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Identity, Insurgency & Healing

by Dianna Wuagneux



A constant challenge faced by the Coalition Forces in Afghanistan is the ability of the Anti-Coalition Forces (ACF) to steadily reinforce its ranks through the recruitment of a seemingly unending supply of fresh human reserves. Though the Taliban, et al are known to recruit from a variety of sources (e.g. particular madrassas and more fundamentalist villages on both sides of the Durand Line), among the most lucrative hunting grounds are those places where refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) languish in political and geographic limbo.

While the numbers vary from one agency to the next, Refugees International estimates that at present over 3 million Afghans remain refugees. Nearly all reside in decaying, ramshackle camps lacking basic health, education, or food facilities and over 300,000 are approximated to be suffering from the effects of contaminated water and substandard food today. The overcrowded shelters provided most often consist of makeshift tents which cannot protect the inhabitants from the extreme environment, or provide women and their children with basic privacy and protection. The needs of these Afghans are for the most part neglected by the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (IROA), CFS, and donors alike. In recent months many refugees and IPDs have

made efforts return to their former homes. They are largely undocumented, disenfranchised, and unwanted where ever they go, leaving them, like their counterparts remaining in the camps, particularly susceptible to the attentions and motivations of ACF. Like any predator, Taliban and other ACF recruiting scouts are seeking the prey most vulnerable to their intentions. This includes individuals who, because of their experiences and circumstances, are both angry and malleable, such as young and impressionable males without much in the way of resources or future prospects and who lack sufficient mature patriarchal guidance. These landless, disenfranchised populations offer the ACF an abundance of low-hanging fruit.

Easy Pickings: Refugees & IDPs

What's different about them?

In Afghanistan, it is not unusual to meet IDPs and refugees who have been trapped in the no-man's-land of "temporary" government camps for over twenty years. All of these individuals suffer from feelings of powerlessness, victimization, shame, and humiliation. And within their numbers is an entire generation of young men and women who have never known anything else. Their collective trauma stems from the loss of their homes and land and the on-going threat of violence. The psychosocial, economic, and emotional damage which this causes is considerable. The stresses of daily life in an unstable and insecure environment combined with the pressure of coping with difficult and humiliating living conditions with no end in sight leave these refugees and IDP's emotionally exhausted, psychologically apprehensive, and particularly vulnerable to even seemingly innocuous conflict triggers and instigators. The result is the perfect fodder for those wishing to turn traumatized humans into weapons of insurgency.

According to a US News & World Report article by Aamir Latif last year, some Afghan refugee camps along the Pakistan border are known to have become fertile recruiting grounds , and safe havens for Taliban fighters who are involved in cross-border infiltration. Citing a senior Pakistani intelligence officer, he affirms that there are concrete reports of Taliban militants frequently visiting and holding secret meetings with small groups of tribal youths in various refugee camps in different parts of the war-ravaged Northwest Frontier Provinces. As in other locations, elders have said that more and more of their youth join the Taliban every day, a situation that they find worrying.

In addition to refugees, the ongoing conflict and lack of internal security have displaced approximately 270,000 Afghans, 100,000 of which are in the least secure southern provinces. For a time, analysts allowed themselves to believe that the extremist doctrine of ACF groups would be enough to limit their influence among even the weakest and most dispossessed members of the population; however, this was naïve. We have allowed ourselves to ignore the fact that we are dealing with a traumatized nation suffering from collective mourning, with all of its corresponding ramifications. And worse, we have left those who have lost the most, the least protected, the least assisted, and the least befriended. Add to this, Mullah Mohammed Omar's directive earlier this year rebranding the Taliban's image into that of a liberation movement aligned against the presence of foreign troops. With the Taliban message transformed, would-be

recruits are provided with a convenient and palatable lie, and one that gives them someone to hold responsible for their suffering.

Why This Most Available Source is so Dangerous to COIN Ops

- ◎ **Collective Response to Trauma and Loss:** The literature dealing with the trauma of displacement describes shock and anxiety accompanied by feelings of guilt over a life and place left behind. In these instances, the memories of home, and the life that was are glorified and held onto. This idealized version of what was keeps individuals from accepting or adapting to the changes with which they are faced daily. This inability to move on results in a lack of capacity for healthy psycho-social development expressed in part by:

- Loss of Identity

When individuals are up-rooted and separated from their homes by way of violence or other external force, along with their physical possessions they lose the social, economic, and historic framework that had previously provided them with a sense of identity. Individuals who have been cast adrift in this way have difficulty reestablishing a sense of self, of fitting in, of belonging, all of which are crucial to emotional balance and a healthy ego. Children raised in this environment can have an especially difficult time figuring out who they are, and what their place is in their community and society.

- Lack of Self-Efficacy (*the belief that one can accomplish that which is necessary to self-worth/esteem/confidence*)

Refugees and IDP adults have had the experience earlier in their lives of accomplishment. Despite their difficult circumstances and traumatic experiences, most retain the understanding that they possess the abilities needed to achieve a goal, because they have done so in the past. Youth who are raised as refugees and IDPs on the other hand, have grown up in an environment fraught with futility and frustration. Their experience tells them that they are not likely to be able to achieve or succeed. This lack of self-efficacy among teenagers and young adults leave them little in the way of self-confidence, self-esteem, or self-worth.

- Lack of Status (*as perceived by self, and as believed to be perceived by others.*)

Again, adults who find themselves as refugees or IDPs can usually maintain at least some level of status within their provisional community, especially if they were perceived as leaders in the past. Youth, and especially young males, have the need not only to define themselves and demonstrate to themselves and others that they have ability, but they have the need to be valued as worthy men. Unfortunately, there are few opportunities for young men to demonstrate that they can make a difference in such a way as to secure a position of significance and earned respect in this type of environment. This inability to attain status leads to a further deterioration of self-worth. In the stronger individuals,

these conditions induce a sense of combined helplessness and victimization resulting in deep and incendiary anger defined by the need to avenge their losses and their shame.

Growing to Be a Man in Geographical and Cultural Context

Most peoples of the world establish and maintain their identity from a place, its traditions and heritage; this is certainly true in Central Asia and the Middle East. The principles by which the peoples of Afghanistan and Waziristan, e.g. have traditionally organized themselves and understood their relationship to one another is fundamentally tied to land ownership. For instance, the tradition sometimes known as the “Wesh System” (begun by Pashtun tribesmen in the 16th century), dictates that communities are to be administered through a village assembly, such as the Jirga, where *only those who are landowners* are offered the right to speak. Conventionally, the potential authority of a man is derived almost exclusively from his ability to own and control land. Being a landholder gives a man status and allows him to develop profitable connections. There is a Waziristani tradition which states that the region is divided into "satisfied men" and "hungry men," referring to whether or not an individual and his family are able to offer others the hospitality and gifts made possible by land holdings. This generosity provides that others be under a man's obligation elevating him to a position of respect and consequence. In his research of Pakistan and Afghanistan, the Norwegian scholar Frederick Barth recorded that to be truly admired and respected this generosity must be complemented by a leader's reputation for bravado, impetuosity, sense of honor, and his willingness to avenge wrongs. In sum, for a man to achieve estimable status he must be able to:

- 1.) defend the honor and interests of his extended family following a perceived attack upon its reputation and further
- 2.) offer security, hospitality, and access to land if it is asked of him.

Refugees and IDPs families have lost this ability. They are on the outside without access or opportunity. If we accept that these traditional aspirations continue to inform and influence Afghan thinking and perceptions about what it is to be a respectable adult male in Afghan society, the professed value of what the ACF offers frustrated, status-less youth becomes clear.

TALIBAN Offers What they Lack

- ⊙ Identity – belonging, being part of something packaged w/beliefs & values consistent with traditions/heritage
- ⊙ Self-Efficacy – given specific, actionable tasks w/i their reach; they are emboldened with each success.
- ⊙ Status – emotionally & psychologically empowered from the above, as well as tangible compensation in money/access to resources for themselves and/or their family
- ⊙ Opportunity to avenge perceived wrongs

A Crucial Exacerbating Factor

Transgenerational Mourning & Insurgency

Traumatized parents often have trouble giving love and holding healthy relationships with others, including their children and/or spouse. When they are unable to process and deal with their own fear, guilt, and pain, their trauma is passed on to their children. Their children carry the sense of shame and victimization that their parents were never fully able to recover from. This leaves them confused and angry, and fuels a desire for retribution against whatever or whomever that they see as being the cause. Within this dynamic, the analysts have missed a powerful driver. That is, in the face of violent conflict, and especially in the case of refugees and IDPs, women often suffer the worst privations, and find themselves ill-equipped to deal with their loss and the increased stress in their day-to-day living. Their depth of suffering is only matched by the fuel that it provides to the insurgency, and the degree to which we have been oblivious of the dynamic.

- ⊙ As the inner workings and underpinnings of the recent wars have revealed, the state of mind of young men who choose to participate in violent acts are deeply influenced by their perceptions of their mother's pain and suffering.
- ⊙ Sons who feel that their mothers have been profoundly hurt, shamed, demeaned, injured, or abandoned, and who have lived with a mother who was unwilling or unable to heal from her wounds feel an absolute justification and even an *obligation* to hurt others as a means of retribution.
- ⊙ This is especially true in locations where there is an absence of a strong, mature male presence in the community to rein in the younger males or model more productive ways of dealing with their emotions.

And, while it is by no means common at this point in Afghanistan, it is not unheard of for women who have lost their male protection and means of support to be offered a guarantee of support and education for their younger sons and the promise of a fitting marriage for daughters by ACF in return for service to their cause.

Addressing the needs of Women and Youth in Adaptive Ways

- ⊙ Programmatic attention must be expanded to better meet these unique concerns and needs of displaced women and their sons.

Foster Programs, Projects and Practices that Support :

- Identity –Sense of belonging to something meaningful and productive/constructive

- Self-Efficacy (*the belief that one can accomplish that which is necessary to self-worth/esteem/confidence*)
- Status (*as perceived by self, and as believed to be perceived by others.*)
- Opportunity to achieve a consequential degree of justice in ways that are healthy, as well as consistent with their beliefs, values, and traditions

Considerations

Kudos to the CF and the International Community for paying attention to the cultural and historical landscape in Afghanistan, but in our effort to capture and employ this broader view, have we overlooked our near vision of the situational context?

In the RAND Counterinsurgency Study "*Heads We Win, the Cognitive Side of Counterinsurgency (COIN)*, 2007" author David Gompert reminds us that insurgency draws strength from the strength used against it. The more fragmented, dispersed, and embedded the ACF concept of their mission becomes, the harder it becomes to use force against it without confirming the jihadist story of who we are and what we are about.

Back in 2008, soft power became the new way to describe our understanding of how best to proceed. By recognizing the needs and motivations of Afghanistan's dispossessed women and youth, we are in a position to demonstrate our understanding of the desperation that comes from lack of hope and absence of solace, and demonstrate our true intentions through visible acts of humanity designed to facilitate their recovery. With all of the analyses and all of the terms and metrics chosen, created, and recycled to describe Afghanistan's needs and deficits, it is ultimately about healing -- the healing of the Afghan people, their internal relationships with one another, and their external relationships regional and global neighbors. We are presented with the opportunity to act as an agent which aids in the easing of the plight of refugees/IDP's and the facilitation of the reintegration of this population back into greater Afghan society whenever and wherever possible. This deprives the ACF of a viable recruiting stream, but more importantly, empowers those who would otherwise become their victims and our potential enemies.

The Challenge

Improving the situation will require cooperation and coordination among and between IROA, the members of the CF, and the International Community. In a statement outlining "Improving Harmonization and Alignment of Aid Practices" the United Nations Economic and Social Affairs Office Committee for Development Policy Report "Strengthening the International Partnership for Effective Poverty Reduction" admits that "*Country experiences reveal that the effectiveness of aid depends critically on the degree to which programs financed with external assistance are in line with the development objectives of the receiving countries... there are a number of challenges that donors still need to address. The proliferation of channels through which donors provide official development assistance*

(ODA) to a recipient country and the fragmentation of donor funded activities are still a problem (World Bank, international development Association, 2007)."

Even the world's most respected humanitarian organizations recognize that there are no easy five step solutions. According to the United Nations Development Program Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery, Lessons Learned: Programming for Youth in Conflict Prevention and Recovery:

There is, however, anecdotic evidence that youth related interventions have not always been systematic and coherent. These sentiments are consistent throughout the United Nations National Human Development Reports on youth from Bhutan, Argentina, Croatia, Panama, Lithuania, the Russian Federation, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Jordan, Lebanon, etc. Understanding of the youth/violence link is still blurred and the dichotomy of youth as spoilers/youth as peace builders overshadows the complexity of youth as a multifaceted social group. Currently, little guidance exists on how the link between youth and violence can be addressed programmatically (1 April 2007).

Recommendations

We tend to function in foreign affairs through our bureaucratic structures. This affects our decision-making, analyses and assessments. It impacts the way we view assistance, identify problems, and evaluate strategies. Structures and processes solely designed and implemented by CF and the International Community are likely to be ineffective and ultimately fail. What is needed is an Afghan solution developed by Afghans. Adjust your thinking. Understand that these refugees/IDP's thought of as the weakest players, and therefore inconsequential, are in fact powerful actors. Understanding and helping them to meet their needs is crucial to the success of the CF and the healing of Afghanistan. In instances such as these, our role is not to do, but to facilitate. As we proceed, it will be useful to:

- Think of the young men in question:
 - What does peace alone offer them in their current situation?
 - How do they measure their quality of life? What are their indicators?
 - How do they perceive trust? How is it earned? Maintained?
 - And their mothers? Same questions.

- Given what we learn from these questions, what are the critical challenges? Anticipated obstacles? If these cannot be eliminated, what can be done to minimize them and their effects?
- Who are the pivotal Afghan players who can make a difference in their lives?
- Appreciate and accept their need to respond to their circumstances.
- Recognize that their willingness to take risks will be different from yours.
- Respect their choices. It is their country and their future.
- Learn about their idea of appropriate response mechanisms to insult, injury, and injustice.

- Help link them to others who are succeeding and moving forward in this area.
- Facilitate their connection to healthy, adaptive, organic social structures available in their environment. Through these connections, they will be able to evolve on their own.
- Connect them to those with training in conflict mitigation and working with the displaced who can help competing parties disengage while saving face, and help those who are willing to engage with other internal/external actors who endorse more adaptive choices and relationships /partnerships.
- Provide willing engagement groups with contact information for those who can help if progress begins to break down.
- Determine what, if any, mental health and grief counseling services are currently available to the populations in question by way of UN Refugee Agency. Record and consider their determinations and concerns.
- Expect efforts be intentionally misconstrued by the ACF and honestly misunderstood by intended beneficiaries. Develop an open, supportive counter narrative.
- Inter-agency public affairs coordination is essential. Keep explanations absolutely clear and consistent with the help of cultural advisors, local NGOs, and trusted linguists. Messages that seem inconsistent between agencies, PRT's, embassies, etc. can be seen as contradictory and can be used as "evidence" of dishonorable intentions by the ACF.
- Be patient. The situation has evolved over decades. Meaningful improvement will take time.
- Bear in mind that this is a dynamic -- it will continue to change behavior over time. *Pay attention; remain flexible.*
- When considering a local strategy, what are the boundaries? In other words, what is absolutely off the table? Everything else is up for discussion and consideration.
- Do not invest time and energy on strategies/applications beyond local control to implement (at any given time this can change giving you additional tools and options, for now, make a difference with what you have. National and international actors will continue to define the context of the situation and will likely be too slow to respond in a useful way during one rotation, so help those in need to define actionable objectives. Stymied people need action to relieve frustration and a sense of helplessness.

Finally, discover the role of the Afghan Diaspora in your AOR. They too are a grieving population with concerns and motivations of their own. Many have connections and relations who are refugees or IDPs. Consider how they might be incorporated in solutions to help themselves, their families and their homeland.

In Summary

In Afghanistan, as well as other parts of the world where decision-making processes are still governed by social systems that are patriarchal and tribal, the ability to avenge losses is fundamental to being an adult male, a respected member of the household, and a responsible

member of society. To young men growing up in Afghanistan, to do otherwise can be seen as negating one or all of these. Without the wisdom that comes from experience, or the understanding that develops over time from years of negotiation and compromise, young males in war-torn nations have a tendency to see things in black and white. And this view is exacerbated by the need for an identity, the desire to prove oneself to achieve status, and feeling powerless to take action against those who are (real or imagined) to blame. The volatility within these groups is understandable.

It is human nature that when a group comes under unusual levels of stress, its shared anxiety magnifies fears, and expectations making them more subject to manipulation by those portraying themselves as saviors. Accept this fact and allow that these same processes can be utilized by the CF and International Community to the advantage of the population. According to the October 17, 2009 issue of the economist "*Gen. McChrystal is an impressive soldier with a coherent plan... the coalition leaders... have grasped that it must behave not as an occupying army, but as a partner whose aim it is to build up the local forces that will ultimately ensure Afghanistan security.*" It is my opinion that these forces include those that make up the family unit, and that by partnering with those in need, easing their suffering, and offering them hope, we are willing and able to contribute to the promising future of Afghanistan in ways that are both meaningful and tangible.

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