

# Military Coalition in Afghanistan Underminded: Why the Kandahar Offensive Could Backfire

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Global Research, April 20, 2010

[Wired](#) 16 April 2010

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Rather the Taliban than the government of Karzai or the US army say the people of Khandahar, about to face yet another NATO onslaught touted as a “turning point” after nine years of war in Afghanistan.

The southern Afghan province of Kandahar trusts the Taliban more than the government. And that’s according to a survey commissioned by the US Army.

Kandahar is expected to be the focal point of operations for US and NATO troops this summer, but a poll recently conducted by the Army’s controversial social science program, the [Human Terrain System](#) (HTS), is warning that rampant local corruption, and a lack of security, could undermine coalition efforts to win the support of the local population.

Among other things, the survey’s authors warned that a lack of confidence in the Afghan government “sets conditions for a disenfranchised population to respond either by not supporting the government due to its inability to deliver improvements in the quality of life or, worse yet, by supporting the Taliban.”

The unclassified report ([.pdf](#)) is worth examining for several reasons. For starters, it addresses many of the [questions raised by Maj. Gen. Michael Flynn](#), the top US intelligence officer in Afghanistan. In an assessment made public earlier this year, Flynn [complained](#) that the coalition lacked a real understanding of the cultural context of the insurgency, and said troops needed richer information about the communities they were trying to engage.

That’s where HTS is supposed to come in. Originally, the program was focused on embedding social scientists and anthropologists within brigades. But as several people close to the program tell Danger Room, there is now an emphasis on larger-scale polls run by local contractors as a way to obtain a larger picture of the situation.

Both polling and embedding researchers have their risks, and their shortcomings: Two HTS social scientists have been killed in Afghanistan, but conducting surveys, even through local companies, can also be perilous. The survey draws on a total of 1,994 interviews covering nine of Kandahar Province’s 16 districts. But it leaves out seven crucial districts: As the survey’s authors note, there are “inherent dangers associated with conducting surveys in a conflict zone” like Kandahar Province, and interviewers stayed out of areas with active violence.

In other words, the survey leaves out the populations that most need to be understood, at least from the coalition’s perspective. Still, the results are telling. Interviewers queried

residents of Kandahar on everything from quality of services like clean water, electricity to the availability of primary schooling for girls and boys and medical care. They also asked local residents about security government effectiveness.

Among the findings: Security on the roads is a major issue for residents of Kandahar. “When respondents are asked if they feel unsafe traveling within their district or around the province, in eight out of ten districts, at least half say they are unsafe,” the study says. And the biggest threat to security while traveling in the province, respondents said: Army and police checkpoints.

Likewise, attitudes in the south are generally sympathetic to the Taliban. Reconciliation with the insurgency is a popular concept in the province, and a significant majority of respondents viewed Taliban as “our Afghan brothers.” Some 84 percent cited “corruption” as the main reason for the conflict. But most of that corruption in on the government side: 53 percent said the Taliban cannot be corrupted.

Finally, there’s a significant amount of skepticism about the local police and security forces. “The primary reason respondents in Kandahar consider joining the ANSF [Afghan National Security Forces] is the desire for a job and a paycheck,” the study says. “Respondents are deterred from considering a career in the ANSF because of the dangers. Across all districts, the ANP [Afghan National Police] is viewed as a more dangerous profession than the ANA [Afghan National Army].”

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