

UK military returns to Afghanistan

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Last month, barely one year since Prime Minister David Cameron officially declared the end of the UK's 13-year intervention in Afghanistan, British troops were sent back into the country's southern Helmand province.

Cameron is following the lead of US President Barack Obama, who last October reneged on his pledge to withdraw virtually all US troops from Afghanistan before the end of his administration—ordering a force of 9,800 to remain there through most of this year, with at least 5,500 troops still in place when he leaves office in January 2017.

Although the Ministry of Defence (MoD) insisted that British military personnel would not be going into combat and would act only in an “advisory role” from within a military base, they are being mobilised to join NATO and Afghan forces to retake control of the key town of Sangin.

The *Times* reported recently that at least one 30-strong elite SAS unit was being deployed to back US special-forces and the Afghan National Army as they try to retake territory from Taliban forces.

The return of the British Army to Sangin is significant, given that between 2006 and 2010 it faced some of its heaviest fighting since World War Two and saw the loss of over 100 soldiers to Taliban forces.

Along with Sangin and most of the southern Helmand province, the Taliban now controls large swathes of the country. Insurgent forces have been described as being camped on the doorstep of several provincial capitals. According to recent estimates by Afghan officials, Taliban forces have control of, or a significant presence in, roughly 30 percent of districts across Afghanistan—more territory than in any year since the 2001 US-led invasion of the country.

The most recent NATO statistics reveal that up to November, around 7,000 members of the Afghan security forces had been killed in 2015 with 12,000 injured—a 26 percent increase over the whole of 2014. Attrition rates are soaring and deserters and injured Afghan soldiers say they are now fighting a more sophisticated and well-armed insurgency.

On ~~Washington~~ *Washington Post*, ~~the~~ reported a previously undisclosed transcript of a meeting in late-October of the Afghan National Security Council to illustrate how “in private, top Afghan and American officials have begun to voice increasingly grim assessments of the resurgent Taliban threat.”

Abdullah Abdullah, the US's puppet chief executive in Afghanistan, told the confidential meeting, “We have not met the people's expectations. We haven't delivered. Our forces lack discipline. They lack rotation opportunities. We haven't taken care of our own policemen and soldiers. They continue to absorb enormous casualties.”

The Afghan army's chief of staff, Gen. Qadam Shah Shaheem, said that limited reinforcements and new recruits couldn't make up for force attrition in Helmand. He reported that 40 percent of Afghan army vehicles in Helmand were damaged beyond functioning capacity. He described a leadership crisis within the security forces, where “clashing personalities exist between the security pillars.”

Various other highly-placed figures compiled a list of grievances including the low morale of the security forces, exhaustion—some soldiers had not been home in two years—junior commanders “openly defying their superiors” and the depletion of facilities, equipment, surveillance and air support.

Having overrun several bases, insurgents have seized a significant arsenal of US weaponry provided to the stooge Afghan forces. Afghan soldiers and police now say they face an enemy that is equipped with night-vision scopes on their rifles, military vehicles, heavy artillery, machine guns, rockets and mortars—and a “seemingly endless supply of ammunition.”

Taliban fighters have been seen using Russian-made ZSU anti-aircraft guns with night capability, as well as “an abundant supply of mortars and a communications network that is difficult to infiltrate.”

The *Post* wrote, “senior military officials no longer even pretend that they can fight the Taliban effectively on their own.”

The insurgents are on the doorsteps of several provincial capitals, applying more pressure on urban areas than in any year of the conflict. The clashes in Helmand echo the Taliban strategy that led to the takeover of the northern city of Kunduz in September—seizing surrounding districts before moving in on the provincial capital. Already, the Taliban are in the enclave of Babaji, within the borders of Helmand’s capital, Lashkar Gah.

According to the transcript, the commander of US and allied forces in Afghanistan, Gen. John Campbell, who recently put on record his intent to resist any reduction in the US occupation, spoke of “just putting our finger in the dike in Helmand.”

Helmand was a key focus in a major US-led offensive launched in 2010, after Obama proclaimed his “surge” of 30,000 troops to Afghanistan. By late 2012, the Taliban was believed to have been suppressed in much of southern Afghanistan.

“If there was one province in Afghanistan that the Taliban should have found impenetrable, it was Helmand. The Afghan army has its entire 215th Corps based here, numbering more than 18,000 soldiers. There are also thousands of Afghan police officers. Yet a few hundred Taliban fighters managed to overrun parts of Marja and other districts. Soldiers and police officers fled with little resistance or surrendered to the insurgents,” wrote the *Post*.

Helmand’s deputy governor took the unusual step of alerting Afghan President Ashraf Ghani to the dire security situation and requesting urgent reinforcements through an open letter in a Facebook post last month, claiming that he had not been able to make contact through official channels.

Vowing “to fix Helmand,” Campbell attacked Afghan security officials for “not managing” their forces and for “breakdowns in discipline.” He pointed out that only about half the troop positions in the 215th Corps were manned. Western and Afghan officials have said that this is largely due to desertions, high casualty rates and a lack of new recruits.

“The blame game must stop now,” Campbell threatened. “If I hear one more policeman complain about the army or vice versa, I will pull my advisers immediately. It’s over.”

The *Washington Post* paints a picture of the US’s puppet regime in complete disarray: “the government is grappling with its own problems. The economy is crippled; high unemployment and corruption remain entrenched, breeding public resentment. Political

infighting, policy disputes and leadership woes have deepened inside the administration of President Ashraf Ghani, who shares power with Abdullah, the chief executive. The cabinet remains incomplete, with no defense minister as the security issues become more serious.”

But an air of crisis hangs over the Taliban too. The territorial gains by the Islamist organisation have been accompanied by internal divisions and a leadership crisis triggered by the surprise announcement last summer that its previous leader, Mohammad Omar, had been dead for more than two years. News of his demise from tuberculosis in Pakistan in 2013 was kept secret. The power struggle among Taliban factions has been exacerbated by the encroachment into its former fiefdoms by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which has attracted younger Taliban fighters.

In August, the Taliban condemned a video filmed in the north of Afghanistan showing what appears to be a group of ISIS fighters killing a group of Taliban prisoners by blowing them up with explosives.

The Taliban’s infighting has also apparently thwarted efforts by Ghani to bring it into peace talks with the government. Some western diplomats believe the new Taliban leader, Akhtar Mohammad Mansour, popularly distrusted as having been imposed into the leadership by Pakistan, is set on a strategy of strengthening the Taliban’s bargaining position by escalating attacks across the country.

It was announced January 7 that the White House will nominate Gen. Joseph L. Votel, a veteran special operations commander, to lead US Central Command—underscoring the Obama administration’s growing dependence on special operations forces in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan.



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