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<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/dec/08/us-wants-taliban-even-nastier>

## Does the US military want Afghanistan to get even nastier?

Job Boone

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Even by [Afghanistan's](#) high standards, [the massacre of Shia worshippers in Kabul on Tuesday](#) 6 December was an act of stomach-churning brutality. A suicide bomber posing as a pilgrim on Ashura, one of the holiest days of the calendar of Shia Islam, had inveigled his way into the middle of a packed crowd of men, women and children. Witnesses watching from the rooftop of the nearby Abu Fazal shrine said body parts flew up into the air near the epicentre of the blast when the unknown bomber detonated himself.

The clearing smoke revealed a scene strewn with lifeless and often mangled bodies, lying in circles around the blackened area of tarmac where the bomber had stood. A young girl who had somehow miraculously survived was snapped by a photographer wailing into the air. Among the 55 killed there were no police officers or soldiers or anyone who might remotely be considered a "legitimate" target of the [Taliban](#)-led war against the Afghan government.

The Taliban itself was quick to condemn the attack in strong terms, while an extremist Pakistan-based movement called [Lashkar- e-Jhangvi al Almiv has been fingered](#). If it really was a unilateral operation launched without the consent of the Taliban's leadership it is another worrying sign of how the insurgency in Afghanistan is spinning out of control, becoming crueller and ever more willing to inflict horrendous damage on ordinary civilians.

But not everyone thinks such horrors are an entirely bad thing. Indeed, some within the US war machine have long argued the emergence of a nastier insurgency could be really quite useful for Nato's war aims. So useful, in fact, that foreign forces should try to encourage such behaviour.

One of them was Peter Lavoy, a former chairman of the US National Intelligence Council, the body that examines data from across the US government's intelligence gathering machine and turns it into high-grade analysis that is rarely discussed publicly. At a closed-door meeting with ambassadors at Nato headquarters in Brussels in December 2008, Lavoy spelled out a strategy for winning the war in Afghanistan that has never been uttered publicly: "The international community should put intense pressure on the Taliban in 2009 in order to bring out their more violent and ideologically radical tendencies," he said, according to a State Department note-taker in the room. "This will alienate the population and give us an opportunity to separate the Taliban from the population."

His words, which we only know courtesy of WikiLeaks, are extraordinary because they have been proven at least partially right. They also differ fundamentally from the publicly stated strategy in Afghanistan. Known as population-centric counterinsurgency, or Coin, the fundamental principle is that foreign forces should try to keep ordinary Afghans safe from insurgents and thereby win their support.

The idea that Nato may actually be trying to make the population less secure appalls observers. "It just goes completely against the ethos of the American military to take more risks in order to protect civilians," says John Nagl, a retired lieutenant-colonel who co-wrote the US army's field manual on countering guerrilla warfare. "I find it hard to believe elements of the US military would want to deliberately put more risk on to civilians."

But behind the scenes, powerful voices continue to argue for a harder-edged strategy that makes the lives of ordinary Afghans more miserable, not less. Michael Semple, a regional expert on the Taliban, says it is an outlook he runs across in discussions with Nato officials: "I have heard serious, thinking officers articulate the idea that provoking Taliban fighters into acts of extreme violence against the population could be taken as a sign of Coin progress, prior to the final victory when the people turn against them."

And evidence has been building up for some time that the Afghan insurgency is indeed becoming a lot nastier. In the view of some analysts, a turning point came in February when a group of gunmen rushed into a bank in the eastern city of Jalalabad. What came next, as the high-definition, full-colour CCTV footage showed, was no ordinary bank job. The raiders did not try to force staff to open the safe or even scoop up the wads of money the cashiers had ready to pay the salaries of the many police officers and soldiers in the bank that day. Instead of stealing anything, the seven men, who were wearing police uniforms in addition to their suicide-bomb vests, methodically walked around the bank and shot customers and bank workers at point-blank range, killing dozens.

One cashier, who was hiding behind his desk, heard an attacker coolly order a man on the floor to stand up and recite a Kalima, a prayer Muslims say as they prepare themselves for death. "Before he finished, he shot him dead," said Ilyas Yousafzai. "The Taliban claim they are

fighting for Islam, but they order people to recite their Kalima and then kill them. That is not Islam."



Intelligence suggests the Taliban is reeling: some fighters refuse promotion or to even step foot in Afghanistan.  
Photograph: STR/Pakistan/Reuters/Corbis

Such sadistic cruelty is, to say the least, counterproductive for a movement that has a heroic self-image as a force that swept out the warlords who had plagued the country in the 90s. In its own view, the Taliban brought security to a troubled land, a justice to oppressed civilians. It is a treasured reputation it has tried to burnish in the years since its re-emergence, even issuing codes of conduct in the name of [Mullah Omar](#), the Taliban's one-eyed leader. The rules order fighters not to persecute civilians and generally not to repeat the errors of the mujahideen commanders who became heroes for fighting the Soviet occupation in the 80s but also villains for their corrupt and predatory warlord rule.

But there are plenty of examples of their deeds falling far short of their words. This summer in Gereshk, central Helmand, an eight-year-old boy was kidnapped by the Taliban in an apparent bid to get his father, Noor Mohammad, to hand over his police pickup truck. Unfortunately for the young boy, his father refused. "After two days they hanged my little innocent son, and threw him in the water canal," Mohammad said. "I never believed the Taliban would ever kill him. I thought they would set him free, but they did the cruellest thing possible. God will never forgive them."

In Kandahar province this year, four people working on a US-funded road project were kidnapped and had their ears sliced off.

In Paktia province, the researcher Kate Clark reports that the Taliban's far-from-perfect court system has broken down. Whereas in the past suspected "spies" would get a trial, ultimately sparing some, today an increasingly neurotic local insurgency moves straight to the throat-slitting stage when its suspicions are aroused.

The Taliban has not only grown increasingly fond of suicide bombings, something that was largely unheard of until around 2006, it has also made greater use of children, despite its own strict ban on using underage fighters. On 26 June, for example, in the southern province of Uruzgan, insurgents instructed an eight-year-old girl to carry a bomb to a police pickup truck, which they then remotely detonated, killing the girl but nobody else.

The suicide bombers often completely fail to harm what Taliban press releases call "stooge" foreign forces, or "puppet" soldiers of the Afghan government. Instead it is civilians that often pay the price. On 7 January, in the southern border town of Spin Boldak, a suicide bomber blew himself up in a public bath house, supposedly in a bid to kill the deputy commander of the border police. However, he was not even present. The explosion ripped through the building, killing 15 and wounding 20.

UN figures show the vast majority of civilian casualties are due to Taliban operations. Whether or not there is a deliberate effort to radicalise the Taliban, it appears to be an unavoidable side effect of trying to crush it militarily. And that is exactly what the US has been trying to do in the last two years.

The US-led decimation of the Taliban's mid-level leadership begins in top-secret intelligence hubs crammed with analysts scrutinising vast amounts of raw information gleaned from Afghan spies, interrogations and eavesdropping into mobile phone networks. After sifting through the data, a targeting "packet" is created and handed over to special forces teams who are sent out on up to six "kill or capture" missions every single night. Dozing in their traditional mud compounds in distant villages all over rural Afghanistan, the targets have no clue they are in the crosshairs of one of the most advanced intelligence and military machines the world has ever seen until they hear helicopters racing over the horizon.

Nagl says all this amounts to a revolution in the way war is fought. "In the history of counterinsurgency, we have never been this good at taking insurgents off the battlefield," he says.

And, it is working, say Nato's data crunchers, who pore over information in a windowless office in Kabul. They claim there are significant signs that the insurgency has weakened in the past year, including the loss of areas in Helmand and Kandahar provinces, where the Taliban used to operate unmolested. Radio intercepts and other sources of intelligence suggest the Taliban is reeling: commanders struggle to resupply its men in the field, while some fighters apparently refuse promotions or even to step foot in Afghanistan, preferring the safety of Pakistan. There are also signs that the average age of Taliban commanders has dropped as the movement struggles to replace those who are killed or captured, leading to a new generation of less experienced and less capable insurgents taking the lead.

But despite all this apparently good news, Nato's generals know they have still not succeeded in their stated strategic goal of protecting the population. In fact, the data currently shows Afghans feeling less secure the more the insurgents are pummelled. As a senior official with Nato's [International Security Assistance Force](#) (ISAF), charged with supporting the Afghan government, put it recently: "Even though the Taliban are not present in the numbers they used to be, and even though they still don't enjoy popular support, do the people yet feel more secure? No, not yet."

This is largely because the Taliban has responded to its pounding by ramping up the number of homemade land mines it plants. Although they are intended to blow up Nato vehicles, more often than not they kill civilians.

Another cause for public discomfort is how Nato's intensified operations have changed the profile of insurgents in many areas, from disgruntled locals to vicious, hot-headed youth sent in from over the Pakistani border where they are indoctrinated in a network of madrassas.

"If you come into a neighbourhood that you grew up in you are probably going to have a harder time slapping around Grandma than if you are an outsider," says a senior Nato intelligence officer on the issue of "out of area" fighters. He believes the Taliban experienced this problem particularly acutely in Helmand this summer when, lacking enough local fighters, it "emptied out the madrassas" in Pakistan and sent teams of youngsters over the border. "The [US] marines soon saw these guys infiltrating in, carrying weapons openly," he says. "Then they started getting reports from locals of increased intimidation and beatings."

Nagl believes all this is an indication that the Taliban is being degraded to the opening stage of Mao Zedong's famous three "phases" of revolutionary warfare. According to the Chinese revolutionary leader and insurgency theorist, phase one is essentially terrorism, involving attacks on easy targets such as mayors and police chiefs. (When the Taliban re-emerged in 2006, it did indeed specialise in burning schools and intimidating NGOs.) Phase two sees the emergence of larger teams of rebels capable of taking on government military forces to some degree. Phase three is full-blown conventional war.

"The Taliban have been knocked down to phase one and you see what you would expect to see, with the resulting risk of alienating the civilian population," Nagl says. "If we can get the civilian population on our side in the south, in their heartlands, we can knock them back to phase zero."

But will the civilian population ever come completely over to the side of the Afghan government and its foreign military backers? The Nato intelligence official, drawing from a thick pile of graphs and bar charts, points to some encouraging signs: 2011 has seen record numbers of tip-offs from locals revealing where caches of weapons and IEDs (improvised explosive devices) are hidden. There has also been brisk interest in signing up to the Afghan Local Police scheme, a US special forces-mentored programme that recruits villagers to defend their own communities.



A woman walks past Italian Nato troops in Herat province, Afghanistan. Photograph: Jalil Rezayee/EPA

In one interesting case in August, in the Nawa district of Helmand, furious villagers stoned to death a Taliban commander and his bodyguard after the insurgents had killed an old man

accused of collaborating with the government. But although the Taliban has long been extremely unpopular, there is precious little sign the public will risk their lives in a big way to defy them.

Sceptics say US strategists are basing their strategic thinking on the "awakening" in the Iraqi province of Anbar in 2006, when the population turned conclusively on the al-Qaida-led insurgency. But bad though the situation in Afghanistan currently is, it is nowhere near the level of violence and destruction that held sway in Iraq.

Optimists call for patience. "We will go through a period of rising violence when we don't know if success is over the hill," predicts one former adviser to Nato's top general in Afghanistan last year. "It's like the theory of how passengers respond to a plane hijacking, where the first lot of people will get hurt and killed if they try to resist," he says. "They only have a chance when the whole mob rises up with a 'let's roll'."

But it is a depressing reality that so far it is mostly foreigners who get blamed for the Taliban's outrages, with many Afghans identifying their misery not with the insurgents, but with the international troops seen as the source of fighting. In the immediate aftermath of Tuesday's bomb in Kabul, some furious young Shia men at the scene denounced both the Pakistanis and the Americans.

And, as the Nato adviser acknowledges, compared with some other successful counterinsurgencies, people might think twice about rising against the rebels if they don't think they will get much help from a weak and often corrupt Afghan government.

"For all the implied Coin hope that the nastier Taliban will find it more difficult to survive, in the presence of a failing government, extreme violence may be an effective tool of social control," says Semple.

Worse still, some analysts fear the new generation of Talibs created by Nato operations will crowd out wiser members of the old regime who are interested in a negotiated, political settlement to the conflict. "The fact that they are a coherent group is a good thing," says Clark. "It is much better to have a Taliban that actually has a structure you can deal with and implement peace if it so wished, rather than a fragmented, abusive movement more strongly aligned to al-Qaida."

Killing off potential peacemakers within the insurgency is a real concern, says Nagl, who thinks those insurgents who might be interested in reconciling should be put on a special list that would protect them from Nato's night-time hit squads. "But it is not at all clear that we are any good at that because people who understand reintegration and reconciliation are Afghans and people who do the targeting are Americans," he admits.

Others call for a more radical approach to bringing the war to a close that would entail trying to make the Taliban behave better, including confidence-building measures such as ceasefires. That, it is hoped, would then form the basis for peace talks between Afghans. A better-behaved movement would also make the majority of Afghans who never supported them, and are

increasingly worried that they might one day return to power, more inclined to some sort of a negotiated compromise.

Semple says he had assumed that a strategy to improve behaviour "was almost orthodox" among US diplomats. But, he notes, the soldiers running the war in Afghanistan are still wedded to military operations they believe will eventually lead to victory, even if it makes life miserable for many Afghans along the way.

"We didn't intend to make the Taliban nastier," a Nato military officer in Kabul says. "But if it helps us, we're not going to complain."