

Afghanistan and Pakistan

NEW CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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In 2009 Afghanistan will present both challenges and opportunities as it emerges definitively from its limbo as the 'forgotten front'¹, into which it was pushed because of American involvement in Iraq and because of other factors connected to internal political issues among the NATO allies including Italy.²

Attention in Afghanistan will be focused on the crucial issue of security, on the upcoming elections in 2009 and 2010, on the difficult economic picture and on the failure to successfully promote development. The regional scenario - the thorny issue of the porous Pakistani border and the unpredictable situation in Iran - will also be studied.

In 2009 Pakistan will have to deal with its crisis with India, the fragility of its civil government, the threat posed by the neo-Talebans in the tribal areas and the serious financial crisis.

It will not be an easy year for these two neighbouring countries and there is a risk that the Pakistani crisis may spill over into Afghanistan and vice-versa.

The crucial area of conflict will continue to be in the unstable tribal areas. Here the renewed American presence, which has been announced for 2009, will demand great commitment from Pakistan but it will not be easy for Islamabad, whose government and president have to withstand the pressure from an increasingly anti-American opposition and deal with an economic crisis and a situation of high tension with India following the terrorist attacks in Mumbai.

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Security

The security situation in southern, southwestern and eastern Afghanistan has not improved.

In the capital, Kabul, there were many attacks, mostly carried out by suicide bombers, some of which, like the attack on the Serena Hotel, the attempt on President Karzai's life, the mined car driven into the Indian embassy, achieved 'spectacular' results.

The capital's crime rate also rose. This does not mean, however, that 72% of Afghanistan is in the hands of hostile forces as an NGO recently claimed and NATO denied. In the north and in the centre of the country the situation is relatively quiet.

89%³ of the population believes the things will get worse not only in 2009 but in the years to follow as the Talebans and the drugs warlords gain more control at the expense of the central government.

The tables that follow are taken from a report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies Washington.⁴ They show how the situation is changing with regard to various security

¹ "Afghanistan back to basics" by James S. Robbins The Journal of International Security Affairs nr. 15, 2008 p. 79-88

² The first signs were already evident in 2009 when American Marine reinforcements were sent in and with the renewed centrality of the Afghanistan within the international security scene.

³ This figure is taken from a survey carried out on 3000 people by a serious international organisation working in Afghanistan which does not desire to be named until it has published the full results.

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factors such as the number of security incidents, the civil losses, and the losses among the more exposed allied contingents.

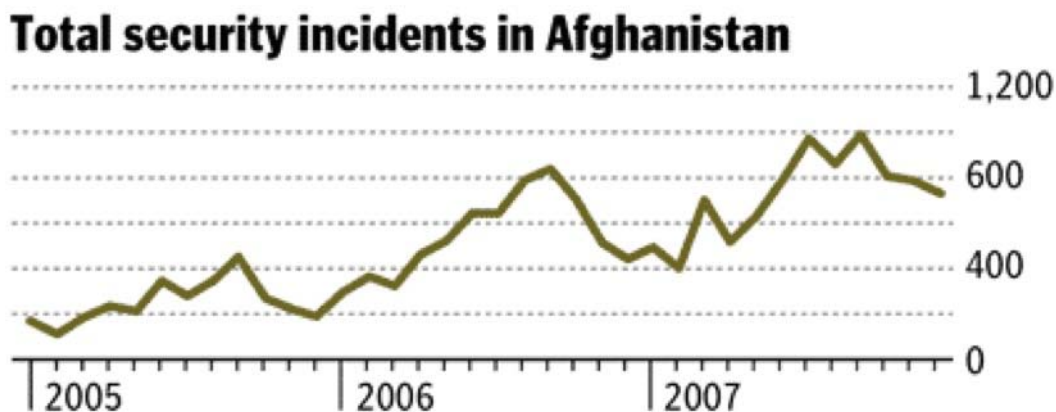
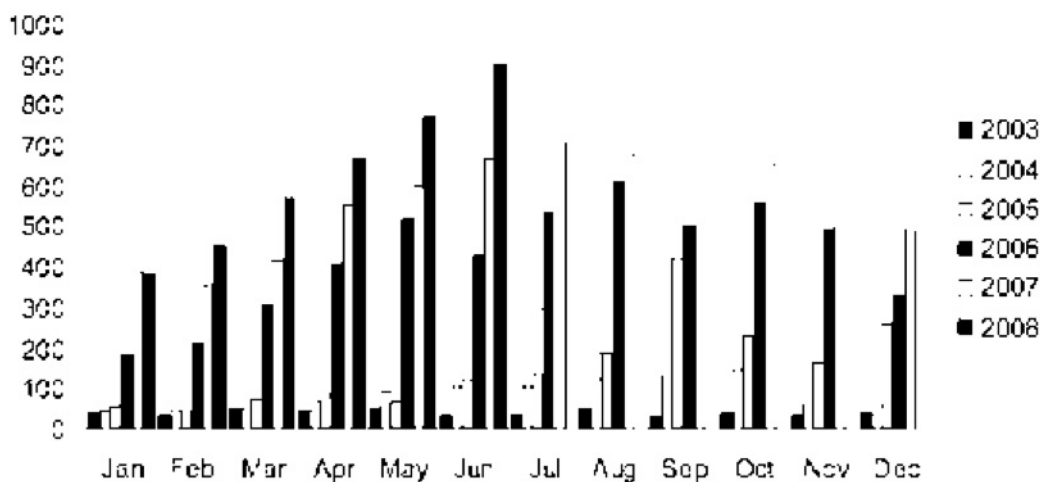


Figure 1. Total security incidents in Afghanistan from 2005- to 2007

UN Estimate of the Growth in the Number of Security Incidents: 2003-2008



Source: United Nations, Office on Drugs and Crime, "Afghanistan Opium Survey 2008," Executive Summary, August 2008, p. 19

Figure 2. Increase in the number of security incidents between 2003 and 2008 (source UN)
 The increase in violence connected to hostile forces in 2008 is about 40% and it is not expected to get any better next year. The continued rise in levels of violence will be caused by two factors: the impending Presidential election and the subsequent national elections to renew Parliament in 2010. The reinforced American presence from January and the new commitment

⁴ "Winning in Afghanistan: Creating effective Afghan security forces" Working Draft: Revised December 9, 2008 Anthony H. Cordesman Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy, David Kasten, Adam Mausner.

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promised by the US president elect, Barack Obama, to deal with the Afghan crisis and the situation in Pakistan means that we will probably see a further rise in violence during the year ahead.

According to the Afghan defence ministry the number of foreign fighters taking part in the international holy war has increased since last year. The Jihadist fighters have begun to move toward Afghanistan from the main front in Iraq. This tendency could continue in 2009 with the arrival of American reinforcements which is now possible because of the gradual withdrawal from Iraq. The main site of conflict is shifting to Afghanistan-Pakistan. The use in recent years of suicide tactics and the increase in the number and sophistication of explosive traps (IEDs) is a sign of how the Afghan insurgency movement is gradually evolving into a typically 'Iraqi' model.

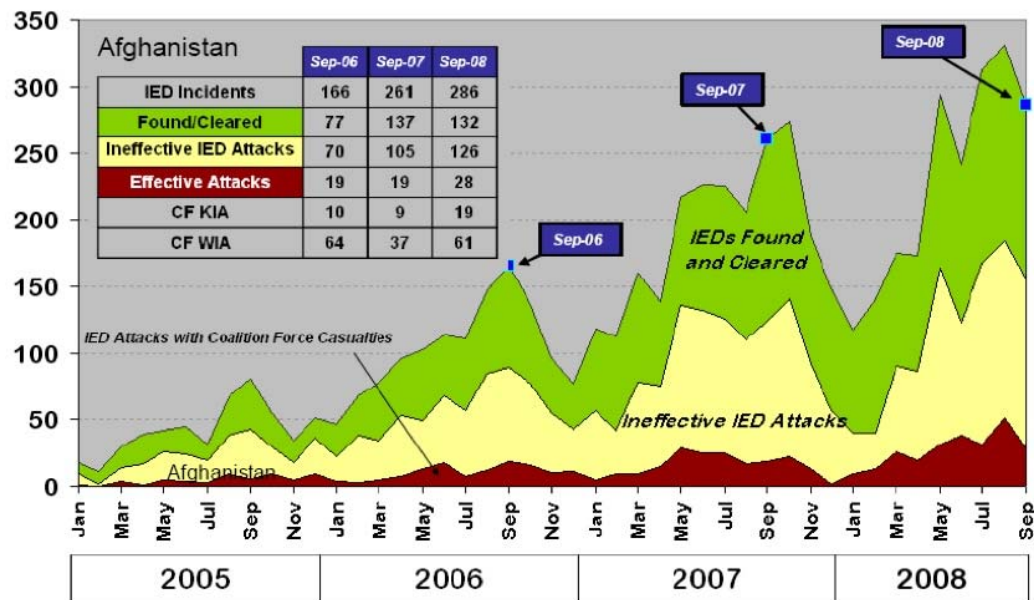


Fig. 3. IED incidents from 2005 to 2008

According to Intelligence sources⁵ the number of insurgents in Afghanistan (hard core, part-time fighters, active supporters usually reckoned at 10,000 people) is now beginning to be as large as that in Iraq.

American General Jeffrey J. Schloesser, commander of the Combined Joint Task Force 101 said last October: "The enemy has increased by 20 to 30 percent this year". In order to halt this trend, there is an urgent need to intervene to support the country's economy and to lower the unemployment levels.

Governance and the effectiveness of the legitimate institutions, also in the periphery, are vital factors along with the fight against corruption which, as Karzai admits, is one of the most deeply embedded problems at all levels. As the following table shows, the rise in the attacks carried out by the insurgents and the reaction of the international and Afghani troops, starting

⁵ "Winning in Afghanistan: Creating effective Afghan security forces" Working Draft: Revised December 9, 2008 Anthony H. Cordesman Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy, David Kasten, Adam Mausner.

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with the sometimes excessive actions of the Enduring Freedom contingent, has led to an increase in the number of civilian casualties.

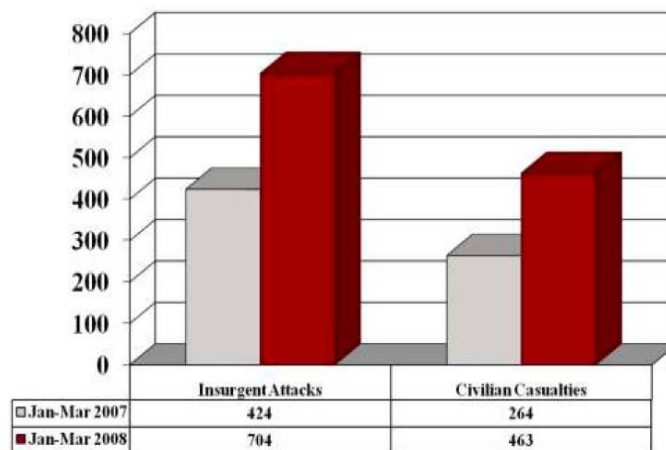


Fig. 4. Civilian losses in the first six months of 2008

The increase in civilian losses, caused by Allied actions, and often exaggerated by Taleban propaganda, is leaving a deep scar on the Afghan population which no longer sees the NSTO soldiers as liberators from the Talebans. The difference between the ISAF mission and Enduring Freedom is, whenever it is underlined, lost on the Afghans who do not even distinguish between the different uniforms or flags of the foreign soldiers in the country. Local public opinion and to some extent western opinion as well fails to make any such distinctions. In 2009 it is crucial that greater attention be devoted to the means of intervening against targets in heavily populated areas if the population is not going to be further alienated. 2008 has also been a difficult year in terms of allied losses. In May 2008, for the first time since 2003, the international coalition in Afghanistan lost more men here than in Iraq. The number of English losses continued to rise (38 in 2008). The Canadians have decided to withdraw their troops in 2011 because of the rising number of casualties in battle. The French, in a single ambush in the valley of Uzbeen, south of Kabul, suffered their worst single-day loss since 1983 in Beirut. The rise in American casualties and wounded is evident too as the following graphic shows. It will be difficult to halt this trend in 2009 even if total numbers are not significant. The problem is that in the eyes of public opinion at home, Afghanistan is an increasingly “forgotten front”.

Worse again, in European countries including Italy it was, and in part still is, Afghanistan is presented not as an asymmetrical war but as a peace mission in which we are committed to humanitarian and development aid.

For a long time attacks were presented as almost casual “incidents” and the real weight and intensity of the conflict in Afghanistan was hidden so as to avoid political repercussions.

For this reason each loss becomes even more unbearable because there is no knowledge or understanding that deaths are “inevitable” in a conflict such as the Afghan one.

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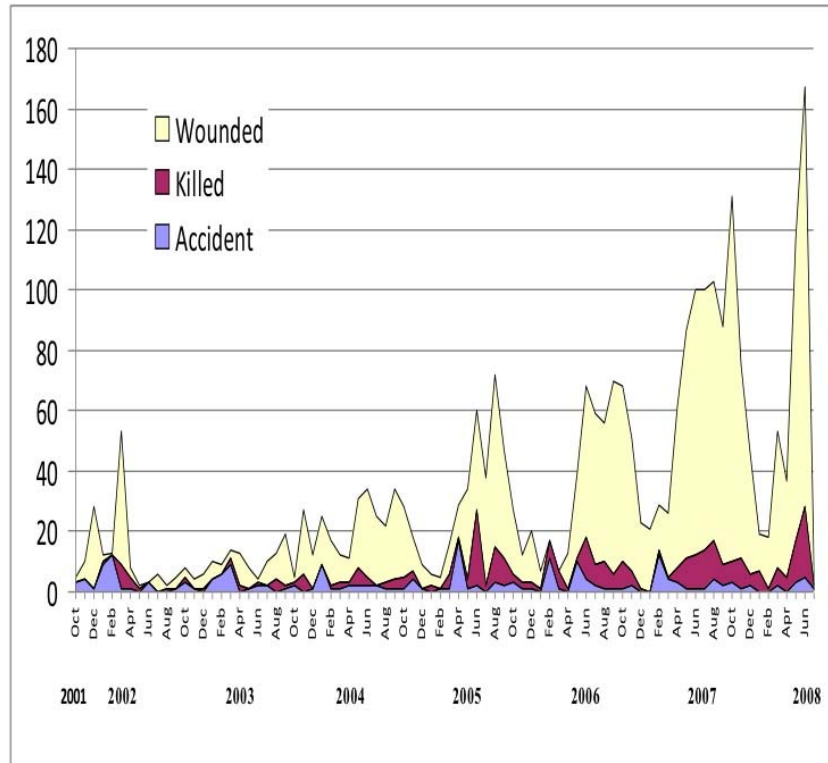


Fig. 5. American injured and dead in Afghanistan

Reinforcements and the Petraeus doctrine

Before the summer of 2009 20,000 American soldiers will be sent to Afghanistan by the Pentagon in response to the request from the commanders on the ground.

The first 3500 will arrive in January and will be used to strengthen the forces in the Lowgar and Wardak provinces near Kabul in the hope of pushing back the insurgents who over the past year won territory in this area which is dangerously close to the capital.

Propaganda from the talebans and the militia attached to Jalaluddin Haqqani and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, as well as the groups of foreign fighters who are often connected with international terrorism, claims that they all have plans to carry out attacks, even during the winter.

Military activities are usually halted in winter but the American commanders also intend to keep the hostile forces under pressure during the coldest months of the year so as to ensure that the threat does not reemerge as violently as ever in the spring and after, which will coincide with the Presidential elections, or in the summer when the attacks usually increase.

The surge in Afghanistan will see 5000 soldiers in operation in the province of Helmand, a further 5000 in the Kandahar area and in the provinces of Zabul and Uruzgan, while almost 10,000 will be placed in the eastern provinces.

In January the Italian contingent will send a second battle group of 400 men from the 7th Alpine Regiment of the Brigata Julia to Farah, the most difficult province in the western sector under Italian command. Starting in the spring the Italians will probably be involved in decisive anti-guerrilla operations in Farah, where, until 2008, only a part of Task Force 45, made up of special

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corps, was operative and maintained a presence on the strategic Ring road which connects Kabul-Kandahar to Herat.

The Afghan surge may enjoy immediate success but the real solution to the conflict will depend on various factors. The American General David Petraeus, Centcom commander since mid-October and fresh from a successful campaign in Iraq, is preparing a new strategy for Afghanistan. In parallel with the military pressure there will be a focus in 2009 on civil-military cooperation (there are already 26 PRT in Afghanistan), an increased commitment to reconstruction, development, governance and the formation of the Afghan security forces.

The Afghan security force's wager

The target to work for, according to the European Union's special representative in Kabul, Ambassador Ettore Sequi, is the "Afghanization" of the country, beginning with security. The Ambassador told a recent sitting of the Senate Foreign commission: "This will be the real victory for us and for the Afghans. ... We must be prepared for a long military effort but at the same time we need to accelerate the process by which the country takes responsibility for its own security".

It is no surprise that during Petraeus's visit to Rome, the Italian Defence Ministry announced an increase in the number of Italian OMLT⁶ from 4 to 7.

In 2009, the commitment to the Afghani security forces will be accentuated and accelerated so that they will become credible and capable of operating autonomously. The Afghan National Army (ANA) has made reasonable progress and is seen in a more credible light now by the population. There is still a long way to go if this army of 70,000 men is to become efficient. Many, starting with the Afghan government, would like to double the number of soldiers. The Afghan National Police is still a long way from becoming a real police corps. The Afghans do not believe it represents an authority worthy of the name because it is unreliable and corrupt.

The Carabinieri, whose efforts in training local forces in Iraq, are highly thought of by Petraeus, may be asked for a greater commitment. Karzai's removal of the Interior Ministry and other changes at the Ministry, should lead to improvements in the new year. All of the estimates, however, show that the efforts made to bolster the ANA and the ANP will not produce concrete results in the zones most at risk before 2012.

This year will see a project involving the Afghan "local forces" take shape. This will involve the tribal militia, who may come to play a role in improving the country's security. One of the models is the one Petraeus implemented in Iraq with the "Awakening" groups from the Sunni tribes. Even if the Pashtuns in Afghanistan are not the Iraqi Sunni, a careful policy to mobilise local forces could bring results in a country in which the tribal militia are part of the tradition. Few details of the plan are available it will probably involve an expansion of the mandate of the Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG), which seeks to increase governance at provincial and district level. The local forces should be created through an expansion of the Afghan Social Outreach Program (ASOP), which finances the tribal chiefs so they can form the

⁶ Operation Mentoring Liason Team

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traditional Shura assemblies. These councils will have the task of recruiting the militias to be used to keep peace in the areas under their jurisdiction⁷.

Negotiations with the Talebans

In the final months of 2008, the international media reported real or presumed negotiations or underground negotiations with the Talebans and the other hostile forces. In reality there have been secret contacts for at least two years but no concrete agreements have been reached. The most obvious problem is that the hostile forces are fragmented and even the Talebans are divided into various factions and local interest groups. This does not mean that it is a lost cause. 2009, with its presidential elections, and 2010, with its parliamentary elections, will be crucial years in which to convince at least some of the hostile groups to abandon the armed struggle and choose to enter the political system. President Karzai's publicly declaration of willingness to negotiate caused quite a bit of negative reaction from the more liberal and pro-Western elements and above all from the Tajik opposition, which has lost much of the power it had gained followed the fall of the Talebans in 2001. Should an agreement be reached with Hekmatyar the possibility of the Northern Tajik again taking up arms should not be excluded. Petraeus is convinced about the possibility of "negotiating even with those who have your blood on their hands" if the objective is national reconciliation. Ambassador Sequi believes that if stability is to be achieved in the country the key word is "inclusion". It is necessary to start a dialogue with the insurgents on the condition that they accept the constitution. In any case the only way to negotiate in Afghanistan is from a position of power.

The problem is that Karzai is seeking to be re-elected President and that he needs successful negotiations with those hostile forces that are willing to compromise not so much to impact upon the country's destiny as to consolidate his own power.

Elections in Afghanistan

Presidential elections are due to be held around or after spring of 2009 and outgoing President Karzai is aiming at being re-elected even if he has unresolved issues with the international community which supports him, first and foremost with the English and then with the Americans. The vote for the district councils is due to be held along with the Presidential election.

The Talebans are already at work to block registrations to the electoral lists. In the "red" zones, infiltrated with insurgents it will not be easy to guarantee a regular vote. The parliament term ends in October 2010 and the strenuous efforts of Karzai and his staff to hold the parliamentary elections early, along with the Presidentials, have, so far, been to no avail. The president of the lower house, Yunus Qanooni, one of the most prominent opposition leaders, is determined to keep the two votes separate. There are also increasingly alarming rumours that Karzai might force the situation by convoking a special National Loja Jirga to change the constitution and again nominate himself head of state in an emergency situation until greater security is enforced in the country.

⁷ "Winning in Afghanistan: Creating effective Afghan security forces" Working Draft: Revised December 9, 2008 Anthony H. Cordesman Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy, David Kasten, Adam Mausner.

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A coup of this sort would not be easily accepted by the international community present in the country. It would also be opposed by the opposition that has already made it clear that it is ready to take to the streets should something of this nature occur.

These threats may well be part of the long election campaign which began months ago when Karzai announced his intention to run for reelection. As we have already seen, the attempt to open negotiations with hostile forces could also be part of a strategy of gaining more support before the vote. At present, Karzai is the favourite but his reelection is not clearcut. Although it is unlikely that there will be 18 candidates as there were in 2004, there are already many possible challengers emerging. Ramazan Bashardost, a parliamentarian who has made his name in the fight against the deeply felt problem of corruption, will run again as he did in 2004. From the predominantly Tajik faction, the word is that the first President of Afghanistan after the fall of the Communist regime, Burhanuddin Rabbani, will be a candidate. From the same group, the former Minister for foreign affairs, Abdullah Abdullah, and Mustafa Zahir, nephew of Zahir Shah the deceased monarch, are both said to be interested in running. This latter figure is the alternative candidate who has the strongest support within the National Front. Other contenders could be the finance Minister, Anwar ul-Haq Ahady, whose resignation was not accepted by Karzai; the former interior minister, removed by the President with veiled accusations of corruption; Faruq Wardak, the Minister for Parliament and two brothers of the legendary Commander Massoud, Ahmad Wali and Ahmad Zia, the current vice President. The former procurator general, Abdul Jabar Sabet, who is on a collision course with the powers that be for having attempted to stem corruption, may also run. The Pashtun economist Hedayat Amin Arsala and the outsider of Afghan origin, Zalmay Khalilzad, former US ambassador to Kabul, Baghdad and the United Nations are two other strong candidates.

Governance and corruption

According to the already cited poll⁸, trust in the government has fallen to 16% compared to a figure of 25% in 2007. Education, health, and agriculture remain the executive's main areas of success. One interesting finding is that the Afghans are starting to show greater appreciation for the institutions at a regional level.

First among them is the province of Balkh and Nangarhar. The major cause of the government's low approval is corruption. More than 89% of those polled were convinced that corrupted is one of the greatest obstacles in their lives. It is widespread in all sectors from research to work, effecting the probity and efficiency of the police, even blocking a just distribution of water. The judicial system, the reform of which has seen Italian involvement, is at the top of the list in terms of perceived corruption. Corruption at ministerial level, with regard to the handing out of jobs, is also widespread. Finally, more than 50% of those interviewed declared their trust in the Mullahs and the elders, especially those in positions of religious authority, in so far as they are involved in decisions involving local communities, as non-governmental "institutions".

Economics and development

If we compare the situation today with that under the Talebans clearly things have improved economically and in terms of development. In 2008, most of the Afghan road network was

⁸ This figures comes from a poll carried out on 3000 people by a serious international organisation which is working in Afghanistan but has asked to remain anonymous until the full poll results are published.

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asphalted and the construction of new schools allowed 44% of Afghans to enter education, a net increase compared to previous years. In the health sector, 30% of those interviewed approved of the services available although the ministry's announcements about coverage now being extended to 82% of the territory raise doubts.

The real challenge in 2009 and in future years, apart from the security question, is the economy, development and employment. Ten million Afghans live below the poverty line. More than half the families (made up of six people, on average) live on 2-4 dollars a day. There are worrying peaks in unemployment, which in Kabul, for example is at 67%. The absence of jobs is one of the factors that drives new recruits to the Talebans but also to the organised crime groups, which are becoming worryingly strong.

The lack of security and the inability of the government to protect private enterprise is one of the main causes of Afghanistan's underdeveloped economy. In Herat and Kabul, in particular, the plague of kidnapping entrepreneurs has spread with ever more exorbitant ransoms being demanded. The other factor is that the Afghan economy remains in the hands of the important families that form the local and national power elite and control illegal trafficking (drugs) and illegal exploitation of mineral resources.

The opium economy

The opium economy suffered a sharp fall in 2008.⁹ Income from Afghan opium production was less than 730 million dollars while the value of opium, morphine and heroin exports was around 3.4 billion dollars compared to 4 billion in 2007. UN figures show that opium poppy production fell 19% from its 2007 level to 157,000 hectares. The fall is due to three main factors: reduced sowing in many provinces in response to pressure from government, Shura and village leaders; the dynamics of agricultural pricing (for many years Afghan opium production is greatly in excess of world demand and prices have fallen by over 20%); exchange reasons (while earnings from opium have declined those from grain tripled in 2007). According to a UNODC report 2009 should see a further decline in opium production. This is above all for political reasons: Mohammad Gulab Mangal, governor of the Helmand province (which produces two-thirds of all Afghan opium) is genuinely committed to reducing opium growth. There are also economic reasons: if the price of grain remains high the farmers will be able to increase the grain crop and reduce opium production. The UN experts have also pointed out that cultivation of Afghan opium is decreasingly geographically and being concentrated in precise areas. 98% is grown in seven provinces in the southwest where the insurgents control the territory and organised crime under their protection.

Regional scenario/the porous Pakistan border

As happened during the Soviet invasion the Talebans and the terror cells linked to Al Qaida have been able to find sanctuary in the tribal areas on the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. In 2008, the border battles involving NATO and Pakistani troops made it clear that the conflict involves both Afghanistan and Pakistan. The 60% increase in raids from Pakistan into Afghanistan shows that the real blackspot is the land just over the border which is occupied by the hostile forces in the tribal areas.

⁹ "The opium economy in Afghanistan 2008", UN Crime and Drug Office (UNODC)

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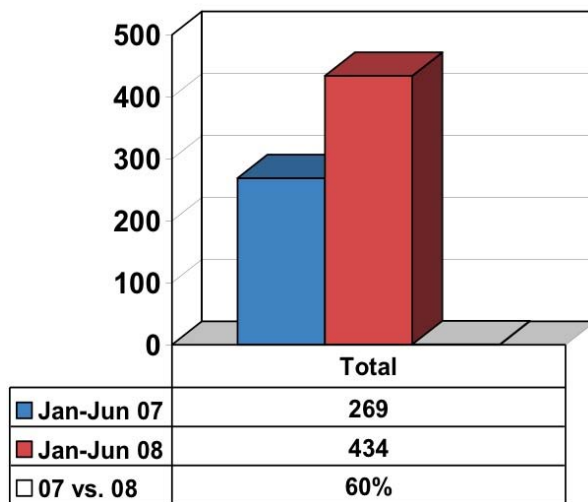


Fig. 6. Increase in raids from Pakistan into Afghanistan

The situation could improve in 2009 only if the Pakistan government decides to intervene more decisively in the tribal areas.

As we will see later, the crisis between Islamabad and India adds a further unknown which will have a major impact on the regional scenario.

Regional Scenarios/ What will Iran do?

Iranian influence in Afghanistan is constant and is most deeply felt in the western part of the country under Italian control. Ali Najafi Hanish, Iran's Consul General in Herat, considers this border zone "our province from a cultural point of view". There is more than culture at stake however. There is an obvious strategy which hopes to keep the Americans and NATO soldiers who are close to Iran "busy and distracted"¹⁰. The Teheran regime fears, with some justification, being surrounded by the American presence in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Although Teheran claims to cooperate with the Karzai government and to invest in Afghan development, arms manufactured in Iran have been seized from the hostile forces in various parts of the country. Large cargoes of arms continue to travel over the long border with Iran even if the level of government involvement is still not clear. The one thing which is clear is that the IEDs in Afghanistan are increasingly sophisticated and increasingly similar to those being used in Iraq. They have the same technical characteristics as those sent from Iran to the Iraqi front.

The situation will remain under control as long as the Iranian nuclear race does not explode into a more serious crisis. If the Islamic Republic of Iran should suffer an air attack, its reaction would involve Iraq and Afghanistan (particularly the western zone). "In the west, Iran has a latent capacity to destabilise the country (*Afghanistan*) should the United States decide to

¹⁰ James S. Robbins, "Afghanistan back to basics", *The Journal of International Security Affairs* nr. 15, 2008 p. 79-88

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increase pressure with regard to the nuclear programme. For the Iranian regime western Afghanistan represents a strategic investment which has not been opposed”¹¹.

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The crisis with India

The multiple attacks in Mumbai, the financial capital of India on 26 November were the start of a serious crisis between India and Pakistan. The members of the suicide command that carried out the attack are all said to be Pakistani terrorists (as is the only one that was captured alive), although it is obvious that they were also able to count on supporters in Mumbai.

The 179 victims of the three-day battle will weigh on future relations between the two countries. Various scenarios can be hypothesised in the coming months.

WAR: The option of war between these two nuclear powers is highly unlikely but the possibility of selected Indian attacks on the Pakistani bases of the terrorist groups involved in Mumbai and in other attacks (Lashkar-e-Taiba e Jaish-e-Mohammad) should not be ruled out.

Much will depend on the willingness of the Islamabad government to disband the terrorists cells which are often camouflaged with new names or disguised as pseudo charity organisations. India has consigned a list of twenty suspects that it wants to extradite, including the former commanders of the ISI, the powerful military intelligence agency, such as Hamid Gul. It is unlikely that he will be handed over. Pakistan must show greater incisiveness in dealing with elements linked to groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba, which often work openly. It is not enough merely to run them out of their strongholds or to pretend to intervene in Pakistan Kashmir. Their structures and the structures that shield them need to be dismantled in the Punjab zone which is, historically, the reservoir of volunteers for the “liberation” of Kashmir. Otherwise there is the risk that the Indians will attempt to do this with precision bombing. These air or ground raids would provoke, however, a dangerous escalation in tensions between these two countries, both of which have nuclear arsenals. At the same time, if the Pakistani authorities push too hard to repress these elements they risk alienating a broad slice of public opinion and attracting even more militants into the galaxy of militant Islamic anti-India militancy.

NEITHER WAR NOR PEACE: One scenario which appears to be inevitable is the freezing or slowing down of the peace process concerning the historical problem of Kashmir, which was already proceeding with great difficulty. Every time the Pakistani and the Indians hold a high level meeting to discuss Kashmir (it also happened with Mumbai) a serious terrorist attack takes place designed to influence the talks.

In this “neither war nor peace” scenario, there is a risk of returning to the pre-2002 situation when a suicide attack on the Indian parliament risked causing the outbreak of the fourth war between the two countries.

Pakistan continues to tolerate and make use of Independentist groups from Kashmir to keep the pressure on India, which holds two-thirds of the former kingdom on the world’s rooftop.

India may respond by fomenting the nationalist revolt in Baluchistan with a view to destabilising Pakistan. The inevitable rise in tensions would lead to a greater troop presence on the control line that divides Indian and Pakistan Kashmir.

¹¹ Idem

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Troops involved in the policing of the areas hiding the Taleban and Al Qaida followers on the border with Afghanistan were immediately moved after the Mumbai attack to Kashmir front for fear of Indian reprisals.

The danger is that the crisis with India will lessen Pakistan pressure in the tribal areas thus worsening the situation in Afghanistan .

WAR IN AFGHANISTAN: Another scenario which is taking shape is the establishment of an even stronger anti-Pakistan front between Delhi and Kabul. The first obvious signal of a “secret war” between Pakistan and India in nearby Afghanistan was seen in July, following a suicide attack against the Indian embassy in Kabul. “One of the worst fears of the military is the collaboration between Afghanistan and India to destroy Pakistan”, an anonymous high functionary involved in strategic planning in Islamabad told the New York Times. The Indian secret services would use Afghanistan to support the Baluchi rebels, while Kabul intelligence would continue to infiltrate the tribal areas.

The problems is that the unfortunate Afghanistan, which certainly does not need another “secret” war on its border, would pay for the ancient rivalry between India and Pakistan.

The blackspot of the tribal areas

In 2009, as in previous years, the Pakistani tribal areas just behind the Afghan border continue to be the obstacle towards the pacification of Afghanistan. The FATA or Federally Administered Tribal Areas are, in at least some significant parts such as Waziristan, shelter the Talebans and the foreign fighters linked to Al Qaida that are operative in Afghanistan. Despite the presence of some 80,000 Pakistani soldiers, not only do the tribal areas continue to guarantee safe havens to the Afghan insurgents but they have also created a new local Taleban movement, thanks to local commanders such as Baitullah Meshud, whose targets are mainly in Pakistan or at least in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP). He represents not only an external threat to Afghanistan but also to Pakistan with his policy of “Talebanisation” of the more unstable areas near the Afghan border. A not secondary aspect is that the Taleban influence and military pressure extended as far as Peshawar, provincial capital of the NWFP in 2008.

Northern and South Waziristan (almost 13 thousand square kilometres) are two of the seven most infiltrated FATA. Mihran Shah, the provincial capital of Northern Waziristan, was renamed “capital” by the neo-Talebans. Unemployment there is between 60 and 80%. Only 17,4% of the population can read and write (just 3% of women) and a chronic lack of schools has been compensated by more than 300 madrasses. All this makes these tribal areas a perfect reservoir in which to recruit new Taleban supporters. Khalid Azaz, former chief secretary of NWFP, reckoned that in (North and South) Waziristan there are “80,000 unemployed men between 18 and 25 who could be attracted by the Taleban front”. If we add the five other tribal agencies, we can hypothesise a theoretical number of 200,000 young men who are easy prey to Taleban propaganda. Islamabad is enlisting the tribal militias to keep the peace in the areas under their control. In any 2009 will see the Neo-Talebans increasing in strength in the tribal areas in Pakistan.

The new Pashtun province

The population of about 40 million people in NWFP is overwhelmingly Pashtun - the ethnic group from southern Afghanistan which is the cradle of the Taleban movement. The Pashtun

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parties, such as the Awami National Party, see their strength more in nationalist than in religious or Jihadist terms.

In the last provincial elections the Pashun nationalists defeated the religious parties. The central government is accused of treating the Pashun areas like Baluchistan as poor provinces where there is less investment and development than in the richer ones.

In 2009 the nationalist parties will pursue their plans for the new province, called Pashtunkhwa, which should unite all the Pashun regions, that is the FATA, the NWFP and north Baluchistan, along the 1200 kilometre-long border with Afghanistan. Once they have managed to create the new province, the Awami party will attempt to convince Pakistan and Afghanistan to recognise the international border between the two countries along the Durand colonial line. This plan, corroborated by a Marshall plan for the tribal areas, which is already being studied by the United States, could begin to pull the rug out from under the feet of the neo-Talebans.

The changing of the guard in Washington and in Pakistan

The President elect, Barack Obama, long before taking office made it very clear to Pakistan (and he was correct) that in order to win the war in Afghanistan, more needed to be done in the tribal areas. Both American and Pakistani sources confirmed to the Washington Post that the US government had come to an agreement with Islamabad over incursions into the tribal areas.

In practice, Islamabad authorized attacks with remote controlled missile-carrying planes but refused permission for land operations. The incursion by members of the American special forces in September caused a diplomatic row. According to the agreement, the Pentagon is never obliged to confirm air operations in the tribal areas and the Pakistan government will only make verbal protests.

This deal was pushed through by General David Petraeus, when he became head of Centcom, the Central Command of the US forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. His opposite number in Islamabad is the head of the armed forces, General Ishfaq Parvez Kayani. The Americans are keen on Kayani who is Pakistan's current strongman, the number one enemy of the terrorists. In 2009, the policy of continuing only with remote-controlled air raids against Taliban or Al Qaida targets will not suffice. The new American President will demand that Pakistan does more.

One of the possibilities being examined is to increase the number of American military advisors to the Pakistani troops in order to improve the anti-guerrilla training and tactics in the tribal areas. Greater US involvement on the Pakistani side of the border, even if it has been hidden up to now, will cause new internal political protests. There is widespread anti-American sentiment in Pakistan which is being fomented by the political parties. Taliban propaganda does the rest. The result is that public opinion in the country is becoming convinced that the wave of suicide attacks, which shocked the country in 2008, is nothing more than a reaction to the hasty American raids in the tribal areas and not a tactic which is part of a precise attempt to destabilise the country.

Politics and economics

Neither Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari nor the first civil government following the long "reign" of former general Pervez Musharraf will have an easy time in 2009. The security challenge is crucial not only for the crisis in Afghanistan but for the very survival of Pakistan and its territorial integrity. The coalition government led by the late Benazir Bhutto's Popular Party is supported ever more externally by its ally Nawaz Sharif of the Nawaz Muslim League.

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Zardari, the widower and political heir to Bhutto, is in constant search of a compromise with Sharif, the former prime minister, but in 2009 it is likely that the squabbles between the two leading parties, who opposed Musharraf and have taken power, will continue.

A crucial role will be played, as is always the case in Pakistan, by the military. General Kayani has taken steps that would have been unthinkable up to very recently by order the military to abandon all their roles in the civil administration, even prohibiting them from having contacts with politicians. He has also implemented the government's order to dismantle the political office of the ISI and to replace those in charge of Intelligence with officers who have agreed not to interfere in the political life of the country. Former General Talat Massod, today a political analyst, maintains that "if Kayani attempts to promote democracy and then becomes its protector, Pakistan has a chance of making it". After the security problem and the stability of the government, the next most worrying problem for 2009 is the economic crisis. Pakistan has obtained a loan of 6.7 billion dollars from the International Monetary Fund, more than half of which has already been received. The Pakistani economy risked bankruptcy because of a collapse in the balance of payments, after it was thrown into crisis by the rise in oil prices and the increase in the costs of basic import goods.

The final nail was the global financial markets crisis. In July inflation had reached 24.3% and the value of the rupee fell over 20% against the dollar in 2008.

President Zardari defined the credit given by the IMF as "a bitter pill to swallow but those who take medicine do so to get better". The opposition has attacked the government because the tight repayment schedule will necessitate a stringent austerity policy. The government has already taken unpopular decisions such as increasing the price of petrol and electricity even if private homes and businesses often have to live with electricity cuts lasting several hours a day.

Economists have pointed out that big spending cuts are needed even in the up to now untouchable military budget. It is also necessary to reduce non-essential imports. Taxes will be increased and applied to all sectors, including the big landowners who for decades managed to resist all such increases.

If bankruptcy is avoided, the austerity programme imposed by the loan conditions will sharpen social tensions in a country that is already suffering. The parliamentary opposition and that of the Neo-Talebans will find it easy to exploit that discontent generated by the sacrifices dictated by the crisis.