

MILITARY SLOWLY GAINING PERSPECTIVE ON INSIDER ATTACKS IN AFGHANISTAN

Citing a “former American official”, the New York Times today dubbed insider, or green on blue, attacks as “the signature violence of 2012” as it provided information directly from an Afghan soldier who turned his gun on US troops on May 11 of this year in Kunar province, killing one US soldier and wounding two as the US soldiers were visiting the Afghan post where Mahmood, the attacker, was stationed.

The Times points out that despite the Taliban’s claims that they have many infiltrators within Afghan forces, in the case of Mahmood, he took the initiative in approaching the Taliban once he decided that he wished to carry out an attack. It appears that local opinions where he was stationed played a role in shaping his decision:

But until May, he worked and fought alongside foreigners without incident. The change came in the Ghaziabad District of Kunar, where he ended up after the start of 2012, he said.

The area is thick with Taliban, along with Islamists from Pakistan. Many residents sympathized with the insurgents and often complained to Afghan soldiers about the abuses committed by Americans and the failure of Afghan soldiers to control much of anything beyond the perimeter of their own outpost, Mr. Mahmood said. The Taliban, they glorified.

Listening to villagers, Mr. Mahmood became convinced that the foreigners had killed too many Afghans and insulted the Prophet Muhammad too many times. He

wanted to be driving them out, not helping them stay. The villagers' stories "strengthened my desire to kill Americans with my own fingers," he said.

The article provides hope that the military is finally gaining a real perspective on the issues highlighted in the seminal report "A Crisis of Trust and Cultural Incompatibility" (pdf), which the military first retroactively classified and then embraced as it raced to respond to the growing crisis of insider attacks by preparing "training materials" implementing (in a very crude way) some of the recommendations from the report. But it now appears that the military is stumbling its way toward a deeper understanding of how cultural flashpoints are symptomatic the larger problem that the US simply is not welcome in Afghanistan:

But behind it all, many senior coalition and Afghan officials are now concluding that after nearly 12 years of war, the view of foreigners held by many Afghans has come to mirror that of the Taliban. Hope has turned into hatred, and some will find a reason to act on those feelings.

"A great percentage of the insider attacks have the enemy narrative – the narrative that the infidels have to be driven out – somewhere inside of them, but they aren't directed by the enemy," said a senior coalition officer, who asked not to be identified because of Afghan and American sensitivities about the attacks.

The result is that, although the Taliban have successfully infiltrated the security forces before, they do not always have to. Soldiers and police officers will instead go to them, as was the case with Mr. Mahmood, who offered a glimpse of the thinking behind the violence in one of the few interviews

conducted with Afghans who have committed insider attacks.

That is a remarkable level of insight for a military that has been so slow to recognize the way that insider attacks multiplied this year. Recognizing that “many Afghans” now hold views on the US that can only be described as “hatred” is an amazing concession from those who still cling hopelessly to the image of the US as the “global force for good” rather than a foreign force that has been occupying Afghanistan for over eleven years. When significant portions of the population view us as the enemy, there simply is no longer a reason to be present, and withdrawal is the only viable option.

I had briefly touched on the attack carried out by Mahmood in this post in May, where I was describing the overall situation in Afghanistan as a “meltdown”. It would appear that the Taliban now recognize the current NATO strategy of continuing with its planned withdrawal of combat forces by the end of 2014 and handing over security responsibility to “trained” Afghan forces for what many in the comment threads here at Emptywheel have noted:

The Taliban has likened the planned withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan to America’s pullout from Vietnam, calling it a “declare victory and run” strategy.

The group following a statement on Wednesday said the ongoing transfer of security operations from U.S. troops to Afghan forces was merely a retreat similar to the American withdrawal from South Vietnam prior to the communist victory there in 1975.

“They want to flee from Afghanistan just as they turned tail and ran from Vietnam,” the Taliban statement said. “When America faced utter destruction in Vietnam, they came up with the formula

‘declare victory and run’ and want to
utilize the formula of ‘transfer
security and run’ here in Afghanistan.”

Now if we can only get the Obama administration
to move to a much shorter timetable for the
withdrawal, we can avoid a number of unnecessary
deaths on both sides.