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## Pentagon Map Shows Wide Taliban Zone in the South

By Gareth Porter

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The Pentagon was still trying to spin its report on the war in Afghanistan issued this week as holding out hope because the instability had leveled off, even as some news outlets were noting that it documents the continued expansion of Taliban capabilities and operations.

The most significant revelation in the report, however, is that Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal and the U.S.-NATO International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) joint command now acknowledge officially that the Taliban insurgents dominate a vast contiguous zone of heavily populated territory across southern Afghanistan that McChrystal regards as the most critical area in the country.

The report admits that the population in key districts across most southern provinces is sympathetic to or supportive of the insurgents.

The contiguous zone of Taliban political power stretches all the way across the 13 provinces from Farah province in the far west of the country through Helmand and Kandahar to Wardak, Logar, Paktia and Khost provinces west and south of Kabul.

The extent of Taliban political power in southern Afghanistan, which had not been acknowledged previously by ISAF, is documented in a map showing an "overall assessment of key districts" as of Mar. 18.

The map shows for the first time the location and political and security status of 121 districts chosen late last year by planners on McChrystal's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) Joint Staff as the most important for a strategy of weakening the Taliban gains.

The contiguous Taliban zone includes but is not limited to 58 of the 121 key districts, of which seven have populations assessed as "supporting" the Taliban, 25 with populations "sympathetic" to the Taliban, and 21 with populations that are "neutral".

Only five of the districts within that zone are shown as having populations that are "sympathetic to" the Afghan government and none that are "supporting" the government.

The degree of Taliban political dominance in the south is partly obscured, however, by an obvious effort to portray the attitudes of the population in Helmand and Kandahar provinces more favorably than is reflected in reports from those locations.

Eight of the "neutral" districts shown on the map are in Helmand province, where it has acknowledged in the past that the population was largely sympathetic to the Taliban.

The districts of Nad Ali, in which Marja is located, Naw Zad, Lashkar Gah and Sangin are all shown on the map as having "neutral" populations, even though it has been well documented that the populations of those heavily opium poppy-growing districts had turned decisively against the government and foreign troops over government eradication efforts and the abusive behavior of police associated with local warlords.

The population of Nad Ali had been shown in an assessment in late December as being supportive of the Taliban. Naw Zad and Sangin districts, on the other hand, had been assessed as "neutral" in December.

A report by *The Guardian's* Jon Boone last week quoted a recent British visitor to Sangin as remarking on the "intense hatred of people who hate everything you stand for" he had felt from people there.

McChrystal's staff apparently defined "neutral" so as to include populations in districts where U.S. and NATO forces have carried out operations aimed at clearing the Taliban and are now the object of attempts to change their political views.

Earlier this year, however, an ISAF official familiar with the assessment on which the command was basing its plans clearly included those same districts among those in which the Taliban were regarded as having gotten popular support. The official told IPS in an interview in late January, "We have a system of 80 districts where Taliban influence is strongest, where people support the Taliban for whatever reason."

That set of 80 districts that are the most pro-Taliban in the country is same set of 80 "Key Terrain districts" defined in the new Pentagon report as "areas the control of (and support from which) provides a marked advantage to either the Government of Afghanistan or the insurgents."

The ISAF official also said that "about one-fourth" of the 80 districts in which the Taliban had the strongest support would be in the "contiguous security zone" that ISAF was planning to establish in Helmand and Kandahar provinces this year. That coincides with the 19 districts in those two provinces that are shown on the Dec. 24 assessment map as "neutral", "sympathetic" to the Taliban or "supportive" of the Taliban.

If the districts labeled on the map as "neutral" are understood to be pro-Taliban as well, the districts in all three categories form an almost unbroken chain of territory with populations leaning toward the Taliban across the full length of the Pashtun south.

The 80 districts described by the ISAF official in January as providing the strongest support to the Taliban apparently included only those pro-Taliban districts that had the largest population and were closest to the major lines of communications. The list does not include a large number of other districts in several Pashtun provinces of the south where the Taliban insurgents predominate but which are farther from the major roads.

The evidence of a coherent Taliban zone of political control in the new Pentagon assessment is consistent with an Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) Provincial/District Threat Assessment as of Apr. 23, 2009, which was reported by BBC last August. An ANSF security map reflecting the ANSF assessment showed almost every district in the Pashtun south except for Nimruz province as being either "high risk" or Taliban-controlled.

Although McChrystal seemed to reject the idea that the Taliban had broad political support in his initial assessment last August, an "integrated campaign plan" jointly agreed by McChrystal and U.S. Ambassador Karl Eikenberry that same month hinted strongly at such support in Pashtun areas.

The campaign plan document concluded, "Key groups have become nostalgic for the security and justice Taliban rule provided."

McChrystal's announcement earlier this year that ISAF would establish a "contiguous security zone" which would include the bulk of the population of Helmand and Kandahar provinces may have been a response to the recognition that the Taliban had formed its own zone of political dominance in southern Afghanistan.

However, given recent evidence that foreign troops have been unable to clear insurgents from Marja, and that local leaders and elders in Kandahar are opposing U.S. military operations in and around the city, that objective now appears to be well beyond the reach of U.S. and NATO troops.