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Barack Obama's Review of the War in Afghanistan: The year that was and the challenges yet to come **By: Jonathan Preece**

On December 16, the White House released a summary of the American Government's year-end review of the war in Afghanistan. Citing progress in disrupting al-Qaeda and combating the Taliban and other insurgent groups, this report provides a cautiously optimistic assessment of this nearly decade long conflict. Announcing the release of this document, President Obama stated that significant gains have been made in breaking the Taliban's momentum, boosting civilian efforts and expanding cooperation between Afghanistan and Pakistan in Afghanistan since the American troop-surge began nearly a year ago. As a result of such progress, Obama added, the United States is back on track to achieving its goal of transferring security responsibilities to the Afghan government starting in July 2011. However, the President cautioned that the gains that have been made over the last year are fragile and could be quickly reversed. He added that the war in Afghanistan will remain a "very difficult endeavor," and emphasized that progress has not come fast enough in Pakistan where insurgents continue to find safe havens in the country's lawless tribal region. While the road ahead will be arduous, Obama stressed that his administration remains steadfast in its commitment to the Afghan mission: "It will take time to ultimately defeat al-Qaeda and it remains a ruthless and resilient enemy bent on attacking our country. But make no mistake. We are going to remain relentless in disrupting and dismantling that terrorist organization."

However, not everyone agrees with the Obama Administration's rosy evaluation of the war in Afghanistan. Earlier this week, two classified reports on Afghanistan and Pakistan intended for congressional committees were leaked to media outlets. Representing the consensus view of 15 American intelligence agencies, these 'National Intelligence Estimates' paint a bleak picture of condition in Afghanistan, claiming that success in this mission is highly unlikely due in large part to the Pakistani government's unwillingness to fight insurgent groups operating in Pakistan's tribal region. These reports also emphasize that Pakistan's nuclear stockpile represents a huge security threat as enriched uranium or plutonium could be smuggled out of laboratories or storage sites and used to construct 'dirty bombs.' This scathing assessment stands in contrast to the Obama Administration's recent praise of Pakistan and its military chief Gen. Ashfaq Parvez Kayani for acknowledging the need to strengthen Pakistani security and hunt down insurgent groups.

American military and defence officials were quick to downplay the significance of these leaked reports, stating that recent gains in Kandahar and Helmand provinces were not taken into consideration and that the opinions expressed in these documents are those of individuals who are far removed from what is going on in Afghanistan. Speaking on the condition of anonymity, one senior defence official stated "they [the authors of these reports] are not on the ground living it day-in and day-out like our forces are, so they don't have the proximity and perspective."

Still, these reports mirror growing concern amongst the public that the war in Afghanistan has not gone as planned since the Obama Administration revised its Afghan strategy a year ago. As the United States enters the 10th year of its engagement in Afghanistan – the longest military commitment in American history – public opinion is at an all time low. Furthermore, Obama faces mounting criticism from Republicans and Democrats alike who feel that the war in Afghanistan has been mismanaged or that the establishment of a stable and secure Afghanistan is simply not a realistic policy objective. Speaking on the American public's growing unease, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated, "I understand it...[but] leaders – and certainly this president – will not make decisions that are matters of life and death and the future security of this nation, based on polling."

Taken together, the White House's year-end review and Obama's subsequent remarks demonstrate that the Obama Administration's approach to the war in Afghanistan remains unchanged. Both in response to the leaked intelligence reports and the more recent year-end review, American officials have stated clearly that the United States will continue to fight al-Qaeda and other insurgent groups while helping to build the capacity of Afghan security forces. As such, the United States will begin withdrawing forces from Afghanistan in July, thereby initiating the long process of transferring authority to the Afghan government.

The coming year will be crucial for American and NATO operation in Afghanistan. However, it remains to be seen whether or not the American public has the patience needed to see this transition through to fruition.

Further Reading: [Intel Reports Reveal Grim Afghan War Outlook](#), [NATO: Taliban Momentum Reversed in Afghanistan](#), [Intelligence Reports Offer Dim View of Afghan War](#), [Obama: US on track in Afghanistan, Pakistan](#), [As the President Releases Afghanistan Review, do you think the War has been worth Fighting? A Tet in Afghanistan? Outlook Grim as US Touts Progress in Afghan Review](#), [Whitehouse cites Progress in Afghanistan](#), [Review Cites Strides, is Less Confident on Afghan Governance](#), [Whitehouse Review Cites Progress in Afghanistan](#).

Haifa Forest Fire Extinguished with Help of NATO Disaster Assistance

By: Chelsea Plante

A massive forest fire in Northern Israel has now been extinguished, emergency officials say. The blaze, which broke out in forests close to the city of Haifa last Thursday required international firefighters and equipment to stem it.

Many Evacuated Persons have been sheltered by families and friends, while community shelters were set up in major towns to support others. The Israeli authorities continued to monitor wind direction and additional buses were pre-positioned to allow for additional evacuation if necessary. In addition to this, a situation response centre was established by the Israeli authorities comprised of police, medical staff, firefighters, and military. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs also established a situational room for liaison with the international community and link with the operation cell. On December 3, 2010, however, the Israeli Government made a request for assistance through NATO's Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response and Coordination Centre (EADRCC).

NATO Secretary General Rasmussen immediately informed the Prime Minister that NATO had complied with the request from the Israeli authorities for disaster assistance. He sent out an urgent request to NATO and partner countries with a view to providing a coordinated response to meet the requirements of Israel during its time of need.

Assistance was provided as follows, by Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC), Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) and Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) countries (EADRCC Report N°2):

- Austria: Offered up to 1.000m fire hoses.
- Azerbaijan: Offered 2 helicopters.
- Bulgaria: Provided a team of 92 fire fighters.
- Croatia: Offered 1 Canadair CL415 866 with a crew of 8.
- Egypt: Offered fire-extinguishing materials.
- France: Offered 4 firefighting planes, 2 Canadairs, a Dash 8 and fire extinguishing materials.
- Germany: Offered an advance guard and 4 medium helicopters for fighting and logistics support.
- Greece: Provided 4 fire fighting CL-415 aircrafts, C-130 aircraft, and roughly 27 staff.
- Jordan: Offered fire extinguishing materials.
- Netherlands: Offered 1 fire fighting helicopter Boeing CH-470 Chinook and crew, 3 fire fighting helicopters Eurofighter AS-532U2 Cougar MK II and crew.
- Romania: Provided 1 aircraft.
- Russia: Provided 1 IL-76, 1 B-200 plane and 1 helicopter MI-26.
- Spain: Provided 4 Canadair CT-415 aircraft and 14 staff.
- Switzerland: 1 Falcon and 3 Cougar-helicopters with crews both consisting of Swiss Army and Swiss Humanitarian Aid Personnel.
- Turkey: 2 airplanes.
- United Kingdom: 2 fire fighting helicopters.

In addition to this, a senior Turkish Foreign Minister diplomat told Hürriyet Daily News & Economic Review on Friday under condition of anonymity that “time will tell if tension will be eased in our bilateral relationship with Israel, but this is a humanitarian situation...We don’t discriminate in humanitarian operations.”

The fire covered an area of roughly 30 000 acres of mainly forest on the Carmel Mountain north of Israel, the largest forest fire in the country’s history. According to the Israeli authorities, by late afternoon Saturday December 4, 2010, due to concentrated international support the situation began to improve. On December 6, 2010, the fire was extinguished.

To date the confirmed death toll is 43 people, with 20 000 people evacuated. Approximately 10 000 acres of land has been destroyed, with an estimated 4 million trees burnt. Israeli media assessed the cost of the fire's damage at around 2 billion shekels (USD \$550 million).

Further Reading: [NATO Secretary General sends letter of condolences to the Israeli Prime Minister](#), [Turkey Joins Fight against Israeli Forest Fires](#), [NATO Sends Disaster Assistance to Address Recent Forest Fires in Israel](#), [EADRCC SITUATION REPORT N°2 FOREST FIRE – ISRAEL](#), [Israel fire quelled, senior policewoman dies of burns](#)

Countering Improvised Explosive Devices in Afghanistan: Progress with NATO’s New Response

By: Chelsea Plante

In the last year, Taliban fighters more than doubled the number of homemade bombs they used against NATO forces in Afghanistan, often relying on explosives that are far more primitive than those used elsewhere like Iraq.

Improvised Explosive Devices (IED's) are built in a variety of ways all of which the aim is to induce permanent anxiety among troops and the local populace. Some are ignited by thin wires attached to switches such as washing machine timers, while others are detonated remotely by a transmitter such as a hand-held radio or mobile phone. In addition to these, others are victim-operated, exploding when the unsuspecting soldier or civilian steps on a pressure plate or trip wire.

Despite the insurgents' crude approach, the explosive power of the IEDs is rising. On average, each bombing in Afghanistan causes 50 percent more casualties than it did three years ago, said Army L.Gen. Michael Oates, director of the military's Joint IED Defeat Organization, or JIEDDO. Even armored transport vehicles for troops are now vulnerable even though they were designed to protect roads against roadside bombs.

The unparalleled collection of data in the leaked war logs present the most comprehensive picture yet of successful violence by the Taliban. Between 2004 and 2009, Taliban insurgents killed or injured at least 7 000 Afghan civilians in IED attacks. In 2009 alone, the US military recorded 8 159 IED incidents in Afghanistan compared with 3,867 in 2008 and 2,477 in 2007. A total of 680 foreign troops have been killed in Afghanistan so far this year.

Although technological advances have enabled the military to save lives, whether it be through improved armor or other forms of troop protection, the high-tech approach has failed to produce an effective means for detecting IED's in the field. Roughly 4/5 of the devices that are detected before they explode are found by troops who notice revealing signs such as a disturbed patch of dirt.

With the threat of IED's ever present, ISAF and coalition forces are constantly trying to find new ways of countering them. Now, a new type of road termed "Route Trident" is being built and tested in Helmand province helping to make travel safer.

The British-funded "Route Trident" is a construct using a new material called Neoweb – a plastic, honeycomb strip that offers resistance to IEDs. A hard surface is put on top of the Neoweb and then a layer of wire mesh on top of that, which enables it to survive any weather conditions. At the same time, it gives confidence to the local nationals to drive on it because they know that the strength of its materials make it close to impossible for insurgents to put IED's underneath it.

The road will connect the provincial capital Laskar Gah to the busy town of Gereshk. Royal Engineers working on the road also employ local workers on the project and so Afghan's are more likely to protect it because it is something that serves them directly.

Its completion has been delayed, however, because of local insurgents. Interestingly, it has been a magnet in terms of attracting insurgent attention, which is a testament to the understanding of the insurgents of how important this is to the local communities. Every few days the construction site is attacked with guns or rocket-propelled grenades.

Security check points have been set up along the route to help protect the project by Afghan Security and ISAF forces. Moreover, a local police presence has been established along the construction zone. And, with local populations on side with the police, as Oates stated, "the number of Taliban attacks is likely to drop."

Further reading: [Tackling Roadside Bombs – NATOChannel](#), [Progress Slow and Messy in Afghanistan](#), [Soaring IED Attacks in Afghanistan](#), [Afghanistan war logs: How the IED became Taliban's weapon of choice](#), [Reconciliation key to counter Afghan IED's: general](#)



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