The insurgency in Afghanistan is undergoing a shift that many observers have labeled as ‘Iraqization’. Having lavished praise on the Iraqi insurgents’ ability to cause more ‘enemy’ casualties, Zabihullah Mujahed, a Taliban spokesperson (who is known to have been in contact with Al Qaeda’s liaison to the Iraqi insurgency Abdul Hadi al Iraqi prior to Al Iraqi’s arrest in 2006) recently announced that the Taliban are studying Iraqi insurgency tactics and have begun to deploy Iraqi insurgent strategies in Afghanistan. This comes after many references to the Iraqization of the insurgency in Afghanistan by international media and government officials around the world. There is increasing evidence of such a shift taking place beyond the overt statements of the insurgents and the government and coalition forces.

The insurgents in Afghanistan have suffered heavy casualties while fighting the international coalition and the Afghan National Army head on. For example in the course of Operation Medusa in September 2006 NATO claims to have killed over five hundred Taliban fighters. As a result the insurgents adapted their methods of attacks by concentrating more on softer targets rather than confronting militaries head on. The change in their choice of military hardware reflects this shift. Through use of suicide bombers, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), propaganda material and by assassinating local supporters of the central government the insurgents have intimidated the population and driven a greater wedge between the people and the government. People consider government installations and convoys as targets that could be attacked anytime by insurgents, so in remote districts and even major cities some people have begun to avoid...
interactions with government officials, establishments and even services in order to deter any danger to
themselves that they might invite by doing otherwise.

However, Afghanistan is clearly not Iraq: the international forces here are broadly accepted by the
local population as needed; the government clearly enjoys a higher level of legitimacy and control if
compared to Iraq; there is no sectarian strife and the country has made considerable political and social
progress since the overthrow of the draconian Taliban. That is not to say that the insurgents are not adapting
tactics and learning from Iraq. They are doing so very rapidly. The insurgency theater may begin to look like
Iraq as there seems to be a surge in the movements of insurgents back and forth between Iraq and
Afghanistan. The insurgents in Afghanistan have also updated some of their hardware and their tactics. This
is mostly inspired by Iraq; yet not necessarily a sign that the insurgency in Afghanistan is déjà vu.

Movements Back and Forth

Since late 2005 stories have surfaced about the movement, back and forth, of insurgents between Iraq
and Afghanistan. The Taliban claim to have sent commanders to train in Iraq—with Al Qaeda being the
major sponsor of such interactions.† Drugs and human traffickers operating along the Afghan-Iranian border
as well as Baluch extremists on both sides of the border are thought to be facilitating the connection between
the two insurgencies. Taliban commanders who claim to have traveled to Iraq have come back inspired by
the sophistication of the Iraqi insurgency. They have singled out the following activities for praise and have
proclaimed to replicate them in Afghanistan: the training of adolescents for suicide mission; roadside IEDs;
ambushes and the production of combat and propaganda videos that help raise funds for their operations.
Furthermore, reports suggest that Mustafa Ahmad Uthman also known as Abu al-Yazid was also in Iraq for
almost two years prior to becoming the ‘general leader’ of Al Qaeda in Afghanistan.

There has been a recent influx of foreign fighters—mainly Arab militants—into the insurgency in
Afghanistan. A Saudi citizen who was allegedly about to carry out a suicide attack on a high level
government official was arrested on July 3 2007 close to the Office of Administrative Affairs in Kabul. The
police have mentioned that he is part of a group of militants who have entered the city with the purpose of
carrying out suicide attacks. Many of these militants are believed to be disillusioned with the sectarian nature

of the insurgency in Iraq. Observers believe these Arab militants have been summoned by Al Qaeda back to Afghanistan because of the purity of cause Al Qaeda attaches to the insurgency in Afghanistan. Al Qaeda considers the insurgency in Afghanistan pure because in Afghanistan it is not Sunnis fighting Shias or vice versa, but insurgents fighting the government and its foreign backers.

It has also been argued by several analysts that these militants are moving away from Iraq and into Afghanistan because there is more room to maneuver due to the fact there are far fewer coalition soldiers stationed in Afghanistan when compared to Iraq. The insurgency in Iraq is a fusion of multiple actors many of whom are motivated by sectarian, ethnic and tribal interests as well as anti-occupational resistance. Consequently, the dogmatic ideological sermons of Al Qaeda have less appeal to them. Yet that is not the case in Afghanistan. The insurgency in Afghanistan is probably more closely aligned with the brand of ideology that Al Qaeda professes. The Taliban, Hizb-Islami Hekmatyar and Al Qaeda all share strict interpretations of Islam and have always rallied for creating Islamic governments that base their rule on their twisted understandings of the Shari’ia (Islamic jurisprudence). The local insurgency and Al Qaeda nexus in Afghanistan is a far more eminent possibility than in Iraq due to the ideological proximity as well a historic legacy of ties between the two. The current insurgent theater is actually a growing manifestation of such a nexus.

**Insurgent Tools and Tactics**

In Iraq insurgents have used IEDs to stop passing convoys of Humvees and trucks belonging to the coalition forces, which they have then ambushed with AK47 gunfire and rocket propelled grenades. The insurgents are increasingly using this tactic in Afghanistan. In March 2007 a convoy of U.S. Marines was approaching Marko Baazar outside the city of Jalalabad when a suicide bomber attacked the convoy. The exchange of fire that followed the attack killed twelve civilians. Similarly, on May 27 an Afghan police and coalition convoy came under fire after vehicles from the convoy were hit by two roadside IEDs in Helmand. The incident killed one Afghan truck driver and injured three coalition soldiers.

It is not only tactics that signify the Iraqization of the insurgency in Afghanistan. The increasing brutality that came to be identified with the now dead Taliban commander of the southern zone, Mullah Dadullah was seen as Dadullah mirroring the notorious Jordanian leader of the Sunni Arab insurgency in Iraq Abu Musab al Zarqawi. He ordered kidnappings, beheadings, ambushes and —unlike the early Taliban
who were famously camera shy—Dadullah liked to be filmed while conducting these operations. His increasing presence on Jihadi websites and other media propaganda signified the resurgence of the Taliban as a force more aware of the potential of media than what they thought of it during their rule between 1996-2001.

Gruesome films of beheadings and executions, or groups of men dressed in dark colors carrying AK 47s while standing in front of banners with Arabic script have since its inception been characteristics of the Iraqi insurgency, and more specifically of the insurgents under Abu Musab Al Zarqawi’s command. Dadullah replicated those forms of propaganda and added a whole new dimension: commencement ceremonies for trained would-be suicide bombers whom he blessed on tape. His brother Dadullah Mansour having replaced him as the Taliban military commander in southern Afghanistan, has followed this lead with recently releasing a propaganda video in which he blesses approximately three hundred would-be suicide bombers proclaiming to be on their way to the U.K., U.S., Canada and Germany. One of the main shared tactics of the two insurgencies is suicide bombings. Suicide bombings were once an alien phenomenon in Afghanistan. They are no more. The Center for Conflict and Peace Studies (CAPS) has recorded over fifty-nine suicide attacks since January 2007—and in 2006 there were in total a hundred and eighteen suicide attacks all across Afghanistan.‡

‡ CAPS Violent Actors database
In terms of inflicting casualties, suicide attacks in Afghanistan— unlike Iraq—have a mixed record. Often it is only the bomber who gets killed or he (there are no records of female suicide bombers having been active in Afghanistan) causes few civilian and military casualties. In the fifty-nine attacks Afghanistan has experienced this year (January-June 2007) less than fifty-five percent have inflicted casualties beyond the bomber themselves. CAPS’ data indicates that despite a high number of arrests and interceptions of would-be-suicide bombers, since January 2007 there has been a ten percent increase in number of suicide attacks carried out in Afghanistan compared to the first half of 2006. The most deadly single suicide attack to date was the attack on the police trainers’ bus in Kabul on June 17 2007. This was the closest insurgents in Afghanistan have been to matching the damage caused by suicide attacks in Iraq.

Perhaps the most disturbing development in the suicide and other terror tactics of the insurgents is the growing use of adolescents for their operations. Over time, the age of the suicide bomber has dropped. A fourteen-year-old would-be bomber was caught with his suicide vest on in Khost province as he was planning to target the provincial governor Arsala Jamal. In April 2007 the Taliban released a video showing a twelve-year-old boy beheading a man accused of betraying the Taliban by contributing to the arrest of one of their top leaders Mullah Akhtart Mohamad Usmani. More shockingly in Ghazni province the insurgents failed to set up a six year old boy Juma Gul with a suicide vest. It is unlikely that even Iraq has seen a six-year-old suicide bomber, but the use of young boys of fourteen and sixteen years old in suicide operations shows a direct parallel with insurgent tactics in Iraq.

**The Explosively Formed Projectile (EFP)**

In early June 2007 an explosively formed projectile (EFP), an incendiary device, was found along a major road in Kabul. EFPs are highly sophisticated manufactured charges that have the ability to penetrate armored vehicles. These devices are largely reputable for causing most of the casualties inflicted on coalition troops in Iraq. They, together with the less sophisticated forms of IEDs cause more than fifty percent of coalition casualties in Iraq. The use of EFPs in Iraq began during May 2004 in Basra and later spread to Shi’ia neighborhoods in Baghdad. It took the insurgents over three years to deploy that same weapon in Afghanistan.

CAPS has studied photos of the EFP found in Kabul and it bears a clear resemblance to those used in Iraq. EFPs are cylindrical devices with a liner shaped similar to a shallow dish. Once detonated, the metal
liner that functions as the top cover is projected towards the intended target. As it moves through the air the linershapes into either a long-rod penetrator, or an aerodynamic slug projectile at a speed of well over one kilometer per second. They are often deployed on roadsides close to road bumps or on intersections that slow vehicles down allowing the operator to launch the device with greater accuracy. The nature of the device means they are only effective if triggered at the right moment to pierce the side of a vehicle, in contrast to a traditional bomb which has a larger radius.

Data collected by CAPS reveals that roadside bombs in Afghanistan have been effective to varying degrees depending on the nature of the target. They have, unsurprisingly, caused more casualties when directed at soft targets such as the Afghan National Police (ANP) or aid workers and government employee vehicles. The impact of basic IEDs on hard targets such as armored military convoys has been limited. In June 2007 out of twenty nine roadside IED attacks ten were targeted at international forces, with those ten causing eight coalition casualties. However, in seven roadside IEDs targeted at ANP vehicles, over fifteen ANP officers were killed. Access to EFPs will allow the insurgents to cause a great deal more casualties to the coalition forces who often travel in armored vehicles and are not as vulnerable to the less sophisticated roadside bombs. Worryingly the EFP found in Kabul is not an isolated discovery. NATO reported it has found a stock of lower quality EFPs in Herat. If and when the insurgents start to use these devices, the number of coalition casualties could be expected to rise.

EFPs in Iraq are allegedly of Iranian origin. They are highly sophisticated and require machine enhanced manufacturing thus it is unlikely that the insurgents could have manufactured them. The discovery of the EFP in Kabul, and the cache in Herat prompted discussions around Iranian involvement in the Afghan insurgency. There is logic in the suggestions that the Iranian state has no interest in further destabilizing
Afghanistan in favor of the Taliban with whom it almost went to war in 1998. However, it has been argued that Iran has softened the United States by directly or indirectly aiding the insurgency in Iraq. Today U.S. interests in the region are far more vulnerable to threats from Iran and her proxies compared to the days before the Iraq war. It could be argued that Iran wishes to signal to the U.S. that the Islamic Republic is a regional powerbroker and needs to be treated as such. The idea of Iranian involvement in the insurgency in Afghanistan can be seen as an extension of Iran’s Iraq policy. To summarize it: Iran’s regional policy rests on cornering the U.S. and her partners to an extent that the U.S. will discard any coercive approach towards Iran, and will seek to negotiate by entering a phase of détente. Control over the insurgency in Afghanistan and Iraq will offer Iran considerable bargaining chips in the event of a détente and subsequent negotiations between the Islamic Republic and the United States.

Conclusion

The impact of the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq on the reconstruction of Afghanistan and the wider ‘war on terror’ has been widely debated. It is now clear that the Iraq effect on the reconstruction of Afghanistan has been severely adverse. Much needed human and financial resources were channeled to Iraq with Afghanistan losing its place in the spotlight that it had after 9/11. The international community was slow to extend the mandate of International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to southern and southeastern Afghanistan. Regional and local actors began to distrust U.S. promises of longer term commitment to the region and the reconstruction of Afghanistan. As a result, the Taliban and other insurgents were able to use the period between 2002 and 2005 to regroup, re-equip and recruit in order to return a great deal stronger and fiercer than they were in 2001.

Yet, it needs to be underscored that Afghanistan is not Iraq; and what is being labeled as Iraqization of the insurgency in Afghanistan is a mere realization that the insurgents in Afghanistan are an adaptable and learning group. It remains to be seen if what is being learned from Iraq, however brutal and damaging to the coalition forces and the Afghan government, is congruent with the mindset of the Afghan people. In all insurgencies it is the people who are the center of gravity and their support must be won by insurgents and counter insurgents alike if they are to overcome their adversaries. Increasing brutality and the use of adolescent and other suicide bombers has not found popular support in Afghanistan. The use of adolescent suicide bombers, young boys in beheading videos and assassinating local elders might backfire harshly on the insurgents. Iraqization of the situation in Afghanistan is clearly synonymous with brutalization of the
insurgency—and in cases further sophistication of it—but unlike Iraq, it is not necessarily a sign that the insurgents in Afghanistan are in the driver’s seat. In short: the insurgents in Afghanistan are feared a great deal more today than in 2003 or 2004, but fear is not identical to popularity. To galvanize support amongst the Afghan people the insurgency will need to look beyond intimidation and fear, yet evidence suggests they are not interested in looking beyond their brutal tactics. Setting up a six-year-child as a suicide bomber is certainly not a sign that they care.