

# General Petraeus takes command as killing in Afghanistan escalates

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In assuming formal command of the US-led war in Afghanistan over the weekend, Gen. David Petraeus reiterated his indications that the military will alter its rules of engagement, allowing a more unrestricted use of air strikes and artillery bombardments in support of American ground troops.

Such a shift will inevitably mean a major escalation in the slaughter of Afghan civilians. The killing of civilians by foreign occupation troops has fueled the insurgency in Afghanistan, which is now stronger than at any time since the US intervened in the country nearly nine years ago.

At a “change of command” ceremony July 4, Petraeus took over the post formerly occupied by Gen. Stanley McChrystal, who had been removed by the Obama administration ten days earlier, ostensibly over insubordinate remarks he and his aides made that were reported in an article published in *Rolling Stone* magazine.

While reflective of the contempt for civilian authority that is endemic in the officer corps, the article was at best a subordinate factor in the decision to relieve McChrystal of his command. Far more significant was the failure to suppress the growing popular resistance to the US occupation, reflected both in the inconclusive offensive in Marjah last February and the recently announced decision to postpone a long-planned siege of Kandahar.

There had also been growing public criticism of McChrystal for implementing new rules of engagement in Afghanistan designed to reduce civilian casualties by limiting the use of American firepower.

At Sunday’s ceremony, Petraeus began by praising McChrystal, declaring that “the progress made in recent months, in the face of a determined enemy, is in many respects the result of the vision, energy, and leadership” of his sacked predecessor.

Petraeus, whose new command formally represents a demotion from his post as head of US Central Command, where he was McChrystal’s superior and in charge of both the Afghanistan and Iraq occupations, seemed hard-pressed to substantiate this “progress.” In his speech he made

references to increased immunizations and cell phone usage in Afghanistan.

The reality is that June represented the bloodiest month for the US-led occupation since the war began, with 102 troops—60 of them American—killed, and many hundreds more wounded.

Petraeus insisted that his taking over the Afghanistan command represented “a change in personnel, not a change in policy or strategy,” and, indeed, he is closely identified with the counterinsurgency doctrine pursued by McChrystal, a former head of the military’s special operations forces.

What precise strategy and objectives are being pursued by Washington was left somewhat murky by the new commander. At the outset, he insisted that the US was waging war to deny “Al Qaeda and its network of extremist allies” the ability to “again establish sanctuary in Afghanistan.” This, the original pretext for the war, has grown increasingly threadbare as US officials admit that there are no more than 100 members of Al Qaeda in the entire country.

As he continued, however, Petraeus declared the mission of the American forces was to “safeguard the Afghan people” and to “reverse the Taliban’s momentum and take away insurgent safe havens.” In other words, US troops have been deployed in an attempt to conquer the country and suppress popular resistance to occupation.

While stressing that the US objectives in Afghanistan would remain unchanged, Petraeus allowed that he would “determine where refinements might be needed” in pursuing these objectives.

The “refinements” under consideration appear to be centered on the rules of engagement introduced by McChrystal last summer with the stated aim of reducing the number of civilian casualties. These rules, governing the use of deadly force by the nearly 100,000 US troops occupying the country, included restrictions on directing artillery fire or air attacks against buildings where civilians were believed to be present, unless American forces feared that they were in danger of being overrun.

McChrystal coupled these restrictions, which he dubbed “courageous restraint,” with an expanded use of special operations killing squads, which have been responsible for some of the most brutal massacres of civilians in Afghanistan over the last year.

In a letter to US troops, Petraeus stressed that, while civilian safety supposedly remained a consideration, “as you and our Afghan partners on the ground get into tough situations, we must employ all assets to ensure your safety.”

The remark clearly suggested that the US was not going to sacrifice the lives of its troops in an attempt to avoid killing Afghan civilians.

In his speech Sunday, the new commander condemned the tactics of the insurgency in terms that appeared to justify the killing of civilians—including children—by US-led forces.

“No tactic is beneath the insurgents,” said the general, “indeed, they use unwitting children to carry out attacks, they repeatedly kill innocent civilians, and they frequently seek to create situations that will result in injury to Afghan citizens.”

The unstated implications of this remark are that children may become military targets because of their “unwitting” use by the insurgency, and that the killing of civilians is not the fault of the US occupation forces, because the insurgency deliberately works to “create situations” in which such killings are unavoidable.

The latest such “situation” was reported over the weekend, after US-led forces searching for a Taliban commander raided a series of compounds in the Kandahar district. Opening fire on suspected insurgents in one of the compounds, the troops shot several civilians living in the compound, killing one woman and one man.

The *Los Angeles Times* reported from Kabul that Afghan civilians are already seeing the arrival of Petraeus as a threat of intensified military violence against them.

“The change of command in Afghanistan has civilians worried that it will be even more dangerous to come into contact with the foreign forces in their midst,” the *Times* reported. “Already, many motorists freeze with anxiety at the sight of a Western convoy or when coming up on a military checkpoint, fearing they will be taken for would-be suicide attackers and shot.”

Underscoring the shift in US tactics in Afghanistan were statements by members of the Senate Armed Services Committee who were present in Kabul for the change in command.

Senator Joseph Lieberman Sunday called upon Petraeus to change the rules of engagement “as soon as possible.”

Speaking on “Fox News Sunday,” the former Democrat-turned-Independent from Connecticut said that the new

Afghanistan commander had told him he was “committed” to reviewing the current rules.

“Ultimately, we’ve got to be concerned about the safety of our American troops here,” said Lieberman. He added that troops under fire should not be forced to wait for air support.

Lieberman’s comments were echoed by Arizona Republican Senator John McCain, who stated at a press conference in Kabul that “General Petraeus is reviewing the entire rules of engagement, and probably there will be some tweaking. We got that impression from him.”

While claiming that the US military had “the right strategy,” McCain warned, “There will be more difficult times, and in the short term casualties will go up.”

At the conclusion of his July 4 speech, Petraeus stressed that the US “commitment to Afghanistan is an enduring one and that we are committed to a sustained effort to help the people of this country over the long-term.”

The message was clear. The “sustained,” “enduring” and “long-term” effort will continue long after the July 2011 date that Obama gave when announcing his Afghanistan surge for the beginning of a US withdrawal from the country.

Last week in his congressional testimony, Petraeus stressed that the July 2011 date applied only to the 30,000 “surge” forces, and even that would be dependent on conditions on the ground. No one should believe, he warned, that the US military would be “switching off the lights and closing the door behind us.”

In giving the Afghan command to Petraeus, a highly political general around whom there has been substantial speculation regarding a future run for the Republican presidential nomination, Obama has installed someone who will wage a political fight for continuing the Afghan war indefinitely.

That this is the Democratic president’s own position was made clear in his response to last month’s feeble attempt by House Democrats to pass an amendment calling for the president to declare a withdrawal timetable. There was “a lot of obsession” about when troops would be pulled out of Afghanistan, Obama declared contemptuously.

The reality is that the amendment maneuvers of the House Democrats—who provided the necessary votes to ensure that funding for the war continued—is only an attempt to deflect the massive popular opposition to the war.



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