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Rockets, guile and the lessons of history: the Taleban besiege Kabul



[Jeremy Page in Kabul](#)

The lorry drivers who bring the Pepsi and petrol for NATO troops in Kabul have their own way of calculating the Taliban's progress towards the Afghan capital: they simply count the lorries destroyed on the main roads.

By that measure, and many others, this looks increasingly like a city under siege as the Taliban start to disrupt supply routes, mimicking tactics used against the British in 1841 and the Soviets two decades ago.

Abdul Hamid, 35, was ferrying NATO supplies from the Pakistani border last month when Taliban fighters appeared on the rocks above and aimed their rocket-launchers at him, 40 miles (65km) east of Kabul. "They just missed me but hit the two trucks behind," he said. "This road used to be safe, but in the last month they've been attacking more and more."

The road from Kabul to Kandahar is even more treacherous, according to other drivers. "If the Afghan Army isn't there, a fly cannot pass," said Bashir, a lorry owner, pointing to the scorched shells of three vehicles he retrieved from a Taliban raid on the Kandahar road last week. Of 60 lorries, 13 were destroyed, he said. "Why can't the Americans stop this?"

Seven years after a US-led invasion toppled the Taliban, that is the question now troubling President Karzai and Nato forces in Afghanistan.

Despite the presence of 70,000 foreign troops, the Taliban have advanced on Kabul this year and hold territory just outside Maydan Shar, the capital of Wardak province, 20 miles southwest of the capital.

Militants in Wardak mount almost daily raids on the Kandahar road, which also links the main US bases in Afghanistan. In the past month, they have stepped up attacks on the road from Kabul to Pakistan via Jalalabad - the main supply route for food, fuel and water.

This week they killed ten French soldiers in Sarobi, 30 miles along the Jalalabad road from Kabul. Simultaneously, they attacked the biggest US base in eastern Afghanistan. Such is the fear of a Taleban "spectacular" in Kabul, that when Gordon Brown visited on Thursday he was taken around by helicopter rather than being driven through the streets.

"We're seeing history repeat itself," said Haroun Mir, co-founder of the Afghanistan Centre for Research and Policy Studies and a former aide to Ahmad Shah Massoud, the assassinated Mujahidin commander. "The Taleban's trying to cut the main roads to Kabul to target supplies for foreign forces, just like the Mujahidin did with the Soviets. If the highways are cut even for two days, it could also create riots in the city."

Kabul is vulnerable to blockades because it is surrounded by mountains and has to ship in supplies on three roads leading north, east and southwest. The British learnt this the hard way during the siege of Kabul in 1841, documented by Lady Florentia Sale in *A Journal of the Disasters in Afghanistan*. "Khojeh Meer says that he has no more grain," she wrote on December 3, 1841. "He also says that the moolahs have been to all the villages and laid the people under ban not to assist the English and that consequently the Mussulman population are as one man against us." A month later, the British began their retreat from Kabul.

In the 1980s it was Soviet forces encircled in Kabul by the Mujahidin. They withdrew in 1989. In 1996 the Taleban took Kabul after capturing Wardak and Jalalabad and blockading the capital. Isaf, the International Security Assistance Force, says that circumstances are different today: it has superior air support and logistics to the Soviets and the Taleban. The militants, though, have experience on their side, thanks to former Mujahidin commanders who have blockaded Kabul before.

Zabihullah Mujahid, a Taleban spokesman, said that their new strategy was announced by the brother and deputy of Mullah Omar, the Taleban leader, in late 2007. "The Taleban will surround Kabul politically and militarily to make it hard for Nato forces to receive logistic convoys," he told *The Times*. "That will mean less Nato movement and will show we can make trouble in the capital."

Local officials say that the Taleban, which derive most of their support from ethnic Pashtuns, are enlisting villages around Kabul and feeding off frustration with the lack of development since 2001. They fear that the next target will be the northern routes to the borders of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

The Afghan Government insists that it controls the country's main roads and Des Browne, the British Defence Secretary, this week dismissed recent Taleban raids near Kabul as

indiscriminate. "In no sense have they created, or can they make, a strategic threat to the Government of Afghanistan," he said. Brigadier-General Richard Blanchette, an Isaf spokesman, said: "We're fine for fuel and food. With the air power we have, and the quality of troops on the ground, there is no way they can win."

But monthly foreign troop casualties are on the rise, surpassing those in Iraq, and set to make this year Afghanistan's bloodiest since 2001.

The Taliban's strategy is also impeding aid agencies, especially since militants shot dead three women aid workers last week. Ebadullah Ebadi, of the World Food Programme, said that 20 of its convoys had been attacked so far this year, compared with 30 in all of 2007, many in parts of southeastern Afghanistan previously considered safe.

The lorry drivers know the risks, but say there is no other work. "They used to warn us not to supply the infidel," said Mr Hamid. "If they catch me now, they'll throw me in my own container, cover me in petrol and burn me alive."

The Afghan Interior Ministry said that 76 civilians, including 50 children and 19 women, were killed yesterday by US-led coalition forces in the western province of Herat. Western forces confirmed the operation, but said only 30 Taliban had been killed.

History of war in Afghanistan

1839 British invade Afghanistan to install compliant king

1842 British retreat from Kabul; 16,500 troops and civilians killed; one survivor

1878-80 Second Anglo-Afghan War

1979 Soviet forces invade to prop up Communist Government

1988-89 Soviets retreat

1989-92 Civil war among warlords

1996 Taliban take over

2001 US-led invasion topples Taliban Government

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article4592765.ece>