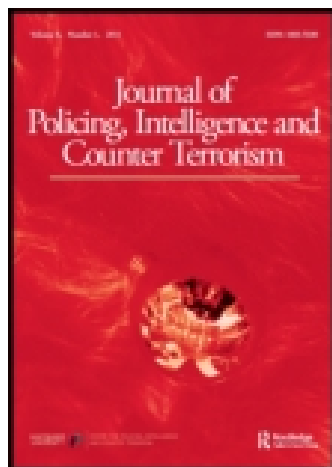


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Publisher: Routledge

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Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rpic20>

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Published online: 03 Aug 2011.

To cite this article: Hekmat Karzai (2009) Understanding the Role of the Media in Facilitating the Spread of the Extremist Message in Afghanistan, *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism*, 4:1, 76-86, DOI: [10.1080/18335300.2009.9686925](https://doi.org/10.1080/18335300.2009.9686925)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/18335300.2009.9686925>

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Forum

Understanding the Role of the Media in Facilitating the Spread of the Extremist Message in Afghanistan

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ABSTRACT

In 1994, when the Taliban in Afghanistan initially came to power, they enforced draconian measures on the population and banned everything related to modernity and globalization. Today, however, the Taliban acts as a sophisticated terrorist/insurgent group with a developed strategic communication strategy that uses various platforms to communicate with their target audience, including the internet, radio and television. They cater their messages to a wide range of people and have developed a website that is available in five different languages, Pashtu, Dari (the two official languages of Afghanistan), English, Arabic and Urdu, and that is updated four times each day. Thus far, the Taliban have been more successful in their strategic campaign than the Afghan government and the Coalition Forces combined. This paper focuses on how the Taliban in Afghanistan have used communications to further their cause, the strategic weaknesses of the Taliban, and recommendations for how the Afghan government can improve the efficacy of its strategic communications.

The Taliban and strategic communications

The Taliban started as a small grassroots movement in 1994, but by 1997 it controlled a majority of Afghanistan. Many people joined the group because they were fed up with the various commanders and warlords who had segmented the country into their personal fiefdoms. When the Taliban emerged, many of those commanders either fled to neighboring countries or were killed.

In the beginning, many people were optimistic; the Taliban brought then-unprecedented security in areas that were under their control. Attitudes began to

change when the Taliban started imposing strict rules on the populace. Some of the draconian measures included: couples were to be stoned to death if caught in adultery; thousands of widows were banned from employment; schools and universities were closed for girls; men were not allowed to shave or trim their beards; and TV, Radio, music and football were all banned.

Also, to enforce and implement these measures, there was a “Religious Police Force” that patrolled the various cities and towns looking for individuals violating the strict code of conduct. Many analysts argue that the Taliban movement was strict at the outset, but it became even more extreme later when it was hijacked by Al Qaeda and religious fanatics from Pakistan.

During their reign, the Taliban outlawed all but their own radio station “Shariyat Ghagh” (Voice of Shariya). It only played religious programs and Taliban propaganda.

The transformation of the Taliban

The United States asked the Taliban to hand over Osama bin Laden, whom they held directly responsible for the 9-11 attack that killed over 3,000 people. The Taliban’s refusal led to Operation Enduring Freedom, which began on October 7, 2001. Within less than a month, the Taliban’s military frontlines were destroyed and many of the top Taliban and Al Qaeda commanders were either captured or killed.

The Taliban immediately realized that they could not face the might of the US military, and so the majority went across the Durand Line to Pakistan or back to their villages where they merged with the population. It was from the safe sanctuaries in Baluchistan and the North Western Frontier Provinces of Pakistan that they started to recruit and gather renewed momentum. The top Taliban commanders including the Mullah Dadullah, went to various madrassas across Pakistan and preached *jihad* and the ideological battle between Islam and the West.

Today, the Taliban have adopted a successful strategy to take advantage of the limited media outlets available to them. Although their communication mechanisms are not advanced, the avenues of output – clandestine radio, night letters, internet, rumors – seem well structured and well-equipped. They have been able to convey their message to people successfully using ordinary facilities.

The Taliban’s means of communication

FACE TO FACE

The Taliban exert influence in most communities in southern Afghanistan, and is thus able to force the people to obey their instructions and avoid activities which are against their Islamic perceptions. A driver, who used to carry cargo from Herat province in the west to Helmand, Kandahar and Zabul provinces in the south, tells

a story that stands as an example of Taliban tactics (Centre for Conflict and Peace Studies interview with Mohammad Akbar, Herat, April 2006):

“When I arrived with my loaded truck at Sangin district of southern Helmand province, it was already sunset and the owner of the cargo invited me to his house to spend the night. ‘I hope you aren’t worried because I have some guests who are Taliban’ the man told me. When I entered his house it was dark in the night. I saw a group of about 30 Taliban gunmen with their guns and rocket launchers. One of them asked me: why don’t you [the residents of Herat province] move against western troops and their puppet government? I replied, ‘All the radio stations talk about Pakistan’s interference in Afghanistan and you are talking about the western troops. I do not know who is right’. One of them said: ‘Yes, the Pakistani government was treacherous to us but now our first duty is to force western troops out and then we will settle our score with Pakistan’. The house owner was looking at them with respect”.

NIGHT LETTERS

At times, the Taliban communicate with the people through booklets, night-letters and pamphlets. Terror and intimidation is part of the strategy; foreign aid organizations, modern schools, and teachers are special targets. The Taliban ask the people to obey their instructions and they threaten those who ignore or oppose their orders. For example, specific forms of night letters have appeared in certain areas ordering farmers to grow poppy, with direct instructions that if they don’t they will be shot.

Additionally, in the summers of 2006 and 2009, the Taliban distributed pamphlets entitled *Layeha*, or “Rule Book” (see Annex). The *Layehas* includes articles and the Taliban strategy.

RADIO & TELEVISION

The Taliban have maintained their ties with international media outlets - especially some Arabic-language and Pakistani radio and TV stations - and use them to send their messages across to the people of Afghanistan and others throughout the world. The Taliban have three spokespersons - Dr. Hanif (who has been captured), Zabiullah Mojahid and Qari Mohammed Yousuf - who are regularly in touch with the media, especially the Afghan Islamic Press based in Peshawar. They keep the various media outlets informed of Taliban activities and developments and of the casualties suffered by the International Coalition forces. Additionally, top commanders such Mullah Dadullah and Mullah Osmani (both have been killed) provided regular interviews to broadcast networks like Al Jazeera, Geo (a private station in Pakistan), and others.

THE INTERNET

The Taliban have a website Al Emarah, “The Emirate” (<http://www.alemarah.cjb.net/>, since closed down), in which they publish their ideas and their political and military achievements and update it regularly. It is produced in five languages:

Arabic, Pashto, English, Persian, and Urdu. The website includes numerous photos, particularly of children who are victims of war and casualties of NATO's military operations in the southern and eastern areas of the country. In this way, the Taliban aims to attract the attention of the people to the war they are fighting and to arouse their sympathy towards the Taliban movement.

The style of articles ranges from simple news pieces giving information on alleged numbers of Taliban, ANA, and foreign forces casualties, to more polemical pieces that comment on current issues. Occasionally statements are issued through the website from the "leading council" of the IEA (Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan).

From time to time, *Al-Emarah* is taken offline (by coalition forces and US-government technological assistance). For example, in July 2007 it went off, but reopened at <http://www.alemarah.r8.org/> approximately a month later. It has since been shut down and reopened at <http://www.alemarah.i67.org/>.

There are over 2,000 jihadist web-sites that are also covering the activities of the Taliban. Taliban videos and magazines regularly appear online and are downloaded in most parts of the world by both militants and ordinary net surfers, who the Taliban hope will adhere to the calls of "global jihad" by bin Laden's International Islamic Front.

DEATH THREATS

Sometimes the Taliban threaten to kill those who fail to follow their instructions. Taliban have assassinated Muslim scholars and leaders who have supported the government and the Western military presence in Afghanistan. For instance, the Taliban killed Mawlawi Abdul Fayyaz, the most prominent cleric in southern Kandahar city, on the grounds that he was supporting the government. Social activists who were working with the Afghan government were killed by the Taliban after having received death threats demanding that they leave their official positions with the government. Safiya Amajan, the provincial head of the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MOWA) in Kandahar, was shot dead by the Taliban in Kandahar as well.

The message of the Taliban

The Taliban disseminate several messages to the people: to expel all foreign troops from Afghanistan; to regain the sovereignty and independence of the country; to establish an Islamic government and Islamic system; to end the corruption and the Western puppet government; and to end the foreign interference and sever the involvement of infidels in Afghanistan (*Al-Emarah*, <http://www.alemarah.cjb.net/>, since deactivated).

While the aforementioned messages of the Taliban have so far failed to spur a mass rebellion against the Afghan government and against the international troops in Afghanistan, they have been partially successful in enabling the Taliban, since 2006, to regain some momentum. Evidence shows that the Taliban's numbers have increased, particularly in the wake of the number of casualties in 2007 and 2008. The

Taliban have also been able to capture some districts in the south of Afghanistan, albeit only for a day or so. Their capture of these districts is not a testament to their sophistication but rather the absence of a strong central government.

The people between the Taliban and the government

President Karzai asks the people of Afghanistan to support good governance and the values of democracy and freedom in the country. He particularly emphasises economic development and maintaining good relations with the international community.

The problem, however, is that the majority of the Afghan population is illiterate and uneducated and so do not fully comprehend these ideas. Only a portion of the population is able to understand and relate to President Karzai's message. Another problem is that, because of the ongoing violence in the country, all efforts of President Karzai to establish a stable government and restore the peace in the country have failed to produce the desired results. This has left some circles in the country less optimistic towards the future.

Even though the Taliban offer no solutions for nation building through economic and/or industrial development, their followers are not deterred because they are from the overwhelming illiterate and uneducated majority. Their loyalty to the Taliban is therefore not a product of their understanding of the situation in the country but of their lack of understanding of that situation.

The impact of Taliban communication strategies

The Taliban focus their rhetoric to appeal to the ideological sensitivity of the people. They talk about an "occupation" of Afghanistan by Western troops, about the current administration being a US-puppet government in Afghanistan, about ethical issues like corruption, drinking of wine, and adultery among the young generation which has resulted in the spread of AIDS in the country, among other grievances. They also warn that the aforementioned issues are the result of the presence of an un-Islamic government in the country. While the impact of their messages cannot be quantified, six broad categories of people buy into the Taliban rhetoric:

THE FINANCIAL FACTOR

Operation Enduring Freedom brought much needed hope to the Afghans, especially, since they were victims of long and bloody conflict. Regrettably, the international community did not make a very serious investment in Afghanistan. The war stricken country received the lowest aid per capita since World War II. In the south and southeast of the country, there was enthusiasm at the outset but lack of delivery and broken promises disillusion a specific segment of the populace. The young and uneducated started looking for alternative economic opportunities. While the government started recruitment of the security forces with the salary of \$70

US dollars a month, some groups paid their foot soldiers three times that and also allowed individuals to fight in their own areas rather than traveling to a different region. The main sources of income for the various groups come from the lucrative drug trade, Al Qaeda and their supporters in the Middle East, and official and unofficial organizations in the neighboring countries.

THE POLITICAL/GOVERNANCE FACTOR

With the new government in Kabul many unwanted individuals came to power. Clearly, these individuals were not qualified for their jobs and they regularly abused their authority. The power-sharing arrangement was grossly disproportionate in favor of certain groups with little popular base, while many others who did not agree were simply labeled as Taliban and sent to prisons in Guantanamo or Bagram Airbase. The actions of these individuals directly forced people to join the Taliban, not because they did not agree with the government in Kabul, but to stand against their local representative.

Many unsavory characters took over positions at the provincial and district level. Even though Kabul moved towards greater power-balance following the national political processes – the Emergency and the Constitutional Loya Jirgas and the Presidential Election – the corrupt power-holders at the local level changed little, even became more entrenched in many places due to their control over local resources. The politics of these power-holders were often designed to serve their own kins, thus, alienating large segments of the population.

THE REVENGE FACTOR

From the outset, the international forces failed to fully appreciate and understand the character, religion and most importantly, the culture of the Afghan people. Many mistakes were made (and some are still repeated today), including random and culturally-insensitive searches without consultation, accidents that kill innocent elders and children, and disrespecting tribal elders in front of their constituents. Needless to say, in a collective and conservative society such acts can provide political oxygen to the conflict.

THE MADRASSA FACTOR

To counter the Soviet ideology during the Afghan resistance, an influx of Madrassas were funded across the border in Pakistan. A significant number of those Madrassas still operate and some of them openly call for Jihad in Afghanistan. Their instructors regularly give speeches to motivate their students, most of who come from poor backgrounds. A recent example is the fourteen year old boy who was sent to the Madrassa by his parents, but rather than learning the Koran he returned to Afghanistan as a suicide bomber to attack the governor of Khost.

THE ETHNIC FACTOR

The Taliban have always been very smart about playing the ethnic card. Whenever, they were moving forward in the battlefield and the momentum was on their side, they were Muslims but when they were pushed back, they would become Pashtun. They take advantage of the traditional code of Pashtunwali and recruit from their kin. Today, there are certain tribes that may feel isolated from the government. The Taliban leadership have exploited their grievances.

THE IDEOLOGICAL FACTOR

In their effective strategic communications, the anti-government elements are constantly stressing the notion that infidels have occupied Afghanistan and it is the duty of all Muslim to fight the occupation. It should be noted that similar rhetoric was used against the former Soviet Union to mobilize the Muslim *Ummah* and tens of thousands of Muslims came from all over world to take part in the *jihād*. Eventually, a superpower was defeated. Mullah Mohammed Omar, the leader of the Taliban in one of his messages said “the enemies of the religion of Islam and independence of the country have launched satanic propagandas under the slogans of democracy and freedom [...] we must put aside all of our internal, regional and linguistic differences and get united against the enemy” (*Afghan News*, August 19, 2007). This message has resonance amongst certain segment of the Muslim population.

Government communication strategy weaknesses

We must not, however, fail to acknowledge some serious strategic and tactical weaknesses in the government-coalition communication strategy.

Attempts to reach out to the local Afghan population – particularly that directed at the rural majority – have thus far failed to engage its audience. PRT radio broadcasts – in Lowgar or Helmand provinces, for example – consist of “messages” from either the governor or the PRT itself, when in fact the best way to package government messages (for the moment we can even disregard the content) would be to introduce music programming and discussion/call-in programs.

Similarly, the government newspaper issued on a regular basis is drafted in Kabul in cooperation with a team of foreign media professionals. It is not read by the local population. When it is read, the pictures of smiling children and otherwise “positive” development stories are not taken at face value. Afghans – having lived through years of ideological propaganda – are savvy to word-play and manipulation from their leaders. In the southern provinces, the only use ISAF’s newspaper serves is to wrap warm bread at the bakery.

The basic tenets of their profession dictate that journalists must act to monitor the centres of power. This must, by definition, involve speaking to all involved parties, especially at a time when the government seeks to achieve dominance of the media sphere. As an example, journalists from the BBC, IWPR and Radio Liberty

were recently invited to Musa Qala by members of the Taliban. A parade of over 200 vehicles (each with armed Taliban) and a series of interviews were held in the district centre. The journalists came away with a sense of the Taliban's strength in the area. However, when they returned to Lashkar Gah, the provincial capital, three were arrested and imprisoned by the government on terrorism charges. Two others were forced to flee to Kandahar province to avoid imprisonment. The government's treatment of the journalists was seen – by both journalists and the public – as a tacit admission that they are threatened by the Taliban. For journalists, such arrests only drive a deeper wedge between the government and their activities, and may lead them to sympathize more with the Taliban.

Most importantly, the government does not have a strategy that is proactive. It is constantly responding and reacting to incidents rather than taking the initiative of reaching the people first.

Strategic weaknesses of the Taliban

First, the Taliban have killed many Muslims during their battle against the Afghan government and the Coalition Forces. This is doubly problematic for the Taliban and Al Qaeda, as the Qur'an forbids killing both civilians and fellow Muslims.

Second, the Taliban have enforced draconian measures on the population which the majority of the people resent. Thus, the history of the Taliban is a serious problem.

Third, the Taliban have made a list of enemies that include Muslims who don't share their views; most Western countries; Jews and Christians; some Middle Eastern regimes; some news organizations; the United Nations; and international NGOs. Clearly, this range of enemies does not offer many options for a strategic victory.

Fourth, the Taliban lack vision. They have stated that they want to establish the Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan, but what will this Islamic Republic stand for? Do they want restore the caliphate, or simply a Taliban-style theocracy stretching from Afghanistan to Morocco?

Recommendations

- The Afghan government has established a new department – the Government Media and Information Center (GMIC) – the Office of the President to proactively respond to Taliban's propaganda. Unfortunately, the GMIC does not have the capability or qualified personnel to fulfill its mandate. The international community must support GMIC and provide assistance and resources that will allow it to stand on its own feet.
- It is essential that the Afghan Government and the International Community have a coordinated and unified approach to strategic communications. On many occasions, there seem to be two different sets of views and ideas being conveyed, which in the long-run creates confusion and muddies the message.

- The Afghan government must engage the tribal elders in the countryside and request their support. Afghanistan is a conservative and collective society where there are many bonds and relationships between people. In this regard, in each district and province there are leaders to whom the locals turn for guidance.
- The Afghan Government must be responsive and prove that it cares about the population. Many promises have been made by senior government officials but few have been delivered. Thus, to win battle for strategic communication, the Afghan government must improve the livelihood of the people – only then will the population listen to them.

Annex: Layeha (Rule Book) to the Mujahideen. Translated by the Centre for Conflict and Peace Studies

From the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan [Mullah Omar]. Each Mujahid is obliged to obey the following rules:

1. A person with responsibility (only commanders) is allowed to give an invitation to those Afghans who are supporting infidels to join the way of the true Islam.
2. To those who leave the infidels we will grant security for him and his property. But if he has some personal dispute, or somebody has some claim against him, he has to face our judiciary system.
3. Each Mujahid who is in contact with supporters of the current regime and who invites them to join the true Islam has to inform his commander.
4. Those who accept the invitation to join the true Islam but aren't loyal and become traitors will lose their contract with us and will not be protected by us. There is no way to give them another chance.
5. A Mujahid who kills an infidel who has joined the Mujahideen's side will lose our support. Islamic law should punish him.
6. If a group leader (or any ordinary Talib) wants to leave his district to join a unit in another district he is allowed, but he should get permission from his senior leader.
7. If a Mujahid captures any foreign invader without the permission of the movement leader, he mustn't exchange the prisoner with another prisoner or for money.
8. The provincial, district or regional commander in charge is not allowed to sign an individual contract with an NGO [non-governmental organisation] or make a deal for money with the NGO. This matter has to be decided by the Shura.
9. No person in a position of responsibility is allowed to use Jihadi equipment and property for his personal interest.
10. Each Mujahid is responsible to his commander for the money he spends and the equipment he uses.

11. Mujahideen are not allowed to sell any kind of equipment without the permission of the provincial leader in charge.
12. One group of Mujahideen is not allowed to invite Mujahideen of another group to join it in order to increase the group's membership. But if there is good reason (lack of personnel) this might be allowed. But a written permission is necessary and the Mujahideen who join a new group should leave their weapons with their old group.
13. Weapons or equipment confiscated from the infidels, or allies of the infidels, should be evenly distributed among the Mujahideen.
14. If someone who is working with the infidels wants to cooperate with the Mujahideen, nobody is allowed to kill him. If somebody kills him he will face the Islamic Sharia court.
15. If any Mujahideen or commander is disturbing innocent people he should be warned by his leader. If he doesn't change his behavior he should be expelled from movement.
16. It is strictly forbidden for Mujahideen to raid houses and take weapons by force from civilians without the permission of the district or provincial commander.
17. Mujahideen have no rights to take the money or personal belongings of the people.
18. As under the earlier [Mullah Omar] regime, Mujahideen should avoid smoking cigarettes.
19. Mujahideen are not allowed to take young boys without beards to the battlefield or to their homes.
20. If a member of the opposition, or the government, wants to surrender to the Taliban we can consider their conditions but the final decision has to be made by the military council.
21. People with a bad reputation or who have killed civilians during the Jihad must not be permitted to join the Taliban movement. But if the Supreme Leader [Mullah Omar] forgives such a person he should stay at home.
22. If a Mujahid is found guilty of a crime and his group leader discharges him, then other Taliban groups are not allowed to accept that person. If he wants to join the Taliban again he should come back to his own group and ask for forgiveness first.
23. If a Mujahid faces an issue not described in this book, the regional commander should find a solution in consultation with the group.
24. Working for the current puppet regime is not permitted, either in a Madrassa [religious school] or as a schoolteacher, because that provides strength to the infidel system. In order to strengthen the new Islamic regime, Muslims should hire a religious teacher and study in mosque or another suitable place and the textbooks used should be from the Mujahid [anti-Soviet war] time or the Taliban time.

25. Those who are working in the current puppet regime as a Madrassa teacher or schoolteacher should be warned. If he doesn't stop he should be beaten. But if a teacher is teaching against the true Islam he should be killed by the district commander or a group leader.
26. The NGOs that came in the country under the infidel's government are just like of the government. They came here under the slogan of helping the people but in fact they are part of this regime. That's why their every activity will be banned, whether it is building a road, bridge, clinic, school or Madrassa or anything else. If a school matches these conditions it should be burned. If it is told to close, but doesn't it should be burned. But before burning it, all religious books should be taken out.
27. Before someone is found guilty of being a spy, and can be punished, no commander or person of responsibility is allowed to interfere. Only the district general commander is allowed to do so. In court evidence has to be brought forward that might prove the accused person to be a spy. The persons who bring forward the evidence should be a mentally well and have a good religious reputation. They must not have committed a big crime. The accused should be punished only after the whole case is closed and he is found guilty.
28. No lower commander is allowed to interfere in the civil, common disputes of the people. If people insist [on intervention] the case should be brought in front of a district or regional commander. But he should present the case to the religious scholars or the Jirga [council]. If they can't find a solution the case should be taken to very well known scholars.
29. Every Mujahid group is committed to keep watchful guards on duty day and night.
30. The above 29 rules are compulsory. Whoever violates any of them should be treated according the Islamic rules.