



The Afghan Surge: Operation Disarray?

Commentary: Will religious purity and the barbarity it inspires persist after combat mission ends?

By Malou Innocent - *September 17, 2012 14:11*

WASHINGTON, DC — A major goal of US President Barack Obama’s “surge” of 33,000 troops in Afghanistan was to force the insurgency’s less intractable elements to accept conditions for reconciliation. But as Afghans prepare for a post-NATO combat mission in 2014, a peace deal with the Taliban and other insurgent groups doesn’t appear any closer. Indeed, heavily indoctrinated low-level fighters seem committed as ever to fighting on. Despite upbeat reports by the war’s decision-makers, the surge’s short-term, tactical victories could pave the path for long-term, strategic defeat.

The US military has been tireless in its efforts, and yet Afghanistan, as a whole, is no more law-abiding, democratic or stable than it was before the surge. The latest monthly trend report put out by the International Security Assistance Force shows that compared to the same period in 2011, enemy-initiated attacks between January and July 2012 decreased in Regional Commands East, North, and Southwest, and increased in Regional Commands West and South. Coalition statistics showed a rise in insurgent attacks across the country. In May there were nearly 3,000 violent incidents, an increase of 21 percent compared to 2011.

Reports from the battlefield also paint a disturbing picture of the evolving nature of the insurgency. Only weeks ago, Mullah Mohammad Omar urged his fighters to “emphatically” avoid civilian deaths. But Ahmad Khan and Hamid Shalizi of Reuters report that “some militants are hard to control.” The recent shooting and beheading of 15 men and two women in Southern Afghanistan, allegedly by Taliban militants, illustrates the difficulty of more pragmatic senior leaders imposing obedience on the estimated 20,000 fighters across Afghanistan and Pakistan. According to one senior Afghan intelligence official, “Even when Mullah Omar tells them or orders them not to harm civilians, local commanders prefer punishment and value their Islamic duties rather than listen to him in matters of immorality.”

The Taliban has always been amorphous and fragmented. But paradoxically, aspects of the surge may have both weakened the movement's operational leadership and breathed new life into its grassroots fighters.

In their chilling assessment of the conflict, Kandahar-based researchers Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn conclude in *An Enemy We Created: The Myth of the Taliban-Al Qaeda Merger in Afghanistan*, that the coalition's kill and capture campaign against mid-level commanders has weakened the leadership's grip on the chain of command. Some of these higher-ups, however, were more open to peace talks. Younger insurgents opposed to a political settlement are now moving into leadership positions and are increasingly influenced by Al Qaeda's worldview.

Given the complex nature of Afghan society and politics, forging a power-sharing deal between the insurgency and the Afghan government composed of its enemies was always going to be difficult. But if, as reports suggest, a generation of neo-Taliban are refusing to reconcile, and Taliban higher-ups who are less opposed to peace are having the rug ripped out from under them, then something about the surge went terribly wrong.

In addition, the surge brought a massive uptick from US forces in misdirected firepower, kicked in doors, and controversial incidents of perceived cultural insensitivity, all of which sowed discontent among the population and affirmed the worst insurgent propaganda. The kill and capture campaign in particular was never popular among Afghans.

Further complicating matters for the coalition is the unpleasant truth that radicalism is exhibited by more than those against whom our soldiers fight. For example, in the recent shooting and beheading of 17 in southern Afghanistan, one villager alleged that among the attackers was an enraged family member of the two girls. And consider Aisha, the Afghan girl who graced the cover of *Time* magazine after her nose and ears had been severed. In that horrendous episode, a Taliban commander helped, but "Aisha's brother-in-law held her down while her husband pulled out a knife. First he sliced off her ears. Then he started on her nose."

This level of religious purity and the barbarity it inspires persists after more than 10 years of war, more than half a trillion US taxpayer dollars, and thousands of young American soldiers dead, maimed and traumatized. Sadly, the loss of blood and treasure continue for desperate and war-weary Afghans who opposed the surge in the first place.

Competing nationalisms and ethnic and factional differences remain impervious to the increased foreign troop presence, particularly after more than three-decades of continual conflict. In this respect, the surge's central weakness was not that it was executed poorly, but the assumption that it could have magically fixed the underlying causes of Afghanistan's instability.

In 2009, Obama's refocus on the "good war" did not require a "surge" as the way forward. What it needed — and eventually lost — was a politically focused strategy as a way out.

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