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Taliban cracks Afghanistan's fortress

by James Brown

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The Taliban's [attack on the Provincial Reconstruction Team \(PRT\) compound in Panjshir province over the weekend](#) shows that, for the first time, there is some truth to the Taliban claim to be able to strike anywhere in Afghanistan.

Five Taliban fighters attacked the gate of the compound using an explosive-laden vehicle in an attempt to breach the outer perimeter. On Twitter, the Taliban [claimed](#) 43 ISAF casualties and eight destroyed vehicles. According to ISAF and provincial Governor Keramuddin Keram, two civilian fuel truck drivers were killed and two Afghan security guards were injured.

Panjshir is approximately 100km north of Kabul and was the only part of Afghanistan to resist both Soviet occupation during the 1980s and Taliban control during the 1990s. It was the birthplace of Ahmed Shah Massoud, the military leader known as the 'Lion of Panjshir' who bears significant responsibility for driving Soviet forces from Afghanistan.

As the Soviets discovered, the Panjshir Valley is effectively a fortress, due to its topography. It is surround by soaring and nearly impenetrable mountains that lead to the Hindu Kush. Towering cliffs at the north and south entry points ensure all traffic is funneled along a riverside road into narrow ravines which can be defended by a small number of troops.

Between 1980 and 1985 the Soviets launched bi-annual attacks against the Panjshir Valley and were repelled every time. The Soviet Army's 30,000 soldiers and thousands of armoured vehicles could only advance along the road two vehicles abreast, and were picked off by Massoud's small force. When you drive into the Panjshir Valley the wrecks of Soviet vehicles litter the landscape for kilometers – halted mid-advance and left to rust for decades.

The same factors that made the valley defensible against the Soviets also make it defensible against the Taliban. There have been no Taliban attacks in Panjshir in the last decade. When I traveled there my entry and security was personally guaranteed by the provincial governor, whose security men (left) controlled entry into the valley and screened all travelers for non-local faces.

For that reason the small Panjshir PRT, led by the US State Department and comprising diplomats, aid workers, and soldiers who seldom wear body armour and travel freely among the locals, is lightly defended compared with other compounds in Afghanistan. The nearest source of military help is the sprawling US Bagram airbase 50km to the south. The small PRT did well to fight off a planned, complex, Taliban suicide attack.

Panjshir is effectively Afghanistan's [charter province](#): a place where improving security and living standards have shown that the ISAF campaign can work. US\$60 million of reconstruction funding in recent years has generated economic growth in the valley. [A wind farm was installed in 2008](#) (by a New Zealander) and micro hydro turbines alongside the river power farms and houses. Education and literacy levels have improved steadily. When I spoke with the provincial governor, he talked of demining Panjshir's mountains and creating a ski resort to bring tourists to the valley. In July the province was one of seven transferred to Afghan security control.

Despite the relatively low loss of life and infrastructure, this attack provides enormous strategic value to the Taliban. It demonstrates that its claim that 'NATO is no longer safe anywhere in the country' is essentially true. For the Taliban to gain access to Panjshir with a truck bomb likely means that someone in the provincial security staff let them in. The question is why, and ISAF have dispatched a team from Kabul to investigate.

This attack takes away the one success story that ISAF and the Afghan government had, and the Taliban propaganda machine has been quick to text Western journalists to point that out.