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Intelligence shift shows change in Afghan war aims

By KIMBERLY DOZIER

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Military intelligence officers were scrambling a year ago to collect and analyze the social, economic and tribal ins and outs of each valley and hamlet in Afghanistan.

This information wasn't the kind of secret or covert material many military intelligence specialists were used to. But it was seen as crucial to helping commanders tell the good guys from the bad, learn what Afghans really needed from their government and undermine the Taliban-led insurgency by winning hearts and minds.

President Barack Obama's announcement Wednesday that the United States will start bringing home U.S. troops next month is part of a gradual scaling back of American operations and ambitions in Afghanistan that is driving a shift away from that labor-intensive attention to local detail.

The old model of military intelligence is back and hunting the Taliban and al-Qaida is the No. 1 priority, officials said.

The White House has been frustrated by Afghanistan's corruption and President Hamid Karzai government's inability to provide competent officials to serve far-flung provinces. That has helped shrink U.S. goals, and the new bottom line is a government strong enough to prevent terrorists' safe havens from returning.

Targeting insurgent leaders and their support networks is seen as an important part of the U.S. exit strategy. The thinking is that Taliban leaders will be more ready for a deal if they feel threatened personally.

The U.S. has confirmed preliminary outreach to the Taliban, but Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said last week that fruitful talks are probably a long way off.

Changing U.S. goals from nation-building to targeting the Taliban to get them to negotiate instead of fight as the U.S. accelerates its handover have driven a gradual intelligence shift over the past year, according to the officials. They spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss intelligence matters.

A secret U.S. National Intelligence Estimate on Afghanistan issued in February said raids against the enemy and small-scale special-operations-led stability operations were showing progress. Larger nation-building projects were not yet taking hold, the report said.