

## Commentary: Saudi rescue in Afghan war?

By ARNAUD DE BORCHGRAVE

Published: Oct. 10, 2008 at 9:44 AM

UPI Editor at Large

WASHINGTON, Oct. 10 (UPI) -- Those who know Afghanistan best say we've reached rock bottom and they don't understand why we keep on digging. Those

who now believe that more U.S. and NATO troops are the best way to beat the Taliban theocracy and bring democracy to a desolate country the size of France (where less than 10 percent of women and 30 percent of men can read and write) are doing the digging.

President Bush, John McCain, Barack Obama and Defense Secretary Bob Gates all are in favor of transferring a few U.S. brigades from relatively quiescent Iraq, on Iran's left flank, to Afghanistan, on Iran's right flank. Yet the British ambassador in Kabul and the former British commander in Afghanistan and the U.S. intelligence community see this as sowing the seeds of a bigger defeat. The country is Taliban by night and ostensibly friendly by day -- though many areas, now growing, are Taliban round the clock.

Until the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan on Oct. 7, 2001, Afghanistan was tyrannized by an Islamic Tomas de Torquemada, 15th century Spain's first grand inquisitor and confessor to Queen Isabella. His body count ranged from 20,000 to 200,000. His Afghan successor, one-eyed Mullah Mohammad Omar, whose headquarters were in the regime's religious capital in Kandahar, vanished underground and has been in hiding ever since -- with a \$25 million price on his head.

The Taliban movement has changed dramatically since its downfall in 2001. Headquartered in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), under nominal Pakistani control, it now has two main wings and many factions.

One wing, under Baitullah Mehsud, is focused on undermining the powers that be in Pakistan proper (e.g., Red Mosque takeover in Islamabad; Benazir Bhutto's assassination; Marriott Hotel bombing in the capital, at which 53 were killed and 260 wounded; guerrilla attacks in the Swat Valley in Pakistan proper); the other branch is made up of young guerrilla fighters under Mullah Omar's command, imbued with the notion that their fathers kicked out the evil Soviet empire from Afghanistan in 1989, and they are now on their way to defeating the other evil empire by chasing NATO and U.S. forces out of Afghanistan.

Afghan-based U.S. Predators occasionally zero in on a local Taliban commander's mud house in FATA and kill a number of Taliban fighters -- and a number of women and children and old men. This, in turn, fires up anti-U.S. feelings in Pakistan and drives more jobless youngsters into Taliban guerrilla ranks.

Hamidullah Khan, a veteran in his mid-40s, told Mehran Bozorgnia, a cameraman for Britain's ITN Channel 4 News, the body counts of the Afghan government are meaningless. Standing together in the late Taliban commander Mullah Dadullah's mudbrick home, Hamidullah said, "He gave his life for Allah's will. When he was killed, 20,000 more came forward in the name of Dadullah. They're now behind him. This is the Taliban's way. When one is killed, another comes in. Then another. We don't leave the ground empty."

These young Talibs see a country mired in corruption, much the way it really is under the Karzai government where almost all ministers are on the take, taking a cut of the multibillion-dollar opium poppy trade. Haji Hyatullah, in his early 20s, face half-covered with the multilayered black turban worn by all Taliban guerrillas, told the British reporter he was getting more money fighting the "crooks" in Kabul than any other job around. There is no work for anyone, he explained. And they fight because they want their daily bread.

The Taliban fighters said there was no shortage of money, now coming in from Islamic countries all over the world; they mentioned Pakistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia. British media came away feeling there was much more to this new breed of Taliban fighters than brainwashed kids coming in from Pakistani madrassa schools, strapped up with explosives. "They happily showed off their Afghan police and army uniforms, which they said they used to infiltrate local security forces," said Alex Thompson, ITN Channel 4's chief correspondent.

There is an endless supply of Taliban fighters but not an endless supply of NATO troops. German Chancellor Angela Merkel pushed her coalition government to agree to adding 1,000 German troops to the 3,500 already there. But the German Bundestag is overwhelmingly against the move, while two-thirds of Germans in one poll voted for an immediate recall of Germany's Afghan contingent. In any event, German troops, like those for most NATO countries with soldiers in Afghanistan, are restricted to non-fighting duties, by caveats voted by their parliaments. Such restrictions have provoked growing resentment from Britain, the Netherlands, Canada and the United States, whose troops bear the brunt of the fighting.

Saudi Arabia, whose intelligence service worked closely with Pakistan's ISI and the CIA during the 1980s guerrilla campaign to push the Soviets out of Afghanistan, has concluded that NATO's counter-guerrilla campaign is going nowhere fast. The Saudis have long argued that the money and blood expended on Iraq, an unnecessary war that already has cost over half a trillion dollars, could have transformed Afghanistan into a spectacular victory and a defeat for the forces of darkness that perpetrated 9/11.

Now it's too late. There is donor fatigue everywhere. And the world's economic support system appears to be crumbling.

President Hamid Karzai, outward appearances notwithstanding, quietly greenlighted a Saudi initiative designed to explore a face-saving way out for the United States and its allies. So last Sept. 24 through 27, the Saudis quietly hosted a three-way meeting in Mecca, including an Iftar dinner with King Abdullah.

Guests included the Taliban's former foreign minister Wakil Ahmad Mutawakil (who did a stint in the U.S. prison

at Bagram Air Force basis near Kabul) and Mullah Mohammad Tayeb Agha, Mullah's Omar's former spokesman; one of president Karzai's brothers; and unnamed ranking Saudis. They then all moved to an undisclosed location in Pakistan for three more days of talks.

A torrent of denials about these secret huddles notwithstanding, the Taliban reps said their break with al-Qaida was irreversible. The catalyst was none other than Nawaz Sharif, the former Pakistani prime minister ousted by then Army Chief Pervez Musharraf in 1999. Sharif then spent seven years in exile in the Saudi kingdom. He's also President Asif Ali Zardari's principal opponent at the top of the Pakistani political establishment.

When President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in 1963, there were already 16,500 U.S. fighting boots on the ground. The number quickly escalated to 546,000. Peace talks following the 1968 Tet offensive took four years. And North Vietnam still won. In Afghanistan, the Saudis are looking for an honorable way out for NATO. So should the next administration. Before a Taliban Tet against Kabul.