

# Opposition to Afghanistan war mounts as US intensifies offensive

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Popular hostility to the Afghanistan war among the American people has hit a record high, even as the US military launches a major new offensive and the Obama administration warns that few US troops will be brought home next year.

The latest Gallup opinion poll released by *USA Today* shows support for the Obama administration's war policy has fallen to 36 percent, down from 48 percent in February. Moreover, a record 43 percent say that it was a mistake to launch the war, which began in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York City and Washington DC and was sold to the American people as retaliation against terrorism.

The apparent sharp growth in antiwar sentiments follows back-to-back months of record US casualties, with 60 American troops killed in June, and 66 in July. It also comes in the wake of the posting by WikiLeaks of tens of thousands of previously secret documents exposing US killings of civilians, Afghan government corruption and the general debacle engulfing the nearly nine-year-old US military intervention.

By the end of this month, Obama's "surge" that sent 30,000 additional US troops into Afghanistan will be complete, bringing the total US force to nearly 100,000, with an additional 50,000 troops deployed by NATO and other countries.

The delayed offensive against Kandahar, Afghanistan's second largest city, with a population of approximately half a million, and a center of support for the anti-occupation insurgency, is expected to intensify in the coming weeks.

The Associated Press reported Tuesday that "US and Afghan troops have begun to challenge the Taliban in the lush Arghandab Valley and other districts around Kandahar." It adds, however, "US officers in southern Afghanistan say villagers are reluctant to cooperate with the Americans and their Afghan partners because they fear the Taliban will take retribution against them once the Americans have gone. The villagers simply don't trust the Afghan police to fill the security gap."

The *Washington Post* reported from Kandahar, "Checkpoints supervised by US soldiers have been erected on all major roads leading into the city." Contractors working for the US military, meanwhile, have installed 7,000 eight-foot-wide concrete slabs—blast walls—around strategic points of the city. And, in another act of "population control," the US occupation force is trying to compel residents to get biometric identification cards that include retina scans and fingerprints.

"If you don't have control of the population, you can't secure

the population," Brig. Gen. Frederick Hodges, director of operations for NATO's regional command in southern Afghanistan, told the newspaper.

The *Post* also reported that in the offensive in the Arghandab Valley, soldiers of the 101st Airborne Division are finding that vineyards and pomegranate groves have been laced with anti-personnel mines, resulting in the maiming of a number of troops. Commanders, according to the *Post*, are considering razing the fields to get rid of the mines, at the cost of further enraging local farmers.

"Counterinsurgency doctrine says you don't want to turn the population against you," one US officer told the paper. "But at how much of a cost does that make sense?"

The depth of the crisis confronting the US-led occupation was made clear in the *Post*'s description of the difficulty confronting US commanders in their attempts to cobble together a local puppet government to assist in the offensive. An attempt to fill 300 civil service jobs—in a country plagued by massive unemployment—turned up just four qualified applicants, even after the requirement of a high school diploma was dropped.

Among the solutions being considered, according to the *Post*, is housing those hired for government jobs in fortified compounds with secret entrances to conceal their identities and protect them from the armed groups fighting the occupation.

Even if they were able to recruit local Afghans under these conditions, it is difficult to imagine how these officials could perform any significant function. And without such personnel, a key element of the US counterinsurgency strategy—winning over the local population by providing enhanced public services—is unviable.

An estimated 30,000 US-led troops are being mobilized for the Kandahar offensive, which is being widely described as a make-or-break operation that will determine the future of the US war.

Even as the operation begins, however, there are persistent reports that the offensive by 15,000 occupation troops, led by US Marines, in the Marjah district of neighboring Helmand Province last February has failed to achieve any lasting results.

An article by Afghan journalists posted by International War and Peace Reporting states that residents are speaking of "growing insecurity and fear the insurgents could re-establish themselves there."

The report states that residents are too afraid to go to work and that they had never seen so much violence in the area, which is a

sparsely populated farming region.

“I have not gone to my shop for 10 days,” shopkeeper Haji Abdul Samad told the reporters. “There, bullets drop like rain from the sky. The cattle and sheep die like flies. I swear there is no humanitarianism and no humanity.”

A local resident who took a job on a local US-funded reconstruction project said he quit after threats from the Taliban. “There are Taliban on every road and intersection, but few of them carry guns,” he said. “Some are monitoring the situation, collecting intelligence and information about the American patrols. And some armed Taliban stay at home and prepare for attacks.”

A Taliban spokesman cited in the article said that the movement remained very strong in the area and had no intention of ceding control to the US-led forces. “People help us,” he said. “They give us food and support us, and that is why our operations go so well.”

Attacks by insurgents have grown both in frequency and audacity. On Tuesday, six resistance fighters attacked the Kandahar air base, a US-controlled facility just outside the southern city that houses tens of thousands of military personnel. Two suicide bombers blew themselves up in an attempt to breach an opening in one of the base’s gates, while others fired rockets into the facility and engaged in an hour-long gun battle. One soldier and several civilians inside the facility were reported wounded and the base’s operations were disrupted as civilians were evacuated.

Popular hostility toward the occupation boiled over in Kabul last Friday following a traffic accident in which an SUV driven by Dyncorp International security contractors for the US Embassy slammed into a car, killing and injuring several people on the road connecting the embassy to the airport. There were reports by witnesses to the incident that the contractors emerged from their vehicle firing their weapons. The crash provoked a riot, with hundreds of Afghans chanting “death to Americans” and “death to Karzai.” After a second Dyncorp vehicle arrived, Afghans swarmed over the vehicles, setting them on fire and attacking the contractors.

And on Sunday, several hundred Afghans marched in Kabul under a banner denouncing the US occupation and calling Washington “the guardian and master of [the] ruling mafia in Afghanistan.” Protesters carried placards bearing photographs of maimed Afghan children.

The march was called to protest the incident Friday as well as a recent US missile attack, which, according to the Afghan government, killed 52 civilians.

“We poor people are not just here to be killed,” Rabia, an older woman participating in the demonstration, told the *Washington Post*. She said she had seen the angry response to Friday’s car crash. “The people were so emotional. They were throwing stones at the Americans’ vehicles. If the police hadn’t taken the Americans away, the people would have torn them to pieces. If I had the chance to do that, I would do the same thing.”

In a further indication of the crisis gripping the US occupation, Washington’s ostensible ally, Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari, told the French daily *Le Monde* that the US “is losing the war against the Taliban.”

In an interview published Tuesday, Zardari said that Washington

had “lost the battle to win hearts and minds” and had “underestimated the situation on the ground” in Afghanistan. The Afghan insurgents, the Pakistani president said, “have time on their side.” He added, referring to the US-led occupation, “The entire approach seems mistaken to me. The population does not associate the coalition intervention with an improvement of their lives.”

Faced with mounting opposition and a deteriorating military situation, the Pentagon’s response appears to be a ratcheting up of force that will inevitably mean an even greater number of civilian casualties.

Senior US commander Gen. David Petraeus issued the first order stemming from his promised review of “rules of engagement” set by his predecessor, Gen. Stanley McChrystal, which were ostensibly aimed at reducing the number of Afghan civilians killed by US troops by restricting the use of air strikes and artillery.

Petraeus posted a set of general “counterinsurgency guidelines” that largely echoed those laid down by McChrystal, stressing the need to win over the local population. However, he also provided a more concrete “clarification,” allowing soldiers to call in air and artillery support against insurgents firing from what one senior officer described to the *Wall Street Journal* as “dilapidated former dwellings.”

The original order specified that commanders were authorized to use such overwhelming force for the purpose of “protecting the lives of their men and women as a matter of self-defense where it is determined no other options are available to effectively counter the threat.” Any loosening of this restriction will undoubtedly send a signal that the gloves are coming off.

This perception was strengthened by some of the language in the general guidelines, which called upon US troops to “pursue the enemy relentlessly.” It urged them to “get our teeth into the insurgents and don’t let go. When the extremists fight, make them pay. Seek out and eliminate those who threaten the population ... Target the whole network, not just individuals.”

This last reference apparently includes the so-called targeted killing, or assassination, of reputed Taliban leaders, which has become an increasingly central element of US strategy in Afghanistan.

While support for an end to the war is growing within the US, the Obama administration is making it increasingly explicit that the president’s pledge to begin withdrawing US troops in July 2011 is worthless. Obama had included the date as part of his attempt to sell the public on the 30,000-troop surge last December.

Appearing on the ABC News program “This Week” Sunday, Defense Secretary Robert Gates said, “I think we need to reemphasize the message that we are not leaving Afghanistan in July of 2011. We are beginning a transition period. Drawdowns early on will be of fairly limited numbers.”



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