

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نېاشد تن من مباد بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/01/world/a-taliban-prize-won-in-a-few-hours-after-years-of-strategy.html? r=0>

A Taliban Prize, Won in a Few Hours After Years of Strategy

By JOSEPH GOLDSTEIN

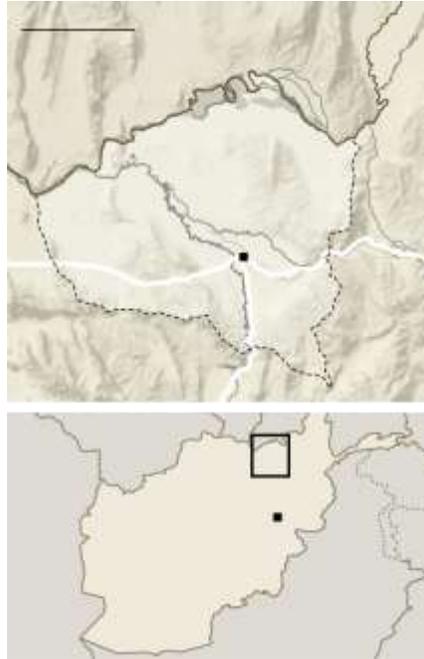
9/30/2015

The Taliban's largest strategic victory of its long insurgency seemed to unfold in a matter of hours: At dawn a few hundred insurgent fighters entered the northern provincial capital of Kunduz from three sides, and by afternoon they ruled it.

But even though it was a shocking victory, it hardly happened overnight. Signs of a determined and innovative Taliban campaign in the north, and Kunduz in particular, could be seen some two years ago.

Timed to the American withdrawal, a steady influx of insurgent fighters, a series of probing and patient territory grabs, and a hearts-and-minds campaign that took advantage of resentment of the government eventually delivered the Taliban's biggest prize of the war.

Beyond questions about why American-trained forces collapsed so quickly, the issues raised by that long-term campaign of Taliban incursion illuminate a potentially grave threat to the American-backed Afghan government: The insurgents' past aversion to all-out attacks against big cities may not have been because they never thought it possible, but merely because they weren't ready until now.



Further, Kunduz Province is far from the only place in Afghanistan where the Taliban have employed similar tactics around provincial capitals this year. Just Wednesday, there were new concerns that the insurgents might be threatening the capital of Baghlan Province, just south of Kunduz, where people were worried enough that they began evacuating the city.

The encirclement of Kunduz began in earnest two years ago, as the American military began pulling out of the province in the summer and fall of 2013.

It took only minutes to see the signs in Dashte-Archi, a district northeast of Kunduz, for instance. There American Special Forces had built up an ethnically diverse police force, recruiting Uzbeks and Turkmens and placing them in Pashtun areas.

But as the Special Forces soldiers drove out of the province, they received radio reports that the district governor had been assassinated, and that the police had abandoned their bases.

“It worked so long as you had a Special Forces team there, and the minute they left it collapsed and reverted to form,” Ted Callahan, then a civilian adviser to the Special Forces and now a security adviser in the north.

The Taliban began a series of attacks all around the province. Sometimes, magnetic bombs would be slapped on government vehicles. Opportunities came for assaults on police checkpoints, and another bit of territory would fall under Taliban rule.

In those places, not just in Kunduz, but across the north and east, the Taliban took a calculated and new approach to governance, one that involved some flexibility and local input. Some

Taliban permitted girls' education, even distributing class supplies — seemingly a big change from a group that became known for destroying schools.

A 27-year old Taliban judge interviewed in June, Obaidullah, who ran a court in Badakhshan Province, east of Kunduz, described a more lenient Taliban that no longer relied on corporal punishment for being clean-shaven or listening to music. “Our mentality has changed,” Obaidullah said in an interview in jail after his capture. “We realized that having a strict stance will not lead to success, so we changed.”

Perhaps more important, the Taliban took care to navigate the fractious ethnic politics of northern Afghanistan, which is largely Tajik and Uzbek, with concentrated settlements of Pashtuns.

The Taliban had traditionally drawn on Pashtuns for its members, but in the north in recent years it has played a canny game of recruiting disaffected ethnic leaders. At times that meant supporting a Tajik tribal elder in a dispute over development dollars against a more powerful Uzbek neighbor. Elsewhere, the Taliban gave commands to Uzbek militants from neighboring countries to operate in northern Afghanistan, which drew ethnic Uzbeks to their cause.

“I am Hazara myself,” one Taliban commander involved in the capture of Kunduz, Mohammadullah Sadat, said by telephone, identifying himself as a member of a group that has traditionally known terrible persecution at the hands of Pashtuns. “We are all fighting side by side under one banner, which is Islam. We are struggling for Islam not for any particular ethnic group.”

Even the Turkmens, one of Afghanistan's smallest and most isolated ethnic groups, began joining the Taliban in substantial numbers this year in four provinces across the north. It was a decision made largely because they were dissatisfied with their marginal representation in government, said Allah Nazar Turkmen, a member of Parliament.

Indeed, the local expression for joining the Taliban — “he went to the mountains” — hints at an act of protest, removing oneself from the government's world.

Over the past few years, faith in the government and the warlords who were allied with the government, never strong, has rapidly diminished. Militias and Afghan Local Police forces installed by the American Special Forces were largely unaccountable. They extorted protection money from farmers, and committed rapes and robberies. But because they had guns and the backing of local strongmen close to the government, people's complaints were ignored.

In Khanabad, a district southeast of Kunduz City, for instance, residents complained that the local militias were worse than the Taliban in part because while the Taliban would only demand payment once for a harvest, there was often more than one militia, each demanding its own share.

Over time, as villages threw their lot in with the Taliban, the insurgents' cordon around Kunduz grew tighter. By last year the city felt so under siege that police officers were resistant to driving

in a marked government vehicle for fear a Taliban fighter on a motorbike would slap a magnetic bomb on it.

Residents of Kunduz in northern Afghanistan fled Wednesday after the Taliban took over the city on Monday. Afghan security forces are trying to regain control.

But even as alarms started to be raised in Kunduz, there was a troubling bigger picture: Not just in the north, but all around the country, a campaign of steady and direct attacks on the Afghan security forces, who could no longer count on American support all the time, were taking a record toll.

That toll was sometimes described by American and Afghan officials as compelling evidence that the Afghan forces were fighting hard. But officials in places like Helmand Province in the south, and in Kunduz as well, described a pattern of worsening morale, and reluctance by troops and policemen to leave their posts.

Sometimes, the Taliban didn't have to kill the police to make headway. In February this year, the Afghan intelligence service, the National Directorate of Security, or N.D.S., said it was investigating dozens of police officers in Kunduz for cooperating with the Taliban, sometimes even selling their ammunition.

As attacks began stepping up early this year, residents and officials all across northern Afghanistan began reporting that the Taliban appeared to have more fighters in the north than in past years. Some of it was said to be from local recruitment among various ethnic groups.

Hundreds of insurgents began arriving from the south, claiming to be migrant laborers for the opium poppy harvest, according to some officials. And more foreign fighters were reported to have come in from Pakistan, evading a military offensive there.

"Kunduz was their focus right from the beginning," Abdullah Abdullah, who with President Ashraf Ghani leads the unity government in Kabul, said in an interview on Wednesday.

"The foreign terrorists — some Tajiks, Uzbeks, Uighurs, Chechens, from all over — they were able to get to Kunduz," he said, adding: "At that time, Kunduz was not a hot spot. But we knew what was evolving, what was about to happen, because these terrorist groups had found their way there."

By spring, the Taliban had begun to test Kunduz City itself, mostly coming through Chahar Dara, the district to its west. "They rolled into the city but were stopped — or chose to stop before getting to the city center," noted Thomas Ruttig, a co-director of the Afghanistan Analysts Network, a research organization and think tank.

It was not very subtle. At points the fighting right outside Kunduz City was fierce enough that provincial officials warned of an imminent collapse, and the national government in Kabul began to ask militia leaders to come to the city's defense.

But then the Taliban seemed to withdraw, with attacks ebbing somewhat for several months.

"I am not sure if they wanted to go into the city or if they wanted to stop and embed themselves in the suburbs, but that is what they did, and then that was the base they used to launch this attack," Mr. Ruttig said.

All the while, provincial authorities sounded the alarm, warning the Kabul government that the province was on the verge of collapse, despite a large number of government forces and nominally pro-government militias garrisoned in the city.

But government officials assured that the reinforcements would come if needed. And the American commander in Afghanistan, Gen. John F. Campbell, asked this May about the Taliban's military strategy, seemed almost dismissive. "If you take a look very closely at some of the things in Kunduz and up in Badakhshan, they will attack some very small checkpoints," he said.

"They will go out and hit a little bit and then they kind of go to ground," he added, "so they're not gaining territory for the most part."

When the assault on Kunduz did come, on Monday, the Taliban hardly had to fight their way in. The ease with which they captured the city left some of its defenders scrambling to explain it.

"If the governor and head of N.D.S. weren't involved, how could this have happened?" said Mir Alam, a powerful militia commander who retreated from Kunduz on Monday.

Mr. Abdullah, meanwhile, spoke of investigating an infiltration of the city's security forces.

"There's one part we know, that they infiltrated the security structure and started the operation from within the city," he said in the interview. "They took everybody by surprise in the middle of the night. That needs to be investigated later on. But at the moment, the focus is on how to retake Kunduz."