

A shaky holding operation in Afghanistan

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Afghanistan is in the grip of chaos caused not only by the advance of the Taliban and its foreign terrorist allies during their summer offensive but also by a leadership crisis in Kabul that has permeated down to the regular and irregular armed forces deployed by the government, widened the country's ethnic and political divide and helped worsen the economic meltdown.

The season has seen a dire security situation – yet the US seems reluctant to admit how bad it has become. At least [two provincial capitals](#) – Lashkargah, the capital of Helmand province in the south, and Kunduz, the capital of a province with the same name in the north – are besieged by the Taliban, who have shut down all roads into the two cities.

Three members of the [US Special Forces have been killed in Helmand](#) and 100 have been deployed to help Afghan forces coordinate the defence of Lashkargah. There is heavy fighting in the east of the country, where at the end of August the Taliban opened a new front in Paktia province after capturing key districts on the border with Pakistan.

At best, western and Afghan forces are conducting a holding operation that has so far – but only just – prevented the fall of a major city to the Taliban. That is largely due to the US, which has stepped-up air strikes on Taliban units.

But conditions in urban areas are getting worse. The Haqqani network – the Taliban's most vicious force – was probably responsible (although no group has claimed responsibility) for the 10-hour audacious [attack on the American University](#) in the capital Kabul on August 25 that killed 16 people, including eight students, and wounded 53.

The militant group Isis has also made a deadly appearance, carrying out its worst urban attack in the country. On July 23 in Kabul a suicide bomber from the group killed 84 people and wounded 230 – mostly members of the Hazara ethnic group, a Shia minority.

The recent attacks point to the fact that both Isis and the Taliban, which are bitter rivals, now have highly active cells in the capital. Indeed, so confident are the Taliban that on August 30 they appointed a [new military chief, Mullah Ibrahim Sadar](#) – a close ally of the [deceased Taliban founder Mullah Mohammed Omar](#) – even as they take more ground and reject all peace talks.

Kabul's relations with Pakistan, which continues to host the Taliban leadership, are at their worst, with the Afghan president Ashraf Ghani reportedly saying that the university attack was "[organised and orchestrated](#)" from Pakistan. Islamabad denies the charge but is snubbing both the US and Afghanistan for seeking helicopters and arms from its resented neighbour India to boost the Afghan forces.

A major problem has also emanated from Kabul itself. Mr Ghani and his coalition partner, chief executive Abdullah Abdullah, have long been at loggerheads – until recently they had not met for three months.

Afghan journalists and officials tell me that decision making in the government's paralysed, especially on making key appointments, and there is no agreement on a political and security strategy. Whatever one leader suggests, the other refuses to accept. This has widened the ethnic divide, with Mr Ghani trying to appoint his fellow Pashtuns and Mr Abdullah doing the same with the Tajiks and other minority groups.

One political faction has gathered around Mr Abdullah and is trying to force him to leave the government unless Mr Ghani carries out the electoral and political reforms that he had promised two years ago.

Another faction, of mostly Pashtun from the south, has gathered around the former president Hamid Karzai and are demanding that Mr Ghani step down unless he holds a Loya Jirga – a tribal gathering – to reconstruct the government. In the original deal this was promised by a September deadline and they say that only it can help rebuild national unity, while aides to the president say it will merely worsen the political tensions.

This strife means that the administrative hierarchy is polarised. Mr Ghani's attempts to rein in corruption have themselves weakened the administration as he sacks corrupt officials – but then is unable to replace them.

There are deep divisions also in the military. In the provinces none of the separate military units of the army, special forces, police, regional and village militias and local warlords – all ostensibly on the side of the government – are prepared to co-operate or accept a single leader to resist the Taliban. Meanwhile, the army has to contend with poor logistics and desertions – some recent Taliban successes have been due to soldiers running out of ammunition or food and water.

With such a loss of central control in the provinces and no clear chain of command, poverty, corruption and the drugs trade have thrived amid an ever growing economic crisis that has seen tens of thousands of Afghans trying to reach Europe.

The US reluctance to acknowledge how bad the security situation has become stems partly from a wish to ensure that the fragile alliance between Mr Ghani and Mr Abdullah does not collapse. Afghans say only the Americans are holding the system together.

The successes of the Taliban are sucking in other regional extremist groups. Nato officials told me recently that among the groups fighting alongside the Taliban are central Asians, Chechens, Chinese Uighurs, Arabs affiliated with al-Qaeda and both Pashtuns and Punjabis from Pakistan. They use Afghanistan as a base from which to attack their respective homelands.

The Islamist extremists spilling out of Afghanistan and Pakistan cannot be contained until there is a greater international commitment to ending the war. It is not a question of more foreign troops but more international pressure on the Afghan factions to heal their rifts and on neighbours such as Pakistan and Iran which continue to host some Taliban groups.

The US administration appears unwilling to make further commitments before the presidential elections in November. It is to be hoped that Afghanistan does not implode in the meantime.