

The Taliban and humanitarian targets in Afghanistan

Author:

Michael Taarnby



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Theme

International humanitarian workers are increasingly being targeted by the Taliban in a deliberate effort to undermine reconstruction efforts. This development could potentially have serious consequences for the current counter insurgency campaign and the prospects for the stabilization of Afghanistan.

Summary

Violent attacks on humanitarian staff in Afghanistan have increased considerably in 2008. These security incidents have been carried out by a range of criminal and Islamist militant groups, but the most thoroughly planned and spectacular operations have been the work of the Taliban. By studying the target selection, the tactical means employed and the willingness by the Taliban to claim responsibility for the attacks it seems evident that the insurgents place a strategic importance in eliminating foreign experts. International humanitarian organizations are faced with an increasingly difficult operational environment that can reasonably be expected to deteriorate further. This situation will impact on the overall COIN operation in Afghanistan where the key to success is the civilian population.

Analysis

On 30 October 2008 three armed assailants launched an attack on the Ministry of Culture and Information in Kabul. Two gunmen opened fire on the police guard posted outside the Ministry clearing the way for the third attacker, later identified as Naqibullah originating from Khost. As the gunmen fled the scene, Naqibullah entered the building and detonated the explosives concealed on his body. The terrorist organization behind the attack needed to identify the bomber as only the legs remained after the explosion. Five people were killed in the attack, including a policeman, three Ministry officials and a civilian; an additional 21 were injured.

Shortly after the attack Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid claimed responsibility for the attack, and stated that the intended target was "foreign experts" present at the Ministry. Though it has not been possible to ascertain whether or not there were actually any foreign experts present, the deliberate targeting of foreign civilians is noteworthy. This attack indicates several issues of relevance to the development of the Taliban's strategic perspectives. First of all, the Taliban quickly claimed responsibility and made it quite clear that the target was foreign experts. Moreover, the planning necessary to launch this operation in Kabul clearly indicates that the Taliban is determined to engage this type of civilian targets and that they do receive operational priority. This could not have been pulled off without extensive surveillance, updated intelligence and the allocation of resources, including a suicide bomber.

This article intends to focus on the increase of attacks on humanitarian personnel in Afghanistan by the Taliban and the consequences this development may have on the prospects for stabilization and reconstruction efforts in this country.

In a sense there is nothing new concerning a strained or outright hostile relationship between Islamist militants and foreign NGO and humanitarian organisations operating in Afghanistan. During the reign of the Taliban in the late 1990s, it was Al Qaeda that successfully persuaded the Taliban to expel western aid agencies or to make their working conditions as difficult as possible, effectively hindering them from doing their job. In the end it became impossible to conduct meaningful relief and reconstruction efforts as the acclaimed Afghanistan expert Ahmed Rashid has pointed out. While the Taliban leadership appeared utterly indifferent to the suffering of its own constituency their treatment of foreigners was often rude or hostile but rarely descended into violence.

However, this relationship has gradually deteriorated to a point where humanitarian workers increasingly find themselves in the cross hairs of the militants. According to Ahmed Rashid

more than 100 Afghan employees of the largest donor of foreign assistance USAID were killed between 2001 and 2006. These casualty figures are often ignored at the expense of battlefield fatalities suffered by Western troop contributors, yet even a simple comparison clearly illustrates that this aid organisation alone took more casualties than a significant troop contributing nation like the UK for instance.

Recently, security incidents involving NGOs have reached unprecedented levels all over Afghanistan. Between January and September 2008 a staggering 146 incidents were reported to the Afghanistan NGO Security Office, ANSO, of which 71 occurred during the third quarter alone. According to Mohammed Hashim Mayar, the deputy director of the group overseeing the aid community in Kabul, attacks against relief workers have risen to 28 killed in the first nine months of 2008 compared to 17 in all of 2007. In the same period 92 aid workers, both foreign and Afghans, were abducted by insurgents or criminal groups. It should be noted that ANSO only monitor NGOs, so these figures do not include attacks on UN personnel for instance. Out of Afghanistan's 34 provinces, security incidents have been reported in 29, testifying to the decline in the overall security situation although some areas are much more dangerous than others. ANSO believes that 60% of the attacks could be attributed to insurgent groups, meaning the Taliban or Hekmatyar's militia, the remainder was conducted by criminal groups. The range of different actors that have targeted aid workers is confusing and even when credit is taken for an attack, some uncertainty to the real identity of the perpetrator remains. This article is only concerned with the actions of the Taliban being the largest insurgent organization, though it must be remembered that there are other violent actors in this field.

Tactical means

The escalation of violence against humanitarian targets was clearly evident in 2007 and has become even worse in 2008. In order to effectively scare off or to derail aid and reconstruction efforts a range of tactical means have been fielded by the Taliban. This article does not intend to provide a complete survey of attacks but rather to illustrate the how this strategy has been employed at the tactical level during the first ten months of 2008. While the Taliban has not outright declared war on humanitarian workers their actions certainly speak for themselves and clearly indicate a concerted effort on behalf of the insurgents.

The strike team mentioned in the attack on the Ministry of Culture and Information was a first in combining gunmen and a suicide bomber against a humanitarian target. As the target was described by the Taliban in general terms as "foreign experts" and no specific individuals were named it is hard to categorize this particular operation as an assassination. However, premeditated attacks have occurred as in the killing of Gayle Williams on 20 October in Kabul. Two men on a motorcycle approached Ms. Williams as she was walking to work at SERVE – Serving Emergency Relief and Vocational Enterprise. Although she was working with handicapped Afghans, the Taliban claimed she had been propagating Christianity and that this was the reason for the assassination.

Ambushes have been carried out successfully in various ways, often with devastating efficiency. On 13 August five men armed with automatic rifles opened fire on an SUV from the US International Rescue Committee. Three western women and their Afghan driver were killed. The vehicle was clearly marked while travelling on the main road south of Kabul. The Taliban once again claimed responsibility, and as a result of the killings the IRC suspended their humanitarian programs. In another ambush which occurred on 9 January an IED was detonated as a NGO vehicle passed through Nakhom Baba. No one was hurt in this incident, yet the Taliban claimed responsibility clearly signalling their intent.

The kidnapping of foreigners have risen sharply over the past two years, though not all hostage situations have been the work of the insurgents. Criminal Afghan groups have consistently kidnapped wealthy Afghans and released them for a ransom. However, in recent years both criminal groups and the Taliban have resorted to the capture of foreigners. Two

Frenchmen were abducted on 18 July in Daykundi province, both of them working for Action Contre la Faim who later suspended operations citing security concerns.

Suicide bombings have increased dramatically in Afghanistan, though rarely against humanitarian targets. However, two Indian engineers working for the Border Road Organization were killed on 12 April in Nimroz province when the Taliban targeted a convoy of construction workers travelling by car. This particular stretch of highway between Zaranj and Delaram has been fiercely contested by the Taliban and the BRO. In November 2005 an Indian engineer was abducted and later killed, while yet another Indian telecom engineer was abducted and later beheaded in April 2006. The Taliban has repeatedly demanded that the BRO must leave Afghanistan immediately or face severe retribution for its continued presence.

These examples of suicide bombings, assassinations and kidnappings support the presumption that these attacks were not random acts of violence, nor were they conducted by criminal elements. The Taliban has consistently taken credit for these type of attacks, and has apparently been indifferent to the Afghan and international outrage and widespread condemnation that followed. In order to carry out more than 80 attacks on NGO targets during the first three quarters of 2008 by Islamist militants, considerable resources have been diverted from battlefield engagements with ISAF, ANA or OEF forces in Afghanistan. This development clearly indicates a strategic decision made by the Taliban to disrupt humanitarian efforts whether spoken of or not.

Changes in the humanitarian environment

Two years ago, in September 2006, the ANSO operations coordinator commented on whether or not humanitarian workers were being specifically targeted. At the time, ANSO did not see a specific campaign directed at the international civilian community, but conceded that the stage where humanitarian workers were perceived as impartial and neutral were long gone. Some aid organizations have stated that recent attacks were due to misperceptions. They occurred as a result of the insurgents believing that humanitarian workers were collaborating with western military forces. However, based on the previously mentioned range and intensity of security incidents it seems hard to believe that this level of violence can be explained by poor communication alone.

Over the summer of 2008 humanitarian organisations and ISAF worked together to create a set of rules to improve civil-military interactions and to clarify their respective roles. The guidelines agreed upon received widespread recognition and endorsement from the international community with a presence in Afghanistan. However, a voice from the other side, the ubiquitous Zabiullah Mujahid had no idea of the existence of such guidelines. In an interview conducted in August, Mujahid professed his complete ignorance of the guidelines, but stated for the record that the Taliban supported humanitarian action as long as it was not tied to military operations.

Keeping the hard line Islamist ideology of the Taliban in mind, it is conceivable that they would try to target what they perceive as efforts by foreigners to proselytize; in essence to spread Christianity in Afghanistan. The harsh treatment, including beheading, of 23 abducted Korean medical and missionary workers in 2007 testifies that the Taliban does not in any way tolerate proselytizing activity by foreigners. However, the religious argument in itself appears unfounded considering the attacks on people of other beliefs, including Muslims. The Taliban's claim of respecting humanitarian work does sound hollow when the previously mentioned considerable operational planning is taken into account. It is hard to perceive the majority of these attacks as anything but premeditated murder.

Operational and Strategic effects

As evidenced by some of the incident mentioned before, some NGOs have chosen to suspend their operations in Afghanistan either for a period of time or indefinitely like Medecin sans Frontiers who left Afghanistan in 2004. In these cases, the effects can be felt almost immediately by needy Afghans.

International organizations and NGOs have been forced to implement heightened security measures to protect its employees from being Taliban targets. UN agencies have increased the use of armoured vehicles even while driven around Kabul and blast resistant walls have been erected to protect offices and compounds. Staff is increasingly relying on air transportation because the roads are too dangerous. These measures have driven up the operating costs considerably but also created a new set of problems. It has removed the aid workers from the people they came to help, both the needy communities as well as their local partners.

Far more Afghans are involved in humanitarian work than international experts and they are often the ones working in the most risky environments, often because of language barriers. Of the 28 workers killed between January and September, 23 were Afghan nationals. In the same period 72 aid workers were abducted of whom 68 were Afghans, and of these three were killed in captivity. Again, it must be noted that not all abductions can be attributed to the Taliban as criminal groups also prey on aid workers. The current situation for locally hired Afghans working for international organizations has deteriorated as evidenced in a recent interview with a relief worker from Kandahar who spoke on condition of anonymity. To avoid being detected by the Taliban he had resorted to growing a beard, changed his style of dress and deleted all foreign numbers from his phone. He had been working for five years in Kandahar but had never felt as insecure as now and was convinced that the Taliban would abduct or kill him if they knew of his ties to Western organisations. ANSO has even suggested that insurgents, usually referring to the Taliban, have recently resorted to the outsourcing of abductions because criminal gangs have easier access to urban areas, but the exact nature of this relationship remains murky.

ANSO has recommended that NGOs do their utmost to state their independence from military and political actors also present in Afghanistan. They have been encouraged to demonstrate their independence, but whether this will gain any respect from the Taliban remains to be seen. Based on their previous statements and behaviour this move is unlikely to have the desired effect. The special representative of the UN secretary-general for Afghanistan, Kai Eide, called on the Taliban to support a new humanitarian agenda in October 2008. This statement was backed by OXFAM and the ICRC, among others. Both organizations have recently warned that parts of Afghanistan is on the verge of a large crisis, and predict that the coming winter will be particularly difficult for impoverished Afghans.

Conclusion

The deliberate targeting of foreign humanitarian workers and foreign experts stationed in Afghanistan by the Taliban, indicates an escalation of violence that threatens to severely undermine reconstruction efforts by the international community. Considerable financial resources have been allocated to Afghanistan, yet implementing the good intentions has become much more difficult than anticipated. If the security incidents throughout 2008 are taken into account, it seems very likely that the operational environment for humanitarian organisations will become even more difficult in the foreseeable future.

90 out of 400 districts are categorized as extremely risky, and at least 40% of the country is inaccessible to UN aid activities. An international aid worker in Afghanistan commented on the current situation, stating that aid workers were suffering unprecedented attacks and that they have never before been attacked so widely, repeatedly and deliberately.

A resurgent and self-confident Taliban clearly seeks to undermine the humanitarian efforts by the international community working together with the Karzai government in order to delegitimize the presence of foreigners as well as the current government. In denying the stability and reconstruction which Afghanistan badly needs, the Taliban seems determined on denying Afghans help and relief at all costs. The generally accepted wisdom concerning a successful COIN operation states that winning the trust and confidence of the civilian population is the key to victory. Yet the lack of progress in improving the livelihoods of ordinary Afghans has proven itself to be a formidable obstacle and this is a situation which the Taliban understands very well and appears intent to exploit to the widest extent possible.