

US-NATO Under Siege in Afghanistan

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The furore in the Muslim world over the vicious trailer of the Innocence of Muslims, leading to the death of the US ambassador and three other US embassy officials in Libya, was only one facet of the hebdomas horribilis, or horrible week, that the Americans have suffered.

Much could be written about what this will mean for America's relations with the Muslim world and Pakistan in particular, but in this article the focus is on the other facet of the 'horrible week' — the developments in Afghanistan over the past few days.

On Friday and Saturday, in two separate green-on-blue attacks, six coalition soldiers were killed by Afghan security personnel.

This brought to 51 the total number of Nato troops killed in such incidents in 2012 and follows the 13 deaths under similar circumstances in August.

So far the Americans had been expressing a measure of satisfaction with the steps that the Afghans were taking to recheck the background of recruits in the Afghan forces to suspend those suspected of having ties with the insurgents. Booklets were also issued to Afghan forces on cultural differences that urged Afghans not to take umbrage at some of the things American soldiers did.

Now this latest set of insider attacks has prompted a harsher reaction, with the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Martin Dempsey stating bluntly that the Afghan authorities have to take the problem seriously.

Whatever the Americans may ask for, the fact is that there is little that the Afghans will be able to do given the unwieldy size the Afghan security forces have acquired and given the American insistence on enlarging the Afghan Local Police from 16,000 to 30,000. It is said that recruitment has now been suspended; but since the Americans do see it as a means of countering the Taliban in the rural areas this suspension is likely to be lifted.

On Sept 11, probably to mark the 9/11 anniversary, the Taliban destroyed a heavy transport helicopter at Bagram base, killing three Afghan soldiers and wounding a number of Americans. Attacks on Bagram from outside the base have happened before — most notably about a month ago when Dempsey's transport aircraft was damaged. This time, however, it seemed that the Americans were more concerned by the accuracy of the attack.

Nevertheless, this attack was far less important than the one launched by 15 insurgents on what was regarded as the "impregnable" British base, Camp Bastion, in Helmand. Not only did the insurgents, wearing US military uniforms, penetrate the defences but in something eerily reminiscent of the Mehran base tragedy in Karachi succeeded in their attack. In

addition to killing two American marines, they destroyed six Harrier jets valued at \$30m each, three refuelling stations and a number of aircraft hangars.

Helmand, it must be remembered, was one of the provinces in which the 'surge' was supposed to have broken the back of the Taliban resistance.

The Taliban have also issued a call on their website for increased attacks in Afghanistan, specifically on US forces, to avenge the aforementioned anti-Muslim film. If nothing else, one can expect that a few more Afghan soldiers will cause green-on-blue incidents.

Relations with President Karzai touched a new low when the latter condemned the said film and implicitly held the American administration responsible, but failed to condemn the killing of the American ambassador in Benghazi. He is also at loggerheads with the Americans regarding their insistence, even while handing over control of Bagram prison holding some 60 high-value prisoners.

As if this were not enough, Karzai also issued a scathing criticism of the air raid in Laghman province on Sunday where the Americans conceded that while the attack was on insurgents, there had been civilian fatalities, which according to the Afghans included nine women and girls. The International Security Assistance Force has accepted full responsibility and will presumably pay compensation but this will be fresh fodder for the anti-American sentiment that seems to be growing stronger by the day in Afghanistan as much as it is in other Muslim countries.

British Defence Secretary Philip Hammond, who was visiting Camp Bastion just a couple of days before the insurgent attack, claimed in an interview to the Guardian that his commanders were now advising that British troops could be withdrawn more quickly than originally thought. It is probable that the major part of the 9,000 British troops now in Afghanistan will be withdrawn in 2013 leaving only a skeleton force in place till full withdrawal in 2014.

Interestingly, Hammond also spent some time in the interview talking about the urgent need for reconciliation. He said: "The Afghan government needed to do much more to bring about a political settlement with the insurgents because the diplomatic effort was lagging behind the military campaign" and that any peace in Afghanistan will need to involve "reaching out Northern Ireland-style to at least the moderate part of the insurgency, to try to bring it inside through reconciliation and integration".

He suggested that the "Afghan government needs to do more and the neighbours who have influence [Pakistan] also need to maintain pressure on those parties...to come to the table".

Speaking of the objectives of the British in Afghanistan, he maintained that Al Qaeda having been "eliminated" it would not be right to ask British troops to risk their lives for nation-building. His view was: "Even if we had achieved nothing lasting, every year that goes by keeping the bombers at bay, keeping them off our streets, is a significant achievement in itself. But we have clearly built the basics of a future that will deny the space of Afghanistan to those who would seek to harm us."

The British do from time to time have differences with the Americans. Hammond said as much when he asserted that "tracking people down and removing them from the battlefield" was not the best way of finding a settlement, calling into question the American

campaign to eliminate mid-level commanders.

One assumes he was reflecting the views of the Nato alliance as a whole. If so, it would be fair to suggest that not only will Nato forces face greater military difficulty in the months ahead but the maintenance of a residual American military presence after 2014 may also be called into question.

For Pakistan this adds to the urgency of promoting reconciliation and doing whatever lies in its power to make this happen.

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