

Will widening Taliban Offensive target a major Afghan City?

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With international focus on the fall of one city – Ramadi in Iraq – to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, the possible fall of a major city to the Taliban in another insurgency-wracked country is barely registering on the global agenda.

Yet such an event could happen in Afghanistan, despite 14 years of the presence of US and Nato forces and the Afghan army being a much better fighting force than the Iraqi army has recently demonstrated itself to be.

Unnoticed, Afghanistan is going through its worst political and military crisis since 2001. Unless the international community shows greater interest and support in bolstering the government's fighting and peacemaking capabilities, an important city and considerably more of the country's territory could fall to Taliban militants before the autumn. The traditional Taliban summer offensive has turned out to be the most lethal ever. Militants have launched attacks or large-scale offensives in 26 out of 34 provinces, according to the Afghan Ministry of Defence. While previously Taliban offensives were limited to their traditional areas of support in the south and east along the Pakistan border, this year the heaviest fighting has been in the northern provinces bordering Central Asia and the western provinces close to the Iranian border. "The enemy is fighting in almost every province," [General Sher Mohammad Karimi](#), the Afghan army chief of staff, told the press recently.

Meanwhile, lethal suicide bombings take place two or three times a week in Kabul, killing foreign aid workers, diplomats and Afghans. On May 14, the Taliban attacked a popular hotel in the centre of the capital, killing 14 guests including nine foreigners.

The Taliban seem to be adopting new tactics from the playbook of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant – also known as Isis – such as launching multiple attacks in opposite directions, laying siege to cities then retreating when coming under pressure, popping up suddenly in another region and publicly executing captured Afghan soldiers. The Afghan army is having a tough time keeping up with the insurgents' movements due to a lack of mobility, equipment, ammunition, air power and training.

There is also a political crisis in Kabul, with support for President Ashraf Ghani plummeting amid [growing criticism](#) of him by members of parliament. On Thursday, Mr Ghani appointed a new defence minister, Masoom Stanekzai, but some nine months after he came to power many cabinet positions and key appointments in the provinces remain unfilled, which has led to further attacks on his governing style. The [national unity government](#) with Mr Ghani's partner, Abdullah Abdullah, is not going well.

Mr Ghani is banking on a complete change of heart by Pakistan, which has traditionally backed the Taliban but is now expressing a desire for greater co-operation with Kabul. The intelligence agencies of the two countries, which have been at loggerheads for decades, signed an unprecedented agreement recently to co-operate on counter-terrorism operations.

However, Mr Ghani's overtures to Pakistan have sparked a crisis in Kabul, with many politicians accusing him of selling out the country's interests to Islamabad. They include Hamid Karzai, chairman of the Senate and former president, who asked for [immediate nullification of the agreement](#), his office said on 21 May.

Mr Ghani is frustrated, according to Afghan officials, because Pakistan had promised last year to deliver the Taliban for peace talks with Kabul. So far, nothing has happened, and Pakistan says it does not have unequivocal control over the Taliban. A senior Pakistani official disputed Afghan officials' hopes, telling me Pakistan had only promised that it would try to "nudge" the Taliban, not deliver them for talks.

The semantics of who is right or wrong is not as important as the rapidly deteriorating military situation on the ground. Even though there are still 13,000 US and Nato troops training the Afghan army, there are chronic shortages that only the west can remedy.

There is no coherent Afghan air force capable of backing its ground forces, evacuating the wounded or delivering supplies to beleaguered garrisons. The west should commit aircraft, helicopters and their crew to the government, at least for this summer, and speed up the process of creating an Afghan air force.

There should be greater international pressure in support of peace talks. Pakistan has to be firmer with the Taliban and push them into talks with Kabul, while restricting Taliban access to supplies from Pakistan. The Taliban summer offensive has months to run and the lack of concern, actions or policies in western capitals as to how to prevent another debacle in Afghanistan is a matter of concern.

Some say the Taliban will eventually come to the table, but only after capturing a city or two. For a weakened government, that would be a disastrous start to any negotiations.

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