

British military in crisis as NATO mission in Afghanistan unravels

Harvey Thompson
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Faced with a burgeoning insurgency and the deteriorating authority of the central government of Hamid Karzai, the NATO command has signalled its determination to sacrifice more Afghan civilians and its own soldiers in a desperate bid to wrest control of the country.

Fierce resistance to the occupation, resulting in heavy losses for both insurgent fighters and foreign troops, has forced commentators close to the British military to dispense with the pretence of a “peace-keeping” mission and describe the situation as “all out war.”

Forty British soldiers have now been killed in the war in Afghanistan, of which 35 have died in the past six months. An additional 211 have been injured, many seriously.

An unnamed military observer told the BBC: “We’re fighting a war in southern Afghanistan. This is not an enhanced peace support operation.”

Other military sources have said that British forces have not faced such a severe challenge since the Second World War. Major Charles Heyman, editor of *Armed Forces of the UK*, said, “It’s worth remembering what Field Marshal Slim said during the Second World War: ‘The more you use, the less you lose.’ And he was talking about soldiers on the ground. So, an option to consider is to reinforce the troops immediately with at least three battalions of around 2,000 fighting soldiers... If they can’t get more troops, the British may have to maintain security in a smaller area than they are currently operating in.”

On September 3, the *Sunday Telegraph* published details of the changes made to the military’s rules of engagement (ROE).

“Under the new rules, commanders now have the legal authority to launch air strikes against suspected Taliban strongholds, conduct ambushes and order pre-emptive attacks against insurgents’ camps.”

The newspaper revealed that British commanders had now been given official clearance to use the army’s controversial Hydra rockets, which are developed to kill large concentrations of people with tungsten darts. It commented that “the disclosure marks a major escalation in hostilities in the war-torn country and directly contradicts claims made by the government that the Army was only in Afghanistan to provide the security conditions needed to allow reconstruction and self-governance to take place.”

Sources contacted by the BBC say that UK forces do not have sufficient men both to hold areas cleared of Taliban fighters and to mount mobile offensive operations. According to these sources: “The nature of the terrain, the altitude and the complexity of communications impose punishing strains upon both men and equipment. More troops may well be needed. But the question is, from where will they come? Britain—with ongoing operations in Iraq and elsewhere—is clearly hard pressed to come up with additional soldiers,

at least for any sustained period.”

The higher than expected death toll of UK troops has ignited a barrage of criticism and counter-criticism in the British press. On September 3, the new head of the British Army, General Sir Richard Dannatt, gave an interview to the *Guardian* in which he said that British troops could only just cope with the demands placed on them in Afghanistan.

Dannatt warned; “We are running hot, certainly running hot. Can we cope? I pause. I say, ‘Just.’” He added that the UK was doing “more than its share of what is required in Afghanistan” and called for a national debate about how much money should be spent on defence.

General James Jones, NATO’s supreme commander of operations, acknowledged that the alliance had been taken aback by the extent of violence in southern Afghanistan and urged allied countries to provide reinforcements.

NATO spokesman Mark Laity told the BBC that NATO forces were currently undergoing a period of “intense combat” in the south of the country. Brigadier Ed Butler, commander of British forces in the south, described the fighting as “extraordinarily intense.” He told the media, “The intensity and ferocity of the fighting is far greater than in Iraq on a daily basis.”

A recent *Sunday Times* interview with Captain Leo Docherty, a former soldier and ex-aide de camp to the commander of the UK taskforce who had served in Afghanistan, revealed that he had been so unhappy with operations in Helmand province that he had quit the British Army. Describing British involvement in Afghanistan as “a textbook case of how to screw up a counterinsurgency,” he said: “All those people whose homes have been destroyed and sons killed are going to turn against the British... all we’re doing in places like Sangin is surviving. It’s completely barking mad.”

In total, 477 foreign troops have been killed in the fighting since the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. A recent report by the Royal Statistical Society (RSS), which looked at the death toll of foreign soldiers from the 2001 invasion to mid-August this year, argued that official UK Ministry of Defence casualty figures did not give a true picture of the risks troops faced because they failed to take into account the number of soldiers deployed in different campaigns.

The study found that attacks by insurgent forces have raised the fatality rate among NATO’s 18,500-strong International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to an average of five a week—more than twice the death rate coalition forces sustained during the battle for control of Iraq in 2003. These figures put the present conflict on a par with the nine-year Soviet war in Afghanistan more than 20 years ago.

Professor Sheila Bird, vice president of the RSS, commented, “Our forces are facing an extremely high threat, and that threat is twice that

which they were facing in major combat in Iraq.”

It has been estimated that since 2001 up to 17,000 Afghans may have been killed due to the present conflict.

In recent weeks, there have been indications that the insurgency is not just deepening in the already volatile south and east of the country, but is spreading to the as yet quieter western and northern provinces. The nature and tactics of the insurgency are also changing.

Up until very recently, it was still rare to witness any major insurgent activity in the tightly controlled capital city, Kabul. The situation has changed dramatically with a spate of recent bombings. More than 70 people, mostly Afghan civilians, have died in suicide bombings in the past five weeks.

On September 7, a suicide bomber rammed his car into a US Humvee near the heavily protected US embassy, killing at least 16 people, including two US soldiers. About 30 people were wounded in the blast.

On the Kabul-Kandahar highway, once touted as a successful western reconstruction project, the Taliban sporadically mount checkpoints. Anyone found to be linked to the government or foreign organisations is either beaten, kidnapped or killed.

NATO's Operation Medusa was a graphic illustration of just how much the security situation has deteriorated in Afghanistan. The operation was essentially aimed at breaking up a Taliban assault on Kandahar. In a recent piece in the *Guardian* titled “Kandahar Goes into Reverse,” Pamela Constable described how drastically things have changed in the city:

“Less than a year ago Kandahar was a city on the rebound after years of conflict, drought and political isolation. Business was booming with an influx of international development aid, shops stayed open late, markets burst with locally grown fruit and traffic snarled hopelessly much of the time.

“Today Kandahar is a ghost town, braced for the next suicide bomb and full of refugees from rural districts where Taliban insurgents are battling Afghan and NATO forces. Streets are all but empty of vehicles, foreign aid offices are reduced to skeleton crews and shoppers hurry home before dark instead of lingering at tea shops.”

The desperate situation facing the majority of Afghans across the country is now a mixture of war, poverty and the very real danger of famine. A Christian Aid survey of 66 Afghan villages published this month revealed that farmers in the worst affected areas have lost all their produce.

The aid agency is urging the British government and international bodies to give money to prevent people starving in the north and west of the county.

Most of the water has dried up in the provinces of Herat, Badghis and Ghor, producing an alarming crop failure. The wheat harvest is down by 90 percent to 100 percent in parts of Faryab province.

The Afghan government has set up a drought appeal which needs at least £41million.

The spread of extreme rural poverty and the continued social instability created by the military occupation of the country have fuelled the growth of the Taliban insurgency. The spread of poverty amongst farming communities is also contributing to the nexus between opium production and the recruitment drive of the Islamist militants.

In 2006, the production of opium poppies has officially risen by almost 60 percent to an unprecedented 165,000 hectares across the country. Some 70,000 hectares is produced in Helmand province, where production has risen 162 percent. It is believed that around

three million Afghans are involved in the opium trade. Opium farmers can earn up to 10 times more per hectare than cereal farmers.

The European-based think-tank Senlis recently claimed that destroying poppy fields has “led to a wave of starvation among farming families. In districts where control shifts daily between insurgents, international troops and the central government, forced eradication of poppy crop intensifies these power struggles.”

The Taliban once officially denounced the opium trade as un-Islamic and “immoral.” Earlier this year, it reversed its previous position and openly allied itself with the drug barons. This has provided the Taliban with a steady flow of revenue, as drug producers and smugglers increasingly look to the Taliban militants for protection.

There is also speculation amongst some military analysts that the Taliban is receiving funds and military hardware from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. A large number of the fighters are coming from Pakistan and the tribal border regions to Afghanistan's east, prompting demands for military intervention there.

Despite the recent rebuff by other NATO countries for additional troops, the thinking among the UK military top brass is of an extended occupation of Afghanistan. Brigadier Ed Butler, the commander of the British taskforce in southern Afghanistan, told the London *Times* last week that UK troops could be in the country for as long as ten years.

Butler was unguarded about the challenge of turning many young UK recruits into killers: “Some of these guys are barely out of school. Killing someone is a very difficult thing to do. People think: ‘Well, that's what soldiers are paid to do,’ but it still takes raw courage to go out and do it.”

Meanwhile, public discord amongst the military hierarchy continues unabated. On September 22, an intercepted e-mail from a British major described the supporting role of the Royal Air Force (RAF) in Afghanistan as “utterly, utterly useless” in protecting troops on the ground.

Major James Loden of 3 Para, based in Helmand, wrote: “... Harrier pilot ‘couldn't identify the target,’ fired two phosphorous rockets that just missed our own compound so that we thought they were incoming RPGs , and then strafed our perimeter, missing the enemy by 200 metres.”

Loden also said there had been “plenty of tears” following casualties in the intense fighting with the Taliban, and added that more troops and helicopters were desperately needed.



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