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Afghan Assaults Signal Evolution of a Militant Foe

By ERIC SCHMITT and ALISSA J. RUBIN

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Western military and intelligence officials acknowledged on Monday that they were surprised by the scale and sophistication of the synchronized attacks in [Afghanistan](#) on Sunday, seeing it as a troubling step in the evolution of the [Haqqani Taliban](#) network from a crime mob to a leading militant force.

Even as the Western officials praised the Afghan security forces' response and sought to play down the attacks' strategic impact, they privately agreed with the criticism by President [Hamid Karzai](#) on Monday. He said the assaults — involving dozens of attackers who crossed hundreds of miles to strike at seven different secured targets, all around 1:45 p.m. on Sunday — represented an “intelligence failure for us, and especially [NATO](#).”

The officials said the episode raised two pivotal questions: whether the militants now had the ability to mount such audacious assaults repeatedly, rather than just once every several months, and whether the Afghan government would be able to blunt such plots after 2014, the deadline for Western troop withdrawal, when its access to allied intelligence assistance would be limited.

“It certainly seems there’s some kind of gap in intelligence collection or in sifting through the volume of what’s collected,” said John K. Wood, an associate professor at the National Defense

University who was senior director for Afghanistan on the National Security Council in the Bush and Obama administrations, and who just visited Kabul.

For the Haqqani network, a [family of border criminals and smugglers](#) that has gained an astonishing notoriety in recent years as a leading killer of allied troops in Afghanistan, the attacks on Sunday represented more than just the ability to paralyze the mostly tightly secured districts of Kabul for hours. They were proof that the Taliban offshoot could create the vast network of logistical support and planning needed to mount terrorist attacks without anything leaking to the intelligence groups so tightly focused on it.

American intelligence officials view the Haqqani network, which operates in Afghanistan and Pakistan, as a strategic asset of Pakistan's spy agency in the Afghan theater. At the same time, though, the Haqqanis are in league with the Pakistani Taliban, who are fighting the Pakistani Army, highlighting the bewildering web of alliances and plots that spans the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

While Afghan officials said they thought that Sunday's attacks originated in Pakistan, where Haqqani leaders are in hiding, American officials said that unlike in the group's prior attacks in Afghanistan, Pakistan did not serve as the launching pad. "Though the evidence leads us to believe that the Haqqani network was involved in this, it doesn't lead back into Pakistan at this time," Gen. Martin E. Dempsey, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told reporters in Washington.

Mr. Karzai laid the blame for the failure to detect the plots at the door of NATO, above all, but members of the Afghan Parliament were more inclined to point fingers at the National Directorate of Security, Afghanistan's intelligence agency. "There is a big question mark: How did they manage to bring all these weapons and all this ammunition and rockets and keep it here in the vicinity of the sensitive installation of Afghan government and international community?" said Fatima Aziz, a lawmaker from Kunduz and a member of the internal security committee.

NATO's main intelligence strength in the region is based on capturing and analyzing communications from cellphones and other electronic devices. The Afghans, with their cultural and linguistic advantage, provide a large network of informants. In reality, the work of the two are intertwined, said American and Western officials here, so it is of some concern that neither picked up on the imminent threat of multiple, simultaneous attacks in four different provinces.

While allowing that the shared intelligence was not perfect, NATO officials emphasized that there was nothing harder than pre-empting attacks, and said that “9 times out of 10,” the Afghans and their Western allies had prevented attacks that the public never learned about.

“There is no intelligence service that gets all the threats, but the enemy gets to choose the place and time,” said Lt. Col. Jimmie Cummings, a NATO spokesman in Kabul.

Colonel Cummings noted that Sunday’s attacks were the first major coordinated assaults in Afghanistan since Sept. 13, when men linked to the Haqqani network [struck at the American Embassy in Kabul](#) and the nearby NATO headquarters, ultimately to little effect.

A senior NATO official said there had been at least a few instances since then when NATO and Afghan forces, acting on intelligence, had intercepted, in or near Kabul, supplies and fighters who were preparing to carry out attacks. The official did not provide details and, as with several others interviewed for this article, spoke on the condition of anonymity in order to discuss classified intelligence.

Privately, however, American and Western officials were more blunt in their self-criticism, in an almost grudging respect for their foe. “It was not lost on anybody that these were very well-coordinated, well-timed attacks,” a senior American official said. A Western official added, “We had general indications that they were planning something in April, but nothing specific enough to actually act on.”

While it is true that it is all but impossible to intercept every terrorist attack, there was not one attack on Sunday, but at least seven — three in Kabul, two in Jalalabad, one in Paktia Province’s capital, Gardez, and another in Logar Province’s capital, Pul-e-Alam. There would have been dozens more people involved than just the assailants who struck on Sunday.

The nearly 40 fighters who took up positions in vacant buildings in strategic locations in the four provinces were the tip of the iceberg, while the bulk of the terrorist activity that made their attacks possible was hidden: the financiers, trainers, reconnaissance agents who chose the sites, logistics experts who arranged transport, and the weapons suppliers who provided what they needed for the attack.

“It’s always hard to stop small groups from doing things like this,” said Thomas Ruttig, the co-director of the [Afghanistan Analysts Network](#), a research institution in Kabul, who has studied the country since the 1990s.

“But that they cannot stop them in Jalalabad, Kabul, Paktia, and Logar — which are all focus areas for U.S. troops — that is very striking,” he said, adding that whereas there have been complex attacks before, he could not remember an instance when there had been simultaneous ones in several provinces.

Still, Mr. Ruttig cautioned against overstating the episode’s significance: “At the same time, it doesn’t mean that the Taliban are capable of taking over Afghanistan. But it is a sign the Taliban are here.”

One troubling facet of the attacks, Western officials said, was that there was little indication that the Americans had picked up much cellphone or satellite phone chatter about it. Often the Americans, who have enormous listening capability, can pick up insurgent chatter and piece together enough information to work with Afghan intelligence services to disrupt the planning or actually detain the plotters.

One Western official suggested that perhaps the insurgents, and specifically leaders in the Haqqani network, were more aware of the danger of using electronic communications and were imposing more discipline in their ranks.

Speaking to reporters in Washington, Defense Secretary [Leon E. Panetta](#) warned of more violence as the Taliban’s spring offensive unfolds. “We’re going to continue to see suicide attacks,” Mr. Panetta said. “We’re going to continue to see efforts by them to try to undermine confidence in Afghanistan that we’re headed in the right direction.”

He added: “It hasn’t worked in the past. I don’t think it’ll work in the present.”