

MULLAH OMAR'S MISSILES: A FIELD REPORT ON SUICIDE BOMBERS IN AFGHANISTAN

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GARDEZ, TRIBAL AREA OF EASTERN AFGHANISTAN, MAY 2007 —

On an unusually warm spring day, my Afghan driver drove me out of Kabul, and we made our way down a road known as “IED alley” that leads to the Pakistani border.¹ On the way he pointed out several sites where Taliban suicide bombers had recently detonated themselves next to U.S. and NATO convoys. With a grin that concealed his fears, he informed me that a Taliban bomber had also hit a civilian SUV much like our own on this very stretch of road just a few weeks earlier. For this reason, we tried to maintain a low profile as we joined the dusty line of brightly decorated ‘jingly’ cargo trucks, packed buses, beat-up Toyota Corollas and Afghan Army vehicles disgorging from the capital.

Having made our way out of the city, we soon left the main road and turned south. There we found ourselves on a newly built tarmac road that wound its way through clay-walled villages, dry fields and barren mountains to the Pashtun tribal lands. But for all its stark beauty, the provinces we were driving through were among Afghanistan’s most dangerous and

had recently been labeled a no-go “red zone” by most foreign nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and the United Nations. This point was driven home by the Afghan National Police soldiers who stopped us at several checkpoints along the way. At the last one, Kalashnikov-toting paramilitaries warned us to turn back, as Taliban insurgents operating in the area had just attacked a UN vehicle.²

Sadly, such attacks were becoming increasingly common in this region. Since 2005, the Taliban had been making inroads into the Pashtun territories of the southeast, and the province we were aiming for, Khost, had become a hotbed for insurgent activity. Alarming, the tiny border province of Khost had also become the number-two target (after the Taliban’s spiritual capital of Kandahar) for *fedayeen*, the dreaded Taliban suicide bombers. And, truth be told, it was my research on Afghanistan’s suicide bombers that had drawn me from the safety of my world to the Pashtun tribal regions that straddle the Pakistani-Afghan border. For this reason, I opted to press onward, hoping that our low profile would keep us out of harm’s way.

But we did not need to go all the way to Khost to study the toll the Taliban suicide bombers were taking on the Afghan people. As we pulled into the provincial capital of Gardez, we passed an Afghan National Army base entrance that had just been hit by a suicide bomber. While the bodies of the victims had already been taken away, the blackened detritus of the bombing was still plainly visible from the road. Just hours before, a Taliban terrorist had approached the entrance and blown himself and those around him to bits in a tactic that had come to define the Taliban insurgency.

When I interviewed locals who were still traumatized by the attack, I began to understand the impact that a single bombing has on a community. As I talked to bewildered villagers who cursed the bombers as “bad Muslims who pervert Islam” or “enemies of Afghanistan,” their shock and fear were palpable. It reminded me of the fear that struck America when the so-called Beltway Sniper roamed the Washington, D.C., area in 2002 killing innocent victims at random.

But that comparison only went so far, because the Beltway sniper “only” killed 10 people and had a relatively brief run of it. In Afghanistan, hundreds of bombers have now detonated themselves, seemingly at random, in the midst of average Afghans going about their daily lives. There seemed to be no pattern to the killing, or so I thought when I first began my study. Hundreds were dying in the bloody carnage that seemed to be part of a cruel effort to destroy the very optimism that the war-weary Afghans had begun to tentatively build since 2001.

As I interviewed the angry and fearful people of Gardez, one old turbaned elder asked me, “How could this evil have come

to us? What sort of humans blow themselves up among people trying to go about their lives? We never had these things before. Not even when the Soviets occupied our lands. What are these killers trying to achieve?”

While I did not have all the answers to his question of what motivated the suicide bombers or how this alien tactic had arrived in this land, I told the elder that, *inshallah* (God willing), one day I would. The following is the result of my U.S.-government-sponsored study to understand the mysterious origins, overall strategy, impact and distinct Afghan trajectories of this deadly phenomenon. Among other things, this study points to one of the first examples of the so-called “Iraq effect” (the transfer of terror tactics from the Iraqi theater of action to other zones) and to a uniquely Afghan bombing campaign that, for all its Iraqi origins and inspiration, has its own distinct targeting patterns.

“IRAQ EFFECT” COMES TO AFGHANISTAN

Prior to the summer of 2005, conventional wisdom held that Afghanistan was “tamed” and that the Taliban fighters who were carrying out random terror attacks in the southern Pashtun tribal regions were “dead-enders.” Having toppled the Taliban Emirate of Afghanistan in 2001 with a minimum of casualties, the victorious Americans could be forgiven for believing that the Taliban’s days were over. Besides, all eyes were on Iraq. It was there that the real war on terror was unfolding. By 2005, the “Forgotten War” in Afghanistan had been relegated to the Central Command’s back burner as the U.S. military focused on the suppression of a surprisingly vicious insurgency in Iraq’s Sunni Triangle.³

But in a demonstration of the law of unintended consequences, the Taliban, who had found refuge in the Pashtun tribal areas of neighboring Pakistan, took heart from the successes of their Iraqi counterparts. Al-Qaeda operatives who made their way to the mountains of Pakistan's tribal zones from the deserts of Iraq's Anbar Province brought inspirational tales of the feats of Abu Musab Zarqawi's American-hunting Iraqi insurgents. Far from being invincible, they argued that the American *kafirs* (infidels) who had so disheartened the Taliban with their satellite-guided bombs, close air support and "Beeping Joe Doss" (B-52s in the local dialect) could be beaten.

But the al-Qaeda emissaries warned that Afghanistan's "infidel occupiers" could not be beaten via frontal "swarm" attacks or traditional guerrilla warfare of the sort favored by the Pashtun tribes who make up the majority of the Taliban.⁴ The Taliban needed an equalizer, much as the anti-Soviet mujahideen had with their Stinger ground-to-air missiles in the 1980s. If the Taliban wanted to resist the might of the *Amriki* (Americans), they needed to use terrorism to level the playing field. And nothing, the Arabs argued, was as effective in the pursuit of this goal as fedayeen (martyrdom) operations. The way to defeat the seemingly invincible American occupiers was by sending young men strapped with bombs into police stations, crowded markets, military check-points, police recruitment centers and military convoys. The al-Qaeda Arabs claimed that these human guided missiles could infiltrate enemy positions and shred the fabric of the very society the Americans and their *munaftiq* (apostate) "stooge puppets" were trying to build.

While the Arabs realized that the local Taliban had deep-seated taboos against

suicide and such "unmanly" forms of warfare (the Taliban were predominately Pashtun tribesmen who had a well-defined code of honor and pride in their ability to wage frontal combat), this would have to change. The Arabs argued that those who engaged in "martyrdom operations" were not condemned to hell as "craven suicides." On the contrary, they were "Allah's warriors"; they were the true *ghazis* (fighters of jihad), and their heroic actions were not only effective, they were sanctioned by the holy Quran.

While the Taliban's reclusive spiritual head, Mullah Omar, was initially opposed to the employment of this "sinful" foreign tactic, many of his mid-level commanders, such as Mullah Dadullah, were willing to adopt it, especially after they were shown graphic DVDs of Iraqi insurgents using suicide bombings to kill Iraqi "collaborators" and coalition troops in places like Baghdad, Baquba and Anbar Province. By 2005, the first wave of Arab volunteers had infiltrated Afghanistan and begun to strike at coalition and Afghan-government targets in an effort to teach their Afghan hosts *istishhad* (suicide) tactics. The lesson they taught was that even a few suicide bombings could have a profound destabilizing effect.

While the Arab bombers (and first few Afghans) carried out no more than 22 attacks that first year, the impact these bombings had on the Afghans, who had never seen anything like it before, was tremendous. By killing International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF) troops, Afghan National Army soldiers and even the police chief of Kabul, the bombers showed that no one who worked with the "infidel occupation" forces was safe.⁵ As Western NGOs pulled out of areas that had been hit by suicide bombs and coalition troops became

skittish when on patrol, the Taliban celebrated the deaths of their enemies through what would ironically enough become known as “Mullah Omar’s missiles.”⁶

In response, by 2006, the Deobandi school of Islam practiced by the Taliban appears to have endorsed the previously forbidden tactic of suicide bombing. Soon thereafter, scores of indigenous Afghans began to blow themselves up to kill “traitors,” “infidels,” “occupiers,” “stooges” and, most importantly, hundreds of innocent Afghans who were near these targets at the time of the attacks. Astoundingly, by year’s end, the Taliban and their al-Qaeda allies had unleashed 139 suicide bombers on targets across Afghanistan. By 2007, the number would rise to 160. In just one year, Afghanistan had gone from being a land that had never had a tradition of suicide bombings to being surpassed only by Iraq in sheer numbers of suicide attacks.⁷

This chapter is the result of my field research analyzing the process whereby Iraqi-style suicide bombing came to Afghanistan and took on the uniquely Afghan features that sharply differentiated it from the Iraqi bombing campaign. To understand this story, one must trace the gradual efforts by al-Qaeda in Iraq and al-Qaeda Central (the core group around Bin Laden in Pakistan) to graft this tactic and ideology onto the Taliban insurgency.

THE GATHERING STORM, 2002-04

In the aftermath of the U.S.-led coalition’s overwhelming victory in Operation Enduring Freedom, many of the so-called “village Taliban” were destroyed or simply melted into the Afghan countryside. The hardcore Taliban, however, withdrew over the border into the Pashtun tribal regions of Pakistan to regroup. It was at

this time that Mullah Dadullah, a Taliban hardliner, Jalaladin Haqqani, a former mujahideen extremist, and several second-tier commanders, such as Nek Muhammad and Baitullah Mehsud, gradually took the lead in reunifying the Taliban in the Federally Administered Tribal Agencies of Pakistan.⁸

In a short time, the Taliban had established *shuras* (councils) in Quetta, Baluchistan, and Wana, Waziristan (a Pakistani Pashtun tribal agency), and given command of local operations to a variety of Taliban commanders. As in the earlier jihad against the Soviets, Arabs once again became a major source of funding for the jihad against the coalition forces. Only, on this occasion, the Arabs appear to have played a greater role as trainers and propaganda activists as well.⁹ Both the Taliban and the Arabs shared a common goal of waging jihad against the infidel occupiers, even though the local Talibs were often taken aback by the Arab fighters’ willingness to die.

In light of the symbolic importance Arabs place on Afghanistan, the land where Bin Laden and the first Arab mujahideen unit had their baptism by fire in the 1987 Battle of Jaji (in Paktia Province), it is not surprising that they chose to assist the Taliban in resisting the formation of the pro-Western Karzai “puppet” government. That al-Qaeda chose suicide bombings as a tactical response to their joint defeat is even less surprising, considering the failures of the Taliban and allied al-Qaeda fighters (the so-called *ansars*, or “supporters”) to hold ground in frontal combat with coalition forces. Both the Taliban and al-Qaeda had seen the devastating effect of U.S. close air support.

Al-Qaeda’s response to their enemies’ overwhelming military superiority was to rely upon a tactic that was central to its

overall strategy and ideology, *istishhad* (self-sacrifice). Stressing the premise that “we cherish death more than you cherish life,” al-Qaeda began to promote the idea that it was the true Muslims’ willingness to sacrifice themselves that gave them an advantage over the “weak-willed infidels.” Yoram Schweitzer and Sari Goldstein Ferber have aptly summed up the importance of suicide attacks to Bin Laden’s organization as follows:

In al-Qaeda, the sacrifice of life is a supreme value, the symbolic importance of which is equal to if not greater than its tactical importance. The organization adopted suicide as the supreme embodiment of global jihad and raised Islamic martyrdom (*al shehada*) to the status of a principle of faith. Al-Qaeda leaders cultivated the spirit of the organization, constructing its ethos around a commitment to self-sacrifice and the implementation of this idea through suicide attacks. Readiness for self-sacrifice was one of the most important characteristics to imbue in veteran members and new recruits.¹⁰

Despite initial reluctance from Taliban chief Mullah Omar, al-Qaeda had no problem in finding support among such increasingly important operational Taliban commanders as Dadullah and Haqqani for a campaign based on these Arab principles. By 2003, the Taliban field commanders were clearly interested in *any* strategy or tactic that allowed them to undermine the U.S.-backed Karzai government’s claims to bring security to the long-suffering people of Afghanistan. But there seems to be little evidence that the rank-and-file Pashtun-Taliban were willing recruits to suicide terrorism at this early stage. It would be up to al-Qaeda to legitimize the

tactic and demonstrate the effectiveness of a taboo act that was as alien to Pashtun.

Al-Qaeda’s 2002 Afghan suicide-bombing campaign began in the symbolically important capital of Kabul with two failed attempts on Afghan government targets. Al-Qaeda subsequently launched three suicide attacks in 2003 against two government targets and a busload of German NATO troops. They followed this up with three attacks in 2004 against NATO troops.

I was in Kabul around the time of the attack in 2003 on the German NATO troops that killed six soldiers, and I remember its having an unsettling impact on both Afghans and foreigners. But most people I met passed it off as the work of “die-hards” who could not halt the general trend of rebuilding. And from the Taliban’s perspective, there was actually still little at this stage to suggest that the suicide tactics most closely associated with the underdog Palestinians and Chechens resulted in any tangible benefits. On the contrary, suicide bombing seemed only to lead to more repression. Most recently, it had actually cost al-Qaeda its state-within-a-state in Afghanistan following the 9/11 suicide attack. But this perception would eventually change as a result of external factors related to another zone where suicide bombers were to subsequently demonstrate the effectiveness of suicide bombings. Most notably, it changed in response to developments in distant Iraq, a country that had by that time become a magnet for jihadi extremists across the Middle East.

TERRORISM’S NEW TESTING GROUND

As al-Qaeda’s initial suicide bombing campaign of 2002-04 was tentatively playing out in Afghanistan, foreign fighters in

Iraq (many of them linked to Abu Musab Zarqawi's group *Jamaat al Tawhid wal Jihad/Al-Qaeda in Iraq*) launched an insurgency that many counterterrorism analysts thought had the potential to destabilize surrounding regions.¹¹ Afghan specialists, in particular, feared that the Iraqi jihadi incubator might undermine progress achieved in Afghanistan, a country that had become a showcase for the Bush administration.

Concerns increased when it became obvious that the Iraqi insurgents were intent on disseminating their cult of carnage to other zones where their Muslim brothers were fighting "unbelievers." It was known that many of the foreign jihadis in Iraq had direct ties to the core al-Qaeda group hiding out in Pakistan. It was also widely suspected that al-Qaeda operatives had begun to pass between these two theaters of action, sharing information, funds, strategies and tactical information. And it soon became evident that al-Qaeda in Iraq had a lot to teach the defeated Taliban about insurgent tactics.

By fall 2003, the Iraqi insurgents had, for example, begun to employ suicide bombing of a scale and lethality not seen before in the Middle East. While the coalition had proven unbeatable on the field of battle, there was little the Americans and their allies could do by 2004 to prevent suicide bombers from attacking a wide range of targets: a top UN representative in Baghdad; over 100 Shiites and their leader, Grand Ayatollah al-Hakim; U.S. intelligence headquarters in Irbil; the Turkish embassy; the Red Cross; Kurdish party headquarters; U.S. military bases (including the headquarters of the 82nd Airborne Division in Ramadi); police stations; and an Italian compound in Nasariya.

The widespread calls for the withdrawal of Italian troops from Iraq, which

took place in Italy following the last-mentioned attack, vividly demonstrated the impact that even one bombing could have on a weak coalition government. Clearly, this terror tactic worked from both a tactical perspective (as a leveler or equalizer) and a strategic viewpoint (as a powerful societal destabilizer and means to mobilize anti-war sentiment in coalition countries). And, lest these lessons were lost on others, Zarqawi and his associates in Iraq launched an unprecedented media blitz, saturating the Internet with snuff images of improvised-explosive-device (IED) and suicide-bombing attacks on U.S. military targets that were previously deemed impregnable.¹² For extremists everywhere, Zarqawi's DVDs and online video images were electrifying. The era of cyber-jihad had begun.

By summer 2004, jihad videos from Iraq that had been dubbed into Pashtun were readily available in the tribal areas of Pakistan. These "kill DVDs" were often spliced (presumably by techno-savvy al-Qaeda operatives) with scenes from Guantanamo Bay and images of U.S. "collateral damage" in Afghanistan. For the Taliban, who had been stunned by their horrific losses against a seemingly invincible enemy in 2001, the images of U.S. and coalition targets being blown apart by Iraqi IEDs and suicide bombers that were captured in DVDs such as "Slaughter of the Americans in Iraq" were nothing if not inspirational.¹³

But the Taliban needed more "theater specific" videos with local content to inspire their followers to engage in the previously forbidden tactic of suicide bombing. To answer this need, an al-Qaeda operative named Abu Yahya al Libi began producing jihad videos for Afghanistan based on the Iraqi models. These came to include such hits as "Holocaust of the

Americans in Afghanistan,” “Pyre for the Americans in Afghanistan” and “The Winds of Paradise.”¹⁴ The online versions of these videos soon came to include all the hallmarks of Iraqi DVDs, including images of Afghan bombers reading their wills before blowing themselves up.

Another indicator of the borrowing of Iraqi horror tactics by the Taliban began to appear in the form of video-taped beheadings of the sort that had become Zarqawi’s stock in trade. While the Taliban had banned the Internet from the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan as recently as August 25, 2001, al-Qaeda had always been more media-savvy and willing to use the Internet to broadcast its message.¹⁵ By 2004, Al Libi had convinced the Taliban to use this effective propaganda medium as Internet cafes sprang up in post-Taliban Afghanistan and the tribal areas of Pakistan.

In September 2004, a Taliban Internet site known as Labaik posted a video of the gruesome beheading of a “Crusader spy” that appeared to be an imitation of Zarqawi’s videotaped beheadings in Iraq. One commentator at the time wrote, “This latest video reveals how the practice of decapitation initiated by al-Zarqawi and, in the early days, resisted by the leadership of al-Qaeda, has reached Afghanistan.”¹⁶ This Iraqi-inspired trend eventually led to the unbearably gruesome 2007 beheading of an “infidel spy” by a twelve-year-old boy trained by Mullah Dadullah.¹⁷

Coalition forces also noticed an increase in the use of Iraqi-style IEDs in Afghanistan at this time. A Western military analyst claimed, “The insurgency in Afghanistan has been very carefully studying the lessons learned by the insurgents in Iraq... We’re starting to see more organized ambushes in Afghanistan and the

sort of roadside bombs that previously we were just seeing in Iraq.”¹⁸ Clearly the exiled Taliban government was morphing into a brutal terror group under the impact of a particularly virulent form of terrorism emanating from Iraq that was so bloody that even Ayman al Zawahiri (al-Qaeda Central’s number two) originally resisted its macabre emphasis on butchery. And certainly the question of the destabilizing impact that the invasion of Iraq has had on the war in Afghanistan is one that is politically loaded in the United States.

Not surprisingly, many Afghans, whose country was suffering from the bombing campaign, shared this perspective. As an official of the Afghan National Directorate of Security put it to me in Kabul, “Had the Americans not invaded Iraq and created a jihadi training ground there, we would never have had these bombers here. This all comes to us as a result of America’s war against (Saddam) Hussein.”¹⁹ The implication was that the U.S. invasion of Iraq directly contributed to the destabilization of his own country.

For this reason, members of the U.S. military with whom I spoke, including Lieutenant General Karl Eikenberry, commander of Combined Forces Command-Afghanistan, were loath to acknowledge any *direct* link between suicide bombing in Iraq and Afghanistan. In May 2006, Eikenberry went so far as to claim, “We have not seen conclusive evidence that there has been any migration from Iraq to Afghanistan of foreign fighters that are bringing with them skills or capabilities.”²⁰

Until 2007, many sources in the media unquestioningly parroted the U.S. military’s agnostic approach, maintaining that they had seen “no direct evidence of links between the insurgents in Iraq and in

Afghanistan.”²¹ Radio Free Europe, for example, refuted the notion that there were any direct ties between Iraqi and Afghan insurgents, claiming, “While the neo-Taliban have acknowledged that there are foreign fighters among their ranks, there is no evidence to suggest concerted co-operation between al-Qaeda and the neo-Taliban.”²²

But the rather coy words of the extremist Taliban commander Mullah Dadullah, given in a subsequent interview to Al-Jazeera, tell a different story. In light of their importance in pointing to *direct operational ties* between Iraqi insurgents, who perfected suicide bombing techniques by 2003, and those in Afghanistan, who had never used this tactic, I have included a portion of Dadullah’s interview here:²³

Mullah Dadullah: We like the al-Qaeda organization. We consider it a friendly and brotherly organization which shares our ideology and concepts. We have close ties and constant contacts with it. Our cooperation is ideal.

Interviewer: Do you coordinate with them in military operations in Afghanistan?

Mullah Dadullah: Yes, when we need them, we ask for their help. For example, the bombings we carry out — *we learned it from them* [emphasis mine]. We learn other types of operations from them as well. We have “give and take” relations with the mujahideen of Iraq. We cooperate and help each other.

Interviewer: Did Arabs from al-Qaeda participate in the recent operations in south Afghanistan?

Mullah Dadullah: Some may have participated in the bombing operations....

Mullah Dadullah: We may have sent our people to Iraq, and [the Iraqis] may have sent their friends to us. We have continuous contacts with them, whether by phone or by other means. Some of our brothers may have met them, and they may have met with us too.

Interviewer: Do you send people for training? For example, do they come here for training, or do you maintain contact through the Internet?

Mullah Dadullah: We have training centers here in Afghanistan, and, as you know, they have their own centers there. If we discover anything new, they come here to learn it, and if they discover anything new, our friends go to learn it from them.²⁴

Pakistani journalist Syed Saleem Shahzad provided a more detailed account of one such direct meeting between al-Qaeda in Iraq fighters and Mullah Dadullah, which took place in 2005:

In March, a three-man delegation was sent by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (al-Qaeda’s leader in Iraq) to Afghanistan, where they met Osama bin Laden, Ayman Zawahiri and Mullah Omar.... The delegation brought audio and video material justifying suicide attacks. There was no precedent for this in conservative, observant Afghanistan: suicide is strictly prohibited in Islam. There had recently been a few suicide operations, but they were isolated incidents and never turned into an effective strategy.

Dadullah set out to win hearts and minds in order to develop an organized strategy of suicide attacks for the 2006 offensive. He showed audio and video material from the Iraqi resistance which explained that suicide attacks were

permitted and demonstrated how the Iraqis used them as their most effective weapon. He managed to convince groups from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Pakistan, as well as Waziristan. A first group of 450 recruits came from the Kunar Valley.... That was just the tip of the iceberg.²⁵

While the U.S. military continued to deny that there was any evidence that Afghan bombers might be getting direct assistance or inspiration from their Iraqi counterparts, a *Newsweek* reporter managed to uncover the following proof of such ties during the following interview:

Mohammad Daud (a Taliban commander in the contested province of Ghazni) launches into a glowing account of where he spent the first few months of this year and what he's done since his return.

I'm explaining to my fighters every day the lessons I learned and my experience in Iraq. I want to copy in Afghanistan the tactics and spirit of the glorious Iraqi resistance.

Daud and other Taliban leaders tell *Newsweek* that the Afghan conflict is entering a new phase, with help from Iraq. According to them, Osama bin Laden has opened an underground railroad to and from jihadist training camps in the Sunni Triangle. Self-described graduates of the program say they've come home to Afghanistan with more effective killing techniques and renewed enthusiasm for the war against the West. Daud says he's been communicating a "new momentum and spirit" to the 300 fighters under his command.

Worse yet, he says, there are "strong indications" that al-Qaeda has brought in a team of Arab instructors from Iraq to teach the latest insurgent

techniques to the Taliban. "We have information that the Taliban have received new weapons and explosive devices," says a European diplomat who didn't want to be named because of the sensitivity of the subject, "most probably because of increased financial support from abroad and some traffic between Iraq and Afghanistan through Iran.

One beneficiary of Al Qaeda's renewed interest in Afghanistan is Hamza Sangari, a Taliban commander from Khost province.... Sangari spent his time in Iraq being escorted to guerrilla bases in towns like Fallujah and Ramadi, and in remote desert regions. He says he was welcomed wherever he went. "I've never been so well received," he says. He was impressed with what he saw. "The Iraqi mujahedin are better armed, organized and trained than we are," he says. He stayed four weeks at a remote training camp called Ashaq al Hoor, he says, *where he saw adolescent boys being trained as suicide bombers* [emphasis mine].

The big worry is that studying Iraqi tactics will make the Afghan resistance significantly stronger and more lethal. During a recent sweep of pro-Taliban sites along the Afghan frontier in north Waziristan, Pakistani troops collected a mound of Arabic-language training manuals, apparently copies of the ones used by insurgents in Iraq. Sangari says he was impressed by the way Iraqi insurgents created combat videos to help fund-raising and recruiting efforts; now similar videos of Taliban attacks are showing up in bazaars along the Pakistani border.²⁶

Around this time, Dadullah was said to have issued bottles of holy *zamzam* water from Mecca to purify bombers and transport

them to paradise. A Taliban commander named Mullah Haq Yar, who had been dispatched to Iraq by Mullah Omar to learn the Iraqi insurgents' tactics, also returned at this time and began to carry out an insurgency strategy that resembled that of the Iraqis.²⁷

The pieces were slowly being put into place for the indigenous Afghan militants to begin a campaign that would deploy "human guided missiles" against "infidel" targets across Afghanistan. In one of the most unexpected turns of the war on terror, far from acting as a catalyst for democratization, Iraq had become a disseminator for new forms of insurgent terrorism that were about to make their impact felt in the "Forgotten War."

2005: THE CAMPAIGN BEGINS

While the 2005 campaign started out tentatively, with the attempted murder-by-suicide attack of the Northern Alliance Uzbek warlord General Rashid Dostum, Afghanistan suffered its first Iraq-style mass-casualty bombing on June 1. That bombing, which killed 21 people (including the Kabul police chief) in a mosque in the Taliban's spiritual capital of Kandahar, stunned average Afghans. Many considered the fact that the bombing had taken place in a house of worship to be blasphemous. One of my Kandahari sources described it as "an obscenity, an insult to Islam."

Perhaps as a result of this negative reaction, the Taliban denied involvement in the blast.²⁸ While it is impossible to say whether the Taliban approved of this particular mosque bombing (which might have been carried out by al-Qaeda), it proudly took credit for the bombing spree that shook the country in the following months. Space does not permit an analysis of all the subsequent bombings of 2005, but

my study shows that suicide bombers struck Afghan government targets nine times and foreign troops eight times before the year was over. Government targets included provincial governors, a polling station, an election-oversight body in Kabul, a local police commander and the parliament building in western Kabul — in other words, exactly the same sorts of targets being hit by suicide bombers in Iraq, *but with one notable exception*. Apart from the Kandahar mosque bombing (which local officials believed was carried out by an Arab), there were no targeted killings of crowds of innocent civilians (in crowded bazaars, schools, breadlines, religious festivals, etc.) of the sort that had begun to shred the fabric of society in Iraq.

It was the comparatively low number of civilian targets that first led me to conclude that Taliban suicide bombers were acting on a completely different set of targeting principles than their Iraqi counterparts. It became increasingly apparent that, for some reason, the Taliban suicide bombers were more selective in their targeting patterns than the Iraq-based bombers. Far from going for "soft" civilian targets, the Taliban seemed to be going for "hard" military targets. When I pointed out this trend to Pashtun colleagues, they explained that this targeting was more emblematic of the Pashtuns' martial code (Pashtunwali), which does not condone the killing of civilians. The Taliban's Pashtun-style attacks on hard targets included bombing strikes on U.S. convoys in Helmand and Kandahar provinces, Afghan National Army (ANA) convoys in Kandahar and a NATO convoy in Kabul.

But, for all the fear they inspired, the bombings of 2005 were clearly a means to test the waters and perfect the technique.

It was not until 2006 that the Taliban were finally prepared to unleash a full-scale bombing offensive that would see waves of human guided missiles go after an increasing array of targets. In the process, Afghans would begin to die in the hundreds as the collateral damage of a bloody campaign that ravished Afghans of all walks of life in an increasingly broad swath of Afghan territory in the southeast.

2006: ANNUS HORRIBILIS

The new year began with a failed suicide bombing in Kandahar (January 5), which was followed by a suicide-bombing assassination attempt on the U.S. ambassador during a visit to local leaders in Tirin Kot, Uruzgan Province. Proving the maxim that suicide bombing usually results in more civilian than military deaths despite the best of intentions, on this occasion the suicide bomber missed his target but *killed 10 civilians* and wounded 50. But at least the Taliban were able to claim that they were trying to kill a high-ranking American, not civilians.

No such claim could be made about the attack on a wrestling match in the Pakistani-Afghan border town of Spin Boldak, Kandahar Province, on January 16, 2006. This bloody bombing proved to be Afghanistan's worst attack thus far in terms of civilian casualties. What made this attack so "un-Afghan" is that the suicide bomber seemingly targeted a crowd of innocent civilians; there were no government or military targets in the immediate vicinity. For all intents and purposes, the Spin Boldak massacre, which killed 23 spectators at a traditional Afghan wrestling match, had all the hallmarks of an Iraqi-style suicide bombing.

The response to this bloody outrage seemed to catch the Taliban by surprise. Local Afghans closed their stores and

marched to protest the slaughter of so many of their countrymen, while they were engaged in one of Afghanistan's most beloved pastimes. The attack, which led marchers in Spin Boldak to chant "Death to Pakistan, Death to al-Qaeda, Death to the Taliban," was clearly a public-relations disaster for the Taliban and al-Qaeda in a tribal region where chants of "Death to America" were the norm.²⁹

While the Taliban initially claimed responsibility for the bombing (as they had with all previous bombings in Kandahar Province), it is noteworthy that they subsequently denied involvement in this unpopular attack. Although one can see the denial of responsibility as damage control, the fact that the nature of the target differed so drastically from the Taliban's *modus operandi* (i.e., a tendency to go after military/government targets) might lend some credence to their claim. My study clearly shows that the Taliban had avoided this sort of bombing for fear of losing support among fellow Afghans who might be on the fence. It is probable, therefore, that the suicide bomber who struck in Spin Boldak was not an indigenous Afghan (someone who would have qualms about killing so many of his countrymen). Rather, he was a foreign Arab-salafi extremist who would have found an "un-Islamic" activity like a traditional wrestling match to be an affront to his puritan beliefs. I have attended these sorts of events in Afghanistan; local Afghans usually bet on the outcome. Strict Wahhabi fundamentalists from the Arab Gulf consider any form of gambling to be *haram* (religiously forbidden) and viscerally dislike such activities.

For their part, many locals speculated that the horrific bombing had to be the

work of outsiders. One source claimed, "I think suicide bombings across Afghanistan are the work mainly of Arabs.... At times they are accompanied by Pakistanis." Another Afghan claimed that, "Regardless of their nationality, suicide bombers should be condemned as cowards.... If suicide bombers were real men, they would come out and fight openly."³⁰

Clearly chastised by the widespread disgust that the bombing had generated, the Taliban appeared to have learned their lesson from the Spin Boldak incident. While my study shows that there were a stunning 139 suicide bombings in Afghanistan for the year 2006, there was only one suicide bombing against what patently appeared to be civilian targets that year. All the other bombings in the terrible campaign of 2006 were against military-government targets.

That is not to say, however, that the Taliban did not kill scores of innocent bystanders as "collateral damage." On the contrary, my studies show that, for all their efforts to avoid civilian casualties, it is innocent Afghans who indisputably suffered the most deaths from the 2006 suicide bombing campaign (only 14 foreign soldiers were killed by suicide bombers in 2006).

This high rate of collateral damage stems in part from stepped-up defensive procedures on the part of the coalition troops and Afghan government. While I was able to photograph "soft-skinned" (un-armored) U.S. Humvees on the roads of Afghanistan in summer 2003, by summer 2005 they had begun to be replaced by heavily armored versions. Having learned the terrible lessons of Iraq, where 80 percent of U.S. casualties came from IEDs, coalition forces in Afghanistan had begun to deploy heavily armored LAVs (light armored vehicles) by the time the Afghan suicide-bombing campaign began.

Such armored vehicles were able to deflect much of the blast power of suicide bombings and allow those inside to survive many attacks. This was especially true for those carried out by bombers on foot, who carry far fewer explosives than vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs). But the civilians in the vicinity of the attacks had no such protection. In numerous instances, suicide bombers driving VBIEDs plowed into coalition convoys on crowded streets, and the explosion, shrapnel or burning car ricocheted off their armor into bystanders. On other occasions, suicide bombers on foot trying to infiltrate Afghan government targets were caught up in stringent security procedures. When they were apprehended, they blew themselves up in lines of civilian workers trying to enter through checkpoints.

An analysis of the major bombings for 2006 clearly reveals the outlines of this trend: On August 3, a suicide bomber drove his car into a Canadian ISAF convoy in Kandahar killing six soldiers and 19 civilians. Then, on August 28 in Lashkar Gah, Helmand, a BBIED (body-borne improvised explosive device) bomber blew himself up next to a former police chief and killed him and 16 civilians and wounded 47 more. On September 8, a suicide bomber blew himself up next to a U.S. convoy in Kabul and killed two U.S. soldiers and 16 civilians. Again in Kabul, on September 18, a suicide bomber struck at a U.S. convoy and killed two policemen and 13 civilians. On the very same day, a suicide bomber tried assassinating the deputy head of police for Herat and succeeded in killing four policemen and seven civilians.

As the rampage year continued, on September 26, a suicide bomber aiming for the governor of Helmand killed nine soldiers

and nine civilians in Lashkar Gah. Finally, on September 29, a suicide bomber who was noticed by guards in a line of workers as he attempted to infiltrate the Interior Ministry in Kabul set off his bomb prematurely and killed 12 civilians. The mayhem continued on October 13, as a suicide bomber who hit a U.S. convoy killed one ISAF soldier and eight civilians. The year ended on December 7, when a suicide bomber bounced off a U.S. military convoy killing no soldiers, but slaughtering 14 civilians.³¹

When I broke down the civilian-to-military death ratio from bombings for 2006, I found that Afghan suicide bombers, *who were targeting government or military targets in every one of these incidents*, actually succeeded in killing 114 civilians and only 25 government military targets (4.6 civilians for every military-government target).

But, clearly, there was more to the Taliban's terrible success rate than the logistic difficulties involved in trying to take out hard military targets protected by armor, sand bags and blast barriers. In fact, by 2006, another tendency became noticeable as well. My study found a bizarre trend wherein dozens of Taliban suicide bombers (in some months the majority) succeeded in killing only themselves! The high rate of victimless bombings led me to question whether the suicide bombers were engaging in suicide bombing or simply suicide.³²

THE WORLD'S WORST SUICIDE BOMBERS?

As I analyzed the circumstances behind every suicide bombing for 2001-07, I noticed that time and again Taliban suicide bombers exploded their bombs

prematurely, killing themselves and no one else. This trend was to culminate in the first weeks of 2007, when I recorded 19 bombings from January to the end of February.³³ Astoundingly, of these 19 bombings, the suicide bomber was apprehended or killed in three instances and on 12 other occasions succeeded in killing only himself. In two bombings, the bomber killed only one person other than himself, and in only 2 bombings out of 19 did the suicide bomber kill more than one victim. Hardly an inspiring kill ratio.

Such underwhelming statistics stood in stark contrast to Iraq, where the kill ratio was much higher (it is common for each Iraqi suicide bomber to kill more than 60). These statistics also beg the question that I asked Afghan National Directorate of Security (NDS) leader, Yama Karzai: "Why are Afghanistan's suicide bombers so uniquely incapable of hitting their targets...with bombs?"

Mr. Karzai and several Afghan National Police (ANP) commanders whom I interviewed offered an unexpected explanation that seemed to account for much of the Afghan suicide bombing failures. ANP commanders spoke of arresting bombers who were often mentally unsound, deranged or retarded.³⁴ Western journalists and observers have similarly written of a suicide attack by a disabled man whose only motivation was the promise of payments for his family in exchange for mounting an attack. There was also the case of bombers who were invalids and one who was a blind amputee.³⁵

Far from being elite, white-collar terrorists like the 9/11 hijacking team, one Afghan official has claimed that "at least three of every five (Afghan) bombers suffer from a physical ailment or disability.

Adding those who suffer from mental illnesses, the number of sick and disabled bombers climbs to more than 80 per cent.”³⁶

My own findings backed these sorts of claims. While I was initially skeptical of the NDS's claims (all too often victims of suicide bombing are prone to dismiss the bombers as “deranged,” “fanatical,” “on drugs,” or “brainwashed”), I found overwhelming evidence to support the theory that Afghanistan’s bombers were uniquely “challenged.”³⁷

While it is increasingly accepted by the intelligence community that suicide bombers are not brainwashed dupes, but intelligent self-conscious actors like 9/11 suicide-team commander Mohammad Atta, my field work in the Afghan theater points to an entirely different paradigm. This Afghan paradigm points to the existence of bombers who belong to a much lower stratum than in other Islamic zones where bombing campaigns have taken place.

One source from the U.S. military stationed at Bagram Air Base described an incident that exemplifies this trend. He shared his story of an incident in which a teenage suicide bomber threw his explosive-filled bomb vest at a U.S. patrol, wrongly assuming it would explode on impact. Afghan National police sources say they have had several calls from concerned citizens who had discovered abandoned suicide vests on the streets of Kabul, perhaps indicating a last minute change of heart.

In a similar incident, Craig Harrison, head of security for the UN mission in Afghanistan, told me that an Afghan employee had come to him saying he had noticed, on his way to work, strange wiring in a car that had run out of gas. He grew

suspicious after helping the driver push the car for a while and came to warn his UN employers. When the police arrived on the scene with guns drawn, they found the suicide car bomber *pushing* his car toward his target!³⁸

In another case that was widely reported as the second of its kind in a week, a suicide bomber on his way to his target stumbled leaving his house and set off his bomb prematurely, killing himself and wounding two passersby.³⁹ Another case, from January 2008, involved a group of five terrorists who were preparing their VBIED when it accidentally went off, killing them all.⁴⁰ A UN source told me of a suicide bomber who pulled up to a gas station driving a VBIED. The attendant saw a strange device in the car, and he and another worker tackled the bomber, fought with him to prevent him from detonating his device in a packed gas station, and eventually subdued him. In this instance, the bomber failed simply because he forgot to fill his car up with gas in advance. U.S. military and ISAF seem to agree that Afghan suicide bombers are far more incompetent than their Iraqi counterparts, who have effectively used elaborate bombs to kill over 100 people on many occasions. The fact that the Taliban are deliberately using those who are mentally unsound or of limited intelligence might help explain this phenomenon.

Below is a typical military account that highlights the Afghan suicide bombers’ strange failures:

When an 18-year-old from Pakistan dismounted his bicycle a couple of kilometers outside the eastern town of Khost, his clothes flapped up, revealing a suicide vest to an alert farmer nearby. Police soon surrounded

the teenager and ordered him to remove his vest. He refused, grew increasingly agitated and eventually blew himself up, said Yaqoub Khan, police criminal director for Khost province. No one else was hurt.

(On another occasion) a suicide attacker waited on a roadside in eastern Paktika province, apparently biding his time for a target to appear. When an Afghan army convoy approached, the bomber blew himself up—several meters ahead of the vehicles, said Gov. Mohammad Akram Akhpelwak. He caused no injuries or damage.

The nature of these two would-be suicide bombers' deaths is strikingly common in Afghanistan. Maj. Luke Knittig, a spokesman for NATO's International Security Assistance Force, said NATO commanders have noticed how often suicide attacks in Afghanistan fail. "We have certainly noticed that there have been a fair number that are pretty poorly executed and bungled, and of course they're all ill-conceived," he said.

A U.S. military spokesman, Lt. Col. Paul Fitzpatrick, said that commanders do see trained, planned maneuvers in the field, but that many Taliban attacks fail because of a lack of experience. "Certainly there are a fair number of failed attempts, and that's OK," he said. "I hope they don't get better."⁴¹

When combined with a propensity to go after hard targets, such as fast-moving, heavily armored convoys or guarded installations, the unskilled nature of the Taliban bombers seems to have led to a comparatively ineffective bombing campaign. But I found something even more disturbing that accounted for much of the shocking ineptitude in Afghanistan's

bombers: the reliance on boys as young as six years old to carry out "martyrdom operations."

AFGHANISTAN'S CHILD BOMBERS

My work in the Pashtun areas east of Kabul led me to the conclusion that many young Afghan boys go to Pakistan for *madrassa* (seminary) training, often without their parents' permission. There they join young Pashtun lads from the Pakistani tribal regions in search of adventure, a sense of religious mission and prestige. They are also taught to emulate those who die in the fight for the faith and to reject what few pleasures they enjoy in this world for the pleasures of the next. Fed on a diet of jihad, hatred for infidels, and DVDs depicting the horrors of the foreign invasion of Afghanistan, these poor young men provide the perfect human material for "Mullah Omar's missiles."

Those who are "honored" to be chosen for suicide-bombing missions are isolated from their peers and indoctrinated, then transported to their target. They are told that their family will receive a reward of up to \$15,000 for their "martyrdom." Added incentive comes in the form of "passes to paradise" that Dadullah was filmed handing out to suicide bombers-in-waiting in a cave in Pakistan.⁴² The following case of two young Pakistani Pashtuns who left school without their parents' permission to become suicide bombers sheds light on the recruitment process for Afghan suicide bombers and might help explain why they yield such poor results on hard targets:

"We were told to fight against Israel, America and non-Muslims," said Muhammed Bakhtiar, 17, explaining why he wanted to become a suicide bomber.

“We are so unhappy with our lives here. We have nothing,” he said.

“We read about jihad in books and wanted to join,” said Ahmad. “We wanted to go to the Muridke madrassa so we would have a better life in the hereafter.”

“We were told it is our choice to become a freedom fighter or a suicide bomber,” explained Ahmad, who had a neat beard and wore a white Muslim prayer cap. “But we should never fight against Pakistan.”

“The jihadi man who brought us to Muridke told us we would become great by fighting jihad,” said the clean-shaven Bakhtiar. “We knew we could never become great if we stayed in Buner. I wanted to become great.”

(But) the tribal elders intervened and now Bakhtiar and Ahmad are back in school in Buner. “My brother and my uncle found me in Lahore,” said Bakhtiar. “The people at Muridke let us leave and said we could come back after we finished our exams at home,” he said. But we asked them, “Do you want to go back and learn jihad?” “I don’t know” said Bakhtiar. “Maybe, maybe.” Ahmad agreed. “There is nothing for us here. Nothing.”⁴³

I heard a similar story while meeting with UN officials in Gardez, Paktia Province, in the aftermath of the bombing (described at the beginning of this article) that had taken place just a few hours earlier. Local Pashtun villagers told me that young men had been disappearing in neighboring Khost Province after receiving funding from the Taliban to fight against coalition troops. The parents had little recourse in getting their sons back. On the contrary, they often came to hear that their sons had been killed only when the Taliban arrived at their house with money to

congratulate them on the “martyrdom” of their boys. In one tragic case, a mother found out that her son had returned from a madrassa in Pakistan with the intent to become a suicide bomber (his family would have received \$3,600). When she desperately fought with him to prevent him from carrying out his mission, his bomb went off killing her and three of his siblings.⁴⁴

While Mullah Nazir, a powerful Taliban leader in Pakistan’s Waziristan Province, recently made an unprecedented request for the Taliban to stop recruiting children, a video of a suicide-bomber ceremony in the region would seem to indicate that his appeal has been honored in the breach. In the video that was obtained by ABC, boys as young as 12 are shown “graduating” from a suicide-bombing camp run by Mullah Dadullah Mansour, the successor to Mullah Dadullah, who was killed in May 2007.

As disturbing as this video is, it pales in comparison to the discovery Afghan security officials recently made in eastern Afghanistan. In an incident that caused tears of fury among local villagers, a six-year-old street urchin approached an Afghan security checkpoint and claimed that he had been cornered by the Taliban and fitted with a suicide bomber vest. They had told him to walk up to a U.S. patrol and press a button on the vest that would “spray flowers.” Fortunately, the quick thinking boy instead asked for help, and the vest was removed.

While this case is obviously an extreme example, it fits the trend and certainly goes a long way in helping to explain why almost half of Taliban suicide bombers succeed in killing only themselves. Many Taliban bombers come from small backwater villages and have to be taught how to drive on strange roads, travel beyond their locale or country and hit fast-moving, armored

coalition convoys with improvised explosives. Even in the best of times, suicide bombing is a task that involves considerable resolve, determination, focus and a degree of intelligence. Clearly, such vital ingredients are often missing in the Afghan context, where many of the bombers appear to be as much victims as perpetrators.

This sort of tragedy has created a certain level of tension between the Taliban and local tribes. On one occasion, a local chieftain in Khost threatened to attack the Taliban with his entire tribe when he discovered that Taliban commander Jalaludin Haqqani had taken his son for a suicide mission. Bloodshed was averted only when the chieftain's son was returned with the admonishment that his father had denied him the chance to become a martyr.⁴⁵

I have collected many such stories, and it seems that the Taliban have been actively preying on young men who are brought to madrassas and convinced that suicide bombing offers them a route to honor and the pleasures of paradise. Although the Taliban's claims to have hundreds, if not thousands, of suicide bombers prepared to attack infidels in Afghanistan are exaggerated, they do seem to have a large recruitment pool made up of impressionable Pashtun youth on both sides of the border. But I suspect that many of these young indoctrinated Pashtuns might have qualms about killing innocent fellow Afghan Muslims, especially if they are carrying out the bombings with the aim of acquiring much-needed financial payments for their impoverished families. This might help explain why so many Afghan suicide bombers detonate their bombs prematurely and succeed in killing only themselves.

In one case that would seem to exemplify this trend, a young man with a bomb strapped to his waist approached

security officials and asked for help in removing it.⁴⁶ As he tried to take off his bomb, it detonated, killing him. One can infer from such tragedies that many of the suicide bombers who kill only themselves are doing so not just because they are incompetent or up against hard military targets, but because they are genuinely reluctant to kill others.

All these factors work to mitigate a bombing campaign that could have been far worse and taken on the proportions found in Iraq, where thousands of civilians have been deliberately targeted by suicide bombers. For all the havoc the Afghan bombers indisputably wreak, it seems that (through incompetence or choice) they are not taking the same toll on innocent civilians that their Iraqi counterparts have. While the bombing inspiration and training clearly came from Iraq, the Taliban campaign reflects the unique Pashtun culture which has strict taboos on killing innocents.

Or so my findings led me to believe by the time I finished my field research in 15 of Afghanistan's provinces in May 2007. As I ended my expedition, which had been timed to coincide with the Taliban's much-touted spring offensive, I was confident that my findings had highlighted a little-noticed facet of the Taliban campaign that sharply differentiated it from the Iraqi campaign. But in the month after I left, this paradigm began to shift. It was at this time that the Taliban appeared to shed their concerns about killing civilians and began to unleash a new wave of mass-casualty bombings. The little hope I and countless average Afghans had previously taken from the fact that the Taliban bombers were not setting out to deliberately kill unarmed civilians was to be dashed.

IRAQI-STYLE MASS BOMBING COMES TO AFGHANISTAN

The first sign of an increasingly deadly campaign came in June 2007, when a Taliban bomber boarded a bus carrying policemen in Kabul and detonated an unprecedentedly powerful bomb. The ensuing explosion tore the bus apart, killing 35 policemen on board.⁴⁷ While there had previously been a couple of bombings in Afghanistan that had surpassed 20 deaths (most notably the bombing of the wrestling match in Spin Boldak and the attack on Baghram Air Base during Vice President Cheney's visit), this was the first bombing to kill over 30. This attack was followed by a similarly powerful attack on a bus carrying Afghan soldiers in Kabul in September 2007 that killed 30. These two unexpectedly powerful attacks left the Afghans reeling, but at least they fit the earlier Taliban pattern of hitting hard military targets.

But this pattern also was to change decisively with a deadly Iraqi-style bombing on a civilian-packed event held in the town of Baghlan, northern Afghanistan, in December 2007. This bombing massacre was carried out at the opening of a sugar plant attended by scores of local students, parliamentarians and workers. Between 90 and 100 people were killed, including six parliamentarians.⁴⁸ Tragically, the vast majority of the victims were actually school boys who had come to the event with their teachers, five of whom were also killed in the explosion. Many of these innocents were killed by the bomb itself, which was packed with hundreds of ball-bearings, a tactic that was previously rare in Afghanistan. The sickening carnage caused nationwide mourning and seemed to demonstrate that the Taliban were losing

their sensitivity to the issue of collateral damage. Clearly, the Taliban had decided that the destabilizing effects of mega-bombings outweighed the negative publicity endangered by such slaughters.

This point was vividly driven home when the Taliban launched another mass-casualty suicide-bombing attack in a crowd of spectators gathered to watch a dog fight in Kandahar in February 2008. As many as 100 were killed in this attack, which appeared to be aimed at a pro-Karzai militia commander. Once again, many of the victims were innocent spectators (although the militia commander and 35 of his followers were also killed in the horrific explosion). The following day, a Taliban bomber crashed into a Canadian ISAF convoy in Kandahar and killed 38 bystanders with another unusually powerful explosive. The Taliban, it seemed, had taken off the gloves and were now waging full-scale Iraqi-style suicide-bombing warfare in Afghanistan.

The rising death toll was caused in part by the Taliban's decision to use much more powerful bombs. Explosives experts attributed the increasing carnage not just to such improvisations as adding ball bearings and other forms of shrapnel to the bombs, but to the terrorists' use of a highly explosive C-4 compound. At the time, a Taliban spokesman hinted at more carnage to come: "All these bombs are stronger than before, this is because of the growing experience of our jihadi fighters.... We will continue to make these kinds of bombs to attack our enemies with."⁴⁹ Fearful Afghans seemed to realize that the Taliban were now increasing the lethality of their bombs and putting aside concerns about the negative fallout from their attacks. One Afghan professor claimed, "The attacks

show that the enemies of Afghanistan are changing their tactics. Now they are not thinking about civilians at all. They wanted to cause such big casualties in these attacks to weaken the morale of the government and the international community, to show the world the Afghan government is too weak to prevent them.”⁵⁰

Further high-casualty civilian attacks included the January 14, 2008, suicide bombing of the Serena Hotel in Kabul and the July 7, 2008, Indian embassy bombing, also in Kabul, which killed 58. The second bombing seems to have been organized by the Taliban with the help of Pakistan’s notorious Inter Services Intelligence and may point to a Pakistani hand in the increased suicide-bombing violence.

But it was not just Afghanistan that began to suffer from a savage new wave of Taliban suicide bombings. By 2007, Pakistan, a country that, like its Afghan neighbor, had been largely spared from this scourge, began to experience a bloody wave of bombings. These appeared to be directed for the most part by a Taliban commander named Baitullah Mehsud, who has close ties to al-Qaeda. And the bombings in Pakistan have been deadlier than those in Afghanistan.

By year’s end, Pakistan had suffered as many as 50 suicide bombings, including a massive attack on former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto’s convoy, which killed approximately 150 but missed its primary target, and a later one that succeeded in killing her. The suicide bombers in Pakistan seemed to have had less compunction about killing civilians and struck at political rallies, religious festivals, hotels, funerals, *jirgas* (tribal meetings) and other soft targets. This especially holds true for Shiite civilian targets, which were hit in large

numbers from 2002 to 2006. But, still, the overall trend I have noticed in Pakistan (the Shiite targeting and attacks on Bhutto and the recent Marriott bombing aside) is a tendency to aim for army, police or government targets; it is just not as pronounced as in Afghanistan. The Pakistani bombers also have a higher death rate from their bombings than their Afghan counterparts.

As in neighboring Afghanistan, the Pakistani bombings demonstrate that fedayeen suicide tactics have entered the military culture of the Pakistani Taliban extremists and have become a weapon of choice for destabilizing the government. For al-Qaeda and the radical wing of the Taliban that coalesced around such extremists as Mullah Dadullah and Baitullah Mehsud’s Pakistani Taliban Movement, these developments represent a clear victory over the Taliban moderates. This development has unsettling ramifications for a region that is home not only to thousands of Taliban fighters, and Bin Laden’s al-Qaeda Central, but to nuclear weapons.

As a new generation of Taliban insurgents puts aside its cultural compunctions against killing innocent civilians, the inroads made by the Iraqi-inspired terrorists become more permanent and may one day threaten the West. Each and every one of “Mullah Omar’s missiles” sends the message that the Taliban have not forgotten the “Forgotten War” in Afghanistan nor the new war in Pakistan. Before his May 2007 death, Mullah Dadullah showed that he was all too aware of the long-term strategic implications of the Taliban’s adoption of “martyrdom” tactics, when he triumphantly proclaimed, “The Americans have sown a seed. They will reap the crop for quite a long time.”⁵¹

¹ IED (improvised explosive device).

² For photographs from this and other journeys in Afghanistan, see my website at www.brianglynwilliams.com (under 'Field Research')

³ The United States had shipped Predator drones, elite special forces, and other resources to Iraq, leaving a small force of U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan, a Texas-sized, mountainous country that is considerably larger than Iraq.

⁴ The Taliban insurgents took huge losses from 2004-06 when they attempted to wage frontal combat with the technologically superior coalition forces.

⁵ The Taliban and al-Qaeda subsequently tried to launch terror attacks against Spanish targets (Taliban commander Baitullah Mahsud) and German targets to punish them for providing troops to NATO in Afghanistan. See "Was Baitullah Mahsud Behind the Spanish Terror Operation?" and "German Intelligence Describes a "New Quality" in Jihadi Threats," *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 5, No. 7, February 20, 2008.

⁶ Mullah Omar continued to publicly make calls for the Taliban to avoid killing civilians, but he seems to have come to the conclusion that suicide bombings' benefits outweighed its drawbacks.

⁷ Iraq continued to surpass Afghanistan in total numbers of attacks and actually reached 67 in one month. See "One Month's Toll in Iraq: 67 Suicide Bombers," *The Guardian*, May 12, 2005.

⁸ This mountainous Pashtun region had never been incorporated as a proper part of Pakistan. Rather it was run by government-appointed agents who acted as intermediaries with the largely autonomous Pashtun tribes.

⁹ Brian Glyn Williams, "The Return of the Arabs. Al Qa'ida's Military Role in the Afghan Insurgency," *West Point Combating Terrorism Center Sentinel*, Vol. 1, No. 3, February 2008.

¹⁰ Yoram Schweitzer and Sari Goldstein Ferber, *Al Qaeda and the Internationalization of Suicide Terrorism*, The Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, Memorandum No. 78, November 2005, p. 26.

¹¹ For the destabilizing impact of Iraq, see Brian Glyn Williams, "The Failure of al Qaeda Basing Projects from Afghanistan to Iraq." *Denial of Sanctuary. Understanding Terrorist Safe Havens*, edited by Michael Innes (Praeger, 2007).

¹² One has only to go to www.youtube.com and type in the words — jihad Iraq — to see how effective the Iraqi insurgents have been in exploiting this medium.

¹³ "Underground Jihad Videos in Pakistan Thrive on Beheadings, Hangings," Vital Perspective, http://vitalperspective.typepad.com/vital_perspective_clarity/2006/05/underground_jih.html.

¹⁴ See al-Qaeda al Jihad's surprisingly sophisticated Afghan video at http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=184_1201720200.

¹⁵ "Taliban Enlist Video in Fight for Afghanistan," National Public Radio, *All Things Considered*, November 2, 2006, at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6423946>. For the Taliban bomber's testimony, see Hekmat Karzai, "The Logic of Afghan Suicide Bombing," *IDSS Commentary*, March 27, 2006.

¹⁶ "Beheading Video Reveals Zarqawi's Touch," *Afghanistan Watch*, January 6, 2006, at <http://www.afghanistanwatch.org/newsletterarchive/listserv1-6-06.htm>.

¹⁷ "Child Be-Heading Uncensored," *Jawa Report*, May 24, 2007, at <http://mypetjawa.mu.nu/archives/188003.php>.

¹⁸ "Improvised Explosives. A Growing Menace in Afghanistan," *Canadian Broadcast Channel*, April 25, 2006.

¹⁹ Interview carried out with National Directorate of Security official in NDS headquarters, Kabul, April 2007.

²⁰ Pamela Hess, "Taliban Regrouping in Southern Afghanistan," UPI, May 10, 2006.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² For more on the Iraqi origins of Afghan suicide bombing, see Brian Glyn Williams, "Afghan Suicide Bombing," *Jane's Islamic Affairs Analyst*, August 13, 2007. Available under Publications at [brianglynwilliams.com](http://www.brianglynwilliams.com).

²³ It should be noted that neither the Afghan mujahideen freedom fighters of the 1980s nor the pre-War on Terror Taliban used suicide bombing in the past.

²⁴ "Taliban Military Commander Mullah Dadallah: We Are in Contact with Iraqi Mujahideen, Osama bin Laden & Al-Zawahiri," Middle East Media Research Institute, *Special Dispatch Series*, June 2, 2006, No. 1180, at <http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=archives&Area=sd&ID=SP118006>.

²⁵ Syed Saleem Shahzad, "Taliban Resurgence in Afghanistan" *Le Monde Diplomatique*, September 2006.

²⁶ Ron Moreau, "Terrorism: An Iraq-Afghan Alliance? The Taliban Haven't Quit, and Some Are Getting Help

and Inspiration from Iraq,” *Newsweek*, September 18, 2005.

²⁷ Syed Saleem Shahzad, “Osama Adds Weight to Afghan Resistance,” *Asia Times*, September 11, 2004.

²⁸ James Rupert, “20 Dead in Suicide Bomb at Mosque,” Peace Corps On-Line, June 1, 2005, at <http://peacecorpsonline.org/messages/messages/467/2032507.html>.

²⁹ “Afghans Protest at Bomb Attacks,” BBC.co.uk, January 18, 2006.

³⁰ “Afghanistan: Are Militants Copying Iraqi Insurgents’ Suicide Tactics?” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, January 17, 2006.

³¹ There was also a suicide bombing in Urgan, Paktika (Nov. 26, 2006) Province aimed at a district police chief and Afghan special force commander that killed 15 people. I have been unable to obtain specifics on the casualties; all the most accounts claim that it was a mixture of civilians and militiamen.

³² Brian Glyn Williams, “Taliban Fedayeen. The World’s Worst Suicide Bombers?” *Terrorism Monitor*, July 19, 2007.

³³ Brian Glyn Williams, “Cheney Attack Reveals Taliban Suicide Bombing Patterns,” *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 5, No. 4, Feb. 27, 2007.

³⁴ Others have noticed this trend. See for example: “Over 60 Percent of Suicide Bombers in Afghanistan Are Physically Disabled,” *The Mainichi Daily News*, October 28, 2008.

³⁵ Daan Van Der Schriek, “New Terrorist Trends in Afghanistan,” *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 2, No. 22, November 18, 2004. See also Carlotta Gall, “Taliban Step Up Afghan Bombings and Suicide Attacks,” *The New York Times*, October 21, 2006.

³⁶ Soraya Sarhaddi Nelson, “Disabled Often Carry Out Afghan Suicide Missions,” National Public Radio, *Morning Edition*, October 15, 2007.

³⁷ Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terrorist Networks* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004). Sageman’s excellent work focused on the more elite al-Qaeda terrorist network.

³⁸ Interview with Craig Harrison, Director of UN Security in Afghanistan, UNAMA Compound, Kabul, April 2007.

³⁹ “Jihadist Dies from Accidental Discharge. Suicide Bomber Falls Down Stairs,” Liveleak.com, January 24, 2008.

⁴⁰ “Five Terrorists Die When Planting a Car Bomb in Afghanistan,” *RIA Novosti* (Russia), January 2, 2008.

⁴¹ “Bombers in Afghanistan Usually Miss Targets,” *St. Petersburg Times*, November 23, 2006.

⁴² B. Raman, “What’s Cooking in the Jihadi Kitchen? Entry Pass for Heaven,” *Terrorism Monitor*, Paper No. 148, March 11, 2006.

⁴³ Mushtaq Yusufzai, “How Two Teens Were Recruited for Jihad,” MSNBC.com, March 28, 2007.

⁴⁴ “Afghan Suicide Bomber Kills Own Family,” Associated Press, October 16, 2007.

⁴⁵ Story relayed by Tom Gregg, Director of UNAMA Mission, Gardez, May 2007.

⁴⁶ “Afghan Suicide Bomber Kills Own Family,” Associated Press, October 16, 2007.

⁴⁷ “35 Killed in Kabul Suicide Bomb Attack,” Associated Press, June 18, 2007.

⁴⁸ According to some unsubstantiated reports some of the victims may have died in panicked gun fire from guards who survived the explosion.

⁴⁹ “Taliban’s Bomb Expertise Grows as Regard for Civilians Cast Aside,” *International Herald Tribune*, February 20, 2008.

⁵⁰ “140 Afghans Killed in 2 Days of Bombings,” Associated Press, Feb 18, 2007.

⁵¹ “Taliban Leader Says Suicide Army Ready,” UPI, March 1, 2007.

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