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Suicide Attacks on the Rise

CCS Research Staff

The last six weeks has brought some of the worst violence in Afghanistan since 2001. In 2007, there were more than 230 Improvised Explosive Device (IED) attacks and 145 suicide attacks.¹ Casualty rates were at least 25 percent higher in 2007 than the previous year.² In the past 18 months, IED attacks have targeted numerous police and army busses, a group of legislators outside a factory at Baghlan, a five-star hotel in Kabul, and a Canadian convoy near a busy marketplace. The trends show that attacks are increasing in number and becoming more violent and dreadful to the Afghan population.

On January 14, eight people were killed at the Serena hotel in Kabul when three attackers wearing Afghan National Police uniforms stormed the popular five-star resort. One attacker was shot in the parking lot by a hotel guard, which then triggered his suicide vest. The second attacker blew himself up near the entrance to the hotel's lobby, and the third attacker made it inside the hotel and shot his way through the lobby and toward the gym. At the time of the attack, a meeting for the Norwegian embassy was being held.³ The head of Afghanistan's intelligence service, Amrullah Saleh stated that the attack was planned by Siraj Haqqani, a militant leader thought to be based in Pakistan's tribal area in Miran Shah, North Waziristan.⁴ Like many of the attacks we have seen, this was carefully planned and it is likely the hotel had been canvassed prior to the event.

¹ BBC Monitoring Service.

² Human Rights Watch, World Report 2008, <http://hrw.org/englishwr2k8/docs/2008/01/31/afghan17600.htm> (February 19, 2008).

³ Associated Press, "Kabul attacker wore police uniform; toll at 8," *MSNBC*, January 15, 2008, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/22647590/> (January 20, 2008).

⁴ Livingston, Kari, "Taliban Responsible for Serena Hotel Attack," Associated Content, January 14, 2008, http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/540951/taliban_responsible_for_serena_hotel.html (January 21, 2008) and Associated Press, "Kabul attacker wore police uniform; toll at 8," *MSNBC*, January 15, 2008, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/22647590/> (January 20, 2008).

One month later, on February 17, more than 100 people were killed near Kandahar city in Arghandab district when a suicide bomber detonated explosives in a field full of men and boys watching dogfights.⁵ Abdul Hakim Jan, the head of the local auxiliary police and 13 police officers were among the victims. It is likely the attack was directly targeting Abdul Hakim. He was a commander in the jihad against the Soviet occupation in the 1980s. Abdul Hakim had the “reputation of a fierce opponent of the Taliban and Pakistani influence in Afghanistan.”⁶ His death makes Arghandab vulnerable to the Taliban and their planned spring offensive, which has long been known as a haven for Taliban forces and their adherents. Taliban spokesman, Khalid Mohammad Yusuf denied Taliban responsibility for the attack; this is likely due to the high level of civilian casualties.⁷ Afghan civilians have not been a regular target of Taliban violence; however recent events may hint toward the Taliban’s willingness to bring more civilians into their crosshairs.

In a second attack on February 19, a suicide bomber drove his car near a small convoy of Canadian Coyote light armored reconnaissance vehicles on a crowded border town street. The suicide bomber detonated his explosives near the convoy, killing 36 and wounding 38, mostly civilians – street vendors and shoppers – while 4 Canadian soldiers were injured. The attack occurred in the town of Spinbaldak, 60 miles southeast of Kandahar and the main border crossing to Pakistan. At the time of the attack, the border crossing was closed due to Pakistan’s general election.⁸ In contrast to the Kandahar attack, the Taliban claimed responsibility for this one through another spokesman, Qari Yousuf Ahmadi, however he denied that the attack had wounded or killed any civilians.⁹

These attacks were likely masterminded by Siraj Haqqani, a Taliban associated militant with close ties to al-Qaeda. His tactics have increasingly been reminiscent of the brutality seen in Iraq. Lt. Col. Dave Accetta, US spokesman at

⁵ Khan, Allauddin and Noor Khan, “Suicide Attack at Afghan Market Raises Two-Day Toll to About 140,” Washington Post, February 19, 2008, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/02/18/AR2008021802009.html?sub=AR> (February 19, 2008).

⁶ Rubin, Barnett. “Across the Borderline-Pashtuns and Taliban in Two States,” *Informed Comment*, February 24, 2008, <http://icga.blogspot.com/2008/02/rubin-across-borderline-pashtuns-and.html> (February 29, 2008).

⁷ Constable, Pamela, “Suicide Bomber in Afghanistan Kills More than 80 at Dogfighting Event,” Washington Post, February 18, 2008,

⁸ Hutchinson, Brian, “Canadians were warned about bomber: Afghan governor,” Canwest News Service, February 18, 2008.

⁹ Shah, Taimoor and Carlotta Gall, “Suicide Attack Kills 36 in Afghanistan,” New York Times, February 19, 2008. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/19/world/asia/19afghan.html?> (February 19, 2008).

Bagram called the recent attacks in Kandahar, “classic terrorist methodology – intimidate the population (...) we believe him (Haqqani) to be much more brutal and much more interested in attacking and killing civilians. He has no regard for human life, even those of his Afghan compatriots.”¹⁰ Recently, Afghan security officials have noticed insurgents using C-4, and packing IEDs with ball bearings to maximize fatalities¹¹ – tactics rarely seen before in Afghanistan.

Spring is approaching, which means we are likely seeing the beginning stages of a surge in Taliban related attacks. They have traditionally limited attacks to military and security related officials such as ISAF, ANA, ANP, and local militia forces. Recently however, the Taliban have publicly stated their intent to broaden their range of targets to include those with heavy foreign exposure – hotels, restaurants, businesses, and areas considered “soft” targets.¹² At the same time, civilian casualties are becoming more palatable. This is in direct contrast to prior Taliban methods of insurgency which did not usually target civilians. It is evident through recent press statements that they realize the danger civilian casualties pose towards their public relations campaign. However, the old leadership has been replaced by a new generation of militants, many of foreign influence; many coming from Iraq. Counterterrorism officials have acknowledged that there is a crossover between Taliban and al-Qaeda, and knowledge is freely shared across the world using videos and the Internet.¹³

To counter their psychological operations, ISAF could extend coordinated information operations to rally the local population behind the Afghan government and against the Taliban. In 2001, the US dropped leaflets over Afghanistan showing



“Is this how you want your women treated?”

Taliban beating a woman – an act considered taboo within the Pashtunwali code.¹⁴ Similar campaigns should be conducted to remind the population of the brutality a return to the past will bring.

The Taliban are attempting to shift the local population’s fear and anger towards ISAF and the Afghan government. Building an information campaign directed

¹⁰ Associated Press, “Taliban’s bomb expertise grows as regard for civilians cast aside,” *Moby Media Updates*, February 21, 2008.

¹¹ Jason Straziuso, “Afghan insurgents step up attacks with more lethal bombs,” *Associated Press* via Moby Media updates, February 22, 2008.

¹² Associated Press, “Kabul attacker wore police uniform; toll at 8,” *MSNBC*, January 15, 2008, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/22647590/> (January 20, 2008).

¹³ Associated Press, “Taliban’s bomb expertise grows as regard for civilians cast aside,” *Moby Media Updates*, February 21, 2008.

¹⁴ Dorronsoro, Gilles, *Revolution Unending: Afghanistan, 1979 to the Present*, Columbia University Press, 1985. p. 340.

at the local population who is primarily anti-Taliban and nonviolent, is an essential part of minimizing future Taliban and Al Qaeda attacks. Part of this process is developing a much larger presence of Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP) in the southern regions of Afghanistan where the Taliban move and operate with little difficulty. The US is sending 3200 additional Marines to southern Afghanistan in March, but a significant increase in other NATO forces are equally needed in order to provide a substantial increase in security and confidence to the local population. Without local support, the Taliban will find it increasingly difficult to conduct IED attacks - especially those which target civilians.