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Afghan Taliban Have the Capital of Helmand Province Surrounded

Bill Roggio
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Helmand “Practically Besieged” By The Taliban

A recent article from The New York Times on the deteriorating security situation in Helmand province highlights the limits and failure of US military policy in Afghanistan. In a nutshell, the Obama administration has decided to draw down US forces to 8,400 troops by the end of 2016, rely more on air power and special operations forces to support Afghan troops and provide military advisors to Afghan units. The Afghan Army and police is then to bear the brunt of the fighting – though they are by all accounts largely unprepared to do so.

In certain instances, this has worked. For instance, US special operations forces and airpower were critical in the retaking of Kunduz from the Taliban, which fell to the group for two weeks in September 2015.

However, that ignores the fact that Kunduz fell to the Taliban only after unprepared and overwhelmed Afghan forces were defeated in the surrounding districts in the first place. Afghan forces backed by US airpower and special forces have also had an impact against the Islamic State in Nangarhar province. Again, this ignores the fact that the Islamic State was able to organize and seize ground in Nangarhar, and hold it for well over a year.

Despite the US military’s increased use of airstrikes and special operations forces, another provincial capital, Lashkar Gah in Helmand, is “practically besieged.” From the Times:

Even as Afghan and American officials insist that they will not allow another urban center to fall, concerned about the political ramifications for the struggling government in Kabul as well as the presidential campaign in the United States, residents and local officials describe Lashkar Gah as practically besieged.

The main road connecting the city and the highway to the southern commercial and military hub of Kandahar has been repeatedly blocked in recent days by the Taliban, who blew up several bridges. Civilian passengers can travel on an alternate dirt road, but have to pass through insurgent checkpoints. Many businesses and nongovernmental organizations based in Lashkar Gah are trying to evacuate, and the road blockages have added to their alarm.

The Afghan forces' continuous failure to hold ground in a province that has seen the deployment of a large number of troops and resources, as well as hundreds of NATO military advisers, is taking a toll on the residents of Lashkar Gah. The city has long been a haven for people displaced from other areas of Helmand by the constant back and forth between the Taliban and the coalition and government forces.

Questions are also being raised about the sustainability of a military response that relies desperately on airstrikes against a guerrilla force.

In Afghanistan, a limited US military engagement coupled with local Afghan military and police forces that are unprepared to operate independently is going to struggle against a committed enemy such as the Taliban, which receives state support and sanctuary from Pakistan.

The Times report also verifies The Long War Journal's reporting on the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan and Helmand in particular. This is from an Aug. 2 report on the government's claim that it killed the Taliban's shadow governor for Helmand (the Taliban has denied this, and released an audio claiming he is alive):

In the audio, the Taliban claimed that the districts of Nad Ali and Nawa-i-Sarraj in Helmand are "under Mujahideen control" after heavy fighting with Taliban forces. The Taliban's claims cannot be independently confirmed, but it has accurately reported on the control of districts in the past while the Afghan government has downplayed or ignored districts lost to the Taliban. The Taliban currently control or contest more than 80 of Afghanistan's 400 plus districts, according to a study by The Long War Journal. That number may be higher as reports from some districts known to be Taliban strongholds are unavailable.

Security in Helmand has deteriorated as the Taliban has pressed its offensive to regain the ground lost there between 2009-2011. Of Helmand's 14 districts, five are known to be controlled by the Taliban (Now Zad, Musa Qala, Baghran, Dishu, and Khanashin), and another seven are heavily contested (Nahr-i-Sarraj, Kajaki, Nad Ali, Nawa-i-Barak, Marjah, Garmsir, and Sangin). Of the remaining two districts, The Long War Journal believes one (Washir) is contested, but the situation is unclear. Only Lashkar Gah, the district that hosts the provincial capital, has not seen significant Taliban activity, however the Taliban has reported activity there. But Taliban forces based in Nahr-i-Sarraj and Nad Ali are just miles from the city.

Afghan officials continue to tout the killing of senior Taliban leaders (wrongly in some cases) and senior US military officers laud the performance of Afghan security forces, while the Taliban controls more ground today than any time since the US invasion in 2001.

The Obama administration's response has been to slow the withdrawal of US forces from the country, leaving 8,400 troops in Afghanistan instead of the 5,400 originally planned. But still, 1,400 US troops will be withdrawn by the end of the year despite the fact that President Barack Obama described the security environment in Afghanistan as "precarious." We have yet to hear an explanation as to how fewer troops will help the worsening security situation.