

US DOUBLES DOWN ON “CRAZY KARZAI” MEME

As the US military bumbles and stumbles toward an ignominious exit from Afghanistan that is looking more and more like it will follow the script from the Iraq exit, it appears that the final ploy from Washington is an effort to paint Afghan President Hamid Karzai as detached from reality. This current ploy seems to be serving two purposes. First, it attempts to set the stage for an end-run around Karzai in a last-ditch effort to get some other party to sign the Bilateral Security Agreement allowing US troops to stay in Afghanistan after the end of this year. Second, it is obscuring yet another incident of indiscriminate US air raids and affiliated operations resulting in civilian casualties. Totally missing from these US actions is any awareness that Afghans cooperating with the US in this operation could well be motivated by the upcoming elections or an appreciation that the willingness of some Afghan citizens to participate in fabricating charges against the US isn't necessarily an endorsement of the Taliban as much as it represent the intense desire of many Afghans to get the US out of their country after 13 years of war.

The current circus was precipitated by the January 15 incident in the Ghorband District of Parwan province. As I noted right after it happened, distinctly different accounts of what happened appeared in the New York Times and Washington Post. Karzai appointed a commission to investigate the incident. Leading the commission was Abdul Satar Khawasi. He is a member of the Afghan Parliament and represents Parwan. He also is known to be anti-American, and articles about the commission's report from both ToloNews and the New York Times mention a video in which he appears and:

Mr. Khawasi is heard urging a crowd of angry Afghans to wage a holy war against

Americans, saying, "Anyone who sits silent is a traitor."

The Times pointed out just after the report was released that at least one photo in the report was from 2009, but now the entire report is being questioned by the Times because of that one photo:

The CD-ROM contains nine other photographs, all of which appear to be frames from a video clip on the disk. The video purports to show the funeral of villagers who were killed in the airstrikes and houses that were destroyed. The graphic images include some of a woman whose face is gone.

The Times' examination found no physical clues in the video that would help determine where or when it was shot. The file's creation date is Dec. 18, nearly a month before the raid, though it may not be accurate; digital time stamps on the accompanying photos say they were created in April 2014, and the video's embedded data could be similarly unreliable.

Even if the video is actually of a funeral in Wazghar, some Afghan and Western officials said there was no way to tell from it whether an airstrike or some other gunfire or explosion had killed the people seen being buried, or who was responsible.

But even though an Afghan villager was brought out to "identify" fellow villagers in the false photo in question, this whole episode of discrediting the commission's report still has one major problem:

There is no dispute that American airstrikes on Jan. 15 did hit Wazghar, a few hours' drive west of Kabul in a valley controlled by the Taliban, and

that some civilians were killed there. The American-led coalition put the number at two, and said the airstrikes were called in after a force of Afghan commandos and their American advisers were pinned down by heavy Taliban fire from the village and were unable to retreat.

The bottom line is that a US air strike hit at least one house with civilians in it. Whether Taliban were in the house and firing at coalition troops or not does not negate the fact that US bombing of civilian homes has been at the heart of Karzai's objections to US actions for years. He has tried multiple times to get the US to halt any attacks on homes (whether they are air strikes or night raids), but the US always ignores these entreaties and does exactly as it pleases.

But the US was not content merely to discredit the report prepared by Khawasi's commission. An article in the Washington Post now clearly is aimed at painting Karzai as so deranged that he now believes the US is actively taking part in raids otherwise attributed to the Taliban:

President Hamid Karzai has frequently lashed out at the U.S. military for causing civilian casualties in its raids. But behind the scenes, he has been building a far broader case against the Americans, suggesting that they may have aided or conducted shadowy insurgent-style attacks to undermine his government, according to senior Afghan officials.

Karzai has formalized his suspicions with a list of dozens of attacks that he believes the U.S. government may have been involved in, according to one palace official. The list even includes the recent bomb and gun assault on a Lebanese restaurant in Kabul, one of the bloodiest acts targeting the

international community in Afghanistan, the official said. The attack, which left 21 people dead, including three Americans, was almost universally attributed to the Taliban.

This whole article is based on anonymous quotes from “senior palace officials” and seems to rely on only one of them for the wildest claims. And yet nowhere in the article do we get any acknowledgement that Afghanistan will soon have a Presidential election in which Karzai cannot run. The article tries to remove doubts about the leaking official by saying that he is “sympathetic to the president’s view”.

Somehow, remarks by Karzai in March of 2013 have been allowed to shape this entire story about him blaming the US for attacks attributed to the Taliban. But if we go back to the Post story linked in the current Post smear, we have this from Karzai:

In a televised speech about violence against women, Karzai said two fatal bombings carried out Saturday, including one outside the Defense Ministry, should not be interpreted as a Taliban show of force aimed at undermining the U.S. military, which is considering keeping a small force in Afghanistan after its wartime mandate expires at the end of 2014.

“In reality, the bombs that went off yesterday under the name of the Taliban were a service to the foreigners,” Karzai said, casting doubt on the assertion of responsibility made by the Taliban, which said that the attacks were carried out to mar Hagel’s visit. Karzai said the blasts helped Americans justify a prolonged troop presence in Afghanistan. “We have been down this road before too many times,” he added.

If we look closely at what Karzai actually said here, it is almost exactly the opposite of the current accusations. Last year's words read to me as if he is telling the Taliban that their attacks that kill civilians play into the hands of the US and provide further justification for the US wanting to stay in Afghanistan. Even then, it was the Post saying that Karzai was blaming the US for the attack rather than Karzai actually saying it. Somehow, the current "controversy" relies on this inversion of Karzai's words that is almost a year old .

It's clear that both the US and Afghanistan are deeply into information operations with very high stakes as we come down to final days on the decision of whether US troops will stay in Afghanistan after the end of this year. With so much deliberately false information being offered up, truth remains far out of reach.