

Afghanistan's Heart of Darkness: Fighting the Taliban in Kunar Province

By Brian Glyn Williams

MOST OBSERVERS SEE Afghanistan's southern provinces of Helmand and Kandahar as being the heart of the country's insurgency. Northeastern Kunar Province, however, has been described in mythic proportions as the "most dangerous terrain for U.S. forces anywhere in the world."¹ U.S. soldiers who fight a bold enemy in Kunar Province's rugged mountains have dubbed it Afghanistan's "Heart of Darkness." In 2007, the province saw 973 insurgent attacks making it the second most active Afghan province after Kandahar. The Kunar battlefield is not the flat open plains or scrub covered desert mountains of the south, but forested mountains similar to those found in Colorado's Rockies. What Kunar does share with Helmand and Kandahar is a "bleed over" of tribes and loyalties between Pashtuns living in Afghanistan and those found in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan.²

The combination of lush tree cover, rugged mountains, cross-border sanctuaries, and prickly mountain tribes that resent outside rule is a volatile mixture that has made Kunar prime insurgent territory. Kunar Province has been a "no-go zone" since its people rose up against the Communists in 1978. In many ways, it remains one today. Kunar made headlines across the world for the coalition's two deadliest actions in Afghanistan to date, namely the spring 2006 ambush of a U.S. Navy SEAL team followed by the shooting down of a Chinook helicopter sent to rescue them, and the summer 2008 swarm attack on a newly built U.S. outpost that almost succeeded in overwhelming it. Both attacks revealed the existence of a bold enemy that had seemingly found the way to use the local terrain and the enemy's unfamiliarity with Kunar's history, tribal politics, culture and tactics

1 Tim Hetherington, "The Fight for Korengal," *Vanity Fair*, December 3, 2007.

2 Kunar shares a border with FATA's Bajaur Agency, which can be crossed through the Nawa and Ghahki mountain passes.

against them. This article will examine the history of warfare in Kunar Province up until the present day, in an effort to provide a context of understanding for U.S.-led international forces.

A Natural Fortress: The History of Kunar

In Afghanistan, Kunar is a rare forested valley carved by the Kunar River, which flows 300 miles southward along the Pakistani-Afghan border from Chitral down to the Kabul River near Jalalabad. Along the way, the Kunar River is joined by numerous tributaries—such as the Pech Dara—that add to its flow. Kunar's population is roughly 380,000.³ The north-south Kunar Valley parallels the Pakistani border and has been used as a corridor of communications between the uplands of Badakshan (Tajik territories to the north) and the Pashtun lands of the south for centuries. Insurgents have

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long used the Kunar-Nuristan corridor for attacking Kabul and other parts of Afghanistan. Alexander the Great saw the strategic importance of Kunar and invaded the valley in fourth century BC on his way into Bajaur, the tribal land to the east. When he invaded, the local inhabitants burnt their houses and fled to wage guerrilla warfare against his troops, a style of warfare their descendents would continue right up until the modern era.⁴ In the late 19th century the British found that the

3 For a virtual tour of Kunar featuring its landscapes and tribes, see the video at www.youtube.com/watch?v=B1uJG16M3_k. Also see www.youtube.com/watch?v=DiuPV6wB-3E.

4 A.B. Bosworth, *Conquest and Empire: The Reign of Alexander the Great* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 121.

best way to suppress the local Pashtuns was to divide their lands artificially and place the Pashtuns of Bajaur in British India (later Pakistan) leaving the remainder in Kunar, Afghanistan. The artificial border did not prevent the Kunari Pashtuns from joining with their Bajauri Pashtun kin in waging guerrilla jihad against the British up until the late 1930s.

The vast majority of Kunar's population is Pashtun, with the Pech-based Safi tribe the most prominent.⁵ Yet if one goes up the Kunar Valley, into the Pech and Korengal Valleys which reach up to the remote mountains of Nuristan, one encounters non-Pashtun tribes previously known as "Kafirs" (pagan unbelievers). The Kafirs were conquered by the Afghan-Pashtun state in the 1890s and converted to the *nur* (light) of Islam; their land was renamed Nuristan. By the mid-20th century, these two remote peoples had put aside their differences and came to be included in one province known as Kunar.⁶ Fundamentalism came to Kunar in the 1950s via the neighboring Pakistani Pashtun province of Bajaur. Like new converts elsewhere, the Nuristanis became zealots, and the Kunari Pashtuns similarly developed a reputation for being fundamentalists.

The Kunari Pashtuns and the newly converted Nuristanis were driven closer together in 1978 by the clumsy policies of the new Communist government that assumed power in the Saur Revolution of April 1978. Both conservative tribal groups resented the new government's interference in their lives and rose up in opposition to Kabul's efforts to arrest their elders, de-emphasize Islam, empower women, and redistribute land. In fact, the first sparks of what would become the mujahidin resistance were lit in the mountains of Kunar by the summer of 1978 as local *lashkars* (fighting units) began to attack regional Communist government police and garrisons.

The Peoples Democratic Party of Afghanistan's (PDPA) army eventually

5 The Safis or Safays are broken down into the Masaud, Gurbaz, and Wadir sub-tribes. Smaller tribes include the Shinwari, Mahmud, Kuchis, Pashai, Hisarak, among others.

6 In 2004, Nuristan was administratively separated from Kunar and now forms its own province.

responded to these attacks by carrying out the systematic massacre of Kunari Pashtuns in the farming village of Kerala in April 1979. In this tragic event that has come to define the Kunari Pashtuns' deep distrust of outside government forces, some 200 Afghan Army troops and Soviet advisers executed and bulldozed almost 1,700 men into a mass grave.⁷ The slain men's women and children fled over the border into Bajaur, and became the first of millions of Afghan war refugees who would soon settle in Pakistan. By the summer of 1979 Kunar had become "virtually independent," and the local government forces had been forced into their compound in the provincial capital of Asadabad.⁸ This garrison later mutinied and joined the rebels who, for a brief time, seized the provincial capital.

In response to these insurgent activities, the PDPA's Soviet allies helped the Afghan Communist government shore up garrisons in key points along the Kunar Valley at Asadabad, Asmar and Barikot. While the Soviets initially aimed to hold static positions and allow their Afghan Communist allies to move out into the countryside to fight, they eventually got sucked into the fighting. They launched several large-scale military operations in Kunar designed to open up the valley, such as their first major Afghan operation in February-March 1980. The Kunar invasion included approximately 10,000 Soviet troops backed by 7,500 Afghan Communist troops.⁹ The invasion forced as much as two-thirds of the local population (estimated to have been around 330,000 at the start of the war) to flee to Bajaur in Pakistan. While the Russian *spetsnaz* did occasionally issue out from their bases to destroy mujahidin bases and groups or launch air assaults to relieve bases, for the most part the Soviets and their Afghan Communist allies remained "bottled up in their forts" and under a state of "semi-siege."¹⁰ The Soviets spent most of their

time fighting off local mujahidin swarm attacks and being shelled by rebels who had an almost ritualistic style of warfare.¹¹ The Soviets responded to these attacks with large clumsy sweeps and by using close air support that led to high civilian casualties.

By the mid-1980s, Kunar had become one of the "hottest" zones in all of Afghanistan for the Soviets. By this time, all the major mujahidin resistance groups had established a presence in the valley. The independent commander Jamil ur Rahman from Pech, a Salafist religious leader belonging to the Safi tribe (and former Hizb-i-Islami commander), succeeded in expelling Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hizb-i-Islami and establishing an independent Wahhabi-style state with Saudi aid.¹² Soon thereafter, scores of Arabs made their way to Kunar via Bajaur to fight the Soviets alongside Jamil ur Rahman. Saudi and Egyptian fighters in particular came to consider the province to be their home base. One of these Arab volunteer mujahidin, Abu Ikhlas al-Masri, married a local woman and was to play a key role in reintroducing Arab fighters to Kunar after 2001.

When the Soviets began to pull out their troops in 1988, the Afghan Communist government saw its position in Kunar as untenable and withdrew troops from the isolated garrisons in spring of that year. By November 1988, Asadabad had been taken by the rebels, making it one of the first provincial capitals to fall to the mujahidin. With the removal of the Communists, Jamil ur Rahman set up a Salafist-Wahhabi "amirate" in Kunar. Jamil ur Rahman crushed all other local fighting groups and fought to fend off attacks by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hizb-i-Islami, which aimed to control the entire northeast. In August 1991, Hekmatyar launched a major invasion of the Kunar Valley that led to the deaths of 50 of Jamil ur Rahman's Arab allies and the sacking of his capital at Asadabad. In response, Jamil ur Rahman fled across the border to Bajaur, where

he took refuge. On August 30, 1991, he was assassinated by an Egyptian, presumably on Hekmatyar's orders. Hizb-i-Islami took control over most of the valley.

In 1996, Hizb-i-Islami's dominance in Kunar was threatened by a new anti-mujahidin force emerging from the south: the Taliban. By late 1996, the Taliban had defeated Hizb-i-Islami and forced its leader, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, to flee into exile. The Taliban subsequently claimed the right to rule. Most local Salafists rejected the Taliban due to their insistence on referring to Mullah Omar as *Amir ul Mui'meen* (Commander of the Faithful), a claim that the Salafist puritans did not accept. The main Salafist leader in Kunar, Haji Rohullah, in fact moved to Pakistan to avoid the Taliban and stayed there in exile until the Taliban regime was destroyed in 2001's Operation Enduring Freedom.

Kunar Post 9/11: The Crucible of the Afghan Insurgency

When Operation Enduring Freedom commenced, the locals either waited on the sidelines or helped their former Taliban and al-Qa`ida opponents escape through their territory into Pakistan out of a feeling of Islamic solidarity or because they were bribed. The locals began to turn against the government and its coalition allies in June 2002 when an elder from Ganjgal named Abdul Wali, who was wanted by the coalition, was taken to their headquarters. He subsequently died under mysterious circumstances. When his body was released¹³ two days later, the locals decided to revolt much as they had in 1978. Additionally, the locals began to complain that policemen sent to the province from Kabul were extorting money from them. To compound matters, the recently returned Salafist leader Haji Rohullah was arrested by the coalition on grounds that he was collaborating with the Taliban.¹⁴ As these events were taking place, the local Salafists began to lose power as their leaders were displaced by professionals

7 Edward Girardet, *Afghanistan: The Soviet War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), pp. 107-110.

8 Anthony Hyman, *Afghanistan Under Soviet Domination: 1964-1981* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), p. 124.

9 Mark Urban, *War in Afghanistan* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), p. 156.

10 Brigadier Mohammad Yousaf and Mark Adkin, *Afghanistan the Bear Trap: The Defeat of a Superpower* (Havertown, PA: Casemate, 1989), p. 132; Michael Scheuer, "Assessing the Six Year Hunt for Osama bin Laden," *Terrorism Focus* 4:30 (2007).

11 Ibid.

12 Gilles Dorronsoro, *Revolution Unending: Afghanistan, 1979 to the Present* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 230. A similar Wahhabi state known as the *Dawlat* (the state) was also formed in neighboring regions of Nuristan at this time by Maulvi Afzar.

13 One popular account said his body was thrown on the side of the road.

14 Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), pp. 71-72. Antonio Giustozzi points out that the accusations against Rohullah may have been false.

sent to rule the province from Kabul. This bred further resentment against the Hamid Karzai government.

Fears that Kunar would turn on the coalition seem to have been borne out. Fighting began in late 2002 as the 82nd Airborne arrived in the valley. Kashmir Khan, the Hizb-i-Islami commander who had earlier fought against the Taliban, seemed to be leading the revolt. In an effort to flush out Kashmir Khan's Hizb-i-Islami fighters as well as dozens of foreign fighters led by Abu Ikhlas al-Masri, who was declared al-Qa`ida's *amir* in Kunar and Nuristan, the United States launched Operation Mountain Resolve on November 7, 2003. The operation involved a Soviet-style airdrop into the Hindu Kush mountains by the U.S. 10th Mountain Division and resulted in the killing of Hizb-i-Islami commander Ghulam Sakhee, a few clashes with the enemy, and the discovery of some minor weapon caches.¹⁵

The next U.S. operation was Operation Red Wing, which occurred on June 28, 2005. The small operation involved the insertion of four elite Navy SEALs into Kunar to track and kill Ahmad Shah Ismail, a mid-level Taliban/al-Qa`ida mercenary commander said to be leading a group of 200-300 Afghan and Arab fighters calling themselves the *Bara bin Malik*. The operation failed when the Navy SEAL team operating on a 10,000-foot high ridge known as Abas Ghar (near Korengal Valley) was spotted by local shepherds. The shepherds informed Ahmad Shah Ismail, who sent roughly 140 fighters to surround and attack them.¹⁶ Reinforcements arrived, but one of the Chinooks carrying SEALs was shot down en route by a Taliban rocket-propelled grenade. Sixteen soldiers were killed in the ensuing crash. Meanwhile, three of the encircled Navy SEALs on the ground were killed, while the fourth escaped.¹⁷ In the aftermath,

15 Sergeant Greg Heath, "10th Mtn. Div. Shows its Mettle In Operation Mountain Resolve," Defend America, U.S. Department of Defense, November 2003.

16 "US Navy Seal's Afghan Disaster," BBC News, July 25, 2005.

17 The story of this tragedy, the worse loss of Navy SEALs in its history, was vividly recounted in a *Time Magazine* article entitled, "How the Shepherd Saved the SEAL," and a book entitled *Lone Survivor: The Eyewitness Account of Operation Redwing and the Lost Heroes of SEAL Team 10* (London: Little, Brown and Co., 2007). The tar-

Regional Command East decided that Kunar and the neighboring province of Nuristan needed a greater military presence. In response, it launched Operation Whaler in August 2005, Operation Pil in October 2005 and Operation Mountain Lion in April 2006. Hundreds of Taliban-linked fighters were killed in the operations. Since then, Regional Command East has also been active in building roads (including a \$7.5 million road linking the Pech Valley to Asadabad), bridges, schools and other Provisional Reconstruction Team projects as part of a "hearts and minds" strategy.

The military has been active in establishing forward operating bases far from the town centers controlled by the Soviets in the 1980s. This has meant inserting a U.S. presence¹⁸ deep into a countryside that is hostile to the coalition and generally supportive of the local Pashtun, Pashai, Nuristani and Arab insurgents. Moreover, the new counter-insurgency strategy has resulted in the construction of small, platoon-sized outposts throughout the province. These have become magnets for local insurgent attacks.¹⁹ While this forward base policy has increased U.S. casualties in the region, it has also extended the writ of the Afghan government to places where there has been no government presence for decades. It has helped cut off insurgent "rat lines" over the Ghahki and Nawa passes from Pakistan into Kunar and on to Nuristan. Writing about one such base in the Salafist-Wahhabi-dominated Korengal Valley,²⁰ Elizabeth Rubin of the *New York Times* explained:

get of this failed operation, Ahmad Shah, escaped his pursuers and survived a subsequent B-52 strike on his compound, but was eventually killed two years later.

18 The Marines, 173rd Airborne Brigade, 10th Mountain Division and 503rd Infantry Regiment have all been involved.

19 These attacks are often posted online. For a Taliban perspective video of the fighting in Kunar, see "Part 2 of BM Rocket Operation in Kunar," at www.liveleak.com/view?i=3c9_1174862660&c=1. See also "Mujahideen Launch Hawk Rockets at American Post in Kunar" at www.liveleak.com/view?i=a37_1174985631.

20 For remarkable video footage shot by Sebastian Younger for ABC on life in an outpost in Kunar's deadly Korengal Valley, see www.liveleak.com/view?i=d0f_1197424119.

Unlike in Iraq, where the captains and lieutenants could let down their guard in a relatively safe, fortified operating base, swapping stories and ideas, here [Korengal Operating Post] they had no one to talk to and were almost as vulnerable to enemy fire inside the wire as out...And unlike every other place I've been in Afghanistan—even the Pech River valley, just an hour's drive away—the Korengal had no Afghan police or district leaders for the Americans to work with.²¹

The enemy in Korengal and nearby Pech consists of a variety of fighters belonging to Kashmir Khan's Hizb-i-Islami faction, Abu Ikhlas' al-Qa`ida, angry local Afghans who resent the presence of "infidels" or any outsiders in their valleys, Lashkar-i-Tayyaba, Taliban fighters led by Dost Muhammad and Qara Ziaur Rahman, Nuristanis led by Mullah Munibullah, Arab fighters from a group calling itself Jami'at al-Da`wa al-Qur'an wa'l-Sunna, and Pakistani volunteers. Among these groups are hundreds of fighters who routinely ambush U.S. patrols, plant IEDs, snipe at exposed soldiers, shell observation posts, and on occasion even attempt to storm forward operating bases.²²

This last point was vividly demonstrated in one of the boldest insurgent attacks in Afghanistan to date: the July 13, 2008 mass assault on a partially established overt observation post in the Kunar/Nuristani border village of Wanat. The attack was launched by Hizb-i-Islami commander Maulawi Usman and involved between 200-400 Arab and Afghan fighters in a pre-dawn ambush

21 The story of the insurgency in Korengal Valley begins with the Americans getting caught up in a feud with rivals from the nearby Pech Valley. According to Elizabeth Rubin, the Americans were duped into bombing the house of a local lumber magnate named Haji Matin. Several of Haji Matin's family members were killed in the attack. To gain revenge, he took his men over to al-Qa`ida commander Abu Ikhlas al-Masri and began to fight against the Americans. As more blood was spilled, Matin's *lashkar* gathered up the support of locals in the Korengal who made it their mission to destroy the U.S. forward operating post in their valley.

22 For video of an example of a typical ambush on one of these patrols, see www.liveleak.com/view?i=2b1_1193703874. Also see Sebastian Junger, "Return to the Valley of Death," *Vanity Fair*, October 2008.

on 45 Americans and 25 Afghan Army soldiers who were protected only by concertina barbed wire, earthen barriers and a wall of Humvees. At one point they breached the post and fighting was done face to face before the insurgents were repulsed.²³ In the eight hour firefight, the Americans came close to being overrun and were only saved when A-10s, F-15s, Apaches, and a Predator drone bombed and strafed the perimeter of the base. When the smoke cleared, nine members of Chosen Company serving in Wanat had been killed, 21 wounded, and four allied Afghan soldiers wounded. Between 15 and 40 of the enemy were also killed in the assault. While the operation was a Taliban military failure, it was a strategic success because of the propaganda value of the attack. Three days later, the U.S. military decided to evacuate the base altogether.

The Future of Kunar

From a larger perspective, the United States has little presence along the porous Kunar-Bajaur border and its authority is largely limited to the Jalalabad-Asadabad-Asmar highway, the same area the Soviets tried to control. The arrival of thousands of Pashtun refugees into Kunar fleeing a Pakistani offensive across the border in Bajaur in the fall of 2008 might exacerbate problems.²⁴ Thus a pattern of revenge killings, spontaneous tribal jihad, and counter-insurgency that goes back 30 years to the original *lashkar* uprising against the Afghan Communist regime continues in the Kunar Valley and its tributaries. While the coalition has advantages over its Soviet predecessors in terms of intelligence, training, equipment, and fighting spirit, it will continue to sustain heavy losses as it fights valley by valley for control of Kunar. Qari Ziaur Rahman, the overall Taliban commander for Kunar, Bajaur, and Nuristan, summed up the importance of the battle for Kunar as follows:

From the Soviet days in Afghanistan, Kunar's importance has been clear. This is a border province and trouble here can

break the central government. Whoever has been defeated in Afghanistan, his defeat began from Kunar. Hence, everybody is terrified of this region. The Soviets were defeated in this province and NATO knows that if it is defeated here it will be defeated all over Afghanistan.²⁵

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²³ This was the first time a U.S. post had been breached.

²⁴ This problem may be mitigated, however, by the Pakistani Army's recent success in taking back much of the neighboring cross-border Taliban sanctuary in Bajaur Agency in late October 2008.

²⁵ Syed Saleem Shahzad, "At War with the Taliban: A Fighter and a Financier," *Asia Times*, May 23, 2008.