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From: Lloyd Etheredge <lloyd.etheredge@policyscience.net>

Subject: 145. The National Academy's Afghanistan chapter: 9 years of data, theories, forecasts, lessons; Fwd: Nordland, "Security in Afghanistan is Deteriorating . . ." NYT 9/11/2010; Fwd: Shane et al., "Secret Assault on Terrorism Widens on Two Continents" - NYT 8/14/2010

Dr. Fischhoff and Colleagues:

Now, with 9 years of data, theories, forecasts and experience, I hope that your National Academy Report will make a candid assessment of what we should be learning re human behavior and Afghanistan - for example, in light of trends discussed recently by Nordland (the attached article) and others..

I know that these are tough questions. However silence, especially at your level, is going to be taken as evidence that academic behavioral scientists are useless and that we have nothing left to contribute of importance about any urgent national problem/challenge, when I think that the opposite is the case.

What's missing?

A similar set of questions can be asked about data, theories, forecasts, and results in Yemen [e.g., # 99, archived on www.policyscience.net at II.D]. where the current erosions after 9+ years were recently referenced in the attached article by Shane et al., "Secret Assault on Terrorism Widens on Two Continents" - Yemen being seen, now, as potentially "the next Afghanistan."

The official sequences of "Once we believed, now we know . . ." and "Now, we are just beginning to get a handle on things . . ." etc. are predictable, and perhaps legitimate. How can the DNI calibrate these claims?

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The New York Times

September 11, 2010

Security in Afghanistan Is Deteriorating, Aid Groups Say

By ROD NORDLAND

KABUL, Afghanistan — Even as more American troops flow into the country, Afghanistan is more dangerous than it has ever been during this war, with security deteriorating in recent months, according to international organizations and humanitarian groups.

Large parts of the country that were once completely safe, like most of the northern provinces, now have a substantial Taliban presence — even in areas where there are few Pashtuns, who previously were the Taliban's only supporters. As NATO forces poured in and shifted to the south to battle the Taliban in their stronghold, the Taliban responded with a surge of their own, greatly increasing their activities in the north and parts of the east.

The worsening security comes as the Obama administration is under increasing pressure to show results to maintain public support for the war, and raises serious concerns about whether the country can hold legitimate nationwide elections for Parliament next Saturday.

Unarmed government employees can no longer travel safely in 30 percent of the country's 368 districts, according to published United Nations estimates, and there are districts deemed too dangerous to visit in all but one of the country's 34 provinces.

The number of insurgent attacks has increased significantly; in August 2009, insurgents carried out 630 attacks. This August, they initiated at least 1,353, according to the Afghan N.G.O. Safety Office, an independent organization financed by Western governments and agencies to monitor safety for aid workers.

An attack on a Western medical team in northern Afghanistan in early August, which killed 10 people, was the largest massacre in years of aid workers in Afghanistan.

"The humanitarian space is shrinking day by day," said a CARE Afghanistan official, Abdul Kebar.

The International Security Assistance Force, or ISAF, does not routinely release detailed data on attacks around the country, and the Afghan government stopped doing so in mid-2009. United Nations officials have also stopped releasing details of attacks, though they monitor them closely. Requests for access to that information were denied.

ISAF officials dispute the notion that security is slipping from them, pointing to their

successes with targeted killings and captures of Taliban field commanders and members of the Taliban shadow government.

American military officials say the increased level of violence is related to the rise in the number of its forces here. The last 2,000 of 30,000 new American troops are expected to arrive in the next week or two, military officials say. The result is more military operations, they say, and more opportunities for the insurgents to attack coalition forces.

That does not entirely explain the increased activity of the Taliban in areas where they were seldom seen before, and where the coalition presence is light, however.

Last year, American military leaders adopted a strategy of concentrating operations in what they identified as 80 “key terrain districts,” mostly in the south and east of the country, less than a fourth of Afghanistan’s districts.

The idea was to attack the Taliban where they were strongest, and concentrate forces where populations were largest.

While how many fighters the insurgents have is a matter of estimate and conjecture, the impact they have had is easy enough to judge.

Last month, ISAF recorded 4,919 “kinetic events,” including small-arms fire, bombs and shelling, a 7 percent increase over the previous month, and a 49 percent increase over August 2009, according to Maj. Sunset R. Belinsky, an ISAF spokeswoman. August 2009 was itself an unusually active month for the insurgency as it sought to disrupt the presidential elections then.

With one attack after another, the Taliban and their insurgent allies have degraded security in almost every part of the country (the one exception is Panjshir Province in the north, which has never succumbed to Taliban control).

The Afghan N.G.O. Safety Office says that by almost every metric it has, Afghanistan is more dangerous now than at any time since 2001.

The most recent troop buildup comes in response to steady advances by the Taliban. Four years ago, the insurgents were active in only four provinces. Now they are active in 33 of 34, the organizations say.

“We do not support the perspective that this constitutes ‘things getting worse before they get better,’ ” said Nic Lee, director of the Afghan N.G.O. Safety Office, “but rather see it as being consistent with the five-year trend of things just getting worse.”

Despite the spread of the conflict, humanitarian organizations say they are still able to serve Afghans in much of the country. They have to be much more careful, restricting their movements and pulling back from some areas altogether.

They use Afghan workers rather than international staff members. They avoid travel by road and take greater security precautions. They have also taken to operating incognito as a matter of routine. As a result, while insurgent attacks have more than doubled since last year, attacks on N.G.O.'s have actually declined by 35 percent, Mr. Lee said.

Because of the lack of security, CARE, like many humanitarian groups, no longer uses the country's principal highway, the Grand Trunk Road connecting Kabul, the capital, to Peshawar in Pakistan. CARE has 10 offices around the country to manage its 1,000 employees, but its own international staff members can safely visit only four or five of them, according to a spokeswoman, Jennifer Rowell.

Likewise, there is no longer an Oxfam sign on display in the entire country, although the British-based aid group finances projects in scores of villages, mostly staffed by Afghans.

"Most N.G.O.'s don't send foreigners to most places any longer," said Ashley Jackson, head of policy and advocacy for Oxfam in Kabul, referring to nongovernmental organizations. Like many major aid groups, Oxfam now subcontracts much of its work in the provinces to partners, usually Afghan aid groups.

The threat to government workers is just as severe. Last month, Afghan police and army officials asked the Independent Election Commission to cancel 938 of its proposed 6,835 polling centers, almost 14 percent, because it could not guarantee security for those areas. Polling places in 25 provinces were affected.

On Tuesday the election commission said it would cancel 81 other polling sites, nearly a fifth of the polling places in eastern Nangarhar Province, which was relatively safe during last year's presidential election. The commission has warned that it may have to close still more polling centers in other provinces if the authorities cannot provide adequate security for voters.

Only 500 international observers are coming to monitor these elections, compared with more than a thousand last year, according to Jindad Spinghar of the Free and Fair Election Foundation. International observers will be able to go only to provincial capitals, not rural areas, where most of the population lives, he said. The election foundation, the leading Afghan monitoring group, has had to cut back its own observers, who will be watching only 60 percent of polling places.

"Because the control of the central government is decreasing," Mr. Spinghar said, "power

brokers and warlords will be able to use their influence at the local level, where there are no observers.” It was in just such areas in 2009 that widespread voting fraud took place, resulting in a disputed and internationally discredited presidential election.

Military officials counter that they are making headway against the Taliban. Gen. David H. Petraeus, the ISAF commander, said recently that NATO forces had killed or captured 2,974 insurgents this summer, 235 of them commanders. Last December, the military assessed Taliban strength at 25,000.

“While we do not routinely release data on total attacks around the country, we did expect the number of attacks to go up as the number of ISAF troops increased,” said Major Belinsky, the ISAF spokeswoman.

“We are pushing into areas where the Taliban have enjoyed safe haven in the past, and we are taking that away from them,” Major Belinsky said. “They are putting up a tough fight, with more tough fighting to come, but we are making progress.”

A top coalition general bristled recently when asked about views among some critics that NATO was losing the fight. “How do they know we’re losing? I can lay out rhyme and reason about where we’re making progress. We’re building, they’re destroying. I say to them, prove it.”

August 14, 2010

Secret Assault on Terrorism Widens on Two Continents

By SCOTT SHANE, MARK MAZZETTI and ROBERT F. WORTH

This article is by Scott Shane, Mark Mazzetti and Robert F. Worth.

WASHINGTON – At first, the news from Yemen on May 25 sounded like a modest victory in the campaign against terrorists: an airstrike had hit a group suspected of being operatives for Al Qaeda in the remote desert of Marib Province, birthplace of the

legendary queen of Sheba.

But the strike, it turned out, had also killed the province's deputy governor, a respected local leader who Yemeni officials said had been trying to talk Qaeda members into giving up their fight. Yemen's president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, accepted responsibility for the death and paid blood money to the offended tribes.

The strike, though, was not the work of Mr. Saleh's decrepit Soviet-era air force. It was a secret mission by the United States military, according to American officials, at least the fourth such assault on Al Qaeda in the arid mountains and deserts of Yemen since December.

The attack offered a glimpse of the Obama administration's shadow war against Al Qaeda and its allies. In roughly a dozen countries – from the deserts of North Africa, to the mountains of Pakistan, to former Soviet republics crippled by ethnic and religious strife – the United States has significantly increased military and intelligence operations, pursuing the enemy using robotic drones and commando teams, paying contractors to spy and training local operatives to chase terrorists.

The White House has intensified the Central Intelligence Agency's drone missile campaign in Pakistan, approved raids against Qaeda operatives in Somalia and launched clandestine operations from Kenya. The administration has worked with European allies to dismantle terrorist groups in North Africa, efforts that include a recent French and Mauritanian strike near the border between Mauritania and Mali. And the Pentagon tapped a network of private contractors to gather intelligence about things like militant hide-outs in Pakistan and the location of an American soldier currently in Taliban hands.

While the stealth war began in the Bush administration, it has expanded under President Obama, who rose to prominence in part for his early opposition to the invasion of Iraq. Virtually none of the newly aggressive steps undertaken by the United States government have been publicly acknowledged. In contrast with the troop buildup in Afghanistan, which came after months of robust debate, for example, the American military campaign in Yemen began without notice in December and has never been officially confirmed.

Obama administration officials point to the benefits of bringing the fight against Al Qaeda and other militants into the shadows. Afghanistan and Iraq, they said, have sobered American politicians and voters about the staggering costs of big wars that topple governments, require years of occupation and can be a catalyst for further radicalization throughout the Muslim world.

Instead of "the hammer," in the words of John O. Brennan, President Obama's top

counterterrorism adviser, America will rely on the “scalpel.” In a speech in May, Mr. Brennan, an architect of the White House strategy, used this analogy while pledging a “multigenerational” campaign against Al Qaeda and its extremist affiliates.

Yet such wars come with many risks: the potential for botched operations that fuel anti-American rage; a blurring of the lines between soldiers and spies that could put troops at risk of being denied Geneva Convention protections; a weakening of the Congressional oversight system put in place to prevent abuses by America’s secret operatives; and a reliance on authoritarian foreign leaders and surrogates with sometimes murky loyalties.

The May strike in Yemen, for example, provoked a revenge attack on an oil pipeline by local tribesmen and produced a propaganda bonanza for Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. It also left President Saleh privately furious about the death of the provincial official, Jabir al-Shabwani, and scrambling to prevent an anti-American backlash, according to Yemeni officials.

The administration’s demands have accelerated a transformation of the C.I.A. into a paramilitary organization as much as a spying agency, which some critics worry could lower the threshold for future quasi-military operations. In Pakistan’s mountains, the agency had broadened its drone campaign beyond selective strikes against Qaeda leaders and now regularly obliterates suspected enemy compounds and logistics convoys, just as the military would grind down an enemy force.

For its part, the Pentagon is becoming more like the C.I.A. Across the Middle East and elsewhere, Special Operations troops under secret “Execute Orders” have conducted spying missions that were once the preserve of civilian intelligence agencies. With code names like Eager Pawn and Indigo Spade, such programs typically operate with even less transparency and Congressional oversight than traditional covert actions by the C.I.A.

And, as American counterterrorism operations spread beyond war zones into territory hostile to the military, private contractors have taken on a prominent role, raising concerns that the United States has outsourced some of its most important missions to a sometimes unaccountable private army.

A Proving Ground

Yemen is a testing ground for the “scalpel” approach Mr. Brennan endorses. Administration officials warn of the growing strength of Al Qaeda’s affiliate there, citing as evidence its attempt on Dec. 25 to blow up a trans-Atlantic jetliner using a young Nigerian operative. Some American officials believe that militants in Yemen could now pose an even greater threat than Al Qaeda’s leadership in Pakistan.

The officials said that they have benefited from the Yemeni government's new resolve to fight Al Qaeda and that the American strikes – carried out with cruise missiles and Harrier fighter jets – had been approved by Yemen's leaders. The strikes, administration officials say, have killed dozens of militants suspected of plotting future attacks. The Pentagon and the C.I.A. have quietly bulked up the number of their operatives at the embassy in Sana, the Yemeni capital, over the past year.

“Where we want to get is to much more small scale, preferably locally driven operations,” said Representative Adam Smith, Democrat of Washington, who serves on the Intelligence and Armed Services Committees.

“For the first time in our history, an entity has declared a covert war against us,” Mr. Smith said, referring to Al Qaeda. “And we are using similar elements of American power to respond to that covert war.”

Some security experts draw parallels to the cold war, when the United States drew heavily on covert operations as it fought a series of proxy battles with the Soviet Union.

And some of the central players of those days have returned to take on supporting roles in the shadow war. Michael G. Vickers, who helped run the C.I.A.'s campaign to funnel guns and money to the Afghanistan mujahedeen in the 1980s and was featured in the book and movie “Charlie Wilson's War,” is now the top Pentagon official overseeing Special Operations troops around the globe. Duane R. Clarridge, a profane former C.I.A. officer who ran operations in Central America and was indicted in the Iran-contra scandal, turned up this year helping run a Pentagon-financed private spying operation in Pakistan.

In pursuing this strategy, the White House is benefiting from a unique political landscape. Republican lawmakers have been unwilling to take Mr. Obama to task for aggressively hunting terrorists, and many Democrats seem eager to embrace any move away from the long, costly wars begun by the Bush administration.

Still, it has astonished some old hands of the military and intelligence establishment. Jack Devine, a former top C.I.A. clandestine officer who helped run the covert war against the Soviet Army in Afghanistan in the 1980s, said his record showed that he was “not exactly a cream puff” when it came to advocating secret operations.

But he warned that the safeguards introduced after Congressional investigations into clandestine wars of the past – from C.I.A. assassination attempts to the Iran-contra affair, in which money from secret arms dealings with Iran was funneled to right-wing rebels in Nicaragua known as the contras – were beginning to be weakened. “We got the covert

action programs under well-defined rules after we had made mistakes and learned from them,” he said. “Now, we’re coming up with a new model, and I’m concerned there are not clear rules.”

Cooperation and Control

The initial American strike in Yemen came on Dec. 17, hitting what was believed to be a Qaeda training camp in Abyan Province, in the southern part of the country. The first report from the Yemeni government said that its air force had killed “around 34” Qaeda fighters there, and that others had been captured elsewhere in coordinated ground operations.

The next day, Mr. Obama called President Saleh to thank him for his cooperation and pledge continuing American support. Mr. Saleh’s approval for the strike – rushed because of intelligence reports that Qaeda suicide bombers might be headed to Sana – was the culmination of administration efforts to win him over, including visits by Mr. Brennan and Gen. David H. Petraeus, then the commander of military operations in the Middle East.

The accounts of the American strikes in Yemen, which include many details that have not previously been reported, are based on interviews with American and Yemeni officials who requested anonymity because the military campaign in Yemen is classified, as well as documents from Yemeni investigators.

As word of the Dec. 17 attack filtered out, a very mixed picture emerged. The Yemeni press quickly identified the United States as responsible for the strike. Qaeda members seized on video of dead children and joined a protest rally a few days later, broadcast by Al Jazeera, in which a speaker shouldering an AK-47 rifle appealed to Yemeni counterterrorism troops.

“Soldiers, you should know we do not want to fight you,” the Qaeda operative, standing amid angry Yemenis, declared. “There is no problem between you and us. The problem is between us and America and its agents. Beware taking the side of America!”

A Navy ship offshore had fired the weapon in the attack, a cruise missile loaded with cluster bombs, according to a report by Amnesty International. Unlike conventional bombs, cluster bombs disperse small munitions, some of which do not immediately explode, increasing the likelihood of civilian casualties. The use of cluster munitions, later documented by Amnesty, was condemned by human rights groups.

An inquiry by the Yemeni Parliament found that the strike had killed at least 41 members

of two families living near the makeshift Qaeda camp. Three more civilians were killed and nine were wounded four days later when they stepped on unexploded munitions from the strike, the inquiry found.

American officials cited strained resources for decisions about some of the Yemen strikes. With the C.I.A.'s armed drones tied up with the bombing campaign in Pakistan, the officials said, cruise missiles were all that was available at the time. Drones are favored by the White House for clandestine strikes because they can linger over targets for hours or days before unleashing Hellfire missiles, reducing the risk that women, children or other noncombatants will fall victim.

The Yemen operation has raised a broader question: who should be running the shadow war? White House officials are debating whether the C.I.A. should take over the Yemen campaign as a "covert action," which would allow the United States to carry out operations even without the approval of Yemen's government. By law, covert action programs require presidential authorization and formal notification to the Congressional intelligence committees. No such requirements apply to the military's so-called Special Access Programs, like the Yemen strikes.

Obama administration officials defend their efforts in Yemen. The strikes have been "conducted very methodically," and claims of innocent civilians being killed are "very much exaggerated," said a senior counterterrorism official. He added that comparing the nascent Yemen campaign with American drone strikes in Pakistan was unfair, since the United States has had a decade to build an intelligence network in Pakistan that feeds the drone program.

In Yemen, officials said, there is a dearth of solid intelligence about Qaeda operations. "It will take time to develop and grow that capability," the senior official said.

On Dec. 24, another cruise missile struck in a remote valley called Rafadh, about 400 miles southeast of the Yemeni capital and two hours from the nearest paved road. The Yemeni authorities said the strike killed dozens of Qaeda operatives, including the leader of the Qaeda branch in Yemen, Nasser al-Wuhayshi, and his Saudi deputy, Said Ali al-Shihri. But officials later acknowledged that neither man was hit, and local witnesses say the missile killed five low-level Qaeda members.

The next known American strike, on March 14, was more successful, killing a Qaeda operative named Jamil al-Anbari and possibly another militant. Al Qaeda's Yemeni branch acknowledged Mr. Anbari's death. On June 19, the group retaliated with a lethal attack on a government security compound in Aden that left 11 people dead and said the "brigade of the martyr Jamil al-Anbari" carried it out.

In part, the spotty record of the Yemen airstrikes may derive from another unavoidable risk of the new shadow war: the need to depend on local proxies who may be unreliable or corrupt, or whose agendas differ from that of the United States.

American officials have a troubled history with Mr. Saleh, a wily political survivor who cultivates radical clerics at election time and has a history of making deals with jihadists. Until recently, taking on Al Qaeda had not been a priority for his government, which has been fighting an intermittent armed rebellion since 2004.

And for all Mr. Saleh's power – his portraits hang everywhere in the Yemeni capital – his government is deeply unpopular in the remote provinces where the militants have sought sanctuary. The tribes there tend to regularly switch sides, making it difficult to depend on them for information about Al Qaeda. "My state is anyone who fills my pocket with money," goes one old tribal motto.

The Yemeni security services are similarly unreliable and have collaborated with jihadists at times. The United States has trained elite counterterrorism teams there in recent years, but the military still suffers from corruption and poor discipline.

It is still not clear why Mr. Shabwani, the Marib deputy governor, was killed. The day he died, he was planning to meet members of Al Qaeda's Yemeni branch in Wadi Abeeda, a remote, lawless plain dotted with orange groves east of Yemen's capital. The most widely accepted explanation is that Yemeni and American officials failed to fully communicate before the attack.

Abdul Ghani al-Eryani, a Yemeni political analyst, said the civilian deaths in the first strike and the killing of the deputy governor in May "had a devastating impact." The mishaps, he said, "embarrassed the government and gave ammunition to Al Qaeda and the Salafists," he said, referring to adherents of the form of Islam embraced by militants.

American officials said President Saleh was angry about the strike in May, but not so angry as to call for a halt to the clandestine American operations. "At the end of the day, it's not like he said, 'No more,' " said one Obama administration official. "He didn't kick us out of the country."

Weighing Success

Despite the airstrike campaign, the leadership of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula survives, and there is little sign the group is much weaker.

Attacks by Qaeda militants in Yemen have picked up again, with several deadly assaults

on Yemeni army convoys in recent weeks. Al Qaeda's Yemen branch has managed to put out its first English-language online magazine, Inspire, complete with bomb-making instructions. Intelligence officials believe that Samir Khan, a 24-year-old American who arrived from North Carolina last year, played a major role in producing the slick publication.

As a test case, the strikes have raised the classic trade-off of the post-Sept. 11 era: Do the selective hits make the United States safer by eliminating terrorists? Or do they help the terrorist network frame its violence as a heroic religious struggle against American aggression, recruiting new operatives for the enemy?

Al Qaeda has worked tirelessly to exploit the strikes, and in Anwar al-Awlaki, the American-born cleric now hiding in Yemen, the group has perhaps the most sophisticated ideological opponent the United States has faced since 2001.

"If George W. Bush is remembered by getting America stuck in Afghanistan and Iraq, it's looking like Obama wants to be remembered as the president who got America stuck in Yemen," the cleric said in a March Internet address that was almost gleeful about the American campaign.

Most Yemenis have little sympathy for Al Qaeda and have observed the American strikes with "passive indignation," Mr. Eryani said. But, he added, "I think the strikes over all have been counterproductive."

Edmund J. Hull, the United States ambassador to Yemen from 2001 to 2004, cautioned that American policy must not be limited to using force against Al Qaeda.

"I think it's both understandable and defensible for the Obama administration to pursue aggressive counterterrorism operations," Mr. Hull said. But he added: "I'm concerned that counterterrorism is defined as an intelligence and military program. To be successful in the long run, we have to take a far broader approach that emphasizes political, social and economic forces."

Obama administration officials say that is exactly what they are doing – sharply increasing the foreign aid budget for Yemen and offering both money and advice to address the country's crippling problems. They emphasized that the core of the American effort was not the strikes but training for elite Yemeni units, providing equipment and sharing intelligence to support Yemeni sweeps against Al Qaeda.

Still, the historical track record of limited military efforts like the Yemen strikes is not encouraging. Micah Zenko, a fellow at the Center for Preventive Action at the Council

on Foreign Relations, examines in a forthcoming book what he has labeled “discrete military operations” from the Balkans to Pakistan since the end of the cold war in 1991. He found that these operations seldom achieve either their military or political objectives.

But he said that over the years, military force had proved to be a seductive tool that tended to dominate “all the discussions and planning” and push more subtle solutions to the side.

When terrorists threaten Americans, Mr. Zenko said, “there is tremendous pressure from the National Security Council and the Congressional committees to, quote, ‘do something.’ ”

That is apparent to visitors at the American Embassy in Sana, who have noticed that it is increasingly crowded with military personnel and intelligence operatives. For now, the shadow warriors are taking the lead.

Muhammad al-Ahmadi contributed reporting from Yemen.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: August 22, 2010

An article last Sunday about the Obama administration’s shadow war against Al Qaeda and its allies in roughly a dozen countries gave an outdated affiliation in some editions for Micah Zenko, who in a forthcoming book looks at what he calls “discrete military operations” from the Balkans to Pakistan since the end of the cold war. Mr. Zenko is a fellow at the Center for Preventive Action at the Council on Foreign Relations; he is no longer a scholar at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: August 29, 2010

An article on Aug. 15 about the Obama administration’s secret counterterrorism operations overseas described incorrectly a recent strike in northern Africa that was cited as an example of coordination with allies. The strike in question, on July 22, was carried out by French and Mauritanian troops near the border between Mauritania and Mali; it was not a French strike in Algeria.

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