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Afghanistan and the Globalisation of Terrorist Tactics

Hekmat Karzai*

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FOUR years have passed since the United States' Operation Enduring Freedom toppled the Taliban regime. While much work remains, several surveys indicate that the overall conditions of the Afghan people appear to have improved, and may actually exceed the conditions of the pre-war period two decades ago. A recent poll conducted by US television network ABC indicates that Afghans generally believe their country is moving in the right direction, demonstrated by the return of more than three million refugees. The country currently enjoys an elected government and an enlightened constitution. Educational opportunities have expanded and schooling is now provided for all children regardless of gender.

Yet, the future success for Afghanistan is far from assured. Security remains a concern in the daily lives of the average Afghan as the Taliban, Al Qaeda, and Hizb-e-Islami continue to regroup and undertake terrorist attacks throughout the South and the Southeast of Afghanistan. They are learning and emulating tactics of other groups, especially, the ones practised in Iraq. Last year, 85 American soldiers and over 1,500 individuals, including NGO workers, religious leaders, international officers and government officials were killed by means common to Iraq.

Many experts say that because of the US military might during Operation Enduring Freedom, the Taliban and the foreign fighters were forced to establish sanctuaries in foreign cities and among tribal protectors living in areas between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Though the Taliban did stay quiet for some time to recover their losses, they have returned to armed action, with their targeting NGO workers and government officials and other cross-border attacks. Today, they act as a terrorist group and have gained momentum by not only attacking civil servants but also US convoys and Afghan military personnel. The Taliban's re-emergence as a more sophisticated group rests on several factors:

- a. the reestablishment of their logistics and support from the outside;
- b. the return of foreign fighters;
- c. financial support through the lucrative narcotics trade.

Re-emergence of the Taliban

Taliban tactics have clearly improved. In the past the Taliban's military skills were rudimentary. Today the Taliban are working more closely with foreign fighters and other

outside assistance; they are now capable of coordinating attacks, as well as executing some other tactically challenging attacks. There are reports that they have reorganised into cells of between 10 to 25 fighters, each unit containing either an Al Qaeda member, or other Arab fighter, who teaches them tactics commonly employed in Iraq.

The increasing technical sophistication is illustrated by their use of improvised explosive devises (IEDs). The IEDs are very powerful and can destroy the most well protected tanks, Humvees, and jeeps; they are also able to use advanced triggering devices that allow them to trigger their IEDs at the time of their choosing to hit a particular target.

More significantly, the Taliban and the foreign fighters have introduced a new arsenal in their protracted war -- suicide bombing. Before September 11, this weapon was unknown in Afghanistan's long history of conflict, but it has gained a rapid foothold. Many Afghans allege that suicide attacks are carried out by foreign fighters because the phenomenon is alien to the Afghan culture and the brand of Islam that they practice. Before his arrest by the Pakistani authorities, the Taliban spokesperson, Mullah Latifullah Hakimi, warned that they had 45 more suicide attackers awaiting orders to strike. His prediction came true when, during the months of October and November 2005 alone, there were 8 attacks, including one in the heart of the capital, in front of the army training center, that killed over 9 people while injuring hundreds.

Iraq-style beheadings

There are also a number of beheadings, similar to those in Iraq. While the number remains small, it is a dangerous escalation, designed to increase the terror within the local and foreign population in the country. This latter group was most recently targeted, when Ramankutty Maniyappan, a driver with the Indian state-run Border Roads Organisation was kidnapped and later beheaded.

The Taliban has been attempting to link with the larger jihadi community. On December 25th 2005, it posted a video of the decapitation of an Afghan hostage on Al Qaeda-linked websites. This was the first-ever published video showing the beheading of an Afghan hostage in the hands of terrorist cell. In what appeared as forced confession, Saeed Allah Khan a resident of Khost Province stated: "I worked as a spy for the Americans along with four other people. The group received \$45,000 dollars and my share is \$7,000 dollars."

This video demonstrates how the practice of decapitation initiated by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, leader of Tawhid wal Jihad in Iraq, has reached Afghanistan. It is not clear whether the execution was carried out by the Taliban or by Al Qaeda militants. But one thing is for certain -- Al Qaeda has, once again, become active in the region. Al Qaeda has appointed two of its most able commanders to Afghanistan. Khalid Habib, a Moroccan who led a group of foreign fighters and fought with the Taliban, was put in charge of the southeastern part of Afghanistan. Abd al Hadi Iraqi, a respected commander who fought against the Northern Alliance in Takhar province was in charge of southwestern provinces. The reappearance of these two experienced commanders is meant not only to increase the military capabilities in the country, but also to send a message, that the US campaign in Afghanistan has been an utter failure, and that Al Qaeda is so confident of victory it is sending in the best it has.

To further illustrate Al Qaeda's commitment towards Afghanistan, Ayman Al Zawahiri in his last audiotape released in December focused mainly on Afghanistan as the most important

centre for jihad. He stated: “Even if Afghanistan is burned tree by tree and rock by rock, we shall not hand you over to the enemies of Islam.”

The long-term stability of Afghanistan at this crucial stage depends on the Afghan security apparatus -- the National Army, Police and the Intelligence. The international community led by the US may have trained the security personnel but it will take several years before the Afghans are able to deal with the threat on their own. Building their capacity and enhancing the training should be a key priority.

Greater emphasis should also be put on establishing institutions that can monitor and analyse the threat currently posed to Afghanistan. Innovative trends are emerging, new developments are occurring, and alliances are being established – all without being thoroughly examined.

Afghanistan is undergoing tremendous changes. There are new influences from Iraq, new terrorist alliances, new terrorist technologies and tactics. A greater emphasis should be put on establishing institutions that can monitor and analyse the changing threat in Afghanistan. To understand and respond to these new challenges, there is a grave need to develop a long view and to act strategically.

The stability of Afghanistan is not only important for the Afghan people but for the region as a whole. The international community must prove its commitment and devotion to this emerging democracy, as it would truly be a shame if Afghanistan once again became a haven for the terrorists.

* Hekmat Karzai, a specialist on Afghanistan, is a MSc student at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University.