

Taliban Summer Offensive Shows Increasing Capability

By Elizabeth Williams

The Taliban's annual summer offensive in Afghanistan in 2014 can be characterized by waves of violence across the country and, in particular, a string of attacks ringing the capital, Kabul. The attacks appear mainly to target Afghanistan's infrastructure, particularly its airports. Although the Taliban attempted to focus its efforts in June on the 2014 presidential election runoff, it was unsuccessful in derailing the elections or disrupting them to a notable degree. That period of concentrated effort lasted less than two weeks. While the Taliban mobilized again at the end of June, launching a large assault in Helmand province, the group carried out only a few attacks throughout the rest of the country. That trend has reversed, however, as July has witnessed a surge of violence in the southern, eastern, and northern regions of Afghanistan. This assessment looks at the groups likely involved in the violence and describes the spread and nature of the attacks in each of the country's Regional Commands (RCs).

Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and Haqqani Network

Although the Taliban has claimed responsibility for many of the summer attacks, it is probably not alone in perpetrating the violence, given its relationships with other militant organizations operating in different parts of the country. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), for example, frequently launches attacks in the north and occasionally east of Afghanistan. Likewise, the Haqqani Network has traditionally maintained a stronghold in eastern Afghanistan. The situation in eastern Afghanistan is made more complex by the presence of an [estimated 77,000](#) refugees fleeing from the Pakistani military's [ongoing operation in neighboring North Waziristan](#). Numerous reports indicate that Pakistan-based insurgents, such as the North Waziristan-based Haqqani Network and fighters from the Pakistani Taliban and IMU have also moved to eastern Afghanistan to escape the Pakistani offensive. The increased presence of militants raises additional security concerns for stability in eastern Afghanistan.

As evidenced in our [March 2012 report](#), the Haqqani Network is active in Khost, Paktia, and Paktika provinces, also known as Loya Paktia. They also operate in Nangarhar, Laghman, and Kapisa provinces, and have staged "spectacular attacks" in Kabul province as well. The Network's de facto leader, Sirajuddin Haqqani, is one of the most competent, dangerous, and well-financed leaders operating in the country. The Haqqani Network effectively organizes and sustains a rigorous training regimen for its fighters and for those of other affiliated groups in the region, such as the IMU.

ISW has previously [assessed](#) that, since 2009, the IMU has had an increasingly destabilizing effect in northern Afghanistan, particularly in Baghlan, Kunduz, Takhar, and Balkh provinces. The IMU began as the Islamist opposition group in post-Soviet Uzbekistan, but [shifted](#) its focus from the Central Asian states to the Afghan North, specializing in "weapons trafficking and narcotics smuggling." The Haqqanis and the IMU have a mutually beneficial relationship in

which the Haqqani Network has provided the IMU sanctuary and training, and the IMU has [provided](#) fighters for the Haqqani Network in exchange.

RC SOUTH

Since June 23, there has been an uptick in Taliban-claimed violence in Helmand province. The Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) have responded by undertaking clearing operations throughout the province. Besides the Taliban's Helmand offensive, insurgents had launched and claimed a relatively small number of attacks throughout the rest of the country during the second half of June. However, on July 1, [reports](#) began to surface of significant fighting in southern Helmand province that caused a large number of Afghan families to flee. Helmand police chief Gen. Abdul Qayyum Baqizoy stated on July 1 that Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) had [driven](#) militants out of Helmand's districts and additional clearing operations were taking place to remove insurgents from remote areas. Local elders and civilians refuted those claims and reported the continued presence of militants in Sangin district. Afghan security forces in Helmand subsequently began preparing for a [counter-offensive](#) focusing on Sangin district. On July 5, Afghan Defense Minister Bismillah Khan Mohammadi met with Helmand local police commanders, officials, and tribal elders to discuss retaking parts of Sangin and other districts from insurgent control. On July 9, militants [stormed](#) security posts in Nawzad district of Helmand province; 18 militants were killed during clashes with Afghan security forces. Many militants originally fighting in Sangin had fled as a result of the counteroffensive to fight in Nawzad in the past days. On July 13, one civilian was killed and three militants wounded when gunmen [attacked](#) a passenger bus on the Helmand-Kandahar highway in Helmand province. ANSF and the National Directorate of Security (NDS), Afghanistan's intelligence agency, conducted a series of security operations on July 15 in Sangin district of Helmand province, and successfully [seized](#) 60 roadside bombs. However, militants [attacked](#) a police check post in Marja district of Helmand province the next day, resulting in 14 militants killed and eight militants wounded during the clash. These events illustrate the ability of Taliban militants to concentrate in fairly large tactical elements, illustrating a freedom of movement and ability to mass that had been rare since the U.S. Marines and ANSF cleared the province in 2009-2011. International Security Assistance Force (ISAF)-provided precision intelligence and targeting had historically made such concentrations of enemy forces unwise; the ability for the Taliban to concentrate in Helmand shows the effect of reduced ISAF presence in theater. Nevertheless, the ANSF ultimately engaged in a counteroffensive. It is too soon to judge whether their operations will have lasting effects.

Violence has also been significant in neighboring Kandahar province. On July 4, a [Taliban](#) militant [drove](#) his explosives-laden car into an ISAF convoy, killing only himself, on the Herat-Kandahar highway in Zhari district of Kandahar province. Three days later, security forces were able to [prevent](#) an attack on Kandahar airport when two of three militants planning to fire rockets at the airport were wounded by an ISAF airstrike. On July 9, 11 militants [attacked](#) the governor's office and police headquarters in Kandahar district of Kandahar province. Two of the attackers used suicide vests (SVESTs) and twenty others exchanged fire with security forces. The attack resulted in 43 casualties, including militants, civilians, and policemen.

Much of the violence, especially in Helmand province, can be attributed to the recent [withdrawal](#) in May of U.S. Marine Forward Operating Bases in Sangin district. The loss of the bases and associated military capabilities has tested the ability of the ANSF and presented the Taliban with a window of opportunity to fill the security vacuum in the south.

RC EAST

The east, like other parts of the country, experienced a lull in violence in the latter half of June; the lull was broken on July 2 when eight Afghan National Army (ANA) Air Force personnel were killed and 13 others were wounded when a suicide bomber [detonated](#) his explosives as troops were boarding a bus in the vicinity of Kabul district. The Taliban struck again in Kabul the next day, July 3, when two Taliban-fired rockets [hit](#) the northern part of Kabul airport, [damaging](#) air force hangars and helicopters. The rockets were reportedly fired from Deh Sabz district of Kabul province, but no casualties were reported. The Taliban also claimed responsibility for [torching](#) 200 oil tankers in Paghman district of Kabul province on July 5. According to press [reports](#), insurgent rocket fire may have started a blaze that destroyed between 200 and 400 tankers. The Taliban continued to [attack](#) in the vicinity of military installations on July 5, killing one civilian via an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) on the Kabul-Jalalabad road in the vicinity of Camp Phoenix in Kabul district. No officials from the camp were injured. On July 10, one policeman was killed and another wounded by a magnetic bomb [planted](#) on a police vehicle in Kabul city of Kabul province. On July 15, two employees of President Hamid Karzai's media office were killed and five others [wounded](#) by a remote control bomb in Kabul City. The next day, in Kabul on July 16, unidentified militants [fired](#) two rockets at Kabul International Airport but, like the attack on July 3, this attack caused no casualties or damage. This was the second attack in less than two weeks that included two rockets fired on Kabul International Airport. Taliban militants attacked Kabul International Airport for a third time the next day. The militants [fired](#) rockets and engaged in a gun battle with Afghan security forces which resulted in six Taliban militants being killed. This attack was the third on the airport in two weeks.

Adjacent to Kabul province, Taliban militants claimed responsibility for a [rocket attack](#) on Bagram Airfield in Parwan province, on July 5. Two rockets caused minor damage to equipment and one building, but caused no casualties among ISAF troops and had "no effect on operational activity," ISAF officials [claimed](#). On July 8, an SVEST attack in front of a medical clinic in Bagram district of Parwan province [killed](#) four ISAF soldiers from the Czech Republic, two Afghan Local Police (ALP) members, and ten civilians, and also wounded eight civilians. The clinic, located in the Qalandarkhil area, is in the vicinity of Bagram Airbase. On July 16, militants [attacked](#) an aid organization in Bagram district, resulting in two militants being wounded and one civilian wounded.

Just northeast of Kabul province, the Taliban [claimed](#) to have taken control of the Askin valley of Alasay district in Kapisa province on July 6, following 12 days of clashes with local residents and police forces. On July 8, one civilian was killed and two others wounded when their houses were [torched](#) in Alasay district of Kapisa province. Kapisa's governor and locals [blamed](#) militants from the Pakistani Taliban for the attack.

South of Kabul, in Orgun district of Paktika province, one police chief was [killed](#), four ALP members wounded, and four civilians wounded in a suicide vehicle-borne IED (SVBIED) attack at a police checkpoint on July 10. Five days later in the same district, a suicide bomber [drove](#) his explosives-packed car into a crowded market in Orgun district on July 15. The blast left 42 civilians dead and up to 67 civilians wounded. The Taliban have denied responsibility for the market explosion, and their spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahid, [stated](#) that Taliban fighters “do not conduct such attacks and such attacks do not bring any benefit to them.” The SVBIED attacks are more likely the hallmark of elements linked to the Haqqani Network. On July 17, four Presidential Protection Service (PPS) guards were [wounded](#) during an ambush on the security convoy for President Hamid Karzai in Zurmat district of Paktia province. The Taliban claimed responsibility for the attack against the convoy as it made its way to Orgun district in Paktika province; Karzai was not in the convoy.

East of Kabul, on July 12, two civilians were [killed](#), one civilian wounded, and one ANA soldier wounded during an SVBIED attack on an ANA vehicle in Jalalabad district of Nangarhar province. Later that day, another SVBIED [targeted](#) a NATO convoy in Behsud district of Nangarhar province. The Taliban claimed responsibility for the attack, which wounded three NATO soldiers. On July 13, another SVBIED attack on a NATO convoy left two civilians [wounded](#) in Jalalabad district of Nangarhar province.

North of Nangarhar, on July 13, militants [raided](#) police and army checkpoints in Alingar district of Laghman province, resulting in six police officers killed, one ANSF soldier killed, and 15 militants killed. On July 15, militants [attacked](#) a security check post in Khost province killing 34 militants and eight border policemen, as well as wounding five policemen. Four days later, three militants were [killed](#) and one security personnel killed during clashes in Jalrez district of Wardak province, on July 19. On the same day in the same district, two civilians were [wounded](#) during indiscriminate shelling by militants.

The security situation in RC East has been the most concerning because of the trend of direct attacks on airports and airbases that have had a crippling effect on the efficiency of security operations in the region. The Taliban has attempted to isolate Kabul logistically through its many attacks on NATO and ANA convoys, as well as attacks on Kabul International Airport, which have [resulted](#) in temporary cessations to daily flight operations and have the potential to [curtail](#) flight operations further.

RC NORTH

In the north, three civilians were [killed](#) and ten others wounded in a bomb blast in Mazar-i-Sharif district of Balkh province on July 3. The Taliban and Afghan security forces [clashed](#) on July 7, after five civilians were killed and four others wounded by a Taliban rocket attack in Aliabad district of Kunduz province. On July 8, four militants, including commander Mullah Darwish, were killed and three militants [detained](#) after an Afghan Air Force air strike in Khanabad district of Kunduz province. West of Khanabad, five Taliban militants were killed, seven militants wounded, and five militants [detained](#) during a clearing operation in Chahar Dara district of Kunduz province, on July 9. Three militants, including a commander, were killed, one ALP officer wounded, and six militants wounded during a clash with security forces as militants [attacked](#) an ALP check post in Dasht-i-Archi district of Kunduz province, on July 16.

Moving west of the Kunduz region, 16 Taliban militants were killed, three policemen [killed](#), and three policemen wounded during clashes between militants and security forces with local residents in Qaisar and Kohistan districts of Faryab province. Four days later, on July 19, the Taliban [launched](#) another large offensive in Faryab province. Over 100 Taliban militants attacked Qaisar district on July 19, and clashes have continued between the Taliban and Afghan forces. Updated casualty numbers are now at 15 Taliban killed, 17 Taliban wounded, and 10 policemen killed. According to a security official, “a number of check posts have [fallen](#) to Taliban control.” The Afghan media outlet Pajhwok [reports](#) that the Taliban is in control of at least half of Shakh Bazaar, causing at least 2,000 residents to flee out of the area to the Khwaja Kanti area of Qaisar.

RC WEST

In contrast, RC West experienced comparatively little violence. On July 9, 300 Taliban militants launched another major offensive and took control over Chahar Sada district of remote Ghor province; however, Afghan security forces were able to [regain](#) control of the district the next day. This is one of the least densely populated provinces of Afghanistan, lacking significant cities and road networks. The concentration of Taliban there is therefore less significant than in more inhabited provinces.

Conclusion

The Taliban summer offensive of 2014 shows a freedom of movement and an ability to mass that had been rare during the surge of U.S. forces from 2009-2011. There was a relative lull in insurgent violence from the end of the presidential election runoff on June 14 through the end of the month; since July 1, there has been a noteworthy escalation in violence in certain parts of the country. Kabul was the focal point of election violence, received a break during the end of June, and became an enemy main effort again. Militants moved in towards the airport with more vigor and consistency than seen before. Attacks on airports nationwide are particularly notable, with five attacks occurring against Kabul International Airport, Kandahar airport, and Bagram Airfield from July 3 to July 17. The attacks have been sequential and widespread throughout all regional spheres of the country, hinting at close coordination between the prominent groups in their areas of operation. Insurgent violence in the east has been concentrated in the provincial capital, as well as the six surrounding provinces, creating a circle around the heart of the country, which illustrates the militants’ probable strategic goal of hitting Kabul hard when the opportunity presents itself.

Policymakers in the United States should note that militant groups in Afghanistan remain capable, organized, and lethal. As U.S. and NATO forces draw down, indicators of insurgents’ growing capability will include ability to mass in larger formations; freedom of maneuver closer to urban areas; ability to seize and maintain control of district centers; ability to displace families; abilities to target critical infrastructure repeatedly; and restrictions on the freedom of maneuver of the ANSF. These kinds of activities were hallmarks of the Taliban, Haqqani Network, and affiliated groups before the surge of forces and counterinsurgency campaign

accelerated in 2009-2010. These early indicators of rising militant capability relative to the ANSF and current configurations of ISAF troops have already appeared in the summer of 2014 and will likely escalate as further troop reductions transpire later in the year.