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## Tactical Strategic Communication! Placing Informational Effect at the Centre of Command

Steve Tatham

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In October 2006, Brigadier Andrew Mackay was appointed to lead 52 Brigade, British Army, to Helmand Province, Afghanistan. Mackay, with much stabilisation experience from previous conflicts had used his pre-deployment time to read and to research not just the country but also some of the many ideas of how counter-insurgency (COIN) operations may be conducted. At the forefront of his mind was the work of former French Army Officer, David Galula, who in his book ‘Counter-Insurgency Warfare’<sup>1</sup> had looked at the need to build consent amongst organic populations to deny insurgencies support; his work was a direct result of his own military service in Algeria. For Galula, and for Mackay, ‘*the population was the prize*’ and in Afghanistan that prize might be for the taking, but in Mackay’s view only if influence was embedded at its core. Mackay explained:

*“16 Air Assault Brigade<sup>2</sup> ended up in a punch up, the [Royal Marine] Commandos<sup>3</sup>, because of force levels, went raiding and created manoeuvre outreach groups to disrupt and interdict and 12 Mechanised Brigade<sup>4</sup> engaged in a more industrial scale of conflict which involved large clearances but without the force levels to subsequently hold. By the time I had observed all of this I concluded .. if we cleared we would hold and if we held we would build. If we could not do this we would disrupt and interdict<sup>5</sup>”*

In his book ‘Operation Snake Bite’ embedded British journalist Stephen Grey suggested that these early deployments had been:

*“... break-in battles, which established a psychological advantage by demonstrating to the population that the Taliban would lose every battle with the British<sup>6</sup>”.*

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<sup>1</sup> Galula D, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory & Practice* (Prager, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> The first UK troops deployed to Helmand Province, Southern Afghanistan in May 2006 and commanded by Brigadier Ed Butler.

<sup>3</sup> 3 Commando Brigade Royal Marines deployed to Helmand in Oct 2006 led by Brigadier Jerry Thomas

<sup>4</sup> 12 Brigade deployed to Helmand in April 2007 commanded by Brigadier John Lorrimar

<sup>5</sup> Author’s interview 6 May 2009 & 52 Brigade Operational Design.

<sup>6</sup> Grey S, *Operation Snake Bite* (Penguin Viking Press, 2009), p65.

This may be the case but as Richard Halloran notes in a 2007 edition of *Parameters* it was also irrelevant:

*“In April 1975, after the [Vietnam] war was over, a US Colonel was in a delegation dispatched to Hanoi. In the airport he got into conversation with a North Vietnamese colonel named Tu who spoke some English and as soldiers do they began to talk shop. After a while the US Colonel said “You know, you never defeated us on the battlefield”. Colonel Tu thought about that for a minute, then replied “That may be so. But it is also irrelevant”.... If that conversation were to be held in today’s vocabulary, it would go something like this. The US Colonel says: “You know you never defeated us in a kinetic engagement on the battlefield”. Colonel Tu: “That may be so. It is also irrelevant because we won the battle of strategic communication – and therefore the war<sup>7</sup>”.*

This too was Mackay’s view. He believed that too much emphasis on attrition of the enemy – kinetic effects – would be counterproductive. *“Body count is a corrupt measure of success”*. This was very much a self-initiated decision and when asked what strategy he was given for his deployment his answer is perhaps surprising: *“Very little<sup>8</sup>”*. Mackay, speaking about the situation he inherited on assuming command in 2007, went on to explain that at the time there was a:

*“... growing realisation that what we had taken on was in excess of what we had anticipated... we were in a muddle over counter-narcotics strategy and counter-insurgency ...”*.

The apparent absence of strategy may seem curious to outside observers but to senior military officers such as Mackay it was normal. He attributed it to an absence of cross government coordination:

*“The machinery of government is very good at identifying problems but not always at solving them. If you look at wire diagrams of a government function (Security Sector Reform for instance) it is telling how widely dispersed it is. They try to resolve this with steering groups, task forces and committees, to wrestle with the complexity and friction of it all. But no single department with ultimate responsibility means authority is diffuse”*.

Thus Mackay essentially had latitude to develop fresh thinking and he determined that alongside his hard military power he would seek to develop an influence based approach to his deployment – one moulded by an understanding of Afghan heritage, culture, language and history; he commissioned this author and outside academics to assist his development, the starting point of which was an audit of the adversary.

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<sup>7</sup> Halloran R, *Strategic Communication*, (Parameters, Autumn 2007).

<sup>8</sup> Interview Tatham / Mackay 29 May 2009.

The early years of the Taliban's<sup>9</sup> rule in Afghanistan were not known for their press freedom. Technology was unwelcome, images of human beings considered apostate and world public opinion largely irrelevant to an organisation that actively sought to return Afghan society to that of the Prophet Mohamed's time. Yet the success of Al-Qaeda's manipulation of the media in its global insurgency, and more latterly in its operations in Iraq, had not gone unnoticed. A primary strategic objective for AQ – nee an imperative – has been the need to mobilize Muslim populations. Analysis of jihadist communiqués between 2001 and 2005 shows a clear preference for Muslim audiences. 92% of their output targeted Muslim audiences, 6% were designed for an undifferentiated audience, while only 2 % was directed specifically at non-Muslim audiences<sup>10</sup>. As one of the principle strategists of al-Qaeda, Abu 'Ubeid al-Qurashi, wrote:

*“They did not aspire to gain Western sympathy; rather, they sought to expose the American lie and deceit to the peoples of the world – and first and foremost to the Islamic peoples”<sup>11</sup>*

And yet in recent years extremist groups have devoted an increasing interest in ‘western’ audiences. For example, many Iraqi Sunni insurgent groups have created English mirrors of their Arabic websites. And they have adapted their output to meet the characteristics and modalities of the West. Between 2005 – 2007 AQ's arch strategist Ayman Zawahiri has quadrupled AQ's video output<sup>12</sup> seeking to confront both the “near” (the Islamic regimes) and “far” enemies (the US) that he defined in his December 2001 treatise ‘Knights under the prophets banner’ in London based pan Arab newspaper Al-Sharq el-Awsat<sup>13</sup>.

Thus the Taliban had much to learn. This is not to suggest that such operations were unknown to Afghan fighters. During the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, two Afghan Islamist insurgent organizations, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-e-Islami and Ahmad Shah Masoud's Jamiat-e-Islami, had both used media campaigns in their operations<sup>14</sup> - inexpensive magazines, local radio broadcasts, newsletters, video and audiotapes and posters to promote their cause in Afghanistan and Pakistan – however these were largely amateur in design and production. In their jihad against the US much more sophisticated mechanisms were needed.

By mid-2002 the Taliban had taken the first steps in the construction of a widespread traditional propaganda campaign that would include:

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<sup>9</sup> It is recognised that the term Taliban is problematic, implying a homogeneous group with similar aims and objectives. The author notes that such characteristics do not define the insurgents of southern Afghanistan and of the Pakistan tribal areas but uses it simply for convenience.

<sup>10</sup> Torres M & Jordan J & Horsburgh N, *Analysis and Evolution of the Global Jihadist Movement Propaganda*, (Analysis and Evolution of the Global Jihadist Movement Propaganda, Volume 18 Number 3 Fall 06), pp 399-421.

<sup>11</sup> *Al-Qa'ida Activist, Abu 'Ubeid Al Qurashi: Comparing Munich (Olympics) Attack 1972 to September 11*, (MEMRI, 12 Mar 02).

<sup>12</sup> *Scarier than Bin Laden* by Bruce Hoffman 9 Sep 07 Washington Post

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.scribd.com/doc/6759609/Knights-Under-the-Prophet-Banner>

<sup>14</sup> Jamestown Terrorism Focus Volume IV, (Issue 15, 22 May 07). See also Borovik A, *The Hidden War: A Russian Journalist's Account of the Soviet War in Afghanistan*, (Grove Press, New York 1990).

*"... the distribution of dictums, leaflets, cassettes and books that call for jihad and explain the punishment for those who cooperate with or work for the crusaders"<sup>15</sup>*

Over the next few years intermittent reports suggested that a growing synergy existed between the insurgency in Iraq and that of Afghanistan. Whilst the increase and sophistication, of IEDs<sup>16</sup> was the most obvious operational consequence of this synergy, another was clearly that of the media battle and by late 2006 the Taliban has formed its own media organization, modelled on al-Qaeda's al-Sahab (*The Clouds*). The author's study of that campaign, between December 2006 and Aug 2007<sup>17</sup> illustrated how that information space had slowly developed into a key component of their campaign, a surprising development demonstrating both a agility of mind and, perhaps more astonishing, a developed grasp of the role of information to their heavily outgunned insurgency. The campaign began in earnest in April 2007 when the Taliban stumbled across<sup>18</sup>, by accident, an Al-Jazeera TV journalist. Initially unsure of what they should do with their captive, higher authorities directed that he be, to coin a coalition term, embedded with the Taliban. The result was a five part news series for the channel's multi-million Arab and Islamic audience. One 'episode' was entitled 'The People's Movement' and gave the first indication of a concerted Taliban 'hearts and minds' campaign. In that piece an (alleged) female afghan doctor declares her support for the Taliban, her bourqa conspicuously absent. That she is a doctor is 'confirmed' by the presence of a stethoscope in front of her as she speaks. Later, in the same episode, tribal elders speak with approval of the 'peace and security' that the Taliban had brought to their region<sup>19</sup>. That same series of news features also spoke of the importance with which the Taliban treated the safety of civilians, noting that coalition helicopters were never engaged over poppy fields lest they fall from the air and destroy the livelihood of the poppy farmers.

Yet it was a June 2007 video release which really began to cause interest. The video<sup>20</sup> was of a Taliban suicide graduation ceremony for would-be western suicide bombers. The video, which purports to show a 'graduating class' of ready to travel bombers, their sights set on targets in the United States and Western Europe. The video is notable for a number of reasons. Firstly it deviates from usual suicide bomber propaganda which is traditionally usually post-mortem and seeks to glorify the martyrdom of the bomber, celebrating his life and his sacrifice for Allah. Previous videos have also sought to focus on individuals or, as in the case of the 9/11 attackers, on very small and discreet groups. This video, however, shows a large a number of individuals, lined up by nationality and apparently ready for suicide operations. It is self-evidently designed not for a Muslim audience but for a western viewer. One young man stands up and states: 'let me tell you why I will be making a suicide bomb in Britain'. Others talk of taking attacks to Ottawa in Canada and to Germany. Indeed, the Taliban's leader, Mullah Dadullah says:

*"Listen, all you Westerners and Americans. You came from thousands of kilometres away to fight us. Now we will get back to you in your countries and attack you."*

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<sup>15</sup> Jamestown Terrorism Focus Volume IV, (Issue 10, 17 Apr 07).

<sup>16</sup> Improvised Explosive Devices

<sup>17</sup> *Op cit*. Strategic Communication: A Primer

<sup>18</sup> The author discussed this incident with Whadah Kamfar the managing director of the Al-Jazeera TV channel during a visit to the station's headquarter in May 2008.

<sup>19</sup> This video, together with translations, is available to view at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v65hRLHRxvg>

<sup>20</sup> The video can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TwwiGXlhnKo>

The graduation ceremony, which has the appearance of a college graduation has the “students,” organized in six national “brigades” (British, American, Canadian, German, French and Afghan), who take turns in pledging future action. In Western military terminology the video is clearly part of an ‘information operation’, seeking to divide the NATO alliance and weaken its commitment to assisting and supporting the Hamid Karzai government. And it had some effect. A Canadian official told the Canadian Television News channel that they take the Taliban threat “*very seriously*”<sup>21</sup>, stating that Canadian intelligence had known for some months that the Taliban leadership had directed its commanders to: “... *take the fight out of the country, to take it to us*”. Celebrated Pakistani journalist Hamid Mir confirmed the report as “*absolutely true*” - suicide bombers, it would appear, were heading to Canada, America and Europe<sup>22</sup>.

Whilst the large Pakistani diaspora in the UK might well be a likely proving ground for such operations, the claims that the Taliban and their acolytes might have the capability and resources to cross the Atlantic does seem unlikely. And yet whether they could, or not, was largely an academic point for like the female Doctor in the earlier video, they are fine pieces of directed Information Operations, designed to intimidate and instill fear in western audiences.

In June 2007 the new Taliban commander Mansor Dadullah provided a long and detailed interview with Al-Jazeera and in July 2007 the Taliban announced themselves to the world, again via the conduits of Al-Jazeera and the web, that they had re-branded themselves as ‘neo-Taliban’. This later proclamation was perhaps of most interest for accompanying the re-branding announcement was a feature on the Taliban’s ‘media centre’<sup>23</sup>. Although not the most sophisticated video editing equipment the news feature showed Window’s based software, in English, being used to create videos and CDs immortalising the Taliban’s fight. Were young radicalised British Muslims now choosing to fight their personal jihad not with AK47 Assault weapons but with computers and video editing equipment – one Security Services Officer enquired of the author.

Perhaps conscious that up until now they had engaged only with Arabic speaking audiences, in October 2007 the English language outlet of Al-Jazeera was sent 14 videos by the Taliban. Among the footage were attacks on Afghan police vehicles. The tape shows one person trying to escape, before being shot. The cars are then set alight. Another tape shows Taliban fighters proudly displaying what they discovered at an empty US military out-post. They appear particularly intrigued by the night-vision goggles<sup>24</sup> As the Al-Jazeera correspondent notes:

*“The desire to gain the psychological advantage has meant that armed groups here and across the Middle East have now embraced propaganda in a big way. On all sides of the Afghan conflict there is an awareness that while the battles are important, the message may help win the war”.*

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<sup>21</sup> [http://www.ctv.ca/servlet/ArticleNews/story/CTVNews/20070618/taliban\\_bombers\\_070618/20070618](http://www.ctv.ca/servlet/ArticleNews/story/CTVNews/20070618/taliban_bombers_070618/20070618)

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.canadafreepress.com/2007/cover062107.htm>

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E2IjuNYAF4Y>

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5jCUeUNbnQE&feature=related>

In September 2008 the Taliban courted the renowned French Magazine Paris Match<sup>25</sup>, posing for its photographers partially dressed in the uniforms of dead French soldiers, killed only days beforehand. The French Defence Minister Herve Morin asked:

*"Should we really be doing promotion for people who understand the importance of communication in the modern world?" he asked. "This is a communications war that the Taliban are waging. They understand that public opinion is probably the Achilles heel of the international community"*<sup>26</sup>

The depth, quality and sophistication of this AQ inspired spin machine are noteworthy; it would appear from the vast numbers of internet videos that not only does no attack on the coalition go unrecorded but, as in the case of the Afghan doctor, no wider propaganda opportunity missed. As Fellow of King's College London Dr Dave Sloggett notes:

*"... we are faced by a second generation asymmetric insurgency that is backed by a sophisticated media operation ... that reinforces a number of key but simple messages. These include the need to do duty through Jihad, to fight Zionist and Christian aggression that are targeting Islam and setting this in some 14th Century period of world history"*<sup>27</sup>

So to what do we attribute this apparent change in communication priorities? Undoubtedly AQ have been disappointed at the response of the Muslim Ummah. In spite of its capability to mobilize significant activist support, the reality is that the dream of a Global Islamic Insurgency has yet to be achieved. Polls in the Muslim world indicate that Jihadist propaganda has not significantly increased the levels of popular support towards al-Qaeda and its objectives. Yet this explanation would belittle the agility and intelligence of AQ. Jihadists recognize that the 'crusader armies' determination to fight depends on the support of its internal constituencies and it seems likely that this is the new target of our adversaries. Thus the Taliban has slowly learned that placing information at the centre of their campaign can add significant value – and undeniably it is a lesson they have learnt from AQ. As Hamir Mir the biographer of Bin Laden, once noted: *"AQ militants fleeing US bombs in November 2001 – every 2nd member was carrying a laptop alongside his Kalashnikov"*<sup>28</sup> It is a campaign that has a marketplace and it is difficult to see how the huge amounts of material available on-line and in more mainstream media can have done anything but help the support and radicalisation process. In short there is a profound battle for hearts and minds - both afghan and western audiences - and whilst the US led coalition may not be losing it is difficult to assess if its message is prevailing. So, enquired Brigadier Andrew Mackay, what was to be done? What indeed.

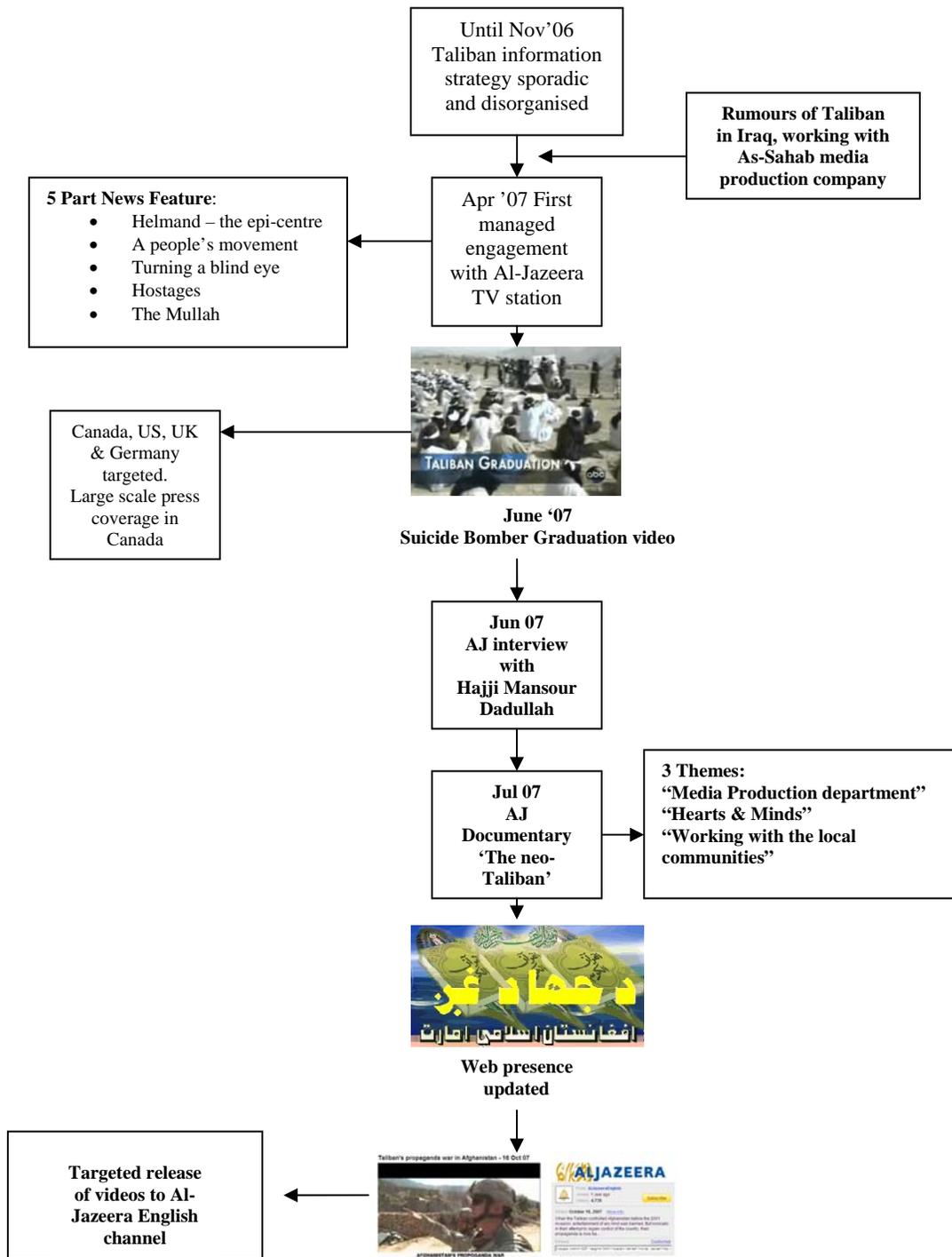
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<sup>25</sup> <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/paris-match-taliban-photoshoot-shocks-france-919109.html>

<sup>26</sup> *Paris Match Taliban photoshoot shocks France*, John Lichfield, The Independent 4 Sep 08.

<sup>27</sup> Sloggett D, *Information Operations: The challenge of Second Generation Insurgencies* (King's College London, unpublished).

<sup>28</sup> Atwan AB, *The Secret History of Al-Qa'ida* (Abacus, 2007), p122.



**Schematic diagram of development of Taliban information campaign Nov 06 –Jul 07**

## Playing the Taliban Media Game

In proposing to address the absence of coalition views a number of issues had to be dealt with. First and foremost the decision was taken to focus on pan-Arab media. Afghan media was already well served by the coalition and Pakistani media at the time were not well understood. Arab media had great reach across global Muslim society and elements of the population within the Gulf Region in particular were known to offer financial and material support to the Taliban's campaign. It would also be useful, for longer term relations, to try to dispel the perception that pan-Arab media were uniformly bias against the coalition. Prior analysis of Al-Jazeera<sup>29</sup> indicated occasional Islamist bias but more visible in discussion programmes than in the editorial aspects of news. However the viewing figures (see chart below) clearly showed it to be, arguably, the single most important conduit to the Muslim world. Abu Dhabi TV clearly did not have the reach of Al-Jazeera but it does carry influence in the UAE, an historically friendly country and one whose government was providing troops, at some risk, to the coalition. And finally, Al-Arabiya. Founded in early 2003 as a direct competitor for the Al-Jazeera TV channel, and funded with money from the government of Saudi Arabia, the channel sought to present its audiences with a counter-point to the rhetoric of Al-Jazeera – much of which was often critical of the Saudi ruling family. In just a few years the channel had built up a following and reputation that broadly rivaled that of its Qatari neighbour and was therefore a logical channel to invite to cover events.

The second issue was addressing the commonly held idea that Arab 'street opinion' was uniformly antagonistic to the West – and there was therefore no reason to attempt to assuage it. This was also felt to be largely erroneous. Countless survey's have suggested that Arab street opinion is antagonistic to western policies, particularly with respect to Palestine and the occupation of Iraq, and actions - based on revelations of coalition misconduct and large scale civilian deaths – but it is not antagonistic to the West *per sae*.

The third issue was the belief that Arab media supported AQ. Again, previous research by the author indicated that not one outlet unquestionable supported AQ activity. A clear differentiation must be made between support AQ actions and the under-lying grievances that have spawned them. Finally the experiment needed to address historical experience of operations in Iraq which suggested that embedding Arab media with coalition forces was troublesome. To a certain extent this was true – the linguistic and cultural differences did make the accommodation of Arab journalists more difficult than, say, the BBC. And it was also the case that the Arab media were less likely to approach western spokesman / press centres for information, which they saw as being largely propagandist.

Whilst the MoD may at first have been ambivalent, the Brigadier was not put off and they finally accepted a multi-level plan devised by the author. Firstly, Mackay was provided a tactical soft-power armoury of background and deployable culturally relevant and nuanced data to help him construct his in-theatre campaign. This he would use as the backbone for the extension of influence 'in the field'. Secondly, he was taken to meet the executives of the major pan-Arab TV channels in the Middle East. At these meetings he extended a personal invitation to the

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<sup>29</sup> Tatham S, *Losing Arab Hearts and Minds: The Coalition, Al-Jazeera & Muslim Public Opinion* (Hurst & Co, 2006).

channels to embed their journalists with his forces. These meetings proved illuminating. At Abu Dhabi TV the Brigadier was told by the channel’s Director that:

*“... troops, helmets and body armour – these are not soldiers but automated killing machines.”<sup>30</sup>”*

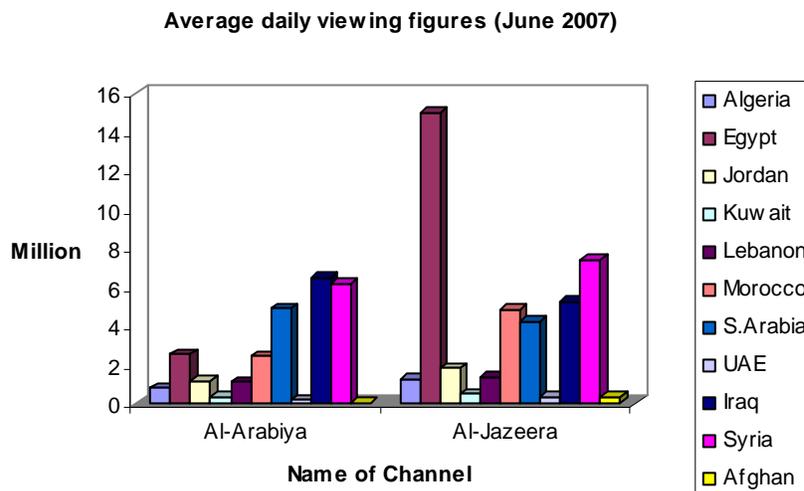
In the TV director’s view the campaign in Afghanistan was completely defined, even subjugated, by that in Iraq, with all the negative connotations that this carried. If true this was potentially extremely serious since the US action in Afghanistan had initially been seen by the wider world to be linked directly to the tragedy of 9/11. Although diminishing in some quarters Afghanistan still had a legitimacy<sup>31</sup> that the Iraq War never had. At the Headquarters of Al-Arabiya Television in Dubai the channel’s Head of News agreed with the sentiments of his colleague at Abu Dhabi, noting that the Arab world:

*“... did not have the coverage of Afghanistan that it wanted”.*

The reception at the world’s most famous Arab TV station, Al-Jazeera, was the same:

*“... we seek a relationship of trust”<sup>32</sup>”.*

The result was extended embedding of Arab media with UK troops.



Private research commissioned by the UK Defence Academy in 2007 illustrated the reach of the two channels across the Arab world.

All journalists embedding with UK forces are required to sign the ‘Green Book’. This publication – agreed between the UK’s Ministry of Defence and representatives of the media

<sup>30</sup> Meeting Ali Al-Ahmed, Director Abu Dhabi TV, Abu Dhabi Sept 07.

<sup>31</sup> As indicated by the announcement that UAE troops were part of the US led coalition. BBC News 28 March 2008. Available at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south\\_asia/7318731.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/7318731.stm)

<sup>32</sup> Whadah Kamfa, Director General Al-Jazeera TV

industry – set out the rules and regulations that would underpin any embed<sup>33</sup>. Conspiracy theorists may think that it is censorship but in reality it exists in recognition that journalists embedded for extended periods of time will be made privy – intentionally or otherwise – to military secrets and the Green Book seeks to preserve them. So, for example, journalists may not report specific locations of units to whom they are attached, for this may be used by the enemy to their advantage, nor may they reveal the names of faces of aircrew, for this may make them susceptible to reprisals. The Arab media signed the document with no difficulty and duly embedded with British troops. One of the particular issues that we had sought to address was the idea of ‘automated killing machines’. The view was taken that the UK needed to show the humanity of soldiers – not in a false sense but in their everyday lives and actions. In part this was prompted by a startling statistic from the Iraq War in 2003. At the end of that year the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) concluded that 80% of the Iraqi population had not physically met a coalition soldier<sup>34</sup>. And yet by this time the insurgency was already well underway. Iraqi’s, admittedly aggrieved by the presence of foreign soldiers on their land, had committed to armed rebellion despite most not having actually met and formed their own view of a coalition soldier. Perception proved stronger than reality. Thus it was hoped that the Arab media would form perceptions from actual interaction with UK troops and accurately portray that to their audiences. In particular the project aimed to dispel the idea of the faceless crusader, without humanity or humility. Al-Arabiya choose to anchor their coverage in every day’s main evening news – devoting 4-5 minutes of the programme to a specially created feature called ‘From Afghanistan’. In all five programmes were produced. One focussed on the work of Afghan translators and bears little relevance to this study however the remaining four were of great utility and their contents are summarised as follows:

**The Afghan National Army<sup>35</sup>:** With the focus firmly on demonstrating the harmonisation of the Afghan national army the programme featured interviews with 3 soldiers – a Hazara, a Pashton and a Tajik as well as with the Commander of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Afghan Army Brigade – Brigadier Mohye Eddin Ghorri – who declared that: “... *we are all afghans, sons of this country and we defend it*”

**A day in the life of two soldiers<sup>36</sup>:** The clip features the living and working conditions of two soldiers – one a British infantryman and the other an Afghan soldier. It focused on their home environments – in particular the British Soldier’s wife and family – and the fact that they share adversity together, living in identical conditions.

**War on the Taliban<sup>37</sup>:** With an emphasis the role of Afghan army and new joint tactics with British Forces in Southern Helmand the clip conducts interviews with Abdawhadud Adbkhalak, the Commander of the Afghan Army in Sanguin and with Brigadier Andrew Mackay of the British Army. It also includes interviews with local markets traders who

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<sup>33</sup> ‘The Green Book’ available to download at: [www.mod.uk](http://www.mod.uk).

<sup>34</sup> Colonel Ian Tunnicliffe – former Director of IO at the CPA – presented this figure at a conference in Rome on public opinion, May 2007.

<sup>35</sup> This video, together with translations, is available to view at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T3429i6C9Kg>

<sup>36</sup> This video, together with translations, is available to view at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oJ3z2WgC8Fo>

<sup>37</sup> This video, together with translations, is available to view at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1PpLWN1-5UM>

explain that the security situation is improving and that the local market has reopened. The programme ends with coverage of the building of mosques by British troops.

**War on Drugs**<sup>38</sup>: Opening with an examination of the country's drug smuggling industry the clip interviews the Head of Counter Narcotics at the British Embassy who describes drugs as a "cancer spreading through Afghan society". It then considers the issue of high level corruption and notes that many known smugglers have apparent immunity from prosecution in Afghan society. Switching the problems of users it notes that coalition nations have built a number of clinics for addicts and in an interview with Brigadier Mackay viewers learn about a micro-finance credit scheme to keep locals out of the hands of drug dealers.

The Al-Jazeera TV channel embedded later in the deployment and followed a similar format to their competitors, compiling short clips and embedding them in their main news stories. On one extended clip a female British soldier is interviewed about her work, her hopes and her aspirations<sup>39</sup> whilst a later clip interviewed a military Chaplain<sup>40</sup>. Abu Dhabi TV enjoyed perhaps the most active time with UK troops for their stay coincided with the retaking of Musa Qala and they were amongst the first in to the town centre, reporting the arrival of Afghan troops under General Moideen and the raising of the Afghan national flag<sup>41</sup>

## Arab Media Analysis

The purpose of the experiment was essentially three fold. Firstly it was clear from preparatory research that there was an absence of informed Arab media coverage of issues in Afghanistan, from the coalition's perspective, and this experiment sought to rectify that issue. The experiment proved that when the Arab media were proactively engaged they responded – particularly so when the invitation was a personal one extended from the Commander of British forces himself. Secondly the experiment demonstrated that the Arab media had no more underlying bias in their reporting than any other international media organisation. Thus previous concerns at the UK Ministry of Defence, in particular, were disproved<sup>42</sup>. Thirdly it demonstrated that when units were properly prepared for media visits specific results could be obtained, even from those outlets institutionally regarded as being anti-US / British. Such preparation necessitated thorough briefings of units and in particular the adaption of two key ideas by those units:

1. To unit had to create a situation where the embedded journalist feels that they should report in a balanced way as what they see is a real effort being made to balance kinetic and non-kinetic effects.
2. That the messages to the "Arab Street" need to contain a significant bias towards visual content. Long interviews with commanders need to be avoided as this will not interest the

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<sup>38</sup> This video, together with translations, is available to view at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gb7nx9En02I>

<sup>39</sup> This video, together with translations, is available to view at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IPf2yFD40uM>

<sup>40</sup> This video, together with translations, is available to view at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B19u1kdZCCQ>

<sup>41</sup> Also captured by British Army camera teams. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vPGRVakos8E&NR=1>

<sup>42</sup> Tatham S, *Op.cit.*

target audience at which this is aimed. It is suggested that as a rule of thumb the balance should be 70% imagery and visual content that expresses our mission intent and 30% voice based on one-to-one interviews.

To facilitate the first condition units were encouraged to develop a cordial relationship with the embedded Journalist and to afford them every possible latitude to report what they wanted based upon what they saw and understood. In particular there should be no suggestion of attempting to push them towards a particular viewpoint or story line. In doing it was recognised that a condition known as cognitive dissonance<sup>43</sup> - a situation where the Journalist holds in their head two competing, but equally valid in his eyes, opinions – might occur. These are the views he held before embarking upon the embed and the opinions and feelings he gains in the course of the embed and the potential for conflict between the two. The way his opinions develop in the course of the assignment and the inevitable mild form of what is sometimes called the Stockholm Syndrome<sup>44</sup> will ultimately decide how balanced the reporting becomes. Being embedded, particularly in conflict situations, can allow the development of a close relationship, unless one deliberately acts to maintain distance. It was suggested to units that maintaining a distance would not be a successful strategy. Indeed units were encouraged create the conditions where a degree of empathy develops and where antipathy develops into an understanding of the other parties' perspectives and world view.

The transmitted coverage was met with slight incredulity in the Ministry of Defence. With three applications for every embed place the Press Office must make difficult and often unpopular decisions over which media organisations travel to theatre. For obvious reasons primacy would nearly always be afforded to British, not Arab, media and to do otherwise would be met with an inevitable howl of protest from 'Fleet Street'. However the forcefulness of the Brigade Commander and the willingness of the cross-governmental Media Management Group finally pushed the issue through. That the coverage was so balanced and positive was perhaps a surprise to the MoD and would lead to further, occasional, embeds for Arab media, in particular Abu Dhabi TV.

### **Monitoring of the Afghan Media and Statements**

As well as proactively supporting the Arab and Afghan media, a process was instigated by the Defence Academy to monitor wider coverage of events in the country and provide the Brigade Commander with the opportunity to rebut or address and specific issues. This entailed the employment of Arab language specialists and the services of BBC monitoring in Caversham. Over 4 months detailed analysis of the Arab media was undertaken and the MoD and Brigade Staff were provided a weekly update of themes and issues. One particularly memorable issue was the statements of a particular Afghan Police Officer in Helmand who presented one view of

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<sup>43</sup> Cognitive dissonance is a psychological phenomenon which refers to the discomfort felt at a discrepancy between what you already know or believe [your world view] and new information or interpretation. It is also defined as being when you engage in behaviour that is contrary to your beliefs. The theory was first postulated by Leon Festinger in 1957 in his book *When Prophecy Fails*.

<sup>44</sup> The Stockholm syndrome is a well known psychological response that has occasionally been manifested in hostage situations when the hostage has begun to develop signs of sympathy to the hostage taker personally or to the events which have led to the hostage situation.

events – normally supportive of ISAF and the UK Position – to western media but a completely different view of the same events to Afghan and Arab media. The information, which had not been picked up by any other agency, was fed through to Brigade staff.

The team also elected to monitor blogs, discussion panels and websites of organisations and individuals opposed to the British presence. Quite quickly it became apparent that the sites were very adept at publishing negative information about British Forces – much of which was wholly inaccurate. The author and his team took the view that this was either because they were naturally disposed to an extreme Islamist view (which would count for the majority of cases) or because (in a few number of cases) they would never have received British and NATO press release or have been able to contact spokesman for accurate information. Using a non-returnable email address the Defence Academy proposed to NATO that it would translate press releases into Arabic and post them to opinion forming websites and other non-standard media outlets. Despite great enthusiasm from the NATO hierarchy the idea was never picked up by the NATO media teams and not one release was posted to a site.

### **The Battle for Musa Qala**

The media coverage was a good starting point but it was just one aspect of the deployment – of far greater importance would be the actual conduct of that operation. This would have far greater effect on Arab and Muslim audiences than a few embedded journalists' reports. And the use of influence within that deployment would be characterised by one single military action – the retaking of the strategically important town of Musa Qala.

Situated in the southern province of Helmand, the town of Musa Qala had become, between 2003 and 2006, iconic for all the wrong reasons. Known as 'The Alamo'<sup>45</sup>, the town had survived 52 days of sustained attack from a determined Taliban force. However in October 2006 British Military Commanders brokered an agreement with village elders that was designed to allow both the UK, and the Taliban, to withdraw<sup>46</sup>. The arrangement ended in February 2007 when Taliban forces retook the town and, during succeeding months, it became both a physical and symbolic base for Taliban. Perhaps more importantly, presentationally it was vital to both Coalition & Taliban forces alike. Yet retaking the town would not be easy and in particular Commanders were concerned about the large number of civilian casualties that might result – an issue of tremendous political concern<sup>47</sup>.

The deployment of 52 Brigade was by no means routine, it had only recently been converted to a type A brigade – a conversion that had met with considerable resistance around Whitehall but which had benefited from the support of the then CINC Land Forces, General Dannatt, who had pushed through it through the various corridors of powers. Mackay recalls:

*“In the Summer of 2006 we realised we had run out of brigades. After lots of thought at Land [Headquarters] the decision was taken that 52 Brigade would become a type A war*

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<sup>45</sup> *Pure hell of the siege of Musa Qala*, Lt Col D J Reynolds, The Times 12 Aug 07

<sup>46</sup> *British troops in secret truce with the Taliban*, Michael Smith, The Times 1 Oct 06

<sup>47</sup> *Karzai anger at civilian deaths*. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/low/world/south\\_asia/5009364.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/low/world/south_asia/5009364.stm)

*fighting manoeuvre Brigade. I received a phone call whilst I was in Lebanon to say 'it was on'<sup>48</sup>*

At the backbone of Mackay's planning was the galian idea of the 'population being the prize'; getting the balance between kinetic and non-kinetic effect right was essential. Thus, he established at the heart of his command team the principle that every activity undertaken by his troops would affect the thoughts, activities and attitudes of either individuals or groups, that the need for 'hard kinetic activity' had to be calibrated, and adjudicated, against the effect and to ensure compliance with this idea he established in every company Non-Kinetic Effect's teams (NKETs), for whom influence was a primary, and notably not an additional, responsibility. Such work was new to the highly experienced troops that he commanded and Mackay recalls that whilst initially sceptical they were:

*"... persuaded in the end but I had to be constantly alert to ensuring that centrality of influence was in persuasion and not a subsidiary function on the periphery"<sup>49</sup>.*

Although influence permeated every aspect of the Brigade's deployment, it was the town of Musa Qala that was to prove its testing ground. The eventual decision to take the town came as a result of Mullah Salam, a Taliban leader from the Musa Qal'eh area, contacting the Coalition with a view to reconciliation. Thus began Operation Mar Karardad. From the outset Operation Mar Karardad would be led by the Afghan Nation Army – reinforcing the idea that Afghans were providing their own solutions, assisted by ISAF. Operational Secrecy (OPSEC) was traded for influence. In advance massive efforts went into developing post-operations stability, in particular 'quick win' projects that would provide employment, income and demonstrable change. Concurrently the coalition began a gradual approach of psychological operations on the Taliban, including the phased deployments of manoeuvre units, beginning with Warrior<sup>50</sup> companies, around the town, with pauses in between to allow information operations to take place and have an effect. Commanders undertook sustained shura activity with locals and tribal elders to inform them of what was happening and to begin the process of choosing a post operation Afghan district governor and council. As Stephen Grey notes, the British Ambassador to Afghanistan, Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles told the Afghan President (already deeply concerned by the growing number of civilian casualties) that:

*"We are not talking here of a major military operation to take Musa Qala....The idea is to let the population of Musa Qala come to us"<sup>51</sup>.*

The twofold purpose of the activities was to convince the Taliban that resistance was futile and to persuade local population to either resist the Taliban, or, of greater chance of success, minimise support to Taliban leadership and prepare for development efforts post the fighting. For the stabilisation phase, a great deal of planning was undertaken to ensure there was no hiatus of activity post the fighting. Military stabilisation teams (MSTs) would be deployed immediately after the fighting to coordinate work with the Afghan leadership that emerged and to direct and

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<sup>48</sup> Author's interview 6 May 2009.

<sup>49</sup> Author's interview 6 May 2009.

<sup>50</sup> Warrior Infantry Fighting vehicles

<sup>51</sup> Grey S, *Op.cit.* p70.

coordinate political, stabilisation and influence activity. Indeed both NKETS and MSTs were visible demonstrations of placing the principle of influence at the heart of the operational design and, in the absence of structures to cope, the innovative drive to create mechanisms to support it. A key tactical influence tool swiftly became the Radio in a Box (RIAB) provided by PSYOPS staff, which deployed to MSQ and provided the only local radio station in the town. Ultimately becoming a key source of detailed information to locals it was to become a full time job for the IO staff in the stabilisation team. From humble origins the station quickly developed its style and content - phone-ins, request shows, political statements from the ANA, the governor and the local religious leaders all contributed to the station's output – which subsequently was to become a successful and enormously powerful information conduit.

The final assault on the town began on the afternoon of December 7. Leaflets had already urged the towns inhabitants to stay indoors but many had chosen to flee into the desert. That evening, a battalion of the U.S. 82nd Airborne was airlifted to positions on the hills north of the town and worked their way through the outer ring of Taliban defences, whilst tactical information operations sought to deceive the Taliban in thinking the attack would come from different directions. Afghan, British, Danish and Estonian units all closed in and with Musa Qala all but surrounded, air strikes targeted Taliban positions in the town. On the 8 December coalition troops began to clear Taliban positions, Taliban retreating from prepared position to prepared position until, ultimately, on 10 Dec fleeing northwards. On the 11 Dec NATO announced the town's fall and on 12 December General Moideen of the 3rd Brigade, Afghan National Army entered the town Musa Qala and reclaimed it for the Afghan national government. With few ISAF soldiers present the event was recorded by the Abu Dhabi TV team placed in-theatre weeks before. The Afghan face had a Muslim TV outlet.

Musa Qala did not fall on non-kinetic power alone and sadly coalition and Afghan lives were lost, yet neither was the town destroyed by hard kinetic effect. The absence of kinetic hard power may be anathema to some – indeed it is perhaps best summed up by one Warrant Officer from the Royal Artillery who, some 2 years after the event attended a presentation given by the author. *'So that's what happened'* he recalled. *'We were waiting and waiting and waiting but the order to open fire never came'*. The victory is hard to empirically quantify. Should we, for example, look at casualty rates, or perhaps number of rounds used? Perhaps instead we can look at enemy deaths or number of prisoners. All are perfectly feasible but the tactical situation in Afghanistan is so changeable that such comparators are highly unlikely to be constructive. Thus a more intuitive assessment is perhaps necessary. And for that the words of incoming US Commander of US troops in Afghanistan may be insightful. A long term Special Forces Officer, soft power would not normally appear to rest easily with his outlook and yet within days of assuming Command General Stanley McCrystal observed that the best measure of effectiveness will be: *"the number of Afghans shielded from violence – not the number of militants killed"*<sup>52</sup>.

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<sup>52</sup> *US Policy to shield civilians.* AP Report USA Today 23 June 2009.

(2003). *He is completing his PhD in the utility of non-kinetic effect on the battlefield.*

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