

Military Watershed: Longest War In U.S. And Afghan History

By [Rick Rozoff](#)

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This week news about the U.S. and North Atlantic Treaty Organization armed conflict in Afghanistan, the largest and longest-running war in the world, has begun to penetrate the wall of triumphalism and complacency erected by Washington during the past year's unparalleled military escalation in the South Asian nation.

Between the inauguration of Barack Obama as the 44th president of the United States on January 20, 2009 and now, the number of American troops in the war zone has almost tripled, from 32,000 to 94,000, with the total to reach 100,000 in upcoming weeks. Late last month U.S. combat forces in Afghanistan for the first time outnumbered those in Iraq, 94,000 compared to 92,000. There will soon also be an aggregate of 50,000 armed forces provided by Washington's NATO allies and NATO partnership nations.

The 150,000 U.S. and allied troops in place by this summer will exceed by tens of thousands the largest amount of foreign forces ever before stationed in Afghanistan: An estimated 118,000 Soviet troops that constituted the high water mark of the USSR's deployment between late 1979 and early 1989. [1]

The territory of what is now Afghanistan was invaded in remote times by Alexander the Great and Genghis Khan among other conquerors, but the first two armed attacks against Afghanistan itself were in 1839 and 1878, in both cases by English and colonial troops invading from British India.

In the First Anglo-Afghan War of 1839-1842 over 20,000 British and Indian troops invaded the country, ending in an inglorious - a disastrous - rout for the aggressors. In the Second Anglo-Afghan War of 1878-1880 Britain invaded with a force of 40,000 troops and that incursion also culminated in a withdrawal to India.

The Third Anglo-Afghan War of 1919 was a three-month campaign waged by London against the government of Amanullah Khan which ended in a stalemate and in the effective independence of Afghanistan as a modern nation.

The 150,000 U.S. and NATO International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) troops in the country, then, represent the largest invasion, occupation and foreign warfighting force in Afghanistan's history. They are also the most diverse military force not only in Afghan but in any nation's experience: Armed combatants from as many as fifty nations and all continents except uninhabited Antarctica.

On June 7 mainstream American media acknowledged that the war in Afghanistan is now their country's longest one, with Washington having entered month 104 of a conflict that

began on October 7, 2001.

The most protracted war before had been that in Vietnam. Current calculations based on the beginning of the American role in major and independent combat operations in that Southeast Asian nation – from the Tonkin Gulf Resolution passed by the U.S. Congress on August 7, 1964 – to the withdrawal of the last American combat troops in March of 1973 total 103 months. In fact it took several months for the Pentagon to act on the resolution and as such the Afghan war has already been the lengthiest in America's history, but the formal recognition of it as such is now a matter of public record.

As for Afghanistan itself, the first Soviet troops entered the country on December 24, 1979 and the final troop withdrawal began on May 15, 1988 and ended on February 15, 1989, a total of 102 and 111 months respectively.

By the beginning of next year U.S. troops will have been in Afghanistan longer than Soviet ones were.

On June 8 CNN (Cable News Network) featured an online report stating "The United States passed [a] grim milestone" on that date with the death of its 1001st soldier in Afghanistan. The next day four more American soldiers were killed when a helicopter they were traveling in was shot down in Afghanistan's Helmand Province.

The independent iCasualties website had already estimated 1,108 U.S. soldiers killed in and around Afghanistan (that is, also in Pakistan and Uzbekistan) and previous accounts had mentioned deaths in excess of 1,000 in the sixteen-nation greater Operation Enduring Freedom area of operations, but the acknowledgement of over 1,000 U.S. fatalities in Afghanistan alone by the commercial media is another landmark.

American deaths this year are now at least at the 165 mark, compared to 327 for all of last year and 155 in 2008 according to iCasualties. Total foreign military losses since 2001 are over 1,800. Britain lost its 294th soldier on June 9, the highest number of combat deaths the United Kingdom has registered since the counterinsurgency war in Malaya in the 1950s and 39 more than in the 1982 war with Argentina over the Falklands/Las Malvinas. Two days before Canada lost its 147th soldier, the highest military death toll for the nation since the Korean War.

On the same day a Polish forward operating base in the province of Ghazni came under rocket attack and four Polish soldiers were wounded. On June 1 Denmark announced the first-ever death of a female service member in an improvised explosive device attack in Helmand Province.

With the five American and British deaths on June 9, NATO has lost at least 29 soldiers in the first nine days of this month. Ten foreign soldiers were killed on June 7 alone, including two Australian and one French serviceman. The deaths occurred both in southern and eastern Afghanistan.

Ahead of what has been planned as the largest military offensive of the nearly nine-year war, the assault against the southern province of Kandahar and in particular the city of the same name which is its capital, the initiative does not appear to be with the U.S. and NATO. The campaign was scheduled to begin this month and culminate in August when combined U.S. and NATO troop strength in Afghanistan will reach 150,000.

On the morning of June 9 fifty NATO tankers transporting oil and other supplies were attacked only fifty kilometers south of the Pakistani capital of Islamabad.

According to earlier reports, top U.S. and NATO commander Stanley McChrystal is amassing over 25,000 troops – American, NATO and Afghan government – for the offensive in the city of Kandahar.

The Daily Telegraph recently reported that “British military intelligence estimates there are between 500 and 1,000 insurgents who operate regularly in the area,” [2] which would mean as high as a 50-1 ratio of U.S.-led troops to Afghan insurgents, comparable to February’s attack on the town of Marjah in neighboring Helmand Province where 15,000 U.S.- and NATO-led forces faced as few as 400 armed fighters. [3]

The Kandahar operation is still scheduled to commence this month and “will focus on Kandahar city and the farmland around it, and could take from four to six months. While Nato commanders are promising a low-key, Afghan-led approach to Kandahar city itself, international troops are preparing for combat operations in some of the areas around the city.” [4]

Despite the pledge by President Obama that after what was touted in advance as a victory in Kandahar and throughout the war-wracked nation to begin drawing down U.S. and NATO troops in 2011, all indications are that Western forces will remain in Afghanistan long after that. Far longer than any foreign military power has ever stayed in the nation before in a war that is already the longest in American history. [5]

Notes

- 1) New York Times, February 16, 1989, “according to Western intelligence estimates”
- 2) The Telegraph, June 1, 2010
- 3) Associated Press, February 14, 2010
- 4) The Telegraph, June 1, 2010
- 5) Afghanistan: Charlie Wilson And America’s 30-Year War
Stop NATO, February 15, 2010

<http://rickrozoff.wordpress.com/2010/02/15/afghanistan-charlie-wilson-and-americas-30-year-war>

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