Another US-NATO base targeted in Afghanistan

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Insurgents in Afghanistan launched another major attack against US-led forces, targeting Kandahar Air Field on Saturday with rocket, mortar, and small arms fire that left several coalition troops wounded. It was the first time that the military base has come under sustained assault. US forces are preparing to launch a major operation in Kandahar, Afghanistan's second largest city, which aims at regaining complete control and suppressing all resistance.

The Kandahar Air Field attack follows a similar operation against Bagram Air Field last Wednesday and a suicide bomb attack on a NATO convoy Tuesday that killed six soldiers. The escalation in violence is being driven by US President Barack Obama's "surge" strategy, which has seen the number of American troops in Afghanistan triple since he took office. The Pentagon yesterday reported that for the first time since the 2003 invasion of Iraq, there are now more US soldiers in Afghanistan (about 94,000) than Iraq (92,000). Another 47,000 NATO troops are also in Afghanistan.

NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) said in a statement that five rockets were fired into Kandahar Air Field. Witnesses reported gunfire and explosions lasting two hours, followed by coalition helicopters strafing nearby fields with gunfire, hoping to hit insurgents. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, the wounded were three Canadian soldiers and ten contractors. The newspaper also reported that four suspected guerrillas were later captured, among them an officer with the local police force. "According to the Canadian military, bomb-making materials were found in the officer's quarters at a police training academy a few miles from the base," it stated.

The report underscores the extent to which the US-led forces and their Afghan government proxies lack any real control in Kandahar Province beyond the heavily fortified perimeter of Kandahar Air Field, a sprawling base that accommodates about 23,000 soldiers. The Taliban dominate Kandahar city and the surrounding areas, in which about two million people live. The area is now the focus of Washington's revised counter-insurgency strategy with a major operation planned once all additional US troops are in place.

Sweeps involving house-to-house searches have already begun in certain areas. A *Los Angeles Times* report published Sunday described "Operation Kokaran", which involved more than 200 American troops and between 200 and 250 Afghan police moving through a district in the outer western area of Kandahar city where 75,000 people live. "Residents of Kokaran and much of the rest of the district have few modern facilities," the newspaper reported. "Raw sewage and garbage flow through open channels carved into rutted dirt pathways... The Taliban operates a shadow government and court system. There is little police or official government presence, other than patrols and checkpoints, which were to be bolstered beginning with Saturday's operation."

US troops did not enter people's homes during the raids, instead directing the Afghan police to do so. This was part of an effort to win support from the population and establish functioning security and government infrastructure in the area. Top US commander General Stanley McChrystal is promoting a so-called clear, hold, and build strategy—clearing resistance fighters from designated areas, holding on to maintain US

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control, and then building the Afghan government's authority and providing some degree of aid.

This is far from a novel and innovative approach, as presented by sections of the US media—many neo-colonial occupation forces have previously attempted similar methods to suppress resistance. The US-led forces in Afghanistan are confronted with a hostile population, a significant part of which actively supports and provides shelter for an unseen enemy. The occupation is ultimately driven by Washington's determination to bolster its global hegemony by controlling Central Asia's oil and gas reserves; the violence and repression directed against the Afghan people is a direct consequence.

Earlier this month US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared that the US military leaders "want to have a successful counterinsurgency operation that doesn't destroy Kandahar in the effort to save Kandahar". This seemingly inadvertent paraphrasing of the infamous remark of a US military commander during the Vietnam War about "having to destroy a village in order to save it" was more revealing than Clinton likely intended.

She added that Kandahar "is not Fallujah", referring to the US military's effective obliteration of the Iraqi city in 2004. These remarks have been echoed by senior military officials, who have described the Kandahar operation as a "process" that will not involve a single identifiable offensive. Such attempts to downplay the pending offensive seem aimed at countering the widespread opposition in Afghanistan to ISAF operations and civilian fatalities in the country.

Another aspect of Washington's change in rhetoric appears to be a growing realisation that the initial goal of expelling the Taliban from Kandahar and establishing firm control over the city by the end of the year is likely to prove impossible. An earlier operation was launched in the Marjah area, a lightly populated rural centre, as a sort of trial run for Kandahar. US forces have still not gained control there, with local guerrillas disappearing into the population at the height of the offensive only to now reappear and launch more attacks.

In Kandahar, the US authorities have few allies beyond the most corrupt elements—beginning with President Hamid Karzai's brother, Ahmed Wali Karzai, who as well as being chairman of the provincial council is a CIA asset and alleged drug dealer. A *Washington Post* article Sunday described as "grim" the contents of an 80-page analysis of the situation prepared by General McChrystal's command. The *Post* explained: "Of 784 uniformed police in Kandahar city and the surrounding area, only 25 percent to 30 percent have been trained, although new forces are scheduled to arrive for the offensive. Of 87 slots for local judges, nine are filled. Saraposa prison, the main detention facility in Kandahar, is overpopulated and is considered less than secure, and the offensive is expected to produce 'far more' prisoners than it can handle."

Another article in the *Washington Post*, published Saturday, detailed stepped up efforts by the Taliban to intimidate or kill those in Kandahar working as government bureaucrats, police, aid workers or other contractors. In the first four months of the year, there have been 27 such assassinations, compared with 15 over the same period in 2009, and 6 in 2008.

There are signs of mounting concern within US ruling circles over the implications of a failed operation in Kandahar. *New York Times* journalist John Burns, who covered the Soviet Union's failed occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s, wrote an article titled "Into Kandahar, Yesterday and Tomorrow". He noted: "Like others with experience of that time, I find recollections of the Soviet debacle sounding like a tocsin in the mind, warning of the miseries that await America if the war's trajectory remains as it is, toward expanding influence for the Taliban and their Al Qaeda cohorts, and mounting signs, for the corrupt Kabul government and its frustrated allies, that the war against the Islamic militants may ultimately be unwinnable."

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