

THE TALIBAN AND THE TOWERS

Barnett Rubin offers an explanation for something we've been pondering for some time: why has the Taliban been blowing up cell phone towers in Afghanistan?

Setting up a cell phone tower anywhere in Afghanistan requires the consent of whoever "controls" the territory, or at least has the power to blow up the cell phone tower.

I have not yet been able to conduct a systematic survey of where the four mobile phone companies in Afghanistan (Afghan Wireless, Roshan, Etisalaat, and Areeba) pay the Taliban or other powerholders taxes/extortion/bribes to protect their phone towers, but one friend in the business says that the companies have to pay the Taliban in most of southern Afghanistan, right up to Kabul province.

[snip]

I have been told that Taliban (or people claiming to represent them) sometimes call up mobile phone companies and claim that they are right at a tower with explosives, which they will detonate unless money is immediately transferred to their mobile phone. This is a new technology that enables migrant workers to send cash home without going through either a hawala or Western Union.

What to make of this? It has contradictory implications. My inquiries thus far indicate that Taliban (or people claiming to be Taliban) are able to launch profitable small military operations (blowing up cell phone towers) or at least to make credible threats of doing so in most of the area

south of Kabul and as far west as the southern part of Herat province. This does not mean that Taliban "control" these areas. No authority "controls" most of these areas. But Taliban, insurgents, or criminal armed groups can operate there with impunity. They can infiltrate. If these groups can also be coordinated (a big question), they have much greater capacity for disruption than they have shown thus far.

On the other hand, their behavior is nothing like al-Qaida. I have not seen any such documents emanating from Ayman al-Zawahari's office giving his cell phone number. The document shows that some Taliban, at least, are trying to operate within the administrative structure of the Afghan state, even if they are trying to subvert it (or extract money from the private sector operating with its consent). Protection of cell phone towers in Wardak is an eminently negotiable issue, unlike, say, replacing the nation-state system with an Islamic caliphate or ending all US influence in the Muslim world. [my emphasis]

In other words, the threats and destruction of cell phone towers is a good old fashioned protection racket, with the added benefit that cell companies can fill phones with "currency" almost instantaneously (does Rubin mean this is real currency, or just minutes?).