

Prisons, Drones, and Black Ops in Afghanistan

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450 Bases and It's Not Over Yet

In late December, the lot was just a big blank: a few burgundy metal shipping containers sitting in an expanse of crushed eggshell-colored gravel inside a razor-wire-topped fence. The American military in Afghanistan doesn't want to talk about it, but one day soon, it will be a new hub for the American drone war in the Greater Middle East.

Next year, that empty lot will be a two-story concrete intelligence facility for America's drone war, brightly lit and filled with powerful computers kept in climate-controlled comfort in a country where most of the population has no access to [electricity](#). It will boast almost 7,000 square feet of offices, briefing and conference rooms, and a large "processing, exploitation, and dissemination" operations center — and, of course, it will be built with American tax dollars.

Nor is it an anomaly. Despite all the talk of drawdowns and withdrawals, there has been a years-long [building boom](#) in Afghanistan that shows little sign of abating. In early 2010, the U.S.-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) had nearly [400 bases](#) in Afghanistan. Today, Lieutenant Lauren Rago of ISAF public affairs tells TomDispatch, the number tops 450.

The hush-hush, high-tech, super-secure facility at the massive air base in Kandahar is just one of many building projects the U.S. military currently has planned or underway in Afghanistan. While some U.S. bases are indeed closing up shop or being [transferred](#) to the Afghan government, and there's [talk](#) of combat operations slowing or ending next year, as well as a [withdrawal](#) of American combat forces from Afghanistan by 2014, the U.S. military is still preparing for a much longer haul at mega-bases like Kandahar and Bagram airfields. The same is true even of some smaller camps, forward operating bases (FOBs), and combat outposts (COPs) scattered through the country's backlands. "Bagram is going through a significant transition during the next year to two years," Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Daniel Gerdes of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Bagram Office recently told *Freedom Builder*, a Corps of Engineers publication. "We're transitioning... into a long-term, five-year, 10-year vision for the base."

Whether the U.S. military will still be in Afghanistan in five or 10 years remains to be seen, but steps are currently being taken to make that possible. U.S. military publications, plans and schematics, contracting documents, and other official data examined by TomDispatch catalog hundreds of construction projects worth billions of dollars slated to begin, continue, or conclude in 2012.


While many of these efforts are geared toward structures for Afghan forces or civilian institutions, a considerable number involve U.S. facilities, some of the most significant being dedicated to the ascendant forms of American warfare: drone operations and missions by [elite special operations units](#). The available plans for most of these projects suggest durability. “The structures that are going in are concrete and mortar, rather than plywood and tent skins,” says Gerdes. As of last December, his office was involved in 30 Afghan construction projects for U.S. or international coalition partners worth almost \$427 million.

The Big Base Build-Up

Recently, the *New York Times* [reported](#) that President Obama is likely to approve a plan to shift much of the U.S. effort in Afghanistan to special operations forces. These elite troops would then conduct kill/capture missions and train local troops well beyond 2014. Recent building efforts in the country bear this out.

A major project at Bagram Air Base, for instance, involves the construction of a special operations forces complex, a clandestine base within a base that will afford America’s black ops troops secrecy and near-absolute autonomy from other U.S. and coalition forces. Begun in 2010, the \$29 million project is slated to be completed this May and join roughly [90 locations](#) around the country where troops from Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force-Afghanistan have been stationed.

Elsewhere on Bagram, tens of millions of dollars are being spent on projects that are less sexy but no less integral to the war effort, like paving dirt roads and upgrading drainage systems on the mega-base. In January, the U.S. military awarded a \$7 million contract to a Turkish construction company to build a 24,000-square-foot command-and-control facility. Plans are also in the works for a new operations center to support tactical fighter jet missions, a new flight-line fire station, as well as more lighting and other improvements to support the American air war.

 Last month, Afghan President Hamid Karzai [ordered](#) that the U.S.-run prison at Bagram be transferred to Afghan control. By the end of January, the U.S. had issued a \$36 million contract for the construction, within a year, of a new prison on the base. While details are sparse, plans for the detention center indicate a thoroughly modern, high-security facility complete with guard towers, advanced surveillance systems, administrative facilities, and the capacity to house about 2,000 prisoners.

At Kandahar Air Field, that new intelligence facility for the drone war will be joined by a similarly-sized structure devoted to administrative operations and maintenance tasks associated with robotic aerial missions. It will be able to accommodate as many as 180 personnel at a time. With an estimated combined price tag of up to \$5 million, both buildings will be integral to Air Force and possibly CIA operations involving both the MQ-1 Predator drone and its more advanced and more heavily-armed progeny, the MQ-9 Reaper.

The military is keeping information about these drone facilities under extraordinarily tight wraps. They refused to answer questions about whether, for instance, the construction of these new centers for robotic warfare are in any way related to the [loss](#) of Shamsi Air Base in neighboring Pakistan as a drone operations center, or if they signal efforts to increase the tempo of drone missions in the years ahead. The International Joint Command’s chief of Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) operations, aware that such questions

were to be posed, backed out of a planned interview with TomDispatch.

“Unfortunately our ISR chief here in the International Joint Command is going to be unable to address your questions,” Lieutenant Ryan Welsh of ISAF Joint Command Media Outreach explained by email just days before the scheduled interview. He also made it clear that any question involving drone operations in Pakistan was off limits. “The issues that you raise are outside the scope under which the IJC operates, therefore we are unable to facilitate this interview request.”

Whether the construction at Kandahar is designed to free up facilities elsewhere for CIA drone operations across the border in Pakistan or is related only to missions within Afghanistan, it strongly suggests a ramping up of unmanned operations. It is, however, just one facet of the ongoing construction at the air field. This month, a \$26 million project to build 11 new structures devoted to tactical vehicle maintenance at Kandahar is scheduled for completion. With two large buildings for upkeep and repairs, one devoted strictly to fixing tires, another to painting vehicles, as well as an industrial-sized car wash, and administrative and storage facilities, the big base’s building boom shows no sign of flickering out.

Construction and Reconstruction

This year, at Herat Air Base in the province of the same name bordering Turkmenistan and Iran, the U.S. is slated to begin a multimillion-dollar project to enhance its special forces’ air operations. Plans are in the works to expand apron space — where aircraft can be parked, serviced, and loaded or unloaded — for helicopters and airplanes, as well as to build new taxiways and aircraft shelters.

That project is just one of nearly 130, cumulatively valued at about \$1.5 billion, slated to be carried out in Herat, Helmand, and Kandahar provinces this year, according to Army Corps of Engineers documents examined by TomDispatch. These also include efforts at Camp Tombstone and Camp Dwyer, both in Helmand Province as well as Kandahar’s FOB Hadrian and FOB Wilson. The U.S. military also recently awarded a contract for more air field apron space at a base in Kunduz, a new secure entrance and new roads for FOB Delaram II, and new utilities and roads at FOB Shank, while the Marines recently built a new chapel at Camp Bastion.

Seven years ago, Forward Operating Base [Sweeney](#), located a mile up in a mountain range in Zabul Province, was a well-outfitted, if remote, American base. After U.S. troops abandoned it, however, the base fell into disrepair. Last month, American troops returned in force and began rebuilding the outpost, constructing everything from new troop housing to a new storage facility. “We built a lot of buildings, we put up a lot of tents, we filled a lot of sandbags, and we increased our force protection significantly,” Captain Joe Mickley, commanding officer of the soldiers taking up residence at the base, told a military reporter.

Decommission and Deconstruction

Hesco barriers are, in essence, big bags of dirt. Up to seven feet tall, made of canvas and heavy gauge wire mesh, they form [protective walls](#) around U.S. outposts all over Afghanistan. They’ll take the worst of sniper rounds, rifle-propelled grenades, even mortar shells, but one thing can absolutely wreck them — the Marines’ 9th Engineer Support Battalion.

At the beginning of December, the 9th Engineers were building bases and filling up Hescos in Helmand Province. By the end of the month, they were tearing others down.

Wielding pickaxes, shovels, bolt-cutters, powerful rescue saws, and front-end loaders, they have begun “demilitarizing” bases, cutting countless Hescos — which cost \$700 or more a pop — into heaps of jagged scrap metal and bulldozing berms in advance of the announced American withdrawal from Afghanistan. At Firebase Saenz, for example, Marines were bathed in a sea of crimson sparks as they sawed their way through the metal mesh and let the dirt spill out, leaving a country already haunted by the ghosts of British and Russian bases with yet another defunct foreign outpost. After Saenz, it was on to another patrol base slated for destruction.

Not all rural outposts are being torn down, however. Some are being [handed over](#) to the Afghan Army or police. And new facilities are now being built for the indigenous forces at an increasing rate. “If current projections remain accurate, we will award 18 contracts in February,” Bonnie Perry, the head of contracting for the Army Corps of Engineers’ Afghanistan Engineering District-South, [told](#) military reporter Karla Marshall. “Next quarter we expect that awards will remain high, with the largest number of contract awards occurring in May.” One of the projects underway is a large base near Herat, which will include barracks, dining facilities, office space, and other amenities for Afghan commandos.

Tell Me How This Ends

No one should be surprised that the U.S. military is building up and tearing down bases at the same time, nor that much of the new construction is going on at mega-bases, while small outposts in the countryside are being abandoned. This is exactly what you would expect of an occupation force looking to scale back its “footprint” and end major combat operations while maintaining an on-going presence in Afghanistan. Given the U.S. military’s projected retreat to its giant bases and an increased reliance on kill/capture black-ops as well as unmanned air missions, it’s also no surprise that its signature projects for 2012 include a new special operations forces compound, clandestine drone facilities, and a brand new military prison.

There’s little doubt Bagram Air Base will exist in five or 10 years. Just who will be occupying it is, however, less clear. After all, in Iraq, the Obama administration negotiated for some way to station a [significant](#) military force — 10,000 or more troops — there beyond a withdrawal date that had been set in stone for years. While a token number of U.S. troops and a highly militarized State Department [contingent](#) remain there, the Iraqi government largely thwarted the American efforts — and now, even the State Department presence is being halved.

It’s less likely this will be the case in Afghanistan, but it remains possible. Still, it’s clear that the military is building in that country as if an enduring American presence were a given. Whatever the outcome, vestiges of the current base-building boom will endure and become part of America’s Afghan legacy.

On Bagram’s grounds stands a distinctive structure called the “Crow’s Nest.” It’s an old control tower built by the Soviets to coordinate their military operations in Afghanistan. That foreign force left the country in [1989](#). The Soviet Union itself [departed](#) from the planet less than three years later. The tower remains.

America's new prison in Bagram will undoubtedly remain, too. Just who the jailers will be and who will be locked inside five years or 10 years from now is, of course, unknown. But given the history — marked by torture and deaths — of the appalling [treatment](#) of inmates at Bagram and, more generally, of the [brutality](#) toward prisoners by [all parties](#) to the conflict over the years, in no scenario are the results likely to be pretty.

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