

Key Factors for the Recent Growth of the Afghan Insurgency

By Captain Michael Erwin, U.S. Army

BEGINNING AT 4:30 AM on July 13, 2008, more than 100 insurgents launched a direct fire assault against Combat Outpost Wanat in Kunar Province, Afghanistan. Taliban fighters fired machine guns, rocket-propelled grenades and mortars from homes and a mosque while another 100 insurgents attacked an observation post from farmland to the east. The attack lasted throughout the day and the enemy continued to attack in the face of coalition machine guns, grenades, artillery, AH-64s, F-15Es, A-10 Warthogs and B-1B bombers. Coalition soldiers managed to repulse the attack, but not until they suffered nine killed in action and 15 more wounded.¹

Today, the Taliban are as strong as they have been since September 10th, 2001. Senior U.S. military commander in Afghanistan, Major General Jeffrey J. Schloesser, acknowledged this in late June when he revealed that the country has witnessed a 40% increase in attacks thus far in 2008.² Despite the insurgency's significant leadership losses in 2007, violent events have transpired with increasing regularity this year throughout the entire country—a poignant indicator that reveals the insurgency's organization and strength. The enemy has sought out new and bold avenues to demonstrate to the world, and more importantly to the people of Afghanistan, that the Taliban will eventually return to power in the country it once ruled.

The growth of the insurgency in Afghanistan can be attributed to a series of external and internal factors, including better trained and equipped fighters traveling in from Pakistan, Iranian support for militant activities, the role of the poppy trade and the strength of insurgent Information Operations.³

1 Tim Coghlan, "US Forces Abandon Wanat Outpost in Afghanistan after Fierce Taliban Attack," *TimesOnline*, July 17, 2008.

2 Julian E. Barnes and Peter Spiegel, "Afghanistan Attacks Rise, U.S. Says," *Los Angeles Times*, June 25, 2008.

3 The assessments in this report are based upon the au-

The Federally Administered Tribal Areas

Ethnic Pashtun Taliban militants and al-Qa`ida sympathizers have enjoyed sanctuary in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) since 2002; therefore, blaming the insurgency's increasing virulence on this factor alone is an oversimplification of the problem. Rather, Afghanistan's devolving security situation may be attributed to the combination of a significant increase in well-trained foreign fighters traveling to FATA to train future fighters, and the on-again-off-again peace agreements between FATA's militant tribes and the government of Pakistan—with the latter issue enabling the former.

As Pakistan's elections neared in early 2008, the country's militants in FATA showcased their power through dozens of suicide bomb attacks deep inside Pakistan's interior, contributing to the election of a moderate parliament that opposed Pakistani military activity inside FATA. Consequently, the country's new leadership engaged in peace talks with the militants during the past six months. Although the Pakistani military has been largely ineffective at conducting operations within FATA since 2002, their mere presence forced militants to be cautious when training fighters. These peace negotiations have enabled foreign fighters with formal military experience from countries such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Chechnya to enjoy unimpeded freedom of movement within FATA.⁴ This allows these seasoned fighters to arrive at *madrasas* and focus on their mission to convert untrained Pashtun Muslims into organized, lethal and survivable fighters; these fighters then cross the border into Afghanistan and assault firebases, attack logistical convoys and overrun district centers at an alarmingly effective rate.⁵

thor's rotation to Operation Enduring Freedom, August 2006 to April 2007. His unit participated in Operations Medusa and Baaz Tsuka where the insurgency had experienced new levels of influence and capacity to leverage violence.

4 Tom Coghlan, "Afghanistan's 'Pristine Jihad' Draws in Outsiders Trained in Pakistan," *TimesOnline*, July 21, 2008.

5 The calculation of the size of FATA in square miles is determined to be similar to the state of California.

Iranian Influence

While Pakistan's influence on Afghanistan is significant, it is by no means the only external factor facilitating the insurgency's growth in 2008. Despite being implicated several times in 2007 for assisting the Taliban, Iranian support continues to filter into the country through the western provinces and through Pakistan.⁶ It is important to note that the support is not coming in the form of high-profile weapons such as Explosively Formed Projectile (EFP) IEDs or Man Portable Air Defense Systems, but rather AK-47s, Rocket-Propelled Grenades, explosives and ammunition that the insurgents use on a daily basis to conduct attacks. As outlined in a U.S. military report to Congress in June 2008, Iranian support has come in two forms: providing overt monetary and reconstruction aid to the government and populace, while simultaneously providing training, weapons and other support to the insurgency to undermine NATO influence in Afghanistan.⁷

Since weapons factories do not exist inside Afghanistan and caches from the Soviet War era are dried up, Iran's logistical support has matured into an enabler to facilitate insurgent ability to conduct attacks at the highest rate in the history of the war. When assessing the insurgency's strength, it is critical to understand that Iranian influence is not limited to the western portion of Afghanistan, but rather is dispersed across the entire country. Their efforts to supply fighters with weapons and ammunition have impacted the insurgency because they have bolstered its capacity to carry out violent attacks against coalition forces, Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and government officials. Research by journalists has led U.S. officials to publicly acknowledge that weapons from Iran—AK-47s, C4 plastic explosives and mortars—have been found in Afghanistan and consistently used by Taliban-led insurgents since 2006.⁸

6 "Report on Progress Toward Stability in Afghanistan," Report to Congress, June 2008.

7 Ibid.

8 One example can be found in the report by Muhammad Tahir, "Iranian Involvement in Afghanistan," *Terrorism Monitor* 5:1 (2007).

The Poppy Business

While Islam is the typical Afghan's form of spiritual livelihood, poppy is the leading form of economic livelihood. A large portion of the populace, especially in the southern part of the country where the insurgency is the strongest and the violence the most notorious, is entrenched in growing, cultivating or transporting the poppy crop.⁹ Tens of thousands of farmers grow it to earn a living and hundreds of powerful tribal leaders facilitate its movement to maintain status and wealth. The stated problem is noteworthy because starting in the spring of 2006 coalition forces and the Afghan government began the practice of formal eradication. The decision to destroy poppies has turned thousands of Afghans from citizens disinterested in coalition force activity to men willing to take up arms to attack anyone they associate with eradication—coalition troops, members of ANSF or the Afghan government.¹⁰

The influence of poppy cultivation extends far beyond deterring the populace from supporting the Afghan government. The massive profits derived from the poppy trade generate more than \$100 million per year that the Taliban use to pay fighters, arm them and gain influence over local leaders.¹¹ UN research revealed that the Taliban earned this massive amount of money through a 10% tax on harvests, complemented by transit fees that they often garnered by transporting the drug outside of Afghanistan.¹² An examination of the amount of poppy grown in 2003 compared to 2007 reveals an enormous increase in just four years: 80,000 hectares cultivated in 2003 yielded an estimated 3,600 metric tons of opium, while 2007 saw more than 193,000 hectares tended by Afghan farmers, resulting in the production of 8,300 metric tons of the illicit drug.¹³ In short, poppy growth has surged in the face of eradication. The Taliban's role

9 Personal observations based upon last deployment to Afghanistan as Special Operations Task Force 31 senior intelligence officer.

10 Ibid.

11 Kate Clark, "Taliban's '\$100m Opium Takings,'" BBC, June 24, 2008.

12 Ibid.

13 "Poppy Cultivation in Afghanistan -- Search for Alternatives," United Nations Information Service, February 4, 2004.

in this prospering business has directly translated into well-funded leaders who have taken this money to fuel the insurgency in a country with a weak economy and few opportunities to earn a consistent wage.

Without profits from the poppy trade, the Taliban leadership could not afford to continue recruiting, arming and paying thousands of fighters at the current rate.¹⁴ Since the poppy crop will remain a critical component of Afghanistan's economy for years to come, unless eradication efforts are improved to achieve a significantly higher success rate of destroyed poppies, the insurgency will continue to rely heavily on profits generated from this business.

Mastery of Information Operations

The final and perhaps most overlooked factor that has contributed to the insurgency's growth in recent years is its influence on the populace's minds, which has increased the Taliban's control over the country's tribes and villages. Commonly referred to as Information Operations (IO), no one in Afghanistan does it better than the insurgents.¹⁵ Ranging from intimidation to spreading blatant lies of coalition atrocities, the insurgents have mastered the ability to influence the masses through word of mouth, technology and the media. They gain support of the populace through coercion by disseminating CDs depicting the beheading of ANSF and government officials "as their punishment for supporting the infidels." They exploit any attack that results in collateral damage by blaming the coalition for deaths, injuries and destruction—whether or not they

14 Assessment based upon intelligence reporting in October 2006 stating that the insurgents were leveraging profits garnered from the poppy trade to pay more than 1,000 new fighters to replace the estimated 900 fighters that were killed by SOTF-31, ANSF and NATO in Operation Medusa. This reporting was corroborated by the numbers of insurgents who returned to the Panjawayi area of Kandahar Province to continue to fight in October and December 2006.

15 Assessment based upon personal observations during rotation to Operation Enduring Freedom where Task Force 31 consistently witnessed the Taliban's effective use of Information Operations to target the populace, including a significant reliance upon spreading lies to disseminate the message that they wanted the people to hear.

actually occurred.¹⁶

Despite the insurgents' use of lies and deception, their story is typically the first to reach the people of Afghanistan, so it is what a majority of them believe to be the truth. The cumulative effect of the insurgents' IO campaign during the past four years has taken hold with a majority of the populace, leading them to believe that the Taliban will outlast the coalition and return to power.

Beyond the dishonesty that the insurgents employ, there are also the consistent IO victories that they have won on a weekly basis since 2006—powerful suicide bomb attacks and the temporary takeover of Afghan government district centers. Each time a suicide bomber

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strikes a convoy or symbolic building, it is a loud and convincing reminder to the populace that the coalition, ANSF and the Afghan government are unable to provide security. Insurgents have also successfully employed the practice of massing armed fighters at district centers throughout the country and forcing the outnumbered ANSF units to flee. During these incidents, the Taliban quickly take down the Afghan government flag, raise their own, call a press agent and within hours the media reports that the Taliban are in control of a district. To the people of that district and to the rest of the world reading that news story, they believe that the Taliban (and not NATO or the Afghan government) is in control. It does not matter if the insurgents often flee 30 minutes later when NATO troops and ANSF respond; by that time, the Taliban will have already achieved the IO victory.

16 Ibid.

Conclusion

A myriad of external and internal factors have enabled the insurgency in Afghanistan to reach its strongest point. While the insurgents' sanctuary in FATA is certainly the leading source of its growth, other issues outlined in this article reveal that the current situation in Afghanistan is much more convoluted than it appears at first glance. Iranian influence, the poppy trade, and the insurgents' dominance in the realm of Information Operations all pose significant obstacles to NATO and the Afghan government in the years ahead. If one aspect is clear, it is that there is no simple solution to the challenges facing Afghanistan in its pursuit of stability, democracy and prosperity.

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