

PRESS RELEASE – NEW AAN REPORT

A Knock on the Door: 22 Months of ISAF Press Releases

EMBARGOED UNTIL

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ISAF officials have long presented the recently stepped-up capture-or-kill operations as one of the most effective parts of the military mission in Afghanistan. They regularly release large figures describing the number of ‘leaders’, ‘facilitators’ and ‘insurgents’ that were killed or captured, to illustrate the success of the campaign. A closer examination of the information that is publicly available, however, reveals some important inconsistencies, particularly surrounding the classification of who is considered an insurgent ‘leader’.

AAN’s latest report, by Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, is based on an analysis of all ISAF press releases over the last 22 months. The report provides important baseline data, as well as an insight into how ISAF sees the success of their operations. Alex Strick van Linschoten: “Because there is no solid data and no transparency, the debate [with regard to the capture-or-kill strategy] tends to be either emotional or anecdotal. If anything goes wrong, ISAF often dismisses the incident as an exception to a successful strategy. Without proper data, you can’t really have this discussion.”

The research covers the period from 1 December 2009 to 30 September 2011 and included 3,771 ISAF press releases, which reported a total of 3,157 incidents (including 2,365 capture-or-kill raids). During this period (at least) 3,873 individuals were reported killed and 7,146 detained. The two peaks of ISAF activity were in September 2010 and June 2011. The numbers show a steady general increase in reported kills and captures each month until June 2011, with a slight decrease over the winter (2010—11). The number of ‘leaders’ and ‘facilitators’ that were reported killed amounted to approximately 5 per cent of the total number of deaths, while the number of ‘leaders’ and ‘facilitators’ detained consists of approximately 13 per cent of the total number of reported detentions.

The data indicates that the terminology used by ISAF in its own aggregate figures is inconsistent. ISAF often uses the terms ‘facilitators’ and ‘leaders’ interchangeably. Moreover, in a number of instances, the number of ‘leaders’ and ‘facilitators’ mentioned in the press releases didn’t match the claims made by ISAF in their aggregate form. Strick van Linschoten: “The inconsistencies may not be intentional, although they could be, but they should at least make policy-makers and journalists think twice when confronted with these figures and the claims of success that come with them.”

The data further suggests that ISAF is pursuing a ‘networked’ targeting strategy, targeting not only specific individuals (presumably on the basis of evidence) but also others perhaps only tangentially connected to them (for which there may be no evidence of wrongdoing). For instance, in July 2010, there was roughly one leader killed for every 20 individuals who ended up dead in capture-or-kill raids across Afghanistan, the second lowest monthly figure during the 22-month period.

The analysis shows a steady decline in almost all the metrics, including overall number of capture-or-kill raids, the overall number of people being killed or captured, the number of ‘leaders’ and ‘facilitators’ killed or captured in the months since June 2011. Strick van Linschoten: “The decline is probably linked to the fact that the pace of capture-or-kill operations was simply unsustainable,

and possibly to the departure of General Petraeus, who strongly believed in the success of the capture-or-kill raids.”

The Guardian (UK) newspaper was given access to the compiled press release data and has produced visualisations to accompany this paper. They can be viewed at www.guardian.co.uk/datablog/afghan_kill_capture from 16:00 (GMT) onwards.

The report examines events only up until 30 September, but the gathering of information has continued. Updated figures based on the ISAF press releases are:

- 1-11 October 2011: 55 incidents, of which 24 were reported to have been capture-or-kill raids, resulting in a minimum of 37 deaths and 130 detentions. Among these deaths and detentions, 7 'leaders' were reported killed, 16 'leaders' detained and 3 'facilitators' detained.
- In the last 7 days: 14 capture-or-kill raids, and at least 27 deaths and 86 detentions.
- In the last 30 days: 82 capture-or-kill raids, and at least 122 deaths and 385 detentions.
- In the last 90 days: 372 capture-or-kill raids, and at least 431 deaths and 1285 detentions.

Alex Strick van Linschoten and **Felix Kuehn** are researchers and writers based in Kandahar. They have worked in Afghanistan since 2006, focusing on the Taliban insurgency and the history of southern Afghanistan over the past four decades. They are the editors of the acclaimed memoir of Abdul Salam Zaef, [My Life with the Taliban](#), published by Hurst and Columbia University Press in 2010. A book-length study on the relationship between the Taleban and al-Qaeda, [An Enemy We Created: The Myth of the Taliban/Al Qaeda Merger in Afghanistan, 1970-2010](#), will be published next month along with a collection of translated [Taleban poems](#).

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