

TALIBAN CELLS AND CABLES

I'm not really sure if these dots connect at all, but let me point them out and have the tech wizards rip me to shreds.

On January 31, two telecom cables lines to Egypt went out. The countries that were most affected, *by far*, by the cuts were Egypt and Pakistan—with Pakistan losing over 70% of its connectivity. Cables continued to go down around the Middle East; eventually, a UN official conceded the outages may have been intentional.

Today, Noah Shachtman reports that the Taliban in Afghanistan are threatening to take out cell phone towers if the providers don't turn them off for ten hours every night.

Taliban militants threatened Monday to blow up telecom towers across Afghanistan if mobile phone companies do not switch off their signals for 10 hours starting at dusk.

Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujaheed said the U.S. and other foreign troops in the country are using mobile phone signals to track down the insurgents and launch attacks against them.

The AP notes that Afghanistan's cell network went in since our 2001 invasion, so presumably the connectivity to the country, like that in Iraq, is largely under US control. That is, as insurgents in Iraq are doing, you'd have to blow the towers to cut their connectivity.

Shachtman goes on to note that the Taliban have a point.

Without getting into specifics, let me say that Mujaheed's concern is eminently reasonable. Former Royal Navy sailor Lew Page notes:

The mobile companies have long been thought by the Taliban to be colluding with NATO and Coalition forces operating in Afghanistan, and in fact it would be surprising if they weren't. The Afghan government is heavily dependent on the international troops. Use of the mobile networks for intelligence is an obvious step which is well-nigh certain to have been taken, just as governments have done in every country. And it's well known that masts can be used to locate a phone which is powered up.

What's less clear is why the Taliban have chosen to demand a shutdown of mast signals at night. Even the most paranoid phone-security advisers would normally suggest taking the battery out of one's phone, rather than menacing local cell operators unless they went off the air. (The idea of removing the battery is to guard against someone having modified the phone to switch itself on without the owner's knowledge.)

It could be that the Taliban want to operate their own networks, of course. Micro/pico/femtocell equipment is widely available, and there's said to be a strong tradition in wild and woolly rural Afghanistan of unregulated, private wireless comms. It might be that guerrilla commanders merely want to clear other operators off the spectrum so that they can use it themselves.

For the moment, let's take the Taliban at their word when they say that NATO and the US are using cell phone signals to track down insurgents. Do you think it's a coincidence that the telecom cables started to go down on January 31, just days after the US reportedly took out a top Al Qaeda leader in the tribal areas of Pakistan (though for a refutation of that claim, see this Dawn article)?

According to the Fox report, the strike was overnight on January 28-29. John Robb has noted that cutting the cables would be within the capacity of small groups. But I think it's unlikely Al Qaeda or their Taliban allies could take out cables in Egypt in just two days, in response to the strike on al-Libi, unless they were already planning such an operation.

Still, I find it suspicious that the Taliban is threatening to take down communications networks just across the vague border from the strike on al-Libi.