

CIA base in Afghanistan hit by suicide attack

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4 January 2010

Eight US operatives died in a December 30 suicide bombing at Forward Operating Base Chapman, near the eastern Afghan city of Khost and the border with Pakistan. Among the dead were 7 CIA agents, including the CIA station chief, and a private security contractor. Six more CIA officers were wounded.

Press accounts suggest the bombing was in retaliation for CIA air strikes from unmanned Predator drones organized from FOB Chapman—officially a civilian camp involved in reconstruction efforts and guarded by Afghan troops. The principal target of these strikes was reportedly the Haqqani Network, a militia led by Jalaluddin Haqqani and his son Sirajuddin that operates on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. There were also reports that the bombing aimed to avenge the CIA's August 5, 2009 assassination of Pakistani Taliban leader Baitullah Mehsud.

The *Wall Street Journal* quoted an anonymous Afghan insurgent commander, who stated: "We attacked the base because the team there was organizing drone strikes in Loya Paktia [province] and surrounding area." He added, "We attacked on that particular day because we knew the woman who was leading the team" would be present.

The suicide bomber was reportedly a US intelligence asset, who lured high-ranking CIA officials to the meeting with the promise of valuable information. The *Times of India* wrote that the bomber was a tribesman from the Pakistani border region of Waziristan, who had previously delivered information leading to successful US raids against insurgents. Because he had had previous relations with the CIA and was brought into the base by a trusted Afghan official, the tribesman was not searched before he met with the CIA team.

A US intelligence agent told the *Journal* that the bombing was a "high-level asset meeting gone bad." He added, "The CIA team there was very professional, and they knew there was a risk to their security

protocols. But they felt the need to gather viable, time-sensitive intelligence was so pressing that it justified the trade-off."

The loss of a dozen agents killed or incapacitated in the attack represents a serious setback for the CIA, which has struggled to train agents with knowledge of Afghan languages such as Pashto and Dari, and who are capable of working inside Afghanistan.

Michael Scheuer, the former head of the CIA's anti-bin Laden "Alec Station" unit, called the bombing "a devastating blow," noting that the station chief killed in the blast had 14 years' experience with Alec Station.

Scheuer suggested the US might boost deployments to Afghanistan in the wake of the attack, which highlighted the security weaknesses in the CIA's paramilitary operations in the region: "This [attack] calls into question the whole strategy of using Afghans to guard the perimeter of camps."

More broadly, the character of the attack highlights the brutal conditions created by the US occupation of Afghanistan. In the US military and CIA, the Afghan insurgency faces an enemy with vast military superiority, which has from the beginning used the most ruthless methods. These include the 2001 interrogation and mass killings of prisoners held at the Qala-i-Janghi fortress, torture of Afghan detainees at prisons including Bagram Air Base in Kabul and Guantánamo Bay, and bombings by remotely-controlled drones. Moreover, the US government has so far proved impervious to popular anti-war sentiment in the American public.

Under these conditions, opposition inevitably assumes desperate and violent forms. Thus CIA agent Gary Berntsen told the British *Sunday Times*: "In the old days when we were running Russian operations, if you had a double agent the worst that happened was he feeds you with false information. These days if you have a double agent he detonates in your face."

In the attack against FOB Chapman, the CIA faces the toxic consequences of its previous operations in Afghanistan, starting from the 1980s Soviet-Afghan war. At the time, Jalaluddin Haqqani was one of the principal anti-Soviet *Mujahadeen* warlords and an important US ally.

Based in North Waziristan, Haqqani's operations in eastern Afghanistan placed him in a strategic location: south of the Afghan capital, Kabul, and near roads linking Afghanistan with northern Pakistan. As a result, he hosted Osama bin Laden, then a CIA asset helping to fund, train and build roads for the anti-Soviet resistance. With material and training provided by the CIA and Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), bin Laden's forces prepared the first suicide bombers used against the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul.

The first *Mujahadeen* warlord to capture an Afghan city — Khost in 1991 — Haqqani deserted the *Mujahadeen* regime in 1995. At that point, he affiliated with the Kandahar-based, ethnic-Pashtun Taliban militia, when the US tried to build up the Taliban to unify Afghanistan under a US proxy regime.

Haqqani found himself on the wrong side of US policy when it turned against the Taliban, after the attacks of September 11, 2001. A Pashtun, Haqqani refused to support the Tajik-dominated Northern Alliance, which the US used as its main proxy force for its 2001 conquest of Afghanistan. Haqqani fled from Afghanistan into the North Waziristan region of Pakistan after the US invasion.

Until now, issues of broader regional politics have prevented the US from either destroying or buying off Haqqani's forces. In 2008, the CIA officially presented Pakistan with evidence that the ISI was supporting Haqqani, in order to counter Indian influence in Afghanistan and maintain order in Waziristan — where Haqqani helped fight a two-year war against Pakistani government paramilitary forces in 2004-2006. Afterwards, in September 2008, the US launched an air strike on what was reportedly Haqqani's residence in the village of Dandi Darpa Khail in North Waziristan, killing between 10 and 23 people but missing Haqqani.

According to the *Asia Times*, the CIA and ISI have since detained Haqqani's brother Ibrahim and son Ishaq in Pakistan, demanding negotiations to prepare a truce. However, Haqqani has apparently so far refused.



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