

BIG STRATEGY FOUNDERS ON CORRUPTION AND TRIBALISM

Hearts, minds and the same old warlords

Go up close to what's happening in Afghanistan – for example, in the city of Kandahar – and you find crime, corruption, tribal conflict and ordinary people powerless to resist the armed might of the militias. No happy ending is in sight

by Stephen Grey

Kandahar, Afghanistan. We visited the snooker club at the Kandahar Coffee Shop. It didn't sell coffee. And I can't play snooker. So we ordered burgers and filmed street life from the terrace: the traffic went around the roundabout and a manic flock of doves circled a hundred feet above. US soldiers drove by in huge armoured trucks, policemen stopped white Toyota Corollas and searched their trunks for bombs, and gunmen of every species drove around in their SUVs and pickup trucks.

Round the corner was our hotel. Half of it was destroyed earlier this year when a man walked past, pushing a bomb on a cart. He was heading for another target but when challenged by police, he and his cart – and the side of the hotel – were blown up. The bomb was detonated by the policemen's shots. The hotel owner is busy rebuilding. He's expecting an influx of journalists and trade when Nato conducts what until lately was called the "summer offensive" or even "the battle for Kandahar" but now, causing confusion, is just a "complex military-political effort".

Everyone is still playing up the game in line with a recent *ABC News* headline, "Campaign for Kandahar May Be America's Last Chance to Win Over Afghans". On a visit to Kandahar, Admiral Mike Mullen, the chairman of the US joint chiefs of staff, described the city as "as critical in Afghanistan as Baghdad was in Iraq in the surge".

Sadly for the US, almost everyone supports the Taliban rebels. Even Nato commanders. A senior officer said: "If I was a young man, I'd be fighting with the Taliban." In this heartland of the Pashtun people, the idea of being a stooge to foreigners or an unpopular Kabul government hardly appeals to the young unless there's serious money involved. They ask themselves if they want to take the money and work with foreigners, or fight and risk a courageous death. Most people loathe those who work with the government.

I met a professional man in his 50s, a generation that dominates the administration (they were in their 20s when the Russians were here). He has a long flowing beard. "That's because he's a communist," said my Afghan companion. "The people that ISAF

appoint, most of them are communists.” (ISAF is the International Security Assistance Force, the Nato mission in Afghanistan.) “They support Lenin and Marx?” “No, not at all, but they were the ones that collaborated with the Russians. We call them the communists.”

“They’re still in power?” “Yes, they like working with foreigners. They’re all communists. Many of them got educated in Russian too. We all despise them.”

“And the beard?” “Oh they do like their beards. They’re trying to cover up their past.”

Who is fighting whom?

In the coffee shop I talked with my Afghan partner-in-crime, with me to make a film, about whether anyone really has any idea of who is fighting who. There are plenty of assassinations, kidnappings and bomb blasts. The journalists, who like a straightforward narrative, blame the Taliban. But locals say there are other darker forces at work, including crime bosses and the armed militias of warlords in league with the government.

For Nato soldiers, the fight is confusing. General Stanley McChrystal – their commander until President Barack Obama accepted his forced resignation last month, the result of his candour – told the troops that, in the counter-insurgency campaign, their primary goal is not to kill or even defeat the Taliban but rather to secure the population. The enemy is not even the Taliban, said Major-General Nick Carter, the British general in charge of the Kandahar campaign, but rather a “malign influence”, a code for corrupt government. McChrystal was unpopular with his troops. To protect the population, he asked them to avoid the escalation of force – firing on cars that appear to be charging towards US convoys, or making night raids at nights on homes.

I asked a US sergeant, when I joined his US convoy heading down a road near the city, about McChrystal. “Don’t get me started,” he said. I got him started: “I’m just not going to risk the lives of my men. I’m not going to let them down. If they’re in danger we’re going to protect ourselves.” But what had been wrong with McChrystal? “He doesn’t understand this place. He doesn’t realise that people don’t respect weakness out here at all. We’re not gonna win like this.”

‘No government here’

From the rhetoric of commanders, you might believe that Nato and the Taliban were fighting on the same side – natural allies even as they are rivals to deliver security for the people fight corruption. That is the theory. But, in reality, the main effort of tens of thousands of US troops is to find ways to kill or beat the Taliban. The troops are brilliant fighters, and often very principled. But, however hard they try, they are not good anthropologists or development experts. And when they fight, they do so only by consent of the Afghan government they say is corrupt.

Nowhere are these contradictions more evident than in Kandahar. “If we told you what’s really happening here, we would not last the night,” said an elder of the province, speaking to President Hamid Karzai at a tribal gathering in the city. Another added: “It’s too easy to blame the Taliban.” Shahida Hussein, a human rights activist, said the government and Nato are in league with the bad guys: “If someone kills someone, the government itself says don’t touch him, don’t bother him, he’s our friend, he’s our relative, he has a connection with us. There is no real government here. Kandahar is run by people in the drugs trade, armed with weapons and backed by foreign countries.”

I asked Falaq Safi, a senior investigating prosecutor in the city who was the bigger threat to security, the militias or the Taliban? He answered: “It’s hard to say... Sometimes the threats are from the Taliban, but mostly they are from people whose own interests are being undermined. People are more afraid of the private militia and those who have illegal weapons.”

Hearing that sentiment, and often, makes it comprehensible why the Taliban seem like the solution. The movement was a born in a village just outside Kandahar and from people’s need to combat corruption, restore basic security and a cohesive government, and have rulers who obeyed moral and religious principles. They fought the same warlords who have now returned, and who rule with what appears to all as the blessing of the US.

On a drive to the main Nato base inside the city, the Provincial Reconstruction Team, where development and “mentoring” are coordinated, we passed wide gates that led into a large military base. Our taxi driver told us this was the “commando compound”; it had a dead dog hanging on a rope from an outside wall. The base is run by a private militia, an armed force said to be controlled by Akhtar Mohamed, accused of being henchman to Ahmed Wali Karzai, the brother of President Hamid Karzai. AWK, as he is known by Nato, or K2, as he is called by others, has the reputation of a mafia godfather – accused of raking money from coalition contracts, running intimidation rackets, squatting government land, and being a kingpin in the heroin trade. He

denies it all and says he is a victim of libel by his enemies.

Militias are everywhere. Even the PRT and other Nato bases are guarded by militias.

A senior figure told us his nephew had just been recruited to work with the Americans, and had been allocated \$36m to recruit militias round Kandahar province. "Of course he's working with the warlords. They're the ones who will supply all the people. He has to get involved with the worst kind of criminals."

The talk at village meetings is what the Americans call the "local defence initiative" or LDI. The people call them militias. There are complaints that these forces extort money and arrest people. An elder in the Arghandab district, near Kandahar, said: "These militia are from local tribes. They don't care about their country. They are just concerned about money. Because of these local militia our government is not improving. Security is worse now." At another *shura* (council meeting) at a US base, we heard: "We can't tell who's militia or Taliban; they're all holding guns, they don't have uniform." An Afghan Army commander, working with the Americans, had a solution: set up a militia to handle security. "Look, you know the good and bad guys in your village. It's entirely up to you how you rule them. I'll support you and provide you weapons and salary. At least provide security for yourself."

Chance encounters only

Rather than scaling back, the US is expanding the militias. Some aren't impressed: "I was with the army for two years and so the Taliban became my enemy. I am afraid of them. Now you say you will give me a gun – but tomorrow you will take it away. By then I will have even more enemies."

We filmed that militia, who looked Taliban except they had no beards and wore fluorescent yellow belts over their shoulders, and a red rags on their rifles, to distinguish them from the enemy. One of their leaders said they are independent of the Americans and aren't paid by them. "They have asked us to join them but we said no. We work with them sometimes but only for the sake of our village. Everyone here is happy with us, if you have any doubt then you can go and ask the people from these villages."

I was going to talk to US Special Forces, since many sensible people argue this local solution to the Taliban is an essential way forward. But the visit was cancelled. Only "chance encounters" are allowed with Special Forces. Any "pre-planned" interviews

have to be approved at a high level, and I wasn't approved. Too sensitive a topic. The term "militia" is a dirty word, suggesting paramilitaries in central America and Iraq, implying these men are "irregular" and outside the regular structures of the Afghan government.

In Kandahar, we met an Afghan working with the Green Berets who said the process was being conducted in secret. "These militias have not yet been introduced to the Afghan government," he said. "They obey our orders, American orders. Unlike President Karzai, who does his own thing." Colonel Wayne Shanks, chief of public affairs for the US Army in Afghanistan, told me: "ISAF and US Special Operations Forces do not support militia groups. We are acutely aware of the history of militias in this country and remain confident that any security programme must be connected to the government." As for the LDI, "this is purely a defensive programme," said Shanks. "The villagers are not paid nor do they have the authority to make arrests. If villagers detect insurgent activity, they notify Afghan police or ISAF forces. Our information indicates that members of this programme are selected by village elders, wear distinctive reflective belts and are known by village residents."

Behind this is a serious but sensitive debate about what kind of security force can be successful in this war. Few are convinced that the corrupt Afghan police or the Tajik-dominated, northern-biased Afghan National Army can quell this rebellion in the Pashtun-dominated south. Military blogs and journals are full of articles by special operations officers on the quest for a "third force", perhaps different tribal forces that can preserve security when US troops start to withdraw in 2011. Some of the American Special Force units, particularly the Green Berets, have a history of raising and working with irregular units. They were set up by President Kennedy to do this in Vietnam.

What few have grasped is that the switch from an "enemy-focused" conventional military campaign to a "population-focused" counter-insurgency (COIN) campaign is not a soft option. The doctrine of COIN, emerging from Malaysia, Vietnam, Oman and central America, emphasises not only overt measures to win the hearts of the population. COIN also means security measures to control dissent and separate the population from the insurgents. It has meant massive forced migration, death squads and militias.

I hear sensible people talking of winning this war "one tribe at a time" with the use of irregular forces. Locals remember the Russians tried to use militias too, as they tried to prop up the last communist prime minister, Mohammad Najibullah. Whatever is done has to be done very carefully. The concern in Kandahar is that the creation of these forces, whatever the intentions, will mean handing back guns to the bad old

warlords.

Who is in control?

If not the Taliban, who is really in control? Nervous local journalists recall a reporter, Jawed “Jojo” Ahmad Jojo, who asked too many questions about militias and their links to Americans. They claimed that first he was sent to Bagram airbase, then he was released but wouldn’t keep his mouth shut. So eventually he was killed, not far from our hotel. The reporters also mentioned a colleague, Abdul Samad Rohani, a BBC stringer in Lashkahr, the capital of neighbouring Helmand. He was digging into the connections between the Afghan police, local militias and the drugs trade. The police chief at the time was said to have warned him off. Then he was killed.

But there is no proof of these connections. We tried to find out about the most notorious crime committed by a militia in Kandahar, the murder in June 2009 of the chief of police, Matiullah Qateh. It was officially investigated by a prosecutor based in Kabul and that has provided rare clarity about a militia force known as the Kandahar Strike Force.

This is what we discovered: Qateh was gunned down in broad daylight along with other senior policemen, by a militia, based at the US Special Forces and CIA base known as Camp Gecko, around the former home of the Taliban supreme leader, Mullah Omar. The militia had gone with US-supplied uniforms, weapons and vehicles to a local courthouse to try to force prosecutors to release one of their members from jail. Brigadier-General Ghulam Ranjbar, a senior military prosecutor in Kabul who investigated the case, told us he had issued an arrest warrant for a US Special Forces commander, known only to him as “John” or “Jonny”. He said all the militia members arrested after the killing had claimed Jonny sanctioned the raid to free their imprisoned comrade. (He did not suggest the Americans ordered or approved the killings, but said they were guilty of creating an outlaw unit and had refused to cooperate with his investigation.)

According to his investigation, and other witnesses in Kandahar, the militia from Camp Gecko could never have left the base in full uniform unless their mission had been approved. But a US spokesman said: “No US or coalition forces were involved in the attack; the guards were not acting on behalf of US or international forces.”

Ranjbar said: “If you go to Kandahar, people say these guys pretend to be interpreters but carry out night raids and assassinations.” And the militia who carried out the raid

were not just a team of guards from Camp Gecko. Instead the men involved claimed to be integrated into Special Force activities, participating in arrest raids on enemy targets by day or night.

We had been told about a more recent death, of a young man, Janan Abdullah, 23, who was killed by grenade and gunfire, and his wife paralysed, during a raid last November led by American soldiers, according to Abdullah's family. They said the Afghans did the shooting. "We were surprised. It was our own people – Pashtuns – doing this to us. They were so cruel to us. We thought not even the Americans can be this cruel. It was those from our own country doing this to us."

The family said they had no idea why their home or Janan was targeted. They heard later it was a mistake. A US spokesman could find no record of the incident. But the independent human rights investigators who studied the case linked the force involved to Camp Gecko. This was also where injured family members were taken.

Every place has a king

Ahmed Wali Karzai's name was the one we heard most often. "Every place has a king and you know better than me who is king of Kandahar," said Shahid Hussein. "It is Ahmed Wali Karzai, and he is not doing it just because he is the brother of the president; he is doing it because he is backed by the Americans."

Locals explained that the two powerful tribes in the city are the Popalzais, led by the Karzai family, and the Barakzai, led effectively by the family of the former governor of Kandahar, Gulab Agha Sherzai, whose militia joined US Special Forces in capturing the city in 2001. Although Sherzai is now based in the eastern city of Jalalabad as governor of Nangahar province, he retains influence and his brother, Major-General Abdul Razik Sherzai, remains in Kandahar, doubling as a head of a construction company and a wing commander of the Afghan Air Force.

Both the Karzais and the Sherzais are said to monopolise lucrative contracts with Nato – from renting land and buildings to coalition troops, to furnishing supplies and staff, implementing vast development projects, providing intelligence to agencies like the CIA and guarding coalition bases and Nato supply convoys. And providing militias to work beside Special Forces. A police commander said: "This is a tribal war here. The people support the Taliban because certain tribes are seen to get all the jobs and all the influence."

Karzai was first mentioned to me when a group of villagers arrived a police station and started haranguing the local police chief. They claimed an armed warlord was trying to evict them and bulldoze their village. The land belonged officially to the government. And the commander was both a relative to, and acted in the name of, Ahmed Wali Karzai.

Akhthar Mohamed, the man who ran the “commando base”, is said to work for the Karzais: he was first to arrive at the scene of the murder of the police chief and his exact role was never clear. He has never been arrested over the killing. Sources we interviewed inside the militias said Mohamed played a key role in recruiting the gunmen who worked with the Americans. He was a Popalzai and came from the Karzai home village of Karz. Senior Nato commanders, off the record, call him a “malign actor”, but the US in Kandahar is totally dependent on him, and US contractors and special force commanders regularly visit his home.

Power vacuum

After Qateh’s murder, 41 members of the Kandahar Strike Force were arrested and jailed. All have now been convicted, some given death sentences. Ahmed Wali was organising a campaign for them to be released on amnesty. Families of the victims had been persuaded to sign an appeal for clemency. But 300 other members of the militia were still free. Ahmed Wali confirmed in a telephone conversation that he supported an amnesty. He said he had no involvement in militias and there were none in Kandahar. The city was under the rule of law. Karzai berated me from not coming to see him while I was in Kandahar.

A senior lawyer at a courthouse said it was a stressful time as an inspection team had arrived from Kabul: there were allegations that they were demanding a bribe of tens of thousands of dollars. Officials in the prosecutor’s office complained the bill was too high: “Business is not that good. We’re not getting that much in.” The senior lawyer was laughing because he had heard the British were going to quit Helmand and come to Kandahar. “This is great news. You have done such a great job and have beaten the enemy.”

When the British came to Helmand in 2006, they arranged beforehand for the governor of the province, Sher Mohamed Akhundzada, to be removed from his job. Like Ahmed Wali, he was a warlord accused of involvement in the drug trade. That was disastrous. Helmand had been propped up by Akhundzada’s militias. As they were stood down, a power vacuum developed. Many simply joined the Taliban or stood