

European think-tank warns: Insurgency strengthening in Afghanistan

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The latest June 25 report on the US and NATO occupation of Afghanistan by the European-based International Crisis Group (ICG) concludes that the Taliban and other insurgent organisations are extending their influence across the country, and particularly around the capital Kabul.

The ICG contradicts the claims made by US President Barack Obama on June 22 when he announced the staged withdrawal of some American troops over the next 18 months. Obama declared that his surge of additional forces to Afghanistan had placed the occupation in a “position of strength.” He insisted that the Afghan army of President Hamid Karzai’s puppet government would be able to take over most security operations throughout the country by the end of 2014.

Based on field research and interviews conducted in seven provinces of Afghanistan between November 2010 and May 2011, the ICG report stated that while “failure is not inevitable” for the US-led occupation, “success is far from guaranteed.” Rather than crumbling, the insurgency was merging with the country’s business elite and elements within Karzai’s government and security forces, as they all prepared for the perceived inevitable withdrawal of foreign forces.

The report described growing “collusion” between insurgent groups and “corrupt government officials” in Kabul and surrounding provinces that were ostensibly under the control of NATO troops. It declared that “insecurity” and “billions of dollars in international assistance” were “progressively fusing the interests of political gatekeepers and insurgent commanders, providing new opportunities for criminals and insurgents to expand their influence inside the government.”

The ICG described the Afghan economy as “increasingly dominated by a criminal oligarchy of politically-connected businessmen” who had relations with both the government and the insurgents. While the Afghan people suffered war and repression, a tiny elite was gouging out vast fortunes from the so-called reconstruction and aid money that continued to flow into the country.

The ICG report implies that as Obama’s “surge” focussed on controlling southern provinces such as Kandahar, Helmand and Uruzgan, the Taliban and other insurgent organisations turned to building up their political and economic influence in the provinces surrounding Kabul. The ICG noted that in 2010 there were more attacks on NATO and Afghan government forces in the central province of Ghazni than either Helmand or Kandahar.

As the tenth anniversary of the US-led invasion of Afghanistan approaches, the ICG assessed that the Taliban has functioning shadow governments in all the key provinces surrounding the capital. Taliban groups maintained fighting units, operated courts, taxed drug-trafficking and other criminal activity and received tribute from local officials and Afghan security forces.

The ICG research showed that in Wardak, Logar and Ghazni provinces the Taliban and other insurgent groups worked with local officials and businessmen to mine and export large quantities of chromite—an iron oxide used in the production of stainless steel. The minerals were smuggled to processing plants in Pakistan and sold into the Chinese market. In Wardak, the local Taliban also generated considerable income from taxes on the province’s large-scale apple industry.

The ICG uncovered “numerous reports” that the Taliban struck deals with local officials and village heads to allow “reconstruction” projects to go ahead, or even to request such funding. The Taliban then skimmed off money and other resources.

The ICG found that the other major insurgent organisation, the Pashtun Haqqani network, had been able to expand its influence from the country’s eastern provinces to Kabul and neighbouring provinces. It receives an “endless supply of predominantly Pashtun recruits” from the tribal region of Pakistan. The ICG alleged that the network operated “legitimate” construction and logistics businesses in the capital that it used to finance its military operations.

The ICG report noted that the Haqqani organisation’s “proximity to Kabul now allows the network to mount

sophisticated and complex attacks on high profile targets in the national capital.” Haqqani fighters stunned the occupation forces on June 28 by attacking the Intercontinental Hotel in the heart of Kabul while talks were reportedly taking place between American, Afghan, and Pakistani officials over possible peace negotiations with the Taliban.

Some armed groups remained loyal to Hizb-e Islami (Islamic Party), which is led by Pashtun warlord and pre-Taliban Afghan Prime Minister Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. The ICG noted that numerous Hizb-e Islami figures had made their way into the Afghan Army and that the organisation had 49 members in the national and provincial parliaments. The report dismissed as “dubious” the claims of “legal” Hizb-e Islami personalities that they had no contact with Hekmatyar or the armed wing of the movement.

The ICG report provides a stark contrast to the official and media depictions of the insurgents simply as “terrorists” and the absurd claims of US/NATO “progress.” The most important factor behind the entrenched resistance is deeply-felt opposition to foreign occupation and the US-backed puppet government headed by Karzai.

The regular killing of civilians by NATO air strikes, combined with the vast increase in special forces raids under Obama, has intensified popular hatred. While there is no exact number, US military boasting over the past 18 months suggests that well over 5,000 Afghans have been assassinated in their homes by US, British and Australian death squads. Thousands more people have been brutally interrogated or hauled away to imprisonment.

The ICG noted the importance of the tribal Pashtunwali code—which demanded revenge against those who attacked ones’ tribe or family—in motivating resistance. Every special forces’ killing effectively recruited fresh forces for the insurgency.

The report also pointed to the mass unemployment facing young Afghans and the destruction of property during occupation military operations as other factors fuelling the insurgency.

The ICG drew attention to the opening up of hundreds of new madrasses—Islamic schools—and official and “unofficial” mosques across Afghanistan, but especially in the areas surrounding Kabul. In a country where much of the population is illiterate, these institutions provided a ready-made network for religious and nationalist agitation against the occupation. The report alleged that some clerics facilitated the insurgency by “storing weapons and sheltering fighters.”

The ICG recommendations suggest that the broad hatred of the occupation can be stemmed by purging corruption from the Afghan government, security forces and business elite.

The pervasive corruption itself reflects the fact that no section of Afghan society believes a US-backed puppet regime will survive as soon as foreign forces scale down or leave. The invasion of Afghanistan is a debacle for the NATO alliance—of no less magnitude than the failure of the Soviet invasion in the 1980s.

In the final analysis, the ICG report dovetails with the opposition to even small troop withdrawals that has been expressed by sections of the American military and political establishment. The only answer of the Pentagon and figures like Senator John McCain to the entrenched resistance of the Afghan people is more killing and repression.

There is every indication, however, that the Obama administration and its European allies are pursuing a different course of action. After nearly a decade of war, the occupying powers are growing desperate to end the conflict while realising at least the main predatory objectives of the invasion.

The real power in Afghanistan lies not with Karzai’s government but with what the ICG described as a “nexus” of Islamist and tribal insurgent militias, corrupt officials, criminal syndicates and business oligarchs.

Behind the peace talks reportedly taking place with elements of the Taliban is a clear intent to make a sordid deal that will bestow international “legitimacy” on this situation—in exchange for the insurgent leaderships betraying the Afghan people and agreeing to the US demands for access to Afghanistan’s resources and permanent military bases to further Washington’s economic and strategic ambitions in Central and South Asia.



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