

Annex 3: Countering the Taliban “Propaganda Machine”

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Countering the Taleban “Propaganda Machine”

Looking at the situation in the south of Afghanistan, particularly Helmand Province, it is tempting to try and pit ourselves against a monolithic, sophisticated enemy with enormous resources at his disposal.

The concept that a rag-tag, disparate force is able to inflict such damage and command such loyalty from the local population is at once a mystery and an affront.

But in order to mount an effective communications strategy against the insurgents in southern Afghanistan, we must first understand who they are and how they operate.

It is highly misleading to talk about a Taleban “propaganda machine.” There is no black-turbaned Goebbels pulling strings from behind the scenes. Instead, there are various power centres that often issue crude and contradictory statements, leaving the other side in little doubt that there is disarray in the enemy ranks.

Afghanistan for the most part lacks the media juggernaut that dominates the border regions. In Quetta, for example, one can openly buy Taleban CD's and DVDs, and jihadi songs echo through the marketplace [although they are less easy to find than before, according to recent research, Annexe 4]. There are radio stations, such as the one launched by Maulana Fazlullah in Swat, that openly espouse the Taleban creed and preach jihad.

In Afghanistan, most likely because of the presence of foreign troops and the government security services, such open displays are rare. Taleban jihadi songs circulate, but from hand to hand. Devotees can buy ring tones for their mobile phones that echo jihadi anthems, and those lucky enough to have computers or DVD players can easily get copies of video material showing the Taleban on the march or on parade. But this is very much ad hoc, friend to friend, rather than a large commercial operation.

It would be a stretch to say that these modest attempts at consciousness-raising are winning the war. They appeal to those who are already onside, and are unlikely to persuade any one else to join the cause.

Much more effective in promoting the insurgency are **face-to-face communications**. The Taleban and their supporters are integrated into communities in the south; in almost every village, locals can point to compounds or individuals who are known Taleban or who offer them support.

They are often friends and relatives of the more moderate citizens, and thus have easy access to the very active “rumour mill” in the south.

This they work with vigour and some skill; by capitalizing on local insecurities and prejudices, the Taleban are able to spread a wide net of innuendo and disinformation. In this they are aided by a high unemployment rate, which ensures that able-bodied men have ample time and leisure to sit and talk to their equally idle peers.

One indisputable fact that must be taken on board when dealing with Afghans in general and the south in particular, is their **discomfort and even hostility to foreign military presence on their soil.**

This is hardly surprising, given recent and not-so-recent history. For many Afghans in Kandahar and Helmand, the Anglo-Afghan wars are the stuff of legend. Any child can tell you about the Battle of Maiwand, 1880, although the facts are somewhat skewed. Most believe that the British suffered a crushing defeat for which they are still, nearly 130 years later, itching for revenge.

This is one reason that the civilian casualties inevitably inflicted in the course of military operations have proven so damaging to British and so profitable for the Taleban. A word or two at the hujra, the mosque, or the shop, can unleash a storm of indignation. With the well-known Chinese whispers mechanism at work, two dead becomes 20 or 100 within hours. It takes little persuasion to convince locals that the dead, now perceived as being in the hundreds, were deliberately targeted by the historically aggrieved British.

Another persistent rumour in the south has the foreigners, specifically the Americans and the British, actively in league with the Taleban. It has been difficult to trace this tale to its source, but nearly everyone has some bit of gossamer evidence linking the insurgents with the foreigners.

Captured weapons and munitions are transformed into "assistance" to the insurgents. Even U.S.-manufactured Meals-Ready-to-Eat (MREs), which can be bought at any bazaar, are taken as a sign that the foreign forces are supporting the insurgents - the Taleban, it seems, are fond of the desiccated, self-heating food packets, and most southerners think that the Yanks are handing them out to the enemy to keep them strong.

The "why" is murky, although the most bandied-about explanation has the United States desperate to retain its presence in Afghanistan as a forward staging post for an imminent invasion of Iran.

The insurgency does recognize the power of media, and does what it can to manipulate the "spin."

The Taleban, for example, have had considerable success in wooing journalists, in what may be the most coordinated arm of their "machine."

Taleban spokesman have become a bit more polished since the days of over-eager Latif Hakimi, who bombarded international media with far-fetched claims of responsibility for almost every negative phenomenon in the country.

Qari Yusuf and Zabiullah Mojahed, who have overall public outreach responsibility for the south and central regions, are both easily accessible and quite articulate in their dealings with both local and international media.

A journalist in Helmand who wishes to visit an area under Taleban control, such as Garmseer, parts of Greshk, or Musa Qala district can make a phone call, and within hours he will be met and escorted to wherever he wants to go. A foreign or local journalist desperate for Taleban confirmations or denials, or simply a quotable sound bite, has little trouble establishing contact with one of the spokesmen.

This is not to say that the Taliban tactics are free of intimidation tactics; journalists who write or broadcast pieces that portray the Taliban in an unfavorable light may be harassed or targeted. This has happened fairly often with IWPR trainees: one in particular was told that he was "on a list" and would be killed. However, local elders interceded and persuaded the Taliban to leave him alone, another sign of how deeply intertwined the insurgents are with their "government-supporting" neighbours.

This behaviour, particularly **the accessibility, contrasts sharply with ISAF's remoteness and general coolness to local reporters.**

There is still no Pashto-speaking officer at the PRT in Lashkar Gah; journalists who need information have to go through a translator who is not empowered to answer queries. The media machine at the PRT is much more geared to international media, in order to marshal domestic support for the troops. **Afghan journalists are too often ignored**, especially if they are seen to be critical of the foreign presence.

And, of course, the PRT has a much longer bureaucracy chain to climb in order to clear comments. Some of this is certainly attributable to a genuine desire to check facts and present correct information; but there is also an element of damage control, or spin, to the PRT's outreach efforts.

This is not to say that the Taliban have a well-oiled spin machine themselves. As numerous examples have shown, they are not united, often boastful to a ridiculous degree, and issue mutually contradictory statements, which gives them limited reliability as a source.

A quick look at the Taliban website www.alemarah.com shows clumsy attempts to claim military successes that cannot possibly be true. Tanks, helicopters, even airplanes, all show up in the Taliban 'win' column. In the spring of 2007, Taliban in Helmand even claimed to have downed a B52.

But while *alemarah* is seen by most foreign journalists as little more than a rant, it is often checked and quoted by those Afghans who have access to the Internet. Governmental attempts to restrain or limit it, only lend greater credence to its inflated assertions.

A more interesting example is the Taliban propaganda mess that surrounded the battle for Musa Qala in December, 2007.

The foreign forces reaped great benefits from their much-vaunted billing of the operation as an "Afghan-led" assault, although the number of ANA soldiers to British was close to 1:10.

The Taliban, on the other hand, could not get their message straight. At the beginning, they announced that they would "never give up Musa Qala" and would "fight until their last breath."

This contrasted sharply with their hasty withdrawal once bombs began to fall, which they explained as a desire to spare the local population.

But even after their withdrawal, small groups continued to fight, **showing that even the military command does not speak with one voice, let alone the "public relations" folk.**

Boastful threats by Mullah Dadullah in spring, 2007, that he had sent 6,000 fighters into Helmand for a spring offensive that never materialized also hurt the Taliban's credibility.

Author James Fergusson cites another, more successful Taliban media coup in Helmand in summer, 2006. The Taliban were lobbing grenades on foreign positions from a pharmacy, locally known as "the clinic", since patients come to the pharmacist to treat their ills. The pharmacy, according to Fergusson, was most likely empty of anyone except insurgents at the time, and the foreigners called in an airstrike.

Western media, specifically Sky News, reported within minutes that ISAF had bombed a hospital, with all the horror that implies. Denials and rebuttals eventually emerged, but the damage was done.

Perhaps this is an example of well-directed manipulation, perhaps a lucky break, compounded by a lack of professionalism on the part of the Western media, which rushed to report without checking sources. In any case, it was game point for the Taliban.

There are steps that we can take to counter Taliban propaganda, but **they must be genuine attempts to change, not just the message, but the reality.** No amount of spin is going to make Afghans feel better about civilian casualties, corruption, lack of development, and unemployment. These are issues that must be addressed if any communications strategy is to have a chance.

But there are concrete actions that can neutralize or counter the Taliban message. These include:

- **Active engagement with the local community.** We must understand the local dynamics, which are usually just as much in play as any ideological commitment when the Taliban appear to be gaining ground. Are there local disputes? Tribal feuds? Some grievance towards the foreigners? The more we know, and the more we can help communities to address specific problems, the greater success we will have in explaining our mission and our short-term goals.
- **Courting tribal elders.** We need to identify influential actors in the community and listen to them. Local shuras, which can identify priorities and develop plans to realize local goals, should take priority over any structure imposed from without.
- **The local media has to have greater access to the government and to the PRTs.** This means that the foreign forces must identify a Pashto-speaking spokesperson, must have regular meetings with journalists, off the PRT if possible, and must take care to give them the same attention they lavish on the international press corps.
- **Major development of Afghan media, primarily, but not exclusively, broadcast.** The local population listens to the radio for news and entertainment. This can be a powerful vehicle for countering rumour and propaganda, provided that programming reflects local concerns.
- **Dialogue with the "insurgents."** Instead of labeling everyone who is disaffected "Taliban" and thereby swelling the ranks of the Global Enemy, we can break down the insurgency into smaller pieces, recognizing that local conditions have affected individual choices. This could help to pry away a good part of the Taliban recruitment base, by addressing local grievances through the government, rather than forcing people to seek redress through a larger, armed group.

The most important step is to understand that the Taliban, like their propaganda machine, are not a unified, monolithic force. They are, instead, the symbol of a local reaction to objective problems. If we try and fix those problems, the Taliban will wither away. Most Afghans do not support the Taliban out of ideological fervor; instead, they look to them for specific needs, such as protecting poppy fields, guaranteeing security against foreign forces, providing a son with employment, avenging a family member wronged by corrupt officials or petty "warlords."

The more we realize the ad hoc nature of the "Taliban", the more directed can be our strategy against it.