

Afghanistan Transition

Dangers of a Summer Drawdown



February 2011

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A report by the International Council on Security and Development (ICOS)

Field assessment: Helmand and Kandahar provinces, Afghanistan, January 2011

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- *Chronic Failures in the War on Terror - From Afghanistan to Somalia (April 2008)*
- *On a Knife Edge: Rapid Assessment Field Survey, Southern and Eastern Afghanistan (May 2007)*

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Executive Summary

This report looks at the current dynamics in Kandahar and Helmand provinces, southern Afghanistan, in the context of the United States' announced plan to begin drawing down military forces in Afghanistan in five months.

The surge of 30,000 additional US forces has changed the security dynamics on the ground significantly, with the additional troops making major gains in clearing districts previously held by the Taliban.

The total troops on the ground in Afghanistan have gone from approximately 89,000 NATO-ISAF troops and 215,000 Afghan security forces in March 2010, to a current total of 131,000 NATO-ISAF troops and 266,000 Afghan police and army, an overall increase of 93,000. The Afghan security forces are also more visible and arguably more professional and better equipped than before.

This progress at the military level will hopefully create an enabling environment for analogous improvement in the fields of aid, development, governance and counter-narcotics which still require significant work. Without that, the military gains will be undermined and unsustainable. The urgent needs of people displaced by the fighting, the chronic grinding poverty and unemployment, and the grassroots political dynamics are not being addressed in southern Afghanistan. It is not at all clear what strategies will be used to tackle these vital issues.

Dramatic rises in the farm-gate opium price (in some areas reported at \$475/kg, with last year's rate at around \$180/kg) may also have serious consequences: the insurgency may stand to gain greater profits from the opium economy and more farmers could be drawn into poppy farming.

As a response to the pressures of the surge, the Taliban are adapting their tactics by using assassinations and roadside bombs. The road networks of the south are still compromised, which both impedes commercial activity in the region and affects the overall security dynamics. There are often-voiced fears that in the face of the usual spring/summer Taliban offensives, the Afghan police and army will be unable to hold the districts which have been cleared. This is especially worrying given widespread fears about Afghan security forces' complicity with the insurgents, particularly with regard to the police and those Afghan units in exposed positions on the roads or away from the urban centers of Kandahar and Lashkar Gah.

The current political withdrawal calendar puts pressure on NATO-ISAF and the international community at large to produce quick results for the training of Afghan security forces, and increases the risks of choosing quantity over quality. It also does not allow sufficient time to build the political loyalty of these forces, or provide assurances that these troops will be able and willing to stand up to Taliban attacks or intimidation.

The White House acknowledges that the gains that have been made are “fragile and reversible”¹. The directive to begin drawing down US forces in July 2011, as stated by President Obama at West Point in December 2009², is based on domestic politics and pressure for a withdrawal rather than on the realities of on-the-ground dynamics in southern Afghanistan.

In addition, there is an inconsistency in discussions concerning the timing of the drawdown. The surge was not fully underway until August 2010. From this date, President Obama’s eighteen-month deadline would end in February 2012, but the July 2011 deadline is being publicly referenced.

Given the fragility of the current situation, maintaining a July 2011 deadline runs the risk of jeopardising the progress made so far. Maintaining current force levels until July 2012 is essential in order to preserve the hard-won gains of the surge and assure an orderly transition process.

¹ Overview of the White House Afghanistan and Pakistan Annual Review, December 16 2010. Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2010/12/16/overview-afghanistan-and-pakistan-annual-review>

² This withdrawal date was reiterated in the December 2010 Afghanistan and Pakistan Annual Review, and in President Obama’s State of the Union Speech in January 2011.

1. Security Update: The (Slowly) Rising Tide

There are just five months until the first US troops start to be 'drawn down' from Afghanistan, in July 2011, as announced by President Obama at West Point in December 2009 and repeated most recently in January 2011.

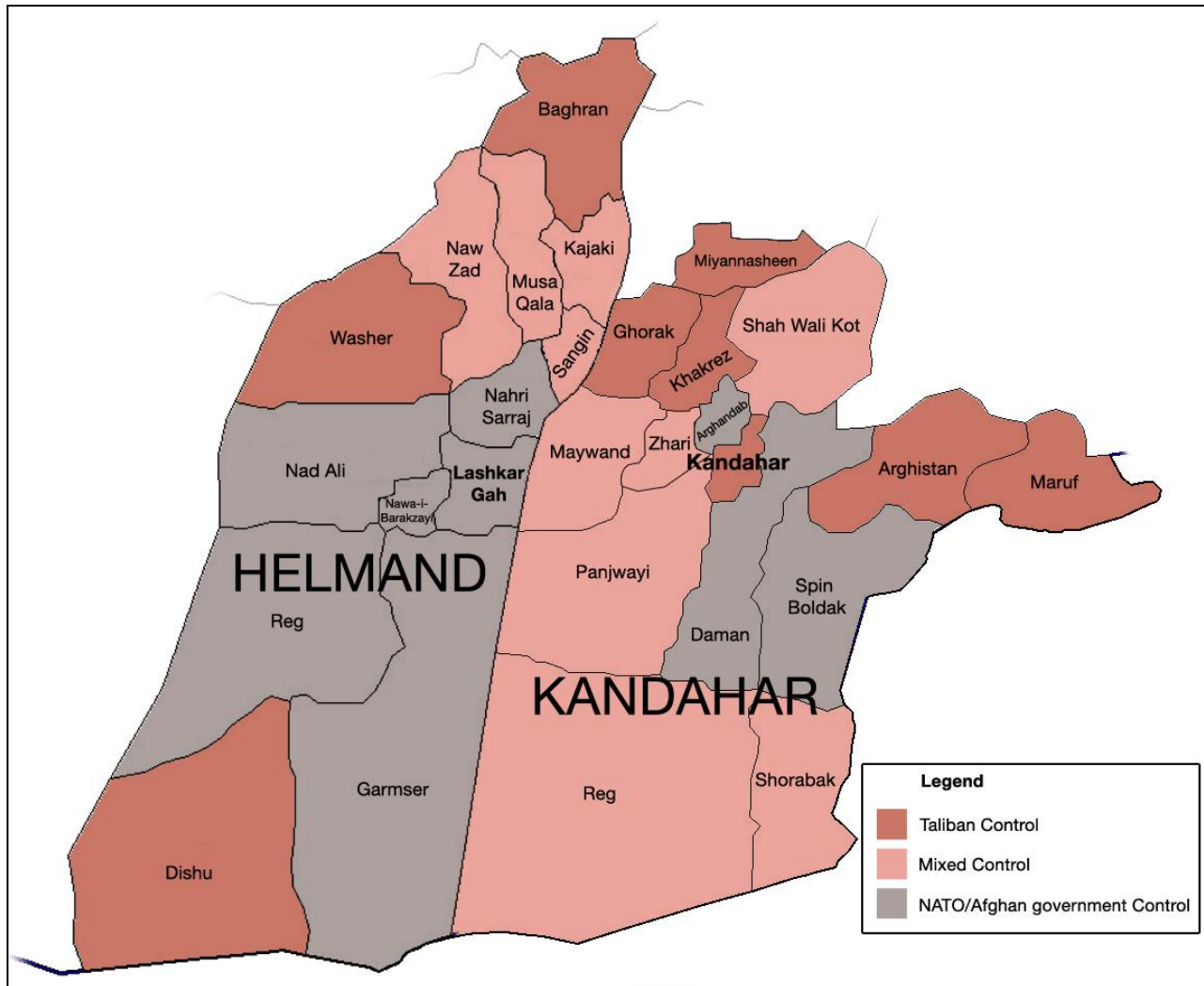
This report considers the security situation in Kandahar and Helmand provinces in the context of this approaching deadline. The security situation is indeed showing clear but unstable signs of progress as a result of the 30,000 extra US troops deployed to Afghanistan. The increase in the numbers and the abilities of Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) is also central to this strategy: capable Afghan forces will be essential for NATO-ISAF to pull out most international forces by 2014, as planned.

The effects of this strategy and of the surge are clearly visible in southern Afghanistan. NATO and Afghan forces now control a greater number of districts in Helmand and Kandahar than before. The most significant districts demonstrating changes in the security dynamics are Nawa, Marjah and Garmsir in Helmand, and Zhari, Arghandab and Panjwayi in Kandahar.



Afghan police officer, southern Afghanistan

The map below details the levels of control across these two provinces, as perceived by local Afghans interviewed.



Perceived control of southern Afghanistan, based on interviews with Afghan civilians in local areas in January 2011.

Some districts are still contested or under insurgent control. Local residents in Kandahar indicated that Khakrez district is dominated by the Taliban. Although Zhari district centre is perceived to be secure, other parts are believed to be infiltrated by insurgent fighters. Panjwayi district has seen notable improvements in security. In Helmand province Sangin district is seeing intense operations by US forces and is still contested.

Control of Road Network Still Contested

The main highway between Kandahar and Helmand, and roads from the cities to the districts which have been cleared, remain compromised by Taliban activities. As a result, travelling outside villages and urban areas is restricted. This indicates that NATO-ISAF or ANSF control does not yet extend beyond the main urban centres in some districts. The roads from Kabul to Kandahar and Kandahar to Lashkar Gah are not regularly clear for safe travel. The roads from Lashkar Gah to all district centres remain questionable, and the roads to Sangin and Musa Qala were reported as functionally impassable.

Naturally, this creates a sense of isolation and lack of security amongst the local population. It also limits the ability of Afghan civilians to fully engage in the social and economic activity necessary to address the poverty and unemployment that plagues the south.

Perceptions and Appearance of Control Improving

Equally as important as the actual level of control is the *perception* of security that NATO-ISAF and Afghan forces provide for Afghan communities. It is clear that security forces are digging into the districts that they have cleared of insurgents, building bases and reinforcing their positions against an expected spring/summer offensive by the Taliban, who will attempt to take back control of these districts or to harass their positions. This has created an improved and, in some cases, very positive sense of security for some local communities.

PANJWAYI DISTRICT SNAPSHOT: AN IMPROVEMENT

Panjwayi district in Kandahar province is significantly safer and more commercially and socially active than it had been on previous visits. Security is provided by more professional, more organised and better equipped Afghan police units. Importantly, police here are from the community and patrol on foot amongst local citizens, building confidence and helping to gather vital grassroots information, illustrating that with effort and time the Afghan police can play a stabilising and positive role in rural communities.

However, economic development remains limited in Panjwayi. Locals complain about the lack of jobs and state that a failure to gain employment leads young men to join the insurgency. They also say that, although foreign agencies have promised employment and reconstruction, this has failed to materialise in any significant way. Electricity supplies remain sporadic.

An open medical clinic exists in the district centre of Panjwayi, which is an encouraging sign, but on a recent visit it was found the clinic has no doctors present, and lacked basic supplies and medicines (including antibiotics and morphine).

ARGHANDAB DISTRICT SNAPSHOT: DEVELOPMENT AND SECURITY PROGRESS

Arghandab district has been the scene of some of the heaviest fighting of recent months, and security has improved significantly. Areas which were once inaccessible due to insurgent activity or control can now be visited in relative safety. Visible signs of the new security dynamic are a number of new smaller bases and checkpoints, controlled by combined American and Afghan forces.

The increase in security has enabled much greater commercial activity and there are more signs of development projects. Bazaars which were previously closed are now open, busy and stocking a wide range of goods. Development and reconstruction efforts are visible.

However, food insecurity, poverty, and unemployment remain serious issues. The controversies related to destroyed homes and orchards in the districts, and the struggles with the bureaucracy around the compensation programmes, are popular topics of conversation and a source of tension between local residents and NATO-ISAF.

Afghan Security Forces: Improving in Quality and Quantity

An encouraging trend is the improvement in the number, the capabilities and equipment of Afghan police and army units. Afghan police, in particular, are far more visible and professional than previously (see, for example, the box above on Panjwayi district). With the support of NATO-ISAF troops they have established multiple small police bases at regular intervals along main roads, and the number of checkpoints is multiplying in an attempt to stop the free movement of insurgents.

The organisation of the police forces is also greatly improved from a year ago. The number of police who appear to be under the influence of drugs is markedly lower. Greater numbers of foot patrols made up of both Afghan and international forces are another encouraging sign.

This indicates that, although serious issues still exist in the behaviour and reputation of Afghan police (discussed further below), international efforts to properly train Afghan security forces are bearing fruit and could eventually create positive momentum for the counterinsurgency campaign.

What Lies Ahead in the Spring/Summer Fighting Season?

As noted above, Afghan civilians report satisfaction with the improvements in the current security situation, but many expressed fears that security forces would not be able to hold the area if the Taliban return in the spring. As the spring fighting season approaches, the Taliban are likely to attempt to re-infiltrate districts that are currently held by NATO-ISAF and Afghan

forces. As NATO-ISAF and Afghan troops are dug into urban areas with significant firepower and support, it is unlikely the insurgents will regain the initiative.

However the concern is that international troops will not be able to move out of the districts they are currently holding without jeopardising the security gains which have been made, because the Afghan police and army units are not yet of sufficient strength to hold the territory.

Despite the progress in the capabilities of the ANSF, serious questions remain over their ability to function without strong NATO-ISAF support.

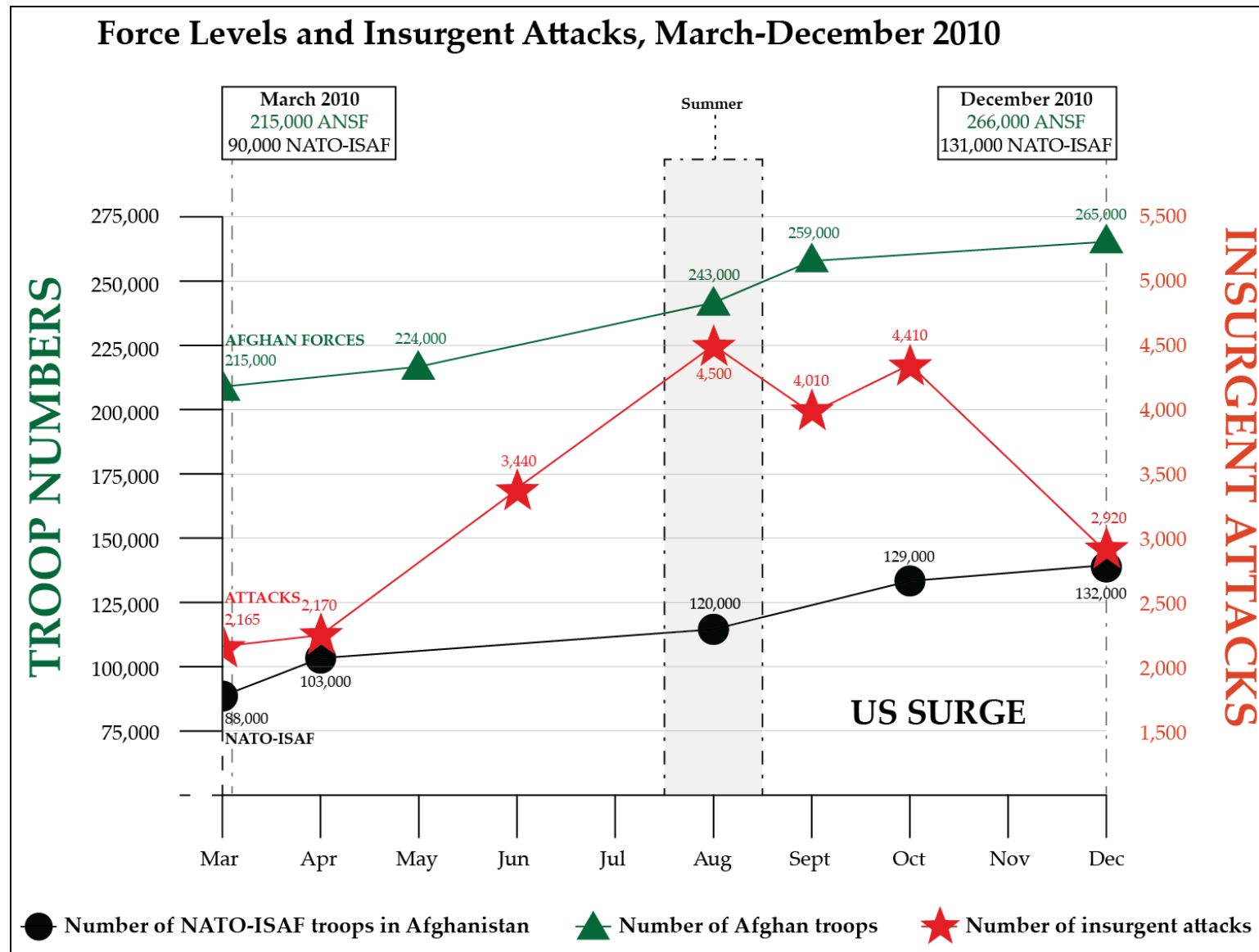
Effectiveness of Afghan army battalions in 2010³				
	May (Number of battalions)	June (Number of battalions)	August (Number of battalions)	September (Number of battalions)
Independent	0	0	0	0
Effective with advisors	27	24	29	32
Effective with assistance	24	37	40	39
Dependent on coalition partnering	28	41	40	41
Ineffective	5	5	0	0
New	0	4	0	1
Unassessed	29	19	27	23

Effectiveness of Afghan army battalions in 2010, as assessed by NATO-ISAF

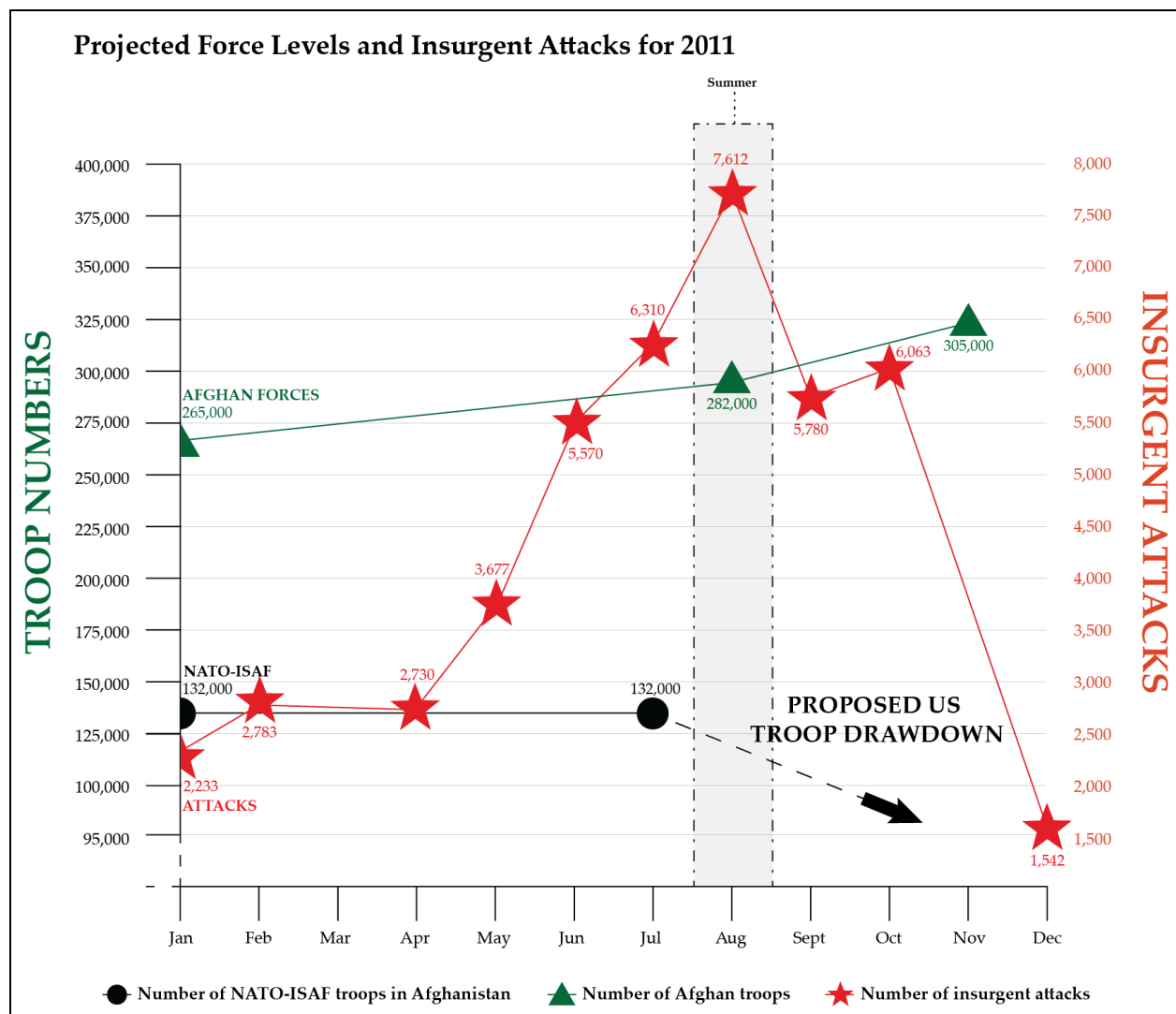
The table above shows the number of Afghan army battalions rated at various degrees of effectiveness by NATO-ISAF trainers. Training teams assess the battalions on several indicators, including leadership, logistics, quality of personnel, maintenance of equipment, and so on.

As the table shows, to date no battalion has been considered “independent”, or capable of carrying out operations on its own. However, the numbers of units assessed to be effective with advisors or assistance has increased slowly. This indicates some progress in the quality of the Afghan forces.

³ Livingston, S, Messera, H and O’Hanlon, M (2011) *Afghanistan Index*. Brookings Institute. Available at: <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/Programs/FP/afghanistan%20index/index.pdf>



Numbers of NATO-ISAF and Afghan forces throughout 2010, as well as insurgent attacks recorded through the year.



Projections for the insurgent attacks are based on a linear trend, using NATO-ISAF figures of insurgent attacks from 2008, 2009 and 2010. These are solely projections and are not intended to provide a prediction of the security situation in 2011.

Insurgency Adapting Under Pressure

In the face of increased NATO-ISAF and Afghan pressure, the Taliban are adapting their tactics. There is evidence that insurgents are now avoiding firefights and direct attacks on NATO-ISAF/Afghan positions, and are focusing on using roadside bombs and targeted killings instead. This is designed to intimidate Afghan civilians and discourage them from working with the government or international agencies, an effective methodology that has limited the ability to recruit officials and develop local government. For instance, the number of assassinations in and around Kandahar has increased dramatically. In the first four months of 2008 there were just four such killings; in the same four months of 2010, twenty-seven assassinations occurred⁴.

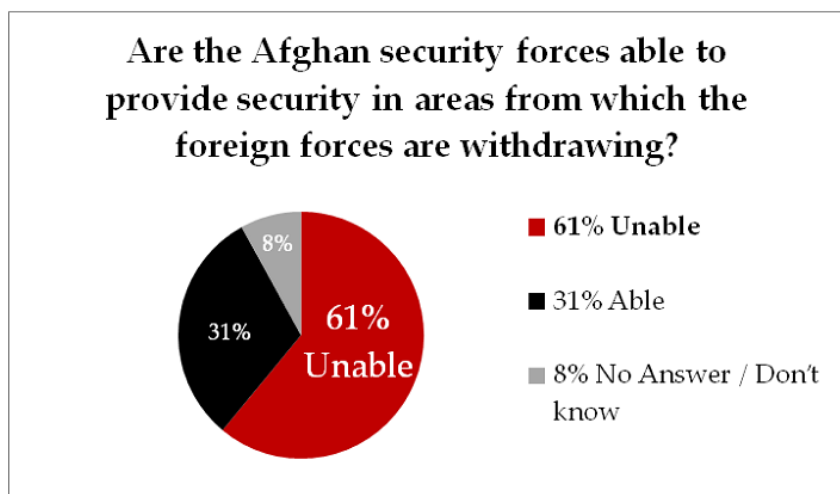
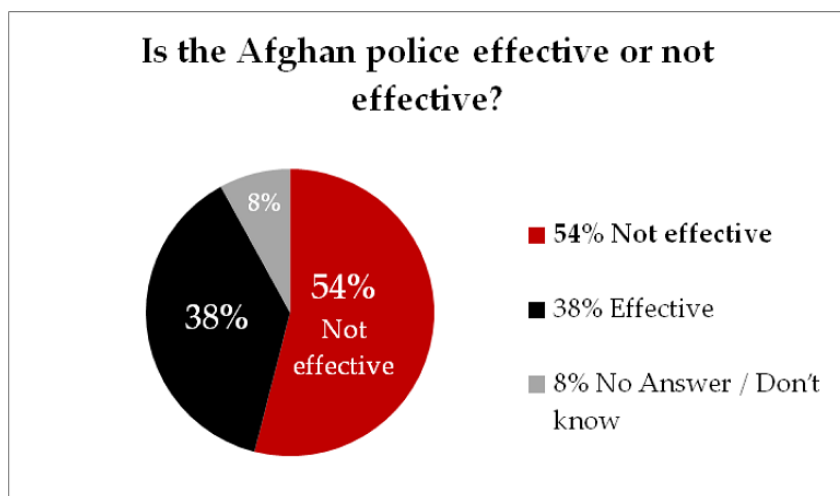
Intimidation, Duplicity and Complicity: Will the Afghan Security Forces Stand Up and Fight?

Another key tactic noted is the intimidation of Afghan security forces. Taliban fighters are reported to be reassuring Afghan police and army units at remote checkpoints that they will not be attacked, provided that they give information on foreigners in the region, convoys travelling through, and so on. This allows the Taliban to gain all of the benefits of gathering intelligence on the roads without having to risk their own safety in doing so.

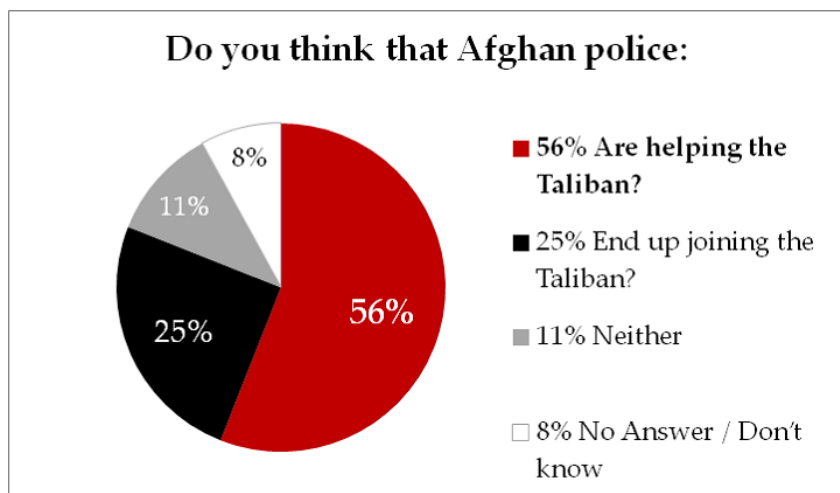
This is less of a danger inside Lashkar Gah and Kandahar City, where Afghan security forces have more ability and will to resist an attack by the insurgents. However in rural areas and on remote roads, some under-resourced Afghan police and army units which do not have the confidence or willingness to stand up to Taliban attacks provide information, rather than risk being killed or abducted by Taliban fighters. This does not imply political support for the insurgency – it is simply a practical response to the exposed positions of the Afghan security forces.

Supporting this assessment, ICOS field research in October 2010 indicated that many ordinary Afghans do not have faith in their security forces. Only 52% of 1,000 Afghan men interviewed in Kandahar and Helmand believed the Afghan army was effective and just 38% thought so about the police. Particularly concerning for the current military dynamics is the fact that 61% of interviewees in October 2010 thought that Afghan security forces would be unable to provide security in areas from which NATO-ISAF was withdrawing.

⁴ Livingston, S, Messera, H and O'Hanlon, M (2011) *Afghanistan Index*. Brookings Institute. Available at: <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/Programs/FP/afghanistan%20index/index.pdf>



Underlining the fears about duplicity and complicity, 81% believed that Afghan police were helping or joining the insurgency, and 69% thought the same of the army.



Source: ICOS field research October 2010.

Quantity over Quality?

Given the substantial quantity and quality of weaponry being distributed to Afghan security forces (see tables below), the threat of defection to the Taliban is concerning.

Afghan National Security Force Weaponry Distribution in 2010			
Total: 383,623			
Afghan National Army: Total 135,125		Afghan National Police: Total 248, 498	
9mm pistol	30,719	9mm pistol	77,701
M16/M4 Rifle	81,371	AK-47	125,635
RPG-7 Rocket Launcher	3,404	DSHK Machine Gun	629
M203 Grenade Launcher	4,382	RPK Machine Gun	9,945
M2 Heavy Machine Gun	1,363	PKM Machine Gun	9,561
D-30 Howitzer	109	RPG-7 rocket launcher	4,947
M249 Machine Gun	5,264	SVD Dragunov sniper rifle	39
M240 Machine Gun	3,794	40mm grenade multi launcher	195
M24 Sniper Rifle	3,038	Other weapons	19,846
SPG 9 Recoilless Rifle	266		
81mm Mortars	208		
82mm Mortars	568		
Shotgun	639		

Source: NATO Training Mission Afghanistan (NTM-A).

Whatever the motivation, the collaboration of Afghan security forces with the militants is a serious political issue for the Afghan government, and for the international forces who train, support and pay for the Afghan police and army.

To date this has not been fully addressed, perhaps because it conflicts with the current emphasis on training as many Afghan troops and police as quickly as possible. For instance, by the end of 2011 NATO envisages an increase in the number of Afghan security forces from 251,000 in November 2010 to 305,000 by November 2011⁵. This is a very large security force, which is almost wholly paid for by Western taxpayers, and the focus has been on getting results in the form of numbers, rather than quality.

There is strong domestic political pressure in the West to show results in training sufficient Afghan forces as a prerequisite for NATO-ISAF forces to begin withdrawing. However, the result of training as many ANSF as fast as possible is a flood of advanced weaponry into the hands of tens of thousands of mostly young men, whose allegiance is often fluid under the pressures they face. There is a risk of trained ANA or ANP switching alliances or fighting for

⁵ The US government is anticipated to spend \$20.9 billion on the Afghan security forces in 2010-2011, more than all the money spent from 2002 to 2009 (\$19.4 billion).

the insurgency instead of for the Afghan state. Addressing this crucial challenge demands more investment in training beyond 2014, and the willingness to continue long-term support for the security sector.

It is hoped that the overall capacity of the Afghan security forces will be improved by NATO-ISAF's partnership and mentorship programmes. NATO-ISAF runs two mentoring programmes, the ANA Operational Mentor Liaison Teams (OMLT) and the Police Operational Liaison Teams (POMLT). The OMLTs and POMLTs are teams of twenty to fifty NATO-ISAF troops who live and work alongside Afghan army and police units as part of the training schedule.

In addition, most ANA units are currently partnered with a NATO-ISAF unit that operates and fights alongside the Afghan unit in combined operations. If there is a troop drawdown this coming summer, this partnering system will be weakened and there will be a greater risk that Afghan units will not be up to the task. In principle, the longer the Afghan security forces are mentored and partnered, the more professional and reliable they will become.

TRANSITION MATH

President Karzai has announced that, on March 21 2011, he will announce the timeline for the first areas to be handed over to Afghan forces.

Given the fragility of the current security gains in southern Afghanistan, this again raises the question of why the drawdown plan is scheduled to begin in July 2011. In order to support the transition to Afghan forces and put it on a solid security footing, NATO-ISAF forces should stay until it is certain that Afghan security forces are capable of holding the first areas.

The overall success of the transition process is critical, and more important than adhering to an arbitrary drawdown date created for domestic political reasons.

Where will the Taliban Focus Offensive Focus in the Summer?

One possibility is that the Taliban would choose to harass only those districts taken in the most recent operations. However, the serious challenge of retaking these districts with NATO-ISAF forces in place leads to the consideration that the Taliban, responding to NATO-ISAF successes in the south, would switch the focus of their efforts north towards Kabul or towards further expansion in northern Afghanistan.

Increased Taliban presence in northern Afghanistan would be unlikely to result in a national security risk as severe as in the south, and would therefore not get priority over operations in Helmand and Kandahar. However it could precipitate a rebalancing of coalition forces in response. Even if one considers that NATO-ISAF forces and a larger ANSF can match this shift (which is arguable), it would be imprudent to believe that the clearing of the south means that

the surge forces can begin a drawdown in the summer of 2011. The Taliban can and do easily adjust their geographic focus, and it would be very optimistic to believe that the ANSF could counter that with a reduced NATO-ISAF footprint in the upcoming months.

SURGE CALENDAR CALCULATIONS

At West Point in December 2009, President Barack Obama announced that an additional 30,000 US troops would be sent to Afghanistan. He also stated that "After 18 months, our troops will begin to come home" and that July 2011 was also set as the date for the beginning of the transfer out of Afghanistan.

However the surge troops were not fully in place until around August 2010: eighteen months from this date would be February 2012, not July 2011.

There is therefore an inconsistency between the 18-month lifespan of the surge and the July 2011 deadline for drawdown. The July 2011 deadline is taking priority, with the result that the full surge will have less than a year in which to show results.

This is insufficient time for the surge to make a decisive impact, which emphasises the need to shift the drawdown date to July 2012 instead.

Plan for Pakistan Safe Havens Still Unclear

It is important to note that the view from southern Afghanistan suggests that the issue of Pakistan's safe havens continues to be inadequately addressed. Senior US officials have said that the war remains "winnable" even if the Pakistani army does not expand operations against militants in the tribal areas⁶.

However, as these areas are vital havens for the Taliban and other insurgent groups to regroup and recruit, the lack of a publicly understood strategy for tackling these areas additionally complicates the security forecast for the next year in Kandahar and Helmand⁷. These safe havens allow the Taliban to sustain themselves despite the losses of the last months, and constitute a clear threat to solidifying the recent security gains.

⁶ BBC News, "Afghan war 'winnable without Pakistan help'", February 2 2011. Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-12342242>

⁷ O'Hanlon, M (2011) *Improving Afghan War Strategy*. Brookings Institute. Available at: http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/papers/2011/02_afghanistan_ohanlon/02_afghanistan_ohanlon.pdf

Weapons Prices Rising

Although in some areas the Afghan peoples' perception of security has improved, in many areas civilians still feel insecure and uncertain about the future.

Weapons prices in the south have increased dramatically from previous visits (see table below). This may indicate an increased demand for personal security, perhaps fuelled by weapons supplied by Afghan security forces; alternatively it could mean that the weapon supply is decreasing, due to more effective public control of weapons. In addition, rumours persist that the inhabitants of Tajik areas in northern Afghanistan are stockpiling weapons, perhaps in preparation for a future civil war.

Average price of weapons in selected Afghan cities (US Dollars)				
	Jan 2007	Aug 2007	Jan 2008	Jan 2011
Kalashnikov (AK-47)	380	325	340	1010
Rocket Propelled Grenade (RPG) Launcher	1,250	500	550	1200
PK Machine Gun	N/A	1,500	1850	6400
Makarov Pistol	600	600	630	1000
Tokarev Pistol	350	300	330	590
Mortar 82mm	1000	4000	1300	N/A
Smith and Wesson 9mm	N/A	N/A	N/A	1500

Average prices for selected weapons in southern Afghanistan, based on local interviews

3. Political and Economic Progress Still Lacking

The valuable military progress achieved by the troop surge is not sufficient on its own. Enhanced security provides space and time for accompanying progress in the fields of governance, development, counter-narcotics and humanitarian responses. All of these would ensure an environment hostile to a Taliban presence, and without progress here the gains made by the surge will be wasted. Above all the political credibility of the Afghan government and the international community must be strengthened, and the polarisation and lack of trust within Afghan society must be tackled.

Political Credibility Issue and Relationship Deficiencies Abound

The Afghan government in Kabul has little political legitimacy or credibility in much of southern Afghanistan, particularly in the rural areas where the writ of the government does not run. In other areas the government and its officials are seen as corrupt and predatory, seeking bribes at every turn. Both a lack of governance and a rapacious government lead to serious resentment against the Afghan authorities, and can encourage people to look elsewhere – for instance, to the Taliban - for political legitimacy and security.

They don't think about us, so we don't think about them.

Afghan man discussing the authorities in Kabul, Kandahar province

Many Afghans speak negatively about their national politicians, who are perceived as distant from their everyday lives. Perceptions of local politicians vary between districts: in some, officials are believed to be unaccountable, not linked to their local constituents and a source of harassment for bribes.

Previous ICOS field research identified a clear 'relationship gap' between the Afghan people and the international community⁸. There is a real lack of understanding about why we are there and what our real intentions and objectives are. Seventy-two percent of Afghan men interviewed by ICOS in Helmand and Kandahar said that foreign forces disrespect their religion and traditions. This suspicion feeds resentment of the international community and decreases the willingness of ordinary Afghans to work with foreign agencies.

⁸ The International Council on Security and Development (2010) *Afghanistan: The Relationship Gap*. Available at: http://www.icosgroup.net/documents/afghanistan_relationship_gap.pdf

Let's Tell Them About 9/11

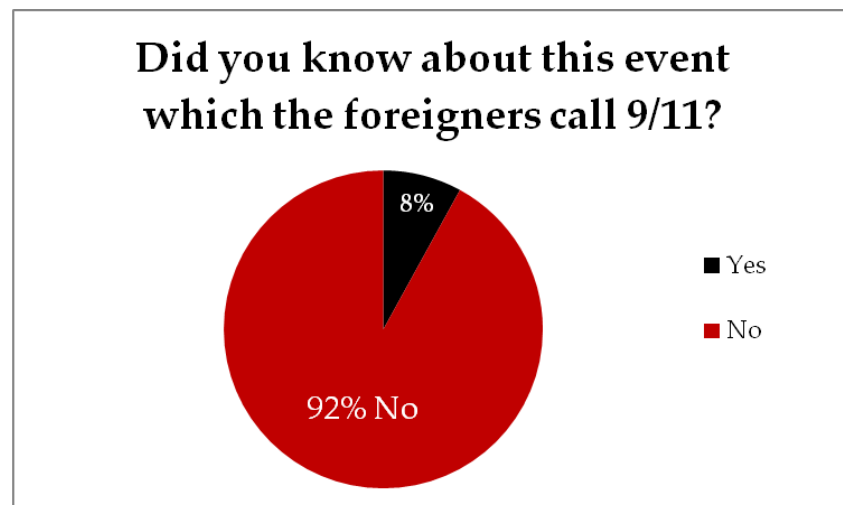
Interviewees in October 2010 were read the following description of the 9/11 attacks which brought the US and its allies to Afghanistan.

"On September 11 2001, Al Qaeda attackers hijacked planes in the United States which were full of ordinary passengers, including women and children. They flew these planes, full of people, into two tall buildings in the city of New York. They destroyed both buildings, which were full of ordinary people.

The attacks killed 3000 innocent citizens, including Muslims. They were organised and directed by Al Qaeda, led by Osama Bin Laden, who was then living in Afghanistan protected by the Taliban government.

The American government asked the Taliban to hand over Osama Bin Laden. They refused, so the Americans and their allies NATO attacked the Taliban, and came into Afghanistan to look for Osama Bin Laden and overthrew the Taliban."

After being read this description, only 8% of those interviewed in Helmand and Kandahar stated that they knew about the attacks.



October 2010 field research by ICOS⁹.

The lack of knowledge and atmosphere of mistrust also allows conspiracy theories to spread. This is facilitated by the environment of southern Afghanistan, with few sources of reliable and unbiased information. For instance, in October 2010, 40% of interviewees in Helmand and

⁹ The International Council on Security and Development (2010) *Afghanistan Transition: Missing Variables*. Available at: http://www.icosgroup.net/documents/afghanistan_transition_missing_variables.pdf

Kandahar believed that foreigners were in Afghanistan to occupy or destroy the country, or to destroy Islam.

Anger and Feelings of Neglect in Afghan Communities

In addition, some Afghans feel that they are treated with a lack of sincerity by all sides in the conflict, and are manipulated to serve political and military objectives. There is a widespread sense that the suffering of ordinary Afghans and the role that they can play in the success of the conflict is ignored. There is a strong sense of anger and resentment between citizens and their own government as well as the international community.



Lashkar Gah citizen being enrolled in the “voluntary” biometric programme

Compensation Issues

This sense of injustice is fuelled by the lack of adequate compensation for property which is destroyed in the fighting.

“It’s not fair. This is what the Soviets did as well. Money cannot replace what we lost. Our great-grandchildren will remember what they did to us. We have no one to speak for us. The foreigners always have lots of promises, but we see nothing.”

Afghan man, Kandahar province

Many Afghans report losing property in the fighting, which often serves as the basis of their livelihood, particularly in rural areas. One Afghan man (serving in the ANA) reported losing his home and trees in Zhari district, which had been owned by his family for several generations. Replacing the house was estimated to cost around \$50,000. He was given the choice of receiving \$8,000 immediately or \$21,000 once his file had been approved by Kabul. He sent off the file but felt unable to press for more compensation in order to cover the full cost of rebuilding his home.

As many Afghans are illiterate, they are unable to go through the complex, time-consuming red tape involved in securing compensation. As a result they cannot restore their livelihoods and grow increasingly resentful towards the Afghan government and the international community.

Divided and Polarised Local Communities

These tensions, uncertainties and resentments are exacerbating divisions in local communities. At the local level, Afghans feel pressured by all sides and often feel suspicious towards members of their own communities. The competing agendas of NATO-ISAF, the Afghan government and the Taliban are creating fractures in local society as different groups align themselves with different parties to the conflict.

Iranians on the Move?

There are signs that other actors are moving in to fill economic voids. In particular, there are several reports that Iranians have been present in southern Afghanistan, lending money and thus seeking to subtly increase Iranian influence. From the perspective of NATO-ISAF, this is an unwelcome development given other rumours of Iranian assistance to the Taliban, and political moves to influence the allegiance of the Kabul government.

Desire for Constitutional Reform

Afghans interviewed expressed a strong desire to choose their local governors during ICOS's October 2010 field research, when 75% indicated their preference for elections for the posts of district and provincial governors. The current power structure in Afghanistan, which was established by the Bonn Agreement in late 2001, centralises significant power in the executive in Kabul. Currently, President Karzai appoints a range of local officials, down to the level of district governors. This reduces local accountability and increases the gap between the Afghan people and their authorities¹⁰.

¹⁰ Barno, D and Exum, A (2010) *Responsible Transition: Securing US Interests in Afghanistan Beyond 2011*. Center for a New American Security. Available at: http://www.cnas.org/files/documents/publications/CNAS_ResponsibleTransition_BarnoExum_2.pdf

A debate should be opened on constitutional reform at the national level. This would have the goal of promoting more decentralisation and accountability at the local level, and could be discussed prior to the second Bonn Conference in November 2011.

Chronic Lack of Development, Aid, and Food Security

As noted in numerous earlier reports, there has been a chronic lack of effective aid in southern Afghanistan despite years of promises to provide assistance. This continues to threaten the gains which have been made by NATO-ISAF on the security front.

Food insecurity is, again, a serious concern across Afghanistan. The current low levels of snow and rain this winter are expected to affect agricultural output seriously if the weather does not change in the next two months. The main short-term concern is the serious decrease in wheat production in many areas, which will cause higher prices and increase food insecurity.

Projections from last year by USAID identified several areas of Afghanistan as food insecure, including some of the northern and central areas: the northern half of Kandahar province and the district of Lashkar Gah in Helmand province in the south; the eastern provinces of Paktika and Paktya provinces; and some areas around Jalalabad.

However, projections for 2011 are much worse, and show that in addition to the areas mentioned above, central and north-eastern parts of Afghanistan will suffer severe food insecurity.



Refugee child, Helmand

DISPLACED COMMUNITIES

Previous field assessments have found that a significant number of Afghan civilians were still displaced by fighting and insecurity in southern Afghanistan, and that there was insufficient planning or infrastructure put in place to provide them with shelter or aid. Many of these people find it difficult to find employment and lack basic services, and are living as squatters in various locations. In some cases they have been displaced for a considerable time, but neither the international community nor the Afghan authorities have been able or willing to address their plight.

After reporting their presence to local authorities repeatedly, we found that the only reaction of the Afghan authorities has been the deployment of police officers who were sent to move them on. Some attempted to request new homes from the government in Kabul, but local government officials demanded a bribe in order to relocate them. Lacking the money to pay, these families are forced to remain where they are.



Refugees in Helmand

Mirwais Hospital in Kandahar Struggles to Provide Adequate Care; Improvements in Bhost Hospital, Lashkar Gah

Improving the poor state of public hospitals would also demonstrate effectively international concern for ordinary Afghans, especially since these are the main source of treatment for civilians wounded in the conflict.

Mirwais Hospital is the main medical facility for the whole of Kandahar and Uruzgan provinces. Conditions in Mirwais hospital remain poor, although there have been improvements since the last visit in 2010.

However, the women's ward, children's intensive care unit and maternity ward are still in extremely bad condition. All were extremely dirty and with a severe lack of equipment, staff and vital medical supplies.



A corpse, left unattended in the entrance hallway of Mirwais Hospital



An overflowing waste bin at Mirwais Hospital

By contrast, Bhost hospital, in Helmand's Lashkar Gah, is much improved - clean and seemingly well-run, with the assistance of staff from the humanitarian medical group Médecins Sans Frontières who have provided assistance in running the hospital since late 2010. Wards had clean facilities, efficient medical staff, and appeared to have a good quality of care compared to Mirwais Hospital in Kandahar.



A clean ward in Bhost Hospital

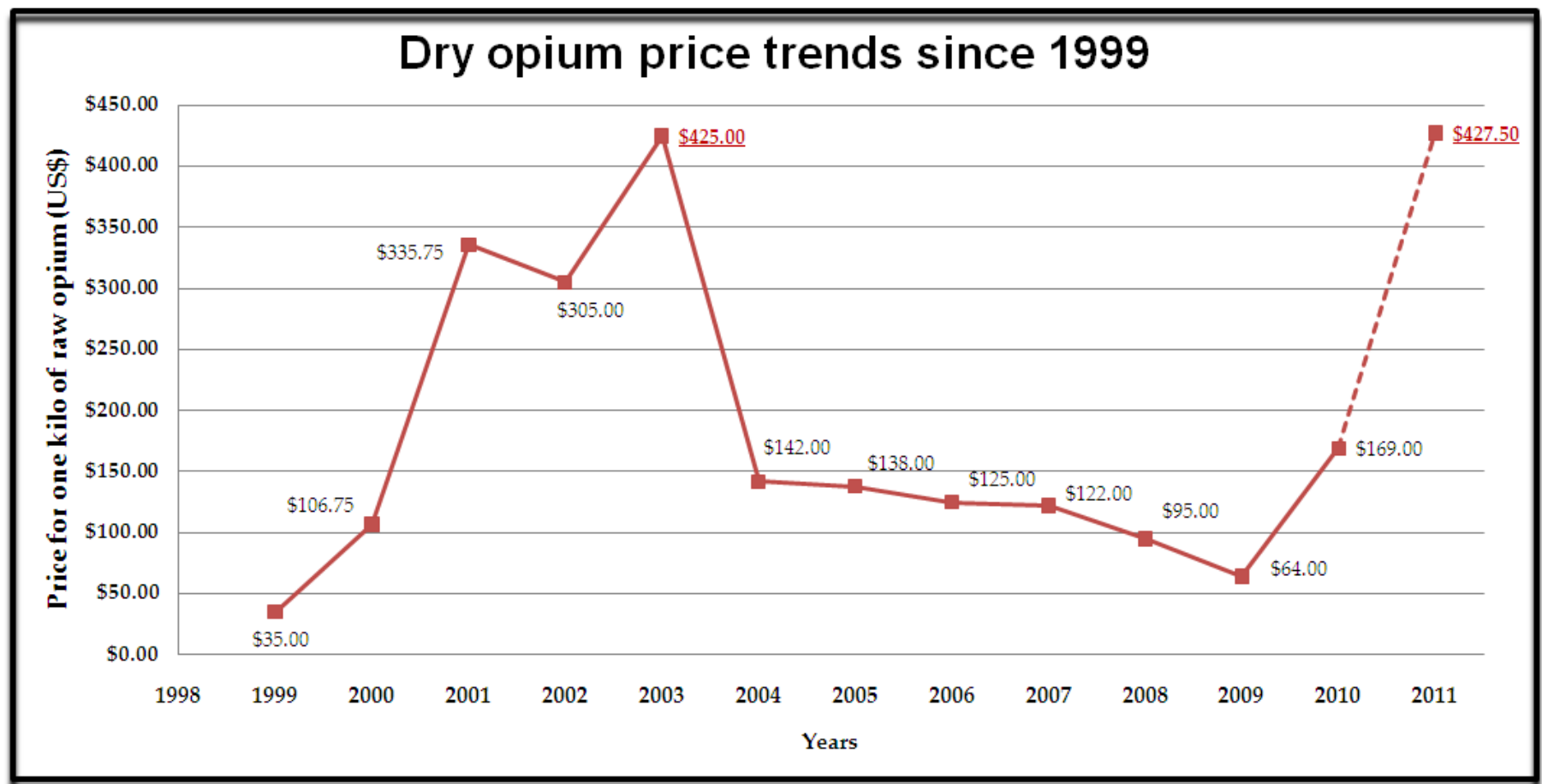
Dramatic Increase in Opium Prices - Lack of an Effective Counter-Narcotics Policy

In January 2011 opium prices showed dramatic increases in the south, with prices in some areas in the south even quoted locally as high US\$333-522 a kilo. The average price in southern Afghanistan last year was \$181/kg, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). UNODC identified a 164% increase in the price of dry opium at harvest time compared to 2009.

Opium prices in Afghanistan have fluctuated significantly over the past ten years. However the average price quoted recently in southern Afghanistan (\$427/kg), would be around 12 times the lowest price for dry opium since 1999, when the figure was just \$35/kg, as seen in the table below. Depending on the developments in the year ahead, Afghanistan might see a record high in opium prices.



Poppies growing in southern Afghanistan



This table details the average prices for dry opium in southern Afghanistan¹¹. The 2011 figure represents an estimate based on anecdotal evidence in southern Afghanistan.

¹¹ Figures drawn from United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

Opium prices are on the rise in Afghanistan because of the fall in opium production last year, the result of a poppy blight that seriously affected the poppy crops. Even if poppy cultivation decreases in the provinces of Helmand and Kandahar, it could increase in areas that were considered 'poppy free' or had more limited cultivation levels. This is an example of the so-called 'balloon effect', where increased counter-narcotics efforts in one area trigger an increase in production in another area. The trend of higher opium prices may again lead to more poppy cultivation in years to come, and particularly in the southern areas that are now the opium basket of the world.

Without sufficient alternative livelihoods for the 1.6 million Afghans involved in poppy cultivation, the illegal opium economy will continue to be a structural problem in Afghanistan. Furthermore, depriving Afghan farming families and their wider communities from growing poppies in the short term may lead to more poverty, disillusionment, and eventually increased instability in the strategically important areas of Afghanistan. This could in turn lead to more resentment towards the central government and the international community, and a still wider gap between the people and the government's policy.

Therefore, in the short term, there should be a wholesale review of rural development and alternative livelihood programmes. Alternative livelihood programmes have, of course, already been implemented around Afghanistan, but their impact has so far been limited, not only because of underfunding and mismanagement, but also because most of these projects take years to become both widely available and profitable for the farmers.

Because of this long timeframe, the international community should start a serious discussion on what can be done in the short to medium term, and delineate what the current counter-narcotics policy strategy is actually based on. For the short term, one of the few available options is the *Poppy for Medicine* (P4M) proposal, which would investigate whether Afghanistan can benefit from the legal production of opium for use as morphine and codeine, which are both made from opium. Whilst boosting the rural economy and diversifying it over time, Poppy for Medicine would also integrate farmers and their communities into the legal economy, thus strengthening the ties between the rural communities and the government in Kabul.

Additionally, the project can solve part of the vast unmet needs for morphine and other pain killers both within and outside of Afghanistan. The International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) stated in 2005 that there is a critical shortage of pain relief medicines around the world. In fact, an astonishing 80% of the world population has little or no access to analgesics, some of whom could benefit from a new brand of Afghan morphine.

However the focus must not be exclusively on the introduction or reintroduction of alternative crops. Particularly in southern Afghanistan, there is a need for investment in more agro-industry and other light industrial activities.

3. Conclusions: Maintain and Support the Surge

The troop surge has demonstrated clear progress in changing the security dynamics on the ground in southern Afghanistan. The additional forces are making real gains in clearing Taliban-held districts. However, accompanying progress in aid, development, and counter-narcotics is still lacking and this threatens to undermine the hard-won security gains. Trust in the international community and the Afghan government is still extremely low.

It has been acknowledged by the White House that these challenges remain, and that the security gains made are “fragile and reversible”¹². It appears that the plan to begin drawing down the additional US forces in July 2011 is based on domestic politics and pressure for a withdrawal, rather than a clear-eyed assessment of current realities on the ground.

However, the dynamics of southern Afghanistan are still precarious and at risk. Given the fragility of the current situation, the July 2011 deadline risks jeopardising the progress which has been made so far and undermining the current security situation in this critical area.

Maintaining existing force levels until July 2012 is essential in order to preserve the hard-won gains of the surge. A premature withdrawal of troops would risk a deterioration of the security situation when we are seeing the first signs of progress. However, if all of the surge forces remain in Afghanistan until mid-2012, they will have the time to ensure the security gains are irreversible.

¹² Overview of the White House Afghanistan and Pakistan Annual Review, December 16 2010. Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2010/12/16/overview-afghanistan-and-pakistan-annual-review>

4. Recommendations

- **Avoid hasty and imprudent drawdowns – maintain the surge until July 2012:** It is clear that the additional US forces in southern Afghanistan are making progress. However they are still in the process of taking the fight to the Taliban, who retain control of key districts across Helmand and Kandahar. Starting a withdrawal in July 2011 will seriously jeopardise the gains which have been made, and would embolden the Taliban in the summer fighting season. The planned troop drawdown should be delayed until July 2012.
- **Emphasise quality as well as quantity for the ANSF:** When NATO-ISAF forces do begin to withdraw, they will be handing over to Afghan police and army units. Despite welcome improvements in their number and quality, there are still serious doubts about the ANSF's ability to single-handedly prevent the Taliban from re-infiltrating districts which have been cleared. Efforts must be made to reduce the danger of duplicity and complicity from the ANSF, and ensure they are willing and able to stand and fight in the face of a Taliban offensive.
- **Dramatic aid and development work needed:** Despite widespread recognition that aid is vital, the impact which it makes is currently minimal. There is a need for visible and significant impacts to address the legitimate and urgent needs of the people of southern Afghanistan.
- **Address urgent food security issues:** Chronic food insecurity in southern Afghanistan must be addressed. The threat of drought poses a humanitarian threat and could result in an increase in poppy cultivation as poppies require less water than most other crops.
- **Address the Relationship Gap - explain 9/11 and *why* we are here:** We must engage in a widespread, grassroots public information campaign in order to explain international motives and objectives. In particular the international community should explain the 9/11 attacks; the rationale behind the subsequent US and NATO intervention in Afghanistan.
- **A Counter Narcotics Policy needed - Poppy for Medicine (P4M) Pilot Project:** P4M would test whether the legal production of opium-based medicines would be a realistic short-term option for Afghanistan before alternative livelihoods become readily available and profitable for Afghan farmers. A scientific pilot project should be started in the next planting season, which for some areas could be as early as March 2011.
- **Constitutional reform:** The international community should support a vigorous debate on constitutional reform at the national level, with the aim of decentralising some of the power currently held by the executive. Providing more power and more accountability to local officials would link them more closely with the citizens.