



New Taliban threats challenge Obama narrative on Afghanistan progress

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April 22, 2015

The Taliban's promise Wednesday of new attacks in Afghanistan as they enter the spring fighting season is the latest development to challenge the White House narrative that Afghanistan is poised to emerge from more than a decade of war.

“President Obama wants his legacy to be the president who got the U.S. out of two wars,” Lisa Curtis, a senior research fellow at the conservative Heritage Foundation, told FoxNews.com. “The facts on the ground don’t support that. He’s gotten ahead of himself.”

The Taliban, in a statement emailed to the media, said they would launch the annual spring offensive against the Afghan government beginning Friday. The terror organization said the strikes — dubbed "Azm" or perseverance in Dari and Arabic — are meant to "prolong the ongoing jihad," or holy war.

This time, the Taliban will face only Afghan forces as U.S. and allied forces are largely off the battlefield.

But the security environment remains fragile. In recent weeks, attacks across the north and east of Afghanistan have intensified in the build-up to the start of the fighting season. And the Taliban threat comes a month after Obama decided to keep roughly 10,000 U.S. troops in the country through the end of the year -- effectively slowing the planned drawdown in response to security concerns from Afghan leaders.

In a joint press conference with Afghan leader Ashraf Ghani announcing the shift, Obama claimed U.S. and coalition troops still have helped "shift momentum" away from the Taliban over the years. With the U.S. out of a combat role, Obama said: "Obviously there are still improvements to be made, but they're making significant progress."

But the Taliban's latest announcement, coupled with months of sustained violence, have some questioning whether Afghanistan truly is entering a reconstruction period.

“The place the White House is trying to get to is ‘good enough,’ and as you would expect, they’re trying to show progress toward that goal,” Justin Logan, director of foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, told FoxNews.com.

Logan said the reality is that the Taliban will be there after the U.S. leaves, “whether we leave in 2016 or 2036.”

“If the goal were to stay until radical Islamist resistance in Afghanistan was defeated, we would be there forever,” he said.

The Taliban have long-demanded the withdrawal of international military from Afghanistan. In the latest statement, the Taliban stated that under U.S. leadership, the "crusaders" will maintain "control of our land and space" through a security agreement with the Afghan government.

The agreement allows NATO and the U.S. to keep a limited number of non-combat troops in Afghanistan to "train, advise and assist" the Afghan forces in their fight against the insurgency.

Afghanistan’s new leader Ghani, warning about security conditions in his country, last month went on weeklong tour in Washington. Ghani visited the Pentagon, paid homage to 2,215 Americans who have died fighting in Afghanistan and thanked U.S. taxpayers for spending nearly \$1 trillion in war-related and reconstruction costs.

In turn, Obama promised to leave 9,800 U.S. troops in Afghanistan until the end of 2015.

With the Islamic State also vying for a foothold in Afghanistan, security there is likely to challenge Obama's narrative going into 2016 that -- as he said last year -- the U.S. is turning the page on more than a decade of war. As he enters the second half of his final term, the president is looking to secure major accomplishments on several fronts, not the least of which may be a nuclear deal with Iran, as his party looks to retain the White House in the coming election.

Logan believes that, with Afghanistan, the White House benefits from the fact that, aside from Ghani’s trip, little public attention is focused on Afghanistan anymore.

“Even if it were, the war has grown increasingly unpopular, and the public is hardly clamoring to stay,” Logan said.

The Afghan people remain under threat. According to a report by the United Nations, 2014 saw the highest number of civilian deaths and injuries in a single year since it began systematically recording civilian casualties in 2009.

Between Jan. 1, 2009 and Dec. 31, 2014, there have been 47,745 civilian casualties – 17,774 killed and 29,971 injured.

Last year, civilian deaths and injuries from ground fighting jumped by 54 percent compared to 2013, making them the leading cause of civilian casualties and the biggest killers of women and children in the country.

In 2010, the number of U.S. military deaths in Afghanistan hit 499. While the number has decreased – in 2014, there were 56 deaths – it's important to note that U.S. military forces have engaged in less combat operations.

Attacks continued this week. Sediq Azizi, spokesman for the provincial governor, said Afghan security forces killed a Taliban commander identified as Mullah Bashir along with four other insurgents. One policeman was killed, he said, and another two were wounded.

Earlier Tuesday, a bomb blast near a police station in the southern city of Kandahar killed three people and wounded 17, while a separate bomb killed one person and wounded five in the north, in Kunduz province. Kandahar province is the heartland of the Taliban insurgency — and the city was the capital of the extremists' government from 1996-2001.