



Timor Sharan

WHAT WENT WRONG: The 2021 Collapse of Afghan National Security Forces



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A little over a year after the precipitous collapse of the Islamic Republic, serious questions remain about the sudden melting away of the Afghan National Security Forces. Yet, while some Western officials have placed the blame squarely on the Afghan state – exonerating the United States and its flawed 2020 exit deal with the Taleban – few have taken a comprehensive look into the swift crumbling of Afghanistan’s security forces. In this report, guest author Timor Sharan* scrutinises the final six months of Afghanistan’s ill-fated Republic and examines the strategies of President Ashraf Ghani and his inner circle and the intentions behind their 11th-hour wholesale reshuffling of the top leadership at the Ministry of Interior and other security institutions. He concludes that the politicisation and ethnicisation of the security forces by President Ghani and his inner circle played a significant role in disrupting the chain of command and weakening morale amongst officers and soldiers. This, he argues, ultimately undermined the security forces’ overall performance and led to their eventual collapse.

Introduction

On 15 August 2021, the Afghan government and large parts of the state, primarily the army and police, came tumbling down like a house of cards.¹ President Ghani's unexpected flight from the capital reportedly derailed a last-minute attempt by American and Afghan peace delegates in Doha to cut a deal with the Taliban to prevent them from taking full military control of the country,² although given the Taliban's overwhelming dominance and the Republic's rapid collapse, it is difficult to see the Taliban actually sharing power.

A day later, US President Joe Biden blamed the Afghan state, its political leaders and security forces for the Taliban's victory: "Afghanistan political leaders gave up and fled the country. The Afghan military collapsed, sometimes without trying to fight," which he said, "reinforced that ending U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan now was the right decision." (See [transcript](#) and [video](#) of President Biden's press conference.)

Many factors contributed to the collapse of the Afghanistan National Security forces (ANSF)³, including widespread corruption, lack of a combat strategy, poor war planning, the withdrawal of US-funded logistics and maintenance contractors and how the US's 'peace' strategy and then its decision to withdraw rapidly, completely and unconditionally had undermined ANSF morale, each of which merits a detailed examination.⁴ This report focuses on the impact of domestic

¹ See for example [this](#) Politico report. The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) is currently looking into the disintegration of the police and army and is likely to publish a comprehensive report.

² According to then US envoy to Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, there was a last-minute attempt between the US, the Taliban and some members of the Afghan negotiating team in Doha to reach a deal for the Taliban not to enter Kabul, possibly resulting in a two-week ceasefire in exchange for Ghani's resignation. However, given the fluid situation on the ground, and with Kabul as the prize, it is doubtful that the Taliban could or would have held to this. Certainly, Khalilzad was quick to sell this as a last attempt to save the Afghan Republic and to blame Ghani for the Republic's collapse – and to absolve himself of responsibility (see, for example, [this](#) Financial Times report).

³ Also known as Afghanistan National Security and Defence Forces (ANSDF).

⁴ See AAN's "[The Taliban's rise to power: As the US prepared for peace, the Taliban prepared for war](#)", which highlights how the US focus on the intra-Afghan talks compelled the ANSF to "take first a defensive and then an 'active defence' stance ... forced to wait passively for the Taliban to attack them and could only watch as the Taliban consolidated territory."

politics. It looks at how the politicisation and ethnicisation of the security sector, in particular its leadership, drove military failure. It probes several major developments in the last six months of the Republic and the role of then President Ghani and his inner circle, as well as other political leaders with a stake in the security forces, in the fall of the Afghan security forces.

The report is structured as follows.

- First, it traces the last-minute and wholesale restructuring of Afghanistan's security institutions along political and ethnic lines, especially changes to the Ministry of Interior's leadership between March and June 2021, which significantly shifted power in favour of Ghani and his inner circle.
- The next section highlights how these changes destabilised the delicate balance of power in the security forces, particularly in the Ministry of Interior (MoI), one of the main institutions where power politics and horse-trading among the key elites took place.
- Section three explores the strategic calculations and incentives of President Ghani and his inner circle for the last-minute restructuring and how others attempted to rationalise them.
- The final section explains how the Palace's decisions and actions undermined the ANSF's ability to counter the Taliban offensive and ultimately contributed to state collapse.

This report draws on interviews with key informants, including politicians and security officials from the army, intelligence agencies and policy institutions, conducted in May and June 2021 in Kabul. Over 40 key informants were interviewed — half from the interior ministry and others from the country's political and security elites. This report also draws on a book by the author on the political economy of the post-2001 international military intervention in Afghanistan.⁵ The mapping of the MoI in this report benefited from the author's previously developed 'political network approach' to governance and statehood in post-2001 Afghanistan by examining the role and power dynamics of political networks and their impact on informal order and state disruption.

⁵ Timor Sharan, *Inside Afghanistan: Political Networks, Informal Order, and State Disruption*, (Routledge, 2022).

Further politicising and ethnicising security institutions: Masoud Andarabi out, Hayatullah Hayat in

What was to be the last six months of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan began with a major sacking. In March 2021, President Ghani forced Minister of the Interior Masoud Andarabi, a Tajik from the Andarab district of Baghlan province

His dismissal, coming as it did at a time when strategic districts and provincial capitals were at risk of falling to the Taliban unnecessarily intensified political infighting among the various and often squabbling factions

to resign, an ousting enforced by Ghani's National Security Advisor (NSA), Hamdullah Mohib (see Reuters [report](#)). According to several interviewees, Andarabi was rather respected among Mol's senior leadership and the police force and appeared to be doing well on the job under difficult circumstances. His dismissal, coming as it did at a time when strategic districts and

provincial capitals were at risk of falling to the Taliban unnecessarily intensified political infighting among the various and often squabbling factions of Shura-ye Nezar of the Jamiat-e Islami *tanzim*⁶ with whom Andarabi was affiliated, and between them and Ghani and his inner circle on the other (more on this below).⁷

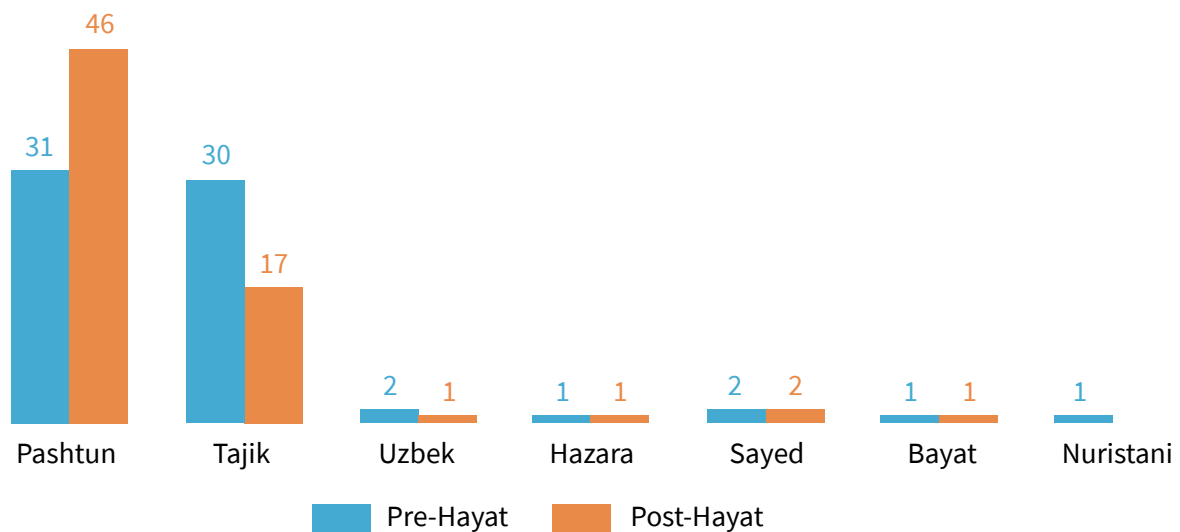
⁶ *Tanzims* refer to the military-political jihadi political parties formed during the wars against the Soviet occupation. In the 1990s, there were seven Sunni and one Shia jihadi groups operating from Pakistan and eight Shia groups administered from Iran, permitted to use safe sanctuaries on the respective countries' soil and function as the 'government-in-exile'. Jamiat-e Islami emerged as the dominant political grouping in Afghanistan in the 1990s and subsequently in the post-2001 Republican era, especially Shura-ye Nezar, a network within Jamiat set up by Ahmad Shah Massud in the 1990s in northeastern Afghanistan, which had at its core ethnic Tajiks of the Panjshir valley. Like other *tanzims*, Jamiat fractured into several patronage and regionally-based strongmen networks following their subsequent setbacks from 2003.

⁷ In his book *Inside Afghanistan: Political Networks, Informal Order, and State Disruption*, the author methodically maps how the National Unity Government's structure had divided state institutions into two rigid competing camps, first in 2014-2019 and later after the 2019 presidential elections. One camp was led by then President Ghani and his largely Pashtun technocrats. The other was led by Chief Executive Officer Abdullah and represented different factions of Jamiat *tanzim* and other centres of power, such as Hazara leader Muhammad Mohaqeq's *Hezb-e Wahdat-e Islami-ye Mardom-e Afghanistan* (People's

Relations between Ghani and most jihadi leaders and strongmen, especially Jamiat leaders, including former Chief Executive Officer Abdullah Abdullah, Ghani’s opponent in the 2014 and 2019 presidential elections and by 2021, head of the High Council for National Reconciliation, were already at breaking point. Abdullah slammed the decision to remove Andarabi and said the move contravened the political agreement he had signed with Ghani following the disputed 2019 presidential election and was “against national interests and is unacceptable.”⁸

Pashtunisation of the Mol?

Figure 1: Ethnic composition of Mol leadership before and after Hayat’s tenure (March-June 2021)



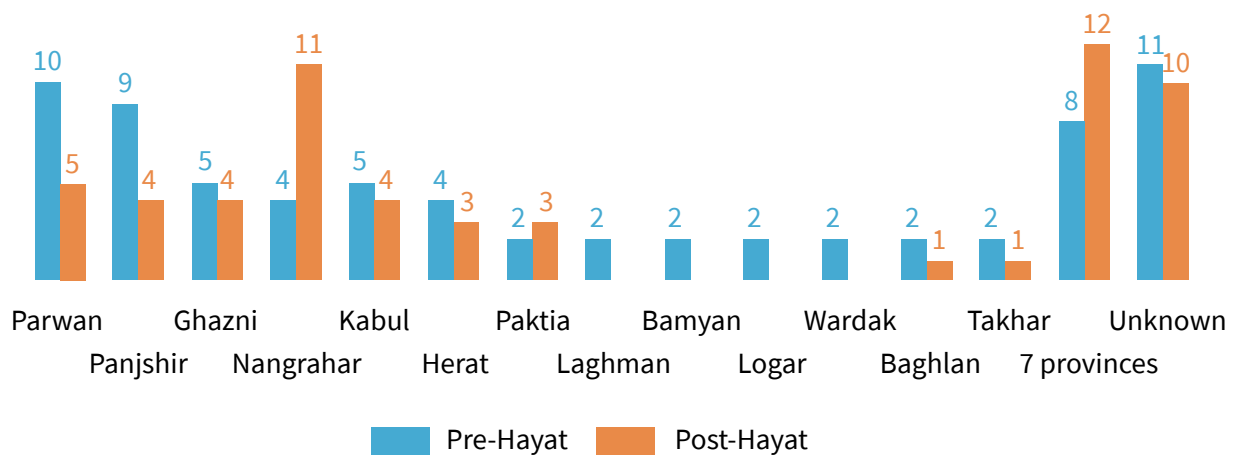
Ghani replaced Andarabi with a Pashtun from Nangrahar province, who was also a former governor of Helmand province. Hayatullah Hayat had no previous experience in policing. His short-lived tenure (less than four months, from March to June 2021) saw one of the most visible wholesale restructurings of the Mol,

Islamic Unity Party of Afghanistan). Ashraf Ghani increasingly saw himself as a Pashtun leader with a responsibility to defend the interests of the ethnic group, as detailed by the International Crisis Group in “[Afghanistan: The Future of the National Unity Government](#).”

⁸ See “[Abdullah Opposes Removal of Interior Minister](#)”, ToloNews, 20 March 2021.

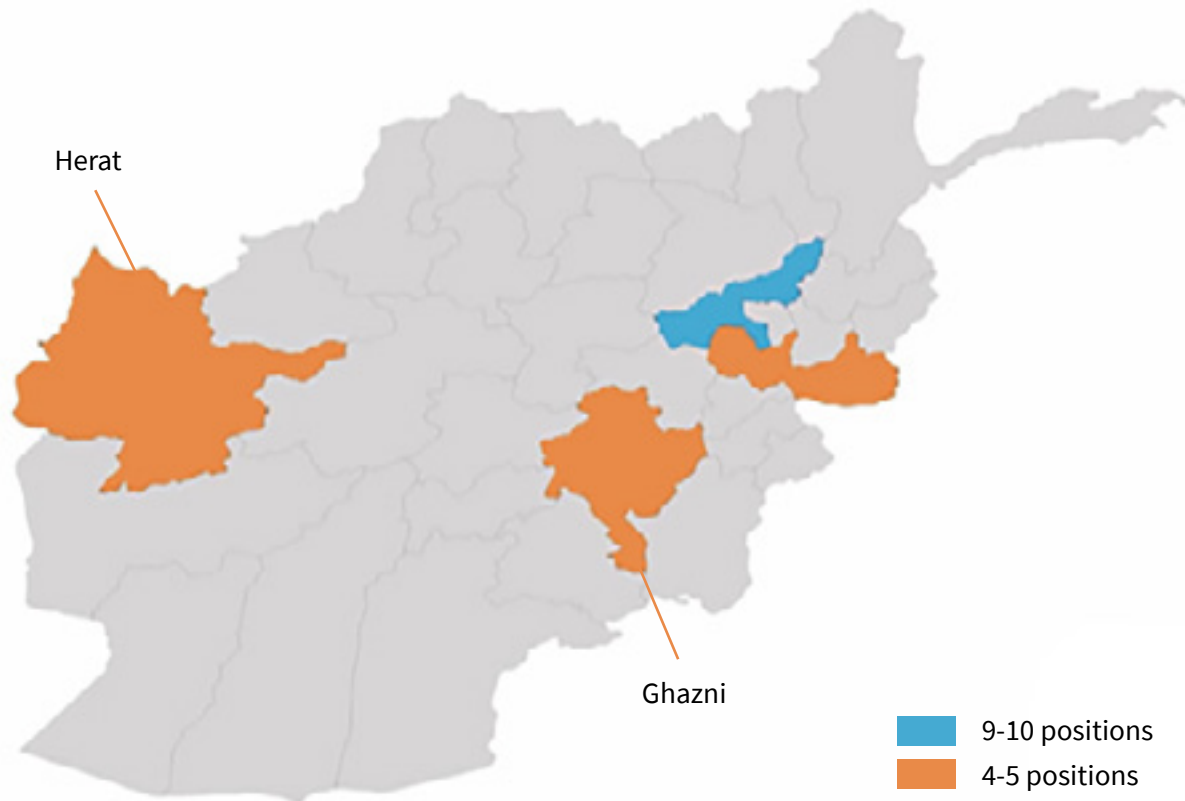
with clients loyal to Ghani appointed to key positions while others, affiliated with his political rivals, were removed from their posts. An ethnic shift was also clear, as figures 1 and 2 show. The data demonstrates a significant shift in power and patronage in favour of Ghani and Pashtuns, and a weakening of Shura-ye Nezar affiliates, mostly ethnic Tajiks. 35, or more than half, of Mol's 68 highest-ranking officials, including department heads, directors-general, directors and senior advisors, were replaced and reshuffled. Most of those removed and downgraded were Tajiks from Kabul, Panjshir, and Parwan provinces with links to Shura-ye Nezar (see Maps 1 and 2). As for Hazaras and Uzbeks, despite their substantial representation in the general population and the police and army as regular soldiers of the ANSF, they had always largely been excluded from progression up the ranks: that pattern continued in Hayat's 2001 reshuffle.

Figure 2: Composition of Mol leadership by province before and after Hayat's tenure (May-June 2021)



As seen in Maps 1 and 2, following Hayat's reshuffling of the Mol, the concentration of power shifted geographically from the predominantly ethnically Tajik provinces of Panjshir, Parwan and Kabul to the largely Pashtun Nangrahar province in eastern Afghanistan. The Mol leadership had previously been weighted towards one ethnicity and one tanzim, and had also been crippled with corruption from its inception. However, Ghani's response to these problems was to continue with the tradition of ethnic imbalance and intensify the ethnicisation. He also chose possibly the worst time for restructuring.

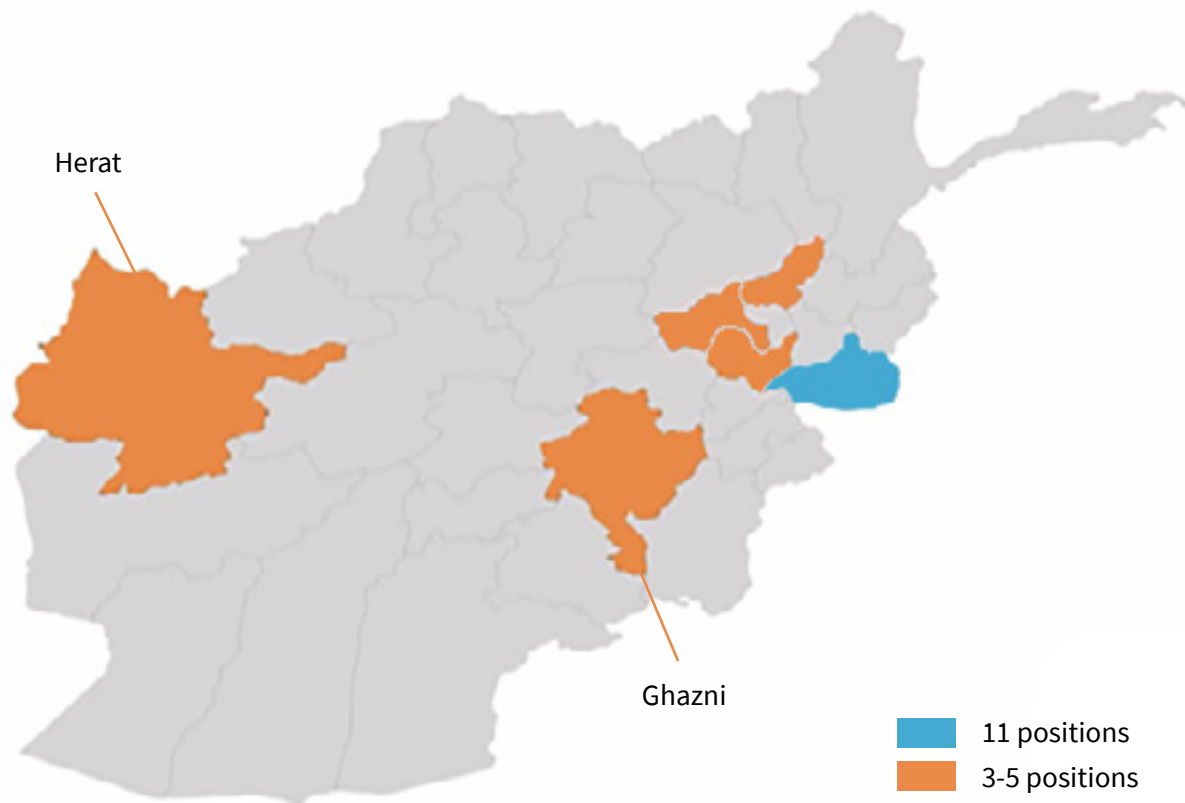
Map 1: Composition of Mol directors by province of origin before Hayat's tenure



Many of those interviewed, both inside and outside Mol, questioned Ghani and his inner circle's intentions in pursuing a wholesale restructuring at a time when the country faced formidable resistance and needed national political consensus. There was a suspicion that, as one mid-ranking interior ministry official told the author in June 2021, it amounted to the "Pashtunisation of the Mol." It was seen, at least by the majority of non-Pashtuns, as part of Ghani and his inner circle's broader ethnic bias in all domains of Afghan polity in favour of his own ethnic group. For example, Ghani's first proposed cabinet list under the National Unity Government (26 cabinet nominees on November 2014), as well as his second proposed cabinet list (21 March 2015), had also favoured ethnic Pashtuns, nearly all of whom were labelled as 'technocrats'.⁹

⁹ See Sharan and Bose, (2016), [Political Networks and the 2014 Afghan Presidential Elections: Power Restructuring, Ethnicity, and State Stability](#), Conflict, Security and Development, Vol 16 (4). For a list of biographies of these ministers, see Afghanistan Analysts Network: "[Finally Towards a Complete Afghan Cabinet? The Next 16 Minister Nominee and their Bios \(amended\)](#)" and "[The Cabinet and the Parliament:](#)

Map 2: Composition of MoI directors by province of origin after Hayat's tenure



The ‘technocrat’ label had become important in the post-2001 political context. It was applied to the unaligned or, at most, those only weakly aligned to a political group or tanzim, and who had a university education – often a Western education. It included men and women from the diaspora who were brought in because of their supposed expertise and technical knowledge. Any expertise, however, was often not specific to their role in government, for example, ‘technocrats’ brought into the lead the MoI who had no experience in policing.¹⁰ A technocrat might also be someone seen as having a background in ‘civil society’, a category typically applying to former senior staff in donor-funded NGOs or the UN. Under this definition, most of Ghani’s first cabinet in 2015 were not only technocrats but also ‘civil society leaders’.

[Afghanistan’s Government in Trouble before it is formed](#)”.

¹⁰ Indeed, it could be argued that a jihadi commander with battlefield experience might, on the face of it, have more suitable expertise for leading a police force fighting an insurgency than a university-educated former senior UN official.

Ghani's first administration, the National Unity Government of 2014-2019, saw nearly all key positions in the president's office, including within the Administrative Office of the President (AOP), National Security Council (NSC), Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG) and the office of Chief of Staff go to ethnic Pashtuns, with a clear bias toward technocratic Ghilzai Pashtuns.¹¹ In a starkly indicative incident that was widely reported, Ghani's Head of the Office for Administrative Affairs in 2017 shared a file on his team's Telegram Messenger group that proposed ways to expand the department's ethnic Pashtun presence and remove non-Pashtun staff.¹²

In this light, it is little wonder that MoI appointments made between March and June 2021 were largely understood to be part of what was perceived as a broader policy to 'clean' the ministry of non-Pashtuns and buttress the president's aspirations for ethnic hegemony in the security sector. As one former senior MoI with links to the former communist regime told the author in June 2021:

In the name of reform and merit-based appointments, they [Ghani, NSC and the Board of Security Appointment] are getting rid of dedicated generals. This is essentially Pashtunisation of the MoI under the veil of competence and merit-based appointments.

It does, however, bear mentioning that stacking the decks in favour of one ethnic group was not new, nor the exclusive domain of the Palace. Of the other key leaders in the National Unity Government, Chief Executive Officer Abdullah appeared to favour fellow Tajiks over Pashtuns when hiring staff for his office, and his second deputy Muhammad Mohaqeq (the Hazara Shia leader of Hezb-e *Wahdat-e Islami*) appointed mostly Hazara aides, a reported 87.5 per cent.¹³ Moreover, it was a pattern familiar from the founding of the Republic.

¹¹ See Sharan and Bose (2014) for details (FN 12).

¹² See Etilaat Ruz, [Dar Guruhe Telegram Edaraye Umur Riyasat Jamhuri Chi Migozarad](#) (What is happening inside the Administrative Office of the President's Telegram Group), 16 September 2017.

¹³ Sharan and Bose, (2016), [Political Networks and the 2014 Afghan Presidential Elections: Power Restructuring, Ethnicity, and State Stability](#), Conflict, Security and Development, Vol 16 (4).

Rival political networks and the capture of security institutions in the post-2001 Afghanistan

The Afghan state bureaucracy and administration in Kabul and the provinces, including the ANSF leadership, had been thoroughly politicised in the very creation of the Republic.¹⁴ Rival political *tanzim* networks and their vessel commanders allied with the US had captured districts and cities and positions in the state as the Taleban fled. The tanzims tended to be ethnic-based, for reasons of war-time solidarity and recruitment, and in 2001 and 2002, leaders rewarded their followers by packing government departments, including ministries, agencies, and governorships with their followers. About four-fifths of the first post-Taleban cabinet were military men or civilian members of tanzims¹⁵ and as the force that had captured the capital, Shura-ye Nezar, secured a strategically advantageous position vis-a-vis all other groups in the country. Utilising their coercive and organisational resources and capacity, they swiftly moved to control strategic parts of the state, including the army, police and intelligence service: Yunus Qanuni, a key Jamiat figure and influential Shura-ye Nezar commander from Panjshir, claimed the Ministry of Interior and was kept in post there in the transitional government, while also becoming deputy to the chairman of the new interim administration; Muhammad Qasem Fahim installed himself at the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and also remained there, post-Bonn; Arif Sarwari took over the National Directorate of Security (NDS), replaced only as intelligence chief in 2004 by party comrade Amrullah Saleh; Bismillah Khan Muhammadi was appointed chief of staff of the Afghan national army in 2002 and stayed there until 2010; Abdullah took over the ministry of foreign affairs and stayed there till 2005. The bonds that tied this close-knit clique were a combination of the shared solidarity of calling the same narrow valley, Panjshir ‘home’, inter-marriage and most importantly, political and financial interdependencies dating back to the jihad.

¹⁴ After the US-led invasion of Afghanistan, some Afghan leaders, the United Nations and representatives from the US and other powers came together in the German city of Bonn to agree on an initial political arrangement for reorganising Afghanistan’s government institutions and choosing the leader of the Afghan Interim Authority (see the Bonn Agreement [here](#)).

¹⁵ See Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan*, London, Hurst, 2007, 16.

Among those taking over the senior offices of state, only finance and the presidency went to people from outside Shura-ye Nezar. The Republic's new leader, Hamed Karzai, was selected at Bonn and replaced Jamiat leader Burhanuddin Rabbani, who had flown to Kabul from his native Badakhshan after the capital fell and installed himself in the Presidential Palace. Karzai was endorsed by Jamiat and the Americans at Bonn partly because of his weakness (a civilian member of a relatively weak mujahedin party, the National Liberation Front), but would slowly see his power increase as he gained control of resources, appointments and other levers of state.¹⁶

The ethnic composition of the ministries of defence and interior showed an over-representation of Tajiks in the early post-Bonn period (Figures 3 and 4), reflecting the capture of these key ministries by the Jamiat network.¹⁷ Several studies have shown that under the Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR) programme, Jamiat successfully re-integrated its militia into the army and police across the country, especially in Kabul and the three northern provinces (Parwan, Kapisa and Panjshir).¹⁸ Of the 100 generals Defence Minister Fahim appointed during his tenure, 90 belonged to Shura-ye Nezar. In February 2002 alone, his choice of 38 generals comprised 37 Tajiks and 35 Shura-ye Nezar affiliates.¹⁹

The power dynamics within Jamiat limited access to the corridors of power post-2001 for many mid-ranking network anchors and regional strongmen and frustrated their ambitions for upwards mobility. From 2004, the Shura-ye Nezar

¹⁶ The Finance Minister appointed at Bonn was Hedayat Amin Arsala, a civilian, an economist, and like Karzai, from the monarchist Afghan National Liberation Front tanzim. He was replaced in 2002 by Ashraf Ghani.

¹⁷ For more details on the administrative and security composition of the Afghan state post-2001, see Timor Sharan, "[The Dynamics of Elite Networks and Patron-Client Relations in Afghanistan](#)," *Europe-Asia Studies* 63, no. 6 (2011): 1109–27; and Sven Gunnar Simonsen, "[Ethnicising Afghanistan? Inclusion and Exclusion in Post-Bonn Institution Building](#)," *Third World Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (2004): 707–29.

¹⁸ The Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration programme (DDR), 2003–2005, ensured that jihadis, in particular Tajiks and Panjshiris, were overwhelmingly represented in the structure and composition of the MoI leadership and police force and enabled them to expand their patronage and nepotism within the Afghan police. Karzai and his Pashtun allies relied on former communists to balance the Jihadis. For more detail on the DDR process and its implications, see Antonio Giustozzi, "[Bureaucratic Façade and Political Realities of Disarmament and Demobilisation in Afghanistan](#)," *Conflict, Security and Development* vol 8, no. 2 (2008): 169–92; and Michael V Bhatia and Mark Sedra, *Afghanistan, Arms and Conflict: Post-9/11 Security and Insurgency*, (London: Routledge, 2008).

¹⁹ See Antonio Giustozzi, [Re-building the Afghan Army](#), paper presented at London School of Economics and Political Sciences, 1 June 2003.

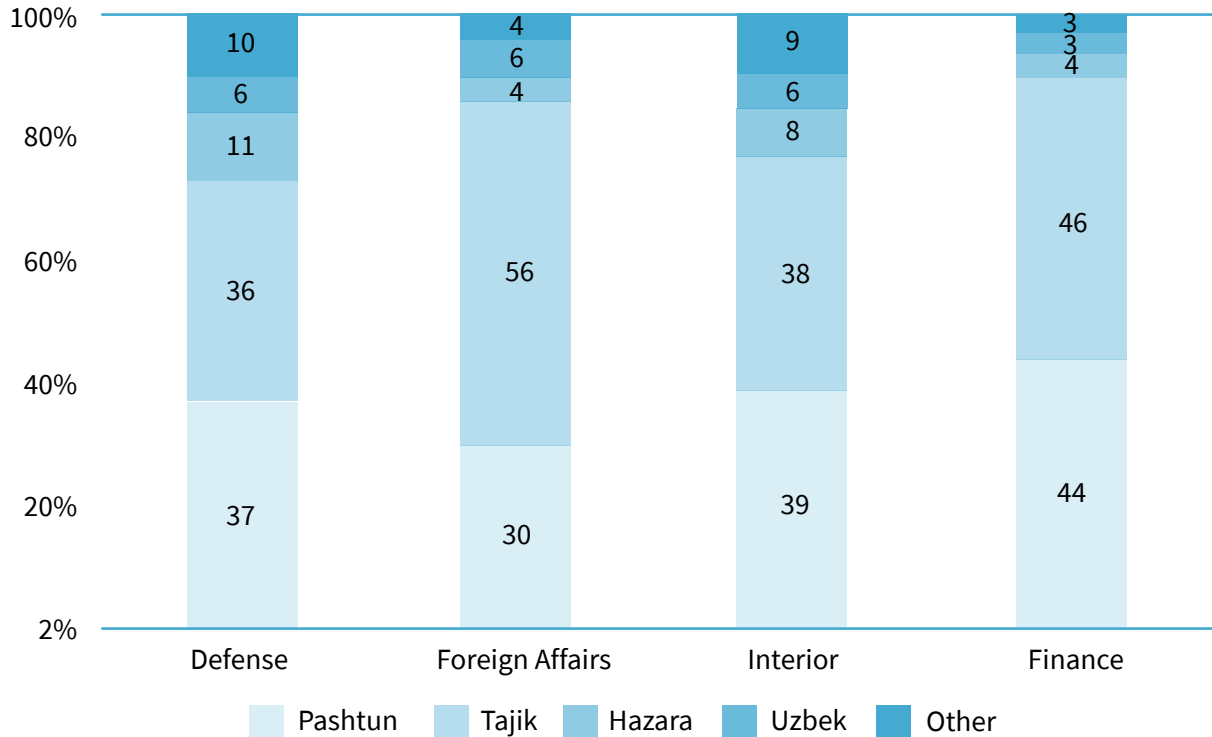


Afghan security personnel and militia stand guard in Enjil district, Herat province
Photo: Hoshang Hashimi/AFP, 30 July 2021

clique fragmented into several smaller and less influential patronage networks organised around key figures, and mostly focused on accumulating financial and military resources. Eventually, they lost social capital, including ethnic and constituency support, not completely, but significantly (see also footnote 35 for more details). Even so, as the author has shown elsewhere, it was after the 2005 parliamentary elections, in which the jihadis did really well, that a tacit norm was established that divided the leadership of the security sector between two broad ethnic and political camps: the Tajiks, especially those from north of Kabul and Panjshir, led by Jamiat network's Shura-ye Nezar who had 'inherited' strength in the Mol, MoD and intelligence and; the Pashtuns, led by the president's office, which controlled the presidency and the National Security Council. In the post-2001 Republic, in a balancing act, a formula developed that if the minister was from one camp, the senior deputy, who at the Mol was in charge of security, and the Chief of Army at the MoD would be from the other camp.²⁰

²⁰ The Deputy Interior Minister for Security is the Mol's most powerful department after the minister and is of equivalent rank to the Army Chief of Staff. He is responsible for the day-to-day military operation of the police, including supervision of all district and police chiefs.

Figure 3: Ethnic composition of the four ‘senior’ ministries at Grade 3 in 2004, percentages²¹



At the ministerial level, as the table below shows, from 2001 to the collapse of the Republic in August 2021, eight of the 15 ministers were Pashtun and seven were Tajik – all but one of whom were from Panjshir province and all but two with Shura-ye Nezar. None were from other ethnic groups.²² The ministry had its worst turmoil during the Ghani presidency when it cycled through seven ministers in five years.²³

²¹ There are eight grades in the Afghan bureaucracy (1-8), with one being the highest, often general-director and director-level positions, and 8 being lowest-level support staff, such as cleaners. Deputy minister and minister-level positions are above these grades and almost always political appointees.

²² Minister Andarabi was neither Abdullah’s nor Jamiat’s first choice in 2018, but was imposed on them at the last minute.

²³ The shortest serving minister was Amrullah Saleh (just over a month) and the longest serving Andarabi (2 years and one month).

Figure 4: Ethnic composition of the Afghanistan National Army by ethnic group

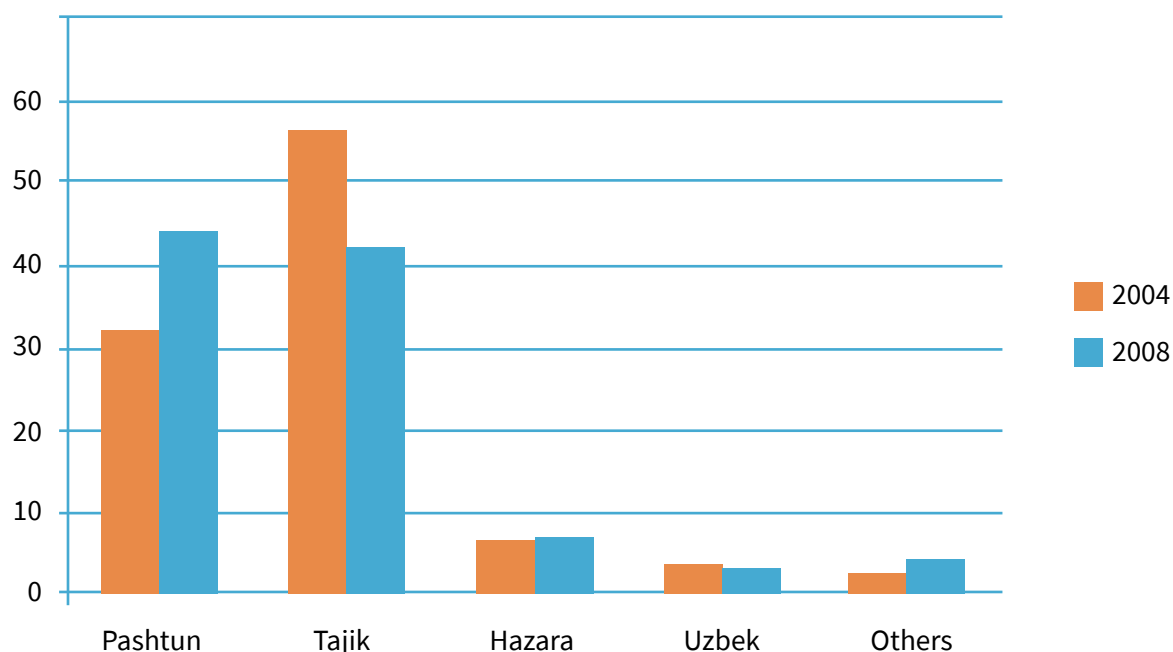


Table 1: Ministers of Interior from November 2001 to August 2021

	Full name	Period	Political affiliations	Ethnicity
1	Yunus Qanuni	Dec 2001–June 2002	Jamiat-Shura-ye Nezar, Panjshir	Tajik
2	Taj Muhammad Wardak	19 Jun 2002–Jan 2003	Jamiat commander, related by marriage to Qanuni	Pashtun
3	Ali Ahmad Jalali	Jan 2003–Sept 2005	Technocrat	Pashtun
4	Zarar Ahmad Moqbel	Sept 2005–Oct 2008	Jamiat-Shura-ye Nezar, Parwan	Tajik
5	Muhamad Hanif Atmar	Oct 2008–July 2010	Technocrat	Pashtun
6	Bismillah Muhammadi	Jul 2010–Sept 2012	Jamiat-Shura-ye Nezar, Panjshir	Tajik
7	Mujtaba Patang	Sept 2012–July 2013	Communist/affiliated with technocrats	Pashtun
8	Muhammad Omar Daudzai	Sept 2013–Dec 2014	Jihadi/affiliated with technocrats	Pashtun
9	Nur ul-Haq Ulumi	Jan 2015–Feb 2016	Communist/affiliated with Abdullah	Pashtun
10	Taj Muhammad Jahid	Feb 2016–Aug 2017	Jamiat-Shura-ye Nezar, Panjshir	Tajik
11	Wais Barmak	Aug 2017–Dec 2018	Technocrat, Panjshir	Tajik
12	Amrullah Saleh	Dec 2018–Jan 2019	Jamiat-Shura-ye Nezar, Panjshir	Tajik
13	Masoud Andarabi	Jan 2019–Mar 2021	Technocrat/former Jamiat	Tajik
14	Hayatullah Hayat	Mar 2021–June 2021	Technocrat	Pashtun
15	Abdul Sattar Mirzakwal	June 2021–Collapse	Former communist/affiliated with technocrats	Pashtun

After coming to power in 2014, Ghani made it clear he intended to reform the MoI, which he viewed as “the heart of corruption in the security sector,”²⁴ a view shared by many (see AAN’s own [reporting](#) on the ministry from 2017). A former minister speaking to the author in August 2020 described it thus:

The ministry functions as a honeycomb for corrupt political leaders as it reinforces criminality rather than curbing it. The formal and informal revenues that it generates from the passport department to drugs trade, to licensing, to kickbacks from businesses, shops and others are huge. In elections, it ensures it can mobilise and deliver votes. Political leaders have used departments of the Criminal Investigation Unit, the Attorney General’s office and the Audit [department] to intimidate and silence his rivals.

Motivated by other factors?

Some interviewees accused those in charge of the 2021 restructuring of the ministry of having been motivated by a desire to control the honey pot of MoI appointments and resources. Whether that was the case or not, what was overwhelmingly obvious was that many of Ghani’s ‘reform’ policies and laws ended up advantaging ethnic Pashtuns, particularly Ghilzai Pashtuns from eastern Afghanistan. One example is Ghani’s 2017 Inherent Law of Officers, which forced the retirement of over 1,500 MoI senior officers including colonels and generals in 2017 and 2018.²⁵ NATO allies had advised the Afghan government on the enforcement of the law which lowered the mandatory retirement age, imposed time-in-service maximums (eg 40 years for generals) and set time-in-grade limits (eg, eight years for generals).²⁶ The goal was to retire most of the ageing generals — who had mostly been appointed as part of a decade-long horse trading between different patronage networks and centres of power — and replace them with the next generation of ANSF leaders, whom the US military and others had trained after 2001.

²⁴ See ToloNews, “[Ghani Vows to Reform MoI](#)”.

²⁵ Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), “[Quarterly Report to the United States Congress](#),” April 30, 2018, section 3, pp. 77-115.

²⁶ See United States Department of Defense, “[Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan](#)” report prepared for the US Congress, June 2018.

The Inherent Law of Officers may have been a needed reform, but to many interviewees, *how* it was implemented looked like a first step in further politicising and ethicising the ANSF leadership. The administration presented the tensions that ensued as an unintended consequence of the hostilities and grievances between jihadis and communists, who had been forced to retire, and the young Western-trained officers who replaced them.

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This step was followed by other ‘reform’ initiatives that were equally flawed. In November 2017, Ghani established the Presidential Advisory Board on Senior Appointments in the Security Sector. The seven-member board, composed of retired generals, reported directly to him and was charged

with putting forward the names of senior officials from ministries of interior and defence and the NDS to the president based on merit. At the time, it was argued the advisory board would speed up the process of appointments and decrease tensions between different camps in the then National Unity Government. Several interviewees, however, complained about the NSC’s influence over the selection process after the appointment to the position of National Security Adviser of Ghani’s trusted ‘technocrat’ aide, Hamdullah Mohib, who holds a PhD in computer engineering but had no military or security experience. (That followed the resignation of another ‘technocrat’, Hanif Atmar, in August 2018). The interviewees said the screening process lacked rigour and that selections were politicised, with the Palace and NSC officials manipulating the process in favour of loyal aides.²⁷ In February 2018, Ghani signed the retirement of the first tranche of 164 army generals.²⁸ By then, the selection process had come under intense scrutiny by parliament, and in December 2018, lawmakers rejected Ghani’s legislative decree unanimously.²⁹

²⁷ Author interviews, May and June 2021, Kabul.

²⁸ See “[Pres. Ghani Signs Retirement of 164 Afghan Army Generals](#)”, Ariana News, 4 February 2018.

²⁹ “[MP’s Reject Ghani’s Decree on Officers Inherent Law](#)”, Ariana News, 20 December 2018.

Most jihadis saw the law and the Palace's move to retire ageing generals as a deliberate attempt to marginalise their comrades and further undermine their power within the state. While it is difficult to glean Ghani's true intentions, the reform process created the impression that, whatever else might be true, the president and his national security advisor favoured Pashtuns, especially those from eastern Afghanistan, including Ghani's home province of Logar and Mohib's neighbouring Nangrahar.

For instance, in one decree, the president promoted 23 army generals to two-star and three-star ranks; they comprised 19 Pashtuns, two Tajiks, one Hazara and one Uzbek. There was a massive backlash in the MoD and considerable resentment among non-Pashtun officials, which subsequently and indirectly damaged the military's morale and performance in the field.³⁰ The consequence was a further politicisation and Pashtunisation of the army and the police.

Disrupting the balance of power: the Mol as a contested playing field

In the last year of the Republic, the NSC and Mol were led by eastern Ghilzai Pashtuns aligned to President Ghani, while the MoD and NDS were led by individuals linked to Panjshir-based, Shura-ye Nezar Tajiks. A formula had developed that if the minister was from one camp, the senior deputy, who at the Mol was in charge of security, and the Chief of Army at the MoD would be from the other camp.³¹ This balancing act inevitably also excluded the vast majority of other ethnic groups in the country, some of whom had a considerable representation in the ANSF and NDS.

The last ministerial-level reshuffling in May 2021 saw: the move of Shura-ye Nezar stalwart Bismillah Khan Muhammadi back to the MoD as minister; Wali Muhammad Ahmadzai (a Pashtun and tribal affiliate of the president) appointed as

³⁰ At the time, the author was the Deputy Minister for Policy and Programme at the Independent Directorate of Local Governance and attended Daily Briefings at the Ministry of Defence Central Command.

³¹ The Deputy Interior Minister for Security is the Mol's most powerful department after the minister and is of equivalent rank to the Army Chief of Staff. He is responsible for the day-to-day military operation of the police, including supervision of all district and police chiefs.

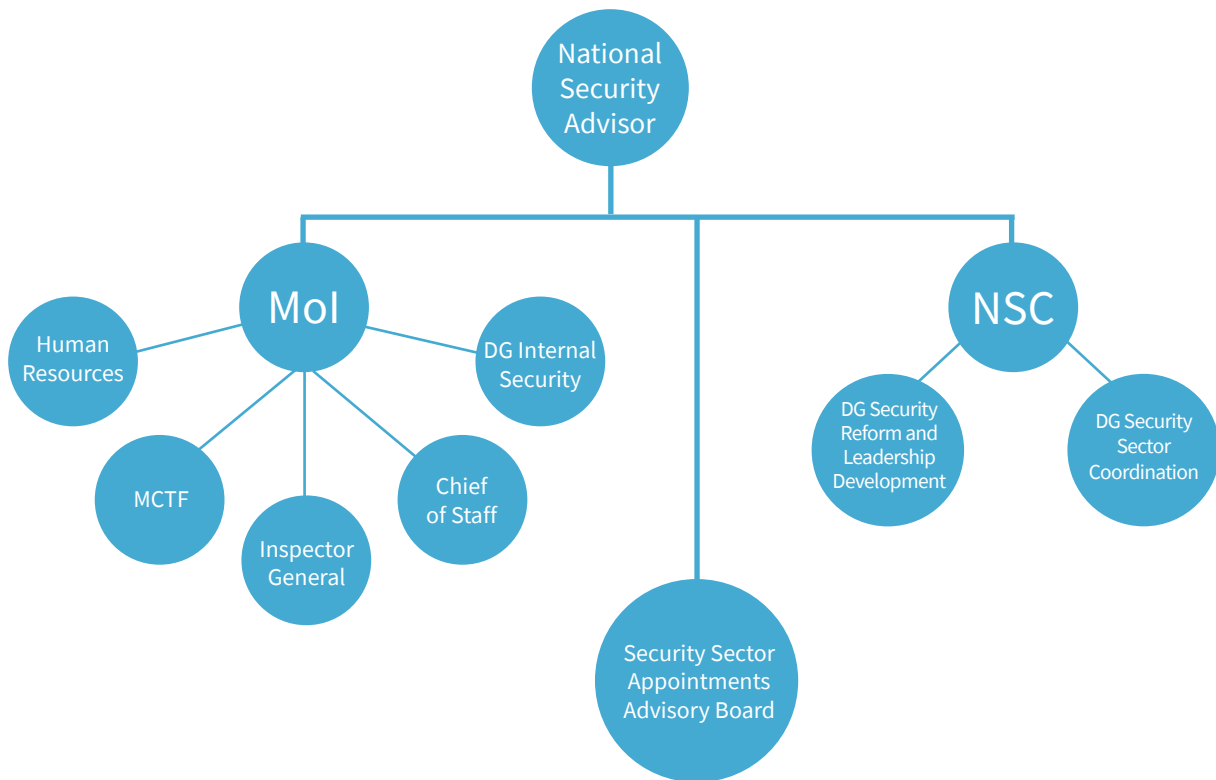
Chief of the Army; Abdul Satar Mirzakwal (a Pashtun) the new Minister of Interior; a former deputy for counter-narcotics Harun Shirzad (a Pashtun) deputy minister for security; and a member of a 2014 break-away group from Shura-ye Nezar, the Grand Council of the North (*Shura-ye Sartasari Shamali*), Muhammad Ayub Salangi (a Tajik) as first deputy interior minister.³² The appointments reflected the intricate balance at the ministerial level. Both Muhammadi and Salangi were known for commanding respect among the ranks, at least among Shura-ye Nezar comrades, but there were also widespread allegations of corruption against them.

There was also a significant restructuring in the composition of certain key departments at the Mol. The changes were most visible in the Audit Department led by the coercive ‘muscle’ of the ministry, as well as the Inspector General (IG), the Major Crime Task Force (MCTF), and the Criminal Investigation Department (CID). For instance, the MCTF had four directors in the fifteen months from May 2020 to July 2021, while the audit and criminal investigation departments cycled through three directors each. Two of the four MCTF directors were removed because of allegations of corruption. A few months later, another was dismissed after leading an investigation that resulted in the arrest of public officials in Herat province. The fourth was appointed in May 2021 while under investigation for human trafficking (see Pajhwok news [report](#)). At the Inspector General’s Office, in a series of directives issued from 1 April to 19 May 2021, the head Brigade-General Muhmad Wali Amini, removed and replaced 21 general managers and advisors at the IG’s Office with new aides, twenty of them Pashtuns.

Amini was in post for only 40 days before being moved on to become Director-General for Internal Security at the ministry. Amini, a Pashtun, was reportedly an ally of the NSA Mohib’s Chief of Staff, Abdul Moqib Abdulrahimzai. His tenure had been short-lived, and that gave the impression that he had been tasked to clean house in favour of Pashtuns before moving on to his preferred position.

³² The region north of Kabul city, comprised of Parwan and Kapisa provinces as well as adjoining districts of Kabul province, is known as the Shomali plains. To break away from the domination of the Panjshiri Shura-ye Nezar leaders, most of the local commanders, members of parliament, and provincial council members came together in 2014 to establish the Grand Council of North (Shura-ye Aali Sartasar-e Shamali). During the National Unity Government, when relations between Abdullah and Ghani were strained, Ghani tried to lure members of the Grand Council to his side by offering major concessions (ie, provincial governorships in Farah and Parwan and a ministerial post in the government). In the 2019 presidential elections, the Grand Council of the North overwhelmingly backed Ghani. In 2021, Ghani appointed Ayub Salang as First Deputy Interior to please the Grand Council of North. This was a symbolic position with little authority within the police.

Figure 5: The National Security Council and Ministry of Interior informal network



Most of those interviewed alleged that the wholesale restructuring of MoI in March-June 2021 was driven by a narrow circle of mid-ranking officials within MoI and NSC with links to Ghani’s National Security Advisor, Hamdullah Mohib (see figure 5). Interviewees reported that a small group of key officials had increasingly come to dominate decision-making, functioned as a gatekeeper to the president on anything related to security, and exerted a monopoly over security sector appointments. Increasingly, the NSC became a major bottleneck as it took over more executive functions and responsibilities for key security institutions, including implementing ‘reforms’, making appointments and conducting background checks on individuals, rather than being an advisory body responsible for policy-making and strategic guidance.

One example of the National Security Advisor’s increasing intervention in the MoI and other key security institutions had come earlier, with the mid-2020 wholesale

a small group of key officials had increasingly come to dominate decision-making, functioned as a gatekeeper to the president on anything related to security

sacking and appointment of some 100 of the country's 364 district police chiefs (see [here](#)). This had led to a sweeping restructuring of MoI power at the subnational level. Mohib and his team at the NSC facilitated these appointments, replacing existing police chiefs with special forces

commanders and intelligence officials. The stated rationale was to disrupt corrupt criminal networks within the MoI. Regardless of the intentions, the move proved to be ill-considered and had serious implications for the further militarisation of the police force. While it might have removed some corrupt and incompetent police chiefs, it also contributed to the breakdown of central command and detached the police from the communities they were serving in an already fragile country divided along ethnic and tribal lines. Most former police chiefs enjoyed close relationships with the communities they served, stretching as far back as the days of the jihad; most were also network clients of key jihadi groups. A number of officials, including several district governors, also noted to the author that the newly appointed police chiefs lacked management skills and community support.

The strategic calculations of Ghani and his inner circle

Many questioned the logic of appointing Hayatullah Hayat, a civilian with no experience in the security sector, as interior minister in early 2021 at a time when the Republic was struggling for its survival. Also, why appoint someone only to leave them in post for less than four months? It appears that he was sent to MoI to clean house, to carry out a wholesale restructuring of the Ministry of Interior despite the Taliban offensive and even though the US and other forces were drawing down, and under the US deal signed with the Taliban, were due to leave Afghanistan altogether.

Some interviewees accused Ghani and his inner circle of making a strategic calculation to ensure his future survival and preparing the MoI as a 'bargaining

chip' in a future power-sharing settlement with the Taliban – most likely, they thought, it would be handed over to the Taliban. As one official at the office of the Deputy Minister for Security at Mol told the author in June 2021:

I am seriously worried about these appointments. This is khanatakani (cleaning house) in getting rid of anyone who is likely to be a force against negotiations with the Taliban; anyone with mardomi (public/constituency) links who could mobilise people in their communities.

Some of those interviewed were more explicit in their suspicions, accusing Ghani of being yet another Pashtun leader trying to realign the state and security institutions along ethnic lines and preparing the ground for the handover of the state to his fellow Pashtuns — the Taliban, thereby ensuring his own future survival and claiming fidelity to ethnic solidarity.

This suspicion, amounting to a conspiracy theory, resonated particularly with former communists and jihadi-era political and security officials who recalled earlier deals concerning the Mol and other security institutions, dating back to the survival strategy of the different networks of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) in the weeks leading to the collapse of the Najibullah government in 1992.³³ At that time, ethnic solidarity determined the fate of former communist generals and defectors. Pro-Najibullah Pashtuns in the government, for the most part, gravitated towards Hekmatyar's largely Pashtun Hezb-e Islami and smuggled fighters into downtown Kabul, especially around the Ministry of Interior and the Presidential Palace. The coup failed and Najibullah ordered the arrest of 127 Khalqi military officers. Meanwhile, most of those who had been supporters

33 Near the end of his regime, President Najibullah tried to reform the organisation of the state, army and economy, with a focus on realigning ethnic composition within the state. Najibullah, a Pashtun, appealed to the Khalqis' (the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan, or PDPA) sense of Pashtun solidarity while balancing their power in the army with non-Pashtun militias outside the regular chain of command. The divide between the pro-Najibullah and pro-Karmal (Babrak Karmal led the PDPA from 1979 to 1986) camps became more prominent as pro-Karmal networks increasingly favoured jihadi commander Ahmad Shah Massud, partly due to ethnic solidarity and partly the belief that he would be more willing to compromise with them in a power-sharing arrangement. In an environment of uncertainty and survivalism, national and regional officials started building contacts and securing assurances from jihadi commanders along similar ethnic and opportunistic lines. See Barnett R. Rubin, 'The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System', (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002); S Fida Yunas, 'Afghanistan: A Political History - Vol 5', (Peshawar: Indus Publications, 2002); Christia Fotini, 'Alliance Formation in Civil Wars', (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Antonio Giustozzi, 'War, Politics and Society in Afghanistan 1978-1992', (London: Hurst & Company, 2000).

of Najibullah's predecessor Babrak Karmal who were primarily Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara with some Pashtuns, surrendered to Jamiat and Wahdat tanzims (largely Tajik and Hazara respectively) or joined Dostum's Jombesh and aided them in controlling strategic parts of Kabul city.

Another earlier historical precedent also present in the political consciousness of the Afghan political elite driving suspicions and conspiracy theories in 2021 was the May 1990 coup attempt by the Khalqi defence minister Shahnawaz Tanai who plotted with his co-ethnic, the Pashtun mujahedin leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar to overthrow Najibullah and open up a security cordon to the south of Kabul city to enable Hekmatyar's Hizb-e Islami fighters to enter the city. The coup attempt was uncovered and Najibullah ordered the arrest of 127 Khalqi military officers.³⁴

The fact that some members of Afghanistan's political elite seriously deliberated the possibility of Ghani handing over the state, including its security institutions, to the Taliban owing to ethnic solidarity speaks volumes about the level of mistrust and fragmentation within the Republic

The fact that some members of Afghanistan's political elite seriously deliberated the possibility of Ghani handing over the state, including its security institutions, to the Taliban owing to ethnic solidarity speaks volumes about the level of mistrust and fragmentation within the Republic. Certainly, after the collapse of the Republic and the ensuing blame game, many non-Pashtun political and security officials accused Ghani and his

inner circle of having deliberately handed over power to the Taliban without a fight. For instance, in an interview with Afghanistan International, former deputy chief executive in the National Unity Government Muhammad Mohaqeq, and one of the key political figures in post-2001 Afghanistan, was quick to accuse Ghani of handing over the state and Mohib of facilitating the deliberate collapse of the army and police.³⁵ Another former ANSF official told the author on 22 March 2022:

³⁴ See references in previous footnote.

³⁵ See Muhammad Mohaqeq's 22 August 2021 [Interview](#) with Afghanistan International: "*Taliban Cheguna Tawanesta Tamami Rahbaran Siyasi Afghanistan ra ba Hashiya Bebarad?* (How did the Taliban manage to marginalise all of Afghanistan's political leaders?)".

Even in the last few days of the Republic, Ghani as a Ghilzai Pashtun, couldn't bear the thought of handing over power to Kandahari Durrani or the thought of giving the transition of power to Abdullah Abdullah and former president Karzai, his rivals. That is why Haqqanis were the first to enter Kabul. This was part of a deal between Ghani and Hamdullah Mohib and the Haqqani network.

At the time, many fingers were pointed at the Palace, and Mohib in particular, simply because he is an eastern Ghilzai Pashtun and comes from Nangrahar, cast by some of his detractors as 'geographically proximate' to the Haqqanis, who are from Loya Paktia (Khost, Paktia, Paktika). It certainly did not help that, later, after the collapse, some former key staff and Palace officials claimed there had been a strategic calculation behind Ghani's flight from Kabul and that the aim had been to create discord among the Taliban: several members of Ghani's inner circle hinted to the author in a number of conversations in September 2021 that it had all been part of a grand strategy to hand Kabul over to the Haqqani network in order not to help the Haqqanis but create divisions among the Taliban. This 'explanation' was offered as a justification for Ghani running away from Kabul, an excuse for his conduct, and does not amount to evidence that there had been any genuine grand strategy on the part of Ghani and his inner circle.

Several interviewees accused senior figures (figure 5) of opportunistically using reforms to get control of the opportunities for graft and corrupt patronage. The author's aim in mentioning these accusations is just to highlight how they point to a high level of distrust and widespread accusations about the security leadership that were circling at the time. It is beyond the scope of this study to examine the extent to which the last-minute reforms of the MoI were incentivised by corruption and the desire to control resources, including appointments and influence contracts. As seen in the map of the MoI's financial flows (Figure 6), opportunities for graft were significant. Over the years, nepotism and corruption within the MoI had enabled the "extortion and recycling of resources into this system and its continuous perpetuation," according to a 2015 Integrity Watch report.³⁶ It had created a "self-perpetuating system" in which political patronage and money ensured appointments and promotions along with protection (immunity from prosecution). This cycle had created strong incentives for individuals to engage in corrupt practices to recoup money paid

³⁶ See Mohammad Razaq Isaqzadeh and Antonio Giustozzi's 2015 [report](#) "Senior Appointment and Corruption within the Afghan MoI: Practices and Perceptions" for Integrity Watch Afghanistan.

It had created a “self-perpetuating system” in which political patronage and money ensured appointments and promotions along with protection

to ‘buy’ an appointment, secure their current positions and ensure their future prospects. However, if Ghani-era reforms had been even partly aimed at enabling corrupt practices, it would have been nothing new, but a wresting of the means of corruption from one set of individuals to another.

Some interviewees put forward another reason for the late restructuring of the MoI. They accused those in charge of opportunistic and corrupt incentives in deciding who to sack and who to appoint. Certainly, the scope for graft, as figure 6 illustrates, is enormous, but this would be nothing new. This dynamic has been written about in research going back to the early years of the Republic.

Implications for the performance of ANSF and its ultimate collapse

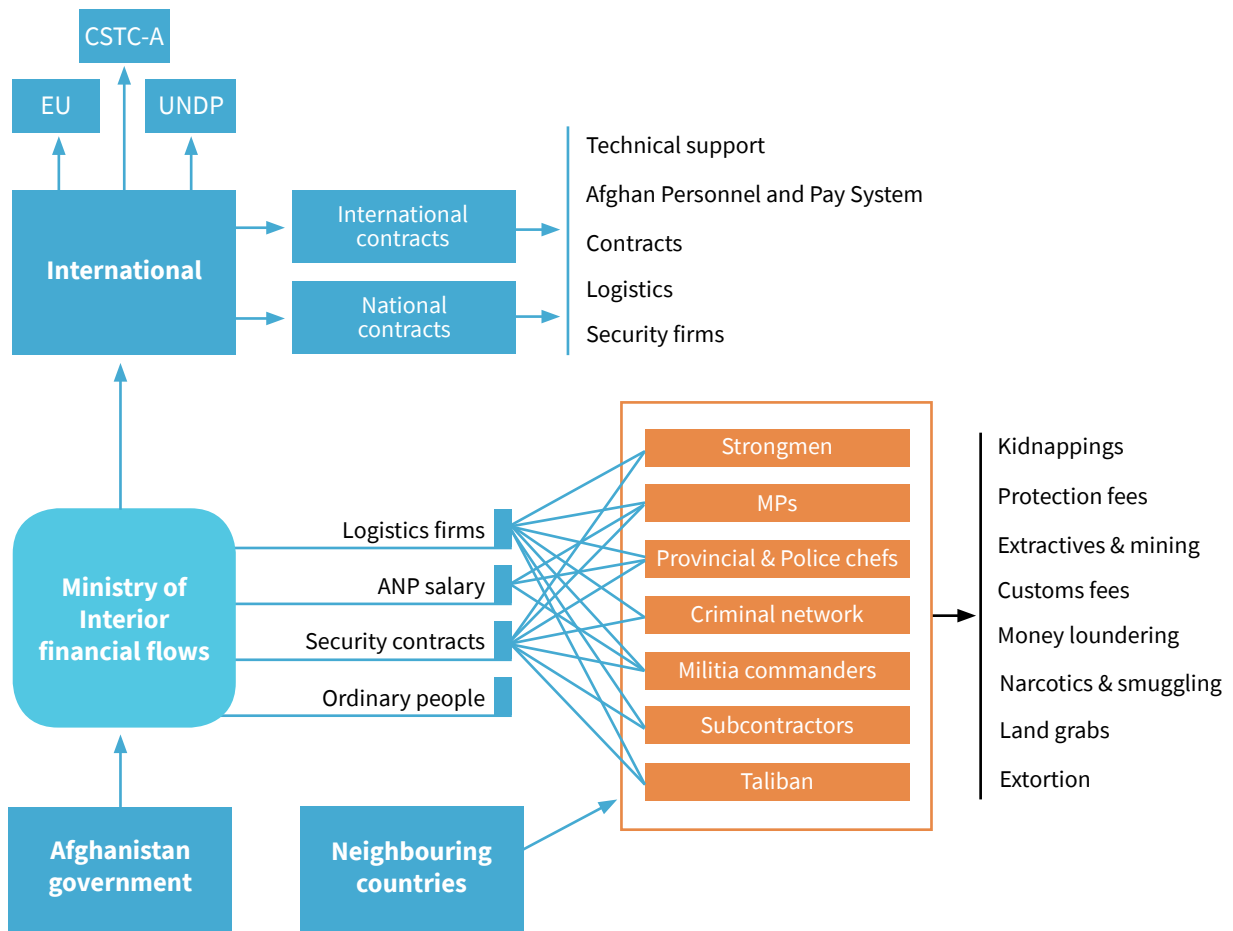
It is undeniable that the MoI and, more generally, the Afghan security sector was in serious need of reform. It suffered from rampant corruption and was paralysed by rent-seeking behaviour. Also true is that at its higher levels, the MoI had favoured one tanzim and one ethnic group. However, as illustrated by this study of the restructuring of the MoI in the spring of 2021, Ghani’s reforms were misguided at best and self-serving at worst. The across-the-board shake-up of the MoI’s leadership, constant reshuffling and turnover of security officials, and the timing of the restructuring fatally undermined the performance of the ANSF in fighting the Taliban and was ultimately a factor in the collapse of the Republic.

The politically motivated appointments and continuous turnovers meant that MoI officials were constantly consumed by internal politics and keeping their positions rather than concentrating on providing logistical and planning support to soldiers on the battlefield. The consequence of shaking up the country’s district police chiefs and then the leadership of the MoI (and the MoD) was felt in the weakening of the integrity and cohesion of the security forces, the breaking of relationships

and of the chains of command and trust, both in the field and between the field and Kabul. Former deputy Interior Minister and former acting Defence Minister, Shah Mahmud Miakhel, [said](#):

There was a disconnect in the chain of command and a lack of coordination between security institutions at all levels. If a local commander in the field can't contact his own leadership, if he gets no response, if he needs air support or direction or coordination at the provincial or district level.... Changes of leadership create a vacuum of leadership. This was a big issue behind the takeovers.

Figure 6: Ministry of Interior sources of revenues



Within the ANSF, senior and mid-ranking generals with links to Jamiat, who had been a key foundation of the security sector, found themselves increasingly paralysed. Their removal by Ghani also meant they had less incentive to defend the Republic.

The example of the Mol was part of a larger policy of ‘reform’ implemented by Ghani, which may have been well-intentioned but backfired and weakened the Republic due to how ethnic considerations underpinned his decisions. Over the years, Ghani’s political agenda and policies eroded the political and military power of political networks and centres of gravity within the Republic, including

Ghani and his inner circle, paralysed by fears of an internal threat in the form of a coup, could not bring themselves to trust the jihadi leaders enough to properly resource them to organise a resistance and for them to mobilise their constituency

those of regional strongmen and militia commanders whom he labelled as ‘corrupt’ and ‘criminal’. In pushing these actors out, Ghani’s decisions were perceived as largely driven by an ethnic agenda, favouring, in particular, his eastern Ghilzai Pashtuns, especially as the ‘reforms’ failed to reduce corruption or improve the livelihoods of Afghan citizens.

However, not all the blame can be laid at the former president’s door. Afghanistan’s political elites, in general, failed the ANSF and rendered it incapable of countering the Taliban offensive. Continued discord and distrust among political groups in Kabul, the lack of political cohesion, Ghani’s chaotic and ethnocentric policies building on earlier ethnic bias along with the lack of political and moral currency not only of the president but also of other centres of power decapitated the ANSF and its ability to counter Taliban offensives. It seemed that, until the last month of the Republic, Ghani and his inner circle, paralysed by fears of an internal threat in the form of a coup, could not bring themselves to trust the jihadi leaders enough to properly resource them to organise a resistance and for them to mobilise their constituency. Afghanistan’s political elite were also unable or unwilling to recognise the real threat from the Taliban. As discussed in this AAN [report](#):

It was not only in the Palace, but also among the political elites of the Republic more broadly, that the Taliban threat engendered far too little sense of urgency. That threat demanded unity and seriousness of purpose if the Republic was to be defended. Yet there seemed little indication from those in power that their action or inaction was helping to foster the fall of the administration. Rather, most carried on as if it was business as usual.

The situation worsened as incessant political and ethnic divisions and turmoil intensified in Kabul, and dysfunctionality became more pronounced in planning for the war and galvanising the population in support of the ANSF. By June 2021,



Afghan National Army soldiers stand to attention during a ceremony at a military base in Herat.
Photo: Aref Karimi/AFP, 3 July 201

at least within the MoI, the central command had partially collapsed, and morale among officers and rank-and-file soldiers was seriously eroded. It had already been undermined by the 2020 US-Taleban deal and then the US decision in April 2021 that the withdrawal of its troops was imminent and could be complete and unconditional. As the US prepared to exit, the Taleban seized the opportunity for a full military victory.

Before non-state elements could establish a much-talked-about second resistance in support of the ANSF and the Republic, it was already too late. Much of their old heartland in the north of Afghanistan had fallen rapidly to the Taleban in May and June (see AAN [reporting](#) from 2 July 2021). The old factional leaders, including Muhammad Mohaqeq, Jombesh-e Milli leader and former vice president Abdul Rashid Dostum and Jamiat-e Islami strongman and former governor Atta

Muhammad Nur all went north on 10 August, only to flee to safety in Uzbekistan, four days later after Mazar-e Sharif fell to the Taleban, and security forces and militias abandoned the city.

Disgruntled and sensing the Republic's imminent collapse, most provincial and district officials began hedging their bets and making backdoor deals with different Taleban factions, especially at the local level where they made accommodations with Taleban commanders. This set into motion their survivalist instincts, a dog-eat-dog world where everyone was fighting for their own survival – or running away to ensure it. To many, it signalled the beginning of the end. Subnational clients, tribal elders and militia commanders concluded that the Taleban were likely to come out on top and began shifting their allegiances to the Taleban. This led to what Afghanistan scholars have described as a “cascading effect” which ultimately led to the Republic's rapid collapse.³⁷

To those watching closely, however, the decay of the Republic and its political elite was deeply rooted and perhaps already terminal before the summer of 2021. Ghani and his inner circle's last-minute policies merely hastened the collapse of the ANSF and the Afghan state.

³⁷ For details see William Maley, *The Afghanistan Wars* 3rd ed, (London: Red Globe Press, 2021), pp. 149-155.

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Cover photo:

Afghan National Army non-commissioned officer candidates stand in formation during their oath-taking ceremony at Camp Gazi, Kabul, Afghanistan.

Photo: Eliezer Gabriel\ISAF, 25 October 2010

Source: Flickr <https://bit.ly/3Hc0YW3>