

The HAG quarterly report analyses access restrictions encountered by humanitarian workers during the first quarter of 2021 (Q1 2021). The report is based on the Access Monitoring and Reporting Framework, which records access impediments encountered by humanitarians in Afghanistan and logs them according to seven different categories of access constraints, which are then further divided into different types of access incidents.

Access Constraint	Q4 2020	Q1 2021	Tendency
1) Interference in the Implementation of Humanitarian Activities	88	115	↑
2) Levy Request	18	19	↑
3) Military Operation and Kinetic Activity	94	56	↓
4) Movement Restriction	52	128	↑
5) Physical Environment and Lack of Infrastructure	12	11	↓
6) Violence/Threats Against Humanitarian Personnel/Assets/Facilities	71	107	↑
7) Landmines/UXO	0	0	→
Overall Number of Access Constraints	335	436	↑

Summary

- Humanitarian partners in Afghanistan continue to deliver much needed services to people in need despite a continuously challenging access environment;
- In Q1 2021, the HAG recorded 436 access impediments, compared to 335 in Q4 2020;
- The increase was driven by an increase in interferences by conflict parties and violence against humanitarians;
- The Taliban initiated most access constraints in Q1 2021 (302), followed by ACG (46), ANSF (33) and GoA (12);
- Registration requests by the Taliban remained one of the key issues for humanitarians;
- The number of levy requests remained stable, with the Taliban requesting for direct and indirect taxation from humanitarians;
- In Q1 2021, nine humanitarians were killed and 22 wounded;
- 24 humanitarians were abducted and 35 detained by the Taliban in Q1 2021.

Overall Access Constraints

In Q1 2021, the HAG recorded 442 access constraints, compared to 335 in Q4 2020 and 194 in Q1 2020. What looks like a significant increase from Q4 2020 to Q1 2021 is mainly related to an improved reporting mechanism for movement restrictions, which led to a nearly threefold increase in logged movement restrictions. Farah, Kunduz and Kandahar were the provinces that logged most access constraints in Q1 2021, with Farah logging most movement restrictions, while Kunduz and Kandahar recorded high numbers of violence against humanitarians as well as interferences (see figure 1).

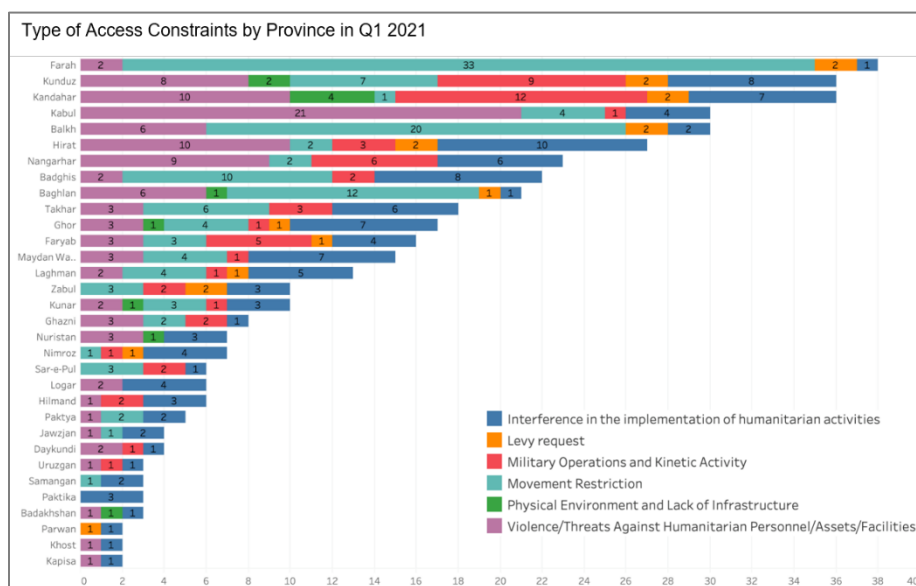


Figure 1: Farah, Kunduz and Kandahar logged most access constraints in Q1 2021

Most incidents were initiated by the Taliban (302), followed by ACG-authored incidents (46), with ANSF and GoA members initiating 33 and 12 access constraints respectively.

The HAG also recorded an increase in access constraints logged under interferences in the implementation of humanitarian activities and violence against humanitarians, both categories increasing by 30 and 50 per cent respectively. Interferences were mainly driven by an increase in interferences in programming, with registration demands by the Taliban being one of the key issues this quarter.

Under the category of violence against humanitarians, the HAG recorded an increase in threats against humanitarian staff, robberies as well as a continuously high number of abductions and detentions. While constraints logged as interference with humanitarian activities were mainly authored by the Taliban, incidents defined as violence against humanitarians were

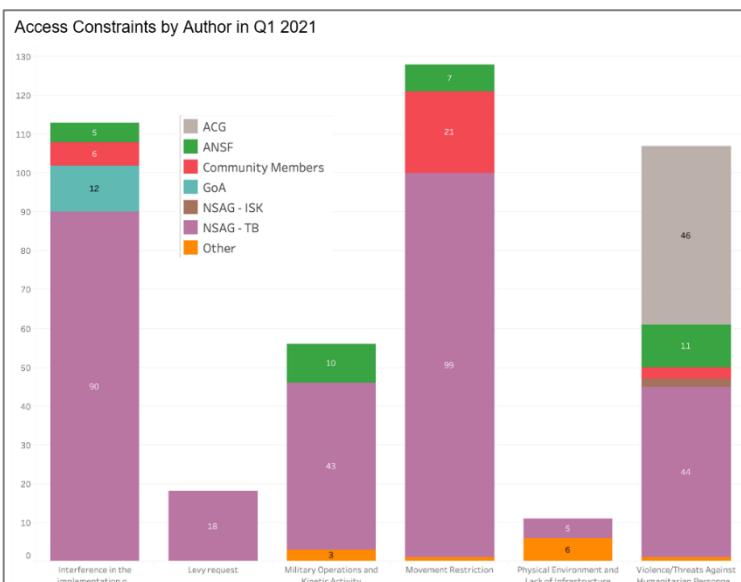


Figure 2: ACGs authored most violence/threats against humanitarians

driven by ACG and Taliban alike who initiated 46 and 44 incidents respectively (*see figure 2*). It was often difficult to distinguish between ideologically and criminally motivated incidents, with criminals regularly claiming to be members of NSAGs – a successful tactic to create even more fear among their victims.

The number of access constraints stemming from military operations and kinetic activity decreased by 40 per cent, from 94 incidents in Q4 2020 to 56 in Q1 2021. The drop can be mainly attributed to a significant reduction in access constraints due to ongoing fighting. This is in line with an overall reduction in fighting in the first three months of 2021, compared to Q4 2020.

The number of levy requests has been stable for the last three quarters, indicating that despite advocacy efforts at highest level, the issue remains unresolved.

In Q1 2021, the HAG recorded the killing of nine humanitarian workers in five different incidents. One NGO security guard was killed due to indirect fire collaterally impacting a health facility. The other four instances were targeted killings, including one directed against an armed IO escort: On 11 February, an IO road mission traveling from Jalalabad to Kabul and escorted by two DPS vehicles was attacked by Taliban small arms fire. While the IO vehicles safely reached a nearby ANP HQ and no IO personnel was wounded, one escort vehicle lost control and swerved into the river that is passing along the highway. The five escort personnel were subsequently shot by Taliban members.

The access environment is expected to remain challenging in the coming months. Interferences with the implementation of humanitarian activities by all parties to the conflict are expected to continue, with principled humanitarian action and local level engagement with conflict actors essential tools to address these issues. The political insecurity together with COVID-19 continues to negatively impact Afghanistan's economic situation, which will likely translate in a continuously high number of criminally motivated incidents targeting the civilian population, including humanitarian workers. The April announcement of US President Biden to extend the 1st May deadline and to withdraw US troops by 11 September 2021 was followed by Taliban statements, indicating that they considered this a breach of the US-Taliban agreement of February 2020. This might lead to an escalation in conflict activity, with the Taliban likely to restart attacks on provincial DACs. HAG records indicate a correlation between an increase in ongoing fighting and an increase in access constraints, including collateral damage, IEDs incidents and movement restrictions.

1) Interference in the Implementation of Humanitarian Activities

Access Constraint	Incident Type	Q4 2020	Q1 2021	Tendency
1) Interference in the Implementation of Humanitarian Activities	Bureaucratic Impediment	7	6	↓
	Interference with beneficiary selection	11	12	↑
	Interference with programming	64	91	↑
	Interference with staff recruitment	6	6	→
	Total	88	115	↑

In Q1 2021, the HAG recorded 115 interferences in the implementation of humanitarian activities, compared to 88 incidents recorded in Q4 2020. The Taliban continued to author most interference attempts (92) followed by GoA (12), with community and ANSF members authoring six and five incidents respectively (see figure 3). These interferences directly impacted humanitarian operations and resulted in at least four relocations of programs, two permanent halts of program and 60 temporary halts of program and/or closures of facilities. Engagement with conflict parties was key for facilities to reopen and programs to restart but it is likely that in some cases the reopening was based on partners adhering to at least some extent to demands and conditions put by conflict parties.

While the number of interferences with recruitment and beneficiary selection remained relatively stable over the last 12 months, the number of interferences with programming has increased steadily, with 91 incidents logged in Q1 2021, compared to 29 in Q1 2020, and 64 in Q4 2020 (see figure 4). This increase highlights the increasingly challenging access environment humanitarian partners are operating in, with interferences of conflict parties making principled humanitarian action a daily challenge. The Taliban reaching out to partners and requesting them to register through a specific form, including submission of sensitive details such as budget details and donor contracts remains one of the major issues for humanitarians.

In 22 incidents, the Taliban interfered with the programming of health partners, demanding for upgrades in their services, including additional medicines, equipment as well as better trained staff. In a number of cases, the Taliban requested for health facilities to either be relocated from government to Taliban-controlled territory or to construct new facilities in their areas of control. These demands for upgrades in services are somewhat in contradiction with the Taliban in at least six instances suspending supervision and monitoring

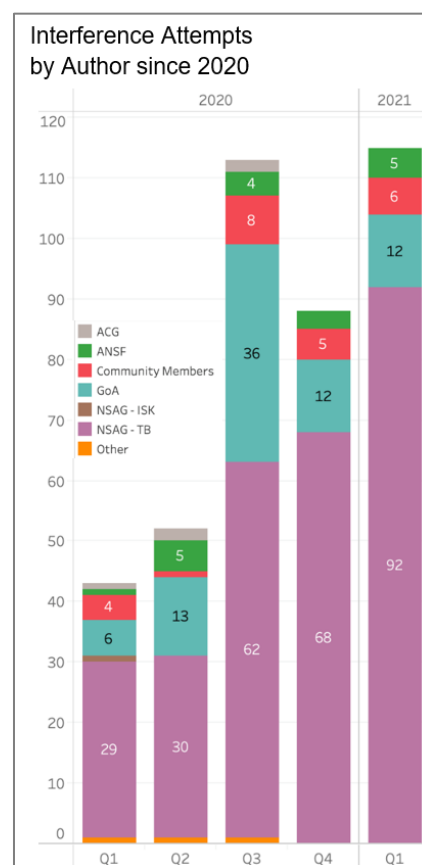


Figure 3: Q3 2020 and Q1 2021 logged the highest numbers of interference attempts

activities of health partners operating in their areas of control. While some partners believed this to be a means to pressure them into conceding to Taliban demands, other explanations could be that the Taliban was trying to hide a potential militarization of some of these health facilities or mistrust towards health staff not local to the area.

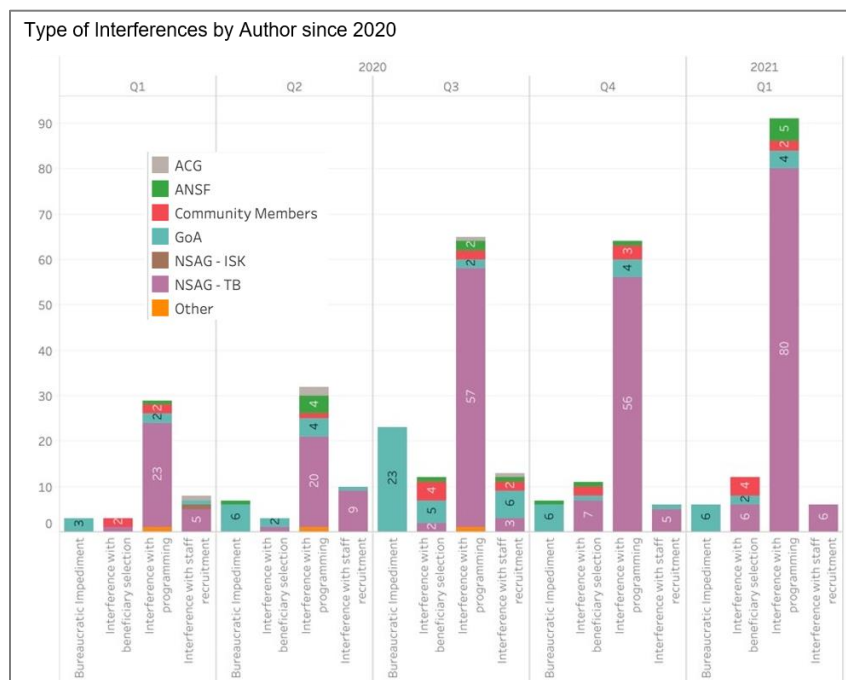


Figure 4: The number of interferences with programming has tripled since Q1 2020

scheme is somewhat similar to the health insurance scheme in 2020, where international NGOs were requested to purchase a local health insurance for the renewal of work permits for their international staff, despite them being already covered by their own health insurance. While this issue was addressed at highest government level, and believed to be resolved, the HAG recorded another incident in Q1 of a government employee rejecting an NGO's medical certificates from a renowned Kabul hospital. The employee pressured the NGO to get medical certificates from another hospital for the exorbitant price of 150USD per individual, compared to 20USD paid for the initial certificate. A number of health partners faced difficulties with the Pharmaceuticals Quality Control Exemption renewal process, with partners having their stock stranded due to the newly established government authority for quality control of Drugs and food having slow and lengthy sample testing procedures.

The HAG recorded six interference attempts with staff recruitment in Q1, which is on par with the six incidents logged in Q4 2020. All six interferences with recruitment were authored by the Taliban. In at least three cases, the Taliban requested jobs for their affiliates in return for their cooperation and guaranteeing staff security. A widely circulated email sent to at least 10 different NGO and IO partners by someone identifying as a Taliban member and asking for recruitment of Taliban affiliates created some concern. Following analysis of the mail and reach out to Taliban interlocutors in Doha, it was assessed that the author had no direct affiliation with the Taliban and the mail was likely criminally motivated.

In Q1 2021, the HAG recorded six bureaucratic impediments, which is on par with the seven incidents recorded in Q4 2020. Partners raised government requirements for MoUs as well as continued uncertainty about the new NGO law as the main issues related to bureaucratic impediments.

Some impediments were directly linked to Covid-19: in March, partners reported that Kabul airport authorities seemed to only accept PCR tests from a limited number of hospitals. Rather than being guided by medical advice, this seems to be a money-making scheme that also creates security and safety concerns for partners as these suggested hospitals do not necessarily have good safety and security measures. This

In Q1 2021, the HAG recorded 12 instances of interference with the beneficiary selection of partner organizations, compared to 11 incidents in Q4 2020. Taliban authored six of these interferences, with community members and GoA personnel authoring four and two incidents respectively. Conflict parties attempted to shift assistance to different locations as well as to add additional individuals to beneficiary lists, with the objective of accommodating their constituencies. There were also several cases of conflict parties trying to get access to beneficiary lists, which is contrary to the JOPs and poses serious protection risks for beneficiaries. In this regard, the newly developed OCHA data sharing protocol is timely and should be used in advocacy with conflict actors. Community members attempted to interfere with beneficiary selection in four incidents. This could indicate insufficient or absence of community engagement during the project planning phase when beneficiary selection criteria should be explained to the community and elders who have a vital role to play in creating local acceptance and avoiding civil unrest during beneficiary selection and distribution processes.

2) Levy Request

Access Constraint	Incident Type	Q4 2020	Q1 2021	Tendency
2) Levy Request	In cash	18	19	↑
	In kind	0	0	→
	Total	18	19	↑

Levy requests by the Taliban continued to be an issue, with requests for taxation often following the sharing of project details. In Q1 2021, the HAG recorded 19 levy requests, compared to 18 such requests in Q4 2020, with all of the levy requests being initiated by the Taliban. At least 10 of the requests resulted in a temporary suspension of programming, with five partners confirming that they managed to resolve the taxation requests through local and regional level engagement with the Taliban, indicating how essential engagement is to resolve access issues with Taliban.

Three of the requests were indirect levy requests, with the Taliban approaching humanitarian contractors as well as beneficiaries for taxation. It is interesting to note, that the only two incidents where the HAG received confirmation that taxation was paid, were incidents of indirect taxation. In one instance, the Taliban taxed a contractor transporting humanitarian goods despite the contractor carrying a Taliban permission letter with him. In the second instance, the Taliban levied 10 per cent of a cash assistance post distribution from the community. In a similar incident, the Taliban offered a partner to tax beneficiaries post-distribution by taking 10 per cent of in-kind aid items as an alternative to a direct tax payment from the partner based on the overall project budget.

In February 2021, a letter by the Taliban Commission of Mines and Industries was circulated among humanitarian partners in Faryab. The letter specified taxation to be paid for different construction work and materials. While the letter did not have significant impact on humanitarian work, it is likely of concern for those partners employing contractors for construction projects.

An incident in Hirat highlighted the lack of coherence on taxation issues between district and provincial level Taliban. An NGO who had previously managed to negotiate a tax exemption agreement was approached by district level Taliban who requested for taxation for a cash for work project. When the NGO highlighted their tax exemption agreement, the District NGO Commissioner claimed that the levy request was based on a new policy of provincial authorities.

3) Military Operation and Kinetic Activity

Access Constraint	Incident Type	Q4 2020	Q1 2021	Tendency
3) Military Operation and Kinetic Activity	Airstrike	0	2	↑
	Attack with heavy weaponry	12	11	↓
	Crossfire	5	4	↓
	IED	16	12	↓
	Ongoing Fighting	60	27	↓
	Search Operation	1	0	↓
	Total	94	56	↓

In Q1 2021, the HAG recorded at least 56 access constraints resulting from military operations and kinetic activity. The number of access constraints in the first quarter of 2021 significantly surpassed the levels recorded during the same period of Q1 of 2020, but were at a much lower level than incident numbers in Q4 2020, when humanitarian actors were affected in at least 94 instances dictated by an overall high level of conflict activity across the country (see figure 5). It is, however, essential to indicate that the overall number of access constraints resulting from military operations and kinetic activity in Q1 2021 is likely to rise by a margin of five to 15 per cent due to late reporting from partners.

The decrease in the number of access constraints relating from military operations and kinetic activity in Q1 2021, compared to Q4 2020 is likely attributed to the lower level of conflict activity and military operations by the Taliban, partially limited by weather conditions but also political developments, including a meeting in Moscow and the upcoming Turkey conference.

During Q1 2021, at least two humanitarianists lost their lives, and two others were wounded due to kinetic activity. In March, in Kunar Province, an MIED attached to a female doctor's private vehicle detonated while the victim was traveling to her duty station. Taking into account that the area where the incident took place was previously significantly influenced by ISK, it is also possible to suggest the vehicle was targeted in line with the recent attacks against women in the Eastern Region, which is discussed more broadly in the "violence against the humanitarian actors" section of this report.

The second fatality in Q1 2021 was attributed to indirect rocket fire, most likely fired by the Taliban towards ANSF positions in Andar District of Ghazni. Due to inaccurate fire, a single projectile impacted against a

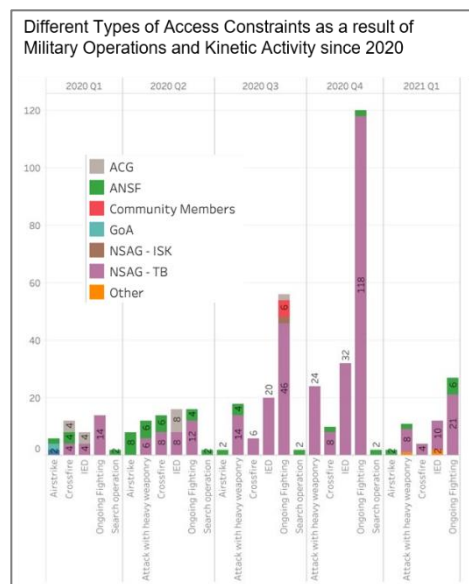


Figure 5: Access constraints stemming from ongoing fighting decreased from Q4 2020 to Q1 2021

local health facility run by an NGO, killing the security guard who was there at the time of the attack. Another incident affecting a health facility due to inaccurate fire and resulting in a humanitarian casualty was recorded in January when during crossfire between ANSF and the Taliban, a projectile impacted against an NGO-run clinic and wounded a nurse.

Overall in Q1 2021, following the same pattern as in previous years, the Taliban remained the main author of access constraints relating from military operation and kinetic activity. However, the number of incidents affecting humanitarian workers initiated by ANSF significantly increased in Q1 2021, compared to the last two quarters of 2020. The HAG recorded at least ten access constraints resulting from ANSF activity compared to three and four registered in Q3 and Q4 2020 correspondently. Most of these constraints were the result of ANSF clearing and targeting operations against NSAGs and criminal elements, collaterally affecting humanitarian access. This increase can be partially attributed to ANSF attempts to stabilize their posture and to regain ground control over areas lost to the Taliban during 2020. This quarter March logged the lowest level of security incidents affecting humanitarian actors as a result of kinetic activity, with ANSF and the Taliban both authoring six incidents each.

The geographical distribution of access constraints stemming from military operations continued to correlate with the overall conflict activity around the country, with Kandahar logging the highest level of restrains to humanitarian operations (11 incidents), followed by Kunduz (nine incidents), Nangarhar (six incidents) and Faryab (five incidents).

In April, US President Biden announced to withdraw US troops no later than 11 September 2021, thereby postponing the initial 1 May deadline. This will likely antagonize the Taliban leadership and a potential spike in conflict activity following the May deadline is possible. As part of the US-Taliban agreement of February 2020, the Taliban agreed to refrain from attacks on urban centers. However, the postponement of the withdrawal might incite the Taliban to shift their focus from rural areas to densely populated urban centers targeting members of GoA/ANSF, thereby increasing the risk of collateral involvement of humanitarian workers.

A single airstrike affecting an NGO was recorded in February in Faryab when AAF reportedly targeted a gathering of Taliban members in the vicinity of an NGO-run school resulting in structural damage to the building. The overall number of airstrikes significantly decreased due to a drop in IMF operations as part of the US-Taliban agreement. While in this case it remained unclear whether the organization had submitted their coordinates to the NSL, the anticipated handover of the NSL to ANSF is a key priority for the HAG.

In Q1 2020, the HAG logged at least 12 IED incidents affecting humanitarians, compared to four such incidents in Q1 2020 and 16 in Q4 2020. It is expected that NSAGs continue to focus on IED warfare in major urban centers, thereby significantly increasing the potential for collateral involvement for civilians, including humanitarian personnel.

Overall IED incidents in Afghanistan (not directly impacting humanitarian activities)

In Q1 2021, the HAG recorded 1646 IED incidents in its specific IED database. The predominant number of IED incidents was attributed to the render safe procedures (RSP), taking approximately 50 per cent (825) of all IED incidents in Q1 2021 in Afghanistan. RSP were predominantly recorded within the borders or in the vicinity of the major provincial capitals. This is most likely linked to two factors: a large number of potential targets for NSAGs and the relatively high capacity of ANSF EOD teams as compared to their capacity in remote areas.

The second most common type of IED incidents were roadside IED, accounting for 20 per cent of all recorded IED incidents in Q1 2021. Overall, roadside IEDs are expected to remain one of the primary types of NSAG asymmetric attacks in rural areas of Afghanistan. Roadside IEDs are generally victim-operated and therefore do not require a spotter or attacker, thereby decreasing the exposure of NSAG members. Roadside IED incidents generally occur along routes known to be frequented by transiting ANSF and GoA personnel but also known for limited ANSF posture in terms of checkpoints or patrols. Therefore, humanitarian personnel operating in remote areas are considered to be more exposed to such type of IEDs. For organizations operating in remote areas, it essential to build a level of acceptance among the local community and to use their knowledge of the areas prior to conducting missions to mitigate the risk of being affected by roadside IEDs.

Roadside IEDs are more common in the southern and eastern provinces: out of 324 roadside IED incidents at least 185 were recorded in Nangarhar (66), Kandahar (61), Hilmand (23), Kunar (20), Khost (15) and Zabul (15). The five most contaminated districts in terms of IED incidents in Q1 2021 remained Kabul (82), Jalalabad (78), Arghandab (77), Khost (75) and Kandahar (66) (see figure 6).

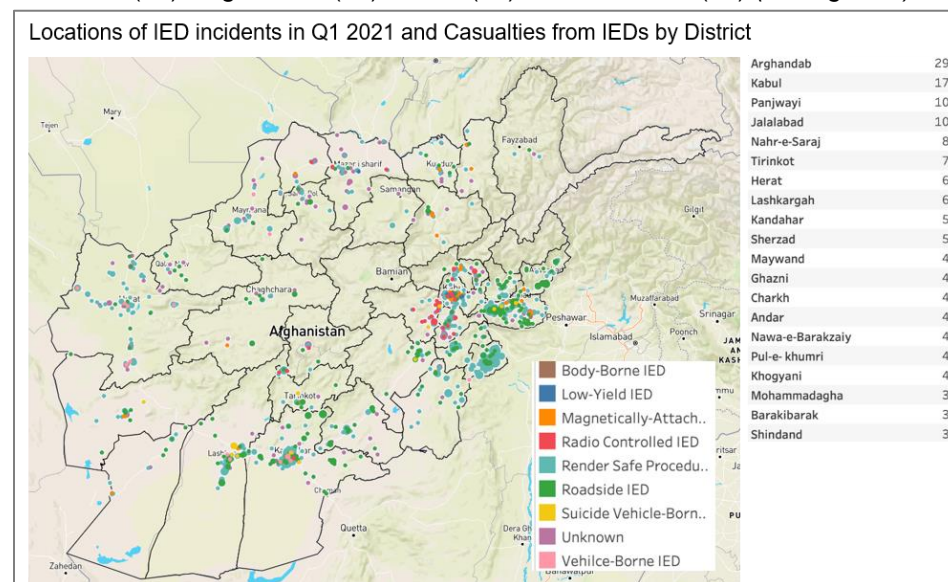
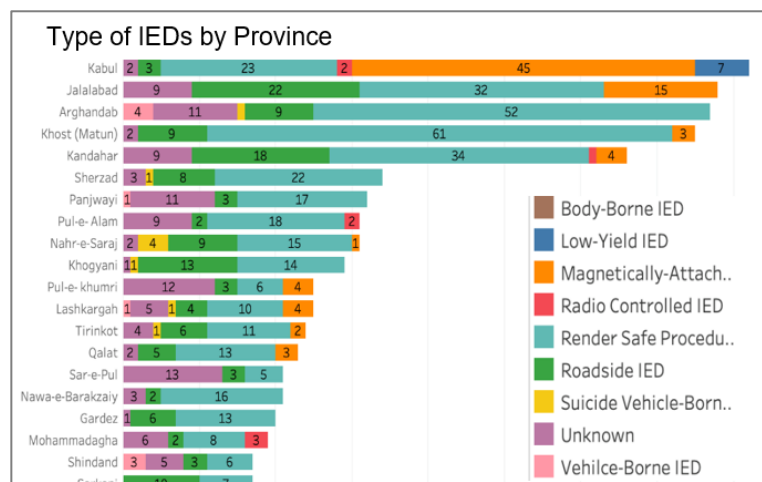


Figure 6: Arghandab and Kabul logged the highest numbers of IED casualties

Kabul registered the highest number of IED incidents, logging also most MIED incidents (45) (see figure 7). Arghandab registered the highest number of IED related casualties, with at least 295 military and civilian casualties in Q1 2021.

Figure 7: Kabul registered most MIEDs



Despite an overall decrease in conflict activity countrywide, the number of IED incidents remained relatively unchanged, with 553 in January, 560 in February, and 533 IEDs logged in March. There is no indication of a drop in the number of IED incidents even in the light of Ramadan and Eid al Fitr, with IEDs remaining a significant threat to humanitarian operations.

4) Movement Restrictions

Access Constraint	Incident Type	Q4 2020	Q1 2021	Tendency
4) Movement Restriction	Checkpoint	43	70	↑
	Demonstration	6	22	↑
	Other	1	0	↓
	Road Closure (not linked to weather hazard)	2	36	↑
	Total	52	128	↑

In Q1 2021, the HAG recorded 128 movement restrictions affecting humanitarian operations, compared to 52 movement restrictions in Q4 2020. The main reason for the increase is linked to the HAG improving its reporting mechanism for checkpoints and road closures.

At least 20 per cent of the movement restrictions in Q1 2021 were attributed to demonstrations taking place along the main roads.

In at least 36 instances, ANSF closed the roads to prevent civilians, including humanitarians, from being affected in active clashes between ANSF and NSAGs. There were no significant geographical patterns in regards to such incidents, with most provinces recording one to three such incidents in Q1 2021, except for Balkh Province, which logged 12 incidents predominantly along Mazar-Shiberghan Road.

In Q1 2021, the HAG recorded 70 checkpoints, 67 of which were attributed to the Taliban. Half of the Taliban checkpoints were recorded in along the Farah-Bala Buluk Road, one of the most contested road segments in Afghanistan. Taliban checkpoints have two major functions, they allow to search for GoA and ANSF personnel as well as to collect road taxes from commercial vehicles. Taliban members manning the checkpoints are not searching for humanitarians, although they are not protected from being searched and investigated when stopped at a checkpoint.

It is expected that parties to the conflict will attempt to improve and fortify their current positions, potentially increasing the number and density of their checkpoints along the roads. Humanitarian movement is expected to rise in line with the humanitarian drought response; therefore, the frequency of incidents affecting humanitarian access on the roads is expected to increase in the coming months.

5) Physical Environment and Lack of Infrastructure

Access Constraint	Incident Type	Q4 2020	Q1 2021	Tendency
5) Physical Environment and Lack of Infrastructure	Lack of Phone Coverage	5	3	↓
	Natural Disaster	4	4	→
	Lack of Road Infrastructure	3	4	↑
	Total	12	11	↓

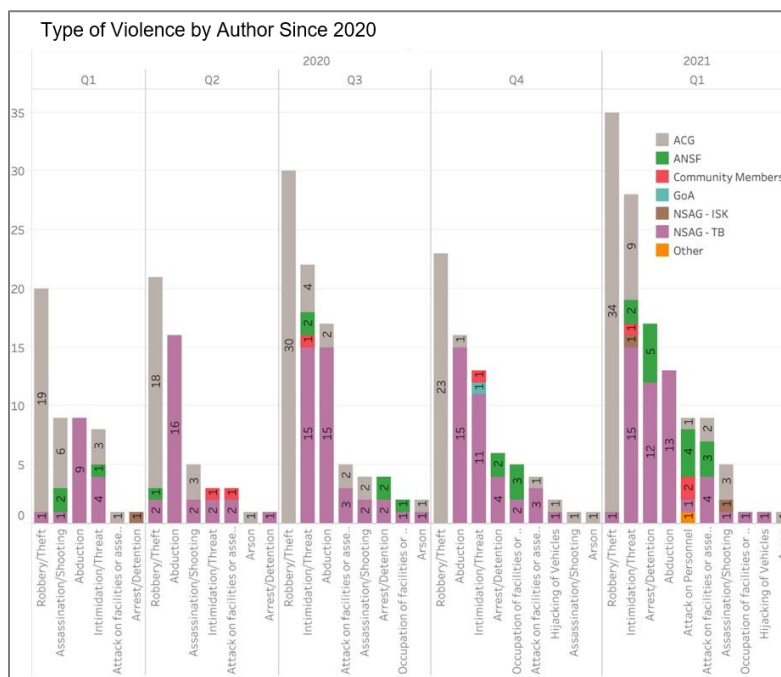
The 11 incidents recorded in Q1 2021 are on par with the 12 incidents logged in Q4 but clearly below the 25 physical constraints recorded in Q1 2020. The lower number is due to a mild winter this year which did not significantly impact road access. In five instances, critical infrastructure was impacted by the Taliban: In Arghandab and Panjwayi districts of Kandahar Province, Taliban destroyed bridges, thereby impeding movement of humanitarian supplies. In March, in Kunduz, Taliban disconnected the Salam GSM and internet services to Kunduz City by destroying the optical fiber, thereby disrupting the only internet and telephone option active during the night in Kunduz.

6) Violence/Threats Against Humanitarian Personnel/Assets/Facilities

Access Constraint	Incident Type	Q4 2020	Q1 2021	Tendency
6) Violence/Threats Against Humanitarian Personnel/Assets/Facilities	Abduction	16	13	↓
	Arrest/Detention	6	14	↑
	Arson	1	1	→
	Assassination/Shooting	1	5	↑
	Attack on facility/asset	4	9	↑
	Attack on personnel	-	8	New Incident Type
	Intimidation/Threat	13	23	↑
	Hijacking of Vehicles	2	1	↓
	Occupation of facilities or assets	5	1	↓
	Robbery	23	32	↑
	Total	71	107	↑

In Q1, the HAG recorded 107 incidents stemming from violence against humanitarians, a 50 per cent increase compared to the 71 incidents recorded in Q4 and more than twice the numbers recorded during the same period in 2020. Most incidents were initiated by ACG (46), closely followed by Taliban-authored incidents (44), with ANSF authoring another 11 (see figure 8).

Figure 8:
Robberies and thefts constitute the largest numbers of violent incidents



The number of abductions and detentions remains concerningly high, with 13 abductions and 14 arrests/detentions recorded this quarter¹. With the exception of four arrests, all abductions and detentions were authored by the Taliban, with a total of 44 humanitarian withhold for at least a few hours, compared to 25 humanitarians in Q4 2020. In 10 instances, humanitarians were released within less than 24 hours, with most of the detentions occurring at Taliban-manned checkpoints, with Taliban members trying to verify the identity of the humanitarians. In two instances, humanitarians were detained despite traveling with a written Taliban permission letter, indicating that prior notification and engagement is key but no guarantee for unimpeded access. Local acceptance and the support of local elders was essential for the quick release of these humanitarians. In 13 instances, humanitarians were kept in Taliban-custody for more than 24 hours, with the abductions lasting from between four to 19 days, with a number of humanitarians still being in custody at the time of reporting. The most common reasons for extended custody were alleged affiliation with the government or ANSF as well as lack of coordination.

This quarter, the HAG also recorded four arrests of humanitarian staff by government forces, with NDS initiating three of the arrests, investigating humanitarian partners for alleged support to NSAGs. Instances of NDS investigating humanitarian partners for alleged support to NSAGs are likely significantly underreported, with partners often unsure about their rights when it comes to engagement with NSAGs. Health partners due to their work along frontlines and due to their mandate under International Humanitarian Law (IHL) to deliver medical assistance to all persons based on need, including parties to the conflict 'hors de combat', are particularly exposed. 60% of all NDS arrests recorded by the HAG in 2020 and 2021 involved health partners. OCHA continues to advocate with parties to the conflict for the respect of IHL and supports partners wrongly accused of wrongdoings to conduct their work in line with the JOPs and humanitarian principles.

In Q1 2021, the HAG recorded 22 acts of violence against humanitarians or humanitarian assets, including five assassinations/shootings, nine attacks on facilities/assets and eight attacks on humanitarian personnel². For comparison, in 2020, the HAG recorded a total of 32 acts of violence against humanitarians or humanitarian assets. Four of these incidents resulted in the death of two humanitarian staff, with another eight individuals closely working with humanitarian organizations also losing their life. The two humanitarians killed were both working for health organizations although it is assessed that they were targeted due to personal disputes and not because of their work. On 11 February 2021, the Taliban attacked the DPS escort of an IO road mission traveling from Jalalabad to Kabul with small arms fire. One escort vehicle lost control due to multiple bullets impacting and the attack resulted in the killing of five escort personnel, while no IO staff member was impacted. On 30 March 2021, unknown individuals killed three female government polio vaccinators in Jalalabad City on the second day of a three-day national immunization campaign launched across the country. While no one claimed this latest attack, the targeting profile and the attack method fit the modus operandi of ISK. Even if humanitarian staff were not directly targeted in these two attacks, their victims were closely affiliated with humanitarian operations and their killing had a chilling effect on the broader humanitarian community.

Out of nine attacks on humanitarian facilities/assets, four were directed against ambulances, with three attacks initiated by ANSF members targeting ambulances transporting injured Taliban fighters. During the attacks, three injured individuals were killed and a caretaker traveling in the ambulance was wounded. In a fourth incident, the Taliban opened fire at an ambulance, wounding two NGO personnel. It remains unclear why the Taliban targeted the ambulance.

¹ If a humanitarian is taken by the Taliban but released within 24 hours, it is counted as a detention. If the individual is held for more than 24 hours, it is logged as an abduction.

² Attacks on personnel include physical acts of violence but exclude shootings.

In Q1 2021, the HAG recorded 23 threats/intimidations against humanitarian personnel, that is already half the number of all threats logged in 2020. 52 per cent of all threats were attributed to the Taliban, with another 35 per cent issued by ACGs although it was often difficult to make a clear distinction between ideologically and criminally motivated threats. Six threats were clearly financially motivated, with victims asked for ransom payments by both ACG and Taliban-affiliated members. In two of these instances, the victims were female staff members. Women and girls were the target of another two threats, both of them initiated by community members: In Pul-e Khumri an IO staff member was physically harassed by an unknown individual on her way to work and in Arghandab District, an unknown individual threw stones at an NGO-run school and posted a threat letter to the school gate, warning the NGO to stop supporting girls education in the area or face harsh consequences. The threat reportedly resulted in an 80 per cent drop of girl's attendance at the school.

HAG Recommendations:

- Partners operating in Taliban controlled, or influenced areas require a coherent, well-developed access strategy, including on strong engagement with local Taliban;
- While local implementing partners and community elders can play an important role in facilitating engagement with Taliban, the HAG cautions against attempts to fully outsource outreach to external partners and advises to consider direct engagement at a local level;
- The HAG advocates to find local solutions for local issues and only elevating issues to the TPC in Doha as a last resort when district and provincial-level engagement proved unsuccessful;
- Humanitarian negotiations should be guided by the Humanitarian and Joint Operating Principles;
- Humanitarian negotiations, including on levy exemptions, are more likely to succeed when carried by a collective of humanitarian partners, as we are stronger when we speak in a joint and unified voice rather than trying to resolve issues on our own;
- Unprincipled humanitarian action by individual organizations has negative impacts for the broader humanitarian community and, ultimately, the people we aim to serve;
- Humanitarian partners directly approached by the Taliban for registration are encouraged to engage them locally, without agreeing to submit any formal documentation;
- Humanitarian partners are encouraged to report access incidents to the HAG to help understand broader access dynamics.

The HAG remains available to support partners on any access related issue.

Abbreviations

AAF	Afghan Air Force
ACG	Armed Criminal Group
ANP	Afghan National Police
ANSF	Afghan National Security Force
HAG	Humanitarian Access Group
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
GoA	Government of Afghanistan
IO	International Organization
NDS	National Directorate of Security
NSAG	Non-State Armed Group
SVBIED	Suicide Vehicle Borne Improvised Explosive Device
TPC	Taliban Political Commission

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