

Assessing ISAF:

A Baseline Study of NATO's Role in Afghanistan



Assessing ISAF: A Baseline Study of NATO's Role in Afghanistan

by Cameron Scott, March 2007

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Front cover photo: US and Portuguese forces near Kabul, 2005. © U.S. Department of Defense

Main back cover photo: ANA soldiers receive instruction from a US advisor. © U.S. Department of Defense

Second back cover photo: US and Afghan military officials meet with local elders in Nangrahar province. © U.S. Department of Defense

Third back cover photo: A Swedish army officer assists at a medical clinic in Mazar-e Sharif. © U.S. Department of Defense



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*Several ISAF member states have contributed to the training of the Afghan National Police
Photo: © U.S. Department of Defense*

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Foreword



by Ambassador Robert L. Barry

Cameron Scott has produced an excellent baseline study of NATO's role in Afghanistan. I fully agree with most of it. Failure remains a distinct possibility, with far-reaching consequences for Iraq, Afghanistan and especially NATO.

My own experience in Afghanistan dates back to 2004, when I headed an OSCE election support team there for the October elections. Some things have changed since then, but too many of the issues Scott describes have not.

In 2004, ISAF units and Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) concentrated on force protection to the exclusion of much else. It was also true then as now that aid workers disagreed with the kind of reconstruction projects mounted by both ISAF and U.S. led PRTs. They felt these "hearts and minds" projects were poorly planned and executed, and did not fit with projects mounted by other donors. What is notable now is that the ISAF mission statement overwhelmingly stresses security over reconstruction. The security mission in turn is largely force protection in areas where national NATO contingents are told by capitals to avoid combat. This does not suggest that turnaround is on the horizon.

When NATO took over from the United States in southern Afghanistan in early 2006, the United States offered increased air support as an incentive. The idea was that if ISAF got in trouble, U.S. air strikes could be called in to turn the tide. As Scott notes, this causes increased civilian casualties and difficulties for the Karzai government.

As in Iraq, the problem in Afghanistan was that then Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and CENTCOM commander Tommy Franks decided to wage war on the cheap. We failed to defeat the Taliban, and relied on warlords to do the heavy lifting. Thus, the Karzai government held no sway outside of Kabul and the United States never made a serious effort to provide security in the south. Before making an impact on Afghanistan we diverted resources and planning to Iraq.

Our OSCE team made a number of recommendations in late 2004, among them that the OSCE assume a larger role in support of the Afghan government. On returning to the United States I met with the NSC-led interagency group dealing with Afghanistan. They were totally preoccupied with counter-narcotics strategy and seemed not even to have read our recommendations.

In early 2002, President Bush called for a "Marshall Plan" to reconstruct Afghanistan, but no funds were committed to this end in the President's budget. Already, in the 2002 State of the Union message, the Administration was looking to Iraq - another war fought on the cheap. At the NATO summit in Riga last year, and again at the informal meeting of Defense Ministers in Seville on February 12, grim warnings were voiced concerning the shortfalls in troop commitments and limitations on combat activities by some NATO members. The Canadian Senate has warned that unless other NATO members step up to the plate, Canada may withdraw its contingent, which has borne a disproportionate share of the burden of casualties.

Unlike the war in Iraq, the war in Afghanistan was a war of necessity. Likewise it is a moral and political necessity to carry through, and not once again abandon the people of Afghanistan to chaos. The greatest contribution the United States could make is to surge forces to Afghanistan, not Iraq. We should keep this in mind when the inevitable decision to "redeploy" from Iraq is made.

Ambassador Barry is a BASIC trustee and senior associate with the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington DC, and has had a long career with the United States government on European affairs and arms control. He headed the OSCE Mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina from January 1998 to June 2001. He also served as Ambassador to Bulgaria and Indonesia. He was Deputy Director of the Voice of America and Ambassador to the Stockholm Conference on Disarmament in Europe.

Executive Summary

The UN-mandated, NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) has a limited but essential role to play in Afghanistan. Although the Afghan government faces numerous obstacles including corruption, growing opium cultivation and insufficient reconstruction and development projects, the immediate problem of insurgent-fostered insecurity requires urgent redress to facilitate progress on the other problems afflicting Afghanistan. NATO member states must make good on their promises to assist the Afghan government in establishing conditions of security and help develop the capabilities for national security forces to assume responsibility for Afghanistan's lasting security.

Key Points:

- ISAF must do its utmost to fulfill its pledge to better protect civilians during 2007 and not allow concerns of force protection to alienate the population from the government and security forces.
- Insurgent attacks will not be easily stopped and may increase in number but ISAF and Afghan forces must continue to proactively counter them by clearing, holding and providing a visible, reassuring presence in the areas targeted by the Taliban.
- Training of the Afghan army and police must be accelerated so that they can take an increasingly independent and prominent role in security provision. Issues of inadequate pay, equipment and training must be resolved.

Recommendations

- Address remaining shortfall in troops and equipment. Those allies who do not contribute these resources should help support the deployment of reinforcements financially.
- Abolish caveats that fracture the unity of command and hinder deployment of troops in areas or operations where ISAF command deems their presence necessary. ISAF forces must be available where they are required.
- Reduce force-protection measures that place Afghan civilians in danger. Consider establishment of HRW-recommended victims-compensation fund or similar scheme to ensure that those who have been victims of violence do not become alienated from the government.
- Deploy additional ISAF and ANF units to areas of southern and eastern Afghanistan where the Taliban have challenged government authority. Emphasize protecting civilians and developing local intelligence networks.
- Ensure that once areas are cleared of Taliban that a sufficient security force presence is maintained in order to prevent re-infiltration by insurgents.
- Security force personnel, particularly Afghan nationals, must receive further training in an effort to prevent suicide bombings.
- Do not rush security force personnel into service until basic training has been completed in full; continue advanced training and emphasize the importance of additional skills such as literacy while in service.
- Address issues of personnel retention and susceptibility to bribery by raising standard wages for ANP and ANA recruits. The international community should subsidize this for the near future.
- Ensure quality and standardization for equipment provided to ANF personnel.

Introduction

The purpose of this baseline study is to determine how successful ISAF has been to date in achieving the limited but critical objectives within its mandate, which is focused on assisting the security and reconstruction effort. Relevant statistics such as civilian and military casualty figures, the number and type of insurgent attacks, and troop levels in the Afghan national forces (ANF) will be complemented by qualitative analysis of the situation to judge the effectiveness of the ISAF mission thus far and to make suggestions to help achieve long-term success.

This study has been compiled from open-source materials such as government documents, media articles, and journal publications.

2006 was a tumultuous year in Afghanistan, as rising levels of violence raised questions about the future of the government led by Hamid Karzai and the role of foreign troops in the country, most of whom operate as part of the UN-mandated, NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).

The conflict with anti-government elements, including the Taliban, is now in its sixth year. Many observers see 2007 as a crucial year when ISAF and the Afghan government must make concerted efforts to avoid regression towards the instability and endemic violence that reigned in Afghanistan during the late 20th century.

The consequences of allowing this to happen could be severe. The Iraq Study Group report suggested that a failed-state in Afghanistan would once again, become a haven for Islamic terrorism,¹ while others have suggested that NATO's failure to complete the mission – already labeled as a test that the alliance must pass if it is to remain relevant to global security in the 21st century – could result in effective dissolution of the organization.²

Success will be measured in fewer civilian casualties, a decrease in the areas in which the Taliban operate and further progress of the reconstruction missions which form the backbone of the ISAF mandate.

There can be little doubt at this stage that Afghanistan is not the success story once lauded as a model for reconstruction in Iraq, and for all appearances the situation there has deteriorated in many respects in the last 12 months. Attacks on civilians and security forces have increased significantly, opium cultivation has achieved record highs, reconstruction efforts have faltered and the Afghan people appear increasingly wary of the direction in which their country is headed.

Despite these trends, NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer insisted at NATO's recent summit in Riga "there is not the slightest reason to voice gloom and doom over Afghanistan."³ British Prime Minister Tony Blair echoed this sentiment by proclaiming, "this mission in Afghanistan is not yet won, but it is winnable and, indeed, we are winning."⁴

Afghanistan: Basic Facts and Figures

Population: 31,056,997 (CIA World Factbook July 2006 estimate)

Since 2001 over 60,000 former militia members have been **demobilized**, nearly 50,000 weapons (including 12,248 heavy weapons) have been collected and nearly 100,000 anti-tank and personnel mines destroyed.⁶

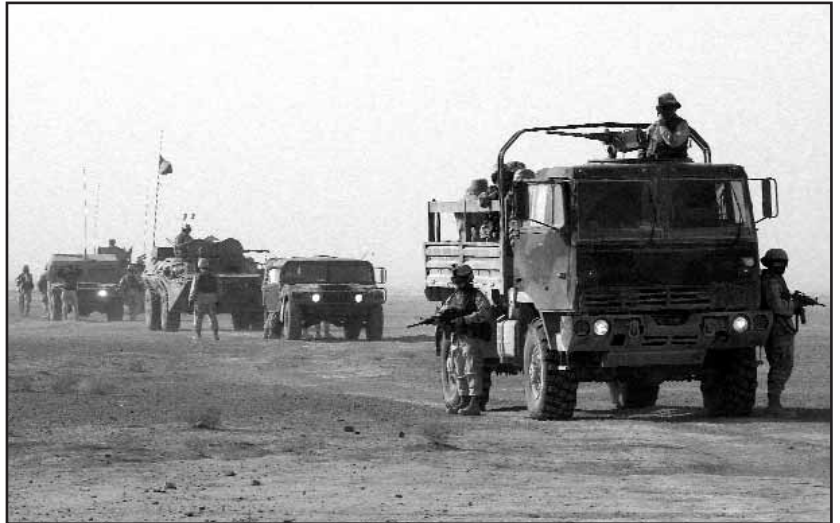
Over 4,000 illegally **armed groups** remain to be disarmed and demobilized.⁷

Afghanistan produced 92% of the world's **opium** in 2006—the 165,000 hectares under cultivation represented a 59% growth in production from 2005.⁸ See Appendix 4 for figures and geography of opium cultivation.

It is unclear by what standards Messrs de Hoop Scheffer and Blair are measuring progress given recent setbacks, but they have reiterated NATO's commitment to assist the Afghan government in bringing security and stability to the country. Under its mandate, ISAF has significant responsibility for assisting in security and reconstruction efforts, but it appears to be falling short of the substantial challenge with which it is presented. Success will be measured in fewer civilian casualties, a decrease in the areas in which the Taliban operate and further progress of the reconstruction missions which form the backbone of the ISAF mandate.

This is not to say that the mission in Afghanistan is impossible or even that ISAF is failing, but the time for NATO states to reassess their commitment to the mission in Afghanistan is overdue. Independent studies conducted by the International Crisis Group and the Center for Strategic and International Studies suggest that the ISAF mission in Afghanistan can succeed but that it must be supported properly with money, personnel, and material.⁵ November's summit in Riga failed to produce a major breakthrough on these shortages that have hindered efforts in Afghanistan thus far, and NATO foreign ministers met in Brussels in February for a second attempt at addressing shortcomings in commitment and strategy.

Much of what must happen in Afghanistan for the central government to succeed is admittedly beyond the remit of ISAF. Afghanistan's insecurity is the result of many interconnected problems including government corruption, the slow progress of reconstruction, widespread poppy cultivation and the continued power of local warlords and militias. These interconnected issues all require redress if the Afghan government is to establish legitimate authority across the country, but lie outside the core mission and competency of ISAF forces. What is certain, however, is that failure by NATO to deliver on its commitment to assist in bringing security and stability to Afghanistan will jeopardize the Afghan government's prospects for success.



*U.S. and Romanian vehicles in a convoy in southern Afghanistan
Photo: © U.S. Department of Defense*

ISAF: Basic Facts and Figures

Created under U.N. mandate at the Bonn Summit in 2001 to provide security in and around Kabul; came under NATO control in August 2003.

Assumed responsibility for all security and stability operations in Afghanistan on October 5, 2006. See Appendix 2 for map of operational areas and expansion dates.

33,460 troops from 37 countries; approximately 26,000 are deployable in a full range of operations including combat.⁹ See Appendix 1 for figures on national contingents.

Operates 25 Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) across Afghanistan. See Appendix 3 for PRT locations.



*U.S. soldiers board a Chinook transport helicopter
Photo: © U.S. Department of Defense*

ISAF background, mission and operations

ISAF was created in December 2001 at the summit in Bonn, Germany, which laid the foundations for a democratic government in Afghanistan. ISAF is separate in command and mandate from the U.S.-led Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). OEF maintains an 8,000-strong force charged with conducting counter-terrorism operations, but transferred its reconstruction efforts and indeed many of its troops to ISAF command in October 2006. ISAF, in contrast, has been focused on providing security and stability to promote reconstruction efforts from its inception.

ISAF's role is described on its operational website as including the following tasks:

- Assisting the Afghan government in extending its authority across the country;
- Conducting stability and security operations in co-ordination with the Afghan national security forces;
- Assisting the Afghan government with the security sector reform process;
- Mentoring and supporting the Afghan National Army;
- Supporting Afghan government programs to disarm illegally armed groups.¹⁰

In practice these operations take the form of conducting patrols, embedding advisors within ANF units, and overseeing the operation of the 25 PRTs located throughout Afghanistan. Described as “the leading edge” of NATO efforts in Afghanistan, PRTs combine civilian and military personnel to coordinate security and reconstruction efforts for the surrounding area. PRTs are not uniform; each is run by an ISAF national contingent and will feature different ratios of military to civilian personnel depending on the lead nation.

PRTs have been a mixed success to date, as civil and military actors have not necessarily communicated well and disagreed over the role of military forces in aid and development work.¹¹ At present, however, the security situation has deteriorated to the extent where many ISAF forces, particularly in the south and east, are involved more in offensive military operations than reconstruction efforts. Although ISAF assumed control of these areas with the hope, as optimistically expressed by former UK Defence Secretary John Reid, that they would complete their mission “without firing a shot,” they have been called upon to engage in what ISAF commander Lt. Gen. David

Richards described as some of the most intensive combat since the Korean War.¹²

This is not a challenge ISAF forces can shy away from or reject as inconsistent with their original mandates. The armed threat of the Taliban and other insurgent groups must be confronted and neutralized in order to allow substantial progress in the reconstruction efforts that will bring long-term stability to Afghanistan. The success of ISAF to date in meeting this security challenge is discussed below.



*ISAF troops have engaged in heavy combat against the Taliban
Photo: © U.S. Department of Defense*

Security sector progress

Civilian Deaths

Protecting the civilian population is arguably the most crucial task of security forces in counter-insurgency, and in Afghanistan the raw numbers imply that the situation has deteriorated rather than improved since the fall of the Taliban in 2001. Reliable statistics for civilian deaths in Afghanistan are unavailable in part because there is no equivalent tracking of casualties in Afghanistan to that done in Iraq by the Iraq Body Count or reports published by The Lancet medical journal. Most media sources state that civilian casualties in 2006 formed roughly a quarter of the 4,000 total Afghan deaths, with the remainder made up by insurgents.

Statistics alone, however, give an incomplete and potentially misleading picture. The increase in casualties of all types – civilian, insurgent and security forces – is certainly in part due to an increase in anti-government activity. It is also a result of expanding operations into provinces such as Helmand and Kandahar where there was previously such a minimal presence of government authority and security forces as to allow de-facto Taliban control. Gen. Benjamin Freakley, commander of the United States Army 10th Mountain Division, acknowledged this and said that international forces would continue to seek out the Taliban with offensive operations in 2007.¹⁶ Engaging insurgents to assert government control in such areas is necessary but difficult and likely to produce casualties. Therefore an increase in casualties of all kinds, although worrisome and undesirable, is not explicitly indicative of regression.

Use of Force

Given that preventing civilian deaths is a key imperative of a successful counter-insurgency campaign, armed force must be applied with caution so as not to kill, injure or otherwise alienate those same civilians whose support is essential if the government is to rule by popular mandate.

Civilian and ISAF Casualties

Approximately 4,000 Afghan casualties in 2006 – a four-fold increase from 2005.¹³

Civilians accounted for roughly one-quarter of all casualties.¹⁴

191 total ISAF/Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) casualties in 2006; U.S., Canadian and UK forces have borne the brunt of losses. The United States has lost 357 troops since 2001 while Britain and Canada have lost 46 and 44 respectively.¹⁵

Unfortunately ISAF actions, particularly air-strikes, caused numerous civilian deaths in 2006, prompting criticism from President Hamid Karzai¹⁷ and a promise from NATO that its forces would place greater emphasis on avoiding civilian casualties in 2007.¹⁸ Human Rights Watch has recently urged NATO to create a communally funded compensation scheme for those harmed in its operations, which would be an improvement over the existing system of uneven payments made by individual member countries.¹⁹

ISAF Casualties

Part of the problem rests with an understandable emphasis on force protection.²⁰ ISAF will undoubtedly suffer further casualties, but the rising death toll has caused public support to waver in countries suffering from the heaviest casualties, particularly Britain and Canada.²¹ Such losses are doing little to increase support for the war in other NATO member states where the long-term commitment to efforts in Afghanistan is seen by some as questionable.²² NATO governments must take a firm stance in support of their mission in Afghanistan if they wish it to succeed, even if such a position is domestically unpopular.

Troop and Equipment Shortages

Deploying troops to the volatile provinces of southern and eastern Afghanistan is necessary for ISAF success but requires acceptance of a certain amount of risk. The United States, Britain, Canada, and the Netherlands have borne the burden of this deployment thus far but need more extensive support from allies such as Germany, France, Italy and Spain. These nations all have significant numbers of troops in Afghanistan but have refused to station them in areas of intense fighting. France has recently conceded that it will allow its troops to be sent anywhere in Afghanistan if requested,²³ but the others have agreed to do so only in ill-defined 'emergency' situations.²⁴ The German government recently agreed to send six Tornado aircraft to Afghanistan to conduct reconnaissance flights, but the proposed six-month deployment provoked significant debate and controversy within parliament.²⁵

The bottom line is that ISAF needs more equipment, greater numbers of troops and fewer operational caveats to properly fulfill its mission. The Riga summit succeeded only in obtaining promises for marginal increases and left a shortfall of roughly 10% of the desired increases in manpower and equipment.²⁶ Subsequent meetings of senior officials in Brussels in January and Seville in February have likewise failed to convince allies of the need to make further contributions.



ISAF has relied on close air-support from Apache helicopter-gunships and other aircraft in engagements against insurgents
Photo: © U.S. Department of Defense

German defense minister Franz-Josef Jung questioned the focus of NATO commanders on military forces, stating that the Soviet Union had placed 100,000 troops in Afghanistan and failed to secure the country.²⁷

Drawing such parallels between the Soviet mission and the current NATO mission misses the point. Unlike the ill-fated Soviet intervention, NATO forces are deployed in support of a legitimate and achievable political objective, but to fulfill its nominal mission of reconstruction, NATO must first provide a basic level of security to permit such projects to progress. More troops and fewer restrictions on their use are essential for this to happen. Danish defense minister Soeren Gade acknowledged this reality, warning that, "if we do not send more soldiers there is a risk that we may fail."²⁸ Some nations have agreed to drop their operational caveats but others remain intact, impeding the ability of ISAF commanders to employ all their available resources as deemed necessary.²⁹ In the absence of European pledges the United States will extend the deployment of 3,200 soldiers from the 10th Mountain Division already in Afghanistan, and Britain has announced it is prepared to contribute an additional 800 troops.³⁰

Despite the increased number of casualties in 2006, support for ISAF and the government remains high among Afghans according to several public opinion surveys conducted in the latter half of 2006.³¹ It is up to ISAF members to ensure that this continued good will is taken advantage of before it dissipates.

Recommendations:

Address remaining shortfall in troops and equipment. Those allies who do not contribute these resources should help support the deployment of reinforcements financially.

Abolish caveats that fracture the unity of command and hinder deployment of troops in areas or operations where ISAF command deems their presence necessary. ISAF forces must be available where they are required.

Reduce force-protection measures that place Afghan civilians in danger. Consider establishment of HRW-recommended victims-compensation fund or similar scheme to ensure that those who have been victims of violence do not become alienated from the government.

Insurgent attacks

The rise in ISAF casualties this year is more than a result of an expanded role – attacks by insurgents have increased in number and lethality (See Box), particularly with the rise of previously rare suicide bombings. The Taliban mounted a concerted effort over the spring and summer to engage ISAF forces and defeat them militarily, and though they were unsuccessful the trend illustrates both an inability on the part of security forces to prevent attacks, and success by the Taliban in recruiting new fighters despite heavy losses.⁴²

Taliban Resurgence

The term “resurgence” is somewhat misleading in so much as the Taliban were never properly defeated following the U.S.-led invasion in 2001. Taliban fighters and senior leadership have been able to consistently exploit safe-havens in Pakistan and conduct operations across the porous border, frustrating Western and Afghan officials and prompting accusations of official Pakistani support for the insurgency. These border areas formed the traditional source of support for the Taliban movement and should have received significant attention in the form of reconstruction projects and a substantial security force presence, but instead were largely ignored,⁴³ allowing the Taliban to maintain a support network and to rebuild a political infrastructure.

The Taliban put up a strong fight against ISAF forces in the provinces of Helmand and Kandahar during the summer and autumn of 2006, inflicting significant losses on U.S., Canadian and British troops in those areas. The Taliban have been able to inflict significant damage despite their relatively simple weaponry—most often machine guns and RPGs and supplemented by the use of suicide bombers. A lack of advanced weaponry, however, will not prevent the Taliban from putting up formidable opposition. In the war against the Soviets, Afghan mujahideen caused substantial losses even before they were provided with more sophisticated armaments such as Stinger anti-aircraft missiles by the United States.⁴⁴

Insurgent Attacks

Attacks on OEF/ISAF forces increased from 900 in 2005 to 2,500 in 2006.³²

Attacks up to 600 per month by November 2006 from 300 in March and 130 a month in 2005.³³

U.S. military statistics showed a total of 4,542 attacks using small arms in 2006, up from 1,558 in 2005.³⁴

Road-side bombings increased to 2,800 in 2006 from 800 in 2005.³⁵

139 suicide bombings occurred in Afghanistan in 2006; just 30 occurred in Afghanistan between 2002-2005.³⁶ 206 Afghans, 54 ANF and 18 NATO soldiers were killed.³⁷

83 aid workers were killed, 52 kidnapped and nearly 800 wounded.³⁸ Many attacks have also focused on soft-targets such as schools and government officials.³⁹

Taliban units up to 400 strong have engaged security forces in southern Afghanistan.⁴⁰

Endemic violence in Zabol and Oruzgan has rendered the provinces too insecure to permit population surveys.⁴¹

Preventing the Taliban from achieving de facto control over contested provinces—an absolute necessity if the central government is to extend its authority over the whole country—will unlikely be achieved without an increase in the number of security force personnel stationed in the districts most afflicted by the insurgency. The prospect of leaving areas under the control of tribal elders and auxiliary police forces appears remote following the seizure of Musa Qala in Helmand by Taliban forces on February 2. The town had been protected under a controversial cease-fire between British and local leaders in which ISAF troops withdrew from the area in September after weeks of heavy fighting, leaving security in the hands of local security forces.⁴⁵ These forces were simply disarmed and captured by the Taliban when the town was seized, and it remains under Taliban control at the time of writing.⁴⁶

When ISAF and ANF troops retake the town it is improbable that a similar deal will be resurrected, as the current governor of Helmand province and new ISAF commander Gen. Dan McNeill are opposed to such arrangements.⁴⁷

More Visible Security Force Presence

Securing areas and establishing government authority without local peace deals however, will require a more visible and robust security force presence. Just 130 U.S. troops were stationed in Helmand province when British forces assumed responsibility for the region in May 2006.⁴⁸ Even with the majority of the 6,500 strong British force deployed to Helmand there is a significant shortfall in troop density there and across the other provinces of southern and eastern Afghanistan. These thin numbers illustrate the desperate need for further ISAF deployments to fill the gap until Afghan national forces attain their intended strength levels and can assume counter-insurgency and stability operations independently.

Although the southern and eastern provinces such as Helmand, Oruzgan and Kandahar have witnessed the majority of the insurgent attacks on civilians and security forces, even the relative safety of Kabul was challenged in late 2006 by suicide bombings.⁴⁹ Deterring insurgent attacks and suicide bombers in particular defies easy solution, but experiences from other conflicts demonstrates that specific training to identify and deal with suicide bombing tactics and the development of intelligence networks and education/information operations to counter extremist ideology provide a broad strategy to reduce the frequency and lethality of suicide bombings.⁵⁰

NATO leaders have recently promised that if there is to be an offensive in the spring, it will be NATO's offensive and not the Taliban's.⁵¹ Former ISAF commander Lt. Gen. David Richards has stated that international and Afghan security forces will continue to push the Taliban remnants out of Helmand and Kandahar provinces and keep them out by controlling the border with Pakistan more tightly.⁵² Cooperation with Pakistani

authorities will be essential if the plan is to succeed, but this requirement will be made easier by the establishment of the Joint Intelligence Operations Center (JOIC) in Kabul where ISAF, Afghan and Pakistani officials will share intelligence on Taliban and terrorist networks.⁵³ This is a vital first step in building the necessary links with Pakistani intelligence that will be invaluable to defeating the Taliban.

Recommendations:

Deploy additional ISAF and ANF units to areas of southern and eastern Afghanistan where the Taliban have challenged government authority. Emphasize protecting civilians and developing local intelligence networks.

Ensure that once areas are cleared of Taliban that a sufficient security force presence is maintained in order to prevent re-infiltration by insurgents.

Security force personnel, particularly Afghan nationals, must receive further training in an effort to prevent suicide bombings.



U.S. and Afghan military personnel meet with village elders in Landikheyl, Nangrahar province. Intense fighting in southern and eastern Afghanistan has often overshadowed this crucial aspect of ISAF operations in Afghanistan. Photo: © U.S. Department of Defense

Afghan national forces

T.E. Lawrence learned from his experience during the Arab Revolt that it was “better the Arabs do it tolerably than that you do it perfectly. It is their war, and you are to help them, not to win it for them.” This principle remains true for any international force assisting indigenous forces in fighting an insurgency and is of particular relevance in Afghanistan, a country dubbed the ‘graveyard of great powers.’⁵⁶ ISAF thus has a vested interest in ensuring that Afghan National Forces are trained and equipped properly to assume ultimate responsibility for stabilizing the country and neutralizing anti-government elements. To date however, this critical objective has suffered from insufficient attention and funding, jeopardizing the chances of bringing peace to Afghanistan.

Afghan National Army

The target goal for the ANA, as established in the Afghanistan National Compact, is to have 70,000 fully trained and equipped servicemen by March 2009, and to be fully operational by March 20, 2011. The November 12 report of the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board (JCMB) stated the current number of troops as 34,688, and that recruitment and training is on pace to reach 43,000 by the end of March 2007.⁵⁷

The ANA will play a critical role in bringing security and stability to Afghanistan, but the force remains a work in progress. International troops working with the ANA describe the force as making progress but still incapable of conducting operations independently and suffering from basic problems ranging from inexperience to illiteracy.⁵⁸ The Afghan MoD is also attempting to strike a balance in ethnic composition to ensure that the Army is broadly representative of the country as a whole, but setting target quotas for different groups has drawn criticism in Parliament.⁵⁹ According to ANA officials, however, early tensions over ethnic divisions within the army have been settled and the force has been successful in gaining the trust of Afghan civilians.⁶⁰

Afghan National Forces

Afghan National Compact has established clear goals for personnel in Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP).

34,688 of planned 70,000 ANA troops trained and equipped for operations; development on pace to meet target by 2011.⁵⁴

Estimated 30,000 of planned 62,000 ANP personnel in operation; force has been accused of corruption and incompetence but retains support of significant proportion Afghan population.⁵⁵

In 2002, the United States assumed the primary role in rebuilding the Afghan army, a responsibility that came under the remit of the Office of Security Cooperation-Afghanistan (OSC-A). Since then, the OSC-A has dealt with numerous problems including under-staffing (having never been above 71% of designated personnel strength), excessive unit rotation (with officers serving tours as short as four months) and insufficient equipment allocation.⁶¹ Indeed this last problem continues to dog the ANA, as Defense Minister Gen. Abdul Rahim Wardak recently deemed the army ready for independent operations but hindered by a lack of weaponry, vehicles and aircraft.⁶² Although ISAF forces are already struggling to meet their own needs for essential items such as armored vehicles and helicopters, the alliance is taking steps to ensure that the ANA is equipped with NATO-standard body-armor, weapons and vehicles.⁶³ The United States recently donated 800 Humvees and 12,000 light and heavy weapons to the ANA, which will be a marked improvement on what Afghan Defense Minister Abdul Rahim Wardak described as unreliable Soviet-era equipment.⁶⁴

*Defense Minister
Gen. Abdul Rahim
Wardak recently deemed
the army ready for
independent operations
but hindered by a lack of
weaponry, vehicles
and aircraft*

These equipment donations complement a training program which has thus far been relatively successful. The Kabul Military Training Center (KTMC) is staffed with advisors from various ISAF nations, including the United States, Canada, Britain and France. Although the basic sixteen week training given to new recruits before deployment falls far short of Western standards, and the progress to date has been described as “painfully slow”⁶⁵, ANA forces have been praised by trainers as brave and eager to learn despite the meager payment of \$70 a month.⁶⁶ They also appear to be earning the respect and trust of the local population, a vital prerequisite to developing the intelligence sources needed to effectively defeat an insurgent threat such as that posed by the Taliban.

Afghan National Police

In contrast to the ANA, the ANP are a major cause for concern. The development of a force that should be the cornerstone of peace and security in Afghanistan has been unimpressive and their current performance is arguably detrimental to the overall security situation. Lt. Gen. Karl Eikenberry, senior commander of OEF, stated “Ten good police are better than 100 corrupt police and ten corrupt police can do more damage to our success than one Taliban extremist.”⁶⁷

The November JCMB report described the ANP as under-funded, under-equipped and essentially corrupt. With officers being paid less than the Taliban insurgents that they must fight, they are all too susceptible to bribery, while poor equipment and shabby uniforms have hindered their ability to earn respect among the populace.⁶⁸ There may even be questions surrounding the loyalty of the police. A recent operation by a British Marine unit against insurgents in Helmand was conducted without the knowledge of the local ANP unit because a previous patrol had been ambushed after the police had been informed.⁶⁹

The target goal for the police as established in the Afghanistan Compact is 62,000 personnel, fully trained and equipped, by March 20, 2011. The JCMB recently deemed this number insufficient to meet security needs and authorized the deployment of an 11,000 strong auxiliary force, while a joint U.S. State and Defense Department report of December 4, 2006 acknowledged there is no clear figure on how many officers are currently in service.⁷⁰ According to this report, the best estimate is just over 30,000 fully equipped and trained ANP personnel.⁷¹ The problem stems in part from the Ministry of the Interior (MoI), which has failed to deliver progress reports and has been rife with corruption from its inception.

The development of Afghanistan’s police force is also a result of insufficient funding and resources. Much like the ANA, the ANP had to effectively be rebuilt from the ground-up following the fall of the Taliban. Germany assumed initial responsibility for this mission at the summit in Bonn in December 2001, but even by July 2005 had no comprehensive plan for rebuilding the ANP.⁷² German efforts have been geographically limited and focused on a national training center in Kabul, while overall efforts have generally fallen far short of expectations. The German government sent only 40 advisors to Afghanistan and since 2002 has devoted \$89.7 million to training 16,000 police.⁷³



*ANA soldiers receive instruction from a U.S. advisor
Photo: © U.S. Department of Defense*

This stands in contrast to the United States, which has spent \$862 million in training 40,000 ANP and Afghan Border Police (ABP) recruits in response to complaints by the Afghan government regarding the shortfall. But the U.S. effort has been hindered too, in large part by bureaucratic infighting between State and Defense Department officials over concerns over the 'militarization' of a civilian force.⁷⁴ Private contractors such as DynCorp have also been brought in to assist with training programs but results have not been satisfactory, with complaints ranging from aggressive behavior towards Afghan officials to sending personnel that were unimpressive or otherwise ill-suited to the task of preparing the ANP to counter a growing insurgency. Australia and the European Union have both announced recently that they will dispatch police advisors to contribute to the training of the ANP, reflecting the growing awareness of the ANP's inadequacy.⁷⁵

Creating an effective and reliable ANP should have been prioritized in 2001, and the failure of coalition and NATO forces to properly plan, coordinate and fund this objective cannot be seen as anything short of a serious mistake. Human Rights Watch warned in May 2006 that senior ANP positions were being filled by figures guilty of human-rights abuses and linked to warlords and opium-cultivation.⁷⁶ This situation reflects the dire state of the MoI, which must be stringently reformed if the police are to become effective in helping to secure contested provinces. Counter-insurgency experts have long argued that the police are the most important government branch in quelling violence and promoting the democratic rule of law; if Afghanistan's democracy is to survive it will require a loyal, corruption free and above all reliable ANP.

Recommendations:

Do not rush security force personnel into service until basic training has been completed in full; continue advanced training and emphasize the importance of additional skills such as literacy while in service.

Address issues of personnel retention and susceptibility to bribery by raising standard wages for ANP and ANA recruits. The international community should subsidize this for the near future.

Ensure quality and standardization for equipment provided to ANF personnel.



More personnel, material and funding will enable ISAF to focus more effectively on its mandate of assisting the reconstruction effort and providing tangible improvements to the lives of Afghan civilians. Photo: © U.S. Department of Defense

Conclusions

Afghanistan faces a long and difficult struggle over the coming years in the effort to achieve security and stability. The all-encompassing nature of this challenge cannot be over-emphasized; it requires redress of all the major issues afflicting Afghan society ranging from policing to education to agriculture.

The role NATO can play may be limited in scope but is certainly vital in terms of impact. Contributing member states must be prepared to commit both their forces and finances to the Afghan cause for the long-term if this effort is to be successful. The United States recently pledged a further \$10.6 billion towards the reconstruction effort and training for Afghan security forces, while European Union member states have promised to deliver an additional \$775 million over four years. Fulfilling these aid pledges is essential. Likewise, the international community must support this financial aid with the military assistance needed by Afghanistan, lest it slip back into the vacuum of power that fostered the rise of the Taliban and their al-Qaeda allies.

Appendix 1: National troop deployments

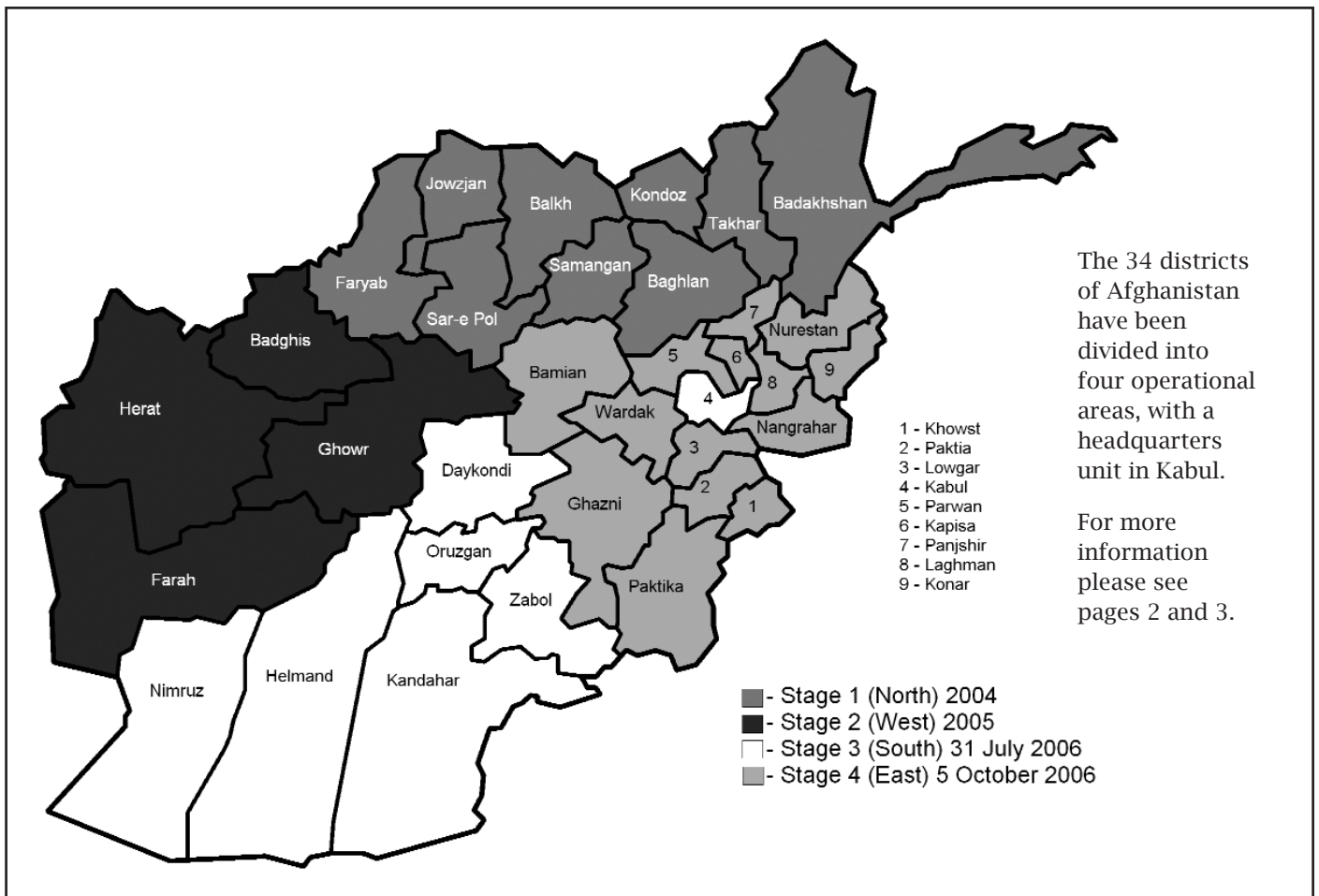
(accurate as of 7 February 2007)*

Albania**	30	Macedonia**	120	Poland	160
Australia**	500	Germany	3,000	Portugal	150
Austria**	5	Greece	170	Romania	750
Azerbaijan**	20	Hungary	180	Slovakia	60
Belgium	300	Iceland	5	Slovenia	50
Bulgaria	100	Ireland**	10	Spain	550
Canada	2,500	Italy	1,950	Sweden**	180
Croatia**	130	Latvia	35	Switzerland**	5
Czech Republic	150	Lithuania	130	Turkey	800
Denmark	400	Luxembourg	10	United Kingdom	5,200
Estonia	90	Netherlands	2,200	United States	14,000
Finland**	70	New Zealand**	100		
France	1,000	Norway	350	Total	35,460

* Numbers are approximate as national contingent strength is subject to unit rotation. Source: International Security Assistance Force website.

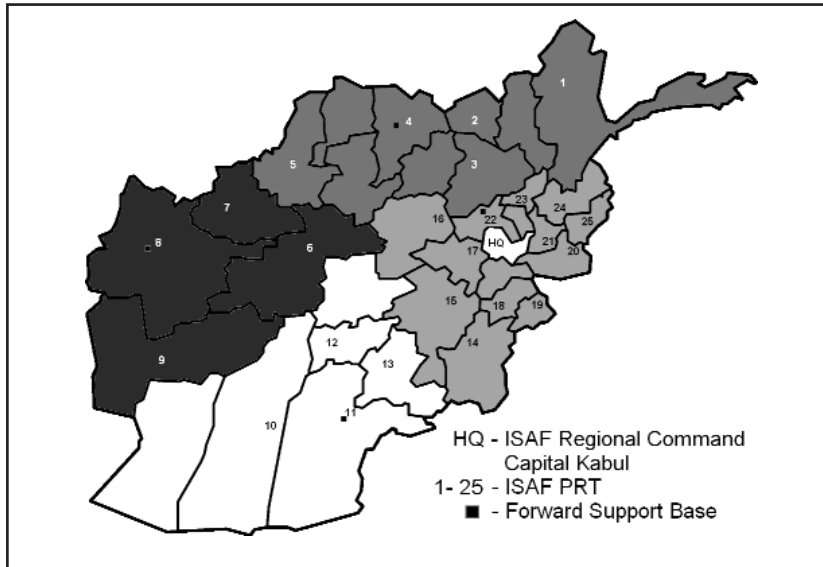
** Non-NATO member

Appendix 2: ISAF Operational Areas and Expansion Dates, 2004-2006



Appendix 3: PRT and Forward Support Base Locations

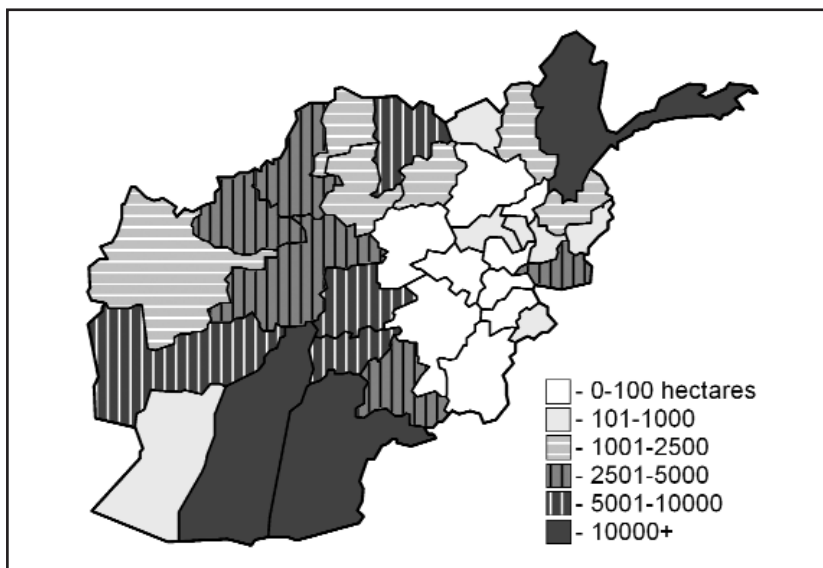
Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) are civil-military task forces designed to coordinate and conduct aid and reconstruction projects. Each PRT is directed by a national contingent and often supported by other ISAF member states.



The following ISAF member states lead PRTs in Afghanistan:

- United States** – PRT Bagram (22), PRT Nurestan (24), PRT Panjshir (23), PRT Gardez (18), PRT Ghazni (15), PRT Khowst (19), PRT Sharan (14), PRT Jalalabad (20), PRT Asadabad (25), PRT Mihtarlam (21), PRT Farah (9), PRT Qalat (13)
- Germany** – PRT Feyzabad (1), PRT Kondoz (2)
- Netherlands** – PRT Pol-e Khomri (3), PRT Tarin Kowt – joint Netherlands/Australian lead (12)
- Canada** – PRT Kandahar (11)
- UK** – PRT Lashkar Gah (10)
- Turkey** – PRT Wardak (17)
- Norway** – PRT Meymaneh (5)
- Sweden** – PRT Mazar-e Sharif (4)
- Lithuania** – PRT Chaghcharan (6)
- Spain** – PRT Qaleh-ye Now (7)
- New Zealand** – PRT Bamain (16)
- Italy** – PRT Heart (8)

Appendix 4: Opium Cultivation in Afghanistan



This diagram shows opium production across Afghanistan for the year 2006 as measured in the amount of land used to grow opium.

While the significant increase in opium cultivation represents a substantial threat to Afghan security, ISAF has an ill-defined and limited role in counter-narcotics (CN) efforts. British Lt. Gen. David Richards acknowledged that ISAF troops will assist the Afghan government in CN missions when asked but stated that such efforts are "not NATO's principal concern" and reiterated that ISAF does not engage in eradication programmes.

(Lt. Gen. David Richards quoted in Ron Syovitz, "Afghanistan: UN Antidrug Chief Wants NATO To Destroy Opium" *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, 12 September 2006)

Province	2005 Cultivation	2006 Cultivation	% Change	% of Total
Helmand	26,500	69,324	+162%	42%
Badakhshan	7,370	13,056	+77%	8%
Kandahar	12,989	12,619	-3%	8%
Oruzgan	2,024	9,773	+383%	6%
Farah	10,240	7,694	-25%	5%
Balkh	10,837	7,100	-34%	4%
Daykondi	2,581	7,044	+173%	4%
Others	31,459	38,390	+22%	23%
Rounded Total	104,000	165,000	+59%	

Cultivation figures are in hectares.

Sources: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Afghanistan Opium Survey 2006. September 2006; The Christian Science Monitor, "Charting the Afghan Reconstruction," 12 October 2006.

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A British soldier raises the Union Jack at the Lashkar Gah PRT during a transfer of command ceremony in May 2006.

Photo: © U.S. Department of Defense

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The UN-mandated, NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) has a limited but essential role to play in Afghanistan. Although the Afghan government faces numerous obstacles including corruption, growing opium cultivation and insufficient reconstruction and development projects, the immediate problem of insurgent-fostered insecurity requires urgent redress to facilitate progress on the other problems afflicting Afghanistan. This new report from BASIC provides an overview of ISAF's activities in countering the insurgent threat and bringing security to Afghanistan.



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