



Afghanistan Update

A twice-weekly, one-page situation report on the latest developments affecting U.S. policy and engagement in Afghanistan.

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Topic in Focus: Kabul Security

- The Afghan government's policy is to **keep Kabul a relatively 'open city'**, rather than creating a barricaded fortress, as was done in Baghdad, to avoid hurting the economy and cutting off the government from its people.
- No matter how great the security measures that are taken, **the porous nature of Kabul** will allow insurgents to smuggle some weapons and explosives into the city.
- Analysts observe that **capital cities are always vulnerable** - the Irish Republican Army's violent campaign against the British government regularly struck at the heart of London, a far more modern, less chaotic capital than Kabul.
- Recent Taliban attacks on Kabul appear to have been aimed at the **psychological effects** of spreading fear amongst the population, but **have not succeeded in any strategic objectives**, such as capture of government buildings, nor created the impact of a major operation such as Mumbai witnessed in November 2008.

In Quotes:

"The attack on Kabul is something that will undermine the Taliban forces, and do them more harm than good ... Mullah Omar announced a few months ago that the Taliban should avoid civilian casualties to improve their image but yesterday they proved they are desperate, that they will do anything to undermine the government."

Haroun Mir, director of Afghanistan's Centre for Research and Policy Studies, Jan 17.

In Quotes:

"We are ready to fight, and we have the strength to fight, and nobody from the Taliban side is ready to make any kind of deal ... The world community and the international forces are trying to buy the Taliban, and that is why we are showing that we are not for sale." **Zabihullah Mujahid**, Taliban spokesman, Jan 17.

Topic in Focus: The Afghan Cabinet

- The Afghan Cabinet is the **main policy and administrative government body** in Afghanistan.
- The constitution gives the **Lower House of the Afghan National Assembly** – a bicameral legislature – considerable power over Cabinet appointments.
- Cabinet nominees must present themselves to the Lower House (Wolesi Jirga) for **approval by secret ballot**.
- One of the most significant issues remains **balancing the Cabinet's composition** to reflect the ethnic diversity of Afghanistan.
- The complete Afghan Cabinet will consist of 25 Ministers who will head **25 separate government portfolios**.

Kabul Security Key Developments:

- Multiple Taliban attacks on key government targets in Kabul on Jan 17 were longer than any initiated by the Taliban in the capital since they were driven from power by an anti-Taliban Afghan alliance and U.S. Special Forces in 2001.
- The overall casualty toll was relatively low: three members of the Afghan security forces and two civilians were killed, and 71 people, including 35 civilians, were wounded. At least seven militants were killed, and Afghan government forces never lost control of key buildings.
- Analysts observe that the attacks were timed to coincide with President Karzai's swearing in of new cabinet members inside the presidential palace several hundreds of meters away.
- The attacks were also designed as an emphatic rejection of a new plan for reconciliation and reintegration of more moderate insurgents away from the Taliban, ahead of its announcement at a major international conference in London.
- The attackers were repelled almost entirely by Afghan security forces and not by westerners, which will be a major morale-builder for those that are often the target of heavy criticism. Analysts praised the security forces for their rapid reaction that kept the death toll and casualty figures so low.

Afghan Cabinet Key Developments:

- President Karzai's submission to parliament of a second list of cabinet nominees resulted in a further seven confirmed posts on January 16, bringing the total approved so far to 14 out of 25 cabinet positions.
- A third session of voting on cabinet nominees to fill the remaining 11 posts will be held after the parliament returns from its winter recess on February 20.
- Shukria Barakzai, a leading female MP, said members will cut the recess to 33 days from the original 45 because not only must they consider the final cabinet posts, but also debate the national budget when they return.
- Despite the delay, all of the most important portfolios have now been filled, including ministers for the interior, defense, education, agriculture and finance, foreign affairs, and justice.
- The appointment of Zarah Ahmad Moqbel to Minister of Counter-Narcotics has been criticized by some international officials involved in efforts to stamp out Afghanistan's opium industry. As Interior Minister up to 2008, Mr Moqbel was accused of corruption and incompetence.

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