



AFGHANISTAN: 5,000 TROOPS ARE NOT ENOUGH

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The White House is dropping [strong hints](#) that the number of American troops in Afghanistan after 2014 may fall below 10,000, possibly even below 5,000. Unnamed White House officials suggested to the press that lower levels of U.S. support to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) will be sufficient to contain future Taliban threats, given the relatively smooth election on April 5 and lack of high-profile attacks that day.

In January, Commander of the International Security Assistance Force, General Joseph Dunford, and other military leaders [recommended](#) leaving 10,000 troops in Afghanistan after 2014 to train and assist the ANSF and to conduct counter-terrorism operations against the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Troop levels would then decrease to almost zero by the end of President Barack Obama's term. General Dunford [argued](#) that because a troop presence smaller than 10,000 would not be able to protect itself, zero would be the next-best option. At the time, the 10,000 estimate was [reportedly supported](#) by the intelligence community and the State Department, but faced resistance from the White House, notably the Vice President.

The White House's view has been reinforced by the fact that there were no "spectacular attacks" on Election Day. But Afghanistan's Election Day was not as peaceful as many contend. The fact is that violence spiked on April 5. The U.S. military [reported](#) 286 insurgent attacks; the Afghan Ministry of Defense [put](#) its own estimate of attacks at 690; and the Afghan Army [said](#) its forces incurred 347 attacks in seven southeastern provinces alone, approximately 10 times more than the average of 30-40 attacks it faces per day. On Election Day, hospitals in Kabul and Lashkar Gah, the capital of Helmand province, [reported](#) admitting around three times more patients than on an average day during the peak fighting season. Levels of violence on Election Day do not indicate a diminished insurgent presence but rather a real and persistent threat. The claim of a relatively peaceful Election Day also ignores the significant uptick in violence across the country in the weeks leading up to April 5. Even though the Taliban failed to disrupt the election as a whole this time, they could be successful in the future.

There are reasons to suspect that the violence could get worse as the election process continues. Preliminary vote returns suggest that the elections are [headed](#) for a second round of voting which would occur in late May at the earliest, well within the Taliban's traditional "fighting season," a period of typically intensified violence. Depending on the degree of fraud that is discovered to have taken place in the first round (some reporting is [not optimistic](#)), tensions among competing political power bases could further deepen instability and lead to greater violence. There could also be a threat from other insurgent groups, such as Hezb-i-Islami, which had not overtly tried to derail the first round of voting but has now [said](#) it will boycott any run-off election.

It is premature to conclude before the election is over that fewer than 5,000 troops will suffice after 2014. Violence will increase as the fighting season begins and the Taliban and other insurgent groups have not yet exercised their full strength. The White House's thinking is based on a misleading single-day snapshot and does not consider the real picture of violence and persisting threats in Afghanistan.