

AFGHANISTAN THREAT ASSESSMENT: THE TALIBAN AND ISIS

Key Take-away: *Militant forces including Taliban factions and the Islamic State's Afghanistan-Pakistan affiliate, Wilayat Khorasan, control considerable terrain across Afghanistan as of December 2015. Militant control extends beyond historic militant sanctuaries and into numerous district centers, representing partial success at establishing governance. Taliban forces are making unprecedented gains in areas that had been cleared and held during the surge, threatening provincial capitals in northern, southern, and eastern Afghanistan. Wilayat Khorasan has also begun to exert social control in Afghanistan, specifically in Nangarhar province, but this control has not yet extended to district centers. The ANSF lack the higher headquarters and mobility functions to conduct simultaneous or sequential campaigns to counter geographically dispersed threats. NATO lacks the force structure and authority to close this gap even with the enduring presence of 9,800 U.S. troops in 2016¹. Violent competition for power among militant groups has increased, particularly as the death of Taliban founder Mullah Omar became known, and is an increasing threat to the Afghan government. The overall threat level in Afghanistan is sharply on the rise without sufficient mitigation.*

Taliban elements possess extensive control over terrain throughout the Afghanistan in 2015². Taliban control exists largely outside of provincial capitals and district centers, where state governance functions are performed and where ANSF are concentrated. Taliban militants have long contested political control in Afghanistan by attacking district centers from these remote strongholds. Taliban attacks against district centers in 2015 demonstrated the intent to control district centers permanently and to deny them to the government of Afghanistan, distinguishing them from hasty attacks on government compounds typical of past years. In some cases provincial capitals like Kunduz City have also come under duress, a new phenomenon in 2015 that signals an escalation in the capability and intent of Taliban forces relative to the ANSF. Districts across Afghanistan have been targeted since April 2015 in what may be considered a national level campaign by the leading Taliban faction led by Mullah Akhtar Mansour, the de facto head of the Taliban. The campaign intensified in August 2015, likely because Akhtar Mansour desired to consolidate power over dissident Taliban factions after the announcement of Mullah Omar's death in July 2015. The status of the district centers that have come under attack in 2015 are illustrated on the map below. District centers and provincial capitals do not represent the full extent of Taliban control in Afghanistan; rather, they represent the frontline of Taliban offensives against the Afghan

government, which is encroaching far beyond the frontlines that existed previously.

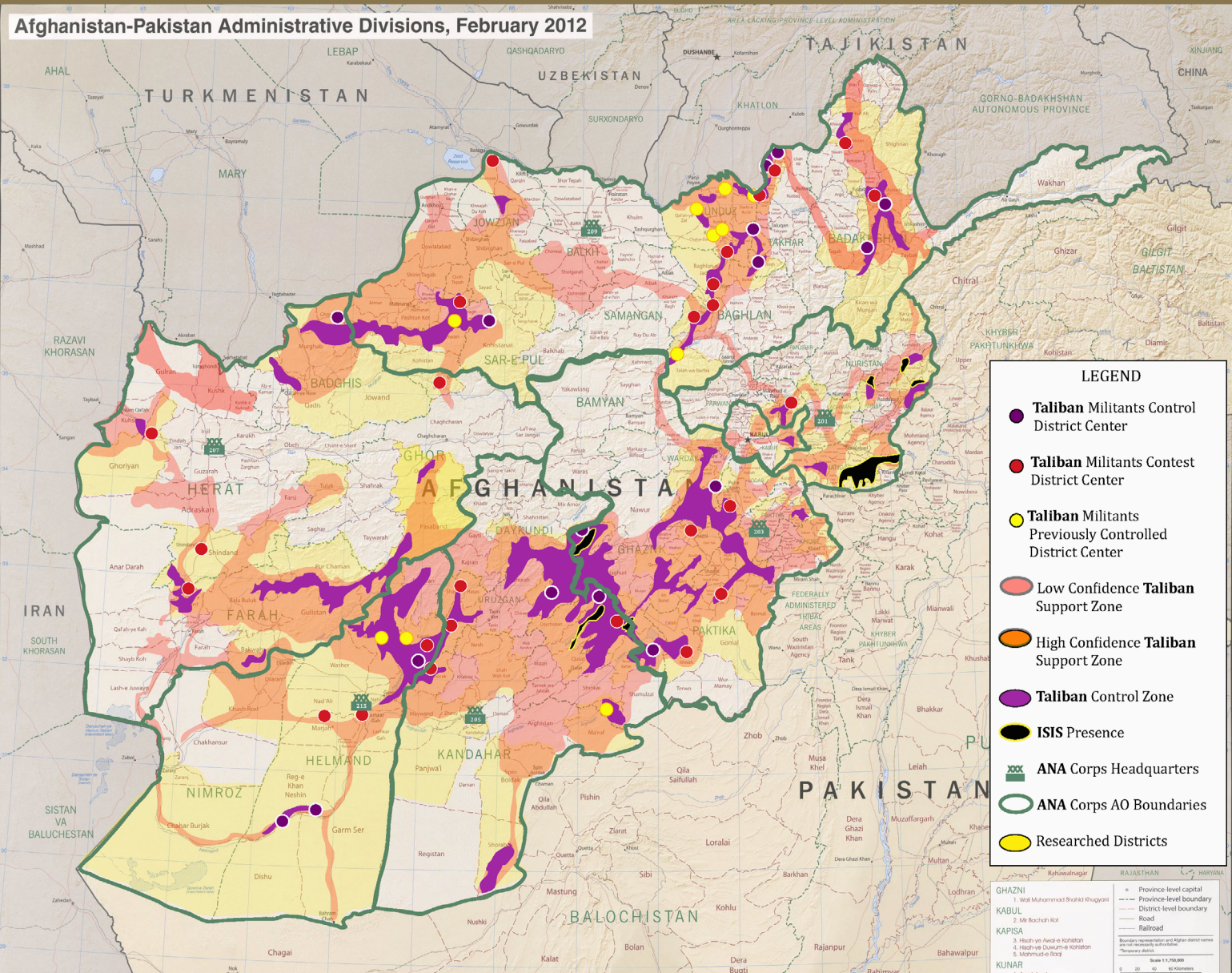
METHODOLOGY

The map below estimates the support zones and control zones of Taliban militants in Afghanistan as of December 10, 2015. It juxtaposes this estimate with the precise locations of the district centers and provincial capitals that Taliban forces have attacked in 2015 with the intent to seize control of them. The areas in Afghanistan where ISIS's Afghanistan-Pakistan affiliate, Wilayat Khorasan, is present are also represented on the map in locations where ISIS's presence constitutes a genuine contest against Taliban elements for control of traditional Taliban strongholds. ISIS is particularly active in eastern Nangarhar province,³ where the ANSF with the support of Coalition Forces has been conducting targeting and clearing operations since early November 2015.⁴ The threat estimate is represented in the context of the operational boundaries of the six Afghan National Army Corps in order to show the geographic breadth of the threat as well as its placement within and between Corps operating areas. Most open-source reporting on the status and disposition of militant groups in Afghanistan is reported at the district level. ISW examined all district centers mentioned in reporting in 2015 as well as all recorded Taliban activity reported from July 2015 to December 2015. ISW performed historic searches on



AFGHANISTAN PARTIAL THREAT ASSESSMENT AS OF 10 DECEMBER 2015

Afghanistan-Pakistan Administrative Divisions, February 2012



This map partially depicts areas of Taliban control and support and ISIS presence across Afghanistan as of December 10, 2015 as well as the status of district centers that have been attacked by Taliban militants in 2015. Some support zones depicted on the map exceed the bounds of the districts explicitly researched as part of this project. These low-confidence support zone assessments are based upon historical, terrain, and demographic analysis. High-confidence support zones are depicted in districts that were fully researched as part of this project. ISW analysts have assessed conditions in 200 of 409 districts. Taliban militants captured the district center of Reg-e Khan Neshin district, Helmand province on December 9 after prolonged clashes with police and ANSF, the last district center capture portrayed on this map. Taliban militants loyal to Mullah Akhtar Mansour attacked the joint U.S.-Afghan Kandahar Airfield near Kandahar City on December 8. This attack is not represented on the map because it does not constitute an attempt by Taliban militants to control a district center. ISW will update this map as ground conditions change and as analysts continue to assess support zones.

these districts and conducted fresh searches on other districts known to witness significant militant activity in the past. In all, ISW considered contemporary ground conditions in 200 of 409 districts across Afghanistan in order to arrive at this partial threat assessment. All district centers that Taliban militants have attempted to control in 2015 are represented on this map. Taliban control zones and support zones throughout the country may, however, be under-represented. The threat in Herat province, for example, is likely greater than that which the map currently depicts. Districts that were explicitly researched are represented on the map in order to show research gaps. ISW refined estimates within districts for Taliban control zones and support zones by considering population density,⁵ demographics,⁶ ANSF fixed positions, transit routes, and historic support and control zones.

DEFINITIONS

Support zone

A support zone is an area “free of significant enemy action” which permits “the effective logistics and administrative support of forces.”⁷ Support zones on this map are assessed on the basis of whether militants can operate and move freely in the district regardless of ANSF presence in order to support attacks and the establishment of control in other districts. Places where militants historically have popular support in the district are also considered support zones.⁸

Control zone

Control is defined by “physical or psychological pressure to assure that individuals or groups within the area respond as directed.”⁹ Control also requires a military commander “to maintain physical influence over a specified area to prevent its use by an enemy.” A control zone therefore refers to an area where an actor maintains capacity to repel opposing forces and govern or compel the behavior of the local population. Evidence of Taliban control includes a withdrawal of ANSF from an area, the administration of alternate governance by Taliban forces within an area, and claims by Afghan officials that Taliban forces control an area. Combat actions to defend against the ANSF are also indicators of militant control.

Attack zone

An attack zone is an area where a unit conducts “offensive maneuver.” Taliban attack zones are assessed¹⁰ on the basis of whether attacks indicate the intent to move forward against a position in which the ANSF is the dominant

force. Attack zones are different from areas where Taliban militants conduct attacks in order to defend their own dominant positions. District centers under government control that fall within contiguous Taliban control zones are not considered to be attack zones, but rather targets for consolidation by militants.

Attack zones are not independently rendered on this map. They include the frontlines that have pushed forward into areas that had previously been secured during the surge of international forces in 2010-2011, including Lashkar Gah, Kandahar City, Kunduz City, Jalalabad, and Kabul.

Sanctuary

Sanctuary is defined by the ability of a force to use terrain to deny the technological overmatch of a stronger enemy force.¹¹ The Abbottabad documents revealed particular interest by core al-Qaeda leaders in four provinces in Afghanistan. These provinces, which Osama bin Laden referenced as “fortified” by mountains, include Zabul, Ghazni, Kunar, and Nuristan.¹² A range of militant groups achieve sanctuary from enemy forces in Afghanistan and Pakistan from these positions. Militant sanctuaries are not explicitly rendered on this map. They align with the Taliban control zones depicted in Zabul, Ghazni, Kunar, and Nuristan.

Key Findings:

Taliban control zones. Taliban militants have established social and military control in several zones that stretch across Afghanistan. Zabul and Kunar constitute enduring militant sanctuaries. Taliban attacks in these zones reflect either defensive measures or intent to consolidate contiguous area control. Taliban activity in other regions, especially offensives targeting provincial capitals in southern, eastern, and northern Afghanistan, constitutes the primary frontline against the Afghan state.

Greater Kandahar. Greater Kandahar (Loy’ Kandahar), comprised of Zabul, Kandahar, Helmand, Uruzgan provinces, constitutes a coherent human and economic system primarily of Durrani Pashtuns.¹³ This region also corresponds with the operating areas of the 205th and 215th ANA Corps. Kandahar is its pre-eminent city and the locale in which Mullah Omar’s Taliban emerged in the 1990s. Kandahar is nevertheless generally more secure than its neighboring provinces as of December 2015 under police chief Lt. Gen. Abdul Raziq.

Multiple militant groups have support zones in Zabul and its eastern neighbor, Ghazni. It is not surprising. Osama bin Laden referred to Zabul and Ghazni as a desirable sanctuary for al-Qaeda even after 2001 because of its highland fortifications.¹⁴ Factions in Zabul loyal to Mullah Akhtar Mansour, the primary successor to Mullah Omar, have contested his rivals for power, including Mullah Rassoul Akhund who is supported by ISIS elements formerly from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). Taliban dissident commander, Mullah Mansour Dadullah, aligned with Mullah Akhund, died in the fighting in Khak-e Afghan, Zabul on November 12, 2015.¹⁵ Khak-e Afghan has since become an ISIS stronghold according to one report,¹⁶ demonstrating how reverberations within Taliban strongholds can produce opportunities for ISIS. Militant infighting in this region will likely increase with new reports that Mullah Akhtar Mansour has himself been injured as of December 2, 2015.¹⁷

Taliban militants likely exercise de facto control in the vicinity of Tarin Kowt, the provincial capital of Uruzgan since the death of its provincial police chief and primary powerbroker, Matiullah Khan in March 2015.¹⁸ Taliban have also been contesting areas in Helmand, which international forces, including U.S. Marines and British troops, had cleared over the surge in 2010-2012. Taliban militants in this zone are responsible for the offensive against Lashkar Gah, the capital of Helmand province in November 2015. ANSF reported gains in Lashkar Gah as of November 3, 2015,¹⁹ but the threat remains as of December 9, 2015. Taliban militants also claimed an attack on the Kandahar airfield on December 8, 2015, demonstrating the increased momentum of local Taliban forces.²⁰ Taliban control zones and support zones extend from Helmand into neighboring Farah, Nimruz, and Ghor provinces, likely reflecting transit routes granting cross-border access through the Baluch areas of Iran and Pakistan.

Herat. Taliban activity from Helmand also extends into Herat, Farah, and Baghdis provinces. Herat is ethnically diverse, but several districts, including Shindand, are majority Pashtun. The Herat region as a whole has been under-examined over the course of this research project and constitutes a known gap where Taliban militants have support zones, given the level of Taliban activity near Shindand especially. ISW aims to close this gap with precision in future editions of the map.

North. This area includes the ethnically diverse Jowzjan, Faryab, Sar-I Pul provinces, as well as parts of Badghis. This region primarily rests within the operating area of the

209th ANA Corps based out of Mazar-e Sharif in Balkh. ANSF presence is slim, especially outside of Balkh, and powerbrokers in this region have mobilized significant anti-Taliban militias in 2015. This zone corresponds with the primary sphere of influence of VP Rashid Dostum, who has been coordinating extra-governmental anti-Taliban militia activity from his home province of Jowzjan.²¹

Hazarajat. Afghanistan's ethno-sectarian minority, the Shi'a Hazaras live primarily within Hazarajat, the central plateau comprised of Bamyan, northern and central Day Kundi, northern Ghazni, and eastern Ghor. Taliban control zones in Greater Kandahar about this region. Targeting of Hazaras has increased in 2015, likely due to the emergence of ISIS-affiliated militants in Zabul and Ghazni which are committing attacks for sectarian as well as ethnic reasons. The region itself is not likely to become a control zone for Taliban-affiliated or ISIS-affiliated groups because of its ethnic groups and terrain, and therefore this map project omitted extensive research on the area.

Greater Paktia. Greater Paktia (Loya Paktia) is comprised of Paktia, Paktika and Khost provinces and forms a larger Ghilzai Pashtun tribal region with Logar, Wardak, and part of Ghazni.²² This region largely coincides with the operating area of the 203rd ANA Corps headquartered at Gardez without an embedded NATO Train, Advise, and Assist Command (TAAC). Taliban militants have attacked several district centers in this region, including Ghazni City, a provincial capital. The Haqqani Network operates in this region between the Pakistan border and Kabul, using support zones and transit routes to project attacks against the capital. The Taliban shura that initially selected Mullah Akhtar Mansour as the new leader of the movement in July 2015 also selected Siraj Haqqani as his deputy,²³ an indication of the Haqqani Network's current alignment with Mansour's Taliban faction.

Capital region. The capital region is comprised of Kabul, Parwan, Kapisa, some of the northern-most parts of Logar and Wardak, and the western parts of Laghman and Nangarhar. Kabul itself is secured by the 111th ANA Division, while the provinces north and east of Kabul comprise the operating area of the 201st ANA Corps. Attacks in Kabul increased after the announcement of the death of Mullah Omar on July 31, 2015, including a deadly VBIED attack on NATO convoy on August 22, 2015, a signature attack of the Haqqani Network.²⁴ High threat levels in Kabul persist in December 2015. The U.S. Embassy in Kabul announced an imminent threat of increased attacks in Kabul on November 30, 2015.²⁵

Taliban reportedly claimed ²⁶a VBIED attack in Kabul near the Spanish Embassy on December 11, 2015, an event that is still unfolding as of the publication of this report. ²⁷

Nangarhar. ISIS's Wilayat Khorasan controls populated locations in multiple districts of southern Nangarhar. Several Pakistani Taliban (Tehrik-e-Taliban, or TTP) commanders pledged allegiance to ISIS in October 2014 following a period of leadership disputes and splintering within the TTP. The Pakistani military pushed this ISIS-supportive faction across the border into southern Nangarhar in early 2015. Wilayat Khorasan subsequently clashed with existing Taliban militants in southern Nangarhar, establishing control over multiple villages and implementing ISIS's brutal version of Shari'a law there. ²⁸ The ANSF with coalition forces support is targeting Wilayat Khorasan heavily in southeastern Nangarhar, particularly in Achin district as of December 2015. Wilayat Khorasan is also launching attacks on Jalalabad, ²⁹ possibly including a reported female SVEST attack on the provincial capital on December 11, 2015 that has not yet been claimed by any group. ³⁰ Traditional Taliban presence has concentrated closer to Jalalabad in the districts of Sherzad and Khogyani, and this Taliban system is likely still thriving.

Kunar and Nuristan. This region is mountainous, remote, and contains the Nuristani ethnic minority among other ethnic and linguistic groups. Osama bin Laden recommended this area as a primary sanctuary for al-Qaeda because of its mountainous terrain. Open source reporting on activities in this region in 2015 is sparse, but the information gap likely reflects greater militant presence and control rather than less. This map may therefore under-represent the extent of Taliban or other militant control in this region in 2015. Taliban control zones in remote Badakhshan province likely extend north from this system. This Taliban stronghold also connects to Laghman province and to eastern Nangarhar.

Tajik North. The Tajik areas of northern Afghanistan are broken into three major power centers: Panjshir, Balkh, and Badakhshan. Significant Taliban activity occurred in Badakhshan, Takhar, Kunduz, and Baghlan provinces in late 2015. Militants in this zone and are responsible for the broad urban offensive against Kunduz City and numerous district centers in October 2015. ANSF largely cleared Kunduz in the wake of the northern Taliban offensive that resulted in the seizure of numerous district centers in the province as well as the provincial capital, Kunduz City. ³¹ The ANSF took over two weeks to retake Kunduz City, because the Taliban had established area control and urban defenses and the ANSF had limited capacity to mass and

respond rapidly. The Taliban threat in this area remains high as of December 2015. Research for this project did not closely examine Balkh and Panjshir provinces, which analysts will assess more fully in future editions.

ANSF on the Defensive. Taliban forces are attacking ANSF across Afghanistan in the vicinity of ANSF bases. This attack pattern exacerbates the security vacuum by requiring ANSF to focus upon defense. Taliban forces began attacking the Corps headquarters of the 215th ANA Corps in Lashkar Gah, Helmand on October 20, 2015. ³² Taliban forces also attacked the Corps headquarters of the 205th ANA Corps in Kandahar on December 8, 2015. ³³ Taliban forces and other militants including the Haqqani Network have sustained long term campaigns against additional government and NATO facilities in Kabul. Taliban forces have conducted significant attacks near military positions in Jalalabad, Kunduz City, Qalat, and Ghazni city, Khost in the latter half of 2015. The cumulative effect of these attacks minimizes the ability of ANSF units to conduct counter-offensives and clearing operations. Taliban forces are therefore able to consolidate area control and increasingly extend the frontline toward provincial capitals, primary population centers, and higher-level ANSF headquarters.

NATO's Battlefield Disposition. NATO forces in 2015 are only embedded within four of Afghanistan's six regional Corps headquarters. NATO does not have a Train, Advise, and Assist Command (TAAC) at either the ANA 215th Corps headquarters in Lashkar Gah, Helmand or the ANA 203rd Corps headquarters in Gardez, Paktia. ³⁴ The lack of dedicated NATO support to the 215th Corps correlates with the struggle to keep Taliban frontlines away from the Corps headquarters and the provincial capital in Helmand. Security conditions in eastern Afghanistan also reflect a lack of NATO resources to formerly stable areas. NATO forces assisted the ANSF in the clearing of Taliban militants from Kunduz city and surrounding districts in November 2015, ³⁵ and NATO supported anti-ISIS clearing operations in Nangarhar with airstrikes and Special Operations Forces in early November 2015. ³⁶ Nevertheless, the scale of the threat across Afghanistan exceeds the force size ³⁷ and authorities that the U.S. and NATO are currently implementing in Afghanistan. The NATO Train, Advise, and Assist mission, "Resolute Support" ³⁸ is not postured to close the gap in ANSF capacity, to keep Taliban militants away from provincial capitals in 2015, or to counter the expanding threat of global terrorist groups like ISIS that thrive in ungoverned spaces. Battlefield disposition is one challenge among many that the ANSF as well as

NATO face in the contemporary threat environment.

CONCLUSION

Afghanistan is sitting at the same precipice as Iraq before the fall of Mosul. ANSF are engaged in operations to defend fixed positions with limited ability to clear militants from proximate areas. Afghanistan's unity government faces multiple internal threats, to include irreconcilable regional powerbrokers like Mohammad Noor Atta, who may respond to the ANSF's demonstrated lack of capacity by accelerating Afghanistan's descent back into civil war. Taliban militants are exploiting the ANSF's lack of capacity to weaken the Afghan state, and ISIS is exploiting the vulnerabilities of the Taliban movement in turn. ISIS will recruit disgruntled Taliban members in the midst of internal disputes, which will increase in scope with the death of dissident Taliban commander Mullah Dadullah and the reported injury of Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mansour on December 2, 2015.³⁹ The implications of Mansour's incapacitation or death are far-reaching, as al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri pledged allegiance to Mullah Akhtar Mansour in August 2015.⁴⁰ The contest for control of the Taliban movement, the global jihadist movement, and control of terrain within Afghanistan will accelerate as the stakes increase and the opportunity to challenge the ANSF expands. The threat posed by militant groups extends to Afghanistan's most populated cities, including Kabul, Jalalabad, Kunduz, and Kandahar as of December 2015, heightening the threat of civil war. NATO's Train, Advise, and Assist mission alone will not prevent Afghanistan's most dangerous contingencies in 2016.

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