

Nine months after the official end of combat operations

US Special Forces fight Taliban militants in Kunduz, Afghanistan

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At least 100 US Special Forces engaged in clashes with Taliban insurgents near the northern Afghan city of Kunduz on Wednesday. The US commandos were part of a larger force of US-NATO and Afghan troops attempting to retake the strategic northern city, which was partially captured by a small Taliban invasion force on Monday morning.

US military aircraft launched at least eight strikes against targets in Kunduz this week in support of the Western-led ground operations, according to the *Wall Street Journal*. As of Friday morning, Afghan commandos and Western “advisers” were still engaged in fighting on the outskirts of the city, according to Al Jazeera.

The US-led combat operations come fully nine months after the official “end” of the US war in Afghanistan, announced with great fanfare by US President Barack Obama at the end of December 2014. Obama vowed at the time that US involvement in combat would cease during 2015, and the US military presence would be progressively reduced to a mere “residue force” by the end of 2016.

Instead, 9,800 US troops have continued to wage a covert war against the Afghan population throughout 2015, carrying out targeted killings and kidnappings across the country. Led by the Pentagon’s Special Operations Joint Task Force Afghanistan, at least 3,000 of these forces are orchestrating continuous counterinsurgency-style combat operations, carried out in the name of “counterterrorism” but in reality directed against opponents of the US-backed government.

In support of these operations, officially codenamed “Operation Freedom’s Sentinel,” the Pentagon has continued to deploy hardened combat units to Afghanistan, including elements of the US Army’s 7th

Infantry, 10th Mountain and 101st Airborne Divisions. Some 1,000 US troops with the 3rd Brigade Combat Team are slated for an extended deployment beginning this fall.

Despite the ample US military support, there is every indication that the US-backed government led by President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani is moving steadily towards collapse. Recent months have seen a resurgent Taliban expand its presence throughout the hinterland, as the insurgency moves to fill the deepening power vacuum opened up by the breakdown of the US-backed regime in Kabul. Earlier this year, Taliban fighters penetrated the central government compound in the capital city of Kabul, launching suicide bombing attacks and engaging in prolonged firefights just outside an ongoing meeting of Afghan parliamentary deputies.

Monday’s seizure of Kunduz itself was accomplished by a relatively small force of several hundred Taliban, according to reports. Hours after entering the city, Taliban members were roaming freely throughout the main residential areas, conducting roundups of high-value targets based on a preassembled “hit list” drawn up by the insurgent leadership, according to Amnesty International. Thousands of Afghan police and military personnel fled to the city’s airport without making significant efforts to resist the incursion, according to Silk Road Reporters. Hundreds more Afghan troops abandoned key positions in central Kunduz on Wednesday after running out of basic supplies, according to Afghan officials.

Kunduz, one of the country’s richest cities and a crucial hub of regional drug-smuggling networks, is the first major urban center to fall under Taliban control since 2001. The insurgents had been massing forces in surrounding areas since the spring, indicating a long-term plan to seize the city as a new headquarters for the

militant group.

While Afghan and Western forces reportedly succeeded in retaking certain areas of Kunduz on Thursday, groups of Taliban fighters remained entrenched in buildings throughout the city on Friday, according to local officials cited by Reuters.

Elsewhere in northern Afghanistan, Taliban fighters took over some 30 government checkpoints in Badakhshan province during attacks on Thursday and Friday, according to Reuters.

Also on Wednesday, some 800 Afghan troops were ambushed by Taliban insurgents while attempting to relieve government forces in Kunduz. The ambush occurred after the Afghan forces had traveled less than one kilometer, and the reinforcements were subsequently stalled for the rest of the day, according to Afghan officials cited by *Daily Star*.

Washington is responding to the deepening chaos with new plans to beef up its military presence. Last week, the Pentagon signaled that it intends to maintain a force of at least 10,000 US troops in the country through the end of 2017, marking the fourth major upward revision of the planned US military role in the country this year.

Underlying the endless extensions of the US combat mission in Afghanistan is the fact that, far from a revenge mission against Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda, as presented by the US media, the true purpose of the US invasion of Afghanistan from the beginning has been to secure a permanent neocolonial “foothold” in Central Asia. The US ruling class has essential interests at stake in Afghanistan, which is positioned along a vital strategic corridor located squarely in the “heartland of Eurasia.” It represents a key outpost in Washington’s grand strategic efforts to encircle and destabilize its main global rivals in Moscow and Beijing.

Immediately after the 2001 invasion, the US military rapidly set about establishing a network of permanent military bases as the foundation for a criminalized US puppet regime in Kabul.

Today, despite the formal drawdown, the US military-intelligence apparatus remains the preeminent power in the country. The top commander of US forces in Afghanistan, General John Campbell, “exerts so much influence at the top levels of the Afghan government that some Afghans refer to him as the country’s “de facto defense minister,” as the *New York Times* editorial board noted on Thursday.

As in Libya, Syria, and Iraq, Washington will respond to the failure of its Afghanistan policy with ever greater

injections of military violence, reducing the entire country to rubble and slaughtering untold numbers to maintain its basing arrangements and political-military domination over the strategically crucial country.

This objective does not preclude some form of US alliance with the Taliban, which has increasingly incorporated Islamist militant groups from throughout Central Asia and the Caucasus that maintain close ties to US intelligence. Foreign fighters began flooding into Kunduz province during the Taliban’s spring offensive earlier this year, including members of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and Islamic State in Afghanistan, according to reports from locals cited by Radio Free Europe.

“The fallout from Kunduz is likely to be felt across the region. Western and central Asian intelligence and diplomatic officials agree that many Taliban militants are not Afghans. They are Uzbeks, Tajiks, Turkmen, Kyrgyz and Kazakhs from the five central Asian republics, who have been fighting for the Taliban in their own designated groups, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the Islamic Jihad Union and Jamaat Ansarullah. There are also Chechens and Dagestanis from the Caucasus and Uighurs—Chinese Muslims fighting under the banner of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement but trying to free their homeland in the province of Xinjiang from Beijing’s control. There are even elements of al-Qaeda, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (Isis), and Pakistani fighters,” a column in the *Financial Times* noted on Thursday.

Afghanistan’s local IS affiliate, an outgrowth of extremist factions backed by the CIA in Syria, now controls major portions of Nangarhar province. Hundreds of IS fighters launched attacks earlier this week against Afghan army checkpoints, according to reports.



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