

US embassy and NATO headquarters in Kabul under fire

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A coordinated series of attacks by Taliban fighters in Kabul yesterday has again highlighted the tenuous nature of the US-led military occupation of Afghanistan and of Washington's plans to hand responsibility for security to its Afghan client regime by 2014.

A handful of insurgents armed with automatic rifles, rockets and explosives launched attacks at around 1.30 p.m. on the heavily-fortified US embassy, NATO headquarters and the country's National Directorate of Security (NDS), as well as other locations in the capital.

The most protracted battle took place when six Taliban fighters killed a policeman and climbed to the upper floors of an unfinished high-rise building inside the capital's embassy district. The area itself is heavily guarded with a string of checkpoints, creating a so-called "ring of steel" to protect sensitive foreign embassies and government buildings.

From their vantage point, the insurgents fired on the American embassy, NATO headquarters and NDS offices using rifles, rocket-propelled grenades and shoulder-held rockets. In the west of the capital, two suicide bombers detonated their explosives outside a police station while a third bomber was killed trying to enter the airport.

The siege in the diplomatic quarter lasted for at least seven hours before Afghan police finally regained control of the building and killed the last of the attackers. Across the city, four police and two civilians had been killed, with another 18 civilians wounded. A US embassy spokesperson reported that four Afghan civilians had been injured during the attack.

The US, NATO and the Afghan government immediately dismissed the attacks. A Pentagon spokesman George Little told reporters: "This was far from a so-called spectacular attack." In Brussels, NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen declared that the Taliban were trying to "test the

transition" to Afghan responsibility for security, "but they can't stop it." Afghan President Hamid Karzai praised the local security forces, saying their "timely reaction demonstrates their improved ability."

The *Guardian* correspondent, however, described Afghan police "firing haphazardly" at the high-rise buildings, followed by the use of NATO and Afghan helicopters to fire on the attackers. Eventually the Afghan police brought in their special forces-trained crisis response unit to enter and retake the building.

An eyewitness, Hinanshu Sharma, told the BBC: "There is no security at all in Kabul. This [diplomatic quarter] is the safest area, and if we are not safe here, then we are not safe anywhere in Afghanistan."

In comments to the *Christian Science Monitor*, Centre for Strategic and International Studies analyst Andrew Cordesman noted that the aim of attacks was to "inflict psychological damage, more than physical damage." He explained: "If you can constantly create the image that you're active, that you're capable of carrying out large-scale attacks in areas where NATO is claiming security, you keep pressure up to leave—to put an end to the war."

The Taliban have carried out three other high-profile attacks in Kabul since June. On June 29, nine insurgents stormed the Inter-Continental Hotel, killing at least 12 people and keeping NATO and Afghan forces at bay for five hours. On July 17, gunmen killed Jan Mohammed Khan, a close adviser to President Karzai. On August 19, insurgents took over the British Council and killed eight people in an eight-hour battle.

Commenting on yesterday's attacks, "extremely close to the heart of the Western military and intelligence presence," the US-based Stratfor think tank pointed out: "The ability to get numerous operatives armed with explosives and heavy

guns into this area could not have been possible without the Taliban obtaining aid from Afghan security personnel posted in high-security areas.”

The US and NATO will undoubtedly react with redoubled efforts to intimidate a population that is overwhelmingly hostile to the decade-long occupation of the country. As it prepares to hand security responsibility over to Afghan authorities, the Obama administration has helped create a vast police state apparatus to prop up the widely hated Karzai regime.

The US-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) has just issued a report that provides a chilling glimpse into the activities of various pro-government militia that have been encouraged, and in the case of the Afghan Local Police (ALP) trained and funded, by the US military, in addition to the regular army and police.

The reactivation of militias—which have a long history of brutality in Afghanistan—has, at least in some provinces, been a deliberate policy of the National Directorate of Security to counter the spread of Taliban influence over the last few years. In the northern Kunduz province, the NDS has provided guns and money and simply let the militias loose on the population.

The Human Rights Watch report stated: “In Kunduz, the spread and power of militias has become pernicious. Human Rights Watch received a number of allegations of human rights abuses by militias in Kunduz, including killings, rape, beatings and extortion. In most cases, no action has been taken against the perpetrators.”

While American and NATO forces collaborate closely with the various militias, the US is directly responsible for the creation of the ALP units. These are trained by American special forces for three weeks, armed with automatic rifles and used for defensive purposes in rural communities. As of August, 7,500 men had been recruited to the ALP. Their pay, which is about 60 percent of regular police, is provided by the US, which has authorised their expansion to 30,000.

Not only are the ALP personnel cheaper than regular soldiers and police, but they operate with no oversight and are just as ruthless as the militias. The HRW cited instances of alleged ALP involvement in murder, theft and rape. In some areas, it reported, known criminals and even Taliban insurgents have been recruited. “Indeed, many Afghans have told Human Rights Watch that this new force is hard to distinguish from *arbakai* [militias],” the report declared.

The revival of militias and paramilitary police units is part of a conscious US strategy to create gangs of thugs that operate with impunity to terrorise the local population. The instances of brutality are not aberrations, but are a direct product of this policy.

A UN Assistance Mission report, which is about to be released, sheds light on another aspect of the police-state apparatus that has been created in Afghanistan. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, the report provides details of torture and abuse in nine prisons run by the National Directorate of Security and Afghan police. The US and NATO have temporarily suspended the handing over of detainees to Afghan authorities, but will no doubt resume the practice once cosmetic changes have been made.

The Obama administration’s “transition” to Afghan responsibility for security by 2014 will not end the US military presence in the country. Negotiations have been underway between Washington and Kabul for more than a month over the terms of a US-Afghan Strategic Partnership that would allow for as many as 20,000 US troops to remain in Afghanistan in the guise of training and mentoring and for counter-intelligence operations.

The US is also seeking the continued use of five major bases that would provide air support for Afghan forces and, more importantly for the Pentagon, a permanent military presence. President Karzai’s top security adviser Rangin Dadfar Spanta told the *Telegraph* last month: “In the Afghan proposal we are talking about 10 years from 2014, but this is under discussion.” Nominally the bases would be under Afghan control, and the US would be present as “guests.”

The framework of the agreement underscores the central purpose of the US-led invasion of Afghanistan. It was never to “fight terrorism” or bring democracy to Afghanistan, but rather was to exploit the country as a base of operations to pursue its ambitions for domination of the adjacent energy-rich regions of Central Asia and the Middle East. The ruthless measures used to intimate a hostile population and suppress the armed insurgency flow directly from these objectives.



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