

# Suicide bombings in Afghanistan

## KEY POINTS

■ Little effort has been made to understand or explain the way the model of the 'suicide bomber' arrived on the Afghan scene.

■ This indiscriminate tactic – which is viewed by many as 'un-Afghan' and 'un-Islamic' – has slowly, but gradually, moved from being a taboo to representing supreme devotion to Islam among Taliban insurgents.

■ The model of the suicide bomber in Afghanistan has been a mere reflection of lessons and the transfer of know-how from the Iraqi insurgency.

One of the most alarming developments in the global war on terrorism has been the transfer of fedayeen (suicide) bombing tactics to the Afghan theatre of operations. The embrace of this alien tactic by the Afghan insurgents represents an ideological and strategic defeat in the war on terrorism. Afghanistan now has the dubious honor of ranking second to Iraq in sheer numbers of suicide bombing attacks (research for this article indicates 141 attacks for 2006 and approximately 70 for 2007). This from a country that saw no suicide bombing attacks against the Soviets during their decade-long occupation, no use of suicide bombing during the Taliban conquests from 1995 to 2001, and no more than a dozen bombings from 2001 to the summer of 2005.

### Suicide bombing: 1979 to 2001

To fully appreciate just how alien suicide bombing is to Afghan martial culture, it is necessary to carry out an assessment of this tactic's role in previous Afghan jihads. Such an assessment makes it glaringly obvious that even the most fundamentalist of Afghan mujahideen factions led by Rasul Sayyaf and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar did not deploy suicide bombers in the 1980s. Discussing this with Lester Grau, the preeminent US specialist on mujahideen tactics, he emphatically says: "The Afghan [mujahideen] fighters fought to

Suicide bombings in Afghanistan have become so prevalent that the existence of an era of pre-suicide attacks seems a distant past. *Brian Glyn Williams* traces the roots of this imported tactic and how, why and when the Taliban embraced its use as part of its insurgency against Western and Afghan forces.

live another day, plain and simple. They wanted to live to enjoy their battle glory and attack again. Suicide never was a part of their game plan."

In his recent work from 2004, *Ghost Wars*, Steven Coll supports Grau's assessment and claims: "The Afghans whom Yousaf [a Pakistani Intelligence commander] trained, uniformly denounced suicide attack proposals as against their religion. It was only Arab volunteers who later advocated suicide attacks." Journalists who encountered Arab volunteers while traveling with indigenous Afghan mujahideen also noticed this Arab-Afghan dichotomy. BBC reporter Saira Shah wrote of the Arab volunteers in Afghanistan: "They don't mind strapping explosives to themselves to become martyrs, but they are afraid of a bit of shelling."

While the xenophobic Afghan-mujahideen could be fierce warriors, few subscribed to the Salafist extremism that eventually led Al-Qaeda to embrace 'martyrdom operations' as a tactic of choice. Similarly, the Taliban did not use this tactic against their enemies. This is partly explained by the fact that a majority of the mujahideen and Taliban were ethnic Pashtuns. The Pashtunwali code and Taliban-Deobandi school of Islam considered suicide to be cowardly and those who engaged in it to be cursed.

But it becomes clear that Arab volunteers, including those 'Afghan Arabs'

who later forged Al-Qaeda, were far more prone to engage in suicidal operations that earned them 'martyrdom'. In their study, *Al Qaeda and the Internationalization of Suicide Terrorism*, for The Jaffee Centre for Strategic Studies in 2005, Yoram Schweitzer and Sari Goldstein Ferber have aptly summed up the importance of suicide attacks to Al-Qaeda: "The organisation adopted suicide as the supreme embodiment of global jihad and raised Islamic martyrdom (al shehada) to the status of a principle of faith."

On 9 September 2001, Osama bin Laden demonstrated the effectiveness of suicide bombers when he sent two suicide assassins to kill Ahmad Shah Massoud, the head of the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance. But as the Taliban Emirate of Afghanistan fell to the US-led Coalition in December 2001, the benefits of suicide bombing for Palestinians, Chechens, Kurds and Al-Qaeda seemed to be far outweighed by its negative consequences. Therefore, the Taliban did not fully come to embrace suicide bombing until its effectiveness was demonstrated elsewhere.

### The Taliban: 2001-2005

In the four years following Operation Enduring Freedom, the Taliban core regrouped in Pakistan and began to wage a traditional insurgency. By the summer of 2002 they were beginning to carry out attacks on Afghan Army checkpoints. They

would later launch swarm attacks against exposed coalition outposts in an attempt to seize Kandahar and Helmand. It quickly became obvious that the Taliban were fighting a conventional guerilla war using mortars, AK-47s, un-improvised Soviet-era landmines, rocket-propelled grenades, and PK machine guns. While there were two failed suicide bombings in the capital in 2002, these were carried out by foreigners with suspected links to Al-Qaeda, not the Taliban.

But in February 2003, Bin Laden issued a tape in which he called for “martyrdom operations against the enemy” in both Afghanistan and Iraq. Bin Laden’s call was not answered until 9 June 2003 with a suicide car bombing against a bus carrying coalition troops. Although there was little evidence left over from the charred corpse in the vehicle borne improvised explosive device (IED), the expertise with which the attack was carried out led most observers to attribute it to Al-Qaeda.

Then, after a seven and half month lull, on 28 December 2003, five Afghan security officers were killed by a suicide bomber when they tried to arrest two men described as “either Arabs or Pakistanis” in Kabul. Two days later Afghan police arrested two Pakistanis and one Afghan in Kabul as they were planning a suicide bombing. The Taliban were clearly facilitating Al-Qaeda’s attacks and it was perhaps inevitable that an Afghan would become a suicide bomber. On 27 January of the following year, Afghanistan experienced its first suicide bombing at the hands of a young indigenous Afghan. The bomber, described by the Taliban as Hafez Abdallah, from Khost, threw himself on an coalition jeep and detonated mortars strapped to his body. One day later, a suicide bomber described as a Palestinian drove an explosive-laden taxi into a British Land Rover. Finally, on 23 October 2004 a suicide bomber carrying grenades beneath his Afghan smock blew himself up next to an International Security Assistance Force patrol in Kabul.

Most Afghans refused to accept that the attacks were done by Afghans. But the Afghans’ certitude would soon be shattered as their kin and countrymen began to embrace suicide bombings en masse.

### **The ‘Iraq effect’: 2006-present**

By 2005, the number of attacks began to increase, even if Arabs seem to have carried out the initial wave. Most alarmingly, it became clear that indigenous Afghans and Pakistani Pashtuns had finally begun to participate in suicide bombings in real numbers. But few could have foreseen the horrors to come in the following year. From more than 140 bombings for the year 2006, the vast majority of these were carried out by Afghan or Pakistani Pashtuns. As hundreds of Afghans were killed or maimed by Taliban bombers, it became glaringly obvious that Pashtun had come to define *istihadiyeen* (suicide bombers) as martyrs for the faith. For a culture, even one like that of the Taliban that was not completely based in Pashtunwali, to embrace a practice that was previously considered a mortal sin was tantamount to devout Catholics suddenly accepting abortion.

But what inspired the Taliban to finally embrace this taboo tactic almost four years after the bloody overthrow of their regime? Officials from the Afghan National Directorate of Security and National Police were quick to point to two closely linked sources: Al-Qaeda and foreign fighters from Iraq. This is not surprising considering the centrality of suicide bombing to Al-Qaeda and the fact that Iraq-based terrorists were employing this tactic on a scale and with a lethality never seen before in the region.

UN sources interviewed for this study near the Pakistani frontier concurred and pointed to post-2003 Iraqi kill videos as the Taliban bombers’ inspiration. These videos, which feature gory beheadings, IED attacks on US troops, and images of suicide bombers hitting their targets, were readily available in Afghanistan’s Pa-

sh-tun regions. On the other side of the border, Pakistani officers also collected Arabic language jihad videos during their 2004/05 sweeps of this area. These videos soon had a local flair as Al-Qaeda’s Sahab Productions began producing Iraq-style jihad videos for Afghanistan such as *Pyre for the Americans in Afghanistan*. By September 2004, a Taliban internet site had even posted a video of a gruesome beheading of a ‘Crusader spy’ that appeared to imitate Abu Musab al-Zarqawi’s video-taped beheadings in Iraq.

As the Taliban adopted Iraqi tactics that were initially seen as unacceptably gruesome by Ayman al-Zawahiri, it did not take long for videos of suicide bombers hitting targets in Afghanistan to appear. While the initial videos featured Arabs engaging in suicide attacks, local Pashtuns soon began to star in these videos, which appeared on Taliban websites (the technophobic Taliban had actually banned the internet and videos in August 2001). The Taliban were clearly beginning to morph into a brutal, techno-savvy terrorist force under the influence of a particularly virulent form of terrorism emanating from Iraq.

But as the evidence mounted that Afghanistan was becoming the primary victim of spill over from the Iraqi insurgents’ cult of violence, US forces in Afghanistan officially downplayed any similarities between suicide bombings in Iraq and Afghanistan. US troops interviewed for this study were loath to admit that had anything more than a demonstrative effect on Afghanistan’s suicide bombers.

In May of 2006, US Lieutenant General Karl Eikenberry, commander of the Combined Coalition Forces in Afghanistan, claimed: “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.” In April, Eikenberry again claimed there was no evidence of any linkage between suicide bombers in the two theatres of action. Sources in the

media parroted the US military officials' agnostic approach who continued to claim they had "seen no direct evidence of links between the insurgents in Iraq and in Afghanistan". A Radio Free Europe report, for example, claimed: "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 neo-Taliban." But by the end of the year several journalists began to speak of direct Iraqi ties to the suicide bombing, IEDs and other foreign tactics appearing in Afghanistan.

Any discussion of the destabilising effect Iraq has had on Afghanistan, a country that was previously held up as a victory, is politically loaded. But Mullah Dadullah, the Taliban commander most responsible for deploying suicide bombers in Afghanistan, claimed the opposite in an Al Jazeera interview on May 2006.

**Mullah Dadullah:** "We like the Al-Qaeda organisation. We consider it a friendly and brotherly organisation, which shares our ideology and concepts. We have close ties and constant contacts with it. Our co-operation is ideal."

**Interviewer:** "Do you co-ordinate 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. We learn other types of operations from them as well. We have 'give and take' relations with the mujahideen of Iraq. We co-operate 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... 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:** "Yes. 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 centres here in Afghanistan and, as you know, they have their own centres 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."

Local commanders who served under Dadullah gave more specific accounts, which spoke of direct training for Taliban fighters who journeyed to the Sunni Triangle in Iraq. But the 'exchange programme' was not one way. A Pashtun source in Pakistan said this year: "Taliban insiders also claim that Arab and central Asian militants, who had earlier left Afghanistan to join compatriots fighting in Iraq, have now returned to resume the original struggle." Nawabzada Haji Lashkari, a tribal chieftain in Quetta said: "Dozens of Arabs have returned to Afghanistan to reinvigorate the militia's fight against coalition troops... Consequently, some of the training videos show Arab militants in Afghanistan demonstrating to new recruits how to make explosives." Further evidence of direct links comes from the governor of the western Afghan province of Nimroz who arrested an Iraqi Al-Qaeda team and announced: "They are linked to Al-Qaeda and fought against US forces in Iraq. They have been ordered to come here. Many are suicide attackers." Iraq's terrorists provided the catalyst for suicide bombing in Afghanistan in both the demonstrative sense and in the shape of 'hands on' training. The gradual passing off of suicide bombing tasking from Al-Qaeda to indigenous Pashtuns is perhaps indicative of the ultimate success of this direct 'train and equip programme'. The means whereby the Deobandi Taliban clerics subsequently legitimised this Al-Qaeda Iraqi tactic are still not clearly understood. But as early as November

2003, a Pakistani source warned: "In the special sessions [Taliban] militants will be told how to make suicide attacks and that suicide attacks are not forbidden in Islam." An addendum to the Taliban's 2006 *Layeha-Rule Book* legitimised suicide bombers' activities with quotes from the Quran. Mullah Dadullah was filmed giving passes to heaven for suicide bombers-in-waiting in Pakistan. Taliban leader Jalaludin Haqqani was even said to have given suicide bombers holy zamzam water from Mecca to cleanse those who have doubts about the sinful nature of suicide.

## The future?

Carl Robichaud notes: "Suicide bombings, like other tactics, are spread by importation and demonstration." In the case of Afghanistan, Al-Qaeda terrorists who previously taught the indigenous Iraqis suicide bombing clearly played a key role in importing this tactic both in person and through their videos. Taliban who traveled to train with Iraqi insurgents further cemented this exchange of ideas. The results were proudly announced by an Al-Qaeda website: "While suicide attacks were not accepted in the Afghani culture in the past, they have now become a regular phenomenon!"

The local Pashtun insurgents of the 1980s who 'lived to fight another day' seem to have embraced a cult of death spawned in Iraq that places greater emphasis on dying to kill others. Just prior to his recent death Mullah Dadullah let it be known that he was all too aware of the importance of this development when he predicted "The Americans have sown a seed. They will reap the crop for quite a long time." ■

## Further Analysis

■ **Fourth generation warfare and the international jihad**

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