

# US military strategy unravelling in Afghanistan

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Afghan Taliban fighters launched a sustained assault on the heavily fortified US Bagram Air Base on Wednesday, killing an American contractor and wounding nine coalition soldiers. The operation, coming less than 24 hours after a suicide bomb attack killed five US soldiers and a Canadian officer travelling in a NATO convoy in Kabul, again demonstrated the escalating crisis confronting the US-led occupation force in Afghanistan. Military authorities retain a highly tenuous control over the capital and immediate surrounds, with increasingly bold guerrilla attacks threatening coalition forces in every part of the country.

The Bagram assault was carried out by a group of fighters armed with rockets, grenades, and rifles. Several reportedly wore suicide vests. The operation was effectively a suicide mission, as the Bagram base is the most heavily fortified area in Afghanistan. It is surrounded by high blast walls and encircled by US and NATO troops and their Afghan army and police proxies. The base's perimeter was reportedly not breached, but the Taliban fighters inflicted 10 casualties before being repelled. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, battles continued for hours as US-NATO forces pursued the guerrillas in farming areas surrounding the base. About a dozen guerrillas were reportedly killed.

Bagram Air Base is one of the high profile symbols of the despised US-led occupation. Located about 60 kilometres north of Kabul, the vast facility has developed into one of Washington's key Central Asian strategic assets. In the eyes of ordinary Afghans, the base is regarded as further evidence of US plans for a permanent military presence in their country. It is also associated with indefinite detention and torture. At least two prisoners are known to have been murdered by US military guards in the facility since 2001, while the International Committee of the Red Cross recently revealed the existence of a separate and secret prison on the base in which detainees continue to be beaten, abused, and subjected to sleep deprivation, sensory deprivation and other forms of torture.

Thousands of additional US troops are being deployed to Afghanistan under President Barack Obama's escalation strategy. Far from stabilising the situation confronting the US-led forces, the "surge" is producing a significant escalation in violence. This month marked the 1,000th American fatality in the Afghanistan war. As the *New York Times* noted, the first 500 deaths occurred over nearly seven years, while the next 500 were killed in fewer than two.

Afghan civilians have borne the brunt of the violence. The Agence France Presse news agency reported that Afghan authorities tallied 170 civilians killed between March and April this year, one-third higher than the same period in 2009.

A US Army statement this week said a "small number" of its soldiers were being investigated for the alleged murder of three civilians in Kandahar Province earlier this year. Few details were released, though the military admitted there were additional allegations of illegal drug use, assault and conspiracy.

CBS News reported: "Members of a squad of about 10 American soldiers are under investigation for murdering at least three local villagers who had angered them. According to the allegations, this is not a case of civilians being mistaken for Taliban fighters and not a one-time moment of rage. Instead, it happened on different occasions over the past several months. The squad leader, a sergeant, is said to have done the shooting. In addition, some members of the squad are accused of smoking hash."

No doubt, this is not an isolated incident. Deployed as part of Washington's strategy of gaining an advantage over its rivals in Europe and Asia by seizing control of Central Asian energy reserves and pipeline routes, US troops are now locked in a classic colonial-style dirty war. Confronted with a hostile population, and with no clear distinction between

civilians and anti-occupation fighters (indiscriminately labelled “Taliban” by US authorities), American and allied forces are increasingly demoralised and brutal.

At the same time, the counter-insurgency strategy advanced by General Stanley McChrystal is in considerable crisis. The “hold and clear” tactic, which is based on concentrating troops in urban centres and attempting to gain the support of residents by destroying Taliban and resistance influence, has nowhere proved successful.

In February, about 15,000 troops were mobilised to seize the rural district of Marjah. The operation was regarded as a forerunner for the forthcoming offensive in Kandahar, Afghanistan’s second largest city. Several recent reports from Marjah, however, point to the inability of the US-led forces to maintain control. A *New York Times* report published May 16, “Taliban Hold Sway in Area Taken by US, Farmers Say”, noted: “The military had seen Marjah as a ‘clear and hold’ operation in which the first part, clearing the district of militants, would be wrapped up fairly quickly. In fact, clearing has proved to be a more elusive goal.”

An estimated 200 resistance fighters, predominantly young men who have lived in the area their whole lives, remain in the district. They are fed and sheltered by the local people, who regard the US forces with deep distrust and hostility. American forces continue to be regularly ambushed, while locals have largely shunned the various aid and construction programs offered by the occupying troops and Afghan government officials. Increasing numbers of civilians caught in the middle of the conflict are fleeing as refugees.

“Every day they were fighting and shelling,” Abdul Malook Aka, a 55-year-old farmer said. “We do not feel secure in the village and we decided to leave. Security is getting worse day by day.” Another farmer, 40-year-old Mir Hamza, added: “I am sure if I stay in Marjah I will be killed one day either by Taliban or the Americans.”

If US troops have proved unable to take control of Marjah, a lightly populated farming region, against a vastly outnumbered and outgunned enemy, there is little likelihood that the situation will be any different when they attempt to move into Kandahar, a city with several hundred thousand people. The urban centre was the former stronghold of the Taliban, and opposition to the foreign forces and the corrupt stooge administration of President Hamid Karzai is just as intense as in Marjah. The president’s brother, CIA asset and alleged drug lord Ahmed Wali Karzai, is nominally in charge of Kandahar and is especially despised by locals.

US military authorities appear to be now downplaying expectations for the Kandahar operation, which was previously promoted as a major offensive and one of the cornerstones of the new Obama-McChrystal strategy in Afghanistan. National Public Radio (NPR) reported yesterday: “Last month, American military spokesmen in Kabul began telling reporters it was incorrect to use terms such as ‘offensive’ or ‘operation’ in describing plans for Kandahar. Last week, Gen. Stanley McChrystal said the ‘efforts’ in Kandahar are a process, not an event.”

The operation has reportedly been postponed. Whereas US military officials previously said it would be underway in spring or early summer and completed by August, it is now expected to be launched this autumn, at the earliest. “Instead, American soldiers will be training their Afghan counterparts in Kandahar, and targeting individual militants in the city and surrounding regions,” NPR reported. “The major offensive is on hold while the US rethinks its strategy.”

The apparent delay is only setting the stage for an even bloodier series of war crimes that will follow the finalisation of Obama’s 30,000 troop surge.

*The author recommends:*

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[19 May 2010]

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