

# Taliban captures key Afghan district in fierce fighting

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Taliban insurgents last Friday overran the district of Jani Khel in the southeastern Afghan province of Paktia in the latest of a series of defeats for the US-backed regime in Kabul. Control of Jani Khel, which is strategically placed on the crossroads of a major route from Pakistan, opens the way for the Taliban to threaten areas of neighbouring districts and provinces.

Abdul Rahman Zurmati, Jani Khel's governor, told the *New York Times* his troops were under siege for nine days and the district only fell because of the lack of ammunition and reinforcements. "We were 90 people, and we had to fight against 1,200 Taliban," he said, adding that 27 of his soldiers were killed.

Zurmati had warned some three weeks ago that the district would fall to the Taliban without extraordinary measures. Janat Khan Samkanai, deputy head of the Paktia provincial council, blamed the lack of support for the defeat and said the Taliban seized dozens of vehicles, along with weapons and ammunition.

Samkanai said the Haqqani network based in the border areas of Pakistan was responsible for the attack and warned that its fighters would now focus on Samkani and Patan districts to create a secure base inside Afghanistan. The Haqqani network has assumed growing importance within the Taliban. Its leader, Sirajuddin Haqqani, was named as deputy to the Taliban's current supreme leader, Mawlawi Haibatullah Akhundzada.

Government forces have launched a counter-offensive to take back the area. Afghan officials claimed on Tuesday that US air strikes killed four commanders of the Haqqani network—a claim the Taliban denied.

The Taliban's capture of Jani Khel took place amid heavy fighting in other parts of Afghanistan, including in the southern province of Helmand, where 100 US military advisors have been dispatched to shore up pro-

government forces, and around the northern city of Kunduz, which fell to the Taliban last year before being retaken.

In mid-August, the Taliban captured the key district of Dahana-e-Ghori in the northern province of Baghlan, threatening to cut the main highway to nine other provinces in the north and northeast of the country.

Al Jazeera noted that the "security problems" were being "compounded by a growing political crisis within the Afghan government," produced by conflicts between the Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah and President Ashraf Ghani.

Attacks continue in the capital, with 16 people killed last week when the American University of Afghanistan was subjected to a nine-hour assault. The walls around the heavily-fortified complex were breached with a truck bomb, allowing fighters to enter. No one has claimed responsibility. More than 50 people, mainly students, were injured.

According to a recent report by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, the government has lost control of nearly 5 percent of its territory to the Taliban since the beginning of the year. Some 36 of the country's 407 districts were deemed under insurgent control or influence, while another 104 were regarded as being "at risk."

The ability of the reactionary Islamist Taliban to gain influence and establish bases inside Afghanistan is a product of the social and physical devastation wrought by 15 years of US-led military occupation. The puppet regime in Kabul, which is propped up by military aid from Washington and its allies, is widely despised throughout the country. The UN ranks Afghanistan at 171 out of 188 countries on its human development index.

The victory of the Haqqani network in Paktia

province points to another significant factor tearing Afghanistan apart. The *Diplomat* noted that the network was thought by provincial authorities to have been “assisted by Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), the formidable spy network that many believe is responsible for Pakistan’s defence policy of strategic depth.”

The possible involvement of Pakistan’s notorious military intelligence highlights the fact that Afghanistan is once again being turned into a battleground on which geo-political rivalries are being fought out. The Pakistani military has long regarded influence and control in Afghanistan as crucial for “strategic depth” in a war with India, shoring up its western flank while fighting Indian forces on its eastern borders.

For its part, India, increasingly backed by the US, has sought to expand its influence in Afghanistan over the past 15 years, providing nearly \$2 billion in aid, including military assistance.

In New Delhi yesterday, US Secretary of State John Kerry announced trilateral talks with Afghanistan and India at next month’s UN meetings to cement strong military ties under the phony banner of the “war on terror.” He pointedly suggested that Pakistan would be isolated if it did not “join other countries in tackling this challenge.”

Washington has long demanded that Pakistan take far tougher measures against the Taliban sheltering in areas bordering Afghanistan. The Pakistani military has waged brutal offensives over the past decade in what are known as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) but has moved only reluctantly against the Haqqani network.

China is also intervening in Afghanistan with investment and aid, including military assistance. The first cargo train from China is due to cross the border from the central Asian republic of Uzbekistan into Afghanistan in September. The rail link is part of Beijing’s efforts to tie Kabul into its ambitious One Belt One Road (OBOR) plans for infrastructure to link the vast Eurasian landmass more closely with China.

China’s focus on Afghanistan is not only aimed at trade, including in minerals, but is part of its attempts to counter the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia” aimed at undermining Chinese influence and militarily encircling it. Beijing fears that the US will exploit

Afghanistan as a base of operations for staging military and covert operations both in the Central Asian republics bordering China, and in western China itself, where there is a festering separatist movement.

General Fang Fenghui, a member of China’s Central Military Commission, met with the Afghan army’s chief of staff, General Qadam Shah Shahim, earlier this month. According to the *China Military Online* web site, Feng called for more high-level exchanges and deeper “pragmatic cooperation in intelligence sharing, personnel training, military capacity building and other areas under the framework of the ‘quadrilateral mechanism’” between China, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Tajikistan. Pakistan has long had close ties with China.

The latest Taliban attack in Paktia province takes place against the backdrop of this geo-political scheming and rivalry, which is drawing the entire region, including Afghanistan, into US planning and preparations for war against China.



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