



356

OCTOBER
2015

THE TALIBAN ARE BACK IN KUNDUZ

Dr. Emma Hooper, Associate Senior Researcher CIDOB

It did not last long. The Taliban capture of Kunduz, on Monday September 28, symbolic as the last city lost by them in 2001, is certainly a propaganda coup. Despite the fact that it was taken in a day and appears to have been at least partly recaptured by government forces, supported by US air power, by the end of the same week, it shows that the fighting Taliban are indeed back. Their inability to hold the city is almost an irrelevance, and in fact, that may never have been their primary aim.

Occurring on the anniversary of President Ashraf Ghani's inauguration of the national unity government, the fall of Kunduz will also draw international attention back again to Afghanistan, which has recently taken a back seat to the seemingly more urgent issues of Syria and IS.

But even though it was a shocking victory, it did not happen overnight. In fact, rather like the "sudden" appearance of Da'esh (the so-called Islamic State) in Iraq and Syria, this is a situation that has been brewing for some time. The attack on Kunduz is actually the culmination of months of intense fighting that began in April, when the Taliban opened up new fronts to take territory in the north, and instability in this northern province rose. And the ground preparations began some two years before that. In 2013, the Taliban took advantage of the pullout of US troops from Kunduz province, together with growing popular disaffection with the national unity government, and began the gradual encirclement of Kunduz with province-wide attacks.

The speed with which the city fell leaves some wondering about the potential involvement (or at least, turning a blind eye) by high level government officials. Given the growing apathy of the police and Afghan security forces, across large parts of the country, particularly in the north. The white flags of the Taliban were flown over the city. The intelligence service headquarters were captured, UN buildings set on fire, and prisoners were released from jails, as government officials and the NGO community fled the city in apparent surprise. Rumours float around that the Taliban infiltrated the security structure and started the operation from within the city, using foreign fighters who had slipped in unnoticed. According to security sources in and outside the Afghan government, the Taliban have also seized two surrounding districts to Kunduz -one of them,

Imam Sahib, is one of the richest in the province- and they now hold five of the seven provincial district centres. Kunduz may have been recaptured by the government, but the muscle-flexing remains firmly in place for the present.

There have been problems for the Afghan government in exerting its authority in Kunduz ever since the withdrawal of Western troops in 2013. The main pockets of anti-Taliban resistance in the province are from former commanders of the Northern Alliance, some of whom, together with their private militias, have been accused of human rights violations, resulting in popular resentment against the national unity government, and even in some cases, sympathy for the insurgents. The complex web of ethnic, tribal and clan alliances – and disputes - common to all of Afghanistan plays out with particular tension in Kunduz. And the Taliban have played this differently from the old days. They have obtained support from ethnic Uzbeks, Tajiks, and even Turkmens. Furthermore, in Kunduz province, different political backers support different ex-commanders of the Northern Alliance and the resulting tensions between them have resulted in a “zero sum” situation where competing factions did not want to see one militia strengthened at the expense of others. And the overall outcome of these tensions is a weakened national government.

The propaganda value of the seizure of the city is as already stated, tremendous, and will negatively impact the nascent peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government. But it was always unlikely that the Taliban’s aim was to hold the city, recognising that this is beyond their capabilities at present. Instead, their motivation is more likely to have been getting back on the map, be looting weapons, cash and vehicles, negating the attempts at peace talks, and securing a propaganda victory, much more than consolidating the seizure into a permanent gain. The Taliban need money to finance their operations, and the gains from Kunduz are financial as well as image-creation. The city is located in northern Afghanistan along key smuggling routes. It is the capital of one of the country’s wealthiest provinces (also called Kunduz), situated at a strategically and economically important trade route near the border with Tajikistan. It also serves as a conduit for both drugs and weapons that move between the northern provinces of Afghanistan, and as a gateway into Tajikistan.

None the less, the symbolism of the date, the location, and the blow to the peace talks will be a test for the Afghan national security forces, and Ashraf Ghani’s government. Furthermore, the longer the Taliban and the Central Asian fighters that are reportedly among their number hold the city, the lower the prestige and morale of the government will sink. And the spin-off from that, should the situation continue for an extended period, would be the risk of a Mosul-like situation in Afghanistan.

The need to deploy Afghan national army troops from other areas of the country to concentrate on Kunduz will deplete the already somewhat tenuous security situation in the country. A Taliban that feels it can win on the battlefield is not conducive to restarting the stalled peace talks (in stasis following announcement of the death of Mullah Omar, the founder of the Taliban, in July 2015). Even when - (or if) - the government reclaim Kunduz, damage has definitely been done. Indeed, Bill Roggio, editor of the Long War Journal, notes that the fall of Kunduz would invalidate the entire US “surge” strategy of 2009-12, with its – with hindsight, misplaced – focus on the southern provinces of Helmand and Kandahar as key to defeating the Taliban, which meant little attention was paid to the north. Not surprisingly, the Taliban exerted considerable efforts to fight the army and the state there, and have gained ground in northern, central, eastern and southern Afghanistan over the past year.

However short or long the current Taliban rule over Kunduz turns out to be, it is clear that the task of convincing the Taliban that they can gain more through negotiations than by fighting will have been made even more difficult. The confidence they will have gained through openly occupying state territory is going to generate fallout, even though Kunduz unlikely to be retained. The exodus of youth from Afghanistan and the north in particular is likely to rise. Afghanistan's northern neighbours (Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Russia) are undoubtedly alarmed and may well react by seeking to strengthen ties with major power brokers and their militias across northern Afghanistan, in order to protect their own interests, thus further weakening the national government.