

## The next surge

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### Can more American troops and a new strategy beat the Taliban?

A SURGE of American troops and a rethinking of tactics worked in Iraq. Can the same be done for the troubled mission in Afghanistan? As America draws down in Iraq, it is sending over 20,000 more troops to Afghanistan. A new strategy is also beginning to emerge after months of high-level consultations, and is due to be unveiled in the coming weeks by the Afghan government and the United Nations.

According to officers in the NATO-led force, the first priority will be to reclaim the ring-road, Afghanistan's main artery, around which the main population centres are concentrated. This route was rebuilt with Western aid after the toppling of the Taliban, but has become increasingly dangerous. The sections south of the capital, Kabul, are largely cut off by Taliban insurgents and criminal gangs.

With more Western troops, and the training of a greater number of Afghan security forces, another aim will be to strengthen areas where the government is in danger of losing control. Forty such districts will be the target of a comprehensive military and political effort to stop them from falling into Taliban hands. A pilot scheme involving the first five of these so-called "critical districts" (see map) is due to be set up soon.



Tribal powerbrokers in these areas will be invited to agree to a "contract". The government, backed by international forces, will undertake to provide security, bring economic development and give each tribal council or *shura* (whose members will be paid by the government) a greater say in the running of local affairs. In return, the tribes will promise to expel and deter insurgents, and to provide recruits (probably about 50 per district) for a local force that would perform guard duties.

This has echoes of the "Sons of Iraq" militia that the Americans created in Iraq as part of their successful "surge". It is also akin to the *Arbakai*, tribal forces that historically operated in parts of Afghanistan.

Many elements of this strategy have been tried before; the *Arbakai* concept was proposed a year ago by Britain's prime minister, Gordon Brown, but made little progress. This time around, disparate initiatives will be joined into a single package. The greater number of forces should make the promise of security more credible, and the Afghan government and the UN will be placed at the forefront of the process.

Will it work or will it, like many other initiatives, collapse amid the perennial feuding and corruption of Afghan tribal politics? President Hamid Karzai has lost popularity, and the quality of most of the police and district officials is woeful.

The Afghan army has been built up with some success. But attempts to improve the police have been unpromising. The Afghan National Auxiliary Police, a local force to be raised by tribal elders, was scrapped this year when it turned out to be a divisive ragtag militia, often biased towards a particular tribe and packed with drug addicts and petty criminals.

Another attempt at reform has been the so-called "focused district development" in which all policemen from a district are taken out for an eight-week training course, re-equipped, and sent back with American soldiers acting as "mentors". The mentors were supposed to withdraw after a few months, but a year into the programme they have yet not felt able to leave their Afghan charges. NATO says there is a shortfall of about 2,300 mentors.

Afghan and Western officials working in the provinces agree that, if the new approach is to work, the right choice of *shura* members will be crucial. But maintaining these bodies will not be cheap for the Kabul government; the proposed wage for members has already been cut from \$200 to \$120 a month.

Balancing local factions is notoriously difficult. "The government is weak and people are losing faith," says Haji Bidar Zazai, an MP from Ali Khail, a proposed "critical district" in Paktia. "We have eight tribes in our district but if a *shura* is not representative of all eight it will never work."

Relying on tribal structures may work best in the south-east of the country, where the tribes are comparatively stable and cohesive. In the south, however, tribal structures are weaker, warlords tend to dominate and insurgents exploit tribal rivalries. In Iraq, the Sunni tribes were vital to success; in Afghanistan, tribal rivalries may undo the best-laid plans.