

Obama sends marines to suppress population of southern Afghanistan

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The Obama administration has ordered the 2nd Marine Expeditionary Brigade (2 MEB) into a potentially bloody offensive in the southern province of Helmand. The objective is the suppression of the ethnic Pashtun population, which is overwhelmingly hostile to the seven-and-a-half year US and NATO occupation of the country and rejects the legitimacy of the Afghan puppet government headed by President Hamid Karzai.

Early Thursday morning, 2 MEB began what has been described as the biggest airlift of marines since the Vietnam War. Code-named “Khanjar”—Pashtun for “strike of the sword”—the operation is the largest undertaken by the Marine Corp since it led the assault on the Iraqi city of Fallujah in November 2004. In all, some 4,000 marines and a 600-strong battalion of the Afghan Army are involved, supported by an array of jet fighters, unmanned drones and helicopter gunships.

An article in Friday’s New York Times by veteran war correspondent Carlotta Gall, who has worked in Afghanistan and Pakistan since 2001, made clear why Helmand has been targeted for the first major operation in Obama’s Afghan “surge”.

She wrote that the “mood of the Afghan people has tipped into a popular revolt in some parts of southern Afghanistan”. People have “taken up arms against the foreign troops to protect their homes or in anger at losing relatives in airstrikes”.

Gall noted: “The southern provinces have suffered the worst civilian casualties since NATO’s deployment into the region in 2006. Thousands of people have been displaced by fighting and taken refuge in the towns. ‘Now there are more people siding with the Taliban than with the government’, said Abdul Qadir Noorzai, head of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission...”

One man interviewed by Gall in June declared: “Who are the Taliban? They are the local people.” Another, whose house was bombed by US jets two months ago, said: “We Muslims don’t like them [the foreign troops]. They are the source of danger.”

Gall’s outline of the real state of affairs refutes the barrage of propaganda depicting the offensive as aimed at saving the people from Taliban tyranny, allowing them to vote in upcoming elections and creating conditions for economic development. Helmand is, in reality, the epicentre of popular resistance to the occupation. Thousands of troops have been poured in to force the population to submit.

In the first days of the operation, marine infantry soldiers have been deployed deep into the lower Helmand River Valley, to the south of the new American base near the city of Lashkar

Gah. They have occupied the towns of Nawa and Garmser, as well as Khan Neshin, just 130 kilometres from the Pakistani border, which has not been visited by occupation or Afghan government forces for more than five years.

The marine assault was preceded by a British operation two weeks ago to seize 13 river crossings to the north of Lashkar Gah, in order to prevent Taliban reinforcements entering Helmand from insurgent-held areas of the neighbouring province of Kandahar. Yesterday, British units began a new offensive to secure the road between Lashkar Gah and the town of Gereshk in the north of the province.

US officers told the Washington Post that “Khanjar” was the product of months of planning. It has been conceived for Obama by the same figures who directed the Bush administration’s surge of tens of thousands of additional troops to Iraq in 2007. These include, most notably, Defence Secretary Robert Gates, Chairman of the Joints Chief of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen, Centcom commander General David Petraeus and the recently appointed US commander in Afghanistan, General Stanley McCrystal.

The offensive has been timed to coincide with the initial stages of an assault by the Pakistani military into the tribal agency of South Waziristan. The ethnic Pashtun tribal agencies are largely controlled by Islamist movements with close links to the Taliban, who provide Afghan guerillas with safe haven and contribute their own fighters to the anti-occupation insurgency.

The combined operations were described by a Pakistani officer as a “hammer and anvil” strategy. The intention is to force the Taliban to fight on two fronts, against both the US/NATO and Pakistani forces. Mahmood Shah, a retired Pakistani officer, told the Washington Post last month that his sources indicated that Taliban leaders had already “called back their fighters from Afghanistan and are bringing them to Pakistan” to meet an expected attack by the army. The Pakistani military has also deployed additional troops to the border between Helmand and the Pakistani province of Balochistan, to prevent any Afghan Taliban escaping the marines.

The marines in Helmand will duplicate the methods used by the US military in Iraq and they are well qualified to do so. Most of the 2 MEB units, and many of the officers and enlisted men, served one or multiple tours in Iraq’s western province of Anbar. The surge tactics were first tested in Anbar, a centre of Sunni Arab resistance to the US invasion. Over two years, the marines honed their counter-insurgency methods at the cost of thousands of Iraqi lives and the repression of the entire population.

Everyone in the newly occupied areas of Helmand—men, women and children—will be treated as potential insurgents. Bases will be established in towns and villages, from which US troops will use intimidation to identify resistance fighters. Afghans will face constant road-blocks, identity checks and searches. Men of fighting age will have to endure the most humiliating treatment. Local tribal leaders will be offered cash bribes to order their clans to collaborate with the occupation. If they refuse, they will be marked as Taliban sympathisers.

While rarely mentioned in the media’s sanitised descriptions, US counter-insurgency tactics rely heavily on targeted assassinations and arbitrary detention. General McCrystal has been placed in command in Afghanistan primarily due to his expertise in directing such operations. From 2003 to 2008, he headed the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC),

whose death squads killed or seized hundreds of alleged leaders and supporters of the Iraqi resistance. The same methods are already being used across Afghanistan by American, British and Australian special forces, and will now be extended into southern Helmand.

In the first days of the Helmand offensive, resistance has been minimal. One marine company fought what an officer described as a “hell of a fight” with Afghan fighters south of Garsmer on Thursday. After hours of gunfire, a jet fighter was called in to destroy the insurgent position with a 500-pound bomb. Further minor clashes took place yesterday. In the areas around Nawa and Khan Neshin, there have been no reports of clashes.

To date, just one marine has been killed and some 11 wounded. Dozens of others have needed treatment for heat exhaustion in the blistering temperatures of the Afghan summer. The British and Danish troops operating in the northern districts of Helmand have also taken casualties. On Wednesday, two British soldiers were killed and six others wounded by a roadside bomb outside Lashkar Gah. Among the dead was Lieutenant Colonel Rupert Thorneloe, the highest ranking British officer to be killed in combat since the 1982 Falklands War. The same day, a Danish soldier was seriously wounded by a suspected mine.

Despite the absence of heavy fighting, concerns have been expressed that the operation may fail due to a lack of troops. According to the Washington Post, the 2 MEB commander, Brigadier General Lawrence Nicholson, had apparently expected that thousands of Afghan government troops would be allocated to “Khanjar”. Instead, only 600 or so are taking part.

Nicholson described the paucity of Afghan forces as a “critical vulnerability”. His marines will be stretched trying to hold what is still only a relatively small area of Taliban-controlled territory, under conditions in which the insurgents are unlikely to confront them in open combat. After more than seven years, the Taliban has learnt to avoid one-sided engagements with the far better armed occupation troops. The resistance will either blend into the sympathetic civilian population or move to safe sites in other areas of Afghanistan. The marines, by contrast, will suffer a steady flow of casualties from roadside bombs, mines and other guerilla attacks.

There are already signs that top Pentagon commanders are pressuring the Obama White House to send even more troops to Afghanistan. To date, Obama has insisted he will not deploy more than the additional 21,000 he ordered to the country upon taking office. General David McKiernan, the former US commander in Afghanistan, was summarily sacked in May largely due to his insistence that more were needed.

Disquiet in the military has clearly not been silenced. McClatchy Newspapers reported on Wednesday that National Security Advisor James Jones, who had just returned from Central Asia, had “started to hear rumblings that new commanders and officials being sent to Afghanistan would quickly urge another shift in strategy and more troops”. An unnamed senior officer allegedly told journalist Bob Woodward that at least 100,000 were needed.

When all the reinforcements arrive, there will be 68,000 American troops in the country and some 30,000 from various NATO countries, many of which are operating under caveats that prevent them moving into combat zones.

Late Wednesday, Joint Chiefs Admiral Mullen told journalists that his instructions to General McCrystal were to come back to him and “ask for what you need” in the way of additional troops. There is no reason to doubt that Obama will accept whatever the military demands.

From his election campaign on, he has identified his presidency with not only “winning” the war in Afghanistan but extending it into Pakistan. Behind the façade of rooting out Islamic extremism and terrorism, the agenda is, and always has been, the establishment of US strategic dominance throughout Central Asia.

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