

The Taliban's propaganda activities: how well is the Afghan insurgency communicating and what is it saying?

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Summary

International analysts and media alike often claim that current Taliban propaganda efforts are winning over the population in Afghanistan and that this is tipping the balance in favour of the insurgency. Such claims are exaggerated; but because of a perceived failure to provide effective security and reconstruction, the Afghan Government and international military forces have lost much of the 'hearts and minds' initiative that they held in 2002 following the defeat of the Taliban. The Taliban's own hearts and minds activities are now prolonging and exacerbating an already difficult insurgency problem for the Afghan Government and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in the south of the country.

From faltering beginnings, Taliban communications have developed to embrace modern technology such as the Internet, partly by observing other insurgencies. However, their methods remain crude, home-grown and only partially effective. Their messages are simple, often underpinned by threats and violence, and appear to be most effective when directed to the Pashtun tribal audience on both sides of the Afghan–Pakistani border. Often they are not so much securing hearts and minds as negotiating short-term tribal allegiances. However, the net result—resistance to the Afghan Government and ISAF—remains the same.

Taliban efforts to communicate do not display much evidence of coordination, and they are seemingly uninterested in wider strategic issues that could assist their cause. There are also indications of confusion in Taliban messages, which suggest differences of opinion on strategic and moral issues such as suicide bombings, civilian casualties and attacking schools. In these respects, they have the potential to perform a lot better and this should be a concern for the Afghan Government and the international community.

In terms of effectiveness, there is still no evidence of a large-scale shift in the mood of the Afghan population towards the Taliban as a result of their efforts to influence them. The antipathy of most Afghan ethnic groups towards the predominantly Pashtun Taliban movement means that significant Taliban progress in the northern half of the country remains unlikely. Despite unhappiness over slow progress in the provision of security and development, the general feeling of the population remains at least tolerant of the current Afghan regime and the ISAF military presence. No significant shift in popular attitude is likely in 2007–2008 unless the Taliban are able to demonstrate an increasing (and much more substantial) presence in the south of the country.

Although it is only through credible progress in governance, the economy and security that the Afghan Government, supported by ISAF and the international community, can effectively tackle the insurgency, the Taliban are also vulnerable to a hearts and minds campaign against

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them. With a strong belief in Sharia-based Islamic governance and that 'Allah will provide', they display only limited interest in how they might govern the country, deal with other ethnic groups or provide reconstruction and jobs. The population do not favour the return of a Taliban regime and the Taliban are not achieving a repeat of the anti-Soviet-style countrywide uprising that they are promoting. The Afghan Government could be doing a lot more to undermine the insurgency—in particular the recruiting base of young, poor, mainly Pashtun men in southern Afghanistan and north-western Pakistan—with a media campaign that challenges and exploits the often confused and uncoordinated Taliban communiqués. An integrated media campaign with a strong Afghan 'face', which also engages the population on the Pakistan side of the border, is needed in order to educate and promote wider popular discussion; to challenge the Taliban to explain their actions and intent; and to more actively question the Taliban's legitimacy, their interpretation of Islam, what constitutes a jihad and the morality of killing civilians.

I. Introduction

In a conflict, effective use of communications media to advance and promote goals, activities and intentions can be key in winning the population's support, or 'hearts and minds'. The retired British general, Rupert Smith, notes that most modern conflicts are primarily about winning the will of the people on whose territory a conflict is being fought: 'winning the trial of strength will not deliver the will of the people, and at the base that is the only true aim of any use of force in our modern conflicts'.¹ This observation seems especially true in the case of Afghanistan, a multi-ethnic and multi-tribal country which has been fought over hundreds of times over the centuries and is currently in its 28th year of more or less continuous conflict—involving the Soviet invasion, civil war and the Taliban regime and, since 2001, Taliban guerrilla resistance to the new Afghan Government, US-led coalition forces and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).² The hearts and minds of the Afghan people are influenced by a range of factors: the actions of the international community as a whole; the actions of the international military forces; performance of Afghan central and local government; local warlords; economic opportunities; perceptions and performance of the security and justice bodies that should be intended to protect them; the actions and influence of neighbouring countries; and, of course, the Taliban-led insurgency.

In Afghanistan, the pragmatic shifting of allegiance by key tribes and warlords can be crucial to deciding victory and, even today, the population's perception of the insurgency and its progress can determine the rise and fall of support for the Taliban. Crucial to the shaping of popular perception is the manner and nature of the Taliban's efforts to communicate their goals, views and values. This paper attempts to analyse and understand the manner and effectiveness of the Taliban's efforts to communicate with, and influence, local and international communities, both supporters and opponents alike. The paper will then suggest some ways in which the international community and the Afghan Government might address this important area of Taliban activity.

¹ Smith, R., *The Utility of Force* (Penguin Books Ltd: London, 2006), p. 331.

² ISAF is mandated under Chapter VII of the United Nations (UN) Charter (Peace Enforcing) by UN Security Resolutions 1386, 1413, 1444, 1510, 1563, 1623, 1659 and 1707. It exists in accordance with the Bonn Agreement of 6 Dec. 2001. ISAF's stated primary role is to support the Afghanistan Government in providing and maintaining a secure environment in order to facilitate the rebuilding of Afghanistan. More than 35 000 troops make up ISAF, with contributions from 37 nations. ISAF's area of operations covers the whole of Afghanistan. See the ISAF website at URL <<http://www.nato.int/ISAF/index.htm>>.

There are many difficulties associated with studying the Taliban, not least because it is problematic to obtain accurate translated Taliban statements. Furthermore, the Taliban website was taken offline during the course of writing this paper, meaning that many Taliban statements quoted here are now very difficult to trace.³ Taliban communications techniques do not lend themselves to precise descriptions such as 'information operations', 'propaganda', 'hearts and minds' or 'media campaign'. The Taliban's activities in these areas are not a formal campaign, and in practice their activities usually fall between these terms. This paper uses these terms where they seem helpful and appropriate, but there are no clear definitions for the frequently ad hoc and unstructured nature of Taliban communications, and care must be taken to avoid attributing artificial meaning, structure and purpose to their activities in this area.

II. Background

Since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, the remnants of the regime made efforts to re-establish themselves as a viable political and military force. The Taliban have now evolved into an effective insurgency, demonstrated clearly during the fighting in southern Afghanistan in the summer of 2006: 'British paratroopers have, as senior commanders admit, been involved in the most prolonged period of intense fighting since the Korean War. What should have been a security operation covering a major reconstruction effort to win "hearts and minds" has turned into a full-blown war'.⁴

The prime reasons for the ongoing persistence of the Taliban-led insurgency are:

- (a) a historically strong tribal gun culture and rejection of external control;⁵
- (b) a large base of residual 'folk' experience of guerrilla fighting against the Soviets;
- (c) a unifying motivation in Islam, compatible with Pashtun tribal values;
- (d) a 'safe haven' in Pakistan's tribal areas from which to regroup and reorganize;
- (e) a pool of recruits from Pashtun and refugee groups on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistani border;
- (f) inspiration (and some practical knowledge gained) from the insurgency in Iraq; and
- (g) the practical, geographical, financial and infrastructural difficulties encountered by the new Afghan regime, despite assistance from the international community.

The world according to the Taliban

When looking at the way in which the Taliban communicate, it is important to have an understanding of who they are and where they come from. There are numerous studies exploring the origins of the Taliban phenomenon. A brief overview should suffice here.

After the initial optimism following the defeat of the Soviet Army and the subsequent downfall of the Soviet puppet regime of President Sayid Mohammed Najibullah in 1992,

³ Dupee, M., 'NATO launches Operation Achilles in northern Helmand; Taliban website "shut down"', *Afghan.com*, 6 Mar. 2007, URL <<http://www.afgha.com/?q=node/2144>>.

⁴ Tweedie, N., 'Troops use up ammo as war with Taliban claims 14th life', *Daily Telegraph*, 28 Aug. 2006.

⁵ 'The Pathan—of whatever tribe—has a strong pride in being a Pathan. The tribal group is the limit of the extent to which the Pathan is prepared to abate his jealously guarded individualism. . . . To the world outside his tribal group . . . the Pathan's attitude alternates between a total indifference and a kind of tigerish contempt for the rest of the human animal kingdom . . . all this makes the Pathan a man to be liked and respected, to be treated tactfully and carefully; and a man rarely, if ever, to be organised within the impersonal conventions of a modern state'. Griffiths, J., *Afghanistan* (Pall Mall Press: London, 1967), p. 61.

the various victorious mujahedin groups began fighting amongst themselves. Numerous, (predominantly Pashtun) Afghans, either refugees from, or former combatants of, the guerrilla war against the Soviets, were fired with Islamic fervour by the religious schools (madrassas) of Pakistan that had given them shelter and education. The Taliban (literally 'religious students') were angered by the corruption and self-interest of Afghan warlords and promised a pure and fair interpretation of Islam that aimed to return the country to the days of the Prophet Muhammad. This struck a chord with the warlord-weary Pashtun populace, most of whom craved only some semblance of law and order. Supported militarily and financially by Pakistan, who saw in the Taliban a means of influencing the region, successful Taliban reprisals against corrupt local Pashtun warlords created a 'bandwagon' of pro-Taliban support in the south of the country. Many pragmatic Pashtun tribal leaders and even warlords from other ethnic groups chose to be swept up in this popular movement, judging it safer to join the Taliban rather than fight them.

In essence, the Taliban world view has been shaped by a combination of 'limiting' factors: limited access to media, education, ideas of governance and conflict resolution, limited access to other countries and limited tolerance of people of different religious or cultural backgrounds. Since their removal from power, the initially anti-modern Taliban have recognized that modern technology and media can be useful for their insurgency. If the Taliban movement is now expanding its horizons, it is through the prisms of al-Qaeda and the insurgency in Iraq. Although the insurgency is still conducted in a typically Afghan style (suicide bombing being the notable exception), some Taliban are starting to perceive and portray themselves as part of a 'global jihad'.

'Islam will take care of everyone'

The Taliban's governance of Afghanistan lasted from 1996 to the end of 2001. During this time the regime demonstrated good performance in some areas, such as the provision of basic security (at least in the regions they controlled), enforcement of religious law and—in contrast to five years of post-Taliban international community efforts—they even achieved a reasonably effective opium poppy ban in 2000–2001. However, the Taliban did not show interest in centralized mechanisms of modern governance and communication with the populace. For the Taliban, as a radical Islamist movement, it simply was not considered a priority. Ahmed Rashid notes: 'The lack of a central authority, state organisations, a methodology for command and control and mechanisms which can reflect some level of popular participation . . . make it impossible for many Afghans to accept the Taliban . . . the Taliban are incapable of carrying out even the minimum of developmental work because they believe that Islam will take care of everyone'.⁶

It has become a cliché much touted by Western media and analysts that Taliban hearts and minds activities are much more sophisticated and effective than that of the international community and are steadily winning over the population.⁷ This is not really the case; but the ability of the Taliban-led insurgency in Afghanistan to communicate its goals, messages and intent has improved significantly in the five years since 2001. Con-

⁶ Rashid, A., *The Taliban* (Pan Books: London, 2001), pp. 212–13.

⁷ 'The Taliban are waging a successful Hearts and Minds strategy in southern Afghanistan; the international community is not'. Senlis Council, *Hearts and Minds in Afghanistan*, 14 Dec. 2006, URL <http://www.senliscouncil.net/modules/publications/017_publication>, p 1. See also Motlagh, J., 'Taliban, take two', *The American Conservative*, 18 Dec. 2006, p. 25.

versely, the Afghan Government and the international community are losing any initiative in this area that they might have had in 2002. The Taliban's efforts to communicate to local and international audiences are significantly prolonging and exacerbating an already difficult insurgency problem in southern and eastern Afghanistan. The commander of ISAF IX, General David Richards, suggested that the Afghan population might be at a 'tipping point' between supporting the Afghan Government or the Taliban-led insurgents.⁸ Although the situation may not yet be as dire as this, the Taliban have a lot of scope for improvement in their ability to communicate their messages, at both the local and international levels. They could also do a lot more (and do it more effectively) to influence the thinking and activities of the Pashtun population in southern and eastern Afghanistan and in Pakistan. The international community should recognize this as a significant cause for concern.

Faltering beginnings for Taliban propaganda efforts

The destruction of the Taliban regime in November 2001 saw the fighters and officials dispersed. Many fled to Pakistan to regroup and reassess their future intentions. Given their limited funding, weapons and fighters, the fragility of support amongst their Pashtun tribal base and the disappearance of their international backing (particularly from Pakistan), it was by no means certain that the Taliban would be capable of reconstituting themselves into a credible military or political organization, let alone a viable 'government in waiting'.

Early Taliban post-December 2001 media efforts were limited and cautious, reflecting the precarious nature of their position. The first media spokesman appointed after the collapse of the regime was Abdul Latif Hakimi. When Pakistani authorities arrested Hakimi on 4 October 2005, he was replaced by as many as three successors. One of these new spokesmen, Mohammed Hanif, was himself arrested in January 2007. The main aim of Taliban media activities during this time was to publicize, in an often exaggerated fashion, Taliban operations undertaken in Afghanistan. This was achieved mainly through contact with Pakistani or international press, usually through radio, telephone or newspapers.

As Taliban capabilities and confidence gradually improved and they were able to expand their guerrilla operations, their efforts to engage with the international media and the Afghan populace began to develop, involving methods ranging from the low technology of 'night letters' to the circulation of DVDs and the more advanced technology of the Internet. Some members of the leadership have been giving radio and television interviews on a regular basis.⁹ Sometimes the Taliban message might even touch on wider issues, such as a Taliban constitution or a 'code of conduct' for its fighters.¹⁰

The Taliban have moved on from banning photography and television sets and are now turning modern technology against the international forces.¹¹ Their embracing of

⁸ Associated Press, 'Top general says Afghans could switch sides without improvements', *International Herald Tribune*, 8 Oct. 2006.

⁹ Dupee, M., 'The specter of Mullah Dadullah', *Afgha.com*, 13 June, 2006, URL <<http://www.afgha.com/?q=node/520>>.

¹⁰ Schuster, H., 'The Taliban's rules', *CNN.com*, 7 Dec. 2006, <<http://www.cnn.com/2006/WORLD/meast/12/06/schuster.12.6/index.html>>.

¹¹ Mir, H., 'The Taliban's new face', *The Rediff Special*, 27 Sep. 2005, URL <<http://www.rediff.com/news/2005/sep/27spec4.htm>>.

technology is probably a result of observing other current insurgencies (in particular in Iraq), but also because of the growing accessibility of such technologies and their increasing ease of use.

With the creation of a high command based in Pakistan (known as the Quetta Shura) the Taliban leaders appear to recognize the importance of promoting a 'media line', and their website contained statements from a 'media committee'. However, in contrast to al-Qaeda's global media reach and the efforts of the Iraqi insurgents, Taliban techniques are still relatively crude, home-grown and only partially effective.¹²

The Taliban today: what are they trying to say?

It is quite difficult to pin down definitive statements from Mullah Mohammed Omar and the rest of the Taliban leadership concerning their goals and intentions for Afghanistan. The Taliban exhibit a general lack of strategic planning and activity, particularly in the area of communications. The most recent of only a handful of interviews with the Taliban leader, Mullah Omar, in January 2007, offers perhaps the best statement of their overall intent: 'foreign troops should leave Afghanistan and then the institutions they created should be dismantled'.¹³

The goal of the Taliban leadership at the strategic level appears to be twofold: the ejection of all foreign military forces and the re-establishment of the Taliban-run Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan that they lost in 2001. Their media activities are directed primarily toward these aims, but it is perhaps indicative of the Taliban's inability or unwillingness to promote themselves in the arena of governance that the bulk of the media effort is directed at the former, rather than the latter, of the two strategic goals. They are more explicit about their intentions to confront and militarily defeat the 'foreign invaders' than they are about their plans for running the country. The Taliban do not cite any authority, other than Allah, as a basis for their actions and therefore make little effort to justify their goals other than to promote the idea that it is the Islamic duty of Afghans to attack the foreign military presence. As regards the content and presentation of their messages, while there are very clear recurring themes aimed at the local population (the call to 'jihad', proscriptions against engagement with international forces or the Afghan Government and abstention from 'un-Islamic activity') there is little evidence of longer-term planning or treatment of wider issues such as governance, politics, reconstruction and the economy.

Taliban propaganda tends to focus on four key areas: (a) victories on the battlefield, (b) values and beliefs, (c) information and instructions to the Afghan population and (d) refuting the claims of ISAF and the Afghan Government. They have been making use of a growing range of media and communications resources to do so: (a) fax, telephone, mobile phone and satellite telephone; (b) radio and TV; (c) newspapers; (d) 'night letters'; (e) direct contact with the population; (f) CDs/DVDs/videotapes; and

¹² The English language section of the now apparently defunct Taliban website, URL <<http://www.alemarah.com>>, remained, certainly throughout 2006 and into 2007, a crude list of claimed losses inflicted on Afghan Government and international forces, the descriptions of which were often barely comprehensible. In one instance, on claiming to have shot down a British aircraft in Mar. 2007, the website noted: 'This is mention the able the rags of airplane were delirium in the location of incident and many people came for the trip'. For months the English section was entitled 'Vice [Voice] of the Jihad'. Technical difficulties aside, this points to a certain amount of indifference to communicating clearly to the English-speaking world.

¹³ Khan, I., 'Omar threatens to intensify war: Talks with Karzai govt ruled out', *Dawn*, 4 Jan. 2007, <<http://www.dawn.com/2007/01/04/top4.htm>>.

(g) websites and the Internet. The main role of Taliban media spokesmen has been to promote information about reported Taliban attacks against targets inside Afghanistan. A secondary function, but recently growing in prominence, has been to disseminate key statements from the Taliban leadership. Regular themes in these statements have included: a rejection of negotiation with the Afghan Government; denials of any Taliban presence in Pakistan or that Pakistan is providing any assistance to them; and—indicating concern for the way they are perceived by the populace—claims not to cause civilian casualties.¹⁴

Although the Taliban's ultimate goal is to achieve a fundamentalist Islamic state under Sharia law and to eject foreign influence, their activities and statements in support of this goal do not appear coordinated.¹⁵ After five years in armed opposition, Taliban propaganda skills in support of their fighters have improved, but their efforts have been and still are frequently contradictory and confused:

A Taliban spokesman denied the group was involved in the Jalalabad blasts, saying it did not target civilians, but the movement did claim a bomb attack in that city on Saturday that killed two women working to register female voters for the UN-Afghan electoral body . . . A Taliban spokesman said on Wednesday the Islamic guerrillas had captured a foreign woman and an Afghan man, raising fears about the journalist's safety, but another spokesman denied this . . . On Friday, Taliban guerrillas killed 16 people in Zabul province after finding they had voter registration cards.¹⁶

Their treatment of issues such as whether suicide bombings and civilian casualties can be justified continues to suggest uncertainty and disputes about such issues within the Taliban leadership:

Monday's attack on a crowd leaving a wrestling match in Spin Boldak near the border with Pakistan was the deadliest of the attacks, previously rare in Afghanistan. The Taliban spokesman denied responsibility, saying the group did not target civilians. He said however the group was behind another suicide bombing in insurgency-hit Kandahar province on Monday which killed four people and one on Sunday that killed the most senior Canadian envoy in Afghanistan and two Afghans.¹⁷

III. Getting the message out: Taliban communications techniques

At this stage it is useful to look at the main communications techniques employed by the Taliban in more detail, in order to get an understanding of the range of capabilities open to them.

¹⁴ E.g. 'Taliban military commander Mulla Dadallah: we will continue to fight America even if it withdraws from Afghanistan', Middle East Media Research Institute, Transcripts of an interview with Mullah Dadullah on Al Jazeera TV, 13 Feb. 2006, URL <<http://memritv.org/Transcript.asp?P1=1036>>.

¹⁵ E.g. 'The strategic objective for the Taliban and their collaborators remains unchanged: the creation of an extremist Islamic state in Afghanistan, and the expulsion of foreign non-Muslim forces'. Maley, W. and Yaqub, D., 'A long hot summer: crisis and opportunity in Afghanistan', Lowy Institute Policy Brief, Mar. 2007, URL <<http://www.lowyinstitute.org/Search.asp?pubtype=10&process=search>>, p. 4.

¹⁶ 'Death toll in Afghan bomb attacks rises to four', *China Daily*, 2 July 2004, <http://www.chinadaily.net/english/doc/2004-07/02/content_344765.htm>.

¹⁷ Agence France-Press, 'Al-Qaeda, Taliban behind Afghan suicide attacks: FM', 20 Jan. 2006, URL <<http://www.afghanistannewscenter.com/news/2006/january/jan202006.html>>.

Contact through the media (radio, television and newspapers)

Afghan guerrillas learned to promote themselves through the media in the mid-1980s while resisting the Soviets. It was a vital means of generating recruits, as well as financial and military support. The Taliban have taken up this approach. Taliban spokesmen appear to be based inside Pakistan (although, judging from Hakimi's arrest on the Afghan–Pakistani border, they have some capability to move between the two countries) and have ensured that they can be contacted by the international media (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Al Jazeera, Associated Press and Reuters) and regional press (*Afghan Islamic Press* and *Dawn*).

It is not always easy to identify exactly who is an official Taliban spokesman—those purporting to represent the Taliban employ mobile phones, satellite phones and faxes. Local Pakistani media outlets have given the Taliban opportunities to promote their views, but increasingly the Taliban recognize the value of being able to talk to international media. Mullah Dadullah, a former Taliban commander killed by US forces in May 2007, was a notable exponent of television interviews.¹⁸

In April 2005, reports suggested that Taliban had managed to establish a mobile radio station, located in and broadcasting from Afghanistan.¹⁹ Perhaps hinting at some of the technical difficulties the Taliban have in grappling with some types of media, there were apparently only two hour-long broadcasts reported, with no evidence since then to suggest that new efforts are likely any time soon.

Taliban combat claims

Claims regarding Taliban fighting performance have been strongly promoted through their media spokesmen. Exaggeration and distortion on the following subjects are commonplace: (a) the numbers of casualties inflicted on coalition, ISAF or Afghan forces;²⁰ (b) claims to have shot down coalition or ISAF aircraft;²¹ (c) kidnappings or capturing of civilian or military personnel;²² and (d) weapons systems available to the Taliban, for example surface-to-air missiles.²³

¹⁸ Gebauer, M., 'The star of Afghanistan's jihad', *Speigel*, 1 Mar. 2007, URL <<http://www.spiegel.de/international/0,1518,469172,00.html>>.

¹⁹ Tarzi, A., 'Taliban radio back on the air', *Asia Times*, 11 May 2005, URL <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Central_Asia/GE11Ag01.html>.

²⁰ E.g. 'We will defeat the Americans and their allies. In return for each 20 soldiers we have killed, we lost one fighter'. 'Taliban chief criticises Pakistan', Al Jazeera, 3 Mar. 2007, URL <<http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/CAD5431A-8120-4D22-8604-842DE4C38D66.htm>>.

²¹ E.g. 'The Spanish defence ministry says 17 of its Nato peacekeepers have been killed in a helicopter crash in Afghanistan . . . a spokesman for the Nato-led International Security Assistance Force (Isaf), Maj Andrew Elmes, said the incident was more likely a case of "mechanical failure" . . . A top Taliban commander, Mullah Dadullah, told Reuters their fighters had shot down the helicopter but his claims could not be verified'. 'Afghan crash kills Spanish troops', BBC News, 16 Aug. 2005: <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/4155916.stm>>.

²² E.g. 'US forces in Afghanistan searched on Wednesday for the last member of a four-man commando unit . . . The US military has said it has no information to indicate he may have been captured, as claimed by the Taliban. Taliban spokesman Abdul Latif Hakimi said last week video of a captured soldier would be provided to news organizations and photographs posted on a Taliban Web site—www.alemarah.com—but neither appears to have happened'. Brunstrom, D., 'Last US commando sought after deadly Afghan hunt', Reuters, 6 July 2005, URL <<http://www.afghanistannewscenter.com/news/2005/july/jul62005.html>>.

²³ E.g. 'the 28 June crash of a U.S. Chinook helicopter . . . might well have been caused by enemy fire . . . Media quoted Lieutenant General James Conway, director of operations for the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, as saying on 30 June that the military believes the helicopter was shot down by a rocket-propelled grenade. . . . The neo-Taliban, who have claimed responsibility for the shooting down the Chinook, have made contradictory statements regarding

There are several reasons for such distortion: (a) deliberate falsification for propaganda purposes, (b) the need to get information out quickly, (c) genuine belief in the validity of the information and (d) the difficulty (and perhaps disinclination) of checking potentially unreliable information in the immediate aftermath of an action. The Taliban routinely claims that coalition and ISAF helicopter crashes owing to mechanical failure are the result of insurgency action. It is likely that some of the Taliban leadership and media spokesmen genuinely believe that their fighters were responsible.

The Taliban appear to recognize that the international media will often broadcast Taliban claims, giving their activities publicity for little additional effort. False or inaccurate claims can work in the Taliban's favour. A large part of the local Afghan and Pakistani audiences that they are communicating to, particularly those in the Pashtun tribal belt on both sides of the Afghan–Pakistani border, are either poorly educated, sympathetic to the Taliban or have limited access to public information sources, preventing confirmation of the claims made. Much of this audience is prepared to give credence to Taliban claims more or less regardless of their plausibility.

Communication with the local audience

Night letters

Night letters are leaflets or letters posted to doors or walls to inform, threaten or advise.²⁴ They are an effective means of communication in areas where access to other media is limited. The contents of the night letters are usually warnings or instructions to the local population—to refrain from engagement with foreigners or to avoid sending children to schools, for example. Some of them are very personally directed to an individual. The following examples show how the messages vary in tone and rarely give the impression that a coordinated message is being promoted except in the broadest of terms:

1. 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan: This is to warn all the teachers and those employees who work with Companies to stop working with them. We have warned you earlier and this time we give you a three days ultimatum to stop working. If you do not stop, you are to blame yourself.'

2. 'Muslim Brothers: Understand that the person who helps launch an attack with infidels is no longer a member of Muslim community. Therefore, punishment of those who cooperate with infidels is the same as the [punishment of] infidels themselves. You should not cooperate in any way—neither with words, nor with money nor with your efforts. Watch out not to exchange your honor and courage for power and dollar.'

3. 'By the Name of the Great God: Respected Afghans—Leave the culture and traditions of the Christians and Jews. Do not send your girls to school, otherwise, the

the type of weapon used. . . . The person most frequently speaking for the neo-Taliban, Mullah Latifullah Hakimi, told several news agencies the Chinook was brought down by a "new type of weapon", without providing any details'. 'Afghanistan: is helicopter downing a sign of new tactics, weapons?', Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 1 July 2005, URL <<http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2005/07/9df7aec1-26b9-4f88-9196-9d51ee855574.html>>.

²⁴ A selection of Taliban night letters targeting teachers and schools are available at the Human Rights Watch website. Human Rights Watch, 'Lessons in terror', URL <<http://www.hrw.org/campaigns/afghanistan/2006/education/index.htm>>.

mujahedin of the Islamic Emirates will conduct their robust military operations in the daylight.²⁵

These messages reinforce Taliban statements that they are operating in the area. Night letters are often accompanied by direct action, such as school burnings and the execution of 'American spies':

'Taliban fighters beheaded a tribal cleric accused of being a US spy in the Waziristan region bordering Afghanistan, a security official in the restive tribal region said. The body of Maulana Salahuddin, 45, was found on Friday on a road between North and South Waziristan . . . A note pinned to the cleric's body described him as an American spy . . . Taliban commanders in Wana . . . addressed a jirga . . . attended by some 300 tribal elders to issue new rules on punishing collaborators and criminals, as well as for collecting funds to finance their operations.'²⁶

Victims are often villagers seen talking to ISAF soldiers, or the victims of local Taliban settling old tribal scores. While such methods do not win the hearts of local villagers, the locals often become reluctant to be seen to be engaging with the international community or the Afghan Government, for fear of retribution.

Direct contact with the population

Most Afghans do not have access to TV or radio, let alone the Internet.²⁷ Talking directly and passing out leaflets are labour intensive and have limited reach, but are often the most effective means of communicating with the populace. These simple methods have the added advantage that they are difficult for ISAF to intercept. With the Taliban now better established in southern Afghanistan, they have had more opportunity to engage directly with the Pashtun populace. Many fighters are local, making it easy to approach the tribes and try to persuade them, if not to fight for them, at least to cooperate with or turn a blind eye to Taliban activities. The concern of local communities over such issues as poppy eradication, corrupt police and ISAF air strikes can be used to gain support: "Most of the attacks are by local people", said a Taliban spokesman in Nadali district. "But the Taliban are helping them. This is a good opportunity to win local support. We can continue our jihad, and local people can keep their lands"²⁸ Threats of retribution have also been more persuasive where the Taliban have been able to establish a semi-permanent presence; something that ISAF and Afghan Government forces have demonstrably struggled to do.

In some areas the Taliban have started enforcing Sharia law, highlighting the government's inability to impose law and order: 'In some areas, there is now a parallel Taliban state, and locals are increasingly turning to Taliban-run courts, which are seen as more effective and fair than the corrupt official system.'²⁹ This sort of activity, if it continues

²⁵ Human Rights Watch (note 24).

²⁶ Reuters, 'US "spy" slain in Waziristan', *The Post* [Lahore], 4 Nov. 2006.

²⁷ E.g. number of television sets per 1000 inhabitants: Afghanistan, 3.7; Pakistan, 21.4; Iran, 69.7; United Kingdom, 511.3. Number of radio sets per 1000 inhabitants: Afghanistan, 6.2; Pakistan, 93.4; Iran, 257.1. Press Reference, URL <<http://www.pressreference.com/>>.

²⁸ 'Helmand heads for record poppy harvest', International Relations and Security Network, 12 Feb. 2007, URL <<http://www.isn.ethz.ch/news/sw/details.cfm?ID=17238>>.

²⁹ Rubin, B., 'Saving Afghanistan', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 86, no. 1 (Jan./Feb. 2007), URL <<http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20070101faessay86105/barnett-r-rubin/saving-afghanistan.html>>.

and develops, will send a strong message that the Taliban are back on a more permanent basis.

However, most Afghan ethnic groups other than the Pashtuns have a very strong antipathy towards the Taliban, making efforts to persuade or negotiate with them problematic, and there is no evidence that the Taliban have even seriously bothered to try. Even among Pashtuns, the Taliban are not universally supported: different tribes have different loyalties, and the issues of support for the Taliban or support for a given tribe frequently merge. The success of the Taliban in the 1990s owed much to gaining short-term tribal allegiances (the traditional route to power throughout Afghan history), rather than genuinely winning hearts and minds. The net result of Taliban efforts—resistance to the Afghan Government's authority and the foreign presence—remains the same, however.

To a wider regional and international audience

CDs, DVDs and videotape

The use of data storage media to promote the Taliban has increased. DVDs are now distributed in the way that leaflets have been in the past.³⁰ The bulk of the content is footage of insurgent attacks or executions of those accused of being spies. The increasing use of such media demonstrates the Taliban's growing ability to learn from other armed insurgent or terrorist groups and the growth of local 'cottage industries' for mass copying and production of audio and video information. It also shows that the Taliban recognize that modern technology can serve their cause just as it serves other insurgencies, notably in Iraq.

The Internet

A significant move forward for the Taliban has been to embrace Internet technology, including the creation of at least one website which, at time of writing, appears to have been deliberately shut down.³¹ Although crude, it listed numerous attacks reportedly conducted by the Taliban (many likely to be unconfirmed or exaggerated) in an English language section.³² Details of recent attacks, video clips and links to other jihadist sites, including ones in Iraq, were posted. There was little attempt to promote views or messages beyond that of jihad, although on occasion the Taliban would post instructions or pass comment,³³ including efforts to refute unfavourable reporting against them.³⁴

³⁰ Watson, I., 'Taliban enlists video in the fight for Afghanistan', National Public Radio, 2 Nov. 2006, URL <<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6423946>>.

³¹ The now defunct Taliban website, URL <<http://www.alemarah.com>>, had an English language section giving a week-by-week account of claimed Taliban attacks and the Taliban's assessment of damage and casualties caused. Comparison of Taliban and ISAF statements about any particular day's event gave a useful insight into each sides perceptions.

³² E.g. 'Today at 12:00 Mujahideen of Islamic Emirate in ambushed a convoy of British soldiers in Shaewal area of Nadali district of Halmand province. In result a tank was demolished and 5 British soldiers were killed, also one other agreeable tank was booty . . . there was no damage to the Mujahideen side'. Taliban website, 2 Mar. 2007.

³³ E.g. 'In Urozgan capital and other related districts of this province . . . Mujahideen of Islamic Emirate . . . with heavy and light weapons and other military things are ready for the holy struggle at opposite of foreigner invades and their mercenary solders. . . . After this notification who help with invaders and mercenary office we kill them and cut their heads'. Taliban website, 3 Mar. 2007.

IV. How effective are the Taliban at communicating?

The effectiveness of the Taliban message is not easy to gauge, but it is clear that the credibility of their insurgent message has been strengthened by their ability to maintain a presence across southern Afghanistan despite the efforts of the Afghan Government and ISAF. Taliban hearts and minds activities are most effective when communicating to Pashtun tribes on both sides of the border—their message is accessible to a populace suspicious of the international community.

The remainder of 2007 and 2008 will be difficult for the Afghan Government and ISAF, but the violence is not significantly spreading beyond the south and east of the country (areas where the Taliban have secured either support or acquiescence). This suggests that there is still no large-scale shift in the mood of the Afghan population (General Richard's 'tipping point') as a result of insurgent military and media activities. No such shift is likely in the remaining months of 2007 unless the Taliban can demonstrate an increasing (and more substantial) presence. Although Western polling of the populace has highlighted declining optimism and a growing concern over security and the poor performance of the Afghan Government, the population is not generally hostile to international military forces.³⁵ This could easily change, however, with another year or two of strong Taliban pressure, combined with little tangible improvement in the lives of ordinary Afghans.

Strengths and weaknesses of Taliban propaganda

The Taliban propaganda campaign is most effective at the local level and significantly weaker when attempting to address more strategic issues. The relentless footage of ambushes, night attacks and improvised explosive device (IED) strikes available on video, CD and the Internet is likely to appeal to young, poor Afghan or Pakistani would-be jihadists, particularly refugees. The absence of a wider content beyond this message, however, is striking. Little attention is given to: (a) what messages they could or should be sending to the West; (b) promoting their own political and governance plans; (c) trying to appeal to a wider Afghan and regional audience; (d) coordinating operations (e.g. use of suicide attacks) for a more effective media impact; and (e) understanding and exploiting the doubts and difficulties of the international community.³⁶

Strengths

Despite the arrest in Pakistan of Taliban media spokesmen on two separate occasions, having a reasonably secure base in Pakistan among a populace that is either sympathetic

³⁴ E.g. 'The claim about the occupation of a senior of leadership council of Islamic Emirate which was published by publications is untrue. There is none one chief of Islamic Emirate lives in the Pakistan country, the all of them are in Afghanistan and do the military activities.' Taliban website, 2 Mar. 2007.

³⁵ The poll compared attitudes in 2006 with those in 2005. '59% think that the parliament is working for the benefit of the Afghan people—down from 77%. . . . Positive ratings of the performance of the United States in Afghanistan are down by 11 points, to 57%. . . . Life is especially difficult in Helmand and Kandahar . . . 80% there rate their security as bad . . . 60% say it's worse now than it was under the Taliban'. Langer, G., 'Strife erodes Afghan optimism five years after the Taliban's fall', ABC News/BBC World Service poll, 7 Dec. 2006, URL <<http://www.abcnews.go.com/Politics/PollVault/story?id=2702516&page=1>>.

³⁶ E.g. 'The Taliban spokesman . . . admitted that the Italians were not a target in particular: "For us, infidels are infidels. As long as they are allies of the Americans, they will remain our enemies"'. Bahram, R. and Biloslavo, F., 'Mullah Omar's spokesman cited on attack on Italian troops in Afghanistan', *Il Giornale*, 7 May 2006.

or acquiescent has proved helpful for spreading the Taliban message.³⁷ The Taliban are usually quick to claim an attack and have posted claims on the Internet. For example, 'Today at noon in Hazrat Jai Bab area . . . of Kandahar city . . . Abdul Rahim of same province performed a sacrificing attack', or 'Yesterday evening Mujahideen of Islamic Emirate with anti-aircraft weapon fired on a airplane of British invaders'.³⁸

While Taliban media representatives do make some efforts to confirm the information they have received, they are not under the same pressure as ISAF (which is accountable to a host of democratically elected governments—all sensitive to the vagaries of domestic public opinion) to get the events and facts right. This frequently leaves ISAF struggling to keep up.

The Taliban's efforts to communicate are most effective at the local level, particularly through the use of night letters and interaction with the populace. The insurgents often come from the same tribes as the local population and are completely integrated in terms of language and culture, for example, with regard to the Pashtun code of tribal law Pashtunwali. Just from a cultural perspective, many tribes are still likely to be more comfortable dealing with Taliban representatives than they would be dealing with a central Afghan Government, let alone foreign civilian or military personnel.

The Taliban present powerful, easy-to-understand messages, emphasizing local concerns such as collateral damage and threats to poppy harvests and tribal customs. Recurrent themes include calls to jihad, the portrayal of ISAF forces as infidels and the characterization of the Afghan Government as a puppet of the West.³⁹ Reliable information in Afghanistan is sparse: high levels of illiteracy combined with poor access to communications leads to an over-reliance on word-of-mouth communication, meaning that information is frequently inaccurate, out of date or second hand. For this sort of audience, any Taliban claims of military success (e.g. the destruction of an ISAF helicopter or coalition 'tanks'), will be given a good deal of credence. Afghans are a pragmatic people and flexible with their allegiances, therefore their assessment as to the strength of the Taliban is crucial in determining whether they will take a pro-, anti- or neutral stance towards them.

The Taliban benefit from the collateral damage and civilian casualties caused by ISAF military operations as well as the impression of lack of respect for people, property and tribal customs unwittingly created by Western military tactics that prioritize force protection.⁴⁰ The actions of the Afghan Government and security representatives, in particular with regard to corruption and the incapacity of local police forces, also make the population receptive to Taliban messages couched in local cultural terms.

Weaknesses

The Taliban have numerous weaknesses in their ability to influence the Afghan population. Underpinning everything is the limited extent of genuine support for them.

³⁷ Constable, P., 'In tribal Pakistan, an uneasy quiet: pact fails to deter backing for Taliban', *Washington Post*, 28 Sep. 2006.

³⁸ Taliban website (note 12), 3 Dec. 2006 and 8 Mar. 2007.

³⁹ E.g. 'Therefore, the Afghan Muslim Mujahids have initiated their sacred Jihad to gain the independent of our beloved country from the crusader powers. The Jihad will continue till the end- till defeat of the crusaders' army, and till the establishment of a pure Islamic State'. Human Rights Watch (note 24).

⁴⁰ 'When the Taliban were here . . . I was never worried about my family . . . every single minute of the last three years I have been very worried. Maybe tonight the Americans will come to my house, molest my wife and children and arrest me'. Sands, C., 'We want the Taliban back, say ordinary Afghans', *The Independent*, 8 Apr. 2007.

People in the northern half of the country—primarily Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras—have no sympathy for the Taliban at all. Within the Pashtun belt in the south of the country, many tribes are similarly opposed.⁴¹

The Taliban generally seem to lack a broad strategic overview. This is evident in both their insurgent activities and the content of their communiqués. With perhaps the exception of Iraq, the Taliban have little or no interest in, or understanding of, wider global issues that could assist them. Returning to the idea that ‘Allah will take care of everything’, the Taliban do not appear to feel it is particularly important to address issues such as governance, management of the economy, reconstruction and development of the country. Although much of the populace may not welcome, or even fully comprehend, the idea of a centralized Afghan state based on Western democratic principles (which in many ways is irrelevant to Afghan realities on the ground), the Taliban’s lack of interest in providing hope, reassurance or alternatives for the future is unlikely to gain wider popular support—particularly second time around.

In international terms, the Taliban could do more to target the things that really worry the international community regarding its commitment in Afghanistan. Taliban understanding of the power of the media has definitely improved, but remains limited. A few months before his death, Taliban senior commander Mullah Dadullah, unhappy about the way in which a particular press story had emerged, announced that ‘we have the Islamic right to kill these journalists and media’.⁴² While the Taliban have increasingly embraced modern communications technology, they struggle to tailor their message. The Taliban are very comfortable with the language of violence and revenge: their website focused on violence and did not offer the kind of discussion that a credible ‘government-in-waiting’ might. The Taliban issued their new constitution in December 2006, but they have not promoted or even referred to it before or since.⁴³ The Taliban do not appear to have a good understanding of how Western domestic opinion is shaped by the media, which in turn shapes government policy.⁴⁴ Thus they are not able to exploit any such sensitivities effectively.

Taliban messages are often confused and contradictory. One spokesman might claim an attack only to have another spokesman refute the claim, particularly if the incident caused civilian casualties. In June 2005, the then Taliban spokesman, Hakimi, denied that the Taliban had carried out a suicide attack on a funeral at a mosque in Kandahar that killed at least 20 Afghans, but claimed to have assassinated the original target for whom the funeral was being held.⁴⁵ More recently, there was confusion over whether the Taliban were to take part in tribal councils:

⁴¹ Author’s conversations with ISAF analysts and Pashtun tribal representatives, summer 2006.

⁴² Associated Press, ‘Top Taliban military commander dismisses NATO casualty reports, warns journalists’, *International Herald Tribune*, interview with Mullah Dadullah, 4 Sep. 2006.

⁴³ Asian News International, ‘Taliban issues its own constitution and code of conduct’, Yahoo News, 9 Dec. 2006, URL <<http://in.news.yahoo.com/061208/139/6a4y3.html>>.

⁴⁴ E.g. ‘individual nations will continue to remain sensitive to individual opinion at home. The loss of Danish soldiers in Helmand or Norwegians in Maymanah will have a disproportionate national effect on what is, after all, a multi-national operation’. Coker, C., ‘Between Iraq and a hard place: multinational co-operation, Afghanistan and strategic culture’, *RUSI Journal*, vol. 151, no. 5 (Oct. 2006), URL <<http://www.rusi.org/publication/journal/ref:A453F20FA86A46/>>.

⁴⁵ Associated Press, ‘Suicide bomber strikes Afghan mosque’, *International Herald Tribune*, 1 June 2005; and Centre of Excellence in Disaster Management and Humanitarian Assistance, ‘Violence rages in southern Afghanistan’, 3 June 2005, URL <<http://www.coe-dmha.org/Afghanistan/Afg060305.htm>>.

A Taliban spokesman said last month the rebels might take part in planned tribal councils that Pakistan and Afghanistan aim to hold on both sides of the Afghan–Pakistani border. But other Taliban members quickly denied there was any chance of the insurgents attending the councils. Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar was reported to have denounced the proposed meetings as an American trick in a message last week.⁴⁶

After four years of attacking schools and teachers,⁴⁷ Taliban spokesman Mohammed Hanif said in an interview in early 2006: ‘the Taliban are supporters of education . . . the people who burn schools, they are not the Taliban. They are the enemies of Islam’.⁴⁸ On the English section of their website, they appeared to advocate a Taliban schooling system in a move that appeared reactive, garbled and, given their track record in the 1990s, barely credible. Although they sometimes have the media initiative when it comes to claiming attacks, they can quickly be put on the defensive. When a spokesman, Mohammed Hanif, was arrested in January 2007 and reportedly made statements about splits within the Taliban, the response on the website was almost naively eager to refute the comments.⁴⁹

For all its disjointed and uncoordinated nature, both ISAF and the broader civilian international presence active in Afghanistan, is demonstrably doing much to win hearts and minds, even in spite of Afghan casualties and collateral damage caused in the course of sometimes very intensive military operations. Reconstruction, food and medical aid are reaching large parts of the community. This exposes the Taliban’s propaganda efforts: they are either unable or unwilling to offer or discuss the same kind of practical and beneficial assistance in any of the forms of media that they use.

Furthermore, even many of the most isolated and xenophobic of tribesmen appear to recognize that what is happening in their area is no ‘Soviet-style’ brutal occupation. Although opinion polls note growing concerns amongst Afghans regarding poor security, lack of economic growth and poor governance, most of the population—even in the Pashtun south—are still at least tolerant of the international military presence. The Taliban do not seem to be able to sell their idea of jihad to the population at the present time, but this is not something to be complacent about.⁵⁰

Suicide bombing

One of the most controversial aspects of the Taliban military campaign is the increasing use of suicide bombing as a tactic.⁵¹ Use of this tactic has soared since late 2005. A recent Human Rights Watch report noted that: ‘Suicide attacks by insurgents have been

⁴⁶ Achakzai, S., ‘Taliban commander vows bloody 2007 in Afghanistan’, Reuters Alertnet, 2 Jan. 2007, URL <<http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/ISL148796.htm>>.

⁴⁷ Several examples of Taliban night letters targeting teachers and schools can be found at the Human Rights Watch (note 24).

⁴⁸ Baldauf, S., ‘Taliban turn to suicide attacks’, *Christian Science Monitor*, 3 Feb. 2006, <<http://www.csmonitor.com/2006/0203/p01s04-wosc.html>>.

⁴⁹ Alemarah.com [Taliban website], Jan. 2007.

⁵⁰ ‘Intensity of sentiment is strongly against the Taliban as well: not only do 89 percent view it unfavourably overall, but 76 percent rate it “very” unfavourably’. Langer (note 35).

⁵¹ ‘In Islamic usage the term “martyrdom” is normally interpreted to mean death in a jihad and its reward is eternal bliss. . . . Suicide, by contrast, is a mortal sin and earns eternal damnation, even for those who would otherwise have earned a place in paradise. The classical jurists distinguish clearly between facing certain death at the hands of the enemy and killing oneself by one’s own hand. . . . Some recent fundamentalist jurists and others have blurred or even dismissed this distinction, but their view is by no means unanimously accepted. The suicide bomber is thus taking a considerable risk on a theological nicety’. Lewis, B., *The Crisis of Islam* (Orion Books Ltd: London, 2004), p.33.

especially deadly for civilians. In 2006 there were at least 136 suicide attacks in Afghanistan, a six-fold increase over 2005. At least 112 of the attacks—over 80 per cent—were on military targets, yet most killed more civilians than combatants: approximately 20 other attacks were intentionally aimed at civilians.⁵²

The report highlights the marked contradictions between the Taliban's stated intention to avoid harm to Afghan civilians and the activities they conduct on the ground. For all the potential value of suicide attacks as a military tactic, Taliban attempts to justify such an extreme method leave much scope to challenge them on moral, legal and religious grounds.⁵³

A key Taliban promoter of suicide attacks was Mullah Dadullah, but even he demonstrated an awareness of the propaganda risks of killing innocent Afghans:

We have said that we will incorporate martyrdom-seeking operations in the new plan we are implementing in Afghanistan. . . . As for the Spin Boldak operation,⁵⁴ it was the government that carried it out. . . . This is not a martyrdom-seeking operation. Several innocent Muslims were killed. The top officials sacrificed some of their own people in order to distort the image of the Muslims and of the Taliban. Our operations do not kill civilians.⁵⁵

Where is their propaganda campaign likely to go next?

The Taliban have many weaknesses in their propaganda activities. If they resolve these issues, it could lead to a significant improvement in their capabilities, influence and recruiting power. This should be a real cause for concern for the international community. In short, Taliban propaganda is underachieving. An analysis of the methods that the Taliban use for communicating and the specific difficulties they are likely to be experiencing in each gives a clue as to the directions that they could take if they are to improve. The following are a few of the improved media tactics and devices that the Taliban might employ over the next few years:

- (a) more effective and articulate media use, with more effective use of the Internet;
- (b) combat actions on the ground coordinated with messages designed to influence the international community, for example, evoking the Tet offensive; missile attacks against civilian aircraft; multiple simultaneous suicide attacks against international targets;⁵⁶
- (c) better quality and content of video productions focusing on wider issues;
- (d) better coordination of messages (with positive as well as negative incentives to the population) and better response to incidents;

⁵² Human Rights Watch, 'Afghanistan: civilians bear cost of escalating insurgent attacks', 16 Apr. 2007, URL <<http://hrw.org/english/docs/2007/04/16/afghan15688.htm>>.

⁵³ 'Human Rights Watch said it hoped the report could shame the increasingly radical Taliban into altering its tactics. "We don't think that change is easy, but they're not entirely impervious to pressure"'. Tang, A., 'Rights group: Taliban targets civilians', *Washington Times*, 16 Apr 2007.

⁵⁴ A suicide attack killed up to 20 Afghans at a wrestling match in the Kandahar province border town of Spin Boldak prompting an anti-Taliban demonstration by hundreds of Afghans. 'Afghans protest at bomb attacks', BBC News, 18 Jan. 2006, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/4624350.stm>>.

⁵⁵ Middle East Media Research Institute (note 14).

⁵⁶ The Tet Offensive was a series of offensives by the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese army during the 1959–75 Viet Nam War. The Tet offensive, although a tactical defeat for the Viet Cong, inflicted severe damage on American civilian morale and contributed to the withdrawal of American forces from the country, in the process becoming a symbol of US political and military failure.

(e) more sophistication: growing understanding of the wider world and how to influence it, for example, through targeting particular countries, governments or NGOs—even individual civilian or military personnel;

(f) greater inclination to discuss wider issues when challenged: the Taliban have already shown that they can be drawn to comment on education, their constitution, suicide bombing and civilian casualties; and

(g) increasing use of media methods used by Iraqi insurgents and other violent Islamic networks—this could involve more TV interviews, as well as staging incidents of kidnapping and torture.

V. Conclusions and recommendations

Making use of the trappings of modern communications cannot conceal the fact that the Taliban still have a weak, poorly planned and inflexible approach to the way they communicate and the content of the messages. However, the Afghan Government and ISAF are not making great inroads in winning over the population either.⁵⁷ A 'tit for tat' trading of casualty lists in the media between ISAF and the Taliban is not winning the battle for Afghan popular opinion: the various audiences to which the information is being presented will for the most part have already made up their minds about the result.

Their extreme methods and the rigidity and contradictions in their approach mean that the Taliban are vulnerable to a focused media campaign against them.⁵⁸ As noted by Ahmed Rashid:

Hundreds of political leaders and chiefs from the Pashtun tribes inhabiting Pakistan's border with Afghanistan have for the first time held a peace jirga, or tribal council, demanding an end to Taliban violence . . . tribal chiefs, religious scholars . . . and young political activists sat together . . . to demand that the peaceful traditions of the Pashtun tribes which 'are being drowned out in a sea of blood' be restored.⁵⁹

Judging by their website, communiqués and statements, the Taliban media campaign is obsessed with inflicting casualties and taking and holding ground (ironically one of the standard accusations levelled at ISAF). The Taliban have a lack of interest in representing how they might govern the country, deal with other ethnic groups or provide reconstruction and jobs. They are not achieving a Soviet-era-style jihad. The absence of an Afghan popular rising against ISAF contrasts sharply with the Afghan reaction against the Soviets in the 1980s and suggests that, broadly speaking, the population remains at least tolerant of the international military presence.

A media campaign with a very strong Afghan 'face', combined with engagement on the Pakistan side of the border (with Pashtun tribes as well as the Pakistani media),

⁵⁷ E.g. Leithead, A., 'Media dragged in Afghan conflict', BBC News, 14 Mar. 2007, URL <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/6439121.stm>>. The article highlights the importance of winning public opinion, but also the recent clumsy efforts by the Afghan Government and the US military to control the activities of Afghan and international journalists.

⁵⁸ 'While they have managed to convey their messages with greater frequency, their pronouncements have sometimes been marked by glaring contradictions. While inconsistencies are not new to the neo-Taliban, their recent frequency suggests strains could reemerge between Afghan opponents of the central government and their foreign allies'. Tarzi, A., 'Contradictions hint at division within neo-Taliban', Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 15 Sep. 2006, URL <<http://www.afgha.com/?q=node/1042>>.

⁵⁹ Rashid, A., 'Taliban drown our values in a sea of blood, say political leaders from the Pashtun tribes', *Daily Telegraph*, 22 Nov. 2006.

should provoke and promote a wider discussion. The Taliban need to be challenged to explain what they are doing, the tactics they are using (particularly suicide attacks) and why they are doing it. Specific challenges could perhaps question the Taliban's authority, interpretation of Islam and the Koran, what constitutes a jihad and the morality of killing civilians. The Afghan Government and the international community could do a lot to regain the hearts and minds initiative by widening the debate and pushing the Taliban to expound on politics, economics, human rights, education and reconstruction.

For this to succeed, information must come less from official ISAF spokesmen and more from the people and sources that are meaningful to potential Taliban recruits and to the Pashtun populace on both sides of the border. This means entering into the discourse in mosques and madrassas and projecting messages through tribal elders, mullahs, former Taliban and the Afghan national and provincial governments and the security bodies (primarily the police and the army) that represent them. Underpinning all this, the Afghan Government and its international supporters must be seen to be doing what they say they will do. This includes acknowledging mistakes when necessary.

Practical steps

The following are suggestions for the wider international community, ISAF, the Afghan and Pakistani Governments and the Afghan populace that might help mitigate the impact of Taliban propaganda activities. They cannot be taken in isolation from (or as a substitute for) effective measures to ensure basic public security, reconstruction and improved governance.

Short term (the next 12 months)

1. More detailed analysis of Taliban communiqués should be made, including their draft constitution. This will help the Afghan Government and the international community's efforts to understand and to challenge them.

2. The Taliban is by no means a cohesive, unified force.⁶⁰ Splits and divisions within and around the Taliban leadership should be highlighted.⁶¹

3. There should be regular media reminders of just what the Taliban did during their regime and therefore what could be expected if they did return to power.

4. Efforts should be made to draw the Taliban out to discuss wider issues, such as accountability to the population, politics, reconstruction and development. The debate should be publicized and their absence of plans for the country should be highlighted.

5. Compel the Taliban to explain their tactics (suicide bombing, attacks on civilians and schools, attitudes to poppy cultivation) in order to expose the contradictions in their arguments.

6. The Afghan Government must be more visible and more regularly present in problematic regions. Greater efforts should be made to talk frankly and openly with tribal elders and villagers to understand their problems and concerns and demonstrate commitment to addressing them. This must be an Afghan-driven initiative rather than that of external actors.

⁶⁰ Credible suggestions of divisions within the Taliban have been around for a long while, see e.g. Pannier, B., 'Afghanistan: spokesman denies split in Taliban', 22 Nov. 2004. <<http://www.eurasianet.org>>.

⁶¹ Khan, Z., 'Warlord splits with Taliban', Associated Press, 8 Mar. 2007.

7. In order to help 'manage expectations', better explanations should be given to the Afghan populace, both from the international civilian development agencies and the Afghan Government, about reconstruction plans in general and progress in them. Making promises without the ability to deliver must be avoided. This should be combined with reminders of the real difficulties for the international community, the practical limitations to its work and the fact that only the Afghan population can ultimately make this work.

8. Key Pakistani and Arab news media that carry Taliban interviews and messages should be engaged with positively and pro-actively to ensure that Afghan Government and ISAF messages are also represented, preferably before the Taliban get their story out.

Mid to long term (the next 1–10 years)

1. It must be recognized that ultimate success against the Taliban will be driven by perceived and actual improvements in security, governance and socio-economic conditions across Afghanistan and Pakistan.

2. The credibility of the Afghan Government must be strengthened. Popular feeling in the south of the country, where the government is widely seen as either corrupt or non-existent, risks drifting toward the Taliban. In some areas the Taliban are providing alternative legal systems based on Sharia law. The government must be visible. Official police and legal systems must be seen to be active—and above all impartial—providers of justice and security.

3. The Taliban recruitment base on both sides of the border must be targeted to isolate it from the leadership by providing more attractive solutions for potential recruits: information, education, food, alternative livelihoods and housing.⁶²

⁶² International Crisis Group, 'Pakistan: Karachi's madrasas and violent extremism', Asia Report no. 130, 29 Mar. 2007, URL <<http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=4742&l=1>>.