Long-term thinking behind deadly Taliban restaurant attack

Twenty one civilians were killed after Taliban militants attacked a popular Lebanese restaurant in the Afghanistan capital of Kabul on January 19. The unprecedented magnitude of the tragedy, which included the deaths of an IMF official and four UN workers, prompted strong condemnation by the international community and generated substantial media speculation as to the causes and motives of the attack, ranging from local corruption, to false flags operations to foreign conspiracies. But these often self-comforting and self-fulfilling narratives amid a sea of conflicting details fail to grasp the more underlying processes at work. The attack should be understood within the context of strained US-Afghan talks over a continued US military commitment to the South Asian country beyond 2014. Any failure to reach a strategic security agreement and forge a long-term partnership will give the Taliban a serious advantage in a post-US Afghanistan.

The attack began when an insurgent blew himself up outside the “Taverna du Liban” restaurant’s entrance, killing several security guards. Two gunmen then proceeded inside and opened fire on patrons until additional security personnel were able to respond and kill the attackers. The MO of the raid was unusual in that it occurred in the early evening hours, a time when security personnel are usually on high alert, making it more difficult for militants to operate.

There is a tendency among many Afghans to buy into conspiracy theories, especially following surges in violence and other negative developments, such as reports about thriving opium production and widespread corruption, etc. Often it comes down to finding some deeper meaning behind the inability of the powerful United States to quell the ever-intensifying Taliban insurgency or solve other domestic social and economic problems.

It is easy to understand the frustrations over unmet expectations. Afghanistan has been wracked by conflict for over three decades and is currently witnessing not the first, but a second world superpower retreat after 12 years of fighting. Often too much is involved for most locals and foreigners to fully grasp the complexity of the problem. It is not surprising then that some Afghans have even alleged a US role in the recent terrorist attack in Kabul as a means to apply pressure on Karzai into signing the bilateral security agreement (BSA) with the US which would allow the US to maintain military footprint in the country beyond 2014. Aside from the apparent absurdity of such reasoning, it does reflect the collective anxiety among many Afghans over the future of their country if a security pact is not signed.

Other reports have emerged alleging that the recent tragedy was the result of the restaurant’s owner failing to pay-off local security services, which indirectly purchase “security guarantees” to keep such locales off a supposed Taliban “hit list”. In supporting this view, attention is drawn to massive delays in payment to Afghan security personnel, as reported in the New York Times on Jan. 12, even though payments were back on schedule weeks before the attack. And while most restaurants and hotels in the country function under some sort of security umbrella, the idea that such a sophisticated attack involving high profile targets was the result of a missed bribe comes off as far-fetched. The fact that the restaurant owner was himself killed while attempting to defend against the attackers weakens such speculation.

The attack has already had a seriously impact on the social landscape in Kabul. The vast majority of expats still residing in the city have been put under “lockdown” because of the security threat. Even those who still have limited
freedoms are refraining from venturing out to the plethora of restaurants, which have sprouted up over the last decade to cater to Kabul’s burgeoning community of foreign workers. Many consider the killings as the first major volley by the Taliban aimed at forcing foreigners out of the country in mass, with the ultimately aim to shutter ongoing development projects. While this view seems plausible since any substantial drawdown in foreign aid workers would negatively impact the heavily subsidized and bloated Afghan economy, and in turn destabilize the government, it is important to understand that most expats will be pulled out of the country anyway as the bulk of coalition forces are withdrawn by the end of 2014.

A residual US presence of possibly 10,000 troops, as the BSA may provide, is expected to focus primarily on combating terrorism in order to prevent the country from reverting back to an Al-Qaeda safe haven, one of Washington’s most repeated fears, and consistent justifications back home to continue prosecuting the so-called “war of necessity”. Such a force structure would be insufficient to ensure the stability required by a large expat community, even with accompanying private security contractors who themselves have been substantially curtailed in recent years. And while many foreign aid workers remain strongly committed to improving Afghan lives, their continued work is ultimately tied to the decisions of major international donors whose policies are dictated by Washington’s overarching strategic goals.

It is now clear that the combination of both hard and “soft power” applied by the US and its allies has failed to create a stable and well-governed country, one able to provide its own security needs. Some would argue that Washington’s ever-changing policies towards the country, ranging from counterterrorism to counterinsurgency, etc, along with the West’s flawed and ineffective distribution of development assistance has contributed to a more perilous situation than what existed prior to post 9-11 US involvement in Afghanistan.

By the mere act of surviving, the Taliban have not only become a more effective and battle-hardened fighting force. The militant jihadist movement has also gained unheard-of political legitimacy on the international level through the US pursuit of a political accommodation involving the central government. This delicate act of face-saving can be viewed as an attempt to withdraw with a semblance of dignity rather than get sucked into a deeper quagmire. This is a compromise that the American public has long been ready to make, as reflected in recent polls. The latest terrorist attack must be understood within the wider context of this exit strategy.

As with most terrorist attacks, the restaurant raid was carried out to achieve a political objective. In claiming responsibility, the Taliban openly announced that the attack was in response to local Afghan civilian deaths at the hands of NATO forces, a sensitive issue that has for years been a serious cause of tension between US government and the Karzai administration.

The Afghan government has already attempted to place constraints on US military operations to curtail such deaths. These include a ban on night raids by Special Forces and the need to obtain permission before conducting airstrikes. Karzai has sought to place additional limits on coalition forces within the framework of the BSA, including a provision depriving legal immunity to any remaining US troops in the country, something the US is strongly against.

In what may seem on the surface as nothing more than a deplorable “tit-for-tat” attack on a popular Kabul soft target, the Taliban are using the existing momentum behind deteriorating Kabul-Washington relations in order to sow further discord and frustrate US plans for a post 2014 foreign military presence in the country. This falls within classic guerrilla tactics aimed at winning without openly fighting a superior force.

Any immediate impact on the behavior or decisions of foreign workers in Afghanistan should be viewed within this larger and more strategic objective of shaping a post 2014 reality, one that will provide the Taliban with a significant security and political advantage. That said, more attacks of this nature will likely follow.

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