



NightWatch
8 June 2008

Special Report: April and May in Afghanistan

Summary: Clashes in April and May surged consistent with spring offensives by both the Allied forces and the Taliban. In late March, the Taliban posted to the Internet the name of their offensive, called Operation **Ebrat**, or The Lesson, and a few of its features. They appear to be loosely following those guidelines in that they have expanded into new areas and attempted new tactics against US and Allied forces.

The number of clashes in the **NightWatch** sample for May is the highest since 2001. The number of districts affected by Taliban or Allied violence was also the highest since 2001. Over 80 percent of the fighting was confined to the 13 core provinces of the insurgency. That effect appears to have been the result in part of more concentrated Allied offensive operations in the Pashtun heartland. The assassination attempt against President Karzai during a military celebration was the most sensational act of violence all year.

There is some change in the pattern of the fighting. The fight remains primarily a Pashtun tribal insurrection, but it slowly is spreading to Kabul and its surrounding provinces. For the first time Kabul City is one of the most violent districts in Afghanistan.

Outlook

The numbers indicate the insurgency is on a path to be at least as bad as last year. Part of the increase in fighting is attributable to Allied offensive operations, but, as in the past, their effect is to uncover the depth and extent of the insurgency more than to make permanent improvements in security. The Taliban appear to have recovered from the huge losses they sustained last year. Ammunition, supplies, manpower and popular support are not limiting factors. If the Taliban can sustain the level of fighting in April and May, 2008 will be far worse than 2007.

NightWatch expected the Taliban to attempt to seize Kandahar City before now. The severe winter and the political instability in Pakistan favored the Allies; no attack took place. They still appear to have that as a goal, but cannot achieve it as long as Allied airpower is available and dependable. The government in Kabul cannot survive without Western military power. That dependency will deepen if the Taliban offensive continues as it has to date.

Operation Ebrat (The Lesson)

The late March web posting about the Taliban spring offensive was boastful, as usual, but made two points. It promised that the Taliban would attack in areas where Allied forces were not present. It also promised to teach Western forces a lesson.

Several analytical exposes from Pakistani analysts amplified the meaning of the posting. They disclosed that retired Pakistani military officers, including some senior officers, recently have begun advising the Taliban. They also said "the lesson" was that the Taliban would attempt to use Vietnamese tactics to try to isolate a US outpost and capture its soldiers.

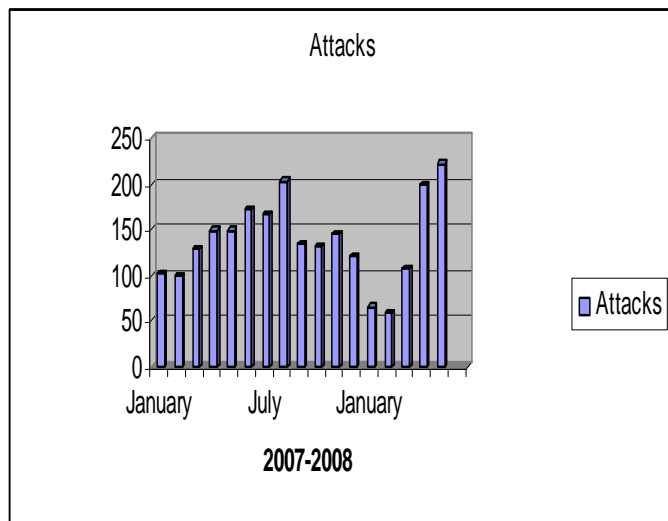
The fighting data in April and May shows no broad offensive featuring the tactics mentioned in the web posting. On the other hand, some local fights are consistent with it. For example, the persistent Taliban operations in the Sabari District of Khost Province look like an effort to capture a joint US and Afghan outpost there. Aside from a significant effort to use improvised bombs to isolate the outpost by ground, the Taliban have engaged in at least two coordinated tactical operations to ring the area. In one of them, five attacks were mounted in separate regions simultaneously. The attackers were no match for Allied technology, but they showed a level of coordination the Taliban have not displayed since before they were driven from Kandahar.

Operation Ebrat also seems related to an increase in direct fire attacks as well as a slight increase in May in attempts to seize remote districts in the core provinces. The overrun of Rashidan district in Ghazni Province was an example of the whipsaw tactic of forcing Allied forces to fight in areas that have no strategic value, are difficult to reach and cannot be secured if the Taliban chose to return. There are several other examples.

Finally, a comparison of attacks in April with those in May shows that the Taliban concentrated their fights against different districts in May from those attacked in April. Last year there was more consistency over time in pressure against districts. It is too soon to consider this a trend, but it is also consistent with Operation Ebrat.

Monthly Fighting Trends

The two graphics below depict the trend of fighting by month and enable a comparison with last year. The total number of clashes in the first five months of 2007 and 2008 are not significantly different. By this time last year, in the *NightWatch* sample, there were 628 clashes compared to 654 this year. The ramp up to the offensive last year was more gradual and delayed a bit by the death of a key commander. This year the ramp up is steep and obvious.



Month 2007	Clashes with casualties
January	102
February	100
March	128
April	149
May	149
June	160
July	172
August	203
September	132
October	134
November	140
December	120
Total 2007	1702

Month 2008	Clashes with Casualties
January	66
February	60
March	107
April	199
May	222
Total	654

Analysis of the Provinces

The core area of the insurgency has not changed. Last year between 19 and 26 of the 34 provinces experienced clashes each month. This year between 16 and 25 provinces are under stress.

In 2007 cumulatively, only two provinces experienced no clashes or bomb attacks: Bamyan and Panjshir. Bamyan's population is Asiatic and Shiite and fiercely hostile to the Sunni Pashtuns. The

Panjshiris are Sunni but also are hostile to the Pashtuns. This year, Panjshir, Daykundi and Samangan Provinces have not reported Taliban attacks. Bamyan has had one clash.

The chart below lists the provinces that had the worst security conditions in 2007 and tracks them in 2008. The yellow highlight indicates that security conditions deteriorated in 2008 in that clashes are more frequent than the 2007 average, especially in April and May for all nine. The green highlight shows three provinces in which the frequency of clashes fell below the 2007 average.

Nangarhar, Paktika and Oruzgan could be good news stories for the Karzai government, but in Afghanistan the absence of violence sometimes means the insurgents are in complete control. That is not the case in Nangarhar, but it could be in both Zabol and Oruzgan. The increase in violence in Kandahar, for example, suggests that Oruzgan is the base area from which this threat is developing, plus Pakistan of course.

With this Special Report, *NightWatch* has added Farah Province to the core provinces of the insurgency. For most of 2007 Farah was shown below the total in the chart below because it was a Taliban expansion area. The sustained level of fighting since last spring justifies adding it to the core group.

Oruzgan remains listed below the core group because the level of combat subsided. As noted above, the significance is not clear, but it has been a traditional Taliban base area, just north of Kandahar. Taliban fighters from Oruzgan came within a few miles of attacking Kandahar last fall. Consequently, the low level of clashes most likely means the Taliban dominate the province and that the Allied forces have pursued higher priorities – such as Helmand Province. Kandahar City remains in significant danger.

The Provinces with Worst Security Conditions

Province	Total 2007	2007 Average Clashes	January Clashes	February Clashes	March Clashes	April Clashes	May Clashes	Total 2008
Ghazni	163	Attack every three days	1	1	7	34	31	74
Helmand	281	Attack every 32 hours	11	14	17	17	30	89
Kabul	57	Attack once a week	5	1	2	7	11	26
Kandahar	199	Attack ever other day	10	9	13	34	21	87
Khost	104	Attack every four days	8	7	9	18	14	56
Konar	85	Attack every five days	1	5	3	4	23	36
Lowgar	34	Attack every 10 days	2	1	1	9	10	23
Nangarhar	80	Attack every five days	3	0	1	2	9	15
Paktika	94	Attack every four days	0	1	0	2	6	9
Paktia	93	Attack every four days	1	0	1	13	20	35
Zabol		Attack every four days	3	2	8	13	6	32
Farah	86	Attack every four days	7	4	5	3	10	28
Total	1370 (80% of 2007 total)	114 per month	52 (78% of Jan total)	45 (75% of Feb total)	67 (62% of Mar total)	156 (78% of Apr total)	191 (86% of May total)	510 (96/month; 77% of 2008 total)

Oruzgan	71	Attack every six days	3	7	5	5	0	21
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In studying the data, the periodicity of attacks is a key indicator of the Taliban's capabilities in any province. None show the local Taliban have the ability to attack multiple times per day in any province. That is an important threshold. One attack per day or one every few days in a province are manageable at current force levels.

The most significant data on the above chart is the portion of clashes in the above listed provinces as a per cent of all clashes. These percentages are shown in parentheses in the **Total** row. A high percentage, such as 86% in May, indicates a concentration of fighting in a limited number of provinces. A low percentage, such as 62% in March, indicates clashes that month spread outside the core provinces which are all have predominately Pashtun populations.

The chart shows a concentration of clashes in the core provinces, compared to March. This is almost certainly the result of the Allied offensive. The provinces at greatest risk in the past 60 days are Ghazni where fighting occurred in half its districts, much of it along the Ring Road; in Kandahar where fighting has occurred in three-fourths of its districts and, curiously, in Helmand where fighting has occurred in 9 of its 13 districts. In Khost, Konar, Paktia, Maydan Wardak and Zabol half of the districts experienced clashes as well. This signifies in the Taliban remains as strong in these provinces as it was at the end of last year's offensive.

In the instability theory, insurgents succeed when they overrun the capital, thereby converting insurgency into revolution. Thus, instability is centripetal. When the Taliban reached Kabul and the government and its army collapsed in 1996, they took charge.

An increase in attacks in and around Kabul is particularly noteworthy because it indicates a physical and psychological worsening of the security situation. For the second time in two years, in May Kabul was one of the regions under the greatest stress. Moreover, there is a slow increase in the numbers of attacks and the area of fighting in the provinces directly bordering Kabul. Kabul is becoming slowly encircled.

Analysis of the Districts

The numbers of districts under stress in May reached 106 of the 398 administrative districts, a quarter of the total. That is the highest number on record.

One of the key indicators of the health of a government is whether it can hold the line on the spread of instability. Healthy systems deliver government services to a predictable set of administrative entities with a predictable frequency and volume. Unstable systems attempt to determine a quality, quantity and frequency of services that they can sustain over an expanse of national territory in the hope of recovering lost territory and functionality.

The spread of combat operations to new areas, then, measures the failure of the government to find that stable line it reliably can hold. Thus far the government in Kabul has been unable to define and defend such an area. The limit on the spread of insurgency seems to be primarily its Pashtun ethnic competition.

All the northern provinces which contain large Uzbek or Tajik populations also contain significant enclaves of Pashtuns as the result of past transmigration programs. Attacks in Konduz and other cities in the north signify that the local Pashtun population supports Pashtun fighting cells affiliated with the Taliban.

Fire fights, bombings, suicide attacks or Taliban arson of girls' schools occurred in 106 districts. Attacks in non-Pashtun regions pose little serious threat in a military sense, but they expose the weakness of the government and overextend its forces and resources.

Districts and Clashes

Province	Total Districts	DISTRICTS					CLASHES				
		January	February	March	April	May	Clashes January	Clashes February	Clashes March	Clashes April	Clashes May
Badakhshan	28	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Badghis	7	0	0	2	1	0	0	0	4	2	3
Baghlan	15	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	2	2
Balkh	15	0	0	4	1	1	0	0	4	1	1
Bamiyan	7	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	0
Daykundi	9	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Farah	11	3	3	3	2	4	3	7	5	3	10
Faryab	14	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	1
Ghazni	19	1	1	2	10	10	1	1	7	34	31
Ghor	10	0	0	1	0	2	0	0	1	0	3
Helmand	13	4	6	6	9	9	11	14	17	17	30
Herat	16	3	2	4	3	1	3	4	7	8	1
Jowzjan	11	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	2	0	1
Kabul	15	2	1	1	3	5	5	1	2	7	11
Kandahar	16	5	6	4	9	12	10	9	13	34	21
Kapisa	7	1	1	2	2	1	1	1	3	4	1
Khost	13	4	4	8	8	7	8	7	9	18	14
Konar	15	1	4	2	3	9	1	5	3	4	23
Konduz	7	0	0	1	4	3	0	0	2	5	5
Laghman	5	1	1	1	2	4	2	1	1	3	4
Lowgar	7	2	1	1	5	3	2	1	1	9	10
Nangarhar	22	3	0	1	2	7	3	0	1	2	9
Nimruz	5	1	1	1	3	0	3	1	4	9	0
Nurestan	8	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	2	0
Oruzgan	5	4	2	3	2	0	7	4	5	5	0
Paktia	11	1	0	1	4	6	1	0	1	13	20
Paktika	19	0	1	0	2	5	0	1	0	2	6
Panjshir	7	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	9
Parwan	10	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	2
Samangan	7	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sar – e-Pol	7	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	2	0	0
Takhar	17	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	1

Wardak	9	1	0	2	1	5	1	0	3	0	6
Zabol	11	1	1	4	7	5	3	2	8	13	6

Comment on district-level security

The settlement patterns at the district level follow water and fields, market areas, historic seats of government and modern administration. For this reason, one attack per week in a prominent location creates a credible security problem. Most Taliban attacks occur once or twice a month in a large number of districts. They show presence and defy government authority but those cells lack the ability to hold ground. They are less capable than the Afghan police as a rule.

In about a dozen districts the Taliban show they dominate the area in the sense they can attack and move with impunity. In April there were eleven such districts. In May there were nine, but most were not the same as those in April. This shift in targeting seems related to Operation Ebrat.

NightWatch suspects that in some districts the Taliban run a shadow government, but that has not been established clearly in public information sources. That is the most important indicator of the loss of government control.

Casualties

The chart below shows the box score derived from official and press sources. Accurate casualty figures for non-NATO fighters are notoriously difficult to derive. The Taliban and Afghans exaggerate their achievements, and understate their own losses. The result is that when either side admits to losses those figures form a reliable minimum that has served as a rough gauge of the lethality of the clashes for the past two years. Levels of clashes and casualties should and do correspond in the data.

The casualty ratios

Ratios for overall casualties and for fatalities provide insight into the lethality of the clashes and the impact of modern western military equipment. **NightWatch** also tracks the changes in loss rates compared to the 2007 baseline data.

Using the reliable minimum technique, Taliban have lost at least 1042 men killed. The Allied forces including NATO and the Afghan Army and Police have lost 384, as reported in the public media.

Force	2007 KIA	2007 Per month	KILLED							% change	WOUNDED				
			Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	2008 Per month	2007 WIA		Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May
Taliban	6218	518	63	112	196	301	370	208	-60	452	13	3	23	70	51
NATO	249	21	14	7	19	14	22	16	-23	210	13	2	12	19	22
Afghan Army	249	21	3	7	8	4	15	7	-66	217	2	16	1	10	20
Afghan Police	780	65	32	22	34	124	51	53	-20	602	56	12	36	103	91
Civilians	1201	100	38	145	128	177	156	129	+29	894	30	146	163	188	154

Source: icasualties.org. for NATO forces -- Six delayed fatalities from wounds are not shown. All other casualties are from a daily compilation and evaluation of reports in the BBC, AFP, Pakistan and Afghan media and official sources.

The Killed-Wounded-Captured Casualty Ratio of Taliban to Allied forces is 1.5: 1. This means for every Allied soldier killed, wounded or kidnapped, the Allies kill, wound or arrest 1 or 2 Taliban. At the start of the spring 2007 offensive this ratio was 4:1. The closer this ration gets to 1:1 the more untenable becomes the Allied position because the number of Western forces in inelastic. The Taliban sustained over 7,000 casualties last year, but appear to have replaced them. Drawing on

a Pashtun population in Afghanistan of over 13 million, manpower is not a problem. They are backed up by over 25 million Pashtuns in Pakistan. This means that of the six main tactics for destroying an insurgency, killing all the Taliban fighters is not possible without an exponential increase in Allied, including Afghan, forces and resources. There are pro-government Pashtun groups, but thus far they have made no significant difference in the insurgency.

The Kill Ratio is 4: 1 thus far this year. This is an improvement from last year when it dropped to about 2:1 late in the year. Still, the Taliban losses are lower than at this time last year. At that time monthly fatalities ranged from 500 to nearly 1,000. They appear to be operating more cautiously compared to last year's spring and summer offensive. This is the best indicator that modern weapons are providing an advantage. When the kill ratios approach 1: 1 that means technology is no longer providing much of an advantage over soldier vs. tribal fighter in firefights.

The Afghan police continue to take the greatest number of losses because they are the presence of the government in every district. The job situation must be critical because the police keep replacing losses and returning to duty, even after their districts have been overrun and recaptured. The police are heavily disparaged, but they are the only Afghan government force fighting.

The Afghan Army continues to make no apparent contribution to the counterinsurgency. Most of its losses in April and May were from vehicles driving around and hitting bombs or unexploded ordnance, rather than from combat.

Deaths by nationality:	April	May	2008 to date.
US	5	16	42
Canada	1	1	10
Australia	1	0	1
UK	3	3	11
Poland	1	0	3
Netherlands	2	0	4
Italy	0	0	1
Denmark	0	0	5
Romania	0	0	1
Czech Republic	1	0	2
Lithuania	0	1	1
Estonia	0	1	1
Total	14	22	82

(Source: icasualties.org)

IEDs and Suicide Attacks

Use of locally made bombs surged as a weapon to limit mobility and inflict casualties on Western forces and Afghan forces and officers using vehicles. The 35 improvised bombs in April and 47 in May both exceeded the previous high of 32 in May 2007. Generally the Taliban bombs are ineffective in that they kill few people. Afghanistan has more unexploded Soviet ordnance than any country in the world, so the terror effect of road mines and explosives is not as great as it might be in other areas. There were three incidents of multiple children killed by UXO in May, not counted in the combat totals.

Suicide bomb attacks in April (13) and in May (14) are consistent with the two year pattern. Taliban bomb makers cannot seem to surge this threat in Afghanistan. However, these are the most effective terror attacks, measured by the numbers of killed and wounded. Still, many suicide bombers detonate themselves prematurely, killing themselves.

Forces Summary

In his valedictory comments, General McNeil repeated his theme that the Afghanistan effort is “under resourced.” The Taliban fighting cells stand up to Western forces, supported by gunships, but they can defeat any comparably sized Afghan force. Without the Western forces, the Karzai government could not survive.

The main weakness of the combat posture is that the Afghan police lack the capabilities to hold territory that has been cleared by the combat maneuver forces. Without reliable village defense forces, the Taliban can and do return after the combat forces move to the next objective. The French, British and American experience is that combat forces cannot maneuver and hold ground at the same time in a counter insurgency campaign. The village defense forces need to be expanded exponentially. The forces must be more than doubled to guarantee success.

Country	Forces of Order	Opposition	Forces of Order : Taliban ratio	Status
<i>Afghanistan</i>	162,400 total - 17,000 Coalition (includes 8,000 US) -52,900 ISAF/NATO (includes 23,550 US) -31,000 Afghan Army -61,500 Afghan Police	6,000 -8,000 Taliban fighters (unknown number of part time fighters)	20-27:1	Taliban can hold terrain against Afghan forces; Allies cannot prevent Taliban attacks and expansion into new areas. ISAF/NATO remain essential for government survival.

End of Special Report