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## **Fighting for a Narrative:**

### **A Campaign Assessment of the US-led Coalition's Psychological and Information Operations in Afghanistan**

*by Oleg Svet*

Despite increases in military and civilian personnel to Afghanistan, the United States is losing in a field crucial to the counterinsurgency's long-run success: the battle of perceptions. Information and psychological operations have failed to substantially gain support for US-led efforts or gain credible legitimacy for the host nation's government. Two reasons have contributed to this failure, both unrelated to political or military realities on the ground. The first is that communication methods used by the Coalition often do not reach a majority of Afghan citizens. The second is that the specific messages and general themes that actually make it to Afghan audiences frequently fail to resonate.

This paper analyzes Coalition and Taliban efforts to shape the battle of the narratives through information operations (IO) and psychological campaigns (PSYOP). Geographically, the scope of this paper is Afghanistan and to a lesser degree Pakistan; temporally, attention is paid to more recent efforts, although early operations are referenced as well. The paper first provides an analysis of Coalition and Taliban efforts aimed at influencing the information environment. Next, it offers a general background on the role of information operations in counterinsurgency and insights on Afghan society drawn from anthropology. Finally, drawing on the analysis presented in the first two sections, the paper proposes ways in which the Coalition's psychological and information operations in Afghanistan can be improved. The three main recommendations are that the US-led Coalition (1) use more traditional and accessible methods of communication; (2) incorporate ethnographic data into its messages; and (3) focus the overall narrative on the country's tribal and socio-cultural legacies rather than religious aspects.

## ***PART I: DIAGNOSIS***

### ***US-Led Coalition Efforts: Methods, Messages, and Management***

**Inaccessible Mediums of Communication.** The methods used by the US-led Coalition to influence Afghan perceptions have often been ineffective. Resources were wasted on television advertisements, even though most Afghans do not own a television and have sporadic access to electricity. The value of Coalition-produced newspapers is also questionable, since most of the population remains illiterate. Recent information operations activities have increasingly relied on traditional networks of respected tribal figures and clerics. Local clerics that had a relationship with the Coalition, for example, refuted falsified claims that US military personnel burned a copy of the Koran in order to quell riots. Resources are also being directed towards local FM radio stations, training journalists, producing audio and video programs, and

expanding cell phone services. These are positive developments because such methods actually have the potential to reach Afghans.

**Lack of Strategic Coherence.** Efforts to coordinate communication efforts have been characterized by a lack of leadership. The State Department attempts to shape Afghan perceptions through traditional public diplomacy efforts. However, Special Envoy Richard Holbrooke has recently established a new “united front” in the State Department’ specifically aimed at countering Taliban propaganda. Previously, the Defense Department led the efforts, though under Obama, the Pentagon’s functions in the area of “perception management” have been degraded; the post of Under-Secretary of Defense for Public Diplomacy, for example, has been removed for fear that it was spreading information viewed as “propaganda.” The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) has its own responsibilities; its special purview lies in covert psychological operations. With diffused authorities, it has been difficult to pursue a comprehensive narrative providing legitimacy for the local government, quickly respond to the Taliban’s propaganda, and proactively shape the information environment. This has been true of other interagency strategic communications efforts throughout the war on terror.

**Lack of Resonance in Messaging.** Major themes in the narrative have often lacked resonance with the Afghan population. When *Radio Free Afghanistan* speaks of “freedom,” for example, the message is perceived differently from the western conception of the term. “Freedom” for many Afghans means “freedom from the central government.” Additionally, messages sent through information and psychological operations in the early phases of Operation Enduring Freedom focused on two themes: (1) delineating the “evil actions” of the Taliban and Osama bin Laden; (2) delivering the point that “The Partnership of Nations is here to help.” Not only has this not resonated with Afghans, who view any kind of outside intervention with skepticism, but it has also failed to advance the counterinsurgency’s ultimate aim of gaining legitimacy for the Afghan central government. The narrative, especially early on, tended to exhibit an enemy-centric approach, rather than a population-centric one.

### *Taliban Propaganda Campaign*

**Traditional and Accessible Communication Mediums.** The Taliban employs a variety of communication methods, but its primary advantage over Coalition efforts lies in its use of more traditional and thus accessible mediums. Amongst Afghanistan’s largely rural population, the Taliban propagates its religious-political ideology and provides its own narrative of battles through “night letters” known as *shabnamah* (leaflets threatening violence if Afghans cooperate with the government or Coalition), wandering preachers, and traditional songs and poetry. For the illiterate population, a majority of the country, messages are conveyed through audiocassettes with mournful chants promoting Taliban heroes and martyrs. The Taliban has recently evolved to using more contemporary mediums, such as producing DVDs, the website “Voices of Jihad,” and downloadable Taliban mobile phone ringtones.<sup>1</sup>

**Messages that Resonate.** Not only is the Taliban able to get its message out, but its message often resonates with Afghan audiences. Taliban information operations serve two main goals. The first is delegitimizing the central government in Kabul. The second is weakening the Coalition’s morale and thus forcing a withdrawal. Whereas Coalition information and psychological operations follow strict guidelines, the Taliban has no rules for exaggerating or

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<sup>1</sup> Coghlan, Tom. “Taliban spin doctors winning fresh ground in propaganda war with Nato.” *Times Online*. (November 12, 2009) <<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/Afghanistan/article6913240.ece> >

lying. The Taliban often exaggerates the number of killed and fabricates whole stories to create its narrative. Its communications efforts are made easier by the presence of a population already predisposed to be skeptical, if not hostile, to central authorities and outside interventions.

## ***PART II: CONTEXT***

**The Role of Psychological and Information Operations.** Psychological and information operations play a critical role in counterinsurgency, the aim of which is to build the legitimacy of the host nation's government. Whether the government is legitimate or not is ultimately determined by the perceptions of the local population. PSYOP and IO seek to influence public perceptions towards supporting the central government. They also conduct counterpropaganda activities aimed at delegitimizing the insurgents and their messages. Finally, especially during major hostilities, psychological operations specifically aim to weaken the insurgency's will and force surrender.

### ***The Information Operating Environment in Afghanistan***

**Regional History.** Central state institutions in Afghanistan never existed to serve the general population. Though there have been functioning central governments, policy and court systems, tax collectors, and armies, their main function was to serve those who controlled them. Individuals were subjects (not citizens), with duties to be performed and resources to be extracted (not rights to be honored.)

**Functions of Tribal Structures.** In the absence of central state institutions, tribal structures were critical in providing individuals' safety and security. They served two main functions: protection from external threats and enforcement of internal order. Anthropologists often refer to the tribal culture in Afghanistan as "*balanced opposition*": each group of whatever size and scope is opposed by a group of equal size and scope.<sup>2</sup> Every individual is a member of a nested set of kin groups, from very small to very large, with an authority figure in charge at every level. Any dominance on the side of one party undermines the security of another.

**Key Tribal Values.** Over generations, the social functions of tribes evolved into cultural norms. Balanced opposition is today fueled at the individual level by *honor* and the collective level by *loyalty*. Honor is the cultural persuader of an individual acting in the group's interest; to let the group down brings *shame*. Meanwhile, *loyalties* to extended kinships provide a mechanism for collective action, especially in the case of an external threat. Both are key to the tribal spirit<sup>3</sup> which continues to hold sway in the region.

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<sup>2</sup> This is an anthropological concept and is consistent in ethnographic data of observers of culture in the Middle East and South Asia. The concept is core to Philip Carl Salzman's *Culture and Conflict in the Middle East*. (Humanity Books: 2008) Similarly, anthropologist Evans-Pritchard remarks on society in the Middle East, "Each section of a tribe, from the smallest to the largest, has its Shaikh or Shaikhs. The tribal system, typical of segmentary structures everywhere, is a system of balanced opposition... Authority is distributed at every point of the tribal structure and political leadership is limited to situations in which a tribe or a segment of it act corporately." Evans-Pritchard, as quoted in Paul Dresch. "The position of Shaykhs Among the Northern Tribes of Yemen." *Man*. Vol. 19, No. 1, March 1984, p. 31.

<sup>3</sup> "Tribal spirit" is a term used by Salzman to encapsulate the various socio-cultural norms, values, and symbols of tribal life. Salzman, p. 168. Anthropologists note that the tribal spirit continues to hold sway across the entire Middle East to this day. It is referred to, for example, as the "tribal ethos" in McCallister, Willam S., Alexander, Christopher, and Kyle, Charles. "The Iraqi Insurgent Movement." (November 14, 2003) <<http://library.nps.navy.mil/home/Iraqi%20Insurgency%20Movement.pdf>>

**Perceptions of Central Authority.** A resistance to centralized power marks Afghan society, engrained in the tribal ethos. Throughout the 20th century, the country alternated between fragmentation and balanced opposition, between tribal warlords and despotic control by powerful central parties (e.g. a communist regime supported by the Soviet Union; the Taliban.)<sup>4</sup> Powerful tribes continue to exist in the periphery, especially Pashtun tribes in the South, surrounding the central government in Kabul. Ingrained skepticism towards central authority poses major challenges for information and psychological operations.

**Pashtun Ethnic Identity.** Ethnicities provide a level of identification above (and thus weaker) tribal identities. Pashtuns, constituting a plurality in Afghanistan, have dominated national politics since the 1747 founding of the Afghan state. Stereotypes associated with Pashtuns<sup>5</sup> stem from specific configurations of hierarchy and equality within the group. Pashtuns are more egalitarian and individualistic compared to hierarchical cultures, such as that of the Baluchs, who value status and honor more.<sup>6</sup> The Pashtuns are themselves divided into two large groups: the Durranis in the southwest and the Ghizalis in the east. The two groups have been historic rivals.<sup>7</sup>

**Religious Identity.** Religion has a force that encapsulates individuals across disparate lines of identity where political ideologies have failed. Nevertheless, it is crucial to note that religious identification is often tertiary to tribal and ethnic identification. Religion has been used at various times throughout Afghan history to mobilize against an overwhelming external threat, notably in the struggle against the Soviet Union.<sup>8</sup> Espousing higher religious values has also enabled groups like the Taliban to administer coercive powers in the absence of central power.

### ***PART III: Policy Recommendations***

#### ***Methods***

**Use Traditional Channels.** Greater emphasis must be paid to using traditional channels of communication, such as narration through traditional songs and poetry. This will make the messages appear more authentic, thus resonating with audiences. Furthermore, it is imperative that the Coalition use modes of communication that are accessible to Afghans. Most of the

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<sup>4</sup> Salzman, p.186.

<sup>5</sup> Mainly, that they can be “bought.”

<sup>6</sup> Titus, Paul. “Honor the Baloch, Buy the Pushtun: Stereotypes, Social Organization and History in Western Pakistan.” *Modern Asian Studies* 32, 3, (1998), p. 667.

<sup>7</sup> The Ghilzais have thrived politically in time of war and anarchy, while the Durranis have emerged as winners during times of peace. As Thomas Barfield notes, this has to do with different dynamics of social organization, which are rooted in the long-term structure of the groups’ agrarian economies: “The Ghilzais do best in times of anarchy because their poor subsistence based regions cope better with economic or political disruption and are harder to coerce because of their isolation... In time of peace, or at least emerging stability, the situation [is] reversed. The Durrani [have] a long established elite that could negotiate for them... while Ghilzai leaders [can] never be sure their followers would back them. The Durrani elite by its very nature has higher levels of education than the Ghizalis, [which gives them] an advantage in the world of diplomacy where dealing with non-Afghans [is] key to success.” Barfield, Thomas. “Weapons of the not so Weak in Afghanistan: Pashtun Agrarian Structure and Tribal Organization for Times of War & Peace.” *Yale University*. (February 23, 2007), p. 15.

<sup>8</sup> For example, during the struggle with the Soviet Union, “Islam offered the more comprehensive pledge of eternal paradise, which was especially potent in a situation in which the continued existence of any individual community – the unit within which memory and honor were preserved– was uncertain.” David Edwards. “Learning from the Swat Pathans: political leadership in Afghanistan, 1978-97.” *American Ethnologist* 25 (4), p. 719.

population is illiterate and has little to no access to electricity. Radio broadcasts, audiocassettes, and other media that actually Afghans are more useful than television advertisements.

**Evolve Communication Methods As Necessary.** As Afghanistan develops, its communications methods will invariably evolve as well. For example, from 2001 to 2009, the number of cellular subscribers in the country increased from zero to nearly ten million.<sup>9</sup> Over the last four years, meanwhile, the number of internet users has increased from essentially zero to an estimated five hundred thousand Afghans. The Coalition must remain attuned to these changes and evolve its communication methods as required.

**Engage the Local Population and Tribal and Clerical Leaders.** Engagement in Afghanistan is key to establishing reliable social relationships that pay substantial dividends in the long-run. Taking the time to sit and engage with the population or local leaders might not seem like the normal function of soldiers, even information and psychological operators. However, engagement with local tribal and clerical leaders helps minimize unnecessary violence and quell it when begins, and serves as an important source of information gathering.

### *Messages*

**Build the Legitimacy of the Central Government.** The key challenge and task for information and psychological operations is to enhance the national government's legitimacy in a society marked by resistance to centralized authority. Psychological and information operations should focus messages on the central government delivering on its promises and providing essential administrative functions in the military, socio-economic, and political realms. Messages should also portray the central government as an honest broker between all of the country's tribes and ethnicities. Tackling narratives that run counter to such aims (e.g. the portrayal of a fraudulent election, focus on the corrupt practices of certain administration officials) will also be key, although ultimately these things must happen as much in deed as in word.

**Be Subtle with Emphasizing Coalition Efforts.** To paraphrase T.E. Lawrence's observation, "Better the Afghans do it tolerably than that you do it perfectly. It is their war, and you are to help them, not to win it for them." It is tempting to think that operations aimed at constructing a narrative in which the Coalition is portrayed as the provider of goods to Afghanistan advances US aims. However, amongst a skeptical and often hostile audience, the opposite may occur in reality. Most importantly, psychological and information operators, as all counterinsurgents, must remember that the ultimate goal is to garner support not for the Coalition but for the Afghan central government. The Coalition must pass the credit for victories to the Afghans.

**Incorporate Ethnographic Data to Deliver Tailored Messages.** Information and psychological operations must all lead to the same general goal (i.e. support for the central government in Kabul.) However, messages cannot be generic. The various regions across Afghanistan not only communicate in different languages, but perceive the same ideas and symbols in different ways. As described earlier on, there are ethnicities within ethnicities, tribes within tribes. It is important to incorporate anthropological insights to deliver tailored messages

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<sup>9</sup> Cellphone coverage has risen from none in 2001 to 9.5 million subscribers today. Shanker, Thom. "U.S. Plans a Mission Against Taliban's Propaganda." *New York Times*. (August 15, 2009) < <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/16/world/asia/16policy.html> >

that resonate with audiences. The creation of Human Terrain Teams embedded with Coalition forces should enable information and psychological operators to more easily access and use ethnographic data.

**Create an Identity in Opposition.** The narrative construction of a distinct Afghan identity will be crucial to the long-run success of the campaign. For better or for worse, identities in the region almost entirely in opposition, so an “opposing identity” must be found, or created. One way for information and psychological operations to go about this is to continuously highlight the distinctions between the Afghans and citizens in neighboring countries. Sadly, this might involve pointing out faults in the opposing side’s identity or highlighting nefarious Pakistani attempts at intervening in internal Afghan affairs. Borrowing on the quality of Pashtuns and other Afghans to “draw the boundaries of community tightly and distrust strangers,”<sup>10</sup> this can be achieved by emphasizing the Taliban’s admission in its messages that it relies on sanctuaries and support in Pakistan.<sup>11</sup> Coalition messages that emphasize nefarious interference by Pakistan, an outside power, in order to prop Afghan identity will be difficult to justify officially, so covert psychological operations will have to be applied.

**Be Careful Using Negation.** Avoid using negation, especially when it comes to Islam. Radio messages in the Coalition’s psychological and information campaigns consistently harped on the fact that the “US is not at war with Islam.” As guidelines by the *Extremist Messaging Branch of the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC)* pointed out in 2008, social psychology studies show that people tend to forget a statement’s negative part. Thus, when messages say the “US is not at war with Muslims,” Afghans remember “US... war... Muslims.”<sup>12</sup> In line with a counterinsurgency’s population- (rather than enemy-) centric approach, messages should focus on the positive work done by the central government, and to a lesser degree that of the coalition or wrongdoings by the insurgents.

## **CONCLUSION**

It would be an oversimplification to say that a counterinsurgent’s sole, or even primary, aim is to win the “hearts and minds” of population in the environment in which he is operating. Indeed, security operations are uniquely essential, for they also enable the conduct of other vital activities such as governance and economic development. Nevertheless, how the population perceives the struggle ultimately determines who the victor(s) are. Psychological and information operations are crucial in this regard, for they specifically aim at framing the narrative. In Afghanistan, this task is a considerably difficult one, since Afghan society is historically marked by hostility and skepticism of central authorities and intervening foreign forces. Nevertheless, relying on ethnographic data from country to create tailored messages and using modes of communication accessible to the Afghan public, it is possible to stay ahead of the information curve and shape a narrative that strengthens the legitimacy of the central government and furthers US aims.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>11</sup> International Crisis Group Report. “Taliban Propoganda: Winning the War of Words.” (July 2008), p. i. <[http://www.crisisgroup.org/library/documents/asia/south\\_asia/158\\_taliban\\_propaganda\\_winning\\_the\\_war\\_of\\_words.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/library/documents/asia/south_asia/158_taliban_propaganda_winning_the_war_of_words.pdf)>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.investigativeproject.org/documents/misc/127.pdf>, page 2.

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