



NightWatch
30 January 2011

Special Report: November 2010 in Afghanistan

Findings: The Taliban sustained a nationwide offensive in November, featuring the highest number of clashes and security incidents in the largest number of districts in the *NightWatch* data base. Clashes and incidents totaled 1,629, more than doubling the 701 recorded in October 2010.

The highlight of the month was the new threshold of fighting, almost evenly divided between attacks initiated by Coalition forces and anti-government fighters.

The number of provinces affected by the insurgency rose to 33 for the first time since early 2009. Fighting in November 2010 was widespread. The anti-government forces displayed a new ability to sustain attacks for a month over a wider area than ever before. For the first time, many groups fought daily in a handful of districts, a periodicity normally associated with organized military forces. In some areas, fighting approached the optempo and style of conventional light infantry firefights.

The NATO command acknowledged that November 2010 featured the highest number of Improvised Explosive Device incidents, but the direct and indirect attacks also were at unprecedented levels for a single month.

The number of districts reporting engagements was 231, out of 400, compared to 193 in October 2010. This is the largest number of districts on record, surpassing the 2009 offensive, but signals no permanent expansion of the fighting. Hundreds of attacks outside the Pashtun south were individual drive by gun discharges to show presence

Measured by results, much of the effort was wasted in the sense that casualties in all categories did not rise commensurate with the surge in operations and the Coalition forces lost no areas. Taliban and anti-government fighters used lots of ammunition in extending their reach, but not their grasp.

The Taliban remain mostly Pashtun. Their operational areas are coextensive with Pashtun-dominated districts, whether in the south or the north. In that sense, they have peaked. November appears to represent the peak of their fighting capabilities. Reporting from December shows a returned to the October level of fighting, but no winter stand down.

NATO forces remain essential for the survival of the government in Kabul, but they are not numerous nor present enough to make permanent the improvements their operations make in the local security situation. Afghan forces, especially the Afghan National Army cannot operate without NATO support and do not bear the brunt of fighting.

Outlook: The fighting usually declines during the winter. Weather reports indicate a mild winter thus far. In the Pashtun south fighting never takes a vacation.

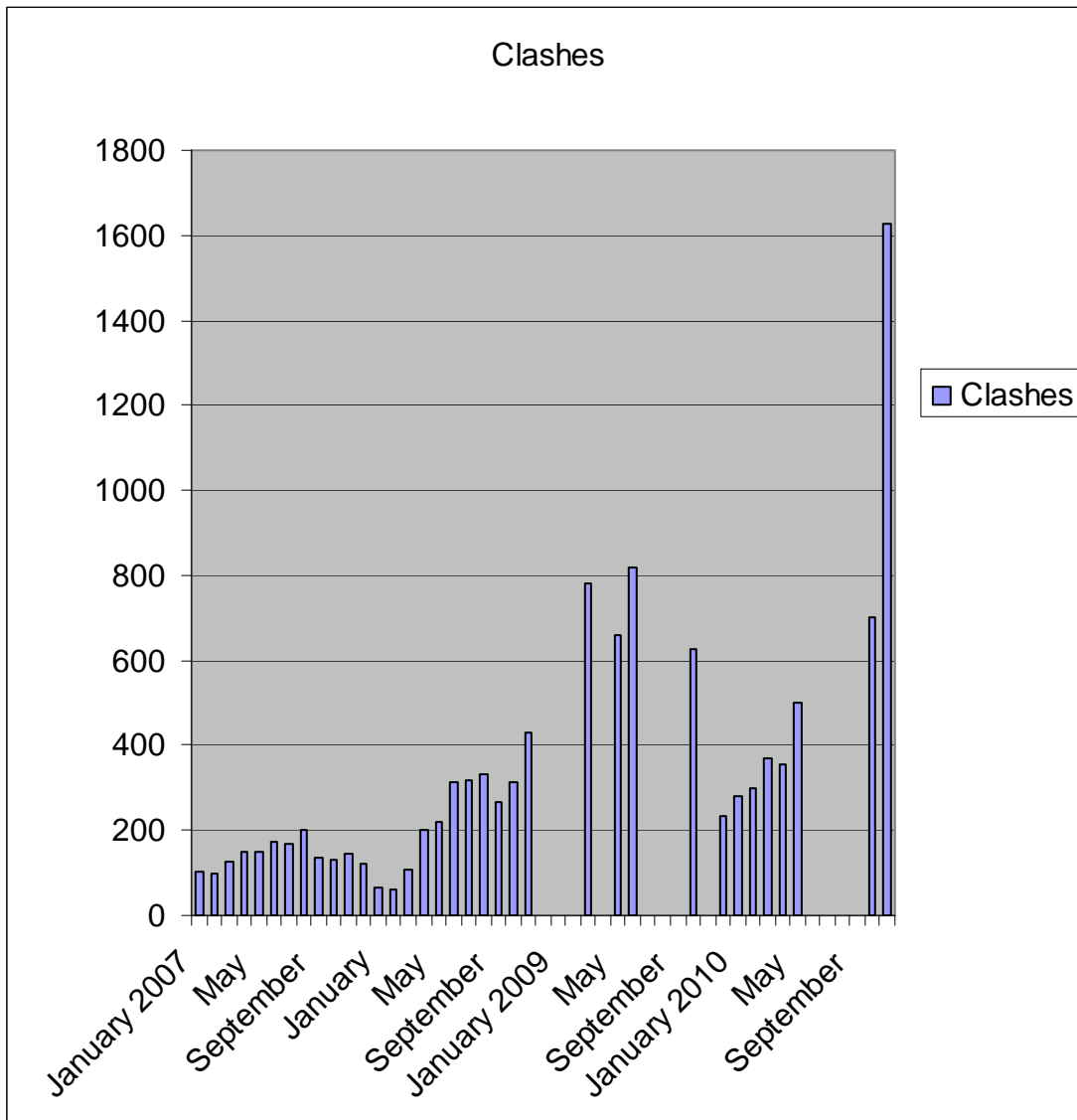
Taliban cannot defeat NATO forces, but NATO forces cannot defeat Taliban, especially without combat air support. Taliban will continue to display more boldness in attacks as long as NATO restricts its use of air power, which is a game changer. The government in Kabul will remain dependent on NATO forces for its survival for an indefinite period.

Technical note: The special report series on Afghanistan is based exclusively on open source reporting. The data is a sample, but one that has proven reasonably reliable as a guide to Readers about the trends in and status of the security situation during the past four years. The numbers are only valid in the context of this report.

Monthly Fighting Data

The graph and table below show the trend of fighting during the past four years. Most analysts assess the Taliban began their bid to return to power in Kabul in 2006. The graph indicates that they doubled their capacity for clashes every year until 2009 and then grew more slowly or remained steady, until the spike in November 2010.

The NATO command reported anti-government forces engaged in 700 security incidents on election day, 20 August 2009. That effort was a single day high that the Taliban have never repeated. Across the country, the daily average in October 2010 was about 25 clashes, but in November anti-government forces showed they could sustain twice that number for 30 days.



Month	Clashes 2008	Clashes 2009	Clashes 2010
January	66		282
February	60		301
March	107	782	368
April	199		357
May	222	658	501
June	314	818	
July	319		
August	330		
September	266		
October	314	626	701
November	441		1629
December	292		
Total	2930	2884 (incomplete)	4139 (incomplete)

Analysis of the Provinces

The table below shows the trend of violence for the core provinces of the insurgency. In the *NightWatch* sample, a core province is one in which the Taliban sustained at least one clash every two days.

The red color signifies the provinces with the worst security conditions. The yellow highlights show those provinces in which security conditions deteriorated or remained serious. Green shows improvement or relative quiet.

In November, security deteriorated in all but one province, with many experiencing very large jumps in the level of engagements. What did not change much is that the provinces below accounted for 85% of all clashes, which is within the normal range of the past three years. In other words the core of the insurgency did not change.

Nevertheless, the severity of the deterioration in the core is significant because the core has been the main target of Coalition operations.

Core Provinces of the Insurgency

Province	Total 2008	2008 Average Clashes	October 2008 Clashes	October 2009 Clashes	October 2010 Clashes	November 2010 Clashes
Ghazni	321	Attack every day	43	24	60	170
Helmand	391	Attack every day; 2 per day twice a month	45	65	132	173
Kabul	109	Attack every 3 days	8	22	8	35
Kandahar	316	Attack every day	24	100	87	132
Khost	198	Attack every other day	13	38	37	155
Konar	122	Attack every	11	71	33	92

		3 days				
Logar	129	Attack every 3 days	21	13	12	16
Nangarhar	76	Attack every 4 days	2	32	25	85
Paktika	115	Attack every 3 days	9	20	49	110
Paktia	160	Attack every 3 days	14	12	28	72
Zabol	124	Attack every 3 days	11	25	14	10
Farah	120	Attack every 3 days	13	6	16	33
Oruzgan	96	Attack every four days	14	8	7	51
Konduz	54	Attack once a week	9	22	22	57
Badghis	60	Attack once a week	7	12	12	30
Baghlan	26	Two attacks per month	3	6	19	39
Heart	97	Attack every three days	12	19	26	32
Takhar	9	Attack less than once a month	1	4	17	18
Maydan Wardak	97	Attack every three days	23	42	29	71
Total	2620 (89% of total clashes)	194 per month	311 (99% of total clashes)	533 (85% of total clashes)	633 (90% of total clashes)	1381 (85% of clashes)

If the Taliban can repeat and sustain just half the November 2010 level of activity, then the core will have undergone a permanent deterioration in security. In the past, the group of 19 provinces always featured movement in and out of the core. Zabol Province was the only such shift in November.

Among the core provinces, eleven experienced two or more clashes per day, which is another all time high and represents a greater level of effort than shown before in the worst of the worst provinces. Even with that, the Taliban still remained unable to secure their heartland. However, they remained strong enough to prevent Coalition forces from establishing security on behalf of the government.

Analysis of the Districts

The chart below lists the province names; total districts in the provinces; the number of districts that experienced clashes in the month and total clashes for each province in the month. The district data provide a more granular look at security conditions. Afghan districts approximate counties in the US. The color coding is the same as for the previous matrix chart.

The district analysis based on the below shows a deliberate decision to disturb as many districts as possible as often as possible. In other words, this was a maximum effort test to this point. The new benchmark for a maximum effort is 231 of the 400 districts.

A closer examination shows important nuances in the data. In 20 provinces, the anti-government fighters staged attacks or resisted Coalition forces in half or all the districts. That is the first time they achieved that level of reach. These are highlighted in **orange** in the Districts column.

In 19 of them the Taliban managed at least one attack per day through the month. These are highlighted in **red** in the Clashes column. A comparison shows the two columns do not always match. That's because much of the effort was token.

Ghor Province, in the west, is an example. Taliban launched attacks in 5 of its 10 districts, but staged only a single attack in 3 of the 5, and 2 in a fourth. This is token activity. Most of the effort was in a single district. That is another sign that a lot of the effort was a show of force, rather than a permanent deterioration.

Samangan Province is another example. Taliban staged 4 attacks in 4 districts.

Yellow means a numerical worsening. **Green** signifies a numerical improvement.

A closer examination of the data shows that in 97 of the 231 districts (42%), the Taliban managed only two attacks all month, many of them were IED plantings. That represents a token effort in nearly half of the districts, which is about the norm. That means the fighters in the base districts ranged farther afield to show some clout, but the area of the insurgency did not change.

The surge showed that the number of base districts containing fighting groups that can execute an attack every four days totals 69. Of that number, 10 districts contain anti government groups that can sustain daily attacks, as do Coalition forces. The 10 include 4 districts in Helmand and 2 districts in Khost Province, 3 in Ghazni, and Kandahar District in Kandahar Province. This is the first time that forces operated with the tempo of regular military forces in so many districts.

In short, the core area of the insurgency did not change, but in the core, the fighting groups showed more capability than they have ever shown before in a single month.

Province	DISTRICTS					CLASHES			
	Total Districts	Oct 2008	Oct 2009	Oct 2010	Nov 2010	Clashes Oct 2008	Clashes Oct 2009	Clashes Oct 2010	Clashes Nov 2010
Badakhshan	28	0	0	4	6	0	0	5	13
Badghis	7	4	3	4	4	7	12	12	30
Baghlan	15	2	4	7	7	3	6	19	39
Balkh	15	2	6	4	8	2	1	5	31
Bamiyan	7	1	2	0	0	1	2	0	0
Daykundi	9	1	0	0	3	1	0	0	7
Farah	11	6	2	7	6	13	6	16	33
Faryab	14	6	7	5	10	13	18	12	49
Ghazni	19	10	9	14	13	43	24	60	170
Ghor	10	1	5	5	5	2	6	9	14
Helmand	13	9	12	11	11	45	65	132	173
Herat	16	4	7	9	9	12	24	26	32

Jowzjan	11	0	3	2	5	0	6	4	17
Kabul	15	2	4	3	6	8	22	8	35
Kandahar	16	9	12	13	12	24	100	87	132
Kapisa	7	3	5	3	3	8	10	8	5
Khost	13	9	10	11	13	13	38	37	155
Konar	15	8	15	13	13	11	23	33	92
Konduz	7	3	7	5	7	9	22	22	57
Laghman	5	3	2	2	5	5	6	2	16
Logar	7	6	4	3	5	21	13	12	56
Nangarhar	22	1	4	11	14	2	32	25	85
Nimruz	5	3	3	5	3	5	6	12	17
Nurestan	8	1	1	0	2	2	6	0	3
Oruzgan	5	5	5	3	5	14	8	7	51
Paktia	11	6	8	10	9	14	12	28	72
Paktika	19	3	9	11	16	9	20	49	110
Panjshir	7	0	0	2	2	0	0	3	3
Parwan	10	0	4	2	5	0	7	5	14
Samangan	7	0	0	1	4	0	0	1	4
Sar – e-Pol	7	0	3	0	3	0	7	0	15
Takhar	17	1	3	6	6	1	4	17	18
Wardak	9	6	6	8	7	33	42	29	71
Zabol	11	6	8	4	5	11	25	14	10

As reported before each district has its own story, which means the Taliban have no effective command and control architecture or central planning. The overall surge does show that fighting groups will comply with central guidance for a single purpose. The fight remains highly decentralized.

Worst Districts

A closer examination of clashes in the districts adds nuance to the overall assessment. Open source reporting showed that 10 districts experienced daily attacks or multiple attacks per day every day. This approximates the operational pace of regular light infantry.

Districts with one or more attacks per day in November 2010

Province	District
Ghazni	Ghazni City
	Andar
	Deh Yak
Helmand	Lashkargah
	Nad e Ali
	Nahr e Sarraj
	Sangin
Kandahar	Kandahar City
Khost	Khost/Matun

In November the anti-government fighters attacked more than 20 times a month in seven other districts and every other day in 44 districts, both of which are new levels of fighting for those districts.

Operational Highlights

The main highlights were the amount of fighting and the number of surrenders. As noted, the anti-government groups put on a display of force in more than half the districts of Afghanistan. In ten districts, as noted above, they fought almost like light infantry in conventional combat.

One explanation in the media attributes the high level of fighting to Coalition offensive operations. The **NightWatch** data shows that half of the fighting was initiated by the anti-government forces.

Another explanation is that most of the attacks were by IEDs. The Coalition command reported November experienced the highest amount of IED activity on record. In the **NightWatch** sample, IED attacks – not counting IEDs disarmed by Coalition forces – represented 30 % of all attacks initiated by anti-government forces.

The other highlight was that 360 fighters surrendered and pledged allegiance to the government. That is the highest monthly total. The surrenders occurred in 11 provinces, all but one of which is in northern and western Afghanistan. More than 200 fighters in small groups surrendered in Baghlan Province, through which runs the main road from Kabul to Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. This suggests that Taliban efforts to expand in that province failed.

Casualty Ratios

Ratios for overall casualties and for fatalities provide insight into the lethality of the clashes and the value of modern western military technology.

In November 2010, the sharp jump in attacks came at the cost of increased casualties for both sides. In November the anti-government fighters sustained 1,115 men killed, wounded and detained, a 70 per cent increase over the October total of 657.

The 2008 offensive was the last time losses were so high, during the spring and summer offensive that year. One difference is greater combat efficiency. In 2008 huge expenditures of manpower each month achieved fewer than 500 clashes in a maximum of 159 districts. In November the number of clashes was 1,629 in 231 districts. The anti-government forces fight better now ... they learn.

Another difference is that the Taliban seem to have more fighters. During the 2008 fighting, Taliban strength was estimated at between 10,000 and 15,000 part time fighters. In November 2010, the Command estimates they have 25,000 fighters. That in itself is measure of increased popular support.

Included in the November total were 467 detainees, most of whom will get released. That number does not include the 360 fighters who surrendered to the government that month. Considering only killed and wounded, the anti-government fighters achieved a 132% increase in fighting at the cost of 34% more losses.

Coalition forces sustained 485 killed, wounded or captured – a 37% increase compared to October 2010.

Death ratios. In November, the numbers of anti-government fighters reported **killed** was 540, compared to 398 the month before. About 20% of those deaths were by Allied air strikes.

Total fatalities in Allied forces -- meaning NATO, ISAF, the Afghan National Army, National Police and local militias -- were 175, compared to 176 the month before.

(Note: Accurate casualty data for non-NATO fighters is notoriously difficult to derive from the public media. The Taliban and Afghan government exaggerate their achievements, and understate their own losses. Trends in the levels of clashes and casualties should and do correspond in the data.)

The **Kill Ratio** in November 2010 was 3 anti-government fighters dead for every Coalition soldier or militiaman killed, or 3:1. This means that Allied soldiers and militias killed 3 anti-government fighters for every NATO and government death in combat. The data show the anti-government surge had no impact on Coalition force strength commensurate with the energy and resources it consumed.

That is a consistent theme in past offensives by both sides: their achievements never seem worth their costs on the battlefields. They produce a lot more fighting without changing the security situation.

IEDs remain the largest source of Coalition deaths and NATO air attacks are the largest source of Taliban deaths.

The Taliban will win a war of attrition in that manpower is not a limitation. Their most significant vulnerability is the supply line from Pakistan. No supplies are manufactured in Afghanistan, for either side, but the Taliban never seem to lack for ammunition or explosives for very long.

The chart below enables a year-to-year comparison of the killed and wounded.

Casualties

Force	2008 Total KIA	2008 Per month		Nov 2008 KIA	Nov 2009 KIA	Nov 2010 KIA		Nov 2008 WIA	Nov 2009 WIA	Nov 2010 WIA
Taliban	6390	533		1038*		540		92		108
NATO	289	24		19		58		17		125
Afghan Army	165	14		30		16		28		55
Afghan Police	873	73		48		79		55		116
Local militiamen	NA	NA		NA	NA	22		NA	NA	4
Civilians	2408	201		233		255		139		401

* October 2008 is the single monthly high for Taliban KIA. **NightWatch** has no data for November 2009.

The noteworthy point is that only the NATO/ISAF casualties occurred at a rate significantly different from the 2008 base year in the box. Afghan army losses have increased as the forces have gotten more mobile and thus vulnerable to IEDs. As always, losses are one measure of who is doing the most fighting. The numbers show the western forces still do most of the fighting.

Opposing Forces

Country	Forces of Order	Opposition	Forces of Order : Taliban ratio	Status
<i>Afghanistan</i>	395,070 total * -145,537 ISAF/NATO -134,028 Afghan Army -115,505 Afghan Police	Unknown (possibly 25,000 part time fighters**.)	16:1 (Coalition forces cannot defeat the Taliban with this force ratio. Taliban and other anti-government forces also cannot conquer Kabul with this ratio.)	Taliban can hold some terrain against NATO and Afghan ground forces without air support ; Allies cannot prevent Taliban attacks and operations in Pashtun areas. ISAF/NATO remains essential for government survival.

* The source for Coalition numbers is the September 2010 Defense Department bi-annual report to Congress.

** Afghanistan is much less violent than Iraq was at the height of the Sunni Arab insurgency. Iraq experienced about 300 clashes per day. The open source data shows Afghanistan averages fewer than 25 clashes a day, but in November 2010 the daily average was 54.

Closing Observations

In November 2010, the Taliban and other anti-government fighters did their worst to date and it made no lasting difference in the security situation. They caused trouble in more districts than ever, but as a statistical measurement. They achieved no fundamental change in the insurgency. Moreover, they appear to have suffered a significant setback in Baghlan Province, whose control is critical to the government.

Based on the assessment of fighting at the district-level, *NightWatch* continues to assess that the Taliban movement is co-extensive with Pashtun settlement patterns. Taliban and other anti-government groups showed they can expand numbers and reach more districts than before for limited periods, but after making a show of force they fell back to the Pashtun areas.

November 2010 was the first month in which the fighting came closest to approximating conventional fighting in some districts. However, the anti-government forces did not sustain that style and high optempo of combat into December or January 2011.

At current force levels backed by air power, the security situation should be containable, but not permanently improvable. The force ratios are not sufficient to achieve permanent results by the Coalition forces, especially when factoring in the low level of capabilities of Afghan government forces. There are not enough dependable forces to maintain security on behalf of the Kabul government.