

Afghanistan war casualties

October 2012

In 2012, NATO/ISAF casualties in Afghanistan reached 369 January to October, and 3,216 since the beginning of the war 11 years ago. The figures do not include deaths of "contractors" — an euphemism for mercenary

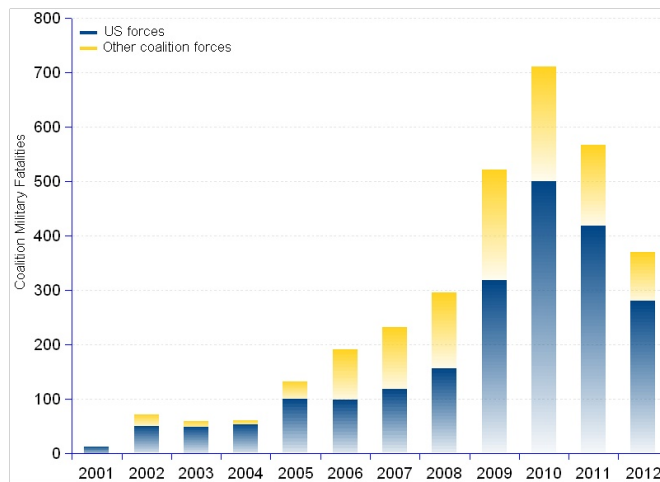
personnel — including armed contractors employed in security missions, that are kept unreported. The fatality trend had its inflection point in 2010, fell by 20% year-on-year in 2011, and seems to continue its downward slide. The

number of killings by IED (Improvised Explosive Device), as well as the number of wounded also decreased in 2012 compared to 2011. Whatever it may mean in strategy terms, it is certainly good news from a humanitarian viewpoint. The heavier fatality burden is carried by the US that suffered 76% of the losses in 2012, a higher percent than the 67% for the entire duration of the war. This may be a symptom of the disengagement process already initiated by the US allies who tend to leave more of the combat operations to US military.

Success or failure ?

After a crescendo of western casualties from 2001 through 2010, what does this turnaround mean in terms of victory or defeat ? The ISAF coalition already lost the war way back, probably around 2006. Nothing of what happened in recent years suggests that

foreign forces in Afghanistan can avoid defeat. The unknown is when are they going to acknowledge the bitter reality, and fully draw the required consequences.



Not surprisingly, ISAF try to save face by claiming that 2011 has been a "remarkably successful year" (statement of January 2012), basing the claim on the lower victim numbers, and on the alleged stabilization of some Afghan chunks of territory.

Reality is stubborn and flies in the face of such a preposterous claim. Are ISAF commanders masochist enough to consider as grand successes operations such as the high-profile insurgent strikes in the highly protected capital city Kabul ?

- June 2011 : insurgents storm the Intercontinental Hotel in Kabul.
- August 2011 : attack to the British Council in Kabul.
- September 2011 : attack to the US Embassy and to ISAF Headquarters in Kabul.
- April 2012 : attack to several sites in downtown Kabul.
- June 2012 : attack to a hotel and resort in the northern suburbs of Kabul.
- August 2012 : various attacks across

the country, including in previously quiet spots.

- September 2012 : attack to the UK base Camp Bastion, culminating with the destruction of 8 Marine Harrier jets on the tarmac.

ISAF commanders must be joking to speak of success when confronted with the spate of infiltrator attacks — in ISAF's parlance "green on blue attacks" —, by which Afghan security elements turn their weapons against US and other NATO personnel, attacks that claimed 43 killed, of which 25 US, from January to August 2012. The occurrence of such insider attacks caused already the freezing of various scheduled training and assistance programs, considered to be too dangerous for western personnel.

Focus on high-profile operations

All symptoms suggest that the war is in a transition stage, facing a fork : while NATO/ISAF go on fighting the 2008-style enemy, the insurgents changed trails, and are currently focusing on selected high-profile operations, including targeted killings of pro-government officials, to further erode the military and political resolve of the foreign forces, scheduled to leave the country until the end of 2014, and to prepare for the internecine struggle for leadership expected to burst in the after-2014 stage.

By September 2012, NATO/ISAF military personnel in Afghanistan amounted to 108,000, including 68,000 from the US and 40,000 from other NATO nations. Approximately a similar number of mercenary staff, including combat personnel, should be added to that number.

Although this is considerably below the peak in 2011, when the US had 99,000 troops in the country in the framework of the "surge"

strategy, it is far higher than the number of insurgent combatants, estimated by NATO/ISAF at about 29,000 altogether — 25,000 Taliban or a number "much lower" (gen. Allen, mid 2011), 3,000 Haqqani, 1,000 HIG (Hizb-e-Islam Gulbuddin), and "less than 100 or so" Al Qaeda (gen. Petraeus, April 2011).

Results of the "surge"

The "surge" episode is worth reviewing. By August 2009, ISAF commander McChrystal announced the new "counter-insurgency" strategy, supposedly aimed to "protect the population" — a revamping of the failed Vietnam war-old strategy of "winning the hearts and minds" of the native people. He considered essential a 44,000 increase of troops to avoid "mission failure" and to "reverse the Taliban momentum in 12 to 18 months".

McChrystal was fired on charges of foul-mouthing the administration, but his approach was followed through. By December 2009 Obama announced that US boots on the ground would increase by 30,000 up to 100,000, and the "transition" to Afghan leadership would begin in July 2011.

The 2011 deadline generated some equivocation among US allies (did it imply that NATO/ISAF would fully entrust combat operations to Afghan forces by end of 2011 ?), and was clarified only in November 2011 to mean that the transition should start in 2011 and be completed by the end of 2014.

Twelve to 18 months later, to use McChrystal's deadlines, little has been accomplished : the situation on the ground looks increasingly like a "mission failure". Militarily, the insurgency has been able to strike at the heart of NATO's defense system and to spread the operations throughout the country.

The ISAF draw-down, both by US and other NATO partners, have significantly reduced their strike, including air strike, capability. The string of "green on blue" attacks have succeeded in jamming the training of Afghan National Security Forces necessary to assure the "transition". Only an inveterate optimist such as the US Secretary of Defense Panetta still hopes that in "2013 we'll be able to make a transition from a combat to a training, advise, and assist role." It is more likely that ISAF will leave Afghanistan in as a messy state of affairs as the US did in Iraq.

The outlook

The strategy to win the hearts and minds has failed flat. Afghan people are exasperated with NATO/ISAF abuses and offenses. A wave of large-scale demonstrations with tragic results unwound throughout late 2011 and 2012 in protest against repetitive ISAF-caused civilian killings, or against arrogant and callously offensive episodes such as the burning of the Quran by a Florida pastor or by US soldiers on the ground, the video of US soldiers urinating on Afghan corpses, or the dubious YouTube film "The Innocence of Muslims".

Politically, the prospects are equally clouded. In spite of having awarded Afghanistan the status of "Major non-NATO Ally", the US keeps trying to negotiate with the Taliban in the back of the mistrusted Kabul administration, thus infuriating Karzai and his cronies. Since Taliban reject negotiations with the "puppet" Karzai, the US, after botched attempts in 2010, resumed in 2011 separate and discreet talks, leading to the agreement to open a Taliban office in Qatar, where further and more regular discussions could be held. The plan was frozen when Karzai got wind of it. Simultaneously, rumors say that Karzai is trying to establish links with the Taliban in the back of the foreign allies.

On the administrative front, the US assessment of the readiness of the Afghan political and administrative systems can be summarized in a sentence : thousands of pages of paper reforms, but little to actually show for it in the field. Socially, financially and economically, the future of the Afghan state is overcast.

The "After-2014" phase


What are the post-2014 prospects, after the expected ISAF withdrawal ? On one side, we meet the "all's going to be fine" opinion holders. It is likely that, if they are generals coveting a juicy position with military suppliers after retirement from the forces, or industrialists aspiring to snatch still another lucrative contract, or financiers waiting impatiently to manage the international cash expected to flow into Afghanistan to rebuild the nation, for these people all will surely be A-OK.

On the other side, western analysts are split. They foresee lots of trouble, and consider three main options.

- First, keeping a foreign military force of at least 50,000 indefinitely in the country. This is plain unrealistic, because of the unaffordable costs, and Afghan people's strong reluctance.
- The second option would be a stable joint government with the Taliban, something that looks very unlikely to happen.
- The third course of action consists of a 'de facto' partition of Afghanistan between the Taliban, who would keep the southern and eastern parts, and the Northern Alliance that would keep the remaining of the country.

These scenarios are highly speculative, minimize the Afghans' reservations, and do not integrate the viewpoints of all stakeholders,

especially the Afghan neighbors Pakistan, China and Iran, and of other key players such as Russia. The more likely is that Afghanistan will remain as troubled a nation, as it has been

along its history, torn apart by intermittent foreign interventions, and precarious national governments. 

Afghanistan War Coalition Military Fatalities (As of 30 October 2012)						
Year	USA	Other Coalition Members	Total	Killed by IEDs ¹		
				Number	Percent of total	
2001	12	0	12	0	0.0%	
2002	49	21	70	4	5.7%	
2003	48	10	58	3	5.2%	
2004	52	8	60	12	20.0%	
2005	99	32	131	20	15.3%	
2006	98	93	191	41	21.5%	
2007	117	115	232	78	33.6%	
2008	155	140	295	152	51.5%	
2009	317	204	521	275	52.8%	
2010	499	212	711	368	51.8%	
2011	418	148	566	252	44.5%	
2012	280	89	369	117	31.7%	
Total	2144	1072	3216	1322	41.1%	

¹ Improvised Explosive Devices

Sources :

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