

Profiles

These profiles are not intended as an exhaustive list but rather reference material on a selection of political actors and government institutions.

Key institutions

The first government after the US-led invasion was the **Afghan Interim Authority** agreed at the Bonn Conference in December 2001. Although led by an ethnic Pashtun, Hamid Karzai, it was largely dominated by ethnic Tajiks of the Northern Alliance (or United Front), a front of mainly ethnic Tajiks and Hazaras that had formed the main resistance to Taliban rule. The aim of the July 2002 Loya Jirga was to correct this and balance demands. However, many in Pashtun areas felt marginalised.

The Interim Authority was replaced by the **Transitional Authority**, of which Karzai was elected president by the Loya Jirga. Karzai later won national elections for the presidency in 2004 and 2009.

After the 2014 presidential elections, a **National Unity Government** was formed after a US-brokered deal between the disputed winner Ashraf Ghani, who was named president, and his opponent Abdullah Abdullah, given the new post of chief executive.

The commission responsible for administering and supervising elections, the **Independent Election Commission** has been embroiled in controversy as a result of Afghanistan's consistently disputed elections. Since 2014 the government has increasingly looked towards the **Special Electoral Reform Commission**. The reform process SERC was meant to lead has been severely hindered, however, and few changes have been made to the electoral system.

The **Afghan National Security Forces** comprise the army and air force, the national and local police, and the intelligence agency, the National Directorate of Security. The Afghan National Army (ANA) was formed in 2003 from various militias that had fought the Taliban. Much of its training has been provided by NATO and ISAF. It currently has around 175,000 soldiers. Since 2001 international actors have been heavily involved in training the Afghan National Police.

The **Afghan High Peace Council** (HPC) was formed in 2010 to initiate peace talks with the Taliban. Comprising 70 members, Burhanuddin Rabbani was appointed to lead it. He was assassinated by suicide bombers in September 2011. The current head is **Abdul Karim Khalili**, who was a Vice-President under Karzai and leader of the Hizb-i Wahdat, a mainly Hazara and Shia group formed in 1989. The Taliban, which seeks talks with US rather than the Afghan government, has portrayed the HPC as an organ of foreign forces.

Political parties and armed groups

Many of today's political parties were once armed groups and military factions, notably the main *mujahidin* groups (the 'Peshawar Seven' and 'Tehran Eight'), who built on their clearly identified leaders and local legitimacy to become parties. As institutions, however, Afghan parties have relatively limited political traction, with many electoral candidates not declaring a party allegiance at all.

Jamiat-e Islami

The oldest Muslim party in Afghanistan is Jamiat-e Islami, formed in the 1960s. Many members are ethnic Tajiks from the north or west. It was led from 1968 to 2011 by Burhanuddin Rabbani and it became one of the most significant groups in the *mujahidin*. After the fall of the communist government, civil war broke out as Jamiat fought Hezb-i Islami, Hezb-i Wahdat, and Abdul Rashid Dostum's Junbish. It retained control of Kabul despite heavy bombardment but was eventually driven from Kabul in 1996 by the Taliban, and subsequently fought the Taliban as part of the Northern Alliance.

Hezb-i Islami

Formed by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar in 1976 as a breakaway from the more moderate Jamiat, Hezb-i Islami is overwhelmingly Ghilzai Pashtun. It split in two in 1979: Mulavi Younas Khalis forming his own faction (Hezb-i Islami Khalis), with Gulbuddin's faction sometimes known as Hezb-i Islami-ye Gulbuddin (HIG). Both factions formed part of the Peshawar Seven. Hezb-i became one of the *mujahidin* groups most favoured by CIA in the 1980s and HIG received support from Pakistan and for a time from the Saudis. Heavily involved in the civil war of the 1990s, it lost crucial Pakistani support as the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) turned to the Taliban to restore order. Many Hezb-i fighters also joined the Taliban or al-Qaeda. After the US-led invasion of 2001, Hekmatyar aligned his group with the Taliban and carried out attacks against coalition forces. In 2016 the group signed a deal with the government that ended its insurgency in exchange for recognition and the lifting of international sanctions on Hekmatyar.

Itihad-i Islami

Itihad-i Islami ('Islamic Union'), was another Pashtun *mujahidin* group that formed part of the Peshawar Seven. Founded in the early 1980s by Abdur Rabb Rasul Sayyaf, it received some support from Saudis. It converted to a political party, the Islamic Dawah Organisation of Afghanistan, in 2005.

The Taliban

The Taliban, from the Pashto word for 'students', emerged in 1994 as a small band of fighters led by Mullah Mohammed Omar. The group attracted largely young men from Pashtun southern and eastern areas educated in madrasas in Pakistan. Responding to the chaos of the civil war era, the Taliban's leaders wanted to re-establish shari'a law in Afghanistan. Opinions vary as to the extent of the role of Pakistan's ISI in the Taliban's emergence, but its support helped the Taliban grow rapidly in military strength. The Taliban effectively seized control of the country when it took Kabul in September 1996, and for several years continued to fight the Northern Alliance with Pakistani support.

Taliban rule reflected its hard-line interpretation of Islam and its government was treated as a pariah by most countries. International ire focused on its record of brutal punishments, include stoning and amputations, its hosting al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, which drew a range of US and UN sanctions, and its demolition of an ancient heritage site, the Bamiyan Buddhas.

The Taliban collapsed within weeks in the face of the US invasion in 2001, with some of its leaders fleeing to Pakistan, especially the city of Quetta, where they formed the **Quetta Shura**, a council of leaders of the Afghan Taliban. There are nebulous links between the Quetta Shura, the various networks of Afghan Taliban, and the separate Pakistani Taliban (Tehrik-i Taliban).

The Afghan Taliban began to re-emerge as an insurgent force in the years after 2001. Taliban influence gradually spread from its base in the south-east close to Pakistan's borders to the central and eastern provinces. Northern Taliban networks grew from around 2008 as the Taliban sought to expand and appointed more non-Pashtuns into positions of power.

After the announcement in 2015 of the death two years previously of Mullah Omar and the succession of Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour, longstanding differences between Taliban networks began to reveal cracks in the movement. In late 2015 Mullah Mohammed Rasool formed a splinter group, the High Council of the Afghanistan Islamic Emirate, and allied with some other Taliban factions against Mansour's main group. Mansour's group consolidated its control though some factional fighting has continued in places since. Mawlawi Hibatullah Akhundzada assumed leadership after Mansour was killed by a US drone strike in May 2016.

The main Taliban demand has been the departure of all foreign troops. It has offered to engage in talks with the US but not the Afghan government. A 'political office' was opened in Doha in 2013. Though it later closed, it has carried on working unofficially.

Haqqani network

One of CIA's favoured groups in the anti-Soviet fighting of the 1980s, the Haqqani network became closely affiliated with Taliban after the newer group took Kabul in 1996. After the Taliban's fall, the Haqqani leaders fled to the Pakistan border regions and remain based in North

Warizistan. It is known as one of the most feared insurgent groups and was among the first to systematically use suicide bombers.

The network has also been closely intertwined with al-Qaeda, and Jalaluddin was the first to bring Osama bin Laden to Afghanistan. Pakistan's ISI has long been accused of links to the network but Pakistan officially banned the group in 2015 as part of its anti-terrorist National Action Plan. It has been on the US list of foreign terrorist organisations since 2012.

The group is led by the Haqqani family: until around 2014 by Jalaluddin Haqqani and since then by his son Sirajuddin. Both have been members of the Taliban's council, the Quetta Shura, and Sirajuddin is a deputy leader of the Taliban. The Taliban have in the past denied the group is distinct.

The US reportedly reached out to explore their willingness to negotiate in 2011: there was a meeting between a US official and Ibrahim Haqqani, Jalaluddin's brother, brokered by the ISI, but it did not yield results.

Al-Qaeda

A Salafist jihadist network founded in the late 1980s by Osama bin Laden, a Saudi who fought with the *mujahidin* against the Soviets. Returning to Saudi Arabia after the war, bin Laden clashed with the Saudi regime over the presence of US troops in the country and was forced into exile in Sudan, where he set up training bases and advocated attacks on the US and its allies. Expelled from Sudan in 1996, he returned to Afghanistan, working closely with the Taliban in its campaign to control the country. Unlike the Taliban, however, al-Qaeda's focus was global jihad and it was responsible for the bomb attacks on US embassies in East Africa in 1998, the bombing of a USS Cole in 2000, and the attack on the United States of 11 September 2001. The Taliban's refusal to hand over bin Laden in the wake of this event prompted the US-led invasion of 2001. Al-Qaeda camps were destroyed but the organisation persisted – less as a coherent group but a vast network of insurgent groups in many parts of the world. Bin Laden was assassinated by US special forces in Pakistan in 2011, replaced as leader by Egyptian Ayman al-Zawahiri. Al-Qaeda has sustained a small but significant presence in Afghanistan, surviving through close links to other militant networks.

Islamic State

IS, or the more derogatory Arabic acronym Daesh, is a Salafi jihadist group that emerged as an al-Qaeda-aligned group in Iraq and gained global prominence for the rapid military gains it made in Iraq and Syria from around 2014. Around the same time there were the first signs its black flag in some areas of Afghanistan, though this represented less an expansion from Syria than appeals from jihadist splinters in Afghanistan, especially among some militants settled in Nangarhar associated with the Tehrik-i-Taliban. In January 2015, the main IS body in Raqqa acknowledged this by announcing expansion into 'Khorasan', an old geographical term it uses to describe an amalgamation of regions in modern-day Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan, without recognising those nation states, and the term Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK) emerged.

The rise of ISK is a direct challenge to the Taliban's monopoly on jihadist insurgency. ISK profited initially from splits in the Taliban and more especially the TTP. Many of ISK's early affiliates were eliminated as the Taliban sought to suppress it, but it did succeed in taking control of a large part of Nangarhar province. The Taliban has publicly warned IS against extremism and splitting the *mujahidin*. The US has attempted to 'decapitate' the group through drone strikes against its leaders, a number of whom have died, but ISK has established itself through significant urban terrorist attacks such as a suicide attack in July 2016 that killed 80 people in Kabul. Perhaps more significant than its insurgent capability is its anti-Shia sectarianism and the danger that it introduces the sort of Sunni-Shia conflict seen in parts of the Arab world and Pakistan, although this generally has little public traction in Afghanistan.

Tehrik-i-Taliban

The Tehrik-i-Taliban (TTP) is an umbrella organisation for militant groups in Pakistan's north-western tribal areas on the border with Afghanistan. Though predominantly Pashtun and opposed to international forces in Afghanistan, it is not formally connected with the Afghan Taliban and is mainly concerned with fighting the state in Pakistan. It has become increasingly fragmented in recent years.

International

Pakistan

Pakistan has had intimate and difficult relations with Afghanistan since the former's creation in 1947, driven partly by border disputes, which persist today, and partly by fears around Afghanistan's close relationship with India. Pakistan has hosted many Afghans in its religious seminaries and madrasses and has supported various insurgent groups over the decades, most notably since its Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) heavily became involved in Afghanistan since the 1970s. Along with the US, Pakistan provided support and safe havens to the *mujahidin* in their conflict with the Soviet occupiers. Pakistan continued to support the *mujahidin* after 1988's Geneva accords, despite the agreement's stated aim of promoting non-interference. When the *mujahidin* factions began fighting each other in the early 1990s Pakistan supported Hekmatyar and Dostum against the Rabbani government. Later it focused its support on the Afghan Taliban, which and supported it with funding, training, diplomatic assistance, becoming one of only three countries to recognise the legitimacy of Taliban rule after 1996. After the '9/11' attacks on the US, Pakistan claimed to have stopped support for the Taliban and put its weight behind the Bonn process, but it is widely believed to have continued to provide refuge and assistance to the Taliban, the Haqqani network and al-Qaeda. The Afghan government has repeatedly claimed that the major need for peace is not between Kabul and the Taliban, but Kabul and Islamabad, with President Ghani claiming that Pakistan has effectively waged war on Afghanistan since 2001. Pakistan's relations with the Taliban have been strained at times and the Taliban has resisted Pakistan's attempts in recent years to assume a mediation role. Pakistan's goal is thought to now be less a Taliban government than one that eventually includes the Taliban as a counterweight to Indian influence.

Russia

Afghanistan has been of strategic interest to Russia since at least the 19th century when it engaged in a rivalry with the British Empire for influence in central Asia known as the 'Great Game'. In the 20th century Afghanistan became a factor in the Cold War. Under Mohammed Daud's premiership, Afghanistan wavered between dependence on the Soviet Union and non-alignment. When the socialist regime that toppled Daud in 1978 came under threat, the USSR invaded 1979. In nine-year conflict, an estimated one million civilians were killed and the Soviet Union lost 14,500 troops. Faced with the high human, economic and diplomatic cost of the occupation, the Soviets began looking for an exit strategy. Moreover, under Mikhail Gorbachev, leader from 1985, Soviet foreign policy became less confrontational with the West and China on many fronts, Afghanistan included. Soviet troop withdrawal was announced in 1987 and completed in 1989. It was conducted largely peacefully following ceasefires reached with *mujahidin* commanders, with some exceptions. Moscow continued to support the Najibullah government in Kabul until the collapse of the Soviet Union in late 1991.

With the rise of the Taliban, which had links to Chechen rebels, Russia lent support to the Northern Alliance and has been generally supportive of the Afghan government since the Taliban's fall in 2001. As Russia's relations with the West have deteriorated in the 2010s, Russia has been seen to take a more assertive diplomatic role in Afghanistan. In 2016-17 Russia held talks about the conflict first with Pakistan and China, then with the Afghan government, Iran and India, in which the US declined to participate. In January 2018 Russia offered to host talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban. In April, US officials accused Russia of arming the Taliban. Russia denies this but with the emergence of Islamic State, Russia may see the Taliban as an ally against one of Russia's top enemies in the Syrian conflict.

United States

Afghanistan first became strategically important to the US during the Cold War, as the US tried to sway the Afghans away from Soviet influence with mixed results. US relations with Kabul collapsed after the 1978 Saur revolution and the Soviet invasion of the following year. The US focused its diplomatic efforts on forcing Soviet withdrawal while also channelling funds estimated to amount to \$3 billion to various *mujahidin* opposition groups being supported by the Pakistan intelligence services. After the rise of the Taliban in 1996, US and Pakistani interests diverged sharply. With the Taliban hosting Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda, the US bombed targets in Afghanistan in 1998. Then, following the '9/11' attacks on the US and the Taliban's refusal to hand bin Laden over, President George W. Bush ordered the invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001, which the US led in coalition with the UK and Canada and later more than 40 countries.

The Taliban government collapsed but it would lead a renewed insurgency that steadily gained strength over the remainder of Bush's time in office. The March 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq marked a critical shift in US priorities, which arguably paved the way for a Taliban revival. While handing over the primary security responsibility to the

NATO-led ISAF, US troop levels remained around 30,000 for much of Bush administration.

With the Taliban increasing in strength, President Barack Obama (2009–17) pursued both military victory and talks with the Taliban. By August 2010, 100,000 US troops were on the ground. In June 2011, shortly after US special forces had killed bin Laden, Obama announced a timetable for drawdown with security to be handed to Afghan authorities in 2014. The Obama administration explored the possibility of talks with the Taliban and were supportive of the group's establishment of a political office in Doha. Relations with President Karzai's government, however, were poor. Karzai, angered by the suggestion the US may talk directly to the Taliban, refused to sign a long-term security deal with the US. The agreement was finally signed when President Ghani took power in 2014.

Troop numbers, down to under 10,000 at the end of the Obama administration, have increased again under President Donald Trump, who in 2017 scrapped deadlines for withdrawal.

India

India has been a close ally of Afghan governments except during the Taliban era. Unlike most Asian countries, India recognised the Soviet-backed People's Democratic Republic. After the Taliban's rise, it provided support to the Northern Alliance, and after the Taliban's fall became the largest regional provider of humanitarian and reconstruction support. This closeness was underlined by the strategic agreement of October 2011 to increase security and development cooperation, coming amid Afghanistan's deteriorating relations with Pakistan.

China

In comparison to other regional powers, China has long appeared relatively uninterested in Afghanistan and has exerted little political influence, despite its economic strength and interests in the country, and the role it could potentially play in rebuilding. In recent years it has shown an increased willingness to be involved in political efforts to transition away from war, proposing a peace and reconciliation forum in 2014 and receiving a visit from the Taliban political office the same year.

Iran

With deep historical ties, in modern times Iran's relations with Afghanistan have been difficult. Iran provided support to the *mujahidin* in the Soviet era and to the Northern Alliance during the Taliban era. Since the Karzai administration, relations have been strained by the Afghan government's closeness to the US. The emergence of Islamic State in Afghanistan with its sectarian agenda has made Iran more amenable to working with the Taliban.

United Kingdom

Britain was closely involved in the emergence of modern Afghanistan through a series of Anglo-Afghan wars between 1839 and 1919 as it sought to consolidate its imperial interests in the subcontinent and counter Russian influence in Central Asia.

In 2001 British troops took part in the US-led invasion before becoming part of the International Security Assistance Force in 2002. British forces moved into Helmand province in 2006 as it came increasingly under renewed Taliban influence. Task Force Helmand was eventually wound up in 2014, ending the UK's combat mission. Some troops remain for training and advice.

UNAMA

Established in March 2002, the United Nations Mission in Afghanistan is 'to support the people and government of Afghanistan in achieving peace and stability, in line with the rights and obligations enshrined in the Afghan constitution'. Its mandate is reviewed annually. **Tadamichi Yamamoto** was appointed as the Secretary-General's Special Representative for Afghanistan and Head of UNAMA in June 2016.

International Security Assistance Force

The UN-mandated international security mission in Afghanistan, 2001–14. It was established in 2001 by UN Security Council Resolution 1386 under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, initially only to secure area around Kabul, with leadership rotating between countries on a six-monthly basis. NATO assumed leadership of the mission in August 2003 and in October 2003 ISAF's mandate was expanded to the whole of Afghanistan. Its presence extended gradually as it took over security responsibilities from the US-led coalition. Its expansion to the north was completed in 2004, and to the west, south and finally the east in 2006.

All NATO countries contributed troops, as well as a number of other countries. NATO's Riga Summit of 2006 saw rising tensions over NATO's role in Afghanistan. Some countries insisted on restrictions on how their troops could be deployed ('national caveats'), some of which they relented on, although many continued to refuse to have their troops deployed in the more dangerous southern provinces.

Operation Resolute Support

Operation Resolute Support is the follow-on non-combat mission to ISAF. Its purpose is to provide training and support to Afghan security services and government.

Operation Enduring Freedom

The US Operation Enduring Freedom encompasses US counter-terrorism operations in several countries, but the most notable operation bearing the name is the joint US, UK and Afghan combat mission in Afghanistan starting October 2001. The NATO-led ISAF mission, to which the US also contributed militarily, increasingly took the lead in combat operations from 2006, although US forces continued operations under OEF in several parts of the country. President Barack Obama announced the end of OEF-Afghanistan in December 2014. It was succeeded by Operation Freedom's Sentinel, which continues to build the capacity of the Afghan armed forces and assist the NATO-led Operation Resolute Support.