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## Afghan Resistance Triggers NATO Retreat

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June 14, 2011

Almost a decade after the war in Afghanistan began, the endgame is now in sight. NATO will soon start its security handover to local forces, and the first U.S. troops will also leave as part of a gradual withdrawal plan that is due to be completed by the close of 2014.

But despite claims from Western officials that the Taliban's momentum has been broken, the truth is that the insurgency is stronger than ever before.

A number of high-profile attacks have taken place across the country in recent weeks, and there are signs of rising public anger toward the foreign soldiers and their Afghan allies. From the militants' traditional southern homeland to once quiet provinces in the north, the bloodshed is spreading.

During the early part of the year, it seemed obvious that the insurgents were far from defeated. In January, a suicide bomber detonated himself inside a supermarket near the British embassy in Kabul, killing at least eight people. In February, a bank in Jalalabad was hit, leaving about 40 dead and scores more injured.

However, the clearest indication of the rebels' growing confidence came in April, when they staged a jailbreak in Kandahar that freed hundreds of prisoners.

All this occurred before the Taliban formally announced an offensive that would, they said, target everyone from government ministers and members of parliament to contractors and alleged spies.

Barely a month into the campaign, the movement has shown that it backs up its words with actions, assassinating top officials, bombing an army hospital, capturing new territory in Nuristan province, and launching coordinated assaults inside key cities.

Yet the simple fact is that the Taliban and Hezb-e-Islami, another insurgent group, are able to operate with such powerful effect because of the support they often get from ordinary Afghans.

Having faced little opposition in the years immediately following the 2001 invasion, foreign troops today find themselves losing the battle for hearts and minds.

NATO air strikes and house raids continue to kill civilians, fueling hatred and suspicion toward the occupation and pushing more young men into the arms of the resistance. Meanwhile, most people have failed to benefit from the aid money that has poured into the country.

In weekly sermons, clerics now frequently speak out against coalition forces, accusing them of raping women, plundering Afghanistan, and violating Islamic culture.

When an American preacher burned a copy of the Quran in Florida earlier this year, demonstrations erupted across the country, with protesters shouting “death to America” and openly carrying the Taliban flag.

NATO tactics and government corruption are two causes of the anger, but the resentment goes deeper than that. This is a conservative society with a history of humiliating occupiers, including the British Empire and the Soviet Union.

Although the initial security transfer will occur in just a handful of provinces and only a relatively small number of U.S. troops are expected to leave this summer, the militants are clearly trying to benefit from the situation and achieve a decisive propaganda blow.

Many recent attacks have been carried out by fighters disguised in Afghan army uniforms, adding to the sense that the government will be unable to keep security on its own. The country’s main highways and financial centers are also likely to come under increasing pressure, putting further strain on the already fragile economy.

There is, therefore, no indication that a peaceful and stable environment is any closer to being created, whatever Western officials may say. Rumors of secret negotiations between the Taliban and Washington have surfaced again, but Afghans do not think the insurgents will compromise when all the evidence suggests they are gaining in strength and ability.

Instead, the violence seems certain to escalate in the years ahead, and the events of the next few weeks might simply come to be remembered as the start of NATO’s long and painful retreat.

