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A violent impediment: the evolution of insurgent operations in Kandahar province 2003–07

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Theorizing about Taliban operations in Afghanistan has its limits and it is possible that Kabul-centric strategies do not adequately address the unique circumstances of each region in the country. How exactly has the Taliban gone about attaining its objectives in Kandahar province and how have those approaches evolved since 2002? And how have the Taliban adapted to coalition forces' attempts to compete with the insurgency and stamp it out? The answers to these questions are critical in the formulation of any counterinsurgency approach to Afghanistan.

Keywords: Taliban; Afghanistan; Operation Enduring Freedom, International Security Assistance Force; Kandahar; suicide bombing

God as our witness, if you do not follow our instructions, you will die by the bullets of the mujahedeen. Your death will be your responsibility.

Taliban 'night letter'

There has been little public domain analysis of insurgent operations in Afghanistan in the years following the collapse of the Taliban regime in 2001–02. This is most likely due to disproportionate focus by the analytic community on the more complex insurgency(ies) in Iraq. When it comes to Afghanistan most discussion revolves around 'big hand–small map' approaches.[1] What is the 'correct' balance between kinetic and non-kinetic activities at the strategic level? What do we do about Pakistan? Should the constitution be changed? Is the 'lack' of aid producing a 'resurgent' Taliban? What do we do about the narcotics issue? Because of the complexity of the local, district, and provincial environments, existing studies don't help us understand how the Taliban operates on the ground and therefore can't provide us with insight into how the insurgent should be fought in his environment. Any successful approach to the insurgency in Afghanistan must address local conditions and the provincial makeup of the insurgent forces, especially in Kandahar. Overly centralized and Kabul-centric strategies may not be able to do so.

Indeed, gathering first-hand information on insurgent operations in Afghanistan is a dangerous prospect apt to deter most analysts that are not part of NGOs, or formed military or intelligence organizations. The importance of

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understanding how the insurgency conducts its affairs is obvious: those practicing counterinsurgency in Afghanistan need to know their enemy and how he adapts to counterinsurgent strategy and operations so he can be defeated or at least contained. For historical purposes, examining insurgent operations in Afghanistan reveals unique aspects of the case at hand and can be one of several inputs into the body of knowledge that supports more general insurgency/counterinsurgency analysis.[2]

Consequently, this study will focus on Taliban operations in Kandahar province and how they have evolved. In southern Afghanistan, Kandahar is the key province. All roads lead to Kandahar City, be they from Kabul, Herat, or Quetta in Pakistan. Kandahar Province has the largest population in the south and Kandahar City is the largest concentration of that population. Control of Kandahar province, therefore, is the sine qua non for insurgent success in the south. The insurgency in Kandahar province has specific attributes and any counterinsurgency effort must take into account the unique evolution of Taliban operations there.

Who are the insurgents?

The answer to this question depends on what year and where in the province itself. The insurgency has evolved year to year with different players playing greater or lesser roles. In the early days, there were the remnants of Al Qaeda's conventional formations and Al Qaeda-supported jihadists. There were the defeated leaders and the remnants of the Taliban regime's conventional formations as well as local opponents to the Karzai government who have dubbed themselves Taliban. There were the professional killers from Gulbiddin Hekmatyar's HiG (Hezb-e-Islami Gulbuddin) organization as well as the highly motivated fighters from the Haqqani Tribal Network (or Organization; HTO). Between 2003 and 2005, an organization called the Quetta Shura emerged to act as a mechanism for these diverse groups to discuss and coordinate policy, strategy, and operations. Between 2006 and 2008, the Quetta Shura evolved further and has developed an even more sophisticated approach to the insurgency in southern Afghanistan.

There are other well-armed entities in Kandahar Province that are not part of the Quetta Shura yet pose problems for the security forces and the counterinsurgents. The first of these are the various police groups in the province, especially when they aren't being paid regularly. The second are the so-called 'drug barons' and their private armies. These narco groups tend to be tribe and family based, are devoted to making money from the poppy crop, and will align themselves against anybody interfering with their activities.

Similarly, the Pashtun tribal code of Pashtunwalli affords various forms of blood revenge between aggrieved parties over the course of generations. Blood feuds involving RPGs and AK-47s are not necessarily Taliban violence, nor are they necessarily insurgent violence.

Consequently, not all violence in Kandahar Province is Taliban violence. Every possible permutation of alliances between these groups – Taliban,

Al Qaeda, HiG, HTO, Narcos, Police, tribal groupings – exists throughout southern Afghanistan. Every incident, every action, has to be carefully examined to see exactly what the motives were behind the specific use of violence by a particular entity or entities. Some Taliban violence may even serve multiple purposes for different groups. This state of affairs poses significant challenges to any attempt to generalize about the insurgency in Afghanistan.

In terms of tactics, techniques, and procedures, there are numerous traditional and non-traditional methods employed by the insurgency array. There are clear patterns and there are distinct emphases that change year to year. Some of these methods are designed for tactical military effect while at the same time serving a strategic psychological effect. Other methods are extremely subtle and are not visible to analysts who have not visited the region. The employment of combinations of these techniques reached a fairly sophisticated level by 2006.

Early days: 2002–03

The ejection of Taliban regime control from Kandahar City by 2002 brought with it a re-definition as to what constituted the Taliban. Many Afghans who had joined the Taliban in a bandwagon effect in 1996 when the Pakistani-supported movement rolled in to establish order had by 2001 become disillusioned with the regime. We should take 2002 as our break point with the past. By May 2002, Mullah Omar, the leader of the Taliban regime, had established what amounted to small stay-behind groups in Oruzgan and Zabol provinces. At this time, weapons were distributed to some small groups in northern Kandahar Province in the Shah Wali Kot district. Instructions had gone out in Pashtun-dominated areas to resist Operation ENDURING FREEDOM (OEF) forces as the American-led coalition and their Afghan allies from the Northern Alliance and other disaffected but loosely organized anti-regime forces blitzkrieged over the Taliban 'shell' looking to get at the Al Qaeda 'meat' beneath it. By the summer of 2002, however, Taliban regime forces were completely defeated and the Al Qaeda structure put to flight. Radio propaganda emanating from Pakistan exhorted the remnants of the regime to conduct guerilla action throughout late 2002.

For the most part insurgent action in the country, as distinct from operations conducted by retreating units like those in the Shah-I Kot Valley and Tora Bora region, was limited to the border regions with Pakistan roughly from Zabol to Nuristan with sporadic incidents in Pashtun-ethnic areas. The state of the insurgency in Kandahar province in 2003 is best described as undeveloped and uncoordinated. OEF forces and their associated Afghan Militia Forces (AMF) allies did not exert overall control the province: they did not have the forces for outright occupation of all districts. OEF controlled Kandahar Air Field (KAF) and used it as a large forward operating base (FOB) from which airmobile forces sortied against Taliban and Al Qaeda remnants based on intelligence hits. The AMF occupied Kandahar City and set about establishing a rudimentary local governance with little opposition from inside the city. Many districts in

the province, however, had no OEF, AMF, or other Afghan Interim Administration presence. The lack of apparent enemy activity may have been the product of a lack of contact and not a true measurement of actual government or coalition control.

The next evolutionary steps regarding the Taliban insurgency occurred in February–March 2003. Taliban officials initiated an email and fax campaign to inform the international media that they existed as a formed body and that their intent was to regain power in Afghanistan. A prominent Taliban military leader, Mullah Dadullah Lang, then announced to the BBC that Mullah Omar was the supreme leader of the effort.[3]

In 2003, the pattern of enemy activity in Kandahar province, at least in terms of active measures against OEF and AMF forces, included sporadic 107 mm rocket attacks against KAF or other FOBs; very rare and small improvised explosive device (IED) attacks; and infrequent ambushes involving fewer than ten Taliban insurgents usually equipped with automatic weapons and RPGs. Notably, the movement employed 'non-insurgent insurgent' tactics as a force multiplier. Operatives would pay citizens to lay mines on well-traveled OEF and AMF routes and essentially walk away. They would not be contacted again: there was no organization to target, per se. The emergent IED specialists, of which there were very few, used primitive detonation mechanisms attached to leftover or scavenged ordnance. Uncoordinated and extremely rare attacks against NGO personnel started in early 2003 when mob action stimulated by agents provocateurs resulted in the death of a UN water treatment engineer.

Maintaining weapons stocks for future operations was another insurgent priority in Kandahar province in 2003. The remote Maruf district, not serviced by paved roads and contiguous with the Pakistan border, served as a weapons depot protected by what appeared to be Afghan government forces but who were in fact sympathetic to the Taliban. These stockpiles included everything from assault rifles to crew-served weapons and even a small number of thermobaric munitions. Similarly, remote valleys in Helmand and Oruzgan provinces hosted similar stockpiles and small guard forces. Almost all were raided and destroyed by OEF sorties throughout 2003.

The establishment of Taliban base and support structures in Pakistan of course pre-dates the 2001 intervention but these structures were reactivated in late 2002. By 2003, the Taliban was able to mount the first cross-border foray into southern Kandahar Province west of Spinboldak. At least one cross-border operation involved a company-sized group of insurgents but the comparatively large size of the force rendered it vulnerable to OEF airpower. Such operations remained rare in Kandahar province and were more likely to occur in the Khost region.

The Taliban loses the initiative: 2003–04

Strategically, the period running from late 2003 to late 2005 marked three significant strategic defeats for the insurgency. Any counterinsurgency effort is dependent on securing the legitimacy of the government and its forces, particularly in terms of

international legitimacy as well as with the population. The establishment of a political process in Afghanistan accredited by the United Nations and supported by the international community provided the basis for this legitimacy.[4] The Constitutional Loya Jirga (CLJ), in which all Afghan factions including the Taliban movement were invited to participate, was held in fall 2003. The CLJ established the future direction of Afghanistan as a state and established what the national legitimacy mechanisms would be, i.e. elections and the constitution. In the fall of 2004, the presidential elections were held followed a year later by provincial elections. Again, the Taliban movement was invited to participate.

The Taliban leadership rejected participation in all three activities, thus ensuring their label as an illegitimate insurgent force in the eyes of the international community as well as illegitimate in relationship to the elected government. That was their largest defeat since the collapse of the regime. The Taliban movement's failure to seriously interfere with the CLJ or presidential elections was their next mistake. There were ample opportunities to use violence to disrupt the CLJ and the presidential elections, but successful security measures, Afghan and coalition, played no small part in limiting these actions, particularly in Kabul. There were, however, Taliban attempts to use violence in Kandahar and Oruzgan provinces in 2004 to intimidate and kill election registration workers. OEF forces were augmented to stave this off as much as possible.[5]

Parenthetically, the Taliban movement appears to have been operationally successful in Kandahar province, and also in Zabol, Oruzgan, and Helmand provinces adjacent to Kandahar over the course of the following year. These provinces marked the lowest registered voter turnout rate for the 2005 provincial elections in the country: Helmand 36.8%; Kandahar 25.3%; Oruzgan 23.4%; Zabol 20% versus 60–70% in the rest of the country.[6] Why this was the case is a matter of some dispute: did citizens stay home on their own because of the potential for violence, or were they deliberately or systematically intimidated? Or did they boycott the elections because they sided with the Taliban? Or did they not have confidence in the government candidates? There may be some correlation between increasing levels of violence in 2005 and voter turnout in Kandahar province, which we will address later.

Successes in establishing a government and solidifying it in 2003–04 now paved the way for a further Taliban strategic defeat. If the insurgents had disrupted the establishment of the federal political process, the government of Afghanistan would not have had legitimacy in the international community and there would have been no aid money flow from the IMF, World Bank, and other institutions. If there was no 'funnel' to put monies in in the first place, then aid monies needed by counterinsurgency forces to undermine the Taliban's attempts to shift the allegiance of the population at the provincial and district level could not flow. With a federal political process and an emergent bureaucracy, the 'funnel' was put into place, though it would take some time for the process to be activated. This state of affairs related to the lack of capacity at the provincial and

district level to use the reconstruction monies as well as the interference of insurgent operations.

The Taliban movement refocused on southern Afghanistan, where the Pashtun confederations are the strongest and where they could exploit the comparatively low support for the government. HiG, Al Qaeda, and HTO tended to focus on the eastern provinces: Paktika, Paktia, Khost, Nangahar and Nuristan in 2004–06, though there would be increased cross-pollination between the insurgent groups over time depending on operational capabilities.[7] For the most part, however, Taliban forces dominated in Kandahar province.

It took some time for the Taliban movement to build up forces that could pose a serious threat to coalition and Afghan forces in the southern provinces. In 2004, Taliban operatives slowly worked on establishing facilitation networks in Kandahar City and the surrounding districts. One of their primary concerns was that they would lose any residual coercive hold over the rural populations. A campaign designed to manage the perceptions of those populations was implemented. Its purpose was to give the perception that the Taliban were more powerful than they actually were and to keep the rural populations from embracing aid and government or coalition organization. This campaign took two forms. The Taliban, like the coalition forces, could not be everywhere but they could appear to be omnipotent to an uneducated population. Taliban mullahs moved into the rural areas on an individual basis. These 'wandering mullahs' could proselytize at will and make contact with the less-educated local mullahs and manipulate them. Wandering mullahs were and remain next to impossible to target. Related to the 'wandering mullahs' were their urban counterparts. Infiltrating the mosques in Kandahar City, Taliban-sympathetic mullahs conducted similar activities. Taken together, this amounts to a 'Battle for the Mosques.'

Second, the small number of Taliban operational groups that did exist on the run in the province employed 'night letters' to intimidate officials at the village level. These missives threatened retaliation for 'collaboration' with the government and implied that there were spies operating in all rural areas so 'transgressors' would be brought to account some day in the future. The combination of the two methods appears to have had a disruptive effect, particularly in the 2003–04 period before the Provincial Reconstruction Team started to enter rural districts to assess them. It most likely had a detrimental effect on the 2005 elections in Kandahar province.

By the end of 2004, the Taliban insurgency in Kandahar province was still limited to what it could accomplish using violence. It was able to intimidate in some rural areas, it could conduct sporadic demonstrative attacks on coalition forces, but it did not have the features necessary for a successful insurgency. For example, for the Taliban to regain control, a parallel government structure was needed even in shadow form so that government legitimacy could be challenged, i.e. there needed to be Taliban shadow leaders for the districts and a shadow governor should have been proclaimed, along with shadow apparatus to tax the population and provide an alternative legal system. Some of these attributes

existed in crude form: the 'wandering mullahs' were key here, but the structure was not advanced enough in 2004 to decisively shift the allegiance of the population. Indeed, the lack of government control and lack of structures to translate national policy and aid to the local level were threats to stability equal to the Taliban movement in the province.

Initiative regained: 2005

2005 is a crucial year in the insurgency. At some point in the spring there was a Quetta Shura reassessment of what could be accomplished in Kandahar province and what tools should be used. The existing measures – wandering mullahs, intimidation, sporadic attacks – all continued, as did efforts to contact Taliban regime remnants and sympathizers in order to build a fighting structure. A number of new ingredients were now added to the operational stew. The interesting aspect about all this is that the main Taliban spokesman to the media, Abdul Latif Hakimi, announced this in April 2005, stating that new targets would include government officials, aid workers, and foreign forces. The Taliban effort, he said, would now be a war of attrition.[8] Mullah Dadullah Lang started to emerge in the Western media as a public face of the Taliban around this time, particularly on Al-Jazeera, and he confirmed that there was a stronger link between Al Qaeda and the Taliban.[9]

As noted earlier, OEF forces in Kandahar did not occupy the entire province: nor could they. The AMF was disarmed and part of it was converted into the Afghan National Army, but the deployment of these new forces took some time and they were not ready in 2005. In 2005, there was only one OEF maneuver battalion assigned to Kandahar province – and it was a re-roled US airborne artillery battalion. A US Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) existed and it was trying to assess the entire province, but it was too small and lacked protective capabilities. NGOs and national aid organizations were active in the province, but their efforts were not effectively coordinated. That said, a school construction programme was underway. Education was and remains critical to the counterinsurgency effort over the long term as even basic education is several cuts above the constrained backward religious education offered by the Taliban regime during its tenure. Indeed, the biggest long-term threat to the Taliban is an educated, politically active population.

A country-wide Taliban campaign against the education system, what I call 'The War of the Schools', started in 2005, though there had been uncoordinated attacks against schools in the Kabul area in the previous year. The initial focus was on girls' schools but the repertoire rapidly expanded to all educational facilities. In time, teachers themselves were also singled out for assassination. In Shah Wali Kot district in northern Kandahar, a Taliban group even beheaded a teacher in front of his class. By the end of 2005, the media reported that 200 schools in the southern provinces had been shut down, with an estimated 20 schools destroyed from September 2005 to December 2005.[10]

At the same time, the first transmissions from the Voice of Sharia, a pro-Taliban propaganda radio station, were received in April 2005. This led to an interesting debate in the media as to who actually controlled Voice of Sharia. One view was that this was a Taliban-controlled venue; another was that it was a black propaganda device of the coalition. A third view was that the coalition 'leaked' that Voice of Sharia was a black propaganda tool in order to discredit and disrupt a Taliban-controlled Voice of Sharia![11]

OEF forces in Kandahar were confronted in 2005 with an increasingly militant network operating in Shah Wali Kot district. A series of coalition operations in Zabol and Oruzgan provinces were 'backstopped' by the Kandahar-based US battalion, that is, the battalion deployed as a net to catch enemy trying to escape from those other operations. When the battalion deployed, they encountered small but well-armed groups of insurgents operating in this district – and that the locals had some allegiance to them. The situation deteriorated with the establishment of a government district centre in Shah Wali Kot that year. Consequently, more and more resources were focused on this area to determine what was going on and to deal with the emerging problem.

At the same time, another network operating from the Zharey district west of Kandahar City initiated a series of ambushes on Highway 1. These ambushes were initially not well organized but they evolved significantly throughout 2005. Then the ambush parties started to attack road building crews and their security forces along the highway when there were no coalition forces present. US forces discovered a 'rat line' from Zharey District into southwestern Kandahar City and also discovered that the police districts there had been compromised by an urban insurgent network. At the same time, there were sporadic attacks against aid workers and later on came the outright assassination of unarmed doctors and health care workers from the Afghan government.

PRT operations in Kandahar province expanded when the Canadians took control in July 2005. This particular PRT had a robust protective capability and consequently was able to get into remote districts that their predecessors had not been to. Important discoveries included the fact that there was a significant facilitation network in Maruf district backed up with a fighting unit in the hills; that Zharey district was essentially a no-go area for coalition forces and that an intimidation campaign was emanating outwards in all directions from it; that there was an IED cell operating in Ghorak district against Afghan police forces; and that schools were being burned in Khakriz district.

We mustn't forget that Kandahar Air Field, the primary operating base for OEF in southern Afghanistan, was under rocket attack from cells or individuals who would set up a 107 mm rocket with a timing device which in turn would launch the weapon some time later. This technique had been in play since 2003 but increased in frequency in 2005.

How coordinated was the Taliban effort in Kandahar province in 2005? It is easy to see a symbiotic relationship between Shah Wali Kot and Zharey

operations in that the OEF force couldn't be in both places at once. Then to what extent were the other insurgent methods coordinated with the more military activity in those districts? At this time there was no notion in coalition circles that there was a specific Taliban provincial command, or even provincial commander: there were several. Given the increased availability of the cell phone network in the province, however, and the availability of satellite telephones, it is possible that there didn't need to be a provincial commander and that the insurgent organization didn't necessarily correspond to Western organization constructs: the Soviets had made this sort of mistake in their analysis in the 1980s.[12]

By mid 2005, then, there appeared to be several insurgent networks in the province. The big questions at the time were: how specialized were those networks or cells? How much of the violence was undertaken by Taliban, 'non-insurgent insurgents', or local 'pinch hitters'? How did they coordinate? Some analysts believed that there were specialized cells and specialized individuals: ambush cells, intimidation cells, religious/political mobilization cells, facilitation networks, financiers, IED specialists, and so forth. Others thought district networks were composed of several specialized cell types. Another school of thought was that certain cells could multitask: intimidate, ambush, and proselytize all at once. What was clear to everybody was that there was an extremely effective observation and reporting system in each district of the province and that Taliban elements operating from district to district could plug into it.

This thinking evolved yet again with the introduction of the most spectacular Taliban development yet: the urban suicide bombing campaign.[13] Inaugurated in the fall of 2005, the Taliban facilitation networks in Kandahar City worked with Al Qaeda-trained, madrassa-recruited, or other jihadist suicide bombers to mutual advantage. The suicide bomber was the 'ammo' brought into the city, 'loaded' into a 'gun' (suicide vest or car) and 'fired' at the coalition forces. The suicide bombing campaign had a fitful start: the first attacks accomplished little in terms of material damage except to the bombers themselves, but as 2005 waned the attackers were getting better.

The improvement of IED attacks was a parallel development, In 2003, the rare IED took place and it was usually ineffective once vehicles were uparmoured, By 2005, sophisticated IEDs were being employed by insurgents in Kandahar province, particularly in Ghorak district and in Kandahar City. In some cases, detonation components produced on an assembly line were used, though they were coupled with scavenged ordnance. More importantly, trained insurgent IED specialists were now present in the province building the devices. The belief that there were specialist IED cells gained credence, particularly after a number of attacks in the Spinboldak area. In most cases, these attacks were not backed up with ambushes or other activity.

The importance of suicide and IED attacks was not merely limited to the tactical degradation of coalition forces: it was strategic. The spectacular nature of the attacks attracted substantial Western media attention, particularly when media outlets started to compare coalition efforts in Afghanistan with the supposedly 'failing'

American-led effort in Iraq where similar enemy IED tactics were employed. This 'guilt by association' generated by Western media between the two conflicts was and remains a major strategic victory for the Taliban and they would exploit it to greater effect in subsequent years. The linkage tool for that was the IED and the suicide IED coupled with growing Western concern over casualties.

There was, however, a debate inside the Taliban as to the Qur'anic legality of suicide attacks and attacks that resulted in civilian casualties. Mullah Omar, apparently, was wavering, but in Kandahar province there were strong advocates for their use, particularly from the Mullah Baqi network operating in Zharey district and inside Kandahar City. These networks were associated with Mullah Dadullah Lang. Baqi won out and continued with the campaign.

The most important development for the Taliban in Kandahar province occurred in January 2006. A Canadian diplomat of ambassador rank working for the PRT on provincial government capacity building was assassinated by a suicide car bomb. Though some believe this was a lucky hit, there are others that do not. Regardless, the effects of this killing were profound. Elements within the PRT suspended capacity building and aid operations right when they were needed most and generated a nearly six-month suspension of the reconstruction efforts in some critical areas. This may have given the Taliban breathing space in rural districts since the PRT did not deploy to those districts subsequently for months.

Another spin-off effect of the suicide and IED campaign was to generate a perception in the international aid community that Kandahar wasn't safe and therefore Afghanistan wasn't a safe place to invest monies and aid resources. It was at this time that the Afghanistan Compact was under discussion, an agreement which would provide some 10 billion dollars to Afghanistan for reconstruction and development. The linkage between the suicide and IED campaign, the generation of the perception of lack of security, and a desire by Quetta Shura to disrupt the Afghanistan Compact cannot be conclusively proven but is highly, highly likely. We see for the first time in Kandahar province cooperation between Taliban forces on the ground, HiG terrorists, Al Qaeda training facilities, and Al Qaeda strategic information operations.

The cumulative effects of IED attacks benefited the Taliban in that Western media focused solely on casualties generated by the attacks and chose not to focus on reconstruction and development progress. This meme still has long-term effects on coalition populations and particularly in the academic/analytic community. The question was: how sophisticated was the Taliban's understanding of information operations? Some analysts downplay this and claim that it was a bumbling, crude approach and that the Taliban 'exhibit a general lack of strategic planning and activity, particularly in the area of communications.'[14] If this is the case, then how were the Taliban been able to generate the perception in the Western media that the war in Afghanistan was a lost cause throughout the 2005–06 period?

The answer is the relationship between the Taliban and Al Qaeda via the Quetta Shura. The Al Qaeda movement does indeed exhibit a sophisticated

understanding of information operations and it became more and more evident in 2006 that their techniques were being employed to support the Taliban's efforts to promote their activity in a global fashion in ways that they had not even two years before. Taliban leaders in Kandahar province, for example, know who to call in the Pakistani media and get their version of events out before coalition forces can even react. Their contacts are a cell phone call away, whereas coalition forces have to practically form a committee to respond to anything.

In time the Taliban developed its own pool of media 'fixers' who became adept at 'spinning' the more naive Western reporters flocking to Kandahar. Any analysis of Canadian media from late 2005 on, for example (the American media tended to focus on Iraq and stay away from southern Afghanistan), will encounter a breathlessly sensationalistic, even alarmist tone complete with the uncritical reprinting of bold statements by shadowy Taliban commanders but little analysis.[15]

Escalation: 2006–07

In early 2006, Afghan analysts concluded a study of the insurgency in the south that confirmed in their view that the Taliban threat was much more developed than previously understood and that it had a three-phased strategy: strategic survival and reorganization; establishment of foothold bases in remote areas; and mass mobilization using tribal and religious elements. The Taliban was estimated to be in the second phase and trying to transition to the third. Their inability to establish a parallel government at the district level was inhibiting their progression to phase three and the coalition and Afghan effort, no matter how flawed it was, was a serious impediment. Yes, the Taliban could mobilize in the rural areas; but could they control all of them all of the time? Could they eventually take the urban areas and consolidate them?

The suicide and IED campaign continued throughout Kandahar in the spring and summer of 2006, which drew most of the media's attention away from important developments in the insurgency. As before, the geographical enemy grouping tended to be in Shah Wali Kot and Zharey districts, with Maruf playing a supporting role. Taliban activities were at this point expanding in Helmand province as British forces deployed into it. Canadian forces were tasked to keep the main service routes to Helmand and Oruzgan open to facilitate British and Dutch force deployments. A series of operations conducted by the Canadian battlegroup discovered that Taliban forces were discreetly infiltrating Zharey district and using sporadic operations in Shah Wali Kot as a distraction. The intent behind this summer build up was interpreted by Afghan government sources as preparations to strike multiple targets inside the city itself with the express purpose of generating a Tet-offensive like effect. This planning went beyond the conduct of IED attacks and ambushes in the hills and indicates that there was a more sophisticated enemy outlook than was previously understood.

The Canadian view was that the insurgents were positioning themselves to dominate the green areas on the three highways surrounding the city

so they could blockade it or otherwise interfere with the commerce flowing on those routes with obvious detrimental effects on the people. Coupled with strikes inside the city, the perception that the Taliban was on the verge of regaining control might tip the allegiance of the population, as it had back in 1996.

Disruptive Canadian operations into Zharey district confirmed a number of things. First, the insurgents stood and fought from prepared defensive positions in a coordinated fashion. Second, the presence of foreign fighters was confirmed: Punjabis and Chechens. Third, the insurgents understood the decreasing propaganda value of using the population as human shields and thereafter depopulated certain potential battle areas by insisting that the civilian population leave. Again, this went far beyond what the previous American battalion had encountered back in 2005.

Further north, the enemy melted away in the face of coalition forces and laid IEDs and mines instead. They still had significant pull over the Shah Wali Kot district and the Ghorak IED cell remained active, but as Canadian forces moved into forward operating bases, enemy tactics changed. Mortars were now employed. In time Canadian forces even captured a Pakistani mortar fire control specialist trained by the Pakistani Army.

IED and suicide IED attacks against coalition forces in and around Kandahar City also increased in number and in their sophistication throughout 2006. As before, jihadis were 'facilitated' into Kandahar City, provided with information and the weapon, and unleashed. In the main, these were foreign jihadis, some from Pakistan, some from Saudi Arabia.[16]

Mullah Dadullah Lang became a Western media darling around this time. The media, finally able to put a 'face' on the Taliban that wasn't merely some shadowy Pakistani cut-out spokesman, flocked to report on the muscular and personally violent 'MDL.' The Taliban exploited this and created what amounted to a personality cult around MDL, which included the distribution of extremely violent and explicit CDs in Kandahar province and throughout western Pakistan. MDL's importance, however, was that he was internally advocating a more conventional approach to the insurgency. This advocacy was apparently the impetus behind the operations in Zharey district and around Kandahar City. Did the media attention permit MDL to gain more influence with the Quetta Shura? Nobody knows for sure. What is known is that some form of green light was given and in the fall of 2006 coalition forces encountered Taliban forces that had massively infiltrated Zharey district. The resulting battle, Operation MEDUSA, was fought using nearly conventional tactics by both sides including the use of tanks, artillery, and airpower by the coalition and anti-tank, mortar, and positional defence by the Taliban. This was a far cry from the days of 2003.

Yet another Taliban operational form emerged concurrently with operations in Zharey. Knowing that coalition and Afghan forces couldn't be everywhere at once, Taliban cells started attacking the district centers in outlying rural areas. The importance of the district centre requires explanation. Generally, the centres

are the headquarters of the local and provincial government representatives, the police, and administration. They are practical as well as symbolic representations of government control or influence.

In 2006, a Taliban campaign was directed against a small number of outlying district centres in Helmand, Oruzgan, and Zabol provinces. In each operation, Taliban forces moved into these towns, occupied and then burned the district centre, and then withdrew, sometimes after fighting coalition forces sent to retake the centres. The objective in all cases appears to have been to draw off coalition and Afghan forces conducting operations against other insurgent forces as much the physical destruction of the facility. In all cases, the Karzai government insisted that the loss of such centres, even in outlying districts, amounted to strategic losses and demanded that coalition forces be redeployed, even in the middle of other operations, to retake them. This technique was repeated in Kandahar in 2007 when the Ghorak district centre was seized in the summer while operations were ongoing in Zharey and Shah Wali Kot. The multiple and concurrent effects of district centre seizure are clearly understood by the Taliban and once again this is an indicator of operational sophistication that was not there in previous years.

Another example of Taliban operational sophistication revolves around the issue of deployment and use of coalition armoured vehicles. Canada was the first coalition member to start using armoured fighting vehicles on a protracted basis in Kandahar province in 2006. These Canadian designed and built LAV-III Kodiak vehicles are eight-wheeled MICVs equipped with 25 mm guns. Taliban fighters referred to them as 'Green Monsters That Spit Fire and Shit White People Out The Back' and the ability of the vehicles to drive into areas that the insurgents believed to be unnavigable seriously unnerved them. Similarly, when Canada deployed Leopard C-2 medium tanks to support operations in Zharey district, they were called 'Super Monsters' by Taliban fighters who were unused to the presence of tanks on the battlefield.

To counteract the psychological shock produced by the vehicles, instructions went out to various Taliban commanders in Kandahar province to catastrophically kill a Canadian armoured vehicle and if possible film or photograph such an attack. This would be used in two ways: one, to bolster the morale of Taliban fighters and, two, to inflict a wave of media criticism back in Canada that already existed over the tank deployment. Previously, there was no interest in conducting such an attack: the Taliban already knew they could kill American uparmoured Hummers and Canadian G-Wagon vehicles with car bombs. Indeed, when the Canadian media announced that Canada would replace the 'vulnerable' G-Wagon with the supposedly 'mine-proof' RG-31 Nyala, a buy made by the Canadian Government partly in response to severe media criticism about the lack of protection for Canadian soldiers, a Taliban cell catastrophically killed one with an anti-tank mine just to prove they could do so.

In time, the Taliban learned, with some difficulty and personnel loss, that they could destroy Canadian armoured vehicles, but measures taken by Canadian forces to deny enemy forces access to strike sites and preventative measures to

restrict media dissemination of imagery of the same has had a countervailing effect on the enemy's I/O war. Taliban procurers then tried in 2006 to acquire anti-tank guided missiles but failed, apparently, to deploy any in Kandahar province. In time, machine-milled explosively formed projectiles (EFP) made in Iran have made their way into an adjacent province, but none have been employed against coalition forces in Kandahar province. The game continues.

This leads us to another extremely important point. The Taliban is able to use the internet to gather battle damage assessment data against coalition forces. The hyper-specific media reporting of coalition operations in Kandahar province, particularly combat deaths and their associated ramp ceremonies, provides the Taliban with ready-made images of weeping Canadian soldiers carrying coffins that can be employed in many contexts and in many forums, like websites, uploadable film clips, and the like. This 'reach back' capability should be assumed. Indeed, it is being employed by Iraqi insurgents: raids against Al Qaeda sympathizers in Germany have found websites with substantial Google Earth imagery used to conduct reconnaissance of American forces in Iraq and then target them.[17] It is also relatively easy for the Quetta Shura to request vulnerability studies from its Al Qaeda allies, who have tentacles in Western universities. Even crude analysis of media on the internet has the ability to inform Taliban and Al Qaeda operations.

This leads us to the controversial idea that the Taliban and Al Qaeda can generate strategic psychological effects on coalition populations using a tactical attack against coalition forces in Kandahar province, a level of sophistication that some analysts and observers don't want to see.

In the plethora of IED and suicide IED attacks against Canadian forces operating in Kandahar in 2006–07, two attacks stand out. The first occurred on 18 September 2006, the day Parliament opened in Canada after its summer recess to debate the continuance of Canada's combat role in Afghanistan. In this incident, a suicide bomber attempted a mass casualty attack against Canadian forces, which killed four and wounded ten Canadians and over twenty Afghans in Bazaar-e Panjwayi, which abuts Zharey district. The debate over Afghanistan in Canada was already picking up steam and this incident accelerated it. Many analysts wrote this attack off as a coincidence, even as the Opposition in Canada's parliament demanded Canada's immediate withdrawal and to open negotiations with the Taliban to surrender the country.

Then there was a mass casualty IED attack which catastrophically killed a LAV-III vehicle and six Canadian soldiers. This attack took place on Easter Sunday 2007. This was the 90th anniversary of the Battle of Vimy Ridge, an event that has been elevated in recent years in Canada to be a second independence day. The entire country and its media was focused on Vimy Ridge ceremonies and had been for weeks in the run up. Again, after the attack, the Opposition demanded Canadian withdrawal from Afghanistan. Again, tactical commanders and analysts insisted this attack was also a coincidence. If we will recall, some also believe that the killing of the Canadian Foreign Affairs PRT

representative in January 2006 was also a coincidence. That is three coincidences in just over a year. Spain, by way of comparison, only needed one 'coincidence' to pull its forces out of Iraq. Some wish to debate whether the Taliban suicide and IED campaign is specifically designed for 'strategic' effect or is specifically designed for 'operational/tactical effect.' Many forget that Taliban leaders and their networks are merely a cell phone call away from Quetta and don't really care about categorizing in such a Western fashion: they are interested in effects.

The most overlooked Taliban 'front' remains, however, the mosques. Western analysts completely missed or misunderstood the role of the mosques in the Taliban mobilization effort. This in part is ethnocentric bias: Westerners recognize the separation of church and state, while Islam does not. While the battle was on in Zharey district in 2006–07, the first tentative coalition steps were taken to assess the religious framework of Kandahar City and its relationship to the Taliban effort.

The National Ulema Shura is a body of religious leaders separate from the government of Afghanistan yet wields tremendous influence in religious affairs throughout the country. The Kandahar Ulema Shura (KUS) is the provincial equivalent. The KUS is a mixture of appointed and self-appointed Mullahs and in theory can influence district and community Mullahs. The Taliban recognized that the KUS was a moderate institution that was mildly pro-government and from 2005 into 2006 sought to manipulate the KUS's makeup through selective assassination. Why? Canadian information operations staff realized that independent KUS condemnation of Taliban suicide and IED attacks that resulted in civilian casualties had a detrimental effect on Taliban operations and reduced their influence in critical areas. The KUS issued fatwa after fatwa condemning the Taliban and those fatwas were somehow reaching a broader audience than television or radio outlets.[18] The Battle for the Mosques reached new heights in 2006–07 when the Taliban overreacted to a series of new fatwas and successively assassinated three popular Mullahs in Kandahar City. There was a public backlash, which was, unfortunately, not exploited effectively by coalition and Afghan forces and promises of funding and salaries, which the government reneged on, were taken up by the Taliban.

Another development in 2006 involved the use of intimidation against civilian personnel employed by coalition forces. This took two forms. Direct attacks started in the summer of 2006, including the bombing of a bus carrying interpreters to Kandahar Air Field for work (killing ten and wounding a dozen more) and the attempted assassination of interpreters working for the Provincial Reconstruction Team. The second was a campaign of intimidation directed at truck drivers in the Kandahar City region. Coalition forces and particularly the Afghan National Army use local trucking extensively to support operations throughout the province. Indeed, a small number of trucks were destroyed but it was unclear if some of those attacks related to commercial and tribal rivalry over contracting disputes. It is possible that tribal rivals and the Taliban have overlapping interests and this plays itself out with a Taliban cell conducting

attacks on behalf of another entity. Interpreters still interpret for the PRT and truck drivers still support coalition operations and facilities.

De-escalation in 2007–08: temporary or enduring?

There were significant changes to the Taliban's approach to operations in Kandahar province throughout 2007. The most important was the elimination of Mullah Dadullah Lang in the course of an extensive special operations forces mission. MDL's killing had multiple effects: he had been set up by the media, his followers, and his own ego into being the 'General Patton' of the Taliban, so his killing generated a psychological shock throughout the movement. Additionally, there was already internal criticism of his attempts at near-conventional operations in Kandahar province and their thwarting by coalition operations in Zharey district in 2006. Indeed, no new leader with MDL's experience or stature has emerged on the public stage. Increasingly effective coalition efforts at all levels seriously reduced the Taliban's capacity throughout the province during this time, though this was not noted by the Western media, which continued their hypercritical mantra that the coalition effort in Afghanistan was failing.

The Taliban were forced to adopt a new posture. The War of the Schools evolved away from outright killing and burning towards a madrassa-like policy, which included the distribution of Taliban-approved schoolbooks in some rural districts in an effort to counter government efforts. The educational battle is on. Indeed, the leaders of Panjwayi district independently sent an emissary to Quetta and insisted that the Taliban stop attacking their schools: the Taliban relented. The government polio vaccine campaign implemented in 2006–07 was not opposed by the Taliban, who even publicly announced that they would not interfere with it. That campaign has virtually eliminated polio in the province. Despite these information operation stunts, the Taliban still do not possess an effective shadow government capable of meeting the needs of the population, though they tried in Maywand district, which straddles the vital Highway 1 corridor to Helmand province. And those needs are increasing when more and more contact is made between the urbanized population and the rural population, between women from urban and rural districts, and when coalition soldiers demonstrate by their actions that they are not merely some kufr occupation force.

Do these developments mean an end to violence? No. Successful coalition operations against IED cells has seriously reduced the Taliban's capacity in this area, albeit temporarily. The 'A' team suicide bomber cells have been reduced to the 'D' and 'E' teams: there appear to be fewer willing recruits for the process. Indeed, one Taliban cell was reduced to manipulating mentally retarded people into wearing wire-filled vests with no explosives in order to entice coalition forces into overreacting and killing them. In many cases, IED specialists have been attrited, which in turn has forced many Taliban cells to resort to the good old dumb land mine laid by the 'non-insurgent insurgent.' Ominously, though, Taliban IED cells are increasingly resorting to extremely large obliterative

explosions, which completely or nearly completely fragment the target. This new type of attack emerged in the summer of 2007 on four occasions. That said, subsequent efforts to regenerate networks in Zharey district are frustrated by coalition operations and attempts by the Taliban to expand similar operations to Argahndab district in the fall of 2007 have met with failure.

In early 2008, the enemy resorted to mass casualty-producing IED attacks against the security forces and the civilian population. This has resulted in a backlash by the community, so much so that the Taliban refused to take credit for one particularly violent attack in February 2008 that resulted in over 100 dead and at least 80 injured. The extremely negative public response to a second attack the day following the first one may have had a role in forcing the Taliban leadership to curtail further operations of this type. Indeed, the split between Mullah Omar and Mullah Dadullah Lang in 2005 over the use of suicide terrorism may be repeating itself: the proponents of suicide terrorism are now at odds with Mullah Omar again and further fragmentation within the movement appears to be developing. At least three senior Taliban commanders in Kandahar and Helmand provinces have expressed an interest in the PTS amnesty process. This is in part due to a drop off in the enthusiasm of the personnel commanded by these leaders for continued operations in the face of improved coalition forces operational techniques, especially in Kandahar province.

Among these techniques was the implementation of a 9/11-type reporting system that takes advantage of the geometrically expanded cell phone network in southern Afghanistan and has produced substantial information on enemy activity subsequently exploited by the Afghan national security forces. Taliban groups in Zharey district have even burned down cell towers out of frustration, even though they need the system to communicate among themselves.

Indeed, rocket attacks against Kandahar Air Field and Canadian forward operating bases in the province are at an all-time low. The peak year was 2006, with a substantial drop off throughout 2007. In 2006, there were attacks nearly every second night for most of the year, with multiple rockets used in each attack. During the first three months of 2008, there has been a single attack against KAF with one rocket, with the last one before that occurring on Christmas Eve in 2007, again with a single rocket.

One Taliban response has been an attempt to open new fronts in the province. An active network in Arghistan district emerged but was suppressed by coalition forces more or less immediately before it could evolve. There was a move by the Taliban to infiltrate and seize a softer target, Shorabak District, in 2007. Shorabak is a remote district right on the Pakistan–Afghan border southwest of the primary border entry area at Spinboldak. It is far away from Kandahar City, is close to Taliban support areas in Pakistan, and should have been an easy win. A Taliban operational commander infiltrated the district and intimidated the local mullahs in an attempt to build a facilitation network. Three madrassas controlled by the operational commander inside Pakistan generated an armed force to use the facilitation network and open up operations against the pro-government district

leadership. The Taliban effort failed by the summer of 2007. Importantly, there was no coalition military support for the government forces: this was a purely Afghan affair. A powerful pro-government leader in Spinboldak deployed forces to assist the district leadership and police, while moderate mullahs from Shorabak proselytized the population to counter the pro-Taliban message. In this geographically desolate terrain, the Taliban forces had nowhere to run to and had no support among the people, even with Pashtunwali operating in the background. They were forced to retreat back into Pakistan.

We are now seeing an expanded intimidation campaign in certain districts as well as in Kandahar City itself. If all the enemy can do is intimidate through night letters and blow things up, he has reached the limits of his influence. It is not enough to partake in these two activities. The Quetta Shura must have Kandahar City in order to achieve its objectives in southern Afghanistan. It has been thwarted from doing so thus far. If the Quetta Shura is incapable of mounting operations similar in scope and scale to those of 2006, the movement will lose ground in Kandahar province in the face of dramatically expanded construction and governance activities, activities that they cannot compete with.

One mystery that has emerged in southern Afghanistan revolves around the Taliban's weapons. On the whole, Taliban fighters are equipped with AK-47 assault rifles, PKM machine-guns, 82 mm recoil-less rifles, and RPG rocket launchers. Mortars have been used, as have 107 mm rockets. Explosively formed projectiles started to make an appearance in 2007. Between 2005 and 2007, there has, however, been no confirmed use of advanced weapons by the Taliban. They have sought ATGMs, and continuously claim to have MANPADs. Al Qaeda fighters possessed a handful of thermobaric munitions back in 2002–03. No coalition armoured vehicles have been engaged with ATGMs, nor have coalition aircraft been engaged with MANPADS. The amount of money available to the movement, including the supposedly massive amounts ascribed to them from those who unrelentingly emphasize the narco-Taliban nexus, has produced no influx of advanced weapons throughout the course of the war. The most advanced weapons appear to be IED detonation components mass produced and provided to the Taliban by elements operating within a neighbouring power.

One possibility is that those supporting and sponsoring the Taliban movement have deliberately chosen to limit access to advanced weapons for reasons of their own. The one clue to the answer is an historical one. In the 1980s jihad against the Soviet Union, General Mohommad Yousaf of the ISI noted that:

> For the Mujahideen, the possession of heavy weapons and plentiful ammunition was a common goal, for which they were willing to show their flexibility, some inclination to listen, or to follow instructions. My giving assurances that a certain operation would be backed up with extra weapons or more missiles, and that success would lead to further supplies, was sometimes the only way I could obtain cooperation. I had a carrot to offer. My stick was to withhold the weapons. Had the ISI not retained this prerogative my task would have been hopeless.[19]

If this scenario is operative, there is no Taliban success to reinforce, and therefore it is possible that they have been denied access to advanced weapons for use in Kandahar province because of their failures.

Conclusions

The war in Kandahar province will continue and the Taliban's operational methodology will also evolve. The pattern of operations is unique and does not follow existing models like the Maoist or Focoist approaches. It would be disingenuous to attribute a linear progressive terrorism–guerrilla action–conventional operations–victory structure to the insurgency. The Taliban and its allies are less systematic in their approach and appear to have tailored it to the specific requirements of a given province.

Thus far the Taliban have not achieved their objectives in Kandahar province short of mere survival. Despite the simplistic rhetoric on insurgency in the Western public domain, survival is not enough. Time is no longer on the side of the insurgents. The development effort in Kandahar, though slow to start and problematic in areas, is gathering momentum. In time, the educational system will produce a generation that is not interested in living a medieval version of Islamic life. That generation will have high expectations from the society they are growing in which places an immense responsibility on the emergent government of Afghanistan leaders and structures. The future fuel for the insurgency can be shut off with effective development and governance, particularly at the provincial level. It is equally crucial for the Western partners in the coalition effort to provide a more robust defence against the perception of failure in order to counter the only real weapon the Taliban has left: our short attention span coupled with our Western cultural fear of death.

Notes

1. See for example Johnson, 'On the Edge of the Big Muddy'.
2. This study is based on the author's annual participation in coalition operations in Kandahar Province, which started in 2003. In the main it is derived from personal observations and discussions with local people as well as with counterinsurgency practitioners. The paucity of documentation derived from what is actually occurring on the ground is the primary motive for the production of this paper.
3. BBC, 28 March 2003, Rahimullah Yusufzai, 'Taleban aims to regain power.'
4. The external academic reviewer of this article snidely referred to this depiction of the situation as 'naive' and implied in his review that federal government legitimacy isn't relevant in the Pashtun areas of Afghanistan. That is a gross generalization not borne out during my travels in Kandahar province. The reality is that any international effort in stabilizing Afghanistan has to be seen by domestic audiences in Western countries to be supporting a legitimate government. International aid money on the scale necessary to rehabilitate Afghanistan will not flow without a legitimate government. The legitimacy of the federal and the provincial governments is indeed important to people in Kandahar province and the perceived lack of legitimacy in 2005–06 was deliberately exploited by the Taliban for their purposes.

5. RFE/RL 6 July 2004 'Afghan Voter-Registration Site Attacked'; 27 June 2004, 'Taliban Targeting Would-be Afghan Voters.'
6. Strategic Advisory Team-Afghanistan, 3 November 2005, 'An Assessment of the 18 September Election Results.'
7. For example, HiG deployed specialist personnel to assist Taliban efforts in Kandahar's Zharey district, while Chechyns affiliated with Al Qaeda acted as a close protection party to a Taliban leader moving operating in western Kandahar province.
8. A summation, 'Desperate Taliban,' is available at www.longwarjournal.org written by Bill Roggio.
9. Jonathan Landay, ' A New Taliban has Re-Emerged in Afghanistan,' Knight Ridder news agency, 19 August 2005.
10. 30 January 2006, 'Militants begin targeting Afghan schools parallel to soldiers,' www.AfghaNews.net
11. For these evolutions, see RFE/RL 22 April 2005, 'Taliban Says US Forces Won't Find Radio Station'; 9 May 2005, 'Afghanistan: Taliban Radio Back on the Air.'
12. See Grau and Gress, *The Soviet-Afghan War*, 72.
13. Suicide attacks had taken place elsewhere in Afghanistan, particularly in Kabul in 2003–04, but there doesn't appear to have been this type of activity in Kandahar province until 2005.
14. Foxley, 'The Taliban's Propaganda Activities'. This paper is worth reading, though there are some problems with its discussion of the tactical aspects of Taliban information operations when it comes to the local rural populations.
15. One such 'fixer', who 'assisted' one of Canada's major television networks and several prominent print journalists, was arrested in 2007 by American forces, declared an enemy combatant, and placed in American custody at Bagram Air Field. Back in 2006, this individual allegedly filmed a lethal suicide attack that took place against a convoy I was traveling in, demonstrating that he knew in advance about the attack. That television network insisted publicly that the Americans were 'mistaken' and 'wrong' to apprehend this fixer – and refused to publicly entertain the idea that the fixer was working for the Taliban and that they had been bamboozled by him.
16. The suicide car bomber that attacked and destroyed my vehicle was a Pakistani, for example.
17. As discussed at www.mypetjawa.mu.nu, 'For those who say the Internet Jihad is No Big Deal. . . .' 16 October 2007.
18. I am indebted to Padre (Capt.) Suleyman Demiray for his insights into religious operations in Kandahar province.
19. Yousaf and Adkin, *Afghanistan: The Bear Trap*, 103.

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