

The 'talibanization' of insurgency

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CHAPTER 3

The ‘talibanization’ of insurgency

Prem Mahadevan

As Western troops continue their withdrawal from Afghanistan, the stage is being set for the emulation of Taliban insurgent tactics elsewhere. Having tested the limits of Western military power, radical Islamists are encouraged by the proposition that persistent subversion, coupled with steady attrition through direct and indirect combat – the latter primarily involving improvised explosive devices – shall exhaust the West into strategic retreat. Although no insurgent group has the capacity to prevent the entry of Western forces into a combat theatre, denying such forces the tactical ability to operate freely shall grow easier.



A member of the US Army's 52nd Ordnance Group prepares confiscated improvised explosive devices (IEDs) for detonation near Combat Outpost Hotal in Maiwand District, Kandahar Province, Afghanistan, 21 January 2013



THE WITHDRAWAL OF INTERNATIONAL SECURITY ASSISTANCE FORCE (ISAF) TROOPS FROM AFGHANISTAN WILL HAVE IMPORTANT IMPLICATIONS FOR THE MILITARY CREDIBILITY OF THE NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY ORGANIZATION, AS WELL AS THE EUROPEAN UNION'S POLITICAL AUTHORITY IN THE DEVELOPING WORLD. As far as radical Islamists are concerned, Western power is diminishing. For them and their supporters, proof of this decline can already be seen in Iraq, where more than a decade of counterinsurgency has brought no lasting result. Rather, Al-Qaida-linked militants have seized control of some of Iraq's most important cities, such as Fallujah and Ramadi, which were bitterly fought over by US troops less than a decade ago.

As Michael Haas notes in the next chapter, the development of anti-access/area denial doctrines has reached an unprecedented level of intensity in many non-Western countries. These states are trying to ensure that the world's preeminent military power, the United States, cannot interfere with their regional agendas. The same applies to non-state actors, which are now likely to learn from the Afghanistan example. The Taliban could not prevent US forces from entering Afghanistan in 2001; they had (and still have) no capability for implementing an anti-access strategy. However, their

insurgency since 2001 has proven that even a non-state actor can pursue the modest goal of area denial against vastly superior conventional armed forces, via asymmetric warfare. Even if Western troops enter an insurgency-affected region, they can be deprived of the freedom to operate at will within it.

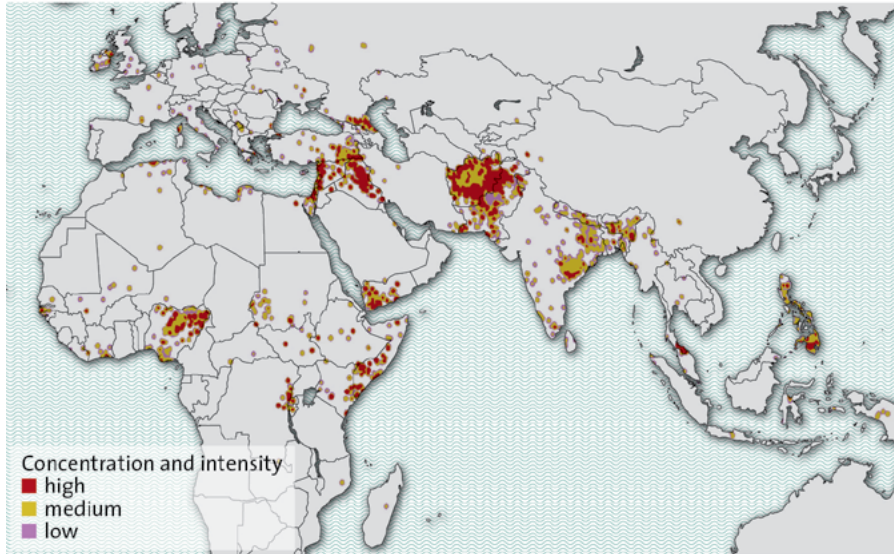
Although the Taliban model of insurgency has yet to be exactly replicated in other contexts, some aspects can already be noticed elsewhere. Suicide bombings in Mali, 'swarming' assaults in Iraq and the tactical innovativeness of jihadist groups in Syria all point to battlefield lessons being transmitted along a knowledge chain originating in Afghanistan. The operators of this chain might be Al-Qaida or its affiliates, or even the Taliban themselves. For over the last decade, the insurgents in Afghanistan have developed a distinctly pan-Islamist worldview, partly out of a desire to mobilize resources from the wider Arab and Islamic community against Western troops in Afghanistan.

This chapter will highlight the main characteristics of 'talibanized' insurgency. In so doing, it will provide a checklist of tactics and techniques that Western militaries will have to watch for in the future, when operating overseas against Islamist guerrillas.



Geography of terrorism

Terrorist incidents, 2012



Source: Global Terrorism Database, University of Maryland

Beginning with the strategic developments that allowed the Taliban to recover from the overthrow of their regime in 2001, the chapter will examine the innovative methods by which the Taliban have enhanced their military, psychological and economic clout and illustrate how other groups are copying these methods. Finally, the chapter will offer some reflections on what the ISAF withdrawal might signify for Western military interventions elsewhere.

Strategic development of talibanization

The Taliban insurgency has been a tactically decentralized affair that has

retained a surprising degree of strategic coherence. Therein lies the first clue to its success: the existence of a layered organization that functions as a loose network while preserving the unity of purpose that comes with hierarchical structures. Any insurgent leader who was co-opted by the West or the Afghan government was swiftly labelled a renegade and deprived of the credibility that would have created a split in the insurgent movement. Throughout, the power centre of the insurgency lay in its leadership's continuing close ties with Pakistani intelligence, and the strategic advice it seems to have received therefrom.



Western analysts have noted that the Taliban have long had an innate understanding of guerrilla tactics at the field level, based on the accumulated wisdom of three decades of civil war in Afghanistan. However, in strategic terms the insurgency of 2002–14 was markedly different from any kind of campaign that the Taliban had ever waged before. This has given rise to speculation that after 2001 the Taliban leadership was following a blueprint for Maoist-style protracted warfare, provided by extraneous actors. Its own leadership showed no particular gift of generalship either before or during the 2001 invasion by US forces, thus raising the question of how Taliban leaders could have had the vision to organize a long-term resistance movement.

Calibrating operations with subversion

Evidence of such a capacity for long-term planning has increasingly come to light. It is known that the Taliban spent the years 2002–05 infiltrating large numbers of cadres into Afghanistan, from safe havens in Pakistan. These cadres, some crossing the international boundary in groups of 100 or more, avoided carrying out the large-scale attacks which were well within their means. Instead, they focused on quietly subverting the populations of remote rural areas, which could serve as bases for the coming insurgency.

During this period, other Taliban forces kept Afghan and ISAF troops preoccupied along the international boundary with low-level irritants such as rocket fire and shallow penetration raids. Distracted from the Afghan interior, and subjected to a policy downgrade back home caused by preoccupation with the war in Iraq, ISAF units were unable to organize for counterinsurgency.

Airpower was a powerful tool for both sides, but in very different ways. ISAF used it to great effect while carrying out area dominance missions and decapitation strikes. The Taliban used it to showcase the ‘foreignness’ of their enemy and discredit the country’s pro-Western leadership for not resisting the use of vastly superior force against Afghan civilians. Thus, the operational contribution of airpower in support of ISAF offensives was balanced out by the psychological boost that it gave the insurgent recruiting apparatus, largely because the insurgents did not have any ability to compete with this instrument. Since they could not be blamed for civilian lives lost in airstrikes, the Taliban used airpower (or rather, the lack of it) to justify their own resort to terrorist tactics.

Fusing terrorism and insurgency

Talibanized insurgency combines tactics of terrorism and guerrilla warfare.



Thus, insurgents in Afghanistan have developed an operational model that is resistant to 'conventional' counter-insurgent measures such as winning hearts and minds among local populations. Unless first provided with security, few rural communities will be willing to cooperate against the insurgents. Yet blanket security coverage cannot be extended throughout the countryside, due to the need to protect infrastructural targets, particularly in a rugged landscape where connectivity is poor.

Counterinsurgent commanders are then caught up in the dilemma of how best to use their limited forces efficiently. Both politically and doctrinally, Western militaries are better suited to short-duration counterterrorism missions than long-duration counter-insurgency, with its attendant task of state-building. Force structures differ dramatically between the two types of mission. Counterterrorism requires the use of stand-off firing platforms and lightly equipped helicopter-mobile special operations troops. Counterinsurgency requires an extensive on-ground infantry deployment and sustained investment in community liaison and trust-building through civic action. It also has a strong civilian component, in the form of both developmental work and political negotiation.

Keeping an eye on the prospect of eventually returning to power, the Taliban have avoided resorting to methods which would lose them popular support within their already finite, Pashtun-centric power base. Thus, they have not carried out frequent rocket attacks on population centres, as the Afghan mujahideen did during the 1980s and the subsequent civil war. In areas where they have a strong support infrastructure, they have provided advance warning to the population before launching attacks on ISAF troops. This allows the locals to escape military retribution and bolsters the Taliban's image as a people-friendly force. However, in areas where the ISAF presence is stronger and popular support for the insurgency is not as pronounced, the insurgents have been happy to carry out provocative attacks. They hope that by doing so, they can engineer a security backlash that would fall upon the locals, who would then either support the insurgency or at least suffer for not having done so.

Exploiting local tensions

The Taliban have been especially shrewd in identifying local faultlines and grievance narratives, which they can capitalize on for recruitment. In remote villages, they begin the process of subversion by approaching influential community leaders. The



insurgents have a good idea of who these individuals are, thanks to cells of 'spotters'. If the community leaders do not respond favourably, the Taliban simply go around them and appeal directly to village youth. Another recruitment tool is the insurgents' shadow justice system. In southern Afghanistan, which is the Taliban heartland, they have installed non-local judges who arbitrate on disputes. The rulings handed out are backstopped by the clear threat of violence for non-compliance. Given the slow pace of the government judicial system, it is unsurprising that many Afghans perceive Taliban courts as a better alternative. In this way, the Taliban can claim that they are already governing large parts of the country and therefore cannot be excluded from political office in the event of a negotiated settlement to the conflict.

In areas where they have neither a support infrastructure nor scope for arbitrating local disputes, the Taliban use assassination as an instrument to shape power dynamics. They kill a government official, triggering a war of succession among various tribes who all vie to get their own candidate appointed to the vacant post. In the process, the Taliban offer their services to one of the factions, thereby introducing themselves into a political landscape from which they had previously been excluded. On other occasions, they have

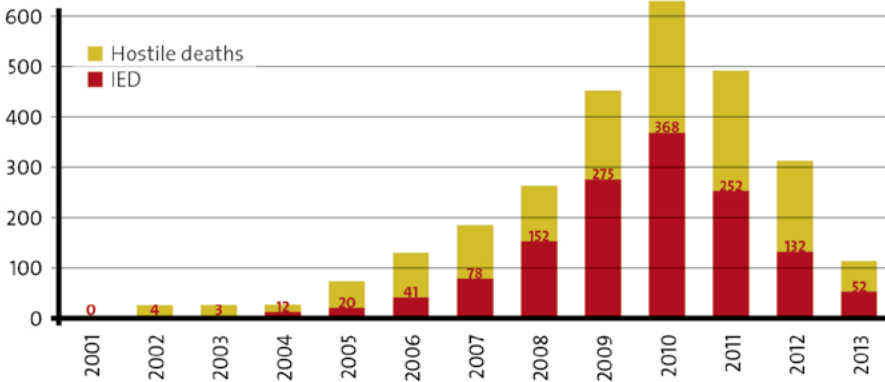
assassinated key individuals in order to weaken the constituency that they represent. Thus, the killing of the Pashtun leader Hamid Karzai's half-brother in 2011 weakened the Karzai clan, while that of Burhanuddin Rabbani, a former Afghan president, weakened the Jumaat-e-Islami. Both political groupings could have stood in the way of the Taliban's ambitions to capture power in the central government once the ISAF withdrawal is complete.

The Taliban as a proliferator of tactical innovations

There is, as yet, no combat theatre where the talibanized style of insurgency has been imported in its entirety as a composite model. However, elements of this style have surfaced in regions across the world where radical Islamists are active. Often, there is a direct link with Afghanistan, in the form of transnational jihadist networks forged by Al-Qaida. The Taliban themselves have contributed to the formation of these networks: Over the past decade, from being a purely local movement, the insurgents have evolved into a success story of the global jihadist community for having stood firm against Western forces. The Taliban have learnt to appreciate the value of Arab support in particular, since it has enhanced their military effectiveness by opening new channels of funding and skill-sharing.



IED fatalities in Afghanistan



Source: www.icasualties.org

IEDs begin to fundamentally influence war costs

The most potent weapon wielded by the Taliban has been the improvised explosive device (IED). In previous conflicts, IEDs were a means of tactical attrition. With the recent insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan, they have transformed into instruments of strategic coercion. Their usage is characterized by a double asymmetry which works in favour of insurgents and terrorist groups. First, the time required to develop new IED designs is less than the time required to develop countermeasures. The pace of technology change thus allows insurgents to dictate the pace of operational activity, since military commanders are compelled to focus on force protection until counter-IED systems become available. Second, there is an asymmetry of costs: Afghan IEDs can be built for

as little as \$265 apiece. The US government, in contrast, spent \$18 billion on designing and manufacturing bomb-detection equipment. There have been further costs, amounting to \$45 billion in mine-proof vehicles.

This double asymmetry skews the cost-benefit ratio of waging counter-insurgency far from Western borders, with all the attendant difficulties of arranging force logistics overseas. Governments are not keen to bear the expense of fighting technologically-advanced guerrillas. Insurgents on the other hand have few inhibitions about projecting their power through foreign training missions: As early as 1991, Hizbollah operatives taught Al-Qaida how to assemble large vehicle-borne IEDs. Al-Qaida eagerly absorbed these lessons because it wanted to emulate Hizbollah's area



denial success in driving out US and French military forces from Lebanon in the 1980s – a feat that Osama bin Laden was determined to surpass in his own fight with the West. Likewise, the Taliban acquired their competence in IED-manufacturing through knowledge transfer from Iraqi jihadist trainers in 2004–05.

There is little reason to believe that the insurgents in Afghanistan, having benefited from foreign assistance, will not now engage in skill-sharing themselves, and arm jihadist groups elsewhere with the technical knowledge to mass-produce anti-personnel and anti-vehicle mines. The Taliban have already demonstrated the capacity to build 8000 IEDs annually, or a little more than 22 per day. This is more than the British army faced in over 30 years of insurgency in Northern Ireland, where the IED first made its appearance as a tool of guerrilla warfare in the early 1970s.

Cultural norms no barrier to adaptation

Sceptics may argue that cultural differences will limit the widespread emulation of Taliban-style IED attacks in other theatres. The historical record is not promising in this regard. Traditionally, Afghan Islam has been more tribalist than fundamentalist. Suicide bombing in particular was frowned

upon. Although the first such bombing occurred in May 2003, it was not until 2006 that suicide attacks became a regular feature of Taliban operations. The attitudinal shift occurred because Iraqi insurgent trainers, based on their own experience of combat against US troops, advised the Taliban that regular use of this tactic would help in eliminating the focal points of Western counter-insurgency efforts.

Despite being initially reluctant to break the Islamic taboo against suicide, Afghan insurgents were eventually won over by operational logic. Assassinations which had previously been difficult to carry out became easy; in just one year (2005–06), success rates shot up from 40% to 85%. Initially sourced from among foreign militants fighting in Afghanistan, suicide bombers were soon coming from communities who had suffered from ISAF counterinsurgency operations. Not content with just this source of recruits, the Taliban also abducted children from remote areas and indoctrinated them for suicide attacks. Knowing that women and children are less likely to be screened at security checkpoints, the Taliban have used girls as young as eight years as human bombs. In a similar vein, they have pioneered the use of ‘turban bombs’. Many Afghan men wear turbans and



consider it an insult if asked to remove these for security screening. Through experimenting with such tactics, the Taliban have found that breaking societal norms and resorting to underhand methods of attack (even by local standards) pays handsome military dividends that offset the cost to their public image.

Since 2007, it appears that Chechen militants have made the same discovery in the South Caucasus. The so-called 'Caucasus Emirate', a network of local jihadists with pronounced sympathy for Al-Qaida, has carried out an unrelenting war of attrition against Russian security forces and civilians. Unlike the early Chechen separatists of the 1990s, these jihadists do not care about international opinion. They are not interested in appealing to the out-groups that they are fighting, but only in winning the respect of their relatively small in-group. As a result, since 2009 they have been carrying out provocative attacks on soft targets, in part because they are competing alongside regional franchises of Al-Qaida to attract fresh funding and volunteers from the global jihadist community. Jihadists in Syria and Mali currently have an edge in the race for resources. Since these are 'new' conflict areas – the jihadist equivalent of emerging markets – improvisation of weaponry and especially IEDs has

been noticeable as a result of advice received from foreign militants. The appearance of suicide bombings targeted at peacekeeping forces in Mali is an example.

Strategic communication as part of the battlespace

Another field in which the insurgents have been surprisingly adept is propaganda, or what is known as 'strategic communication'. Aimed at influencing perceptions that are held by the adversary as well as neutral observers, strategic communication is a tool used to wear down the adversary's morale and raise doubts about the legitimacy of his cause. The war in Afghanistan has seen this tool becoming ever more potent. For a group whose ideological slant once opposed digital entertainment, the Taliban have had few qualms about waging digital insurgency. Radio broadcasts and DVDs of the insurgents' recruiters delivering fiery sermons are widely accessible in Afghanistan. The Taliban even operate websites expounding on their vision of an Islamic state. Knowing that doctrinaire ideas about banning female education would not go down well with the populace, the insurgents have moderated their rhetoric. They now claim to have no objection to girls' schooling, but oppose the 'Westernization' of school curricula and mixed-gender classes. These



are issues that most Afghans find no quarrel with.

Most impressive of all has been the insurgents' ability to shape perceptions of the actual conduct of operations on the ground, and the results achieved. Contrary to notions of the group's strong motivation levels, evidence from the field suggests that violent coercion plays a part in driving Taliban fighters into battle. Insurgent camps raided by ISAF have yielded signs of drug use, in the form of used syringes, while defectors have spoken about fratricidal killings as a result of harsh discipline. Analysis of the insurgency's micro-politics reveals a fragmented structure, with considerable autonomy being granted to subordinate commanders. Yet none of this has dispelled the notion that the Taliban are a rigidly hierarchical entity with the capability to significantly influence violence levels in Afghanistan. This ability to appear far more motivated and capable than they really are has been a key component of the insurgents' psychological warfare campaign.

Several commentators have remarked on the speed with which the Taliban contacts the international media and disseminates its own version of a story, leaving ISAF and Afghan government forces with the burden of establishing the actual facts and issuing a rebuttal.

The insurgents can plant a story in the Western media within an hour of a newsworthy incident occurring. In contrast, ISAF and Afghan spokesmen almost never possess the full facts at short notice. This breeds a crisis of credibility and confidence as far as larger audiences are concerned, since they extrapolate the military situation based on the public relations performance of government officials.

The Taliban can also provide subversive entertainment, in the form of social media duels with NATO spokesmen. Though amusing to read, the exchanges serve to equate the insurgents with the Western forces who are fighting them. Every propaganda point made by the latter is swiftly met with a riposte from the Taliban, thus weakening the overall impression of progress that is crucial to maintaining public support for counterinsurgency. In this regard, the Somali group Al-Shabaab seems to be copying the Taliban. During its September 2013 attack on the Westgate Mall in Nairobi, Al-Shabaab kept up a running commentary via Twitter. Seeking to ridicule the Kenyan government, the group was successful in creating a widespread impression of tactical incompetence on the part of Kenyan security forces. Interestingly, both the Taliban and Al-Shabaab seem to have begun using Twitter as an instrument



Social Media warfare

ISAF and Taliban, Afghanistan

Abdulqahar Balkhi @ABalkhi 22h
 @ISAFmedia since when is ISAF reporting considered authoritative?? and you are already refuting "claims" for the rest of the day???

ISAF @ISAFmedia 23h
 @abalkhi Refuting your feed - you claim 15 ISAF fatalities today, ISAF official reporting currently says zero today

Abdulqahar Balkhi @ABalkhi 21h
 @ISAFmedia Well ISAF personnel need to be held accountable for trying to hide fatalities. Journalists always welcome to confirm 'claims'.

3 RETWEETS

Al-Shabaab, Kenya/Somalia

HSM_PRESS OFFICE @HSM_PRESS2 11m
 still the upper hand! way to go! hoorah! #westgate #AlShabaab

HSM_PRESS OFFICE @HSM_PRESS2 53m
 maybe we dont have a functioning gov or military but were proud to have #alshabaab #westgate

HSM_PRESS OFFICE @HSM_PRESS2 54m
 60 down #westgate #ashabaab #nairobiunderattack

HSM_PRESS OFFICE @HSM_PRESS2 1h
 we're bulletproof, nothing to lose. shoot us down but we wont fall. were #AlShabaab titanium. #westgate #alshabaab

HSM_PRESS OFFICE @HSM_PRESS2 3h
 every mujahids dream is to kick the so called mossad soldiers! #alshabaab is ready for you baby!

of psychological warfare at exactly the same time, in September 2011.

Complex ambushes despite Western air supremacy

Western militaries are reliant on airpower when operating overseas. This is both an asset and a liability. On the one hand, airpower provides a supply lifeline as well as badly-needed fire support during combat engagements. On the other, its importance to the effectiveness of counterinsurgency makes guerrillas highly adaptive to the threat it poses. This has been seen in Afghanistan, where the Taliban have learnt to live with the limitations that hostile airpower usage poses to their operations in a relatively open, arid region. Other insurgent groups will not be far behind in learning that Western airpower threats can indeed be circumvented, even as attacks on ground forces continue unabated.

Initially the Taliban targeted heavy vehicles, hoping that such attacks would cause more casualties. Subsequently they shifted to smaller IEDs, which were intended only for use against foot patrols. By doing this they nullified the counterinsurgency policy being employed by Western units, that of trying to build good relations with Afghan villagers through directly engaging with them. Anti-infantry IEDs ensured that patrols avoided staying in any one locality long enough to be ambushed. In the process, villagers understood the larger message: Western soldiers were worried for their own safety, and could not be counted on to provide protection against the insurgents for any length of time. Many villages thus avoided sharing intelligence with ISAF troops, and some even prepared to reach an accommodation with the insurgents, as and when the ISAF would eventually leave.



During this phase (2007–09) Western forces still maintained a high rate of operational activity, compelling the insurgents to do battle whenever they were discovered. In one 14-month period, 3000 engagements took place between the Taliban and security forces in just two provinces of southern Afghanistan, while another 1300 occurred in the east. During these engagements the Taliban would concentrate fire onto the enemy's communications equipment and heavy weaponry. The insurgents had learned from experience how long it took ISAF airpower to deploy in support of ground forces, and tried to ensure that they could break off contact before it arrived. Recently, French troops in Mali recovered documents suggesting that the lessons learnt by the Taliban are being disseminated widely to other jihadist groups. The documents captured in Mali included an exhaustive list of suggestions for avoiding contact with Western air forces, and focused especially on the risk of drone strikes.

The tactical sophistication of Taliban operations increased in 2009. The guerrillas fought pitched battles in which they used mortars to get foreign troops to take cover, and then hit them with rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) and automatic fire. Firing positions were changed often. Radio discipline – a key weakness

which had often been exploited in the past by Western signals intelligence capability – was better maintained while on the move. As a precaution against bombardment, the insurgents learned to water down the ground, to prevent dust from being kicked whenever a mortar was used and thereby giving away their location. They also showed good fire control, launching RPGs in coordinated attacks from different directions onto individual targets. Their fields of fire interlocked, with machine guns being used to continuously suppress targets even as mortar and RPG teams set up new firing positions. RPGs were used to disable armoured vehicles rather than destroy them outright, since the crew members became vulnerable to small arms fire in any case when they attempted to exit the vehicle. Irrigation ditches were a favourite firing position for Taliban machine gun and mortar teams, since they provided effective cover while manoeuvring away from an essentially road-bound enemy. Given the similarities between Afghanistan and the tactical topography of Mali – large arid expanses with scattered communities – French and United Nations forces might expect to encounter similar tactics in the future. The fact that jihadists in North Africa openly fight under the Al-Qaida franchise suggests that if and when Al-Qaida's core leadership acquires a



safe haven in post-ISAF Afghanistan, the fallout will not be long in appearing across other conflict zones where Islamist insurgencies are being waged.

Tactical deception and counterintelligence

Insurgencies are, to a large degree, a game of intelligence and counterintelligence. The Taliban have shown a strong understanding of Western counterintelligence techniques, using this to plan attacks that leave a small logistical footprint. With few leads to follow, investigators have difficulty in identifying the persons behind a terrorist incident in an urban area. The attack methods used by the insurgents are: cross-networking (deploying cadres from multiple area commands, or even loaned from other militias) and suicidal assaults conducted in security forces uniforms.

The Taliban have been helped by the virtually non-existent capability of Afghan officialdom to regulate the manufacture and sale of security forces uniforms. On numerous occasions, insurgents have used police and army uniforms to attack protected locations or otherwise engage in 'black' operations – killing civilians and attributing responsibility to the security forces. In yet another ploy, they have infiltrated sympathizers into the security forces as bona fide recruits. These

'sleeper' agents remain dormant for months, learning weapon drills and winning the trust of their colleagues, before carrying out surprise attacks, usually in the form of shooting rampages. ISAF troops have been badly hit by such encounters, which understandably lead to tensions between the Afghan and foreign troops and greatly reduce their ability to operate jointly. Considering that much of the Western effort in counterinsurgency campaigns consists of local capacity-building, the risk of insider attacks in other combat threats is only likely to grow. European training missions in northern and central Africa, if deployed for any length of time, could be especially vulnerable to such attacks unless strict personnel vetting standards are maintained for recruits to the local police and military.

Organized crime as a funding source

Talibanized insurgency is a lucrative business opportunity for criminal entrepreneurs. Anecdotal evidence suggests that insurgents in Afghanistan cooperate with the private armies of drug lords. Besides taxing the drug trade, in the form of extracting hard cash and/or material goods such as vehicles, the insurgents offer physical protection for drug convoys. On occasion, they have even been suspected of staging attacks to draw away security forces' attention from border



crossing points where traffickers were moving drugs. If these reports are accurate, the personnel losses suffered by the Taliban would still be worthwhile. Although authoritative estimates are impossible to come by, it has been speculated that the Taliban receive about 40% of their funding from the Afghan drug trade.

ISAF and Afghan government efforts to curtail the trade have backfired. First, opium eradication was seen as an assault on the already impoverished Afghan peasantry. The Taliban were quick to offer monetary support to affected farmers, asking in return that they assist the insurgency. Many were

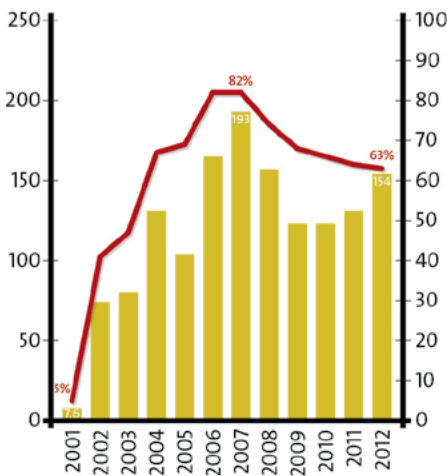
happy to do this. Meanwhile, the destruction of opium farms in government-controlled territory had the unforeseen side-effect of driving up prices in territory controlled by the Taliban, thus strengthening the insurgency's financial base. In recognition of their mistake, ISAF commanders thereafter attempted to pursue the traffickers directly. However, almost all trafficking syndicates had a measure of local government protection, in some cases extending to the authorities in Kabul.

Besides drugs, the Taliban also generate revenue by extortion. Shopkeepers are expected to pay 10% of their earnings to the insurgents, while trucks plying the national highways have to pay 'road taxes'. Since Afghan security forces also engage in such practices, which are blatantly illegal, the Taliban are not perceived any worse than the police as far as economic predation goes. Rather, the relatively disciplined manner of their cadres generates a favourable impression upon most Afghans.

The criminal dimension makes Taliban-style insurgency more resilient to action by security forces. It may also make insurgent factions more volatile and prone to competitive extremes of violence. The January 2013 assault upon a gas field in Algeria was partly

Poppy cultivation in Afghanistan

in hectares and % of global cultivation



Sources: UNODC, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Ministry of Counter Narcotics



caused by a disagreement over the division of proceeds from cigarette smuggling. A local commander, upon being accused of paying more attention to his personal racketeering business than to waging jihad, decided to prove his critics wrong by carrying out a major terrorist attack on Western workers at the gas field. In a slightly different vein, drug cartels in Mexico have become far more violent as a result of combat skills introduced by deserters from the Mexican army and police. Lured by salaries that are twelve times higher than what they could earn in government service, many combat specialists have joined the drug cartels as mercenaries, ratcheting up violence levels in gang warfare. It is interesting to note that certain Mexican drug lords have been openly compared to the Taliban, due to their penchant for mutilating and beheading victims and displaying the severed body parts in public spaces.

Curtailing Western interventionism

The Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan has managed to withstand the best prescriptions of counterinsurgency theory and practice. Its resilience has encouraged other jihadist movements elsewhere in the world in the belief that Western military forces can be defeated over time. Although there exist no insurgent groups with the capacity to prevent a modern Western army

from entering their territory, preventing such an army from operating freely is an easier task. Anti-access would not be a threat to Western force projection efforts in such a scenario, but area denial very likely would be.

Given that Western militaries are being forced to economize, it is safe to suggest that talibanized insurgency offers a model that other Islamist guerrillas would study carefully. There are already worrying signs in Mali, where the initial success of French military intervention bears some resemblance to the immediate aftermath of the 2001 Afghanistan invasion. Instead of staying to fight, the bulk of the Malian rebels have scattered to cross-border sanctuaries in Libya and Chad. If they now build up a capability for political subversion, using the highly organized, Maoist-like strategy developed by the Taliban, the Malian rebels could eventually hope to regain much of what they have lost. The Taliban are already getting close to doing so, despite having fought a numerically much stronger force than has so far been deployed in North Africa. With the French military component being downsized and United Nations peacekeeping troops currently functioning at half their sanctioned strength, the operational environment in Mali is favourable to a Taliban-style insurgency.



History shows that international terrorism received a major boost following the US withdrawal from Vietnam. A belief that strong military powers can be humbled through terrorist tactics runs through much of Al-Qaida's ideological and operational thinking. With the war in Afghanistan now close to ending on less than favourable terms for the West, it is necessary to anticipate the fallout that this conflict could have upon other regions in the developing world, where Western interests are threatened. Following a decade of unsuccessful efforts to reshape attitudes and societies in regions where Islamist insurgencies are active, Western societies have grown more preoccupied with domestic affairs and have little appetite for sustained foreign interventions. Knowing this, insurgent leaders are likely to continue waging regional conflict without concern for Western military power. In short, the West may leave Afghanistan, but Afghanistan will not leave the West for several years to come. ●