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Afghanistan: Marines' Mission Doomed to Failure

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Editor's Note: Just two weeks into July, the month is already the deadliest for NATO troops in Afghanistan. The high casualty count is at least partially the result of Operation Khanjar, the largest U.S. Marine Corps ground offensive in years. But NAM contributor Sonali Kolhatkar writes that NATO's modus operandi are doomed to failure.

The United States' new offensive into Afghanistan's troubled Helmand province provides a test case for achieving President Obama's stated goal: "to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan."

It is the first major push of its kind, relying on a massive ground presence of thousands of Marines rather than air strikes, which American strategists acknowledge have killed far too many civilians over the past two years. But while Operation Khanjar realizes Washington's increased desire to divert more "resources" into Afghanistan, it is unclear what, if anything, can be accomplished by this kind of brute force.

At the launch of the offensive, U.S. General Stanley McChrystal gave only the following explanation: that his intention is to "clear, hold and build" in Taliban strongholds like Helmand.

But what exactly does "clear" mean? If it means to kill, the U.S. Marines will have to distinguish between Taliban and non-Taliban Afghans to avoid more civilian casualties. This is a near-impossible task. The Taliban do not wear a uniform or carry membership cards. They carry weapons, but so do Afghan civilians, who do so to protect their families. In an effort to lower the embarrassing count of civilians killed (often greater than the numbers killed by the Taliban), McChrystal has ordered troops to cut short any pursuit of Taliban fighters if civilians are [at risk](#).

The U.S. troops have to play cautious -- they have everything to lose: their own lives and the

diminishing goodwill of the Afghan people. Unfortunately for the troops, Afghan civilian resentment, built up over the past several years, has not vaporized just because the U.S. military's rules of engagement have officially changed. The Marines are facing a Taliban force bolstered by the survivors of U.S. bombs and the loved ones of those killed. The Taliban's greatest advantage is their ability to move through a population increasingly sick of "death-by-occupation," leaving the U.S. troops with only two options: risk letting the Taliban escape, or kill the Taliban even if it means killing civilians in the process and violating the new rules. Both scenarios lead to a Taliban victory.

Perhaps by "clear," McChrystal means capture. But that raises more difficult questions: Where will they put the prisoners, and what sort of justice will be offered? Will the United States turn Bagram into a greater gulag than Guantanamo? Will they turn over those who survive their torture and interrogation to secret military tribunals? In releasing 90 percent of those imprisoned at Guantanamo without charge, the United States has already proved inept at distinguishing al Qaeda and Taliban members from ordinary civilians over the past eight years. Imprisoning and torturing innocent civilians has the same obvious effect as killing them: increased hostility and resentment toward the occupation.

Perhaps by "clear," McChrystal simply means pushing the Taliban out of the areas where they are operating into surrounding areas. Already there are reports that the Taliban have [escaped](#) the current offensive, simply retreating to the western and northern parts of the country and launching their own counter-operation: [Iron Net](#), intended to trap the U.S. forces. They have killed dozens of troops and civilians through roadside and suicide bombs in the past week alone. In response, the United States has reportedly fallen back on the discredited strategy of air raids to kill dozens of people they claim are "militants," but likely include civilians.

If the current strategy does result, intentionally or not, in displacing the problem into new areas, presumably more Marines will have to be deployed to those areas to repeat the cat-and-mouse game, and push the Taliban up against borders that they cannot infiltrate.

But Afghanistan is not a small country (it is comparable in size to Iraq) and by this logic, the United States is looking at a long-term blanket occupation of the country, something that ordinary Afghans have increasingly declared they do not want.

A [BBC-ABC News poll](#) conducted prior to the current ground offensive revealed that less than 50 percent of Afghans have a favorable opinion of the United States, down from 68 percent in 2005. (The poll also revealed an even greater dislike of the Taliban, meaning that Afghans tolerate the U.S. military only because they have no other options.)

The likelihood of American success in Afghanistan is at best dim and, at worst, heading inevitably toward a lose-lose situation. Given the impossibility of surgically identifying and killing a moving and elusive target, there are only two possible outcomes: killing a lot of civilians, or pushing the insurgency to the rest of the country, or both. After the Iraq debacle, are Americans ready for yet another unpopular occupation, protracted war and thousands of U.S. casualties?

Perhaps the name is apt: the United States' Operation Khanjar is named for an Arabic (not Afghan) dagger widely used in past centuries by fighters in the Gulf Arab region, in countries like Oman. But today, the Khanjar is largely a ceremonial weapon, a decorative objet d'art used to adorn walls but useless in a real fight. Like the Khanjar, the current U.S. strategy in Afghanistan, out-of-touch with reality, is more symbolic than practical.