

President Obama's Secret: Only 100 Al Qaeda Now in Afghanistan

With New Surge, One Thousand U.S. Soldiers and \$300 Million for Every One Al Qaeda Fighter

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As he justified sending 30,000 more troops to Afghanistan at a cost of \$30 billion a year, President Barack Obama's description Tuesday of the al Qaeda "cancer" in that country left out one key fact: U.S. intelligence officials have concluded there are only about 100 al Qaeda fighters in the entire country.

A senior U.S. intelligence official told ABCNews.com the approximate estimate of 100 al Qaeda members left in Afghanistan reflects the conclusion of American intelligence agencies and the Defense Department. The relatively small number was part of the intelligence passed on to the White House as President Obama conducted his deliberations.

President Obama made only a vague reference to the size of the al Qaeda presence in his speech at West Point, when he said, "al Qaeda has not reemerged in Afghanistan in the same number as before 9/11, but they retain their safe havens along the border."

A spokesperson at the White House's National Security Council, Chris Hensman, said he could not comment on intelligence matters.

Obama's National Security Adviser, Gen. James Jones, put the number at "fewer than a hundred" in an October interview with CNN.

Sen. Jeanne Shaheen, D-N.H., referred to the number at a Senate Foreign Relations Committee in October, saying "intelligence says about a hundred al Qaeda in Afghanistan."

As the President acknowledged, al Qaeda now operates from Pakistan where U.S. troops are prohibited from operating. "We're in Afghanistan to prevent a cancer from once again spreading through that country," he said.

Intelligence officials estimate there are several hundred al Qaeda fighters just across the border in Pakistan.

An Obama administration official said the additional troops were needed in Afghanistan to "sandwich" al Qaeda between Pakistan and Afghanistan and prevent them from re-establishing a safe haven in Afghanistan.

"Pakistan has been stepping up its efforts," the official said.

“So the real question is will Pakistan do enough,” said former White House counter-terrorism official Richard Clarke, an ABC News consultant.

“What if they take all the money we given them but don’t really follow through? What the strategy then?” said Clarke.

With 100,000 troops in Afghanistan at an estimated yearly cost of \$30 billion, it means that for every one al Qaeda fighter, the U.S. will commit 1,000 troops and \$300 million a year.

al Qaeda’s Ideological Influence

Other counter-terror analysts say the actual number of al Qaeda in Afghanistan is less important than their ability to train others in the Taliban and have ideological influence.

“A hundred ‘no foolin’ al Qaeda operatives operating in a safe haven can do a hell of a lot of damage,” said one former intelligence official with significant past experience in the region.

At a Senate hearing, the former CIA Pakistan station chief, Bob Grenier, testified al Qaeda had already been defeated in Afghanistan.

“So in terms of ‘in Afghanistan,’” asked Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass., “they have been disrupted and dismantled and defeated. They’re not in Afghanistan, correct?”

“That’s true,” replied Grenier.

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