

Taliban, Take Two

Five years later, our original foe in the war on terror is reversing an easy American victory.

By Jason Motlagh

FIVE YEARS AFTER the Taliban fled to the mountains, Kabul felt normal. French Army Capt. Eric Morgand of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan had agreed to take me on a morning patrol of the capital's periphery and an outlying village. Locals scarcely seemed to care as our convoy of VB-2L "Mad Max" light armored vehicles rumbled past. Billboards for better cellphone coverage and cheaper flights to Dubai lined streets choked with dust and traffic, while ubiquitous homemade kites danced above the warrens of earthen homes that recede up steep mountain flanks. Half-built mini-mansions, of the tasteless variety that betray fast and illicit wealth, smacked of a comeback.

But less than a mile away, in the heart of downtown, Afghan police were busy cleaning up carnage: a suicide bomber had detonated earlier in the morning one block from my hotel, killing a dozen people and injuring scores more as they waited outside the Interior Ministry. "They've done it again," a shopkeeper said in disgust as I stumbled half awake into the clamor to see a bus speeding off with bodies strewn across its floor. Panicked authorities armed with truncheons were at a loss to control the streets.

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Kabul is no Baghdad. But it is showing symptoms of a virus that has crept inward after being allowed to fester at Afghanistan's extremities. Insurgents,

led by a more sophisticated Taliban that has regrouped in lawless tribal areas along the Afghan-Pakistani border, are copying tactics minted in Iraq to destabilize vast swathes of the southern and eastern backcountry and make their presence felt in urban centers where they lack a foothold. Suicide terrorism, once alien to the country, has skyrocketed. Some 90 suicide bombings have been recorded this year, more than the total of all such attacks in Afghan history. Western intelligence agencies say foreign jihadis are coming back to train and terrorize. Improvised explosive devices are used with greater lethality than ever before. And state officials are being targeted in a deliberate campaign to erode what faith remains in a corrupt government that has failed to deliver security and basic services. According to Joanna Nathan, a Kabul-based senior analyst with the International Crisis Group, "Insurgents [have] become increasingly bold and use terror to act in areas they can't control. ... They know it is a way of driving a wedge between the people and the administration."

Former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld tried to paint a rosier picture in an Oct. 8 *Washington Post* op-ed. Playing down the insurgency, he touted the opening of a Coca-Cola bottling plant in Kabul as another harbinger of a resilient national economy that has tripled in the past five years and is projected to increase by another 20 percent in 2007. What he failed to point out is that five

years after the Taliban's fall catapulted popular hopes, narcotics account for about half of the Afghan gross domestic product. Outside of Kabul, the United Nations says that schools are burnt at the rate of nearly one per day, aid workers and now journalists have been killed and abducted, and typically stoic Afghans swear that major roads built to integrate the country are a no-go. Violent attacks—up fourfold to more than 600 a month as of the end of September—have been recorded in all but two of the country's 34 provinces, some of which are infested with militants. A U.S. military official recently conceded that nine of 21 districts in Ghazni province, about an hour's drive south of the capital, have "significant Taliban influence."

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Today's Taliban—made up of a loose alliance of veteran fighters, youngsters educated in Pakistani madrasas, drug traffickers, smugglers and poor, frustrated farmers vulnerable to their advances—has a different complexion than its ascetic forerunner. In the words of one local security official in the restive Helmand province, "some are joining the Taliban, some are worsening the situation in the name of the Taliban." The bearded zealots that previously cracked down on opium production have made arrangements of convenience with criminal networks and farmers in exchange for kickbacks to bankroll their insurgency. Recruits are

said to receive double the wages of Afghan army troops and four times what police are paid, along with better weapons. Not a hard sell to those stuck without viable alternatives.

Over the summer, emboldened Taliban clashed with elements of the roughly 40,000-strong NATO and U.S. troop forces in standing gun battles across southeastern provinces in the bloodiest fighting since the hardline movement was toppled by the 2001 U.S.-led invasion. ISAF claims to have killed more than 1,000 militants in September's Operation Medusa. Taliban commanders counter that they have hundreds of men and are prepared to wage a low-intensity war through the winter—a time hostilities typically come to a halt—and continue for as long as it takes to grind down Western resolve. “By the will of Allah, the fight will intensify in the coming few months,” Mullah Omar, the one-eyed Taliban leader with a \$10-million bounty on his head said in a statement late last month. “Our predictions about the war have proved right in the past. I am confident the fighting will be a surprise for many.”

Unlike the old Taliban that banned television from 1996-2001, this missive was posted on the Internet. The movement has turned to modern propaganda methods in a bid to co-opt Osama bin Laden's global franchise, demonstrated by a presence on some 30 percent of more than 4,000 jihadi websites and radio stations, according to the Center for Conflict and Peace Studies (CAPS) in Kabul. DVDs of NATO civilian casualties and videos of Iraqi beheadings are in circulation, along with the first-ever recorded suicide testimony of an Afghan man from Khost province who later killed 13 people when he blew himself up at a Kabul military training center. Mullah Omar himself is reportedly featured in one tape surveying militants at the frontline of a battleground.

The Taliban's information war is full throttle on the ground in and around its stronghold of Kandahar province. Anti-government leaflets and pictures are distributed by hand, and the grassroots advantage of being able to speak in the local Pashtun dialect gives added leverage among illiterate farmers prone to intimidation. Insurgents have erected fake checkpoints to monitor critical roadways such as the Kabul-Kandahar highway, a one-time poster project that has become something of a death trap that Afghans themselves are loathe to travel. Roving bands are known to stop vehicles and confiscate mobile telephones, punishing people they determine to have Western contacts. “Taliban tokens” are issued to some highway travelers to regulate human traffic,

more I was led to believe that conditions had completely changed,” he said. “The perception has now come to many that [NATO's] understanding was not correct. And so they have to recalibrate their strategy, resources and manpower to deal with the threat. We have a military battle we're fighting. But at the same time we need to do so in a holistic manner with enough resources going towards development.”

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Air Force Lt. Col. Donald Koehler and his Bagram Provincial Reconstruction Team understand that guerrilla insurgencies cannot be beaten by military might alone. One of 24 outfits at work behind the scenes from the Herat poppy heartland to volatile Kandahar, the PRT is

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according to CAPS. In one instance, clean-shaven Taliban disguised as police pulled over a bus and asked passengers if they worked for the local government. Those who stepped forward were never heard from again.

CAPS founder Hekmat Karzai, a nephew of President Hamid Karzai, explained at his Kabul office that the Taliban has evolved to view itself as “part of the global jihad. The Taliban that we knew before [is] not the same Taliban—tactically, ideologically and strategically.” He decided to start his organization this year to bring a grounded perspective to issues threatening Afghan stability after realizing too many Western experts dismissed the Taliban as a “spent force.” Evidence at home indicated otherwise. “The more I came back to Afghanistan to do research, the

building on a development model created specifically for Afghanistan with the blessing of President Karzai. They have built schools, government outposts, deep wells, and bridges in Kapisa and Parwan, hardscrabble provinces north of the capital where a few hundred Taliban foot soldiers are known to hide out.

One crisp afternoon in the valley hamlet of Mahmud Ragi, local officials, village elders, and Islamic clerics assembled with PRT leaders to break ground on a new road they hope will facilitate commerce and boost faith in the central government, moving residents to reject the Taliban. Koehler stressed that his team tries to keep a low profile and put an “Afghan face on projects as much as possible,” relying heavily on local manpower to improve and sustain home-grown capacity. The rusted carcasses of

Soviet tanks that dot the countryside, leftovers from the 1979-89 Afghan-Soviet war, are a grim reminder of the perils of occupation—literal or perceived.

The threat of Taliban ambushes, which have twice occurred, has not deterred PRT members from going to extreme lengths to interact with locals in order to prioritize aid projects. This was evident at the outset of Ramadan, the month-long Muslim fasting period, when a load of food was delivered to the local mullah who, in turn, would distribute the goods to the community. “We are thankful for what the Americans are doing here,” said Mohammed Qasim, a former mujahedin commander who lost an eye fighting the communists. “Yes, we should still expect more from our government, but we need to be patient.”

WELL-PLACED OBSERVERS INSIST THAT A **CRITICAL WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY TO STABILIZE THE COUNTRY** AFTER THE DEFEAT OF THE TALIBAN WAS **SQUANDERED** WHEN NATION BUILDING IN **IRAQ TOOK CENTER STAGE.**

Anti-American sentiment remains low among the majority of Afghans. Instead, they tend to reserve their harshest comments for the Karzai regime, a rag-tag national army, and often-predatory police force one taxi driver likened to “the dirt on a dog’s feet.” Results of the largest-ever opinion survey, financed by the U.S. Agency for International Development, shows that while the overall mood is far from fatalistic, 20 percent less of the population believes the country is heading in the right direction than did on the eve of the 2004 elections. Well-placed observers insist that a critical window of opportunity to stabilize the country after the defeat of the Taliban was squandered when nation building in Iraq took center stage. Meanwhile, a scathing report by the Senlis Council, an international

policy think tank that has covered Afghanistan extensively, went so far as to claim that the Taliban has regained control of the southern half of the country largely due to “ineffective and inflammatory military and counter-narcotics policies” that are losing hearts and minds. NATO and Afghan officials have shot back that this is a myopic exaggeration, citing project success stories and insurgent death tolls.

Yet there is no disputing hard numbers: \$82.5 billion has been spent on military operations since 2002 versus just \$7.3 billion on development, a 900 percent disparity. Swelling ranks of Taliban foot soldiers and a greater frequency of attacks have piqued fears that the country is at a tipping point. British Gen. David Richards, commander of NATO

forces in Afghanistan, recently gave his blunt assessment of the Afghan psyche: “They will say, ‘We do not want the Taliban, but then we would rather have that austere and unpleasant life that that might involve than another five years of fighting.’” If NATO does not fast-track tangible economic improvements to the country, he estimated some 70 percent of Afghans would soon get behind the Taliban.

In late September, President Karzai traveled to Washington to gain aid assurances from President Bush and ask him to bring pressure to bear on a two-faced Pakistan. While President Pervez Musharraf has pledged his country to be a U.S. ally in the war on terror, it is no secret that his intelligence service has actively supported the Taliban. Complicating matters is a new truce signed

with Pashtun elders in North Waziristan, a fiercely resistant region that been a sanctuary to al-Qaeda. NATO says attacks launched from the area into eastern Afghanistan have surged by 300 percent since the deal was inked. And the plot has thickened: about 80 people died in an Oct. 31 Pakistani gunship strike on a religious school the military said was fronting for a terrorist training center, further threatening Musharraf’s efforts to persuade tribesman to back his government over the Taliban and al-Qaeda. A Nov. 9 suicide reprisal by an alleged pro-Taliban insurgent that killed at least 42 Pakistani troops has served notice of worse to come.

Still more troublesome is Baluchistan province in the south, where Taliban leadership uses the city of Quetta as a command center to stage brazen cross-border attacks into Kandahar and Helmand provinces. The consensus is that unless the borderlands are tamed, Taliban and other Islamist militants will always have a rear base to fall back on and reboot. In a July 2005 interview with al-Jazeera, Taliban commander Mullah Dadullah made no secret of the war plan: “Our tactics now are hit and run; we attack certain locations, kill the enemies of Allah there, and retreat to safe bases in the mountains to preserve our mujaheddin. ... We decide the time and place of our attacks; in this way the enemy is always guessing. ... We will always retreat to our safe bases.” U.S. special forces teams given the near impossible task of rooting out insurgents are largely chasing shadows across hostile terrain. As long as this continues, unconfirmed NATO body counts are a shallow measure of success.

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To hear the breathless mayor of Dakowye Payan tell it, nothing in Afghanistan is a foregone conclusion. “We hate the Taliban, and if they come down here we

will fight them to the death—every man, woman and child,” Mohamadin Malek said, gesturing to the gaggle of village children standing behind him, six of which he said were his own. Captain Morgand’s convoy had crossed into the fertile Shomali Plain, where Northern Alliance irregulars reinforced by U.S. forces on horseback routed the last of the Taliban holdouts before taking back Kabul. Seated on a carpet under the shade of cherry tree, French officers listened intently for the better part of an hour as the mayor told of his village’s turnaround. Landmines planted by the Taliban have been removed, schools are rebuilt, and a select few pupils have left for Kabul to attend university. “There is no unemployment at all,” he added with pride. “We are mostly tailors, known for our shalwar kameez.” When the status report finally ran dry, officers asked detailed questions and took notes. A survey of on-looking faces revealed not a wrinkle of disdain for the soldiers’ presence. When it came time to return to base, the mayor promised a meal would be prepared upon the next visit.

The newly tarmacked road back to Kabul keeps communities like Dakowye Payan well within the orbit of security and commerce. Yet even here a fluid insurgency keeps eyes trained on the hills. Moments after departure, Captain Morgand ordered the convoy to halt after lookouts up front spotted suspicious movement high in the distance. “My man thinks someone has been watching us from up there,” he said, binoculars raised. “Could be Taliban.” Back and forth he scanned the jagged ridgeline for signs of the enemy, but the horizon lay still. ■

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Using a block of clay to simulate a bomb, Paris airport workers have made a video demonstrating how easy it is to smuggle an explosive onto a civilian airliner

at Charles de Gaulle Airport. The airport’s principal union is supporting seven Muslim employees who are appealing their recent and well-publicized suspension of security clearances. The union claims that the workers in question have received stringent background checks and have been reliable employees for years while many employees of private-sector contractors working on security at the airport are hardly monitored at all. To make their point, the fake bomb was brought into the airport and onto the plane through various security checkpoints manned by contracted security. There were numerous failures to adhere to airport regulations, and no one even questioned the person who was doing the filming. The bomb passed into a secure area, then into an area controlled by the French Air Postal service Chronopost, then into a non-secure staff canteen, and finally back into a secure area where airplanes were loading.



An American engineer of Indian descent, who has been indicted for passing military secrets to China and Israel, could face the death penalty.

Noshir Gowadia, a former employee of Northrop Grumman and Los Alamos National Laboratory, was a professor of aeronautics at Purdue University prior to his arrest. The indictment, sealed to protect classified information, states that Gowadia sold stealth and cruise-missile technology, considered to be among the most sensitive high-tech defense information. Gowadia, who was apparently motivated by money and not ideology, traveled to China six times between 2003 and 2005 and reportedly received more than \$2 million for the information he provided to Beijing. It is presumed that he passed similar information to Israel, which is known to be upgrading its cruise-missile and stealth capabilities, and that he did so through Israeli defense contractors and “businessmen” who then passed the information on to the Israel Aircraft Industries, the quasi-private government umbrella organization that acquires and develops aeronautical technologies. The Israeli government has denied involvement. The Chinese have not responded to State Department inquiries.



Confidential sources reveal that the United States is sending arms to the militias aligned with the Fatah faction in Palestine to enable a military confrontation with its rivals in Hamas.

Fatah, the party of President Mahmoud Abbas, is larger than its rivals but has been unable to match the grassroots and organizational abilities of Prime Minister Ismail Haniya’s Hamas. The covert U.S. assistance for Fatah has been orchestrated by Vice President Dick Cheney working through the Pentagon office of Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence Steve Cambone. The arms and limited training in their use are supplied directly to Fatah cadres by way of the Jordanian military. Israel has approved the operation. The CIA, which continues to be viewed as “unreliable,” has been excluded from involvement under orders from the vice president.

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