Countering Taliban Information Operations in Afghanistan

BY TIM FOXLEY

> [I]n one particular area [the Taliban have] had the better of 2008: information operations. They've beaten us to the punch on numerous occasions, and by doing so they've magnified the sense of difficulty and diminished the sense of progress. This is down in part to their skill, and in part to our own failings.
>
> —UK Chief of the Defence Staff, Air Chief Marshal Sir Jock Stirrup, December 2008[1]

Even 9 years after international intervention in Afghanistan, little is understood about the tribes and ethnic groups that make up the country. How they react, think, feel, and prioritize remain largely unknown quantities, and therefore international attempts to influence them are perhaps unsurprisingly proving problematic. But perception is everything in Afghanistan, and information activities are playing an increasingly important part in shaping perception and generating support for insurgents and counterinsurgents alike, both inside and outside the country. Hundreds of different groups and actors are at work, from the diverse component parts of the Afghan populace to the array of governmental, military, and nongovernmental organization (NGO) elements of international effort. All are communicating—some even coherently. All are influencing—some intentionally, some unintentionally.

The Taliban are increasingly employing a variety of media to communicate messages in support of their overarching goals of removing foreign military presence and returning the country to their

Tim Foxley is a Researcher in the Armed Conflicts and Conflict Management Programme at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

U.S. Army (Aubree Clute)

U.S. Special Forces extracted after executing air assault mission disrupting Taliban communications

own unique interpretation of Islam. Combinations of communication activities by Taliban insurgent groups in Afghanistan and Taliban leadership in Pakistan are continuing to hamper the efforts of the international community and the Afghan government to bring stability to the country. Defining what we mean in this new information battlespace is difficult. For the purposes of this article, and conscious of the fact that I am crunching over all manner of theories and definitions, I generally refer to all communication activities in support of political or military goals in the context of Afghanistan as information operations (IO).

In the spring and summer of 2006, I worked in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) headquarters as an analyst. While there, it struck me how frequently I was hearing statements to the effect that "well, of course, the Taliban are much more sophisticated and effective at IO than ISAF." Aside from being an IO victory in itself for the Taliban, it also occurred to me how little evidence I could find to support these claims (which are still routinely repeated). As a result, in 2007, I made an attempt to explore the issues of Taliban propaganda and information activity.

I would like to briefly recap some of the main conclusions from my original paper and then refresh them based on my interpretation of developments over the last 3 years. My thinking has certainly evolved in a number of different directions. I then intend to look at ISAF, but predominantly Taliban IO strengths and weakness, and to suggest possible ways in which Taliban messaging might be countered. So yes, at the end, I will most certainly make a plea for "more research needed."

But, in essence, I still believe that Taliban IO sophistication and effectiveness are probably more myth than reality—that the *idea* of Taliban IO capability has long since outstripped Taliban *actual* capability and that a proper analysis of this area is long overdue. The Taliban's efforts are clearly having a corrosive effect, and they are improving each year. However, it is difficult to measure with any certainty just how effective the Taliban are in this information battle. The Taliban may not always secure direct support from the populace—in many ways they are perhaps winning short-term minds but not long-term hearts—but they are helping their military and political goals. They are also undermining the resolve of the international community and causing the population to withhold support for international and Afghan government efforts. But the Taliban have numerous vulnerabilities that more proactive international and Afghan IO opponents could expose, exploit, and attack.

Background

Since their removal from power in late 2001, the initially anti-modern Taliban have increasingly recognized that modern technology and media can (and even *must*) be utilized in support of their confrontation with the Afghan government and international community. From a belief system that actively rejected many of the trappings and processes of quick and effective communication, the Taliban have had to learn to communicate in order to support their goals. Their approach has thus been increasingly pragmatic, and their understanding and usage of communication media have grown accordingly.

Taliban communication methods have embraced old and new techniques and have been utilizing an expanding range of media and communications resources: fax, landline, mobile and satellite telephones, radio and television, newspapers, interviews, intimidating anonymous notes ("night letters"), direct contact with the population, and the Internet. They make extensive use of spokesmen to make claims and statements, and generally to promote or clarify Taliban messages.

My original conclusion was that Taliban IO is not as sophisticated or effective as many suggest, but that their efforts did appear to be significantly assisting the insurgency. They appear much more effective at the local level (mainly in southern, southeastern, and eastern Afghanistan and northwestern Pakistan), where they have a cultural and linguistic advantage in operating within the Pashtun tribal areas from which most Taliban fighters originate. They are much less advanced at the strategic level (communicating to the Afghan government, region, and international community), where a lack of understanding of the wider world, poorly articulated goals and intentions, and paranoia about "Western media" are handicapping their performance.

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This limited awareness has prevented the Taliban from fully understanding and therefore exploiting strategic and powerful communications media such as television, mobile phones, and the Internet. We should resist the assumption that their engagement in these media means *effective* engagement. But they are improving their understanding, willingness, and ability to communicate, particularly in the

messages they direct toward the international community. They have significant potential to improve further, and this could be damaging to the combined efforts of the international community and Afghan government. But there are many weaknesses in what the Taliban do, say, and *do not say* that could be proactively exposed and exploited.

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In 2007, I concluded with some predictions as to where Taliban media activities might go over the next few years:

❖ more effective and articulate media use, with more effective use of the Internet

❖ combat actions on the ground coordinated with messages designed to influence the international community

❖ better quality and content of video productions focusing on wider issues

❖ better coordination of messages (with positive as well as negative incentives to the population) and better response to incidents

❖ more sophistication: growing understanding of the wider world and how to influence it—targeting particular nations, governments, or NGOs—even civilian or military individuals

❖ greater inclination to discuss wider issues when challenged—the Taliban have already demonstrated that they can be provoked to comment on Taliban education, their constitution, suicide bombing, and the causing of civilian casualties

❖ increasing use of media methods employed by Iraqi insurgents and other violent Islamic networks.

I suggest that most if not all of this has taken place, although Taliban willingness to tackle wider issues has improved slowly. But there is still significant scope for Taliban improvement, and this should be of concern.

Yet crucially, we still do not have a good understanding of how effective Taliban information operations actually are. More to the point, it is difficult to identify which specific aspects of their IO activities are damaging and must be countered and which can be ignored (or even encouraged *or copied*). Part of the problem is that it is hard to disentangle IO activity from other activity likely to influence behavior on the ground. Words frequently work only if supported by deeds. The disengagement of a local village may be a result of an effective Taliban information operation, such as night letters. Equally, it may be because the Taliban executed someone recently for talking to an ISAF patrol, or an airstrike killed a civilian, or through general frustration at the lack of progress in their village, or any combination thereof. Furthermore, there is a tendency within ISAF to assume that if the Taliban are saying something—and saying it in rapid reaction to an event on the ground—it, first, is effective and, second, must be countered. This assumption, combined with continual senior international, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and ISAF statements about Taliban effectiveness and sophistication, is an IO victory that is being gifted to the Taliban and is causing resources to be spent

reactively chasing a Taliban-determined tempo of messaging.

Evolutions in Approaches

It is possible to note some shifts in Taliban emphasis as they attempt to find more effective ways of undermining the resolve of the international community and creating "fence-sitters" within the population. They have expended an increasing amount of effort addressing the international community directly, including the targeting of individuals and specific nations. They also devote more time to highlighting ISAF failings, particularly where ISAF might have been involved in killing civilians or damaging property or livelihood.

There is perhaps little doubt that the Taliban have suffered greatly at the hands of airpower—it certainly appears to be something that the insurgents fear and respect. They may have redressed the balance though IO activities by highlighting, exaggerating, and even inventing reports of collateral damage and civilian casualties from air attacks. The domestic audiences of troop-contributing nations are particularly susceptible and sensitive to reports of civilian deaths. The Taliban clearly recognize this vulnerability. Certainly ISAF is now under continual and intense pressure to revise and further reduce its use of airpower. Perhaps what the mujahideen achieved against Soviet airpower in the 1980s with guided missiles, the Taliban are achieving, 20 years later, through the power of guided information.

But this issue also helps to highlight one of the biggest boosts to the Taliban IO effort: the support gained from the (often uncritical) amplification of its claims and messages by the international media. But it is unclear whether the Taliban fully understand the manner in which they can exploit this. I suspect they do

not. They still seem conflicted about the partiality of this same forum, retaining a fierce suspicion, even paranoia, which is almost certainly blinding them to opportunities.

This paranoia is perhaps fueled by a growing Taliban sensitivity to international criticisms of its own behavior:

> *Islamic Emirate has observed a devilish propaganda of the international media, whenever a martyrdom attack is carried out by a Mujahid of Islamic Emirate, or when we blow up landmines or target a convoy of the enemy, its seem* [sic] *that Mujahideen always end up killing or wounding civilians, the hypocritical media propagates the issue of civilians, instead of reporting the realities of Mujahideen operations.*[2]

At one point, in May 2008, the Taliban genuinely appeared to suggest a joint Taliban/international community/ISAF team to investigate reports of casualties among civilians. One can only speculate on the outcome if they had been taken up on the offer.

The Taliban are increasingly aware of "weak links" in the multinational "chain" of nations that is ISAF and have focused messages intended to target the resolve of individual nations. Key themes are the inevitability of ISAF casualties, the unending nature of the conflict, and the differences between Europe and the United States. In addition, they are also learning to take note of Western media, government, and academic critiques of the international effort in Afghanistan. For all their overarching suspicion of the international media, they are now incorporating such texts crudely into their own statements. They are taking timely steps to expose the apparent dissent among the international community:

After the dissolution of Dutch government following its parliament's hot discussion over the American war in Afghanistan, now Canada and Australia have decided to respect views of their people for unconditional withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan. . . . Observers believe that the Austrian [sic] *and Canadian decisions to pull out of Afghanistan indicate the beginning of the fall of American empire and mastership.*[3]

The Myth of Taliban IO Capability

There are two complementary assumptions that go unchallenged: the Taliban have a very effective IO campaign, and ISAF has a very ineffective IO campaign. But how do we know this to be true? The Taliban are not al Qaeda. Use of late 20th-century technology (mobile phones, Internet) does not necessarily make the Taliban sophisticated. Speed-dialing journalists to take credit for an attack similarly does not necessarily make the Taliban effective. There is too much focus on the medium used and not enough on the content of the message. I submit that ISAF does not yet know the effectiveness of Taliban IO, propaganda, and media activities and that therefore it does not know which parts it should be looking to counter. There is likely to be much Taliban IO activity that ISAF could afford to ignore. Some of it may even be working against the Taliban in the longer term, such as its crude and continual use of fear. The Taliban may be winning pragmatic minds in the short term but alienating hearts in the long term.

Measuring Effectiveness

Understanding the effectiveness of Taliban IO must be the essential step before countermeasures of any sort can be drawn up and resources allocated. Information that might allow analysis of Taliban IO effectiveness at the local level includes:

- ❖ evidence of messages—type, content, and frequency
- ❖ population knowledge of, and willingness to repeat, messages
- ❖ population support for, and agreement with, messages
- ❖ compliance of population with messages
- ❖ reasons for compliance of population with messages
- ❖ changes in nature, frequency, and targets of security incidents
- ❖ opinion polls
- ❖ willingness of population to engage with ISAF, the Afghan government, and Afghan security forces
- ❖ level and nature of such engagement
- ❖ level and nature of population engagement with insurgents.

At the regional and strategic levels, analysis should include studies of the way in which Taliban information is received (whether it is unchallenged, supported, or critically challenged) not only by key nations, regions, and constituencies, but also by the media and key governments, as well as individual political, military, or religious personalities.

As is so often the case with multinational operations, much of the raw evidence needed for such analysis has likely been gathered, but is almost certainly languishing, buried. It will be found amid the databases of different headquarters, battle groups, patrols, the Afghan National Security Forces, Operational Mentor

and Liaison Teams, Provincial Reconstruction Teams, NGOs, Afghan government ministries, embassies, and international and local media. Such data might not be packaged in a format conducive to the quite specific task of analyzing Taliban messaging effectiveness. However, if Taliban efforts in some areas are assessed as ineffective after analysis, then they could be ignored. If they are judged counterproductive to the Taliban, they might even be encouraged.

I cannot now say with certainty what ISAF does to study the potential effectiveness of Taliban messages, but given the difficult and labor-intensive process of defining, collating, measuring, and analyzing data, I suspect in-depth study has yet to be done. Certainly open-source media and academic works routinely avoid the question of Taliban effectiveness by making a quick assumption or simplistically skimming over the issue, with little evidence presented.

For instance, an otherwise valuable study of Taliban information warfare posed the question "Are the Taliban effective?" and concluded, "The short answer is yes," and ended the analysis there. Even Thomas Johnson's excellent analysis of Taliban night letters, while conceding that although they could be "devastatingly effective" in some areas, concluded that when discussing the support of the Afghan populace for the Taliban, "it is impossible to evaluate specifically how the Taliban's night letter campaign contributed to this 'support.'" Evidence of Taliban IO effectiveness is generally localized, anecdotal, and difficult to quantify. Wahee Mozdah, a former Afghan foreign ministry advisor, stated: "The Taliban like to show themselves as powerful and their enemies as weak—I don't know how much the people believe that in the villages."[4]

It is necessary to understand not only *what* the Taliban are saying, but also *how* and *why* they might be saying it, and to whom. In other words, it has significant bearing on the ability to understand and therefore counter a Taliban message if we know whether they are saying something because:

- ❖ they genuinely believe it
- ❖ they do not believe it but think it might help them in the short term
- ❖ they are deliberately lying
- ❖ they do not know what is going on
- ❖ they do not understand what is going on
- ❖ they are having to react to external factors beyond their control.

Again, my point is not necessarily that the Taliban are ineffective at information operations, but that I have yet to see evidence that we have a good understanding either way.

Strengths and Weaknesses

I want to focus on the weaknesses of both ISAF and the Taliban, but it should be understood that ISAF has a huge range of intellectual, financial, and technological resources that the Taliban will never be able to replicate. Conversely, the Taliban's greatest messaging strengths—communicating at the local level among the Pashtun tribal populace in southern and eastern Afghanistan—are qualities that ISAF and the international community possess in abundance. They merely need to ensure that they work in full cooperation with the Afghan government, its security forces, and the population, including Pashtuns, tribal elders, mullahs, and former insurgents, to communicate in ways that reflect the culture, traditions, values, concerns, expectations, and worldviews of the population.

ISAF. ISAF information efforts appear to fall into three categories:

- routine "good news" stories (bridges built, hospitals repaired, money spent)

- defending against its own mistakes (ISAF special forces kill the wrong people)

- reacting to Taliban IO initiatives (Taliban claims of airstrike casualties).

ISAF seems to have difficulty conducting information operations. The reasons would be familiar to anyone with an awareness of

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the challenges that all international institutions, military and civilian, have encountered in Afghanistan since 2001. To a still limited understanding of the culture, language, and customs of Afghanistan can be added an unresolved debate as to what IO is and can achieve, what an IO strategy should be, and how such a strategy should be applied. Furthermore, there is a lack of understanding of how the Taliban conduct IO, how to measure the effectiveness of Taliban IO (and therefore which elements of it are actually genuinely damaging), and how best to generate and balance reactive and proactive responses.

There are major problems with coordination of messaging—the Afghan government, individual nations, NGOs, aid agencies, the United Nations, and European Union are all pushing and pulling in different directions. They are sending out different messages, only some of which are intentional. This lack of coherence is compounded by the regular rotation of personnel, resulting in loss of experience

and fragmentation of effort. There are extremely high demands on ISAF from a variety of critical and "media-savvy" audiences, in particular the expectation that it should always provide 100 percent accurate and accountable information—which takes time and is frequently next to impossible. Finally, the key Taliban "safe havens" across the border in Pakistan, where the Taliban find much support and conduct recruitment, are much less accessible to ISAF, Afghan, or international messages.

The Taliban. The Taliban have strengths and weaknesses in their approach to information operations. But we only have to look at the origins of the movement and the background and experiences of the Taliban leadership to gain a sense of where these strengths and weaknesses might lie. In terms of strengths, they come from the same tribal, cultural, and linguistic base as a key target audience—the Pashtun tribes on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. This gives them a significant advantage over ISAF and the international community as a whole. But their knowledge of the wider world—politics, governance, international relations, and the media—is much weaker. Strategic communications is surely unlikely to be a strong point.

The Taliban do not have the same pressures that ISAF has to be accurate in their statements and claims, and they present powerful and easy to understand messages to local audiences, portraying the international community as "infidels" who kill civilians and threaten customs and livelihoods. Furthermore, the Taliban show potential to improve in their understanding of the international community and therefore ways in which they might better apply their IO activity. They appear to be learning, albeit slowly, from international media techniques. It seems easier for

the Taliban to judge what impact they may be having with their IO campaigns by monitoring international media to see how their messages are received and observing the debates and disputes in national and international political and military circles.

My caveats about the difficulties of measuring Taliban IO effectiveness aside, some parts of their operations are clearly having an impact. I would judge Taliban IO successes to include:

❖ weakening the resolve of the international community

❖ increasing recruitment to the insurgency

❖ achieving disengagement of the population from Afghan government and international efforts (fence-sitting)

❖ curtailing ISAF military activities (use of airpower, use of artillery, house-to-house searches, special forces operations)

❖ limiting the engagement and effectiveness of the Afghan government.

The Taliban have clearly improved their game as they attempt to communicate with Western audiences, progressing from incoherent messages such as, "This is mention the able the rags of airplane were delirium in the location of incident and many people came for the trip,"[5] to:

Your colonialist rulers have invaded our country under the pretext of terrorism to augment the wealth of a few capitalists and spread the net of neo-colonialism over our country. Every day, our youths, old men, women and children are martyred by your bombs and rounds of mortars. The invaders raid houses of our people at night. They destroy our green gardens, public properties, educational and commercial centers.

Countering this atrocity and aggression and the defense against it, is our legitimate and national right. We will use this right of ours with all our resources and sacrifices.[6]

There is also a growing focus on the fears and concerns of individual troop-contributing nations. In May 2006, an Italian ISAF vehicle struck an improvised explosive device in Kabul, which resulted in the death of two Italian soldiers. An Italian journalist managed to interview the Taliban spokesman shortly afterward and asked whether the Italians had been specifically targeted because they were coming to the end of their tour (a case, perhaps, of the media unintentionally helping to shape the Taliban's response). The response came back in the negative: "For us, infidels are infidels. As long as they are allies of the Americans, they will remain our enemies."

Exactly 2 years later, a Taliban commander told *Der Spiegel* that "to kill and attack Germans is the goal." The Taliban are increasingly differentiating between ISAF nations and attempting to target perceived weaknesses in resolve of the different ISAF members. An even more recent statement, from April 2010, also aimed

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at Germany, makes an appeal to the historically strong relations between Germany and Afghanistan, with an appeal entitled "Germany Should Not Sacrifice the Historical Relations with the Afghans for the Interests of America." Perhaps unhelpfully, the statement attempts to make a virtue of Afghan support in the 1940s for Nazi Germany as proof.[7]

The Taliban must often react to events just as quickly as ISAF does. Being able to claim responsibility for an attack minutes after it took place often means having to backtrack once it becomes apparent just how many civilians have been killed. Taliban messages are frequently uncoordinated and contradictory, often with an erratic variation in tone.

One situation is worthy of closer examination. In an ambush in Logar Province claimed by the Taliban on August 13, 2008, three unarmed female Western aid workers and their Afghan driver were shot and killed. On August 17, the Taliban posted an open letter "to the Canadian people" about the incident, warning Canada not to continue its involvement in Afghanistan or to support "the terrorists in [the] White House." It was interesting to see the language used by the Taliban and the way it shifted over the 4 days from the attack to the open letter—in particular, the way the Taliban described the victims. The Taliban's initial "combat report" described the incident as an ambush followed by a 1-hour firefight in which five Americans, including three women,

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were killed.[8] The description of the victims went from "terrorists" and "spies" to "soldiers" to "female citizens," suggestive of some of the confusion the Taliban have in getting accurate information. It also highlights their weakness for creatively "filling in the gaps" with stock phrases and descriptions (terrorists, spies,

"their arms were booty"). More significantly, it demonstrates Taliban recognition (perhaps because their spokesman was in high demand for statements in the aftermath) that this was a controversial incident that might impact their international and local credibility.

From their claims and statements, the Taliban continue to demonstrate an obsession with "body count" and the language of war, of victory and defeat. There is little evidence of understanding—and certainly no attempt to address—issues that opinion polls consistently show are of major concern to the Afghan populace: education, accountable government, representing the people, justice, human rights, law and order, medical care, reconstruction, and employment. After 9 years, they still appear to have nothing to say on these issues—in fact, they actively avoid such topics unless compelled to address them. Perhaps they should be compelled more often. They are dangerously misunderstanding the desires of the majority of the population, and I would judge this to be their biggest weakness. Now, more than ever before in their history, the Afghan people have been exposed to the wider world and are increasingly aware of their own potential and opportunities. They want to hear positive and constructive messaging that goes significantly beyond calls for unending jihad.

Taliban under Pressure

The Taliban do not deal well with negative publicity and stick with the language of, for want of a better description, old communist regimes. Their media world is a black-and-white one, where terms like "lies," "baseless," "fake," and "provocations" replace reason or counterargument. The Taliban perceive that the international media are actively working against them, and they still do not appear comfortable, capable, or confident when it comes

to bad publicity. This paranoia is evident right to the top, and a study of Taliban statements is helpful in giving clues as to what the Taliban most worry about. For instance, in September 2008, Mullah Omar stated, "Our enemy due to its devilish nature is very clever in making trickeries. And at the time of its defeat it always put these trickeries to work. And Muslim Ummah often gets caught in these devilish trickeries." Mullah Omar is likely to be talking about IO in some form.

Taliban spokesmen do not appear to have developed the media skills necessary to debate or discuss fast-moving or strategic events—particularly when accusations of any sort have been leveled at them. Their default approach still seems to be to delay, deny, or denounce.[9]

Moreover, the Taliban appear overly sensitive to a range of issues:

❖ reports of Taliban operations killing civilians, particularly when caused by questionable tactics such as suicide bombings

❖ that they take bribes or drug money

❖ that there are splits or disputes within the Taliban and leadership

❖ that they are engaged in talks with members of the Afghan government or the international community

❖ losses they have allegedly suffered

❖ media stories portraying them badly, such as their treatment of the South Korean hostages. In addition, in February 2008, Mullah Omar announced that beheadings of people suspected of spying for ISAF would stop.[10]

Also in 2008, the Taliban started to issue statements outlining their assessment of casualties inflicted upon ISAF and Afghan National Security Forces. The statements are short, grossly inflated by any standards, and make no attempt to explain, justify, or clarify: "The fatalities of the invaders forces reached 5,220, and the fatalities of their puppets Afghan army and police reached 7,552. 2,818 military vehicles belonging to the invaders forces and their puppet forces were destroyed, also 31 various aircraft were shot down."[11]

It is likely that the Taliban continue to perceive that inflicting casualties on international and government forces is one of the most important aspects and measures of their campaign, but it may also suggest that they remain sensitive to the casualties they themselves are suffering. The Taliban do not yet appear to be in a situation where they genuinely want to issue actual figures and credibly contest the figures of the Afghan government, international community, and independent organizations such as icasualties.org.

When the Taliban do believe that they have a case to make (criticizing ISAF airstrikes and civilian casualties, denying that they are negotiating with the Afghan government, refuting the claim that they broke the Musa Qala deal), they tend to expound at length in their media statements. Their choice of easy to grasp topics suggests that they might be uncomfortable if pressed to elaborate on the validity of the statistics and the sources. This may not matter to the Taliban. The figures may look good to important and perhaps susceptible audiences (and potential recruits) in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and also to potential backers in these countries and the Middle East. They will also know that international media sources will pick up and run with the story. Even if the media generally fail to be convinced of the accuracy of Taliban figures, the Taliban may have judged that some international audiences may find the

figures useful to criticize or question the international military presence in Afghanistan. We should ask ourselves, "What evidence is there that these claims are helping the Taliban?" Perhaps these claims have no impact at all. Perhaps they are making the Taliban look foolish and naïve. More understanding of the actual impact of Taliban IO may be needed before a response can be given. To ignore these statements is certainly an option, but there may be even more potential in turning them back on the Taliban. Challenging the Taliban to prove their claims may cause them a loss of credibility, force them to respond, or pressure them into revising what they say and how they say it.

Opportunities

In the last few years, I judge that there have been significant missed opportunities to proactively tackle the Taliban in the media arena. As suggested earlier, the Taliban appear to handle negative public relations in a clumsy way. Furthermore, they have an overarching inability or unwillingness to discuss any wider vision for the future of Afghanistan beyond jihad and the need to kill infidels—no expounding of politics, accountable government, the economy, education, or employment. The Taliban issued their new Afghanistan constitution in December 2006, but they have not pushed, promoted, or even referred to it since. The Taliban response, whenever put under pressure in the war of ideas, is routine, unconvincing, and uninspiring: "Now we are at war. When we are in power, then we will decide."

In tackling Taliban messaging, the international community should aim to:

❖ create coordinated messages with the Afghan government and international community

❖ gain the initiative—changing the tempo to suit the Afghan government and international community, not the Taliban

❖ remove the Taliban from their messaging "comfort zone" of battle, body count, and jihad, taking them into political discourse

❖ expose Taliban contradictions

❖ expose and exploit Taliban fears

❖ reduce and focus ISAF effort—expending resources only when necessary

❖ cause the Taliban to distrust and disengage from the media

❖ cause more confusion and paranoia among the Taliban

❖ expose Taliban reliance on use of fear.

There is a strong need for a better understanding of what the Taliban are saying, how they say it, why, and to whom. Above all, effort must be put into measuring and assessing Taliban IO effectiveness. Only once this process has been adequately completed can appropriate responses (words, deeds, or both) be adopted. Responses should perhaps fall into combinations of five main categories: countering, attacking, ignoring, encouraging, or copying.

In this process, it will also be useful to consider the prime fears and concerns of the three major groupings of actors in Afghanistan to understand how best to conduct defensive or offensive IO countermeasures. I suggest that a study of Taliban fears could give an indicator as to how to regain the information initiative.

The following is a selection of missed media opportunities over the last 5 years where the Taliban have been vulnerable:

- In May 2005, Mullah Omar was stripped of the title "Leader of the Faithful" by the same Kandahar shura that bestowed it on him in 1996.

- In March 2006, the Egyptian Grand Mufti ruled that suicide bombing was illegal—this was picked up by at least one Afghan newspaper, bemoaning the fact that this sort of crucial information was not being adequately promoted across Afghanistan.

- In November 2006, Ahmed Rashid highlighted a Pashtun peace jirga in Pakistan that rejected Taliban violence.[12]

- There have been several instances where the Taliban have been spontaneously resisted by locals—including Pashtuns. In July 2008, in Faryab Province, Pashtun villagers killed two Taliban—including a Taliban shadow provincial governor—who attempted to enter their village and abduct aid workers.[13]

- Brian Glyn Williams's paper on Taliban suicide bombers highlights several anti-Taliban incidents as a result of such attacks.[14]

- An intriguing Taliban request was made in July 2008—apparently to the international community—to form independent investigation teams, including a Taliban and NATO representative in each team, to conduct an Afghan-wide survey of civilian casualties through military action.
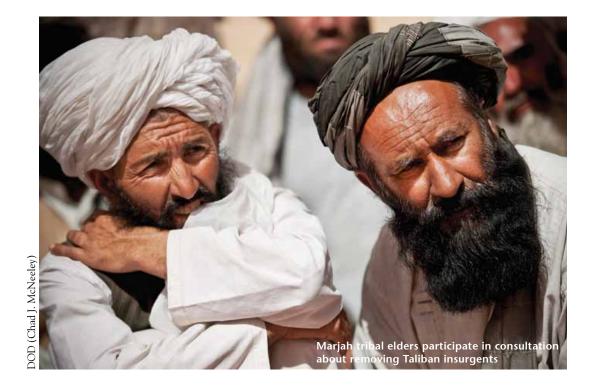
Marjah and Beyond

The success or failure of the ISAF operations in and around Marjah is too early to judge. But looking at some of the language that the Taliban are currently using in response, they appear confused about the messages they should be using against new ISAF and Afghan government strategies. They have defaulted to the language of combat—they expect battle, they want battle, and they couch what they see in Marjah (that is, reasonably sophisticated, population-centric counterinsurgency) in terms of battle alone. But they are sounding increasingly out of their depth and still seem to be talking as if they are dealing with a Soviet-style invasion. Further ISAF operations in Kandahar may confirm this. Perhaps in this media environment there are areas where ISAF and the Afghan government could seize the messaging initiative by easing away from "combat" language and into politics, governance, development, and reconstruction. These are the areas where the Taliban are least qualified to engage and indeed reveal their weaknesses with naïve, ill-informed, and clumsy messaging.

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Conclusion

The reach and influence of Taliban information at both local and strategic levels—its messages, threats, warnings, claims, and statements—are certainly contributing to the faltering of international and Afghan efforts to bring stability to Afghanistan, particularly at the crucial local level. Although the Taliban are now making more use of modern technology, however, their approach remains unsurprising

Marjah tribal elders participate in consultation about removing Taliban insurgents

and unimaginative. They have the potential to do much better—and this should be of concern. But they remain limited by their own worldview, their focus on combat and fear to the exclusion of the political and developmental, and an inherent distrust of what they see as "Western" media. This is ironic, as the international media are playing a key role in amplifying their messages. Yet when one looks at the content of their messages, it becomes clear that there are many contradictions and inconsistencies. They do not have the capabilities, reach, and understanding of al Qaeda's information machine and should not be put in the same category. The Taliban have many vulnerabilities that could be proactively exploited.

Being able to measure the effectiveness of Taliban messaging appears to be a big gap in Afghan and international capability. There is a strong temptation to assume that, because the Taliban are saying things quickly, they are saying things effectively. The international community, the Afghan government, and ISAF need to quantify and identify the effective elements of Taliban IO that are genuinely hindering progress in order to proactively counter, rather than reactively "ambulance chase," Taliban claims. Much more analysis is needed of what the Taliban are saying, how they say it, and why they might be saying it—with more use of regional expertise: Afghans, Pakistanis, Pashtuns, and former Taliban. A better understanding of the audiences the Taliban are trying to reach remains crucial.

The current information environment is perhaps the most difficult it has ever been for getting the Afghan population off the fence and supporting international and Afghan government efforts. Nine years of international involvement have seen an increasingly confident and capable

insurgency, dwindling international resolve, lack of confidence in the Afghan government, and the impending unilateral disengagement of two key NATO members. All these factors are creating significant information momentum for the Taliban, and a countercampaign based purely on good news stories will be ineffective. The international community should beware of relying too much on well-drafted and efficiently delivered messages that bear no relation with the ground truth as experienced by the Afghans receiving the message.

We should be aware of the limitations of IO, the limitations of our understanding of Taliban IO effectiveness, and the blurred relationship between actions and words in this context. The biggest "message" put out by the Taliban is their physical presence across the country manifested by insurgency on the ground and the casualties, destruction, and uncertainty they can now inflict. It is this presence that is undermining international resolve and causing Afghan disengagement and uncertainty. If the Taliban could not deliver this physical impact, their messages would be almost entirely irrelevant. The most appropriate counter to local Taliban presence will not be sophisticated countermessaging but "clear, hold, and build"—replacing Taliban presence with a competent and noncorrupt Afghan government presence. Only then can messages be expected to gain any credence among the population. What the Afghans need is the boringly predictable certainty that a government is going to be present and functioning in their neighborhood—and for decades. This is the most important message for them, as it is one that enables them to plan for the future.

At the strategic level, however, there appears to be greater scope for proactively tackling the Taliban with information, targeting their confusion, incoherence, contradictions, and fears. The Taliban should be forced away from their comfort zone—the language of violence and conflict—and called upon to expound on their plans for Afghanistan's future (politics, economic development, reconstruction, employment, education, and human rights). This is something they have routinely and spectacularly

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failed to do, other than with a handful of naïve and simplistic statements. This is surely a real opportunity. If the Taliban are found wanting and clearly have no credible plans (as appears likely from a review of their statements over the last few years), they can be undermined and exposed as offering no hope for the future of Afghanistan. However, if they attempt to develop ideas and show a willingness to explain themselves, they are moving slowly away from insurgency and into politics and government, like so many other insurgent groups throughout history. Perhaps then the Afghan populace (and the international community) might find it easier to entertain the notion—which is gaining increasing traction regardless—of a Taliban presence in government in some manner. PRISM

Notes

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