



Insider Attacks in Afghanistan: Damaging trust between ISAF and Afghan forces

Nov-Dec 2011

By: Halimullah Kousary¹

Insider attacks have turned into a grave concern for the ISAF forces in Afghanistan. These attacks can be defined as those carried out on the ISAF forces through Taliban recruits from within the Afghan National Army (ANA) and the Afghan National Police (ANP) or through a Taliban member uniformed as an Afghan soldier or police. The first insider attack reported against ISAF forces took place in 2007 and since then there has been increased reiteration in various provinces. The most recent reiterations having been on 29 December 2011, when a man dressed in Afghan National Army (ANA) uniform shot dead two French troops in Tagab district of eastern Kapisa province. The attacker was killed on the spot by return fire from the French soldiers.² And on 20 January 2012 when an ANA soldier shot four French troops and wounded 17 others in the same district of Kapisa.³ It is apparent that insider attacks would not change ground realities in favor of Taliban in Afghanistan, but they can possibly lead to a vacuum of trust between the ISAF and Afghan forces.

The above two attackers had one thing in common and that was their target (ISAF), but it seems what encouraged them to target ISAF is different. The former was a Taliban sleeper with ideological motivations, as claimed by the Taliban, who was a resident of the Khogyani district of eastern Nangarhar province and had joined ANA for an insider attack.⁴ The latter, however, was a real ANA soldier and the only inside attacker captured alive after the attack. During an interrogation, he said that he acted alone in killing the French troops and described his act to the Afghan authorities as revenge of U.S forces urinating on the corpses of Taliban fighters. Early January 2012, a video of U.S troops urinating on the bodies of

¹ Halimullah Kousary is the Deputy Head of Research at Centre for Conflict and Peace Studies (CAPS), Kabul, Afghanistan.

² "Afghan soldier shoots French troops in Kapisa", Pajhwok News, 29 December, 2011

³ "Afghan Soldier Kills 4 French Troops in Kapisa", Tolo News, 20 January 2012

⁴ "Afghan soldier shoots and kills 3 French invaders, injures several more", www.shahamat-english.com, 29 December, 2011



killed Taliban fighters was leaked and it stirred strong criticism from the Afghan government as well as the international community.

Fifty-eight ISAF soldiers have been killed in 26 insider attacks in Afghanistan from May 2007 to May 2011.⁵ Taliban claimed responsibility for almost all of them stating they either infiltrated their members into the Afghan army and police or recruited from within the army and police to carry out these attacks. For instance, Taliban asserted that they were behind the April 2011 shootout by an Afghan air force officer Col. Ahmed Gul at the Kabul airport where he shot dead eight American soldiers. However, Gul's family rejected Taliban's claim and contended that he was a pilot loyal to his duty and country while his brother Hassan Sahibi, a surgeon, stated that he never hated foreigners and always served his country.⁶ An eight-month investigation by the U.S. Air Force into Gul's attack also concluded that Col. Ahmed Gul had acted alone in killing the American soldiers and there was no evidence found that the Gul's attack was part of a Taliban conspiracy.⁷

Taliban claims vis-à-vis some of the insider attacks are valid, but their claim that they are the masterminds behind all of them can be challenged as Taliban are inclined to take credit for any incident that serves their interests. The 20 January 2012 attack in Kapisa by the Afghan soldier is a manifestation that shootouts by attackers not linked to Taliban are possible. With no involvement by Taliban, such attacks display a new dimension to the conflict, one that shows the rising prevalence of anti-ISAF sentiment growing in the ranks of the Afghan Security Forces. Keeping this in mind, the question that arises is why a member of the Afghan forces would turn to such a violent act targeting his foreign counter parts. In some instances such attacks could have been triggered by mere personal differences between the attacker and his ISAF target. Unacceptable attitudes and insensibilities by ISAF troops towards Afghan cultural and religious values have tended to be possible instigators in such attacks.

⁵ "Afghan Soldier Kills 4 French Troops in Kapisa", Tolo News, 20 January 2012

⁶ Craig Whitlock, "Afghan pilot said he wanted to 'kill Americans,' probe of Kabul shootings finds" Washington Post, 17 January, 2012

⁷ Craig Whitlock, "Afghan pilot said he wanted to 'kill Americans,' probe of Kabul shootings finds" Washington Post, 17 January, 2012



The Taliban members, whether they have infiltrated into the army and police or recruited within them recognize both ISAF troops and Afghan army and police as one enemy. And Taliban without any hesitation target both of them in IEDs, ambushes and pitched battles. But they have to a greater extent avoided doing so against the Afghan army and police with an insider attack. This undermines the Taliban's claim that they engineer all shootouts against the ISAF forces inside their bases. But in the meantime the counterargument to this can be that targets of almost all of the insider attacks were ISAF forces because they are apparently of higher value to Taliban as compared to the Afghan soldiers and police. Continuation of insider attacks, whether perpetrated as an insurgency act or revenge, could lead to a vacuum of trust and confidence between the Afghan and ISAF forces. And exert negative impact on coordination between the Afghan and ISAF forces in the ongoing counterinsurgency against the Taliban.

The reaction from the French government to the 29 December 2011 and 20 January 2012 is a case in point. French President Nicolas Sarkozy suspended French military operations in Afghanistan and said that such attacks would trigger acceleration in the French withdrawal from Afghanistan.⁸ French Defence Minister Gerard Longuet said the troops that were killed and wounded in these two incidents were victims of trust, as they considered the Afghan soldiers to be their comrades.⁹ France and other ISAF countries concerns in this regard are valid and both the ISAF authorities and the Afghan government must coordinate in undermining factors leading to these attacks.

Now that a rapid recruitment process is underway to increase the manpower of Afghan army and police, the Afghan government should do its level best to run meticulous vetting procedures to prevent possible infiltrations by Taliban while ISAF authorities have to undertake measures to mitigate the possibility of unacceptable attitudes and insensibilities among its troops towards Afghan cultural as well as religious values. Afghan soldiers and

⁸ "Afghan Soldier Kills 4 French Troops in Kapisa", Tolo News, 20 January 2012

⁹"French Defense Minister Visits Afghanistan", VOA News, January 21, 2012



police are considered eyes and ears of ISAF troops against Taliban. It is crucial for both to benefit from each other's capabilities and increase the level of coordination against their common enemy and in the meantime act together to counter measures that harm their trust in each other.