

The war of the long now

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The Iraq war's relegation to the inside pages of most newspapers and media outlets in the United States is part of a wider decline in attention to areas where the country's political and military interests remain deeply involved. There has been little coverage, for example, of important events in Afghanistan and Pakistan in the first weeks of 2008 (see "[Iran and Pakistan: danger signals](#) [0]", 10 January 2008"). This relative neglect notwithstanding, a cluster of incidents in both countries signals deeper trends with long-term significance.

First, in Afghanistan, the attack on the [Serena Hotel](#) [1] in Kabul on 14 January, which killed eight staff and guests, represents an important escalation of existing tactics by the insurgents. The fact that the hotel was a heavily guarded base for senior expatriates did not prevent the attackers being able to [penetrate](#) [2] the heart of the building. True, actions against foreigners have become fairly common in Afghanistan, but this assault takes the Taliban campaign to a new pitch; it was also accompanied by threats from those responsible of further targeting of overseas personnel.

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Second, in Pakistan, a suicide-bomber [attacked](#) [3] a police checkpoint outside the high court in Lahore on 10 January, killing twenty-six people (most of them police officers) and wounding forty-seven. This has been accompanied by a series of lesser suicide-attacks across Pakistan, and - more ominously - by an outbreak of large-scale warfare at the Sararogha fort in South Waziristan, close to the Afghan border.

The fort, defended by a garrison of forty-two troops from the paramilitary Frontier Corps, eventually fell to a sustained [assault](#) [4] on the night of 15-16 January by as many as 400 insurgents. The scale and intensity of the attack - and especially the ability of the insurgents to operate in such large numbers - make it highly unusual (see Griff Witte & Imtiaz Ali, "[47 Killed as Insurgents Take Key Fort in NW Pakistan](#) [5]", *Washington Post*, 17 January 2008).

The Taliban-affiliated insurgency has also accelerated in more urbanised parts of Pakistan. The city closest to the Afghan border, Peshawar, has been averaging one suicide-bombing a week, and insurgents actually control areas in the city's outskirts (see Jane Perlez, "[Frontier insurgency spills into a Pakistani city](#) [6]", *International Herald Tribune*, 18 January 2008).

The increasing capacity of insurgents to confront Pakistani security forces directly is in part the result of the loss of control of militant groups that Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) had previously exerted. The ISI has fostered radical Islamist militias for many years, including in the war against Soviet forces in Afghanistan in the 1980s and in the decades-long Kashmir dispute with India. In recent years, many of the paramilitary groups have gone their own way, using the knowledge and training gained through the ISI to present a threat to the Pakistani state itself

(see Carlotta Gall & David Rohde, "Militant groups slip from Pakistan's control [7]", *International Herald Tribune*, 15 January 2008).

The war's fallout

This upsurge in violence on both sides of the border has come at a time when the Pentagon has been openly frustrated at what is seen as a lack of resolve in Nato's commitment to Afghanistan (see "The Pakistan-Afghanistan abyss [8]", 4 January 2008). In an unusually frank comment, United States defence secretary Robert Gates implied that some of the key countries operating in Afghanistan - including Britain, Canada [9] and the Netherlands - were simply unskilled in counterinsurgency (see "Gates faults NATO force in southern Afghanistan [10]", *Los Angeles Times*, 16 January 2008).

Paul Rogers's most recent book is *Why We're Losing the War on Terror* [8] (Polity, 2007) - an analysis of the strategic misjudgments of the post-9/11 and why a new security paradigm is needed

This wounding criticism of some of the US's strongest allies was reinforced by claims from a number of Pentagon sources that US forces in Afghanistan have been both more effective militarily and more scrupulous about using their firepower advantages in order to avoid civilian casualties. The resentment of the allies was clear: other Nato sources were quick to point out that British, Dutch and Canadian troops have been operating in the centres of renewed Taliban activity, and that the Canadian [11]s (for example) have suffered casualties proportionally higher than the Americans' in Afghanistan or even Iraq. Moreover, some of the worst examples [12] of "collateral damage" - civilian deaths - have come from American air-strikes,

These internal alliance tensions arise largely from a recognition that the nature of the Taliban revival in Afghanistan, and of its close associates in western Pakistan, is changing in a very significant manner. The militias on both sides of the border have in the past frequently worked closely with al-Qaida operatives, but their focus has been almost entirely territorial: on an attempt to promote a radical Islamist politics in their own areas, rather than relating their activities to the wider global vision that underpins the al-Qaida movement.

This is now changing. The shift is reflected especially in southeastern Afghanistan, where a more globalist outlook is taking root (this is analysed by Antonio Giustozzi in *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan* [13] [C Hurst, 2007]; see also "The resurgence of the neo-Taliban [13]", 14 December 2007). This change of perspective could aid the al-Qaida movement - now working hard to undercut Pakistani government attempts to conclude deals with individual Taliban leaders.

Such deals are in any case less likely to succeed insofar as the vision of the Taliban's militants comes to transcend their immediate circumstances. As a result, the al-Qaida movement is developing a degree of self-confidence that is now at a higher level than at any time since the original termination of the Taliban regime in November 2001 (see Syed Saleem Shahzad, "The Rise and Rise of al-Qaida [14]", *Asia Times*, 17 January 2008).

The long view

The United States response to its continuing strategic dilemma in the region includes the confirmation that an additional force of 3,200 marines is to be deployed to Afghanistan between by April 2008, with the new units likely to work alongside British and Canadian troops. The Pentagon still holds the view that heavier military action is the best way to win the Afghanistan war; for its part, al-Qaida movement is more likely be heartened by such an approach and use it in its extensive and sophisticated propaganda.

US forces form the majority of the approximately 175,000 foreign troops in Iraq and the 40,000 in Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates. The deployment of more marines in Afghanistan will take the overall numbers there to over 55,000. If the many thousands of private-security forces in Iraq, Afghanistan and across the region is added to the total, it appears that well over 300,000 foreign forces - mostly from what global jihadists [15] call the "far enemy", the United States - are implanted in the core of the Islamic world.

Before 9/11, the western Gulf states hosted probably no more than 30,000 foreign military troops, including the 4,500 that were then based in Saudi Arabia. Thus, the result of George W Bush's response to the 9/11 atrocities is a tenfold increase in "crusader" forces in the region. For the al-Qaida movement this is a positive outcome - ideal in propaganda terms because of the movement's project to represent itself as the resolute defender of Islam.

The impact of the United States surge in Iraq on the containment of the worst of the violence is being represented [16] in neo-conservative circles in Washington as a sign of success. The provisional and qualified nature of current trends in Iraq needs to be emphasised, but equally important is that al-Qaida's worldview is measured in decades not years. From its perspective, the more important development in Iraq has been the US's massively increased use of airpower.

Coalition aircraft carried out more than five times as many air-strikes in Iraq in 2007 as they did in 2006. Two recent incidents indicate their scale: US forces dropped 16,500 lb of bombs in operations north of Baghdad and - in an extraordinary burst of air power - deployed B1B strategic bombers and F-16 strike-aircraft to drop 40,000 lb of bombs in ten minutes in an operation southeast of the capital (see Josh White, "U.S. Boosts Its Use of Airstrikes in Iraq [17]", *Washington Post*, 17 January 2008).

These are not, if Iraqi defence circles are to be believed, short-term operations only. On 14 January, the Iraqi defence minister Abdul Qadir said that Iraq would require US forces in the country for the next ten years. His views, expressed during a week-long visit to Washington, were more pessimistic than a year ago, yet caused no surprise in the Pentagon (see Thom Shanker, "Iraq Defense Minister Sees Need for U.S. Security Help Until 2018 [18]", 15 January 2008). This more sober judgment is echoed by the chief US military commander in Iraq, David H Petraeus [19], who says in an interview that "[We] should be realistic at this point, and the reality of Iraq is that it's very hard" ("The Reality is Very Hard [20]", *Newsweek*, 14 January 2008).

The power, money and glamour that surrounds the presidential election in the United States means that much of the media's energies in 2008 will be fixed on that great event. In a lower key, some informed circles in London and Washington are concerned about a further phase in the development of the global *jihad* in Afghanistan and Pakistan in a manner that both exceeds the influence of the al-Qaida movement yet effectively strengthens it. There is too an evolving interest of intellectual, defence and security circles with the "radicalisation" that radiates beyond the region to affect circles of sympathisers in the west (see, for example, the founding conference of the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence [22] [ICSR] on 18-19 January 2008).

In addition to his weekly **openDemocracy** column, Paul Rogers writes an international security monthly briefing for the Oxford Research Group; for details, click [here](#) [21]

The undiminished willingness of the United States to deploy immense immense firepower to achieve its military aims, backed by an intent to maintain a large presence in Iraq and Afghanistan for years to come, may be of little current interest to those whose attention is fixed on the details of the US election. But the disaster that is the war on terror is not going away.

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