



Center for Strategic & Regional Studies Kabul

Weekly Analysis-Issue Number 250 (April 28 – May 5, 2018)

Weekly Analysis is one of CSRS' publications, which significantly analyses weekly economic and political events in Afghanistan and the region. The prime motive behind this is to provide strategic insights and policy solutions to decision-making institutions and individuals in order to help them to design best policies. Weekly Analysis is published in local languages (Pashto and Dari) and international languages (English and Arabic).

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Preface

Last week, the Taliban declared its spring operations named “Khandaq” which, simultaneously, caused increase in bloody security incidents and armed raids. Meanwhile, heavy casualties were suffered by civilians in several attacks of Daesh in Capital Kabul.

Overall, it seems that the Afghan War not only gets bloodier day by day but it also becomes more complex every day. You will read about country's security situation and the challenges ahead in the first part of the Weekly Analysis of the Center for Strategic and Regional Studies (CSRS).

The second part of the Analysis is assigned for the Freedom of Speech and Media Condition in the country. Last week was the bloodiest week for media and journalists where 11 journalists became killed and five other wounded in three separate incidents. Approximately six months ago, Shamshad private TV was assaulted where two people had been killed and 20 others had been wounded. Why the media and media activists are targeted? is the question which is tried to be answered along other questions here.

Why the Afghan War gets Bloodier?



By **Hekmatullah Zaland / CSRS**

Considering the statistics of international organizations, the Afghan War has got bloodier and more severe every year since 2001. After 2014 and formation of the National Unity Government (NUG) in Afghanistan, more than 10 thousand of civilians have been killed and wounded every year.

Approximately, the entire regions of the country witness violence and bloody security incidents on daily basis and following this trend, a strategic region of Kabul was also witness of a bloody security incident which claimed more than 30 people including 9 journalists and wounded 50 others.

In view of the type of these attacks and complexity of the on-going war in the country, disappointment on maintenance of security in the country in on increased day by day and the security situation seems to be bloodier this year.

In this Analysis, the current bloody situation and failed peace efforts, the security challenges ahead and the deteriorating security situation in the country have been discussed.

A Glance at the Current Bloody Situation

Security situation in the country is as much as frail that a total of 75,643 people have been displaced by conflict since the beginning of the year, according to OCHA's Displacement Tracking System (DTS), up by nearly 3,000 people compared to the previous week.¹

As expected, 2018 has been shown to be bloodier than the previous years for Afghans. According to the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), in the first quarter of this year, 2,258 civilians were killed and injured as a result of armed conflicts, which is showing a dramatic increase compared to previous years, with 2181 in 2017 and 1943 in 2016.²

The figures above do not include the bloody casualties of last month, as with the beginning of the new year of the Hijri Shamsi and with the beginning of the Taliban's spring operations, fatal conflicts and raids have been increased in several parts of the country; along with an increase in the casualties of sides involved in war (mainly the Taliban and Afghan forces), civilian casualties have increased as well. The bloodiest attacks that took place in this month and caused heavy casualties to Afghan civilians were an air strike in Dashti Archi of Kunduz and an explosive raid in the West of Kabul, where only these two incidents caused nearly 400 people to become killed and injured.

On the other hand, the role of U.S. forces in the battlefield in Afghanistan has increased again, and in particular, the air strikes of these forces increased in the first quarter of 2018 than at any time since 2001. According to the US Department of Defense, US forces launched 1186 bombs in Afghanistan in the first quarter of this year.³ For this reason, the number of civilian casualties caused by air strikes

¹ See online: <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-weekly-field-report-23-29-april-2018-enps>

² See online, First quarter 2018:

https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama_protection_of_civilians_first_quarter_2018_report_11_april_0.pdf

First quarter 2017:

https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/27_april_2017_-_unama_first_quarter_2017_civilian_casualty_data_english.pdf

First quarter 2016:

<https://unama.unmissions.org/un-chief-afghanistan-do-more-now-protect-civilians-unama-releases-civilian-casualty-data-first>

³ see online: <https://www.darivoa.com/a/intensified-bombing-afghanistan/4362066.html>

has also increased. While Western experts also believe that increased air bombardments will not help in reducing violence in the country.

The Crisis Group had criticized the U.S. military strategy and expressed concerns over deterioration of security situation in this year at the beginning of 2018 and has said that increase in the U.S. forces and military pressure will deteriorate satiation in Afghanistan, as America could not defeat the Taliban in battlefield between 2009-12 while it had more than 100,000 troops in Afghanistan; in the case, this group has been more powerful than every other times and has more areas under its control.⁴

Challenges Ahead

Until a few years ago, the regional countries and the world, to some extent, had consensus on Afghanistan, but after the advent of the Khorasan branch of the Islamic State in Afghanistan and now the insistence of the United States to have military presence in the region, this consensus has collapsed and the regional country are skeptical about America goals in this region. Therefore, the Afghan war is now becoming more complex every day and the country once again faces the threat of becoming a battlefield of proxy wars. Recent arguments between US and Russian officials indicate that a "new cold war" has started between major powers in the region.

One of the other challenges facing the country's security is strengthening the activities of groups that operate outside the Afghan borders and are not included in the peace plan. In the past few months, the Islamic State has been responsible for several deadly attacks, which, on the one hand, reflects the strength of the group's activities in Afghanistan, and, on the other hand, targeting the civilian populations in these attacks indicates that the group is will continue its attack with deadlier method.

The complexity of security situation in the current year of 1397 is one of the biggest security challenges in the time of holding of parliamentary elections that

⁴ International Crisis Group, 31 Jan 2018, See it online:

<https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/dangerous-escalation-afghanistan>

will not only increase civilian casualties in the armed opposition attacks during the election, but also air strikes, which Afghan officials say due to The election will increase, it will also be a challenge for the people of Afghanistan. In the early days of the registration process, several deadly attacks caused hundreds of people to become and injured. On the other hand, schools, mosques and public places are used as registration centers for this process, which has increased the likelihood of civilian casualties.

The government of Afghanistan has practically faced many challenges in maintaining security. For example, the latest reports of SIGAR which released on May 1, 2018 indicates that the number of Afghan forces decreased by 11% (35300) in compare to last year. As there 331700 Afghan forces in January 2017; however, they are decreased to 296400 in January of 2018. The reasons behind are causalities of Afghan forces and escape of Afghan soldiers from the ranks of these forces.⁵

Therefore, this year will be the most challenging one for Afghans more than every other time. It seems that, for one hand, the attacks of AGEs will increase and, from the other hand, the Afghan War will become even more complicated at time the Afghan government is in a state of troublesome political and security situation.

Futile Peace Efforts

Failure in peace efforts is a factor behind prolonging the ongoing war and worry about the country's challenges ahead. However, the parties involved in the Afghan War, including the United States and NATO, have come to the conclusion that insisting on military solutions will not victor any party, but they have practically taken measures that do not include a realistic program for peace in the country.

After the U.S. President Donald Trump removed the timetable for withdrawing U.S. troops from Afghanistan from his strategy towards Afghanistan and, on the

⁵ The Washington post, Afghan security forces declining in number, U.S. inspector general report shows, May 1, 2018, online: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/afghan-security-forces-declining-in-number-us-inspector-general-report-shows/2018/05/01/aa7b7922-4d4d-11e8-85c1-9326c4511033_story.html?utm_term=.214905c1a577

contrary, emphasized the military pressure and increase of troop in the country, the peace process in Afghanistan was also confronted with great controversies as the presence of foreign forces is the most important factor in the continuation of the war in the country.

Given the Taliban positions in the peace process, as long as the United States has begun the war and now has its growing presence in the battlefield in Afghanistan, does not intend to end the war, the process will continue to face deadlock. Consequently, the first relatively modest proposal of NUG for peace talks with the Taliban was also rejected by the group through keeping its silence.

In the aftermath of the political solution of Afghan issue, the United States has pressed Pakistan for months, from one hand, to stop supporting the Taliban and, on the other hand, to play its honest role in the Taliban's engagement in the peace talks. The Inter-Afghan dialogue and the peace process "led and owned by Afghans" will also be fruitful if the United States, as one of the parties involved in the issue, enters this process.

Besides that, the government's efforts to condemn the Taliban's war and to find a Shira "rejection" through convening religious scholars' conferences in Islamic countries such as Indonesia and Saudi Arabia will also have no effect on the fate of war and peace in the country.

On the other hand, despite the fact that presently the casualties of foreign troops in the Afghan War are at its lowest level, and Afghans are the victims in both sides of the ongoing war, the Taliban continues its ongoing pursuit of the United States to become engaged in the peace talks with this group, and it has not got any program for the inter-Afghan dialogue for now. Therefore, this process will not succeed until a realistic approach is taken by all parties involved in the peace process, and until the United States does not put schedule of withdrawal of its troops from Afghanistan on the negotiation table.

A Glance at Media Condition in Afghanistan



By Zia ul Islam Shirani / CSRS

Last week (30 April, 2018), besides other people, 9 journalists became killed and 5 other wounded in the two consecutive attacks in Kabul City. A BBC Reporter shot dead in Khost province the same day, and a Kabul News TV Journalists was murdered by unknown gunmen in Kandahar last week as well.

The Afghan media receives the strike while, besides the upturn in its quantity, the independence of Afghan media has also been remarkably increased in last 17 years. According to Reporters Without Borders, Afghanistan ranks 118 out of 180 countries worldwide; however, this country has been called deadly for journalist and at least 15 journalists and media workers were killed in last year of 2017.⁶

⁶ RSF, Reporters Without Borders, see online: <https://rsf.org/en/ranking>

The Afghan government has always considered the proliferation of independent media and freedom of speech as one of among its greatest achievements; however, the security and personal safety of journalists and media workers has not been taken care as well as its needed.

You will read about background, achievements, and problems, barriers and challenges toward media here.

Background

The media history goes back to 145 years since the second Sultanate of Amir Shir Ali Khan in 1873. At that era, the first newspapers called Shams-u Nahar became established which was being printed by lithography machine in Shams-u Nahar printing press.

After Shams-u Nahar, Siraju-ul Akhbar Afghanistan in 1906 and Siraj-ul Akhbar Afghania in 1912 were important steps in Afghan news writing and media sector which enlightened and paved the way for journalism. But, during Amanullah Khan's Sultanate which is called the era of journalism as well, the media also became improved well as every other sector and there were 23 different magazines and newspapers became published at that time.⁷

For the first time, during the Sultanate of Amanullah Khan, an independent and private newspaper called "Anis" started to operate by Muhiddin Anis. Generally, this era was full of enlightenment and development of Afghan media. After that, till the Sultanate of Mohammad Zahir Shah, however, the media had not got freedom and it censored and controlled by government.

During the Sultanate of Zahir Shah, however, the media freedom became announced, but it was under governmental censor during Daoud Khan and then the Khalq and Parcham Dominion. Moreover, some parties started to have independent publications in the last years of the Najeeb Administration.⁸

⁷ محمد کاظم اهنگ او حبیب الله رفیع: "په افغانستان کې د ڈونالیزم بهر" مومند خپرندویه ټولنه.

⁸ دانش کروخیل: "مسلمکي خبریالي" پژواک خبری آژانس، ۱۳۹۳ هـ، ش، ص ۲۵۵.

The media was completely under the control of government in the Taliban regime and the operation of State TV was also stalled. After 2001, when the Taliban regime became collapsed as a result of America and NATO attacks and the new system backed by them came to ground, the activities of free media became permitted and now, there are hundreds of different media operating in the country.

Afghan Media after 2001

Media, as it is called fourth power in a country, has got special and effective role in every field. Media can work both as bullet or balm in most important and fateful issues in a country.

Last 17 years are considered as an extraordinary period for the freedom of speech and independent media that hundreds of different audio, video, print and online media that broadcast alongside the governmental media; however, these media are also criticized for different reasons as well.

According to the Afghan Ministry of Information and Culture, there are 203 TV channels, 366 Radio channels, 72 Newspapers, 354 Weekly Newspapers, 344 Magazines and 73 News Agencies are registered with this ministry. These media have had a lot of role in providing news, public awareness, monitoring the governmental affairs, analyzing and evaluating the country situation, providing entertainments programs and etc. till now that is considered as an important achievement for democracy in Afghanistan.

On the hand, the media, however, has developed when it comes to quantity, but it still has a lot of problems when it comes to quality, professionalism and impartiality. If we examine the media and its real freedom in current situation, we will conclude that the media has not performed its honest responsibility and mission well; neither it took care of media ethics nor respected the religious and cultural boundaries.

Barriers toward Media

Security Threats; a big challenge toward media workers and journalists in Afghanistan is lack of their safety. Journalists, who often go to the areas of severe and conflicting situations, in order to illustrate the facts of the incidents, often, pay the price by their death.

According to the 1396 report of Nai-Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan, the violence against journalists became increased by 51% in 1396 in compare to 1395. This organization has registered 166 cases of violence against women which include 19 cases of murder, 41 cases of wounded, 23 cases of beating, 16 cases of imprisonment and 67 cases of threatening.⁹

Lack of Access to Information; according to the Article 50 of the Afghan Constitution and Article 5 of the Afghan Mass Media Law, access to information is the right of every Afghan; however, this article of the Constitution is, unfortunately, suppressed by the government itself, the anti-government elements (AGEs) and strongmen which have created a big barriers for the media in order to reach the truths.

Lack of Impartiality; another big barrier is dependence of media on different parties in Afghanistan. Nowadays, most of the media is dependent either on a political party, person or movement inside the country or on a country, person or someone's commercial and financial goals outside the country. Also, the increased number of media in last 17 years shows that a lot of media backed by different countries, parties and persons for different reasons came to ground and started to operate. Therefore, most of them cannot stay stuck to its main mission as a media and so, they cannot be called by impartial.

Vulgar Programs; another barrier toward Afghan media that has prevented it from its main mission is broadcasting of vulgar programs that are considered against the Islamic Sharia and Afghan Culture and Tradition; however, the media, as a result of financial support of foreign parties or its own financial benefits, is obligated to do so. These programs have had a great role in promotion and effectiveness of alien and importing culture.

⁹ See online: <https://pa.azadiradio.com/a/29138220.html>

Why Media and its Employees are Targeted?

The latest attacks on journalists in Kabul, Kandahar and Khost became strongly condemned by Presidential Office, Chief Executive's Office, Wolesi Jirga, Media Organization and several other political parties and personalities inside the country and by Amnesty International, NATO and UN outside the country and called them as War Crimes. Overall, journalists and media workers are targets of the on-going insecurity in the country; however, the questions is what are the reasons behind direct targeting of media workers and media activists?

First; the government, however, has always considered the freedom of speech and media as one of its biggest achievement, but has not fulfilled its legal responsibility and obligation well when it comes to safety of media workers and has failed in this field.

Second; as media plays important role in public awareness and information promotion, so it is targeted by armed opposition, strongmen, Mafia and spy circles for sharing information with people about their actions and activities.

Third; free media should take care of impartiality in its news and other programs. But, unfortunately, a lot of media do not take care of this principle in Afghanistan; most of the time they take a side and broadcast news based on second-hand or baseless information and this reason also has had a lot of role in increase of violence and threats against them.

The End

Contact Us:

Email: info@csrskabul.com - csrskabul@gmail.com

Website: www.csrskabul.com - www.csrskabul.net

Office: (+93) 202564049 - (+93) 784089590



Chief Researcher: **Hekmatullah Zaland**

Researcher and Editor of Weekly Analysis: **Zia-ul-Islam Shirani**

Researcher and Distributor of Weekly Analysis: **Ahmad Shah Rashed**

Translated into English by **Abdullah Jawed**