



War...By the Numbers

It is difficult to measure progress in Afghanistan without data

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Expériences alliées

It seems that the only figure for the war in Afghanistan on which everyone agrees is how long we have been fighting it: 17 years, starting on Sunday 7 October.

Suggested translation:

But beyond this key date, other data, including deaths on Afghan battlefields and civilians killed in crossfire, are denied to us all by American and Afghan officials fighting the war. If the war in Afghanistan were a business, no accountant could check his or her books based on the weak and conflicting data available to the Americans to decide whether or not to pursue this investment. And it's a heavyweight: Beyond the deaths of 2,317 U.S. soldiers in and around Afghanistan, the country has spent nearly \$1 trillion on this war, including \$126 billion to build Afghan security forces capable of defending their country on their own and for economic development.

But after nearly two decades, the United States and Afghanistan are, at best, treading water in this conflict. "U.S. military officials are increasingly referring to the "momentum" against the Taliban, but in some respects the insurgents control or challenge more territory today than at any time since 2001," reported the nonpartisan Congressional Research Service September 18.

They talk about "following the money" in politics. But when it comes to war, "following the numbers" is just as important. The U.S. military has long used numbers - troops deployed, tons of bombs dropped, attacks launched - as benchmarks on the road to victory. Sometimes they can be misleading - no more so than the infamous counts of enemy dead bodies killed in Vietnam - but they are a crude approximation of progress, or lack of progress. The current dearth of data from the U.S. and Afghan governments can mean only one thing: the war is not going well.

U.S. forces in Afghanistan are now focused on training and advising their Afghan allies, with U.S. airpower on call to help beleaguered Afghans fight the Taliban or eliminate key targets. A few numbers are available: The United States launched 1,337 bombs and missiles against targets in Afghanistan in 2016, the last year of the Obama administration. In 2017, the first year under Trump's presidency, the U.S. military released 4,361. In the first seven months of 2018, U.S. fighter jets fired 3,714, suggesting that this year's total will be higher than last year's. But little

has changed. "The Taliban have been anything but militarily defeated," veteran and war observer Bill Roggio recently wrote in the Long War Journal. "The territory controlled and disputed by the Taliban remains unchanged since the United States changed its strategy (a 40 per cent increase in the presence of US troops under President Trump), and the Taliban have dealt significant blows to Afghan forces on the battlefield.

Washington and Kabul have flip-flopped on the figures they provide. For the past 16 years, they have published Taliban body counts, then arrested them, before resuming them again in January 2018. Then they stopped doing so on September 20 when the New York Times asked about the resumption of this practice. Some see the death toll of the Taliban as a way for the Pentagon to show skeptical President Trump that his revised war strategy, with 14,000 U.S. troops currently in Afghanistan - 4,000 under his leadership - is making progress. For the past year, the U.S. and Afghan governments have refused to say how many Afghan soldiers and police have been killed in the fight against the Taliban, while their losses have skyrocketed (up to 400 in one week, according to the Times).

Most of the critical data remains elusive. In his latest report to Congress, released in July, John Sopko, the tireless Special Inspector General for the Reconstruction of Afghanistan, described the war's currently secret figures:

- the number of Afghan casualties (according to the Congressional Research Service, the number of combat deaths has increased from about 5,500 in 2015 to 6,700 in 2016 and to more than 10,000 last year)

- the target size of most Afghan military and police units, and how close each unit is to reaching this target (independent reports from the Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police). reports indicate that only 314,000 of the 352,000 authorized slots are occupied)

- the number of Afghans leaving the Afghan army and police (based on the number of Afghan soldiers and police officers who are leaving the army and police in Afghanistan) (According to external reports, 35 per cent of Afghan army and police personnel resign each year)

- the performance of these units (the Obama administration would not report this information either)

- how ready their equipment is

- the number of aircraft and pilots assigned to the only Afghan air unit with night vision equipment, assault helicopters and capabilities fixed-wing intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capability

- information on the extent of damage caused by the US air strikes against suspected Taliban-funded targets

There are also conflicting estimates of the number of "ghost" Afghan soldiers and police. In this case, the term "ghost" refers to fighters and cops who pocket paychecks but are not members of the country's security forces. A new requirement that only police officers who can prove they are serving by means of biometric data - fingerprints, iris scans and the like - can remove up to 30,000 members from the RCMP payroll from March to June. While this eliminates "ghosts," it also puts an end to the paycheques of those in uniform

for whom the remoteness and attacks of the Taliban make it difficult to obtain biometric certification.

The figures are a rough approximation of progress, or lack of progress. The current lack of data from the U.S. and Afghan governments can mean only one thing: the war is not going well.

The country is tired of war, but taxpayers continue to pay for it (nearly \$1 billion a week) and risk the lives of young Americans on a dark mission. No one better reflects this laissez-faire attitude than the commander-in-chief: he has not yet visited American troops in Afghanistan, or in any other war zone.

Defence Minister Jim Mattis stated on September 24 that the Afghan government was not losing a "war of attrition" at the hands of the Taliban. "So far, they have suffered heavy losses over the past year," he said. "And they're still in combat."

This sounds familiar to those of a certain age. General William Westmoreland fought the same kind of war half a century ago. "The premise was that if he could kill enough of the enemy, they would lose heart and stop their aggression against the South Vietnamese," author Lewis Sorley told me in 2011 when he published *Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam*. "The enemy did not lose courage, did not stop the aggression. Instead, he simply sent more and more replacements to make up for his losses. Westmoreland's first recourse to claim that the progress of the war was always the body count, but in fact, it made no sense. All the enemy's losses were quickly compensated. Westmoreland was on a treadmill."

The good news for Americans is that relatively few American soldiers are dying on Afghan soil - five so far this year. The bad news is that we're on a second treadmill, 2,500 miles from Westmoreland's, and we've been on it for much longer and we don't see the end yet. Without key numbers, there's no way to add up what's really going on.

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