



# Exploiting Insurgent Violence in Afghanistan

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**M**ORE THAN SEVEN years after control of Afghanistan was wrested from the Taliban, victory remains elusive. The Taliban, Al-Qaeda, and a host of other unsavory characters have been driven underground, successful elections have been held—an achievement likely to be repeated soon—and a nominally functional Afghan government exists. Tactically, insurgents pose little threat to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), coalition forces (other than the ISAF), or the Afghan National Army. The Afghan infrastructure and economy have made dramatic progress after three decades of nearly constant war.

In spite of tactical and local successes, however, the possibility of strategic defeat looms ever larger. Both military and civilian casualties have continued to climb steadily. Combined coalition and ISAF troop strength has more than quintupled since 2002, yet Afghan frustration with the security situation continues to grow. Ordinary Afghans' trust and belief that their immediate situation and that of Afghanistan in general will improve has remained low since its sharp downward slide in 2006 and 2007. As security concerns persist, the perceived or actual failure of many investments and projects to reach remote rural areas where poverty predominates provides fertile ground for insurgent recruitment. After seven years of promises, time is running out. Afghans have lost patience with rhetoric. They need to see delivery on promises of improved security and tangible improvements in their personal situation—and soon, if we hope to successfully provide lasting stability to Afghanistan.

Within military and NATO circles, there has been much talk of the need to better sell the idea that we are succeeding in Afghanistan. Millions are being spent in efforts to market success, to overcome the media preference for bad news, and to compete with an agile enemy in an extremely complex and often unfavorable media landscape. Within the military, efforts to gain control of the Afghan narrative have been dubbed as “strategic communications.” As many headquarters struggle with the concept, which is all about achieving greater efficacy and unity of voice in public communications, one wonders whether what is really needed is not “strategic communications,” but a better communications *strategy*.

To be fair, communicating about Afghanistan is an enormously complex undertaking. It is tempting to think that providing “good news stories” to the media, along with facts and statistics and a consistent narrative

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PHOTO: U.S. Soldiers and Afghan policemen walk at the site of a suicide attack in Kabul on 15 March 2009. (AFP, Massoud Hossaini, Hamed Zalmay)

as to why we are in Afghanistan, will solve the problem. However, the number of stakeholders involved and the number of audiences to engage simultaneously can be overwhelming. In an ideal world, all stakeholders, from the UN to the village elder somewhere in Afghanistan, would be communicating identical messages, echoed by the media. Unfortunately, differing and frequently competing agendas, differing perceptions of the current situation, and most important, vastly differing audiences with differing needs and interests suggest that the best we might hope for is some measure of *coordinated* communications. NATO and ISAF have a significant role to play in achieving this coordination.

In spite of a renewed focus on Afghanistan—long in the background when our attention was on Iraq—we have made little headway in changing perceptions, either there or internationally. Changing this momentum is critical to the future of Afghanistan. The most important perceptions are on two fronts: the people of Afghanistan must support their current government and reject what the insurgents offer, and the people of the countries contributing troops and resources to ISAF must support their governments' efforts in Afghanistan. NATO and ISAF must communicate with all of these audiences to compete with an aggressive insurgent communication strategy. Even if our communication strategy is successful, actions in Afghanistan ultimately influence perceptions among all audiences more than any press release will.

Trying to control the “information space” is in many ways like trying to control beads of spilled mercury from a broken thermometer. Journalists who know they will get more traction from their editors from the latest mobile phone call from a self-appointed “Taliban spokesman” often ignore carefully managed and researched press releases, full of facts and statistics. Bad news tends to lead—there is much bad news to report—and the good news that exists often goes unreported. Ultimately, however, strategic communications cannot substitute for facts on the ground. As Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has said, “The solution . . . is not in some slick PR campaign, or trying to out-propagandize Al-Qaeda, but through the steady accumulation of actions and results that build trust and credibility over time.”<sup>1</sup>

## The Future is in Afghan Hands

The facts on the ground are not currently working in our favor. Last summer’s “fighting season” culminated in 268 coalition deaths and for the first time exceeded the death toll in Iraq for several months.<sup>2</sup> Attempts to rationalize the steadily increasing military and civilian tolls—arguing they are a result of our increasing presence in heretofore neglected areas—ring hollow among our audiences. Winter having provided an opportunity for insurgents to regroup, recruit, and respond, it is unlikely that even the deployment of ten, fifteen, or twenty thousand additional troops will significantly alter the situation for the better without a significant change in strategy. Since the earliest days of Operation Enduring Freedom, when there were 9,200 Soldiers deployed in Afghanistan, violent incidents have increased roughly in parallel to the overall troop strength. In fact, given the insurgents’ increasing use of asymmetric methods, both the incidence of events and the accompanying casualties (to include civilians) have climbed even faster than the troop strength. While 20,000 additional troops seem like a significant step forward, the past seven years argue in favor of the security situation deteriorating further before it gets better. The idea that there is a “tipping point” at which increases in troop strength will cause the violence to begin trending downward is a dubious one. If there is such a tipping point, it may take somewhere in the neighborhood of 150,000 additional troops. This is an investment that neither the U.S. nor other NATO partners are likely to make.

We can make up some of the shortfall by continuing to train and equip indigenous Afghan forces, including the army, police, border security forces, and other components of the Afghan National Security Forces. With the exception of the army, progress has been frustratingly and painfully slow. The total number of Afghan National Police today, for a country of nearly 30 million, is only twice the number of police officers in New York City.<sup>3</sup> Despite having borne the brunt of insurgent violence, the Afghan

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Iain Cochran

**Despite complaints of corruption, many dedicated Afghan National Policemen risk their lives daily. The ANP bears the brunt of the insurgency, with three times the casualties of the Afghan National Army.**

police continue to suffer from charges of corruption, tribal factionalism, and a lack of equipment and training. The Afghan National Army (ANA) stands at a strength of close to 70,000, with an eventual goal of 134,000 in the next three years, amid questions of financial sustainability. Even if the international community develops a workable scheme to fund the ANA while the Afghan economy continues to develop, it may be that we cannot afford the time needed to build their capability to defend Afghanistan on their own.

The shortfall in security forces has prompted calls to arm tribal militias—a sort of “neighborhood watch” program with guns. A similar initiative greatly contributed to reducing the level of violence in Iraq. However, there are important differences between Iraq and Afghanistan. Instead of having just two main factions—Sunnis and Shi’as—Afghanistan is host to hundreds of tribes and clans who can be convinced to work together to defeat a common threat, such as a foreign invader. But in the absence of a common threat, they default to working for the interests of their own tribes or a

leader who temporarily unites a few tribes to solve a local problem. If we empower Afghanistan’s tribes to provide their own security, we will have wasted years of work disarming militias in order to give a monopoly on military force to the national government (where it belongs). For an example of what can happen when Afghanistan’s tribes take control of security, we should recall the violence in Afghanistan after the Soviets left and the bloody power struggles that persisted until the Taliban were able to impose their own peculiar brand of security.

Arming “ordinary Afghans” and asking them to secure themselves will create more problems than it will solve, but those same “ordinary Afghans” are precisely where we should place our focus. Ordinary Afghans need to buy into their current form of government and reject what the insurgents offer. However, the current unpredictable security situation does nothing to reassure these ordinary Afghans with regard to the future. This requires a minimal level of security to buy time to accomplish the infrastructural and economic development necessary to stabilize the country and provide a basic standard of living. This basic standard of living will dry up the recruiting base for the insurgents, because a population that has nothing to lose is easy to recruit for suicide bombings against “foreign invaders.” A relatively small number of insurgents from economically depressed areas are able to use spectacular attacks and propaganda to inflate their perceived strength. As a result, even in areas where there is relative prosperity, the insurgency can easily manipulate a security vacuum to its advantage even when the majority is against the insurgency. We must improve security and basic living standards concurrently if we wish to convince ordinary Afghans that their government is winning the fight against the insurgents.

Afghanistan’s history over the last three decades makes Afghans especially reluctant to choose sides. While Afghans privately prefer their current government to anything the insurgents might offer,

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**Afghan National Army recruits come from a wide variety of backgrounds and enlist for a number of reasons. (February 2007)**

they are hesitant to state this openly, because doing so makes them extremely vulnerable. Throughout their history, Afghans have repeatedly suffered indignities from hostile external powers, internecine rivalries, warfare, and overnight changes in government. Because control of their villages has changed hands repeatedly without warning, and continues to do so, the average Afghan will remain uncommitted until the future is clear. Sir Robert Thompson's observation about Malaya applies: "What the peasant wants to know is: does the government mean to win the war? Because if not, he will have to support the insurgent."<sup>4</sup>

It is imperative that we challenge Afghans to make a public—and irrevocable—stand in favor of the government. However, with this imperative comes a heavy responsibility. If we convince Afghans to take such a stand, we are obligated to back them up when insurgents challenge them—as they certainly will. There are enough security forces in Afghanistan to do this locally and in isolated incidents, but it rarely happens. From time to time, a number of Afghan tribes and communities publicly state their support to the government. It is an absolutely critical and moral imperative that we support them when insurgents challenge them on these public statements. Nearby communities carefully watch the situation to see what develops. If they

like what they see, they are much more likely to behave in a similar fashion—news travels fast in Afghanistan in spite of the relative austerity of traditional mass media. This trend needs to be nurtured and developed until it reaches critical mass—a grass roots, pro-government uprising that the insurgents will be powerless to stop.

### **Hearts and Minds: An Uneven Playing Field?**

For an ordinary Afghan, the biggest obstacle to taking such a stand is the insurgents' effective use of propaganda—and especially the use of violence

as a form of propaganda. Insurgents clearly understand the criticality of the information environment and recognize the importance of propaganda in achieving their aims. In some ways, the media environment represents an uneven playing field that favors the insurgents—and they relentlessly use it to their advantage. They share religious, tribal, and ethnic ties; a language; and a much deeper and richer understanding of the Afghan culture and Afghan needs and vulnerabilities. They are rarely bound by the need for truth or the need to verify facts, which allows them to react much more quickly to events—especially when they have engineered those events to support their cause. Moreover, the media corporations' desire for profits favors the type of sensationalist reporting that publicizes insurgent propaganda.

However, in some ways, the Afghan government, NATO, and ISAF are their own worst enemies. They ought to be able to use their credibility, resources, and easy access to audiences to highlight the Taliban's inability to offer Afghans anything but brutality. Despite this advantage, many observers question who is winning the war of ideas.<sup>5</sup> Cultural differences between NATO/ISAF and the Afghan people, and between the Afghan government in Kabul and some of its constituents in remote areas, offer a big advantage to the insurgents.

However, many hindrances to competition in the war of ideas are self-imposed. Bureaucratic and hierarchical structures may help ensure the consistency of messages, but they also hamper agility. Limitations on the use of religious themes also somewhat limit the use of poetry, music, and other culturally relevant tools. Other hindrances include the lack of a consistent NATO policy with regard to Pakistan and other neighbors, different approaches with regard to holding the Afghan government accountable, and difficulties in harmonizing messages with the UN.

In spite of their best efforts, foreign forces and the government of Afghanistan also inadvertently provide fodder for insurgent propaganda planners. Mistakes and accidents that lead to civilian casualties and damage to infrastructure are an unavoidable consequence of military operations. Even the use of precision weapons cannot eliminate such incidents. A relative lack of ground troops leads to greater reliance on aerial weapons when those ground troops run into trouble. Exploiting the strong Afghan mistrust of foreign intentions and the burdens of history, insurgents are able to turn our mistakes into propaganda wins and mobilize support for their cause. Our troops' unfamiliarity with Afghan culture leads to further mistakes and missteps with regard to Afghan expectations. The Afghan government has less trouble with this and is able to employ its own military forces in a more personal and culturally sensitive manner. However, lacking a significant air force of its own, Afghan soldiers require foreign air power to get them out of a pinch, often again resulting in blowback toward international forces when things go wrong. Far bigger problems for the government, however, are the continued and widespread perception of corruption within its highest levels, a perceived failure to provide critical services—including security—and its lack of legitimacy among the Afghan people.

The informational methods of insurgent propaganda such as night letters, statements to the media, internet sites, mobile radio, and

DVDs, often carries little credibility with the Afghan people.<sup>6</sup> Looking only at these “traditional” forms of propaganda, however, is to overlook a significant aspect of the insurgent propaganda effort.

The power insurgents wield in the “information space” is not about what they *say*—it is about what they *do*. Actions such as beheadings, public hangings and beatings, suicide bombings, improvised explosive device attacks, and assassinations demonstrate the insurgency's ability to follow through on promises. This propaganda has real credibility with ordinary Afghans and with international audiences. Religion-based justification for the insurgency fails to resonate with the vast majority of Afghans; however, it only takes a handful of zealots willing to blow themselves up in a crowd of Afghans to send a much more powerful message. These actions give real credence to insurgent threats to cause harm. A demonstrated willingness to back up their threats puts the insurgents in the position of being able to wield sticks much more effectively than the carrots we have at our disposal.

While repeatedly demonstrating their willingness to “keep promises” with regard to violence, the insurgents are simultaneously able to capitalize on the Afghan government's inability to keep promises of security, development, and governance. The insurgents' record of providing development and governance is abysmal, and they lack a single,



Iain Cochrane

Tea houses are an important place where issues of the day are discussed, to include the role and performance of international forces, May 2007.

common vision for Afghanistan. However, the insurgents only need to show that the government of Afghanistan and the West are failing. By preserving the status quo—a stalemate—they boost their own credibility and undermine our credibility and that of the Afghan government.

The insurgents use their ability to blend with the population and to exploit popular grievances and ethnic, religious, and historic ties to portray the government as inept, and foreign forces as outsiders. The insurgents' aim is to eventually offer a brutalized, frustrated, and embittered population their alternative as the only solution to the status quo. Armed with a significant advantage in the informational space, they are willing to lose conventional, tactical engagements to obtain their strategic goal—the eventual rejection of the government of Afghanistan and the foreign occupiers.

At the heart of the insurgents' strategy is the emphasis they place on *persuasion* as the ultimate goal of all their operations. In Western military circles, we tend to characterize actions as “kinetic” or “non-kinetic.” This separation between the two is the core of our problem and of the insurgents' success. The insurgents view “kinetic” and “non-kinetic” as one and the same. According to *Asia Report*, “We tend to view information operations as supplementing kinetic [fighting] operations . . . virtually every kinetic operation they undertake is specifically designed to influence attitudes or perceptions.”<sup>7</sup>

Al-Qaeda's attacks on 9/11 were not simply about killing large numbers of Westerners; they were about influencing the attitudes of the American people, and the actions of the United States government. While being driven into the mountains was not likely a part of Al-Qaeda's calculus, only Osama bin Laden knows for certain whether the ultimate objectives of this massive information operation have been achieved. The Taliban and other insurgent groups within Afghanistan have continued planning their operations in this way. The insurgents push their information strategy both within Afghanistan, where they rely heavily on threats and intimidation, and internationally, where they use “all available networks—political, social, economic and military—to convince the enemy's political decision-makers that their strategic goals are either unachievable or too costly for the perceived benefit.”<sup>8</sup>

## Turning Insurgent Violence to Our Advantage

The perceptions of involved publics represent NATO's Achilles heel when it comes to Afghanistan—whether Afghan, American, French, or any of the other partners contributing troops to the ISAF mission. If Afghans do not support their government and our troops, we will not succeed. At the same time, if the West fails to see any hope and purpose in the ISAF mission, it will withdraw its support.

The trend within Afghanistan is not in our favor. Internationally, there are signs that the insurgents are not only increasingly targeting non-Afghan audiences, but may be seeing increasing success with them. To debate whether more effort is needed to convince Afghans that the insurgency will fail, or to convince the international community to provide more support, is fruitless. Both are needed, and soon.

However, the military has more control, more levers, and can better coordinate its actions within Afghanistan. In addition, the support of the Afghan people for their form of government, as opposed to that offered (if any) by the Taliban, is ultimately what the conflict in Afghanistan is about.

Recognition of the importance of public perception within Afghanistan has increased dramatically within NATO military circles. Despite what news reports suggest, there have been massive efforts to reduce civilian casualties, conduct joint Afghan-ISAF operations, change the way we search the homes of suspected insurgents, and train soldiers to behave in ways that harmonize better with Afghans.

In a nod to the insurgent's ability to mobilize public opinion with violence, we now factor the potential psychological effects of our military actions into our planning considerations. Coalition planners understand that focusing on the network and attempting to kill or capture all of the terrorists

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or insurgents is a Sisyphean task. It fails to address the root cause, the movement.

Rather than using influence actions or operations to *supplement* the main effort—killing and capturing insurgents—“influencing” needs to be *the* main effort in Afghanistan. Influencing needs to be supported, in turn, by military force as needed. This does not imply we should not use military force, but in deciding if, when, or how to use military force, the primary factor to consider is its impact on Afghans and their support for their government.

Since 2005, the use of suicide bombings—once virtually unheard of in Afghanistan—has climbed astronomically.<sup>9</sup> Concurrent with this, the use of improvised explosive devices and the orchestration of events in which insurgents kill Afghan public servants and Afghan civilians have risen dramatically—along with the media coverage. While there has been much study of the trends in insurgent use of “traditional” forms of propaganda, we often ignore, overlook, or misinterpret the role of violence in influencing attitudes and behavior. There have been steps to address insurgents’ use of violence, but they only scratch the surface in terms of the dynamics involved in shaping Afghan public perceptions. We need to turn the insurgents’ use of violence to our advantage.

Ongoing efforts to counter insurgent propaganda focus heavily on the use of mass media to change *attitudes*, because we are familiar with mass media from our own culture, and because using them to change attitudes worked relatively well in recent NATO efforts in Bosnia and Kosovo. In Afghanistan, we often place the use of mass media and other tools to influence attitudes in a parallel or supplementary role, to operations. We try to increase public support for government efforts, while operations to clear insurgents from their hideouts continue unabated. There are billboards, newspapers, television spots, and a growing network of radio stations. We use these tools to change the attitudes of the Afghan public (in the hopes that behavior will follow), while we ignore the behavior of the insurgents themselves. We presume they are so entrenched in their ideology that we cannot hope

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to change them. More important, we almost entirely neglect behavior itself as something we should try to change. There are some efforts to persuade insurgents to behave differently by “showing them the consequences of their behavior”—i.e. by pursuing them relentlessly with military means. When insurgents continue to behave violently, the response is often to exploit their behavior and violence to illustrate that they are nothing more than “bad people” who do not deserve popular support. We highlight insurgent atrocities—IED attacks, suicide attacks, bombings, assassinations, and killings of innocents or “spies”—to attempt to drive a wedge between ordinary Afghans and the insurgents. Ironically, the people who we ask to withdraw their support are powerless to side against the insurgents if they value their own lives or those of their families.

The first problem with this tactic is that the Afghan people are already overwhelmingly against IED makers and insurgents.<sup>10</sup> Afghans know all too well who is doing the killing and who is doing the dying. They want it to stop, and feel powerless to stop it themselves.

However, their non-support for insurgents does not translate into increased support for ISAF or for the Afghan government. In fact, surveys often show the opposite: the increase in random, unpredictable violence often goes hand-in-hand with an increased anger at their government and ISAF for failing to prevent such incidents. Some Afghans not only blame ISAF for these deaths, but also suspect complicity in it, because they are unable to grasp how such a large, wealthy and powerful collection of nations cannot manage to rid them of what we have for years claimed are only a few thousand insurgents. The hope that we can continue to operate as we have until now, and that one day Afghans will simply conclude that they have had enough violence from insurgents and stand up to them is futile. A far more chilling—and not altogether unlikely—scenario is that they will instead lose patience, stand up to their own government, and demand an end to the foreign troop presence.

We devote a great deal of energy to educating our troops how to best avoid becoming victims of





Iain Cochrane

Elders discuss unknown topics in front of their closed shops, March 2008.

bombings and attacks, knowing they will continue and probably increase for the foreseeable future. These efforts should continue, along with efforts to find technical solutions that can offer temporary relief until the insurgents adapt their tactics in response. However, we should not discard the possibility that we can use influence operations to slow or even reverse the current trend of insurgent violence. To do this, however, *it is necessary to stop publicizing these events with the aim of building popular support for ISAF or the Afghan government*, because this may actually support insurgent aims and encourage repetition. If we understand the insurgents' aims in carrying out violent attacks, it may be possible to convince them that they are not achieving these aims, thus persuading them to change tactics.

Insurgent violence aims to create terror, fear, and uncertainty among the populace. Continued unpredictable violence causes Afghans to question whether their government or foreign forces can do *anything* to prevent it. When, as often is the case, this violence targets government or foreign forces, and Afghan bystanders are injured or killed, Afghans protect themselves from future occurrences by avoiding government or foreign forces. When it happens once or twice, Afghans may blame the insurgents. When it continues unabated or increases, Afghans are more likely to blame the authorities for failing to take effective action to prevent it.

Action on the part of Afghans themselves becomes even less likely over time, according to the well-documented psychological phenomenon of “learned helplessness”—when people come to believe they have no control over a situation, they

will become passive, even if they actually do have the power to change the circumstances. Publicizing insurgent violence thus serves the insurgents' goals by increasing elements of the environment that favor the insurgent cause.

The *worst* action we can take is to attempt camouflaging our own mistakes with regard to civilian casualties and damage to Afghan infrastructure—regrettable and unintended as they may be. Occasionally, the media publicize statements by ISAF officials underlining that insurgents cause more civilian deaths intentionally than ISAF causes accidentally. This not only confuses two separate issues that require separate solutions, but also places ISAF on the morally corrupt side of the issue. To equate the accidental deaths ISAF causes in trying to provide security with the intentional deaths the insurgents cause in trying to bring down their government further blurs ISAF actions with insurgent violence in the minds of ordinary Afghans—whose outrage at ISAF-caused civilian casualties is a result of higher expectations for ISAF. Afghans express less moral outrage at insurgent killings because they hold insurgents to a different moral standard. Afghans expect ISAF to stop killing, and to stop insurgents from killing.

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To make matters worse, the behavior of our own troops often unwittingly provides an unexpected bounty to the insurgents who engage in violence, and further encourages repetition of it. After an attack, ISAF troops are often “locked down” for a specified period to ensure the attack is not part of a broader series of attacks. ISAF troops permitted to go to the affected area do so under full alert, under increased protection and vigilance. Rarely are there any efforts to interact directly with affected Afghans, possibly because ISAF prefers to “let the Afghan authorities handle it.” While these actions are all understandable from a “force protection” standpoint, they may actually do more harm than good. They perpetuate the idea that ISAF soldiers are more concerned with their own safety than that of ordinary Afghans, and they increase the gulf that separates Afghans from foreign troops who ride around in armored vehicles, hidden behind bulletproof plates and tinted windows and sunglasses. They fail to convey any compassion for human suffering, to build or exploit common anger against the perpetrators, and convey fear rather than power or authority. While insurgents have on occasion planned complex attacks involving several explosive devices, the vast majority of such attacks involve just a single explosion. It is therefore questionable whether the gain of such follow-on restrictions justifies the lost opportunities and the message unintentionally conveyed.

Reversing the effects of violent attacks will convince insurgents to change their tactics. This means that terror, fear, and uncertainty need to be transformed into public outrage and mutual solidarity. Afghans need to be encouraged to redirect their anger toward insurgents in a public way instead of holding foreign forces and the Afghan government responsible for security incidents. Fanning the flames of the existing frustration via press statements to the mass media will do little to achieve these aims; the intervention needs to be on a personal level. Rather than lying low after an attack, ISAF troops and leaders—in a gesture of compassion and solidarity—need to increase their visibility in the affected areas. In consultation and in partnership with local Afghan authorities, and perhaps together with local members of the Afghan National Police, visits to heads of affected families and tribal elders, where appropriate, to offer condo-

lences, express sympathy, and offer gifts would be helpful. Such visits, accomplished properly, might encourage affected communities to demonstrate publicly against the violence, and express solidarity with their government and Soldiers working to prevent such attacks.

While some may question the feasibility of orchestrating public demonstrations against insurgents, it has in fact happened several times recently. In mid-October 2008, local authorities in Helmand and surrounding provinces carefully managed responses to a series of insurgent attacks. Afghans there vented their anger against insurgents rather than the authorities, and the protests spread to the faraway provinces of Laghman, Nangarhar, Paktia, Herat, and Bamiyan. In Herat, an assembly headed by the provincial governor heard statements by various participants, government officials, and clerics, damning the Taliban as “un-Islamic.” These protests did not happen spontaneously; government authorities carefully nurtured them. These protests gave local Afghans a means to express their anger against those actually responsible and bolstered the idea that the government is concerned for the welfare of those affected. The Ulema Council in Kabul likewise issued statements about the un-Islamic nature of the attacks. To continue to build on these events, local government and foreign representatives expressed condolences three and forty days after the event, as is the local custom.

These are the kinds of events that should receive publicity in the mass media, to demonstrate that Afghans affected by insurgent violence are not alone in their grief or anger. We must study the lessons learned from such incidents and apply them elsewhere. In addition, as mentioned earlier, we should increase the level of security and presence so that we do not leave these newly empowered Afghans open to retribution by the insurgents.

Besides causing insurgents to question the utility of violence to achieve their aims, these kinds of engineered events have additional benefits behind the scenes. Quite often, there are those within the community who have knowledge of others who actively or passively support the insurgents, but are unwilling to share it with the authorities. While we would like those with this kind of knowledge to report it to ISAF or to government security forces, it may be just as beneficial in the end if they report

the information to their elders or simply voice their disapproval privately. This avenue affords local leaders, now armed with this knowledge, opportunities to show they are doing something to solve the problem and highlights the insurgents' status as the minority they truly are.

In order to take full advantage of such opportunities, we must re-think what we would like our intelligence efforts to produce. We need to replace reporting and analysis that occurs behind classified computer systems, feeding the efforts to kill or capture insurgents, with local intelligence on insurgent identities, locations, and support networks. Village and tribal dynamics, local economics and power structures, and the needs of affected Afghans—the “human terrain mapping” currently in vogue—is necessary if we intend to influence the thinking and actions of local Afghans. The meaning and effect of propaganda of all types needs to be understood locally, not just in Kabul. Rather than using expensive technical means or Western-based contractors, we should obtain this kind of intelligence through human contact, supported by cultural, religious, and anthropological expertise that is often freely available locally.

Finally, while mass media continue to have certain uses, the disproportionately large human and financial resources that are consumed by ISAF mass media exploitation need to be made available at the grass-roots level. If we are to win Afghan hearts and minds, we must win them one village and valley at a time. They will not be won by the kind of slick television advertising that sells Coca-Cola. They will not be won by publishing a million ISAF newspapers a year when roughly three-quarters of Afghans are illiterate. They will not be won with a nationwide radio network that plays identical content, even if supplemented with regionally produced recorded content. As in our own countries, Afghans implicitly trust and prefer local media to Kabul media. More important, they trust what their village and tribal elders tell them much more than they trust what Kabul or Brussels tells them.

***The meaning and effect of propaganda of all types needs to be understood locally, not just in Kabul.***

Rather than seizing upon every act of insurgent violence to point out the obvious—that the insurgents are bad people—thereby giving additional press to an action designed to induce fear and gain publicity in the first place, we should reserve our use of the mass media for other issues. Afghans who read newspapers and regularly watch television tend to be decision makers and members of elite minority groups. We should use the media to influence government policy, expose corruption, encourage investment, promote education, and inform this public on the events that affect them. We can use the media to influence opinion and facilitate dialogue among students and the elite in search of longer-term solutions for those acts of terrorism that are already the subject of regional or national public discussion.

We can exploit insurgent atrocities to our advantage, and to the advantage of the Afghans who seek a peaceful future. We just need to do it differently. We should place less emphasis on throwing more



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**ISAF's newspaper provides a means to inform the literate minority. The other 75 percent or so must be reached in other ways. (Kabul, April 2007)**

troops and money at the problem, and consider changes in strategy.

Rather than assuming insurgent behavior cannot be changed—or worse, giving free publicity to their behavior and thus encouraging repetition—we should try to convince insurgents to change their tactics, and galvanize public opinion against them if they do not. The insurgents are rational, adaptive opponents of the Afghan people who have been honing and refining their techniques for seven years—if not longer. Afghanistan is burning, and

the vast majority of Afghans know who started the fire. Rather than arguing over who should operate the fire hoses, or inadvertently fanning the flames, we need to energize and empower ordinary Afghans to help extinguish the fire in Afghanistan before it consumes all of us. **MR**

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## NOTES

1. This quotation by Secretary Gates appeared, among other places, in Peter Spiegel, "Defense Secretary Gates Wants to Spend More on U.S. Diplomacy," *Los Angeles Times*, 16 July 2008.

2. See statistics on <<http://www.icasualties.org/oef>>, and Michael R. Gordon, "Afghan Strategy Poses Stiff Challenge for Obama," *New York Times*, 1 December 2008, Asia section.

3. The New York Police Department lists an active strength of just over 37,000 officers <[www.nyc.gov/html/nypd/html/faq/faq\\_police.shtml#1](http://www.nyc.gov/html/nypd/html/faq/faq_police.shtml#1)>, while a number of sources cite current Afghan National Police Strength at 79,000, with an eventual goal of 82,000 (see for example <[www.defenselink.mil/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=49967](http://www.defenselink.mil/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=49967)>).

4. Quoted in Sir Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: The Lessons of Malaya and Vietnam* (London: Chatto and Widus, 1966).

5. Previous work on the topic includes Tim Foxley, "The Taliban's Propaganda Activities: How Well is the Afghan Insurgency Communicating and What is It Saying?" Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, project paper, June 2007; Thomas H. Johnson, "The Taliban Insurgency and an Analysis of *Shabnamah* (Night Letters)," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 18, no. 3 (September 2007), 317-44; Thomas Elkjer Nissen, "The Taliban's information warfare: A Comparative Analysis of NATO Information Operations and Taliban Information Activities," Royal Danish Defence College, December 2007; and Asia Report No. 158, "Taliban Propaganda: Winning the War

of Words?" International Crisis Group, 24 July 2008.

6. One can make similar arguments concerning messages provided by the Afghan government and the international community. However, both ISAF and Afghan government messages carry significantly more credibility from a raw informational point of view. Perceived corruption and failures to deliver on promises such as improved security will continue to undermine this credibility.

7. Asia Report No. 158; *Ibid*.

8. Thomas X. Hammes, *The Sling and the Stone: On War in the 21st Century* (Osceola, WI: Zenith Press, 2006), 2.

9. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan conducted a study of suicide bombing trends from 2001 to 2007 ("Suicide Attacks in Afghanistan, 2001-2007") which can be found at <<http://fetcher.fw-notify.net/0000000234952526336/UNAMA%20-%20SUICIDE%20ATTACKS%20STUDY%20-%202007%20SEPT%2009th%202007.pdf>> (5 December 2008). In 2008, a series of large-scale attacks has continued to drive casualty figures upward.

10. Numerous surveys and studies support this claim. Among them: Altai Consulting's "Nationwide Research and Survey on Illegal State Opposing Armed Groups—ISOAGs" (April 2006); Environics Research Group's "2007 Survey of Afghans"; the Charney Research Poll released in Nov 2007; and numerous surveys by Manasia Research Associates.

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