Uzbek warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum in 2001.¹⁶ It is also possible that Alem's detention is related to prior conflicts between Uzbek Taliban units under Alem's command and Taliban fighters, possibly affiliated with the Haqqani network. In early December 2021, Taliban fighters, likely from the Haqqani-affiliated Badri 313 unit, disarmed 70 Uzbek Taliban fighters under Alem's command on charges of collaborating with Islamic State – Khorasan Province (IS-KP).¹⁷ A few days later, some Uzbek Taliban members did defect to IS-KP and engaged in clashes with Haqqani Network units and Taliban Uzbek commander Qari Salahuddin Ayoubi.¹⁸ These prior incidents underscore that there is likely pre-existing tension between Taliban Uzbek commanders Qari Salahuddin Ayoubi and Makhdoom Alem. There is a real risk that inter-Taliban splits could contribute or directly lead to more Taliban defections to IS-KP.

Qari Salahuddin Ayoubi continues to support the government and joined Taliban deputy spokesperson Inamullah Samangani, a Tajik Taliban member, in blaming inter-ethnic tensions on democracy and corrupt supporters of the former Afghan government.¹⁹ Inamullah Samangani claimed on January 16 that the situation in Faryab Province is stable and emphasized that the Taliban government reserves the right to investigate anyone, regardless of ethnic affiliation or background.²⁰

This revolt is the most serious incident so far in an escalating pattern of intra-Taliban conflict. Although the situation in Faryab appears stable for now, tensions likely continue beneath the surface. If the Taliban excludes local elites from minority ethnic groups from power, inter-ethnic tensions within Afghanistan will escalate. Nizamuddin Qaisari, a former Uzbek Afghan warlord, threatened the Taliban on January 15 saying if Makhdoom Alem was not released then there would be a national uprising in northern Afghanistan.²¹ The Taliban may find they do not have enough forces to deal with every crisis or revolt if these inter-ethnic tensions spread across northern Afghanistan. The two primary armed groups opposing the Taliban, the National Resistance Front and IS-KP, will likely try to exploit splits within the Taliban movement and inter-ethnic tensions within Afghanistan.

Afghanistan in the Region



Afghanistan in the Region

1. The Taliban government is refusing to acknowledge the legitimacy of the Durand Line border with Pakistan. Local Afghan Taliban forces tore down sections of fencing put up by Pakistan along the Durand Line, which forms the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, in a series of border incidents starting in December. Pakistan Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi acknowledged these incidents on January 4 but stated this was due to “certain miscreants” and that the matter was being discussed diplomatically with the Afghan Taliban government.²² That same day, Taliban forces allegedly prevented Pakistani forces from building a fence along the border near Khost Province, Afghanistan.²³ Taliban Foreign

Ministry Spokesperson Abdul Qahar Balkhi admitted there had been recent incidents along the border, while a Taliban border commander in eastern Afghanistan, Mawlawi Sanaullah Sangin, stated explicitly that the Taliban will not allow Pakistan to put up fencing along the Durand Line. Taliban Deputy Foreign Minister, Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanekzai, denied negotiations were taking place over the Durand Line and stated on January 6 that no Afghan government had the authority to decide on this issue, as it was up to the Afghan people.²⁴ The following day saw an escalation in tensions when Taliban border troops arrested seven Pakistani paramilitary soldiers who were accused of crossing the border into Gomal District, Paktika Province, Afghanistan.²⁵ While these Pakistani paramilitary troops were released shortly afterward, the Taliban has not

compromised on its rhetoric toward the Durand Line. On January 10, Mawlawi Sangin reiterated the need to prevent the border from being fenced, this time at a ceremony with Taliban 201st Corps commander Abdul Sabour Abu Dojana.²⁶ On January 14, Taliban Ambassador to Pakistan Sardar Ahmad Khan Shakib echoed Taliban Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Stanekzai's prior comments, stressing that the Durand Line issue is a national issue that can only be solved by the Afghan nation, not by the Taliban government alone.²⁷

The escalating Pakistani Taliban campaign inside Pakistan will likely push the Pakistani military to continue cross-border operations into Afghanistan, where the Pakistani Taliban maintains havens. The Taliban's ability to prevent Pakistan from fencing the Durand Line is limited. However, this rhetoric and continuing cross-border operations by Pakistan indicate these border tensions may become worse over time.

2. The National Resistance Front stated that it is actively preparing to launch an offensive at the end of winter against the Taliban government. Head of Foreign Relations for the National Resistance Front (NRF) Ali Nazary stated on January 10 and 20 that the NRF is gathering supplies and preparing for a spring offensive that will take place once the snows melt.²⁸ NRF militants have recently been spotted with newer weapons, possibly Russian-made PG-7VR's and SVDS DMRs, which could indicate external support.²⁹ The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs explicitly denied that these weapons had come from Russia.³⁰ There were also reports that Uzbek Afghan warlord, Abdul Rashid Dostum, told his commanders that he will launch a spring offensive against the Taliban.³¹ It is unclear what capabilities Dostum can deploy inside Afghanistan and to what extent he will work with the NRF. The NRF engaged in skirmishes with the Taliban in Kapisa Province on January 16, Panjshir Province on January 18, and Balkh Province on January 21.³² There are reports of ongoing battles between the NRF and the

Taliban in Khost wa Fereng District, Baghlan Province.³³ These battles resulted in mostly minor casualties, but they indicate that the NRF maintains the ability to carry out insurgent attacks and that they may be expanding this capability to other parts of Afghanistan.

3. The Taliban government is seeking to build diplomatic and trade ties with Turkmenistan. Turkmenistani Deputy Foreign Minister Wafa Hajiyevev met separately with the Taliban Deputy Foreign Minister Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanekzai and Taliban Deputy Prime Minister Abdul Salam Hanafi to discuss bilateral relations and cooperating on economic projects including the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India pipeline (TAPI).³⁴ Shortly after these meetings, the Haqqani-run Taliban Ministry of Interior Affairs announced the creation of a special unit of 3,000 soldiers to provide security for TAPI projects in Afghanistan.³⁵ Taliban Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi met with Turkmenistan's Foreign Minister Rashid Muradov in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan, to further discuss TAPI projects on January 16.³⁶ They also reportedly discussed plans to build railways to Aqina and Torghundi, both border crossings into Afghanistan. The Taliban claim construction on these projects will start in March 2023.³⁷ This is likely overly optimistic and it is still unclear who will pay for these projects. Nevertheless, these meetings indicate that Turkmenistan plans to expand relations with the Taliban government.

4. The Taliban is actively working to maintain its air force and is seeking the return of former-Afghan Air Force aircraft from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Latifullah Hakimi, director of the commission that controls airports, stated that the Taliban Air Force has 41 working aircraft and 81 aircraft total as of January 5.³⁸ It is unclear how the Taliban Air Force will continue to maintain its aircraft; according to former Afghan National Army Lieutenant General Yassin Zia, the former Afghan Air Force was spending more than \$12 million per day on maintenance and most Taliban aircraft will likely cease working within

6 months.³⁹ Up to two Taliban helicopters crashed during rescue operations responding to serious flooding in Kandahar and Helmand on January 4.⁴⁰ Taliban Defense Minister Mullah Yaqub underscored the importance of the Taliban Air Force to the Taliban government during a speech on January 11 when he threatened to take action against Tajikistan and Uzbekistan if they did not return former Afghan Air Force aircraft currently being held by those countries.⁴¹

5. The Taliban Clearing of Ranks Commission is slowly expanding its operations but faces violent pushback.

The Taliban Commission for the Clearing of Ranks began operations in Badakhshan Province on January 5.⁴² Armed clashes took place the following day between groups of Taliban fighters loyal to Safaaddin, the local head of criminal investigations, and Salahuddin, the police chief for Maimay District, Badakhshan Province. This clash reportedly occurred because the Clearing of Ranks Commission wanted to remove the local Taliban intelligence official for disobeying orders.⁴³ The clash left two Taliban fighters and a civilian dead with several more Taliban fighters and civilians injured. Latifullah Hakimi, the head of the Clearing of Ranks Commission said the commission has removed more than 2,840 Taliban members from the Taliban's ranks across 14 provinces as of January 16.⁴⁴ Those fighters were removed due to links to IS-KP, involvement in drug smuggling, and violating people's privacy. Hakimi's statement indicates that the commission is not yet operating across all of Afghanistan and is likely being slowly rolled out across the country. It is also a rare acknowledgment from the Taliban that some of its fighters are defecting to IS-KP.

6. Taliban Deputy Prime Minister Abdul Salam Hanafi appears to be taking the lead on economic policy within the Taliban government.

Hanafi chaired meetings of the Economic Commission on January 6 and January 17. The meeting on January 6 included Taliban Minister of

Commerce Nooruddin Azizi and discussed oil, gas, and food imports; increasing trade ties with Iran; and cooperating on a project by Uzbekistan to build a railway from Termez, Uzbekistan, to Torkham on the border with Pakistan.⁴⁵ The meeting on January 17 reportedly focused on increasing electricity in Kandahar Province and responding to significant bankruptcies among Afghan banks.⁴⁶ Deputy Prime Minister Hanafi also gave a prominent speech on January 19 at a major Taliban economic conference. During this speech, Hanafi blamed the country's problems on sanctions and said the Taliban would never sacrifice the independence of Afghanistan's economy to satisfy donor conditions.⁴⁷

7. Taliban Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi led a delegation to Iran and met with Afghan warlord-in-exile Ismail Khan on January 9.

Inamullah Samangani, a Taliban deputy spokesperson, claimed Ahmad Massoud was present for the talks and that the Taliban offered him safe passage to return home to Afghanistan.⁴⁸ Other journalists reported that the National Resistance Front (NRF) denied Massoud was present at the talks. However, these same accounts confirmed that Ismail Khan and other NRF leaders met with Muttaqi.⁴⁹ The Taliban reportedly tried to convince Massoud and the NRF to give up their rebellion and return home to Afghanistan. Sibghatullah Ahmadi, the spokesperson for the NRF, said the Haqqani Network is opposed to any talks with the NRF.⁵⁰ Taliban Minister of Commerce Nooruddin Azizi, an ethnic Tajik who is originally from the Panjshir Valley, was also present. He was likely attempting to demonstrate that Panjshiris will be represented within the Taliban government and can live in Afghanistan without being persecuted. During this visit, Muttaqi also appointed Qayyum Soleimani, reportedly Ismail Khan's nephew, as head of the Afghanistan embassy in Iran.⁵¹ It is unclear whether Iran has formally accepted Soleimani as the new ambassador to Iran. However, Soleimani did comment on the talks

with the NRF and said they were proceeding smoothly.⁵²

8. The Taliban Ministry of Defense is becoming increasingly involved in the distribution of humanitarian aid and food. The Taliban Ministry of Agriculture announced on January 12 that the Ministry of Defense will distribute 21,559 tons of wheat to various unnamed provinces across Afghanistan.⁵³ The Taliban commander of the National Transport and Mobility Brigade, Mawlawi Bismillah, later stated on January 17 that his unit had distributed wheat to two provinces and planned to deliver wheat to more provinces in the near future.⁵⁴ The following day Taliban officials from the 203rd Mansoori Corps distributed food items to poor families in Paktia Province.⁵⁵ These events indicate that international aid organizations may need to work with the Taliban military in order to distribute humanitarian relief in the future.

9. IS-KP continues to carry out regular attacks targeting the Taliban government

and Shi'a civilians, predominantly in Kabul. IS-KP carried out at least eight attacks in Kabul, mostly targeting Taliban soldiers, though at least one targeted a bus carrying Shi'a civilians. IS-KP also attacked local Taliban officials in several districts in Nangarhar and Kunar Province in eastern Afghanistan. In Kunar Province, likely IS-KP militants attacked the home of a local Taliban intelligence commander in Sawkay District on January 16. On January 19, likely IS-KP militants attacked and killed a local Taliban commander in neighboring Narang district.⁵⁶ The January 16 and 19 events came after a failed likely IS-KP assassination attempt on the Taliban district governor for Shegal District on January 14.⁵⁷ In Nangarhar Province on January 11, likely IS-KP militants killed the Taliban intelligence chief for Batikot District. On January 25, IS-KP claimed IED attacks targeting the local Taliban district governor and his bodyguards in neighboring Kama District.⁵⁸ These attacks on rural local Taliban leadership will likely undermine Taliban governance and open up more support and operational areas for IS-KP.

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<https://twitter.com/Natsecjeff/status/1481995853501972486> Video shows a company sized formation of Taliban fighters in a convoy consisting of at least; 5 MRAPs, 6-7 pickup trucks, and 7 armored humvees.
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