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# **Analysis: Taliban Search Operation in Kabul and Beyond the Capital**

HEART OF ASIA SOCIETY

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The Heart of Asia Society works through research, dialogue, and policy analysis and remains dedicated to a vision of Afghanistan that safeguards the rights of men and women of all ethnicities and religions, respects and values diversity, and promotes inclusivity and agency for its citizens. HAS also works with partners in Canada, the US, Europe, and the Pacific, urging them to remain engaged and advance peace, stability, and prosperity in Afghanistan and the region.

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## **Taliban Search Operation in Kabul and Beyond the Capital**

The Taliban search and clear operation in Kabul and some provinces in the north and east was modestly successful in realizing the stated Taliban objective of fighting a rising tide of criminality and confiscating arms illegally owned by people. The unstated but obvious Taliban objective was to conduct the operation as a precautionary measure against a growing penetration of the Resistance in northern parts of Kabul and the north and eastern provinces. Taliban's lack of experience and capacity, limited intelligence, and heavy-handed treatment of an already disgruntled population, including disregard for their privacy, have been key factors for the operation to fall far short of securing the stated objectives. That said, the operation has had some psychological effects in disrupting people's routines, and in this sense, it has been a success.

### **Launching the Operation**

On 25 February 2022, the Taliban launched a search and clear operation in Kabul City, focusing on police districts in the north of the city. The stated intent of the process was to arrest "criminals and evildoers" and confiscate arms and vehicles of the former government hidden away by people. Taliban propaganda assured Kabul residents of their safety and respect for their privacy while asking them to cooperate with the Taliban forces. To stay true to their words, the Taliban disseminated propaganda video clips showing females preceding Taliban fighters while entering homes and asking for entry permission, a copycat of the modus operandi of former government and international forces.

The Taliban depicts the operation as a success, resulting in the arrest of dozens of "criminals" and ISKP members and confiscating of thousands of arms, including unearthing some arms caches. While the Taliban exaggerate the result of their operation, they have indeed seized many arms, ammunition, and vehicles from people's homes and some resistance hideouts. That said, people that HAS talked to pointed to some uglier aspects of the Taliban operation. For instance, people allege that Taliban fighters involved in the operations have engaged in stealing, robbery, and arbitrary detention of people

under dubious pretensions. For example, the Taliban have confiscated people's private vehicles and questioned how they have come to possess a certain amount of money, and thus have confiscated the money. Furthermore, there are instances of Taliban fighters allegedly committing robbery after determining people's wealth during the operation. For example, a resident of police district 11 in Kabul city said that after the Taliban's search of their home during the day, unknown individuals bearing Taliban IDs returned at night for a double-search whereby they tied the hands of his family members and stole some gold and 40 thousand dollars.

Moreover, beyond the claim of fighting criminality, there are some underlying fears and insecurities on the Taliban's part for the launch and concentration of the effort largely in a specific geography. The ongoing search operation extends over large parts of Kabul city. Still, since its inception, it has become apparent that the main Taliban effort is concentrated in the northern police districts of the city (PDs 4, 11, 15, and 17). The Taliban has claimed that the target areas have been infested by "criminality." Still, fighting criminality is merely an excuse, while the untold but obvious Taliban effort is against the resistance cells growing in these areas.

The police districts mentioned above form a cluster with some distinct overarching socio-political characteristics. While the population in this cluster has some heterogeneity, most of them descend from a northern background, mostly from the Tajik majority province, which used to be affiliated with the anti-Taliban resistance in the 1990s and later the post-2001 government. With numerous families being split between Kabul and their native provinces in the north, contact, affiliation, or sympathy with the resistance against the Taliban regime is rather natural. For this reason, the Taliban search teams' behavior was primarily determined by the following question: "what are your province and district?" On the other hand, while scattered across the city, ISKP also has had entrenched cells in this part of Kabul city from where they planned and staged attacks all over Kabul.

## Outcome

The ongoing operation will likely disrupt activities of the resistance cells and possibly of ISKP in the short term. Moreover, it is already apparent that the process has had a terrorizing impact on the general population, an outcome to the Taliban's advantage. But in the longer term, it will be a political and security failure because, on the one hand, the Taliban lack sufficient credible intelligence reports on its potential targets, nor do they have enough force to conduct a systematic search operation in densely populated and largely unplanned settlements where the majority of its residents are believed to be uncooperative with the Taliban regime.

More importantly, the operation has failed to meet its intended target due to a lack of local support. For cultural reasons and constant intrusion into people's private spheres by various forces and governments over the past four decades, the Afghan people have developed a strong sense of aversion toward operations such as the one now undertaken by the Taliban. The abuses and mistreatment of locals have further exacerbated the above situation by the Taliban fighters. Information gathered by HAS shows that during the ongoing operation, the Taliban fighters have resorted to beating people (former security officers), falling on some houses in the dead of night while, as a rule, the operation is conducted during the day, breaking down locks and household items, detaining people under dubious pretexts, generally terrorizing people, particularly women and children which on one occasion in Khair Khana area resulted in people standing up to the Taliban and criticizing their behavior. Such behavior has antagonized people, at least some of whom do not consider the Taliban a legitimate governing entity. The above factors deprive the Taliban of a critical asset to succeed in such operations: intelligence and denial of anti-Taliban elements.

In conclusion, this operation indicates a forward-looking Taliban security policy slowly taking shape, alarmed by events on the ground, some intelligence, and perhaps more paranoia. The absence of support from the local population and the Taliban's limitations of capability will ensure the failure of such operations. Observing Taliban behavior since their emergence in the 1990s and light of their current drive for consolidation, the continued loss of such efforts will likely compel the Taliban to resort to harsher measures in the future to extract local support and establish "law and order" which will, in turn, create more distrust and erode people's confidence.