

# CASE 11.

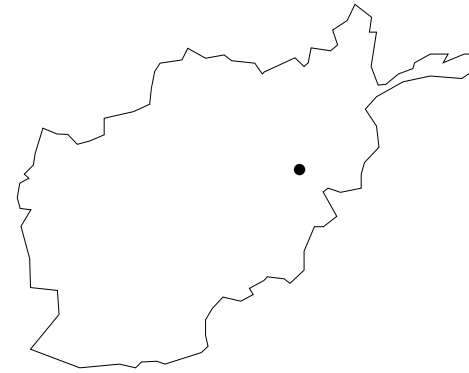
## Suicide bombing:

Bringing fear and  
destruction to Kabul  
(Afghanistan, 2015)

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**COUNTRY**

Afghanistan

**PERPETRATOR**

The Taliban

**ACT**

carried out a series of suicide bombings in Kabul

**OBJECTIVES\***

- to target and harm particular institutions like NATO, ISAF, the Afghan MoD and MoI, and the ANSF
- to rid the country of 'foreign presence'
- to terrorise pro-government civilians
- to undermine trust in the national authorities
- to get attention
- to display strength and resilience, while showing the Afghan government's inability to protect its civilians

\*As far as we have been able to discern, the list may not be exhaustive in this regard

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**CONSEQUENCES****Many deaths and injuries upon impact of the explosives**

- ↳ leading to the social stigmatisation of people with amputated limbs
- ↳ as well as loss of income (because of disability or the loss of family members)

**Damage to infrastructure upon impact of the explosives**

- ↳ leading to loss of livelihood when shops and offices are destroyed

**Psychological trauma among survivors****Fear among civilians**

The rich and diverse history of Kabul, located on the old silk route, is often overshadowed by the turbulent times Afghanistan has seen, especially over the last four decades: from the Russian invasion in 1978, to a civil war between warlords which began in 1989, to the infamous Taliban rule from 1996, and finally the aftermath of 11 September 2001. In 2015, Afghanistan was marred with uncertainties looming about the NATO troop withdrawal, the Bilateral Security Agreement with the US, the political transition in the previous year taking over five months to form a coalition government which for the first time in history appointed a Chief Executive, and the internal displacement which had become a constant as a result of protracted insecurity. While the population was hopeful with the election of President Ashraf Ghani and his hard stance on corruption and eloquence with Western diplomats, the Taliban's siege of the northern city of Kunduz made people start to lose confidence again.

Despite the Taliban's annual 'spring offensive' starting in March, the terrorist group still met with Afghan government representatives in May and July 2015 to negotiate a peace deal, while claiming to continue their battle until the country gets rid of foreign presence. In July, the Taliban announced the death of their leader Mullah Omar several years before, and the rise of Mullah Mansoor in his place. Suffering from decades of war, and despite tensions rife in the country, Afghans were going on with their lives.

### **11.1 Case:** **7 August, the deadliest day in Kabul in 2015**

*Act one:* Generally, an explosion in one part of the city would not affect the other part; there were just too many on a daily basis to keep track of. However, the truck bomb that exploded on 7 August 2015 at 1.14 a.m. in the heavily populated District 8 Shah Shaheed neighbourhood, close to an installation of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), brought the city to a standstill.<sup>1</sup> It levelled an entire strip of shops and dozens of homes and businesses, causing damage and injuries across a one kilometre radius. The explosion destroyed the boundary wall of the base, although no military casualties were officially reported. The blast caused a massive crater, approximately ten metres deep, and its shock waves shattered windows and set off car alarms over a five kilometre radius. Initial reports stated that the explosion claimed 15 lives, and injured an estimated 240 civilians, including 33 children (Latifi, 2015; Al Jazeera, 2015). Many of the civilians were wounded as a result of flying debris and shattered glass. About 35 to 40 people were injured badly enough that they would remain hospitalised for several days. Several dead bodies were too wounded to immediately identify. According to the spokesperson for Kabul hospitals, all casualties as a result of this truck bomb were civilians (Rasmussen, 2015).

In a Los Angeles Times report, 45-year-old Salahuddin, a shop owner in the district, describes the panic and chaos everywhere in a plume of smoke, bitumen and blackened concrete blast walls. 'Everywhere you turned, there was someone else who was hurt; there was blood everywhere.' Salahuddin said that three members of his own staff (two of whom in their late teens), who had been sleeping in a back room of the store, were among the injured.

'All three of them were trapped underneath the rubble, the room was filled with smoke and debris. I have no idea how they made it out, it was nothing short of a miracle' (Latifi, 2015). While driving them to the hospital, Salahuddin picked up more injured. He claims that by the end of the night, he had taken anywhere between 30 and 40 people to Ibn e Sina Hospital. Allegedly, the hospital soon began to turn away patients since they could attend no more, and reports emerged of blood shortages in hospitals.

Following this attack, the Afghan National Police (ANP), the Afghan National Army (ANA) and the coalition forces marked the security level of Kabul 'high'.

*Act two:* Some hours later another attack took place. Four suicide attackers dressed in police uniforms tried to enter the Kabul police academy shortly before 8.00 p.m., as cadets were returning from their weekend. One of the suicide bombers managed to get in line to enter the academy and detonated himself in an attempt to breach the wall. While the other 3 suicide bombers were quickly discovered and killed by security forces, the bomb that did detonate claimed the lives of 28 civilians and injured another 29 persons, all aspiring police cadets in their late teens and early twenties (Clark, 2015). Heavily-armed security officials cordoned off the area and ambulances with wailing sirens were seen rushing to the scene. The academy is a premier training institution for police forces in Afghanistan, with between 2,000 and 3,000 cadets graduating every year. Jan Muhammad, 52, lost his 19-year-old nephew, Irshad, in the attack.<sup>2</sup> He recalled everyone asking Irshad why he had chosen to join the police at such dangerous times; many relatives and family members even calling him crazy when he enrolled in the academy. But Irshad was resolute, saying he wanted to defend his country. Irshad, like many others,

who knew only conflict and hard times since they day they were born, were barely educated. Wearing a police uniform gave them respect from their society, and also paid relatively well (approximately USD 300 per month) in times where unemployment and poverty levels remained high.

*Act three:* A third large explosion went off late at night as insurgents carried out an attack in the Qasaba neighbourhood, north of the international airport. The NATO-led coalition forces confirmed that one international service member and eight Afghan contractors had been killed in the attack on Camp Integrity, a base used by the US special forces. The death at Camp Integrity was the fifth of an international service member in Afghanistan in 2015 (Rasmussen, 2015). Camp Integrity is run by US security contractor Academi, which was known as Blackwater before being sold to investors.

Fighting continued into the early morning hours of Saturday; bullets, hand grenades and choppers could be heard from miles away. The blast outside the base was powerful enough to flatten offices inside, wounding occupants who were airlifted by helicopter to military hospitals during the night. 'There was a big explosion at the gate ... [the gunfire] sounded like it came from two different sides,' said a special forces member who got wounded when his office collapsed. The initial blast caused by a suicide car bomb at the gate was followed by other explosions and a fire that lasted a couple of hours, he said (Harooni & Donati, 2015).

### **11.2 Victims:** **Impact takes its 'toll for a lifetime'**

While the first truck bomb exploded outside an ANSF base, the exact purpose remains unclear, as the timing of the attack was unusual, but it was certain that the truck would cause massive

civilian casualties. It was detonated in a market place with residences above shops in apartment buildings. According to a security source speaking to *The Guardian*, the US military frequently visits the Afghan army base in Shah Shaheed, which also contains a facility housing several high-level detainees (Rasmussen, 2015). Shah Shaheed is a densely populated, rundown, civilian middle-class neighbourhood, with no major foreign presence near it. Neither the Taliban, nor any other terrorist outfit operating in the country claimed responsibility for this attack. Months later, an Afghan newspaper followed up on the victims and stated that the blast had claimed 32 lives and injured 400 persons. The number of injured was so high because many people got trapped in the debris of their collapsed houses (Bashardost, 2015). This stands in sharp contrast to the victims of the third attack on Camp Integrity, who were quickly airlifted by helicopter to receive medical attention (Harooni & Donati, 2015).

Beyond its direct impact, the explosion affected the way people live and earn. Mohammad Shah, who owns a kebab restaurant, said he had no choice but to continue working even though all the glass on the front of the restaurant was shattered. The level of poverty does not allow people like Shah to take a single day off in order to be able to feed their families. He claimed it would take him about 40,000 Afghanis or approximately USD 645 to rebuild his restaurant – a year’s worth of savings. Pajhwok news, an Afghan news outlet, went to Shah Shaheed sixteen months after the devastating day, and reported that while some of the affected victims received cash aid from the government, the government did not take any initiatives towards reconstructing the damaged infrastructure (Bashardost, 2016). A year later, families would still suffer from the memories of that fateful night. Faridullah, a 45-year-old man, explained that his daughters aged 12 and 16

continued to suffer from post-traumatic stress as a result of the explosion. They often wake up in the middle of the night feeling frightened, crying with fear. Faridullah said he has taken them to numerous doctors to no avail.

The second attack represents a classic Taliban tactic: targeting the ANSF, in this case through an attack on the police academy, targeting younger cadets still in their training. Afghan security forces regularly foil similar attacks, according to official spokespersons, but with explosives easily available and bomb-making skills common, it is difficult to prevent all of them. The Taliban also claimed responsibility for this attack.

The third attack from the day targeted foreign troops, also one of Taliban’s usual targets. While still wanting an Islamic state in Afghanistan, the Taliban only want to come to the negotiating table once Afghanistan gets rid of ‘foreign presence’. Hence, they routinely target foreign troops and military/security contractors, as well as the ANSF, and vehicles from the Ministries of the Interior (MoI) and Defence (MoD). However, it is local Afghans guarding the buildings and compounds of international forces and security contractors, and Afghan ministries who are on the front lines, and often become direct casualties of such attacks. Attackers also use sticky bombs and Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) on MoD and MoI vehicles, resulting in mass casualties. Again, casualties mainly include low-level employees and by-standers, and not the high-ranking officials and policy makers that the perpetrators aim for. Furthermore, as seen in the case of the attacks targeting police cadets, it is usually the ANA and ANP that are more adversely affected as compared to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) who are better equipped. An analysis by the Brookings Institute showed that while ISAF fatalities were 3,482 in Afghanistan in 13 years between January 2001 and October 2014,

the fatalities suffered by the ANSF in just 10 months between January 2014 and October 2014 were a staggering 4,634 (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.).

Incidentally, the attacks happened shortly after the UN reported record high civilian casualties in Afghanistan in the first six months of 2015. Unfortunately, these records have since been broken in 2018 and 2019. The 2015 UN report furthermore stated that women and children constitute a growing percentage of the victims (UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2015). According to the UN’s human rights office, insurgents were responsible for 70 per cent of civilian casualties, with more than half that number caused by suicide bombings. Similar patterns of violence, where civilians bear the brunt of the casualties, have been observed in Afghanistan since the fateful day described above. The number of incidents recorded in 2019 (822) was the highest since non-governmental organisation Action on Armed Violence began recording such data in 2011. This rise was part of a continued surge in violence seen in the country over the last few years. In 2018, this had been attributed to an increasing Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP) presence, an affiliate of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Incidents in 2019, however, were again as a result of a notable rise in Taliban violence (Action on Armed Violence [AOAV], 2020).

Afghanistan consistently remains one of the countries most impacted by explosive violence. Since 2014, civilian casualties in the country have been consistently over the 10,000 mark (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan [UNAMA], 2019). Between 2011 and 2019, Afghanistan recorded 42,834 casualties (deaths and injuries) from explosive violence, out of which 58 per cent were civilians. Every time an explosive device is used in populated areas in the country, 83 per cent of the

casualties on average are civilians, thereby showing evidence of the disproportionate effects on civilians (AOAV, n.d.). This upward trend of civilian casualties seems a result of a significant increase in explosive violence – suicide bombings and the use of IEDs – by armed opposition groups (UNAMA, 2019).

While there exists data on civilian casualties, it is difficult to calculate the negative reverberating effects that civilians have had to face as a result of these attacks. For instance, in cases where the primary breadwinner had been killed in such an attack, the economic burden of the family increases; this is even more protracted in countries like Afghanistan where unemployment rates are high, the average household also includes the extended family (such as old parents or young, unmarried siblings), and women participation in the workforce is minimal and culturally frowned upon. Moreover, assets such as buildings, shops, houses and vehicles are typically not insured in Afghanistan, and in case they are, insurance does not cover damage from terrorist acts. This also results in significant economic burdens on families, who have often invested their life-long savings in their businesses or houses, as was reported in the cases above. The government at times does announce severance packages, but they are minimal, cannot compensate for what is lost, and in some cases, those affected do not see any payments as these announcements are merely ceremonial, as also reported above (Bashardost, 2016). Many injured people are unable to pay for medical fees or prosthetics in case of amputations. While some non-governmental organisations are assisting victims with prosthetics, the rehabilitation, social stigma and loss of livelihoods take their toll for a lifetime.<sup>3</sup>

During his fieldwork in Gardez, Afghanistan, an old turbaned leader remarked to Dr. Brian Glyn Williams, an Associate Professor of Islamic History at the University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth,

*How could this evil have come to us? What sort of humans blow themselves up among people trying to go about their lives? We never had these things before. Not even when the Soviets occupied our lands. What are these killers trying to achieve? (Williams, 2008, p. 27)*

Other villagers, also victimised by Taliban suicide bombings called them 'bad Muslims who prevent Islam', and 'enemies of Afghanistan'.

### **11.3 Perpetrators: Undermining trust in the authorities**

The bombing in Shah Shaheed was only the start of the deadliest 24 hours in Kabul in 2015. These attacks came after a two-month lull in major terrorist strikes, during which it was finally disclosed that the notorious Taliban leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar, had actually died in Pakistan back in 2013. Many analysts suggested that these attacks were evidence that the insurgent elements were trying to prove that they were still capable of launching deadly attacks. President Ghani suggested that the Taliban were seeking to divert attention away from its leadership struggles, amid rumours of the insurgent group fragmenting after Mullah Akhtar Mansour was announced as its new head. In a message posted on his Twitter account, the Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid claimed responsibility for the attack on the Police Academy and also the Camp Integrity attack, but refused to comment on the early morning truck bomb in Shah Shaheed (Shakib & Nordland, 2015; Harooni & Donati, 2015). Whatever the motive, civilians bear the brunt of such conflicts.

*Taliban:* According to the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, the Taliban are responsible for most insurgent attacks in Afghanistan,

which follow an established pattern of regular low-level ambush and hit-and-run attacks, coupled with periodic high-profile attacks. The Taliban have been moving aggressively in many parts of the country, evidenced by the fact that suicide and complex attacks increased by 78 per cent countrywide in the first 6 months of 2015 compared to the same period in 2014. The Taliban between 7 and 10 August 2015 conducted a series of attacks in quick succession in Kabul that resulted in at least 60 deaths, marking the deadliest stretch in the capital since the US-led invasion in 2001 (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, n.d.).

Suicide attacks have long been part of the movement's urban warfare strategy. Often, these attacks include an attack on a compound, which starts with a suicide blast at the gate, and once the gate has been penetrated, the rest storm into the building for prolonged battles that can last for hours. As military operations against the Taliban escalated over 2017, so too did suicide attacks: 2017 saw a 50 per cent increase in the number of such attacks compared to 2016, according to the Taliban's own records. As the movement faced further pressure since 2018, the pace of spectacular attacks and urban warfare also continued as pressure on the battlefield is unlikely to radically undermine insurgents' ability to stage them (Osman, 2018).

What matters for the Taliban is being able to impose costs on the Afghan government. Temporarily holding cities – like it did with Ghazni in 2018 – or overrunning isolated military outposts demonstrates the Taliban's resilience and the Afghan government's inability to protect its citizens (Lyll, 2018). Speaking on the suicide attacks in Kabul in 2018, the Taliban's spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid stated that the Taliban 'has a clear message for Trump and his hand kissers that if you go ahead with a policy of aggression and speak from the barrel of a gun, don't expect

Afghans to grow flowers in response' (Walizada, 2018). By turning Kabul into a battlefield, insurgents gain wider attention, shake public confidence in the national government, while showing their continued ability to strike hard (Osman, 2018).

The Trump administration's strategy of violence management sought to protect Afghan urban areas at the expense of the more thinly populated countryside. This defensive crouch, however, ceded initiative to the Taliban while also offering up political gains by allowing large swaths of previously defended territory to fall under Taliban sway. Moreover, Taliban governance typically precedes the capture of territory. Taliban had been slowly squeezing Ghazni city for at least eighteen months before the attack, isolating its economy and garrisons. Even if the Taliban cannot capture and hold cities, the US may find itself defending shrinking urban islands as Taliban floodwaters rise around them (Lyll, 2018). This shows that civilians start bearing the brunt of such insurgencies in the form of fear, coercion, loss of livelihoods, at times even displacement, long before perpetrators like the Taliban even physically attack them, and long before civilian casualties are recorded in official databases. The Taliban have historically always enjoyed more support in the sparsely populated rural areas, since they were the only security providers there. This also shows that in such locations, civilians rarely have a choice since the government does not adequately provide them with the basic protection which is their right as citizens. In many cases these citizens are then seen as Taliban sympathisers which translates into them being marginalised even more.

*The Haqqani Network:* The Taliban are not the only insurgent group behind suicide attacks in Afghanistan. Suicide bombings have also been a trademark of the Haqqani network. This Sunni Islamist militant organisation was founded

by Jalaluddin Haqqani (who allegedly died in 2018), who emerged as a top Afghan warlord and insurgent commander during the anti-Soviet war and was seen as a Cold War ally of the US Central Intelligence Agency; he was a member of the Hizb e Islami faction previously. The Haqqani Network is primarily based in North Waziristan, Pakistan, and conducts cross-border operations into eastern Afghanistan and Kabul. Although the Haqqani network is officially subsumed under the larger Taliban umbrella organisation led by Mullah Omar, the Haqqanis maintain distinct command and control, and lines of operations.

The Haqqanis are considered the most lethal and sophisticated insurgent group targeting US, Coalition and Afghan forces in Afghanistan; they typically conduct coordinated small-arms assaults coupled with rocket attacks, IEDs, suicide attacks, and attacks using bomb-laden vehicles. The Haqqani Network is responsible for some of the highest-profile attacks of the Afghan war.<sup>4</sup> The group is also involved in a number of criminal activities in Afghanistan and Pakistan, including extortion, kidnapping for ransom, and smuggling (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, n.d.).

*Islamic State of Khorasan Province:* Since 2014, the armed group ISKP has been present in Afghanistan, representing an Afghan branch of ISIS. With its rise in Afghanistan, this insurgent group is deploying the same tactics as the perpetrators discussed above; however, they are also engaging in fierce battles with the Taliban, each labelling the other as infidel. While ISKP too wants to rid the country of foreign influence and their 'puppets', their war also includes those who do not follow their version of Salafist Islam. Therefore, many of ISKP targets also include Shi'a population, especially those from Uzbek, Tajik and Hazara backgrounds. Recent clashes between ISKP and the Taliban have led to hundreds of casualties. For instance, the ISKP's

horrific suicide bombing of a vocational school in Kabul targeting the Hazara Shi'a claimed 34 lives and wounded 57 others, and was timed almost exactly with the Taliban withdrawal from Ghazni in August 2018 (Constable, 2018). It represents a calculated effort to wrest attention away from Taliban advances, and to highlight ISKP's relevance. This shadow war will continue, leading to more civilian casualties. Indeed, it is likely to intensify, even as negotiations with the US continue (Lyll, 2018). In 2018, ISKP was responsible for the majority of Afghan civilian casualties (AOAV, 2020).

Another way the two terrorist groups engage in battle is through social media, each promoting their own position and undermining the other with quasi-scholarly arguments about their version of Islam. Using online platforms, ISKP has been heavily involved in applying its understanding of Islam, carefully teaching and radicalising youth as a part of its global 'Cubs of Khilafah' strategy. In March 2018, ISKP's media centre released a video of hundreds of jihadists and local inhabitants pledging allegiance to the then ISIS leader Baghdadi, among them dozens of youths – some as young as seven to fifteen years old – trained in military fashion. That coincided with press reports about ISIS recruiting as many as 300 youths at the end of 2017, and forcing them to join the ISKP army (Wojcik, 2018). Not only is the recruitment of minors a war crime under International Humanitarian Law, in addition to perpetrators, child soldiers are primarily seen as victims of insurgent and terrorist movements themselves.

### **11.4 Significance:** **The nature of suicide bombing**

The first major contemporary suicide terrorist attack in the Middle East was the December 1981 destruction of the Iraqi embassy in Beirut

(27 dead, over 100 wounded); the perpetrators remain unknown (Harmon et al., 2018). The efficacious use of this tactic was soon copied by militant groups in Lebanon, followed by Sri Lanka's Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, the Kurdistan Worker's Party, Hamas, and more recently by the Islamic Salafist groups Al-Qaeda, Taliban, and ISIS.

The act of suicide terrorism shows full commitment of an individual to the group and its mission, which can be used in the future to inspire others. Although each operation sacrifices one individual, it also allows the organisation to recruit many future candidates. According to Krstić, three key elements are needed for suicide terrorist attacks: (1) strongly motivated individuals, (2) access to organisations whose goal is to create suicide bombers, and (3) a community that glorifies perpetrators as heroes and accepts their acts as noble acts of resistance (Krstić, 2018). Suicide bombers are generally people who act because of religious beliefs; people who want revenge for the death of a family member or a close friend; or people who are persuaded by the promise of financial rewards or a better life after death. Most Islamic armed groups rely on young men in their late teens and early twenties. A charismatic figure is a key ingredient in inspiring martyrdom, whereas television and the Internet bring distant causes into real time and immediacy. *Fatwas* (religious edicts) give legitimacy, but the 'okay to do' edicts are taken more seriously than the 'don't do' ones, especially since the former outrank and outnumber the latter, appear to have weightier religious sanction, and find greater resonance (Hassan, 2006).

Suicide bombings have become a popular terrorist modus operandi because it represents a low-cost, low-tech, and low-risk weapon that is readily available, requires little training, leaves little forensic trace, and strikes fear into the general population, often targeting crowded

spaces and softer targets. Generally, scholars argue that terrorism, including suicide missions, is contingent on an imbalance of power, that is, on an asymmetry of resources and combatants between armed groups and their enemies. This argument suggests that tactics such as suicide attacks compensate for such disproportion. Terrorist leaders are thus viewed as rational actors who select combat methods that are expected to provide the desired type and degree of damage to be inflicted on the enemy, relative to the costs of resources (including militants) for military operations.

While suicide bombing as a tactic relies heavily on its staging properties with carefully selected victims likely to be chosen as representative of a larger category, like the Taliban's targeting of foreign troops, foreign contractors and members of the MoD and MoI, it is by no means innocent. Afghan civilians are paying the price of the war, which has now spanned over two decades and has caused the deaths of 38,480 civilians as a direct result of war-related violence (Crawford, 2018).

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## Endnotes

- 1 The ANSF is the umbrella term used for the Afghan National Army (ANA), Afghan Air Force, Afghan National Police (ANP), Afghan Local Police (formed by the US and UK and paid for by the US, and formed primarily as a local defence force against Taliban insurgents), and the National Directorate of Security (the country's primary intelligence agency).
- 2 Based on the author's discussion with locals in the aftermath of the attack.
- 3 See also chapter 6 on the long-term effects of explosive remnants of war in Cambodia.
- 4 Including the June 2011 assault on the Kabul Intercontinental Hotel, conducted jointly with the Afghan Taliban, and two major suicide bombings—in 2008 and 2009—against the Indian Embassy in Kabul. In September 2011, the Haqqanis participated in a day-long assault against major targets in Kabul, including the US Embassy, ISAF headquarters, the Afghan Presidential Palace, and the Afghan National Directorate of Security headquarters. More recently, in October 2013, Afghan security forces intercepted a truck bomb deployed by the Haqqanis against Forward Operating Base Goode in Paktiya Province. The device, which did not detonate, contained some 61,500 pounds of explosives and was the largest truck bomb ever built.