

2010-01-01

US Military and Civilian Surge in Afghanistan

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Recommended Citation

Clonan, T., 2010: US Military And Civilian Surge Afghanistan, Dublin: The Irish Times.

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Dublin Institute of Technology

Year 2010

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Afghanistan

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Obama's Afghan Surge

US and British casualty figures in Afghanistan experienced a dramatic surge in 2010. A total of 499 US troops and 103 British soldiers were killed by the Taliban last year with thousands more seriously injured by improvised explosive devices (IEDs).

The casualty statistics for Afghanistan paint a grim picture of the US-led International Security Assistance Force's (ISAF) campaign against the Taliban. ISAF's war in Afghanistan deteriorated significantly in 2007 as the Taliban re-grouped, re-organised and finessed its counter-insurgency strategy against NATO. For example, the number of US and British troops killed in action by the Taliban on an annual basis trebled between 2007 and 2009. This spike in combat deaths prompted President Obama to announce an Iraq-style troop surge to be deployed in Afghanistan during 2010.

The US troop surge in Iraq in 2007 is often cited as the primary causal factor in the reduction of US casualties there by up to 90% between 2007 and 2009. Whilst many observers dispute this claim, the Obama administration had hoped that there would be a similar reduction in US casualties in Afghanistan. General David Petraeus, architect of the Iraq surge, assumed command of ISAF in July of last year as NATO operations intensified in Afghanistan.

Unfortunately however, increased troop levels – along with a genuine attempt to engage the civilian population with hundreds of civilian-led provincial reconstruction teams – has not led to a reduction in hostilities or casualties. The number of Afghan civilians killed in the war almost doubled during 2010. In addition, US casualties – from a peak in 2009 – doubled yet again in 2010.

Whilst the numbers of US and British troops killed in action grow, the figures for wounded servicemen and women are shocking. According to MOD statistics, Britain has conducted over 4000 medical air evacuations from Afghanistan in the last three years alone. With approximately 60% of those injured by IEDs, the majority of those troops evacuated by air to Britain have suffered traumatic brain injuries (TBIs). Many require surgery to amputate limbs. On most nights of the year, seriously injured British soldiers are flown in a converted RAF Tri-Star jet from Camp Bastion in Afghanistan directly to Birmingham Airport – a ten hour flight.

They are then transferred by ambulance to Selly Oak Hospital and Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Birmingham for surgery. Over 100 soldiers have had limbs amputated in Birmingham. Twelve have been triple amputees with 48 suffering the loss of both legs. According to the UK's Royal Centre for Defence Medicine and the West Midlands NHS – up to 30% of British soldiers who have served in Afghanistan suffer from post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) along with depression. British soldiers aged between 18 and 24, who have served in Afghanistan are three times more likely to attempt suicide than their civilian peers.

According to the US Army Office of the Surgeon General, 66,935 new cases of PTSD have been diagnosed in US troops serving in Iraq and Afghanistan since 2002. The US Congressional Research Service, in a special report for Congress in September 2010 established that 178,876 US veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan have been victims of traumatic brain injury. In addition to PTSD and TBI, the US Army Office of the Surgeon General states that 1,621 US personnel have undergone surgery for amputation since the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. According to the US Department of Defence, 260 US troops have also died of 'self inflicted wounds' or suicide whilst on active service in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The bulk of US, British and NATO troops killed or wounded in action in Afghanistan have been in those provinces that border Pakistan such as Helmand Province, Kandahar Province, Paktia and Konar Provinces. These areas are adjacent to the Tribal Areas and Frontier Provinces of Pakistan that are home to millions of Afghan refugees. These areas are also becoming increasingly 'Talibanised' and unstable. With the risk of the conflict spreading to Pakistan, 15 US service personnel have already been killed in action in Pakistan itself.

Kabul, once a secure environment for ISAF, the UN and international aid agencies has also become unstable and a total of 124 NATO troops have now been killed in action in skirmishes and bomb attacks in the capital. Against this backdrop, Irish Defence Forces personnel are playing a key role in combating the IED threat against ISAF personnel. Irish Ordnance Officers – with extensive experience of IEDs gained in Ireland during the troubles and during our extended deployments in Lebanon – have been an integral part of NATO's 'IED Cell' at ISAF Headquarters in Kabul. They work alongside their US counterparts of the 'Joint IED Defeat Organisation' (JIEDDO) in Kabul in order to identify trends and patterns in IEDs in order to plan for countermeasures and enhanced force protection for ISAF.

As Obama's promised July draw down of troops approaches, there appears to be no let-up in the Taliban's resistance to ISAF and Hamid Karzai's regime. Based on the pattern of the conflict thus far, one can only conclude that the Taliban will continue its war on the Afghan National Army with renewed vigour once the US and NATO have quit the field at some point this year. In terms of blood and treasure, the US simply cannot sustain this nine year war against the Taliban indefinitely.

In the meantime, in a New year message to his troops, General Petraeus urges ISAF forces as follows, 'Team, here is my guidance for the conduct of counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan ... Walk, don't drive by. Patrol on foot wherever possible and engage the population. Take off your sunglasses. Situational awareness can only be gained by interacting face-to-face, not separated by ballistic glass or Oakleys'. With almost 40% of civilian casualties caused by ISAF fire, and with casualties mounting, it appears that there is a great deal more than sunglasses which separate NATO troops from the Afghan population. Indeed, much the

same could be said for that which separates ordinary soldiers in Afghanistan from their military leadership at this point in the war – however sunny their disposition or optimistic their outlook.

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