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## 800 Words on the Last Year in Afghanistan

**Nick Carter**



The last year has seen significant change in southern Afghanistan. An uplift of over 20,000 US troops, and more importantly, a huge increase in Afghan security forces has more than doubled the number of forces in Helmand and Kandahar. When I arrived in southern Afghanistan last October there was one weak Afghan Army brigade in Helmand and one in Kandahar, the original capital of Afghanistan. When I left a year later these had increased to nearly six. The Afghan Police has also been uplifted by 30%. These reinforcements have made possible the disposition of our forces to be realigned so that our counter insurgency strategy can focus on protecting the population.

This population-centric approach recognises that counter insurgency is essentially an argument between the Government of Afghanistan and the insurgency for the support of the people. Up until now it has not been possible to offer a real alternative, but in central Helmand and in and around Kandahar City the 2 million or so Afghans who live there now have the prospect of being able to live more normal lives. They are now more likely to be able to leave their homes, tend their fields, grow a crop of their choice and take their produce to the local bazaar; their children will have access to a school; they will be able to attend community council meetings and have access to their District Governor; there will be a system of redress with the chance for basic disputes to be resolved through a process of traditional justice; they will be able to listen to a radio and will be able to use a mobile telephone. Hitherto these basic rights which we take for granted would have been denied by the insurgents.

These small steps are by no means irreversible everywhere, but traditional communities are now being rebuilt, years of mistrust are being overcome, and the elders who have been targeted by the insurgency are now starting to return and provide leadership to their villages. In Kandahar City

this year the Iftar parties that mark the breaking of the fast after dark during Ramadan went on longer and were more exuberant than they had been for many years. During the last 6 weeks some 80% of reported improvised explosive device or 'IED' events have been hand-ins to the Afghan security forces rather than explosions, suggesting the population feels less intimidated and more likely to trust their forces. Work started recently on Kandahar's electricity. The majority of the 800,000 people who live there have had no access to mains electricity since the 1970s, and the lucky few who have, have been restricted to a few hours a day. This has severely restricted economic development. Capacity will be doubled this winter so that businesses can start to invest and unemployment can be reduced.

The corollary of a population-centric approach is the need to have a better understanding of one's opponent and his motivation. There are many who fight 'with' the Taliban rather than 'for' the Taliban. The former are more likely to be motivated by money or the threat of violence than genuine belief in the Taliban cause. Many are motivated simply through being excluded. As they feel more secure, as economic opportunity improves, and as more inclusive governance becomes available, so many of them will put down their weapons and return to their fields. By denying the insurgency access to the population it will be squeezed out of the spaces it needs to sustain itself. It is losing its recruits and experiencing shortfalls in weaponry and IED components, with the cost of the latter increasing tenfold during the last 3 months. Inevitably the insurgency will change its tactics as evidenced by the campaign of assassination and intimidation it has waged against Government employees in Kandahar. But if sufficient Afghan leaders can be found to govern at district level this threat can be overcome.

Our partnership with the Afghan security forces is changing the dynamics too. Partnership is not an end in itself, but a means to an end that sees the Afghans taking responsibility for the security of their people. This is having a marked effect. In the urban areas of Lashkar Gah in Helmand and Kandahar City it is the Afghan Police who have responsibility with minimal support from us. And in the rural areas they are becoming increasingly assertive with recent operations to the west of Kandahar City and to the east of Lashkar Gah being led by the Afghan Army. Security for the recent parliamentary elections was handled entirely by the Afghans, and its success did much for their confidence. Trusting Afghans to come up with Afghan solutions is a key element of our population-centric approach and is the only long term answer.

These changes are positive, but I have learned from my year in southern Afghanistan that after 30 years of war and chaos it is best to be realistic about progress. Next summer will be the time to judge it. For this is when the insurgency traditionally goes on the offensive, and if it is markedly better than last summer, we can then be sure that our approach is working.

*Major General Nick Carter was ISAF Regional Commander South until November 2010. He assumed command of 6th United Kingdom Division in January 2009 and was responsible for the preparation and training of the Task Forces deploying on Operation Herrick. The Division then became a CJTF and assumed responsibility for RC-South in November of 2009. He commanded 20 Armoured Brigade, based in Germany, from January 2004 until December 2005, including a tour in Iraq in command of British Forces in Basra. After completing Term 1 of Royal College of Defence Studies, he assumed the appointment of Director of Army Resources and Plans in the*

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