

**TALIBAN PROPAGANDA:
WINNING THE WAR OF WORDS?**

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TALIBAN PROPAGANDA: WINNING THE WAR OF WORDS?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Taliban has created a sophisticated communications apparatus that projects an increasingly confident movement. Using the full range of media, it is successfully tapping into strains of Afghan nationalism and exploiting policy failures by the Kabul government and its international backers. The result is weakening public support for nation-building, even though few actively support the Taliban. The Karzai government and its allies must make greater efforts, through word and deed, to address sources of alienation exploited in Taliban propaganda, particularly by ending arbitrary detentions and curtailing civilian casualties from aerial bombing.

Analysing the Taliban's public statements has limits, since the insurgent group seeks to underscore successes – or imagined successes – and present itself as having the purest of aims, while disguising weaknesses and underplaying its brutality. However, the method still offers a window into what the movement considers effective in terms of recruitment and bolstering its legitimacy among both supporters and potential sympathisers.

The movement reveals itself in its communications as:

- ❑ the product of the anti-Soviet jihad and the civil war that followed but not representative of indigenous strands of religious thought or traditional pre-conflict power structures;
 - ❑ a largely ethno-nationalist phenomenon, without popular grassroots appeal beyond its core of support in sections of the Pashtun community;
 - ❑ still reliant on sanctuaries in Pakistan, even though local support has grown;
 - ❑ linked with transnational extremist groups for mostly tactical rather than strategic reasons but divided over these links internally;
 - ❑ seeking to exploit local tribal disputes for recruitment and mainly appealing to the disgruntled and disenfranchised in specific locations, but lacking a wider tribal agenda; and
- ❑ a difficult negotiating partner because it lacks a coherent agenda, includes allies with divergent agendas and has a leadership that refuses to talk before the withdrawal of foreign forces and without the imposition of Sharia (Islamic law).

Out of power and lacking control over territory, the Taliban has proved adept at projecting itself as stronger than it is in terms of numbers and resources. Despite the increasing sophistication of some of its propaganda, however, it still puts out contradictory messages that indicate internal rifts and the diffuse nature of the insurgency. These reveal a cross-border leadership and support apparatus striving to present a unified front and assert control even as various groups maintain their own communications networks. Maintaining relations with transnational jihadist networks, which have a more global agenda, is a potential problem for the Taliban, which has always been a largely nationalistic movement.

A website in the name of the former regime – the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan – is used as an international distribution centre for leadership statements and inflated tales of battlefield exploits. While fairly rudimentary, this is not a small effort; updates appear several times a day in five languages. Magazines put out by the movement or its supporters provide a further source of information on leadership structures and issues considered to be of importance. But for the largely rural and illiterate population, great efforts are also put into conveying preaching and battle reports via DVDs, audio cassettes, *shabnamah* (night letters – pamphlets or leaflets usually containing threats) and traditional nationalist songs and poems. The Taliban also increasingly uses mobile phones to spread its message.

The vast majority of the material is in Pashtu, and a shortage of language skills in the international community means much of this either passes unnoticed or is misunderstood. English-language statements are relatively crude, but the Taliban is able to put out its story rapidly. More effort is devoted to Arabic language output, aimed at soliciting the support of transnational

networks and funders. The overriding strategic narrative is a quest for legitimacy and the projection of strength. Use of tactics such as suicide bombings – previously unknown in Afghanistan – and roadside bombs, as well as such audacious actions in 2008 as a prison break in Kandahar city, an attack on a military parade attended by President Hamid Karzai and an assault on a five-star hotel demonstrate that grabbing attention lies at the core of operations.

Within Afghanistan the Taliban is adept at exploiting local disenfranchisement and disillusionment. The Kabul administration needs to ensure it is seen as one worth fighting for, not least by ending the culture of impunity and demanding accountability of its members. The international community must provide the necessary support and pressure for improved performance, while also examining its own actions. Whatever the military benefits of arbitrary detentions, they are far outweighed by the alienation they cause. The effectiveness of aerial bombardment, even if strictly exercised within the bounds of international law, must be considered against the damage to popular support. Greater efforts are needed in Western capitals to explain to their own populations the necessity of staying for the long haul rather than yielding to the pressure of quick fixes that give only the appearance of action.

The Taliban is not going to be defeated militarily and is impervious to outside criticism. Rather, the legitimacy of its ideas and actions must be challenged more forcefully by the Afghan government and citizens. Its killings of civilians and targeting of community leaders need to be highlighted, including a public accounting for actions by the militants through open trials – something that has not yet happened. Strengthening the legitimacy of the Afghan government and ensuring that its actions – and those of its international backers – are similarly bound by the rule of law should be an important complement. Ultimately, winning popular support is not about telling local communities that they are better off today. It is about proving it.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Government of Afghanistan:

1. Do not block the flow of information, but seek instead to disclose more, in an open and timely manner, and build morale by:
 - (a) responding more quickly on incidents such as civilian casualties and other alleged abuses by the government or its international supporters that are likely to feed into insurgent propaganda;

- (b) speaking out strongly and consistently about Taliban killings and attacks, while holding the international community and Afghan national security agencies proportionately accountable for their actions;
 - (c) refraining from threatening the media for reporting and ensuring that legal definitions of incitement in the media are appropriate and clear; and
 - (d) holding open trials of captured insurgents and allowing their victims public redress.
2. Build the morale of the security forces by having senior officials regularly visit Afghan army and police units around the country, and put a human face on the violence by assisting the wounded and bereaved families.
3. End the culture of impunity by ensuring the rule of law, including by holding government and security officials accountable for crimes and abuses.

To the Governments of Countries Contributing International Troops:

4. Improve communications with Afghans on the directions and activities of the international engagement, while ensuring an Afghan lead in appropriate areas, through:
 - (a) reaching out to local correspondents for international and national media, not just foreign reporters;
 - (b) building language skills among foreign staff and properly training sufficient numbers of professional translators;
 - (c) streamlining systems and devolving more responsibility to ground-based personnel so they can respond rapidly to incidents involving international forces; and
 - (d) directing enquiries on incidents that do not involve foreign troops to the appropriate Afghan institution.
5. Emphasise that the foreign presence is in support of the Afghan people and subject to the rule of law by ensuring that international troops are held accountable, in particular by conducting thorough investigations and improving data collection and information sharing on incidents of alleged civilian casualties.
6. Communicate clearly to the Afghan public that while the troops will stay as long as necessary, there are no longer-term strategic objectives, such as permanent bases in the country.

7. Ensure when using aerial force not only that an operation is strictly within the parameters of international law, but also that its potential immediate military gain has been weighed against longer-term community perceptions.
8. Press the Pakistan military to end its appeasement of pro-Taliban militants and Afghan insurgents operating from Pakistani territory, and encourage a dialogue between Kabul and the democratically elected government in Islamabad.

To Donors:

9. Emphasise the building and reform of judicial and detention systems in which detainees can be handled safely and legitimately and held to account within a rule-of-law system.

Kabul/Brussels, 24 July 2008

TALIBAN PROPAGANDA: WINNING THE WAR OF WORDS?

I. INTRODUCTION

The Taliban has proved remarkably successful in projecting itself as much stronger than it is in terms of numbers and resources on a battlefield where independent verification is nearly impossible.¹ Increasingly the Afghan population in conflict-hit areas is sitting on the fence or weighing options amid a sense of insurgent momentum. The Taliban's growing confidence and worsening violence have created a sense in many capitals of an intractable conflict.²

Communications lie at the core of the insurgents' actions. They use "all available networks – political, social, economic and military – to convince the enemy's political decision-makers that their strategic goals are either unachievable or too costly for the perceived benefit".³ This can be seen in the increasing use of asymmetric attacks, such as suicide and road bombings, which have a major impact on public opinion while requiring little manpower or popular support. There is also a growing use of "spectacular" events which draw headlines around the world. As a U.S. military officer put it, "unfortunately, we tend to view information operations as supplementing kinetic [fighting] operations. For the Taliban, however, information objectives tend to drive kinetic operations ... virtually

every kinetic operation they undertake is specifically designed to influence attitudes or perceptions".⁴

However while the Taliban has had its successes, sometimes contradictory messages signal internal divisions and underscore the diffuse nature of the insurgency. As well as increasing alliances with criminals, there are a number of groups involved in spreading the violence, including Jalaluddin Haqqani's network, the remnants of Hizb-e Islami (Khalis), Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hizb-e Islami and foreign networks, including al-Qaeda.⁵ This report focuses on material issued in the name or in support of the Taliban movement's leadership, which styles itself the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, but will examine the extent to which there may be coordination with others.⁶

The report studies public communiqués in an attempt to learn more about the messenger from the message: to understand how the Taliban seeks to project itself, how words measure up against actions, the coherence and clarity of stated goals and links to broader networks. Given the insecure environment, it was not possible to access the networks, such as local mullahs and elders as well as travelling Taliban, which spread these messages further into the countryside to a largely rural, illiterate population.⁷ While such an ap-

¹See Crisis Group Asia Report N°123, *Countering Afghanistan's Insurgency: No Quick Fixes*, 2 November 2006. According to UN estimates, there are some 3,000 active and 7,000 occasional Taliban fighters, as well as more passive supporters. "Letter dated 15 November 2007 from the Chairman of the Security Council Committee Established Pursuant to Resolution 1267 (1999) Concerning al-Qaeda and the Taliban and Associated Individuals and Entities Addressed to the President of the Security Council", S/2007/677, p. 9. In 2006, an analyst estimated that there were 17,000 Taliban, 1,500 Hizb-e Islami and 2,000 al-Qaeda. Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan* (New York, 2008), p. 132.

²See Crisis Group Asia Report N°145, *Afghanistan: The Need for International Resolve*, 6 February 2008.

³Thomas X. Hammes, *The Sling and the Stone: On War in the 21st Century* (Minnesota, 2006), p. 2.

⁴Crisis Group interview, International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) officer, Kabul, 10 June 2008.

⁵For details on insurgent groups, see Crisis Group Report, *Countering Afghanistan's Insurgency*, op. cit.

⁶For previous work on Taliban propaganda, see Tim Foxley, "The Taliban's propaganda activities: how well is the Afghan insurgency communicating and what is it saying?", Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, project paper, June 2007; Thomas H. Johnson, "The Taliban Insurgency and an Analysis of *Shabnamah* (Night letters)", *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, vol. 18, no. 3 (September 2007), pp. 317-344; and Thomas Elkjer Nissen, "The Taliban's information warfare: A comparative analysis of NATO information operations and Taliban information activities", Royal Danish Defence College, December 2007.

⁷See, for instance, *The Globe and Mail* (Canada) series, 21 March 2008, "Talking to the Taliban" in which 42 low-ranking Taliban in five districts of Kandahar were interviewed in late 2007, at www.theglobeandmail.com. They showed remarkable similarities in their responses, indicating messaging networks.

proach obviously has limits, it still offers insights into what the leadership sees as the most effective messages to gain recruits, ensure its orders are followed and obtain legitimacy and support.⁸ This includes a number of distinct audiences. “The insurgent is sending one message to his supporters, another to the mass of the undecided population and a third to the coalition decision-makers”.⁹ A fourth audience should be added: the transnational extremist networks from which the insurgents aim to draw resources.¹⁰

Distinct multilingual efforts, shaped for different audiences, undertaken on behalf of the Taliban include:

- English language, for international audiences. Disseminated primarily through a regularly updated website and almost daily contact with international media outlets, it aims at gaining global coverage and an international audience through reputable outlets;
- local languages, particularly Pashtu (with some Dari and Urdu). Aimed at regional groups, including on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistan border. This has several objectives: to obtain wider public support through folk imagery and culture (songs/poems) which appeal to national and religious sentiments; fear and intimidation through night letters (*shabnamah*, pamphlets or leaflets usually containing threats) and violent DVDs; and recruitment through morale-boosting martial songs, orations and statements about operations on the website, magazines, DVDs and audio cassettes; and

- Arabic, for wider transnational networks. More closely linked with global issues and movements online as well as through a few publications, aimed at building wider support and presumably gaining recruits and financing. Global groups also seek to link the conflict in Afghanistan to their wider narrative of a battle between the West and Islam.

Material for the report was gathered in Kabul, Jalalabad, Logar and Kandahar. Interviewees included those who worked under the Taliban regime in the communications field, including staff of Radio Voice of Sharia, the foreign ministry, the information and culture ministry and state-run media, as well as some former writers for the Taliban’s current publications. Government and international community efforts are briefly considered, but the aim is to learn about the insurgency from the insurgents – of whom remarkably little is known.

⁸For earlier Crisis Group analysis on post-2001 popular disillusionment which has fuelled – and in turn been fuelled by – Taliban messaging, see Asia Report N°62, *Afghanistan: The Problem of Pashtun Alienation*, 5 August 2003; and Asia Report N°64, *Peacebuilding in Afghanistan*, 29 September 2003.

⁹Hammes, op. cit., p. 209.

¹⁰For work on extremist networks in other contexts, see Crisis Group Asia Report N°147, *Indonesia: Jemaah Islamiyah’s Publishing Industry*, 28 February 2008; and Crisis Group Middle East Report N°50, *In Their Own Words: Reading the Iraqi Insurgency*, 15 February 2006. See also Daniel Kimmage, “The al-Qaeda media nexus: The virtual network behind the global messages”, Radio Free Europe, special report, March 2008; and Christopher M. Blanchard, “Al-Qaeda: Statements and Evolving Ideology”, Congressional Research Service, updated 26 January 2006. The al-Qaeda media apparatus and possible sanctions are further considered in the “Letter dated 13 May 2008 from the Chairman of the Security Council Committee Established Pursuant to Resolution 1267 (1999) Concerning al-Qaeda and the Taliban and Associated Individuals and Entities Addressed to the President of the Security Council”, S/2008/324, pp. 8-10.

II. BACKDROP

A. RISE OF THE TALIBAN MOVEMENT

In their bid to confront the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s, the U.S. and its Western allies, as well as Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern states, provided military and financial support to seven Sunni Islamist parties, which had Pakistan's backing and many of which operated out of Pakistani safe havens.¹¹ These Islamist factions were armed and equipped in deliberate preference to tribal, nationalist or royalist parties for multiple reasons. Pakistani support was based on fears of irredentist claims by Pashtun nationalists on its Pashtun borderlands; Saudi Arabia was guided by its Sunni Wahhabi/Salafi ideological preferences; the U.S. saw the Islamists as the most desirable ally against the Soviets and the Soviet-backed Kabul communist regime. Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hizb-e Islami,¹² now a Taliban ally, was the main beneficiary of external support. Another was Jalaluddin Haqqani,¹³ who later also turned his guns on his benefactors but was described during that period as "goodness personified" by a Texan congressman.¹⁴

¹¹The seven Sunni mujahidin parties were Burhanuddin Rabbani's Jamiat-i Islami; Hizb-e Islami (led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar); Hizb-e Islami (led by Mawlawi Younus Khalis); Pir Sayed Ahmad Gailani's Mahaz-i Milli-yi Islami-yi Afghanistan; Abd al-Rabb al-Rasul Sayyaf's Ittihad-i Islam; Sebghatullah Mujaddeidi's Jabha-yi Najat-i Milli-yi Afghanistan; and Mohammad Nabi Mohammadi's Harakat-i Inqilab-i Islami-yi Afghanistan. For details of the mujahidin groups, see Crisis Group Asia Briefing N°39, *Political Parties in Afghanistan*, 2 June 2005; and Barnett Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan* (Yale, 2002), pp. 201-225.

¹²Hizb-e Islami was heavily influenced by the Ikhwan al-Muslimin (Muslim Brotherhood). In 1978 it splintered into two groups, which became Hizb-e Islami (Hekmatyar) and Hizb-e Islami (Khalis). The latter, led by Mawlawi Younus Khalis, was dominated by tribal *ulama* (Islamic scholars). Hizb-e Islami (Hekmatyar) was the most organised and disciplined of the mujahidin factions, demanding loyalty to the party rather than individual commanders.

¹³Part of Hizb-e Islami (Khalis), Haqqani joined the Taliban and became a minister under Taliban rule. Still a Taliban supporter, he maintains his own distinct network, discussed below.

¹⁴George Crile, *Charlie Wilson's War* (New York, 2003), p. 473. Many of the asymmetrical tactics taught during this period are seen today. An analyst observed: "[Pakistani military intelligence's Afghan operations director Brigadier Mohammad] Yousaf and the Afghan car bombing squads he trained regarded Kabul University professors as fair game, since they were poisoning young minds with Marxist anti-Islamic dogma". Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars* (New York, 2004), pp. 132-134.

With the Pakistani military's patronage and foreign funding, extremist madrasas in Pakistan's Pashtun belt of Balochistan and Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) also mushroomed, becoming a source of recruitment and influence for the Afghan mujahidin.¹⁵ As millions of Afghan refugees poured into Pakistan, refugee camps likewise became a source of support and recruitment for the Afghan Islamists. Ahmed Rashid noted:

Prior to the war the Islamicists barely had a base in Afghan society, but with money and arms from the CIA pipeline and support from Pakistan, they built one and wielded tremendous clout.¹⁶

The distorted interpretations of Sunni Deobandism taught in these madrasas, superimposed on an equally distorted version of *Pashtunwali*¹⁷ were to form the Taliban creed. The Taliban foot soldiers (the *talibs*, students, from which the movement took its name) were mainly dispossessed, marginalised Pashtun youth, many from the Pakistani madrasas; other recruits to the movement were the products of decades of radicalisation and violence in their homeland.

Having first emerged in 1994 as a local reaction to the post-Soviet chaos in the southern region of Kandahar, the movement's easy, early victories quickly drew the attention of Pakistan's security services, whose previously favoured client, Hekmatyar, had little success in capturing the capital, Kabul, from largely non-Pashtun mujahidin factions. With this powerful institutional sponsorship, the Taliban rapidly extended its rule in a series of dramatic victories, taking Kabul in 1996 and overrunning the final major city, the northern centre of Mazar-e Sharif, in 1998. By 2001, only a pocket in the north east eluded its grasp, although but three countries – Pakistan, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia – recognised the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

The Taliban's original leadership, including supreme leader Mullah Mohammed Omar, was largely drawn from Mohammad Nabi Mohammadi's Harakat-i In-

¹⁵For detailed analysis of Pakistan's madrasa sector, see Crisis Group Asia Report N°130, *Pakistan: Karachi's Madrasas and Violent Extremism*, 29 March 2007; Crisis Group Asia Report N°84, *Pakistan: Reforming the Education Sector*, 7 October 2004; and Crisis Group Asia Report N°36, *Pakistan: Madrasas, Extremism and the Military*, 29 July 2002.

¹⁶Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia* (New York, 2002), p. 19.

¹⁷*Pashtunwali* or *Pakhtunwali* is the tribal and social code of the Pashtuns of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

qilab-i Islami-yi.¹⁸ Success and territorial expansion saw recruitment from other Pashtun-dominated mujahidin groups, including Hizb-e Islami (Khalis). Even some members of the Khalq faction of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) were to join the Taliban.¹⁹ A few leaders of other ethnic groups were co-opted mainly for tactical reasons, such as Hazara factional powerbroker Mohammad Akbari, but were never part of the core leadership.²⁰

The Taliban's obscurantist brand of Deobandi Islam, a product of and reaction to years of war and dislocation and superimposed on *Pashtunwali*, was an anomaly to pre-war Afghan society. Non-Pashtun groups were violently suppressed, as the Taliban sought to impose its distorted interpretation of Islam and Pashtun social codes – most vividly seen in attitudes towards women – on others:

They first targeted “bad Muslims”, while Western culture came only second. They had quite good relations with the United States till the autumn of 1997 and did not bother to expel Western NGOs, later turning anti-U.S. for purely political reasons. Instead they took a hard-line on Afghan customs and culture. They banned music, films, dancing and kite-flying.²¹

During the years of the anti-Soviet jihad, Afghanistan also became a testing and training ground for Islamists from around the world. During the 1980s, Islamist radicals converged on Peshawar in Pakistan's NWFP, which had become the base camp for the Afghan jihad. It was here that Osama Bin Laden developed his ideas, a world away from his privileged upbringing in Saudi Arabia. While viewing the conflict in Afghanistan as a breeding ground for radical Islamic movements, Egyptian Ayman al-Zawahiri, who went on to become al-Qaeda's number two, often

wrote dismissively of the Afghans. He stressed: “A jihadist movement needs an arena that would act like an incubator where its seeds would grow and where it can acquire practical experience in combat, politics, and organisational matters”.²²

The intoxicating success of helping to precipitate the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan fuelled international networks of jihadis from Morocco to the Philippines.²³ When Osama bin Laden sought refuge in Afghanistan from Sudan in 1996, he came at the invitation of old fighting friends and under the protection of the Jalalabad shura (council).²⁴ Following Taliban victories, bin Laden befriended Mullah Omar and in 1997 moved to Kandahar, the Taliban de facto capital where the reclusive leader had the previous year taken the title *Amir ul-Momineen* (Commander of the Faithful). It was from Afghanistan that in 1998 all the groups associated with al-Qaeda launched a manifesto along with a *fatwa* (religious edict) declaring: “The ruling to kill the Americans and their allies – civilians and military – is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to”.²⁵

B. MEDIA UNDER THE TALIBAN

Under the Taliban regime, the media was mainly used to lecture the population. Mullah Mohammad Ishaq Nizami, head of Radio Voice of Sharia, declared: “Afghan people have to be told that we are good for them, that is our job and that is what we will continue

¹⁸This predominantly Pashtun party was dominated by traditional clerics. See William Maley, “Interpreting the Taliban”, in William Maley (ed.), *Afghanistan and the Taliban: The Rebirth of Fundamentalism?* (Delhi, 2001), p. 15.

¹⁹The People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), which took power through a coup in 1978, was divided into the Khalq (People or Masses) and Parcham (Banner) factions.

²⁰Afghanistan's population is ethnically diverse, with four distinct groups accounting for the large majority: the Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras and Uzbeks. Precise population ratios are difficult to determine, in large part because of the absence of a census, but also because of refugees flows. The last (incomplete) census, in 1976, put the Pashtuns at 38 per cent of the population and the largest ethnic group. See Crisis Group Report, *The Problem of Pashtun Alienation*, op. cit.

²¹Olivier Roy, *Globalised Islam: the Search For a New Ummah* (New Delhi, 2005), p. 260.

²²Quoted in Fawaz A. Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global* (Cambridge, 2005), p. 12.

²³See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°37, *Understanding Islamism*, 2 March 2005.

²⁴Following the collapse of Dr Mohammad Najibullah Ahmadzai's PDPA regime in 1992, various mujahidin factions controlled regional power centres. The fractious Jalalabad shura of tribal leaders and prominent guerrilla leaders in the east – long a centre for foreign fighters – was dominated by Hizb-e Islami (Khalis), including its most prominent local leader, Haji Abdul Qadir (later President Hamid Karzai's vice president before his 2002 assassination), while also drawing in members of Ahmad Gailani's Mahaz-i Milli-yi Islami-yi Afghanistan. Rubin, op. cit., p. 277; and Coll, op. cit., p. 327. Haqqani in particular had long ties with bin Laden. “When al-Qaeda was formed along the Afghan-Pakistan border in the summer of 1988, its first camps were in Haqqani territory. The first infrastructure of al-Qaeda was essentially supervised by Haqqani ... so bin Laden and Haqqani would have known each other for fifteen years by the time bin Laden came across the border after Tora Bora [in 2001]. “Interview with Steve Coll”, “Return of the Taliban”, Frontline, Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), 2006, p. 8, www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/taliban/.

²⁵Quoted in Rashid, op. cit., p. 134.

to do”.²⁶ Internationally, the Taliban focused on trying to win international legitimacy, particularly by gaining control of the Afghan seat at the United Nations.²⁷ With little understanding of the outside world, its efforts were confused, and its treatment of women in particular attracted strong disapproval.

The ministers of culture and information under the regime were Amir Khan Muttaqi²⁸ and then Qudratullah Jamal,²⁹ who had the near impossible task of justifying to the world such actions as the destruction of the Buddha statues in Bamiyan. Kabul was prized as the traditional seat of power in Afghanistan and home to the official ministries, but the Taliban’s de facto capital remained the southern city of Kandahar, and the head of the department of information and culture there, Abdul Hai Mutmain,³⁰ wielded considerable power in the communications sector. All three men appear to have retained media positions in the reconstituted Taliban leadership structure.³¹ Tayyab Agha,

a personal assistant to Mullah Omar, sometimes acted as his spokesman and is also still occasionally heard, appearing to speak for the top leadership.

The former foreign minister under the Taliban, Mawlawi Wakil Ahmad Mutawakil, claimed that the “Taliban suspended all TV and cinematographic shows but conversely enhanced radio programs and other state print media”.³² The regime renovated printing presses and, like nearly every regime before it, created its own organ, *Sharia*, while continuing more established publications. These were, however, slim and closely monitored to project positive images of the regime. Afghanistan Radio continued under the name Radio Voice of Sharia; presenters were punished if they did not read out Taliban statements in full. Music, except for unaccompanied religious chants, was banned.³³ Television,³⁴ photography and even, in the later stages, the internet were also barred, although a number of regime and pro-regime websites were maintained for external use.³⁵

²⁶ Caroline Lees, “Turn on, tune in to Radio Taliban”, *The Independent*, 26 October 1996. Mullah Nizami initially fled with the Taliban leadership, taking refuge in Peshawar, but in 2007 returned to Kabul under a Karzai government reconciliation program.

²⁷ Although the Taliban had representatives in New York, Afghanistan’s UN seat remained with the Rabbani government.

²⁸ The Consolidated List, established and maintained by the 1267 Committee with respect to al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden, and the Taliban and “other individuals, groups, undertakings and entities associated with them”, last updated 3 July 2008, carries Muttaqi as born in approximately 1968 in Helmand. He was later education minister. Created under UN Security Council Resolution 1267 (1999), the 1267 Committee, also known as the “Al-Qaeda and Taliban Sanctions Committee”, oversees a list of individuals subject to travel bans, assets freezes and arms embargoes.

²⁹ According to the Consolidated List, Jamal was born in approximately 1963 in Paktia. An interview in *Al Somood (Standing Firm)* magazine reported that he fought the Soviet invasion in Paktia and was an early member of the Taliban, serving as a military commander, and created its media committee after the movement lost power in 2001. Ahmad Mukhtar, “Interview with Qudratullah Jamal, Minister of Information for the government of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan”, *Al Somood*, May 2008, p. 9. This Taliban monthly Arabic-language magazine, discussed in greater depth below, carries both Islamic and Gregorian dates, with the former based on a solar calendar and the later a lunar. For convenience only the Gregorian dates will be used in this report. The translation from Arabic is by Crisis Group. Throughout this report, unless otherwise stated, translations are from Pashtu to English and by Crisis Group.

³⁰ The Consolidated List carries Mutmain as born in approximately 1973 in Zabul.

³¹ In contrast, another regime representative, Sayed Rahmatullah Hashemi, went on to study at Yale University in the

U.S. Alan Finder, “A Taliban past and a cloudy Yale future”, *The New York Times*, 6 July 2006.

³² Mawlawi Wakil Ahmad Mutawakil, “Afghanistan and the Taliban”, published in Pashtu in 1384 (equivalent to 20 March 2005–20 March 2006). The quote was taken from p. 32 of an unpublished English version, translated and edited by Mohammad Suhail Shaheen.

³³ Chants by Yusuf Islam (formerly Cat Stevens) were popular and broadcast nearly every night on the English program. Presenters and producers from this time say they received letters from as far away as Scandinavia about their nightly English language shortwave transmission. Crisis Group interviews, Kabul, March–April 2008.

³⁴ A television was kept, in great secrecy, at the foreign ministry to monitor international broadcasts: “The power of the religious police was so great that even powerful ministers such as [Mawlawi Wakil Ahmad] Mutawakil feared them. When he became minister of foreign affairs, he ordered a satellite dish to be installed on the ministry building’s roof....The purpose of it was to receive news on TV especially from the Al Jazeera news agency. He emphasised that it should not draw attention. Although the TV was placed in the basement of that building, Mutawakil locked the door while watching it and placed a guard outside at all times....Abdul Rahman Zahed, the deputy foreign affairs minister, never dared to even enter the room unless accompanied by Mutawakil”. Quote from unpublished English translation by Sepideh Khalili and Saeed Ganji of Vahid Mojdeh, *Afghanistan under Five Years of Taliban Sovereignty* (Tehran, 2003), p. 18. Mojdeh, now a political analyst in Kabul, had previously edited the Hizb-e Islami paper *Shahadat* in Peshawar and worked in the publications department of the foreign ministry under the Taliban. Ibid, author’s note.

³⁵ See Patrick Di Justo, “Does Official Taliban Site Exist?”, *Wired*, 30 October 2001. One Taliban-era communications employee said he was later asked to type – on a computer – a

In Kandahar, the department of information and culture produced the Pashtu and Dari-language *Khilafat Meyashtani* (*Caliphate Monthly*), the “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan’s central publication organ”. An information centre in Kandahar produced other publications, including an Arabic monthly, *Al-Imarat-ul Islamia* (*The Islamic Emirate*) and an English monthly, *The Islamic Emirate*.³⁶ These were colour productions with far more sophistication, as well as interest in international affairs, than their Kabul counterparts. They were indeed produced without cooperation from the capital’s media and appeared to have received assistance from al-Qaeda; at least one American worked with the centre.³⁷

The reclusive Taliban chief, Mullah Omar, did not appear on television and gave only limited interviews.³⁸ Other commanders and ministers occasionally appeared on television, mostly Arabic-language channels (often furtively, not wanting colleagues to know), possibly to gain individual recognition and Arab patronage.³⁹ However, those who worked in the Taliban media emphasise that the leadership did care how they were perceived. While it often had little idea how to burnish its international image, particularly the English-language media was often described at weekly meetings between ministers and local editors as being “on the frontline”, that is, a top priority.⁴⁰ International publications were monitored, as were foreign journalists who were urged to refer to the regime as the Islamic Emirate rather than the Taliban.⁴¹

decree banning the use of computers, although this was never implemented as the Taliban fell from power soon afterwards. Crisis Group interview, Kabul, 9 April 2008.

³⁶The centre’s director was Mawlawi Ahmad Jan Ahmadi. These publications appeared largely aimed at an overseas audience, with subscriptions offered in Pakistan, the U.S., UAE and Saudi Arabia.

³⁷Crisis Group interviews, Kabul and Kandahar, February-March 2008. Several people mentioned “Adam the American” working at the information centre, possibly Adam Gadahn, an American convert, now under U.S. indictment for treason, who still works for the al-Qaeda media arm and regularly appears in Al Sahab video productions. See Raffi Khatchadourian, “Azzam the American”, *The New Yorker*, 22 January 2007.

³⁸These included a 1998 audio interview with the BBC Pashtu service. See www.bbc.co.uk.

³⁹Crisis Group interview, former Al Jazeera stringer, Kabul, 17 April 2008.

⁴⁰Crisis Group interview, former *Kabul Times* staffer under the Taliban regime, Kabul, 3 June 2008.

⁴¹Kate Clark, “The Struggle For Hearts and Minds: The Military, Aid and The Media”, in Antonio Donini, Norah Niland and Karin Wermester (eds.), *Nation-Building Unravelling? Aid, Peace and Justice in Afghanistan* (Connecticut, 2004), p. 85.

As relations with the outside world deteriorated, Mullah Omar denounced the foreign broadcasting of “biased and hostile” information. In March 2001, the BBC was banned and its correspondent, one of the few foreign reporters based in Afghanistan, was forced to leave.

Unlike the Taliban, al-Qaeda’s leadership revelled in the spotlight. Bin Laden had assiduously cultivated media attention and his jihadi credentials during his stay in Peshawar.⁴² The imposition of sanctions made it more difficult to do so, but he continued to give interviews to a select few from secret locations.⁴³

⁴²In 1987, “Bin Laden commissioned a 50-minute video that showed him riding horses, talking to Arab volunteers, broadcasting on the radio and firing weapons – the same things many commanders without video cameras did routinely. He sought out Arab journalists and gave lengthy interviews designed to ‘use the media for attracting more Arabs, recruiting more Arabs to come to Afghanistan’, as one of the journalists recalled. It was the birth of bin Laden’s media strategy, aimed primarily at the Arabic-speaking world; in part he drew on some of the media tactics pioneered by secular Palestinian terrorists and nationalists during the 1970s and early 1980s”. Coll, op. cit., p. 163.

⁴³In 1999, for example, Rahimullah Yusufzai, who worked for *The News* (Pakistan), *Time* and ABC News, was “summoned” to bin Laden’s “tented encampment in Helmand” to hear denials of involvement in the embassy bombings in Africa which had attracted retaliatory U.S. bombing on camps in Afghanistan. “Wrath of God”, *Time*, 11 January 1999.

III. MEDIA AND TALIBAN RESURGENCE

Lacking popular support, the Taliban regime was quickly ousted by the international military intervention that took place after it refused to turn over bin Laden following the terror attacks of 11 September 2001. While the Taliban seemingly melted away, very few of the underlying conditions that had brought it into power were tackled.⁴⁴

The Taliban had gained power rapidly because of Pakistani support and patronage. Although President Musharraf's military government joined what the U.S. described as its war on terror, the Taliban was able to retreat across the border, where it regrouped and reorganised in the Pashtun belt of Balochistan and NWFP. The Pakistani military government's reliance on mullahs to neutralise its moderate democratic opposition also empowered the Taliban. Benefiting from the rigged 2002 elections, the Muttahida Majlis-i-Amal (MMA), a six-party religious alliance dominated by Fazlur Rehman's Pashtun-dominated Juiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI-F), the Taliban's mentor since its inception, formed the NWFP government and was a coalition partner of Musharraf's party, the Muslim League – Quaid-i-Azam. The Taliban thus had a safe haven and a base of operations in the two MMA-controlled provinces, while JUI-F madrasas continued, as in the past, to provide recruits, Afghan and Pakistani, for its cause.⁴⁵

If Taliban command and control structures, sanctuaries and sources of fundraising and recruitment in Pakistan were to help it regroup and reorganise,⁴⁶ domestic dynamics also aided it to regain some lost ground in Afghanistan. In the 1990s, the Taliban had gained a modicum of legitimacy and support by ousting corrupt and brutal commanders. After its own

ouster, many of these discredited leaders were brought into power by the international community, particularly the U.S. They were allowed to return to their predatory ways, including involvement in the opium trade, as long as they helped the hunt for al-Qaeda and mouthed allegiance to Kabul. As U.S. attention turned to Iraq, and the peace dividend failed to materialise, disillusionment began. Attacks by ethnic rivals on Taliban foot soldiers, and on Pashtuns in general, particularly in the north,⁴⁷ as well as civilian casualties in international military operations in the Pashtun heartland, often the result of poor or deliberately misleading information, fuelled alienation and anger in the southern and eastern provinces.

This provided a well of resentment for the Taliban to tap. Highlighting civilian casualties from the start,⁴⁸ it sought to frame the international military intervention as a wider war against Islam and/or Pashtuns. "This is not an issue of Osama bin Laden", Mullah Omar told the Voice of America as early as September 2001. "It is an issue of Islam. Islam's prestige is at stake. So is Afghanistan's tradition".⁴⁹ A November 2002 night letter, distributed in Afghanistan and faxed to Pakistani journalists, stated that Mullah Omar had declared "jihad" against the foreign forces in Afghanistan and the "proxy government".⁵⁰ It also said that he had appointed two deputies, Mullah Brader⁵¹ and Mullah Obaidullah Akhund,⁵² although there was, at this

⁴⁴ See Crisis Group Report, *The Problem of Pashtun Alienation*, op. cit., p. ii.

⁴⁵ On the military government's relationship with the Islamist parties and Taliban presence in Pakistan, see Crisis Group Asia Briefing N°69, *Pakistan: The Forgotten Conflict in Balochistan*, 22 October 2007; Crisis Group Asia Report N°125, *Pakistan's Tribal Areas: Appeasing the Militants*, 11 December 2006; and Crisis Group Asia Report N°49, *Pakistan: The Mullahs and the Military*, 20 March 2003. See also "The United States Lacks Comprehensive Plan to Destroy The Terrorist Threat and Close the Safe Haven in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas", United States Government Accountability Office, April 2008.

⁴⁶ For instance, what is commonly referred to as the Quetta Shura, named after Balochistan's capital, is considered the main leadership council of the Taliban. Crisis Group Report, *Countering Afghanistan's Insurgency*, op. cit., p. 9.

⁴⁷ See "Anti-Pashtun Violence in Northern Afghanistan: Recent Testimonies", Human Rights Watch, 6 March 2002.

⁴⁸ The number of casualties in the earliest days of the intervention is still unknown.

⁴⁹ "Mullah Omar – in his own words", translated transcript of the twelve-minute Voice of America (VOA) interview in *The Guardian*, 26 September 2001.

⁵⁰ Quoted by Asif Farooqi, "Taliban's new hierarchy unveiled", 25 June 2003, islamonline.net.

⁵¹ Originally from Deh Rawood, Uruzgan, and born in 1962, Brader had held the positions of deputy minister of defence, head of the western region and general military commander of the northern provinces under the Taliban regime. After its fall, he first fought in the western provinces and in Uruzgan, Kandahar and Helmand. "The deputy [leader] of the Islamic Emirate gives an exclusive interview with Al Somood", *Al Somood*, January 2007.

⁵² According to the Consolidated List, Obaidullah was born in Kandahar in 1968 and was defence minister under the Taliban regime. He was apparently arrested in Quetta in February 2007 "Taliban Leader Held In Pakistan", BBC News, 2 March 2007, although a foreign newspaper claimed to have interviewed him two days later in Quetta. "Swiss Paper Says Former Taliban Defence Minister Free", Associated Press, 11 March 2007. There have not been statements from him since this time, although he was also reported to have been detained in Lahore in February 2008. Shahnawaz Khan, "Security agencies arrest Mullah Obaidullah again", *The*

stage, little evidence of any more extensive structure or following to command.

With the Taliban's organisational abilities in tatters, the tone of night letters and publications in the early years was largely defensive, focusing largely on American "atrocities". Adopting a pragmatic approach, the Taliban abandoned earlier strictures against pictures of living images⁵³ – although still blurring those of women – and used graphic pictures of Afghan casualties and the destruction of property allegedly by foreign forces. Images from the Iraq war also began to appear. In 2005-2006, as the insurgency grew in Afghanistan, the propaganda projected an increasing air of confidence and assertiveness, depicting images of the bodies of international troops and Afghan security forces, along with their destroyed vehicles and captured supplies, as well as Taliban weapons caches and operations.⁵⁴

A. MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

The Taliban is militarily overwhelmed by international air power, and it lacks control over territory or state institutions. As a result, communications and media coverage assume greater importance. Taliban leaders or spokesmen cannot address large gatherings which would render them vulnerable to attack. Some Western and local reporters have had access to field commanders,⁵⁵ and indeed the Taliban has issued a

Daily Times (Pakistan), 25 February 2008. Even more recently it has been reported that Obaidullah may have been released by Pakistani authorities in exchange for the country's kidnapped ambassador to Afghanistan; see Mushtaq Yusufzai, "Kidnapped Ambassador Freed", *The News*, 18 May 2008. Captured Taliban spokesman Latifullah Hakimi had spoken of the closeness of Mullah Omar and Obaidullah. Ismail Khan, "Mullah Omar's Deputy Obaidullah Captured", *Dawn*, 2 March 2007.

⁵³ Orthodox Muslims believe that the depiction of living images is *haram* (forbidden).

⁵⁴ Crisis Group email communication with long-time Taliban publication observer, 14 March 2008.

⁵⁵ Since the Taliban's fall, the only "press conference" was held during negotiations for the release of 23 South Korean missionaries kidnapped in central Ghazni province in August 2007, for which two Taliban representatives were given safe passage by the government. "After Taliban news conference, Afghan government bans media from South Korea talks site", Associated Press, 12 August 2007. A BBC correspondent was "embedded" with some of the fighters in Kandahar and Helmand in 2006; see David Loyn, "Travelling with the Taliban", BBC News, 24 October 2006; a small group of local reporters was invited into the town of Musa Qala while it was under Taliban control in late 2007, including to view a military parade; see "Special report from Musa Qala", Insti-

number of invitations for journalists, pledging that "the mujahidin of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan will do their best to maintain security for independent journalists so that the realities can be revealed to the people".⁵⁶ Such meetings have, however, proved risky, with a number of journalists kidnapped and/or killed,⁵⁷ while local officials have detained others because of their contacts with insurgent groups.⁵⁸

As a local journalist from an insurgency-hit province said, "the Taliban exaggerates, [while] the government reduces the number of casualties; so if we say the Taliban numbers, the government threatens us; if we say the government numbers, then the Taliban threatens us".⁵⁹ He has moved to the capital due to security fears, including the Taliban killing two students he had interviewed at a new government school because they spoke with the media at such an event. Indeed, the threat of insurgent violence hanging over local journalists is under-reported. The Taliban pays close attention to the coverage it receives and moves quickly to intimidate those it feels report actions or statements in an unfavourable light or do not give them due prominence. Mullah Dadullah,⁶⁰ who had emerged as a media star in television interviews and gruesome DVDs before his 2007 death, ordered "re-

tute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), 27 November 2007. *Asia Times Online's* Pakistan bureau chief, Syed Saleem Shahzad, travelled in Kandahar and Helmand in December 2006; see his series "In the Land of the Taliban", *Asia Times Online*, December 2006.

⁵⁶ "Statement of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan about the comments of a human rights organization", Al Emarah, 1 July 2007 (translation: AfghanWire).

⁵⁷ Italian journalist Daniele Mastrogiacomo was kidnapped in March 2007 in Helmand. He was released, but his Afghan fixer, Ajmal Naqshbandi, and driver, Sayed Agha, were killed. A British journalist and his local assistant were held for three months in eastern Afghanistan. "Film-maker Sean Langan kidnapped in Afghanistan is set free", *The Times* (UK), 24 June 2008. The *Asia Times Online* Pakistan bureau chief was held for six days in northern Helmand during the trip mentioned above. Syed Saleem Shahzad, "A 'guest' of the Taliban", *Asia Times Online*, 30 November 2006.

⁵⁸ "Journalist held over Musa Qala visit freed", IWPR, 9 November 2007.

⁵⁹ Crisis Group interview, Kabul, 13 July 2008.

⁶⁰ Born 1967 in Deh Rawood, Uruzgan, Dadullah was a particularly brutal frontline commander under the Taliban regime and after its fall a member of the leadership council and a commander in the south west. "[H]e was both a man of fighting and media at the same time". Mustafa Mahmood, "Personal biography of martyr commander Mullah Dadullah", *Al Somood*, June 2007, p. 11. See also William Maley, "Introduction", Maley, op. cit., p. xi.

porters and [media] offices to refrain from publishing the enemy's lies. Otherwise we will kill them".⁶¹

With such impediments to independent verification, reports from the field often become a battle of competing press statements. Facts are hard to come by, cross checking is difficult, and rumours can quickly gain currency. The Taliban has proved adept at feeding statements and claims to the flourishing Afghan media scene. The information minister under the Taliban regime, Quadratullah Jamal, boasted of a proactive approach:

The most prominent Afghan specialists admit in their interviews that the Taliban media activities are very quick and reactive when journalists ask us for information. The Karzai media ... are much weaker and cannot compete with us. Journalists confirm that when they ask the ministry of defence to give information about a particular event, it takes 24 hours to get the answer, while we can give the information through satellite phones in a record time.⁶²

Such speed is, of course, much easier when spokesmen do not need to establish facts. Still in its infancy, the local media too often accepts Taliban statements at face value, partly, no doubt, because of the difficulty of verification, as well as the government's and the international military's failure to provide timely reactions. Instead of more proactively putting out its own message, Kabul too often reacts by simply cracking down on a critical media, failing to distinguish between reporting and incitement. In June 2006, for instance, government security agencies issued "guidelines" that sought to bar "broadcasting those materials which weaken the morale of the public, cause security problems and which are against the national interest".⁶³ An international involved in local media train-

ing commented that "the foreign military does not care about them [the local media] or their perceptions. The Taliban cares very much about their perceptions".⁶⁴

Of course, in Afghanistan less than a quarter of the adult population is estimated to be literate, with only 2 per cent claiming to read newspapers regularly.⁶⁵ Around a third of households have a television and 88 per cent radios,⁶⁶ while only a tiny fraction of the population has access to the internet.⁶⁷ In such a situation the Taliban keeps online resources fairly basic. The internet is used to allow the leadership to communicate quickly and broadly – nationally and internationally – with media and other opinion-makers, replacing faxes, which were more common in 2002 and 2003.

In terms of reaching the average member of the population, visual and audio mediums such as DVDs and audio cassettes can make a great impact, and traditional night letters are still widely used. While such methods – and most of all word of mouth – facilitate the much wider spread of ideas and help create a conducive climate, they are, of course, much harder to control. There is some evidence, discussed further below, of frustration among the Taliban leadership and increasing attempts to exert control over what is said in its name.

B. TALIBAN SPOKESMEN

According to the history of the Taliban media in its Arabic-language magazine *Al Somood (Standing Firm)*, a media commission was formed on 23 September 2002 and run first by the Taliban-era minister

⁶¹ "Taliban supreme commander demands 'impartial' treatment by media", Pakistan-based Afghan Islamic Press News Agency (AIP), 4 September 2006 (translation: BBC Monitoring Service). The spokesman reading the statement continued: "Many news sources cruelly treat the Taliban. For example they do not air our reports....However they publish whatever the enemy tells them without seeking the Taliban's view....We will kill anyone who mistreats us like this. What we demand is that the media should impartially and independently air our reports".

⁶² Ahmad Mukhtar, "Interview with Quadratullah Jamal", op. cit., p. 15.

⁶³ Translation of media guidelines distributed to local broadcasters and agencies in June 2006. These included statements or interviews with "armed organisations and terrorist groups", reports of terrorist activities used as the lead story and reports that "aim to represent that the fighting spirit in

Afghanistan's armed forces is weak." In 2008 the Haj ministry apparently attempted to ban reporting from Kabul city mosques without its permission. See "Afghan Ministry Curbs Media Reporting of Mosque Sermons", Tolo TV, 29 January 2008 (translation: BBC Monitoring Service).

⁶⁴ Crisis Group interview, Kabul, 11 June 2008.

⁶⁵ The adult literacy rate is estimated at 23.5 per cent. "United Nations Human Development Report 2007", conducted by the Centre for Policy and Human Development, p. 19. There is a gross gender disparity, with only 12.6 per cent of women literate compared to 32.4 per cent of men. Ibid, p. 24. According to the results of a nationwide survey, 74 per cent said they never relied on newspapers for information and only 2 per cent said they read a newspaper almost every day. "Afghanistan in 2007: A Survey of the Afghan People", The Asia Foundation, Kabul, 2008, p. 108. This surveyed 6,263 respondents in all 34 provinces.

⁶⁶ "Afghanistan in 2007", op. cit., p. 97.

⁶⁷ One estimate put internet access in Afghanistan at 1.7 per cent of the population, www.internetworldstats.com.

of information and culture, Quadratullah Jamal, and from May 2004 by Ustad Mohammad Yasir.⁶⁸ A mujahidin-era minister, affiliated to Abd al-Rabb al-Rasul Sayyaf's Ittihad-i Islami,⁶⁹ Yasir is a powerful speaker who likes to portray himself as a thinker and expert on theological and ideological matters. He speaks Arabic and has made appearances on Arabic television channels. He was arrested in Pakistan's NWFP province in August 2005 and transferred to Afghan authorities⁷⁰ but exchanged in March 2007 for a kidnapped Italian journalist.⁷¹ Upon release he was quoted as saying he was: "grabbing two rifles to begin jihad again to hunt down invaders and fight non-believers".⁷²

While Mullah Omar remains the most important figurehead for the movement, he is rarely heard from, although statements appear in his name on important issues or events. Among successive Taliban spokespersons, Latifullah Hakimi was the most prominent in the early years.⁷³ He was detained in Quetta in October 2005 but was also freed in the March 2007 exchange, although he has not been heard from since.

Following Hakimi's arrest, Qari Mohammad Yousuf Ahmadi (subsequently referred to as "Qari Yousuf") and Mohammad Hanif ("Dr Hanif")⁷⁴ appeared as the

main spokesmen on daily military matters, while Taliban regime official Mutmain spoke, though very rarely, on "political issues".⁷⁵ "Dr Hanif" was arrested in January 2007, apparently soon after entering the eastern border province of Nangarhar from Pakistan.⁷⁶ The presence of so many voices for the Taliban in Pakistan who were able to easily contact journalists when U.S. attention was largely consumed by the hunt for al-Qaeda has long been a matter of contention between Kabul and Islamabad.

Particularly in the early years, a number of self-styled spokesmen and field commanders would give interviews, with or without permission. The leadership's frustration with these competing representatives was apparent when a fax to various outlets in February 2004 refuted comments by a purported spokesman, Saif al-Adl, and named Hamed Agha (possibly an alias for Quadratullah Jamal)⁷⁷ as the only representative authorised to speak for the movement,⁷⁸ although little was subsequently heard from him. A 2005 mes-

⁶⁸ "The media activities of the Taliban Islamic movement", *Al Somood*, December 2007, pp. 5-6 (translation: Afghan-Wire).

⁶⁹ Yasir was born in 1953 in Wardak province. "Interview with Ustad Mohammad Yasir", *Al Somood*, July 2007.

⁷⁰ It appears that he was able to continue his work even while in Pul-i-Charkhi, the country's maximum security prison. A speech on suicide bombings was attributed to him from prison on the Taliban website, *Al Emarah*, dated 11 December 2006. Borhan Younus and Mudassir Ali Shah, "Kabul confirms Yasir, Hakimi among 14 extradited by Pakistan", *Pajhwak Afghan News Agency*, 26 October 2005.

⁷¹ Mullah Dadullah's brother, Mansoor Dadullah, was also among those released and went to lead the fighting in southern Afghanistan after the former's death. "Mullah Dadullah's Replacement Named", *Al Jazeera*, 18 May 2007.

⁷² Ian Fisher, "Italy swapped five jailed Taliban for a hostage", *The New York Times*, 22 March 2007.

⁷³ Ron Synovitz, "Pakistan hails capture of Taliban spokesman as breakthrough", *Radio Free Europe*, 5 October 2005, says Hakimi had been the head of the justice department and then oversaw the department of information and culture in Herat (1999-2000); "Kabul confirms Yasir, Hakimi...", *op. cit.* says he had headed the department of information and culture in Ghazni. See also "The media activities of the Taliban Islamic movement", *op. cit.*, pp. 5-6. This called him the official spokesman, even though statements at that time did not recognise him as such.

⁷⁴ Abdul Haq (apparently his real name), in his mid-20s and from the Nangarhar area, does not appear to have been part

of the former Taliban regime. "Captured Taliban fuels Islamabad-Kabul fire", *Radio Free Europe*, 18 January 2007. Aryn Baker, "A Taliban spokesman's confession", *Time*, 17 January 2007.

⁷⁵ "Mr Mutmain said Mr Yousuf and Dr Hanif would provide information on militant activities in different parts of Afghanistan. They would speak on military matters only, he said, adding that he would be the spokesman on political issues". "Taliban 'appoint new spokesman'", *BBC News Online*, 14 October 2005.

⁷⁶ Following his arrest, he was shown on television a number of times by Afghan authorities, claiming that Mullah Omar lived in Quetta and criticising attacks on civilians. He was also filmed condemning a suicide attack in Nangarhar. "The incidents in which innocent people were killed should be condemned. I would like to ask those people who have been deceived by the enemy and are working against their nation to give up their opposition. If they continue to fight, the people of Afghanistan will undoubtedly prosecute them one day". Text of a report by *Afghan Aina Television*, 15 March 2007 (Dari translation: *BBC Monitoring Service*). *Hizb-e Islami (Khalis)* responded with a night letter: "Whatever these days is published with the media attributing it to Taliban captured spokesman Dr Mohammad Hanif is only conspiracy and propaganda of the puppet administration and intelligence network who want to cheat the Muslim nation of Afghanistan and damage the public's view of the mujahidin". "Statement by the leadership of *Hizb-e Islami* on the comments of detained Taliban spokesman Dr Mohammad Hanif", undated nightletter, attributed to Mawlawi Khalis's son, "amir of *Hizb-e Islami*" Anwar ul-Haq Mujahid, and distributed in the eastern region.

⁷⁷ Graeme Smith, "The Taliban", *Globe and Mail*, 27 November 2006.

⁷⁸ Amin Tarzi, "Neo-Taliban Free To Communicate With Media", *Radio Free Europe*, 9 August 2005.

sage posted in the name of Mullah Omar on the Taliban's Al Emarah (The Emirate) website demanded:

The international community and the people of the country should not term each comment to be those of the Islamic Emirate. The comments of the Islamic Emirate are those which are released by our official spokesmen and our Al Emarah web page.⁷⁹

The practice has, however, continued. In 2007, a statement asking government employees to stop working with the administration was denied by Qari Yousuf, who demanded: "This statement was not released by the Taliban, and it is up to [the] media to take confirmation from spokesmen while releasing on behalf of the Taliban".⁸⁰

Today the most prominent spokesmen, with contacts listed on the website, are Zabihullah Mujahid, who appears to take major responsibility for the eastern and central regions, and Qari Yousuf, who speaks mainly on the south. These are likely *noms de guerre* – commonly used by the Taliban – and, particularly in the case of Qari Yousuf, names that are used by more than one person.⁸¹ They maintain regular contact with journalists through email, SMS and telephone calls and provide online reports on incidents. Journalists stressed that Taliban spokesmen responded to queries around the clock, in sharp contrast to government and international officials. A number of Taliban commanders still appear to use their own spokesmen. For instance, Shahabuddin Attal spoke on behalf of Mullah Dadullah and, following his May 2007 death, his brother Mullah Mansoor Dadullah.⁸²

In March 2008 *Al Somood* outlined an alleged new leadership structure, with Muttaqi heading a "cultural commission";⁸³ a training and education commission

under Mawlawi Ahmad Jan;⁸⁴ and Yasir overseeing "invitation" (recruitment).⁸⁵ It is unlikely that all ten groups named in this organisational structure are up and running. Titles and charts do not necessarily translate into the existence of a coherent organisation. Indeed, the same article admitted as much, saying of the training and education commission that "its activities are currently limited, owing to limited training facilities of the movement". It also acknowledged that the commission of prisoners and martyrs families' affairs "faces a serious shortfall in facilities and financial means" in attempting to provide money for

events b. Issue jihadi magazines and newspapers c. Oversee the internet website related to the movement d. Issue and publish jihadi books e. Prepare jihadi films and publish them on jihadi websites". Ahmad Mukhtar, "Administrative Structure of the Taliban Islamic Movement", *Al Somood*, March 2008, p. 17. It is unclear how this relates to a media unit discussed in the July 2008 issue of *Al Somood*, which it said is overseen by Nasiruddin "Herawi" – a figure discussed below – and works at: "the production and publication of jihadi films; their transmission on jihadi websites; putting in order and publishing the archives of important issues related to the Afghan cause; the gathering of photos, videos and military reports from within the front by *Al Somood* correspondents; the setting up of explanatory media sessions on important subjects from reporters and journalists from within the military frontlines, such as in Musa Qala district in Helmand province, Panjwayi district in Kandahar province, Tora Bora in Nangarhar province, Saydabad district in Wardak province, Askar Kut as-Sakhina in Ghazni province, Sabari district in Khost province and the other regions of Afghanistan if and when the need arises; the publication of the special announcements of the Emir with regard to urging jihad against the Crusaders, and directives and orders for the mujahidin; the starting up of educational, cultural and Islamic courses in the mujahidin's camps; the preparation of books on jihadi thought and their distribution to the mujahidin; the accumulation and organisation of data and statistics concerning the [mujahidin] martyr-soldiers against foreign forces in Afghanistan; the gathering and organisation of the data and statistics of martyrs and orphans of martyrs (both civilian and mujahidin) who died in the battles fought between the mujahidin and the Americans; the accumulation and ordering of data concerning the activities of the Christian evangelical organisations operating under the cover of humanitarian aid to the Afghan people, research into ways of confronting these activities". "Al Somood begins its third year", *Al Somood*, July 2008, pp. 1-3.

⁸⁴"The commission conducts training and education within the mujahidin's fronts and areas under their control". "Administrative Structure of the Taliban Islamic Movement", op. cit. This could be Mawlawi Ahmad Jan Ahmadi, director of the Kandahar Information Centre under the Taliban.

⁸⁵"It carries out invitational (recruitment) activities among the mujahidin, forms invitation (recruitment) and education circles within the fronts to encourage the employees of Karzai's administration to leave working for the Americans and the Crusaders and join the Mujahidin's lines". Ibid.

⁷⁹"Message of *Amir ul-Momineen* to the nations of Afghanistan and Iraq", Al Emarah, 12 May 2007 (translation: AfghanWire).

⁸⁰"Taliban spokesman denies issuing statement against Afghan government workers", AIP, 17 October 2007 (translation: BBC Monitoring Service).

⁸¹Journalists interviewed by Crisis Group said that Qari Yousuf in particular seemed to be a name used by multiple people who answered the same telephone. This practice allows for 24-hour coverage and also minimises the threat posed by the capture of one individual. Crisis Group interviews, journalists, Kabul and Kandahar, February-March 2008.

⁸²Mansoor Dadullah was reportedly captured in Pakistan in February 2008. Candace Rondeaux, "Top Taliban commander is captured in Pakistan", *The Washington Post*, 12 February 2008.

⁸³Duties listed include "a. Establish relations with media channels and agencies to notify them on important military

the families of those killed or imprisoned.⁸⁶ The importance of publishing such an organisational schema was in showing the personalities currently favoured and the roles seen as significant to highlight.

C. SPREADING THE MESSAGE

1. Night letters (*Shabnamah*)

Night letters (*shabnamah*) are a traditional means of communication in Afghanistan. Printed or handwritten pages are delivered to individuals, distributed through towns and villages or even blanketed over provinces. It is difficult to establish the true source of night letters, since messages are sent by a large variety of sources. Criminal groups, including those involved in the drugs trade, could, for example, conceivably use night letters in the name of the Taliban to generate fear in an area.

The Taliban uses them often to deliver threats, generally directed at Afghans who work with the international forces or the government. For instance, a printed one-page missive distributed in south eastern Afghanistan in May 2008 in the name of the “Afghanistan Islamic Emirate Khost Jihadi Military Front” warned “all residents in Khost” that:

1. Tribal elders should not consider the U.S. stronger than Allah and not give verdicts against mujahidin; otherwise you will soon regret it.
2. Those who spy and work for the infidel government and military forces should quit their jobs by 20 June; otherwise they will see something which they have never seen in their lives.
3. Do not get close to the infidel forces at any time or in any place.
4. During attacks on government and infidel forces, you should keep yourselves safe and not provide support for them; if this rule is violated, your death will be the same as the death of the U.S. and their puppets.
5. Our mines are live; we do not allow the killing of civilians, but you should not show them to the infidels and their slaves. We will show our power to those who show our land mines to them or inform them about us.
6. When you see infidel forces on the street and roads, stop where you are and do not go forward.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

7. Those mullahs who perform funerals for those who are killed in the campaign – national army, national and border police and intelligence – will be killed with torture; and remember: such a mullah will never be forgiven.

Schools, often the only government-run institution in many areas of the country, have been the subject of a campaign of intimidation for several years.⁸⁷ A night letter circulated in the central province of Wardak in May and June 2008, and warning that “non-Muslims and Westerners have not come to bring peace and stability”, said:

Non-Muslims and Westerners are implementing their own laws in order to spread immorality and corruption throughout Afghanistan and other Islamic countries. An example is schools constructed for females and using these to indoctrinate women with immorality and corruption. International NGOs are funding these schools, and all patriots are requested to [stop sending] their females ... to those immoral centres; otherwise they will be dealt with under the Sharia.⁸⁸

The National Solidarity Program, a government-initiative with elected councils that oversee grants in their areas, is a more recent target of threats. A night letter in Khost in late 2007 told people:

Reject all of the assistance coming from the National Solidarity Program, and don't accept their solar panels because through this honey they will give you poison....Those from your community who participate in this infidel solidarity ... if you act against Islam or speak against the Taliban ... hell is your place.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ “Lessons in Terror: Attacks on Education in Afghanistan”, Human Rights Watch, July 2006. The report pointed out that other groups, including Hekmatyar's Hizb-e Islami and militias of local warlords, also target schools, teachers and students. It further noted, p. 33, that “in other areas, schools are attacked not as symbols of government, but rather because they provide modern (that is, not solely religious) education, especially for girls and women”. By 2005 there were five million students (primary/secondary/higher) of whom over one and a half million were girls and women, nearly all denied the right to education under the Taliban regime. “United Nations Human Development Report 2007”, op. cit., p. 161.

⁸⁸ “The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Warning Letter of the Maidan Shah [Wardak] Mujahidin”.

⁸⁹ Quoted in Anna Husarska, “Doing good is more perilous than ever”, *Los Angeles Times*, 3 May 2008. Husarska is senior policy adviser at the International Rescue Committee.

Individuals are also targeted through night letters.⁹⁰ Since 2007, text messages on mobile telephones have been increasingly used to deliver threats.

Rival groups use night letters to stamp their claim on territory. When the Tora Bora Nizami Mahaz (Tora Bora Military Front, discussed below) emerged from the remnants of Hizb-e Islami (Khalis), a four-page, full-colour missive with a full-page photograph of its leader, Mawlawi Khalis' son Anwar ul-Haq Mujahid, was distributed in Nangarhar province around June 2007 in a clear attempt by the new group to establish its turf.

2. Publications

Slim pamphlets and magazines supporting Taliban activities and ideas began to appear in 2002, an early example being *Azam* (Tenacity), in Pashtu and Dari. The magazine contained essays and frontline reports, but publication ceased after the editor's arrest.⁹¹ According to *Al Somood*, the long-running publications *Srak*⁹² and *Murchal*⁹³ are products of the Taliban media unit. Of the rest, discussed in a lengthy article on Taliban media activities, it said, "all the supervisors and those who publish and established these media/informational publications are journalists and followers of the Islamic Emirate, even if they prefer to publish these magazine and newspapers not officially as

spokespersons for the movement's media unit on account of consideration necessitated by the present [security] circumstances".⁹⁴

Such publications, not necessarily Taliban-run but highly supportive, include *Tora Bora* – which recently marked its fourth anniversary – published quarterly in Pashtu by the Tora Bora Publication Organ, linked with the Tora Bora Nizami Mahaz.

Several of these publications have an Afghan address on their masthead.⁹⁵ However, given the difficulty of printing and distribution in that country, it is likely that production is done in Pakistan, possibly in Peshawar and Quetta. This is borne out by interviews with two former writers for these magazines.

The Taliban monthly Arabic-language magazine *Al Somood* is "issued by the Media Centre of the Taliban Islamic Movement".⁹⁶ It is of a higher standard than other publications, although it is written in very simple Arabic, likely the editors' second language. Available in a high-quality PDF format as well as hard copy, *Al Somood* seeks to highlight the Taliban's hierarchy, organisational coherence and depth. It also publishes in-depth articles, military statistics and interviews with field commanders and leadership figures, including Mullah Brader, Mawlawi Aminullah (named as a member of the military council), Akhtar Mohammad Mansoor (named as military commander

⁹⁰ A religious scholar, accused of being a spy, was killed in Puli Alam, Logar on 3 June 2008. A night letter left on his body warned people to stop working with the government, Afghan National Army (ANA), Afghan National Police (ANP) or NGOs. Reported by the Afghanistan NGO Safety Office (ANSO), 5 June 2008.

⁹¹ Sami Yousafzai and Ron Moreau, "The very picture of propaganda", *Newsweek*, 8 March 2004. *Al Somood* reported that *Azam* was established on 25 May 2002 by Nasiruddin al-Nasir and stopped publication on 16 April 2003. It also listed other short-lived publications, including Pashtu-language *Tawakkal* (*Trust*) established by Mullah Mohammad Hussain Mustasad (killed in Zabul on 22 July 2007); *Basoun* (*Revolution*) fortnightly, established in October 2002 by Mullah Hussain Khan in Dari and Pashtu, which stopped publication after one year; *Istiqamat* (*Uprightness*) established by Hamidullah Hamed in November 2005 in Pashtu and Dari, which lasted only three issues. "The media activities of the Taliban Islamic movement", op. cit., pp. 5-6.

⁹² *Srak* (*Beam of Light*), a glossy monthly in Pashtu (with a little material in Dari), calls itself the publication of the "Afghanistan Islamic Literary Association". The editor on the masthead is Lutfullah Momand.

⁹³ *Murchal* (*Trench*), a quarterly focusing on military affairs, says it is published by the "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan". The editor on the masthead is Mullah Khabir Ahmad Mujahid, also the name of the person who wrote the speech, "Guantanamo Prison", delivered by Yasir.

⁹⁴ "The media activities of the Taliban Islamic Movement", op. cit.

⁹⁵ *Srak* lists its address as Khair Khana Mina, Area 2, Kabul – unusual given that this is a Tajik-dominated suburb in the capital. It also has a hotmail address. *Murchal* simply gives Kabul as an address, as well as a Yahoo address. *Tora Bora* gives Jalalabad City, District 2, Street 4, House 3 as its address, along with a Yahoo address.

⁹⁶ The inside page of *Al Somood* says it aims to provide: "A genuine image of Islamic jihad in Afghanistan. A thorough follow-up of events on the Afghan scene. A serious media step to help the Afghan question". Its chairman is listed as Nasiruddin "Herawi", who, it says, "enjoys a special status and dignity in his relation to the Commander of the Faithful (May God Protect Him) and, furthermore, undertakes the accomplishment of important military and administrative activities; he has become famous among the leadership of the Taliban and among the mujahidin as the 'right hand' of the Commander of the Faithful (may God Protect Him)... Security circumstances have necessitated that he use the name "Herawi" instead of his real name; as he works in more than one sphere, his original name appears at the head of the Americans' list of main wanted persons belonging to the Taliban". "The media activities of the Taliban Islamic movement", op. cit.

Kandahar) and Yasir.⁹⁷ The similarity of many of the responses suggests a heavy editorial hand.

3. DVDs

This new media negates the need for the journalist as gatekeeper and offers the advantage of speaking directly to the audience. In an illiterate society, it also has obvious advantages over publications. The discs, and MP3s in urban areas, which are sold as well as being distributed to journalists in Pakistan and Afghanistan, appear to be largely aimed at recruitment and morale. They contain emotive chanting, archival footage from the fight against Soviet forces and the Soviet-backed regime, images from Iraq and clips from Western documentaries as well as videos of insurgent training, attacks on government and international forces and equipment seized or destroyed. They also aim at demoralising Afghan forces and disproving the claims of international forces. For instance, a DVD interview with Jalaluddin Haqqani, who was believed to be dead, was released in 2008.⁹⁸ Another, apparently showing two of his commanders mocking reports of their deaths, was handed to journalists in February 2008, within weeks of announcements that they had been killed.⁹⁹

Mullah Dadullah used savage images of beheadings, apparently modelled on those from Iraq. However,

recognising that the practice was invoking wider community disgust, the Taliban leadership gave orders to stop it in February 2008, following an eleven-month period in which more than 100 people had been decapitated on spying charges. A purported Taliban commander in Helmand told a local news agency: "In my opinion, the orders are driven by growing public aversion to beheadings. From now on we will be executing the secret agents by shooting instead of slaughtering them".¹⁰⁰ While no beheadings appear to have been filmed since the decree,¹⁰¹ the Taliban has continued distributing images of its summary form of justice. On the evening of 13 July 2008, several national broadcasters showed clips – apparently taken by an Afghan journalist¹⁰² – of a large group of Taliban kidnapping two women in Ghazni and shooting them because of their "immorality". The incident was strongly personally condemned by Karzai.¹⁰³

More material now seems to be filmed inside Afghanistan, and it is improving in quality. Two cameras mounted on tripods were used to capture a truck bombing on a military base in Sabri, Khost province, on 3 March 2008 which killed two international soldiers and two Afghan civilians; the DVD was distributed within a couple of weeks of the attack.¹⁰⁴ It was noticeably different from the shaky camerawork seen in previous years.

⁹⁷In *Al Somood's* 25th issue (July 2008), which also marked its third year of publication, an editorial pledged that the magazine "will try as much as possible to present an accurate picture of political and military developments in Afghanistan; will try to introduce a special section for military reports from within the front; will concentrate, in the rest of its articles, on including the most important developments in the Afghan struggle; will publish in forthcoming issues of *Al Somood* pages devoted to the history of the Taliban Islamic movement and the founding of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan; and will publish, in particular, articles covering historical developments since the American invasion and occupation of Afghanistan".

⁹⁸The Haqqani interview was distributed on DVD by "The Source of Jihad" (*Manba Al Jihad* in Arabic) and the Cultural Affairs Commission of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

⁹⁹No production house is given, but a white Taliban flag is shown in the background; the two commanders, surrounded by armed men, appear to be Mullah Sangeen and Darim Sedgai. U.S. forces in eastern Afghanistan had stated that Mullah Sangeen was killed in a raid on 11 December 2007. In January 2008, the Bagram Media Centre claimed that unknown gunmen in Pakistan killed Darim Sedgai, "a powerful Haqqani network commander" on 16 January. See Bill Roggio, "Siraj Haqqani's deputy killed in Afghanistan", *The Long War Journal*, 14 December 2007; and "Coalition forces confirm Darim Sedgai's death", Bagram Media Centre, 26 January 2008.

¹⁰⁰Interview with Mullah Sharafuddin, cited as "a Taliban commander in the southern lawless province of Helmand" in Janullah Hashimzada and Akram Noorzai, "Omar to Taliban: Stop beheadings", *Pajhwak Afghan News*, 3 February 2008. See also "Taliban chief orders change in mode of executions", *IRIN*, 4 February 2008.

¹⁰¹There have been some beheadings reported, including two Afghan nationals accused of spying for the U.S. forces in Karangal Valley in the eastern province of Kunar, an area where groups linked to foreign influences and under less direct Taliban control hold sway. See "Taliban behead two for 'spying' for U.S. forces in eastern Afghanistan", *Tolo Television*, 16 April 2008 (translation: BBC Monitoring Service).

¹⁰²Nahal Toosi, "Afghans free journalist who took execution pics", *Associated Press*, 18 July 2008.

¹⁰³Karzai told the national broadcaster: "The [two] women of Afghanistan were martyred by terrorists, who have been trained outside Afghanistan, by spying and intelligence agencies. They have been trained in places where the issue of *namus* (honour) is of no value, and in places where there is no respect for women and honour. They have been trained in places where people are trained and sent [to Afghanistan] to disgrace humans, to disrespect the human dignity and honour". *National Afghanistan TV*, 14 July 2008 (translation from Dari and Pashtu: BBC Monitoring).

¹⁰⁴The footage of the attack was included in Haqqani's March 2008 DVD as a means of dating his appearance.

A number of “studios” have logos “branding” their DVDs, although their exact role in the process – filming, editing and distribution – is unclear. The products of the more local studios are still noticeably less professional than those on Afghanistan produced by Al Sahab (The Clouds), al-Qaeda’s media arm. There is also a growing phenomenon of such images – often the most gruesome – being passed round on mobile telephones, often accompanied by ring tones of songs discussed below.

4. Online

Since mid-2005, the Taliban has had an internet presence through the website Al Emarah (The Emirate),¹⁰⁵ labelled a product of the Cultural Affairs Commission of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (Da Afghanistan Islami Emarat Da Farhangi Charu Kummissiyun) and carrying official leadership statements. It has existed under a number of addresses, which have been successively blocked, and now moves between free service providers.¹⁰⁶ A banner at the top of the website proclaims “The Voice of Jihad” (“Da Jihad Ghag” in Pashtu) – a name also used on a number of DVD productions.¹⁰⁷ “Garmsiry”, named on the website as head of news in the early months of 2008, is also credited on a few of these productions.¹⁰⁸

While fairly basic – partly presumably to make it easier to move when taken down – this is no small-time operation. It has five language sections: Dari, Pashtu,

Urdu, Arabic and English.¹⁰⁹ The often poorly translated English section is the smallest, consisting almost solely of updates – now done several times a day – of inflated accounts of attacks and occasional leadership statements on policy or events. The Pashtu section – by far the most extensive – also largely focuses on inflated battlefield accounts,¹¹⁰ but includes poetry, interviews, extended articles and commentary, as well as links to magazines that appear to have some sort of official approval. Reaction to events is quick: stories on the June 2008 Kandahar jailbreak were up the same evening, though the reporting was confused.¹¹¹

Unlike some of its other Islamist counterparts, Al Emarah has no discussion forums, although some lively pro-Taliban ones in which members tend to more openly espouse the Pashtun ethnic agenda operate unofficially. Unlike many other jihadist websites, it also does not include instruction manuals and does not link with groups in other theatres – although there are several online forums and sites, particularly those focused on Iraq, which report Taliban spokesmen’s statements, particularly when Al Emarah is down.

5. Audio/poetry

The Taliban exaggerates when it claims: “With God’s help we were able last year to open mobile radio stations in Paktia and Helmand provinces, and through those stations we were able to offer ... a good media cover-

¹⁰⁵ Interestingly, al-Qaeda’s Yahya al-Libi (famed for his escape from Bagram prison) has been quoted saying that his job before his 2002 arrest in Karachi was “to transmit the word of the mujahidin to the outside world through the internet and the special website (Al-Imarat-ul Islamia)”. Interview with Yahya al-Libi conducted by Mawlawi Hatem Tayy for *Tora Bora* which then appeared in April 2006 on Islamist websites (translation: MEMRI, special dispatch series no.1160, 10 May 2006).

¹⁰⁶ It has shifted domains between alemarah.net, alemarah.org, alemarah.cjb.net, alemarah.r8.org, alemarah.i67.org, alemarah.110mb.com and, most recently, alemara.110mb.com. The early ones, where the addresses given by those who had registered them were easier to find, gave contact details in Peshawar and Lahore, Pakistan.

¹⁰⁷ This name has been used for jihadist publications in other countries, most notably an al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia’s online magazine, *Sawt al-Jihad (Voice of Jihad in Arabic)*. See Stephen Ulph, “The voice of jihad is back”, *Terrorism Focus*, vol. 2, no. 8 (28 April 2005). Links between them – if any – remain unclear.

¹⁰⁸ DVDs seen by Crisis Group have references to Garmsiry from 2006; his name appeared on the website with an email contact address in 2008. Aliases are often linked to places of origin – in this case, possibly Garmsir.

¹⁰⁹ “Initially in Pashtu and Arabic, only the site’s Pashtu-language pages were updated regularly. In 2006, materials in Persian, Urdu and English were added; however only the Pashtu and Persian pages were updated regularly. In mid-2006 the website was updated daily and often more than once per day”. Amin Tarzi “The Neo-Taliban”, in Robert D. Crews and Amin Tarzi (eds.), *The Taliban and the Crisis of Afghanistan* (Massachusetts, 2008), p. 399.

¹¹⁰ For instance, on 4 June 2008 Al Emarah reported: “In martyrdom operations 50 enemy officers were killed in Khost”, with the story sourced to Zabihullah Mujahid. According to the interior ministry, nineteen civilians and four police were wounded in the suicide attack. “Security developments in Afghanistan”, Reuters, 4 June 2008.

¹¹¹ The first article, in Pashtu, implied that the driver of the tanker that exploded destroying the prison’s defences had fled, and the “mujahidin did not suffer any casualties”. “All the prisoners of Kandahar Jail Were Released in an Historic Attack”, Al Emarah, News Section (Pashtu), 13 June 2008. The account in the English section also explicitly stated that the driver had abandoned the vehicle before another Talib fired a rocket propelled grenade (RPG) at the tanker. Another section, however, subsequently emphasised that it was a suicide attack. “Qari Yousuf: Hundreds of Prisoners of Kandahar Jail Are Safe”, Al Emarah, Hot Events Section (Pashtu), 14 June 2008.

age and spread the news as it happens”.¹¹² There have been some small attempts at broadcasting to different provinces in the south and east, but these are geographically sporadic and for only a few hours at a time.¹¹³

Audio cassettes¹¹⁴ (and, for city dwellers with computers, MP3s) are one of the most effective means of communication, containing songs and poetry, in particular religious chants and *taranas*, emotional, martial, nationalistic songs without musical accompaniment. These are tied closely to Afghan imagery and history, not necessarily produced by the Taliban but aimed at building wider sympathy for the insurgency within the population. While some songs refer directly to Taliban activities, they mainly simply aim to heighten resistance to foreigners and appeal to nationalism. They feed into a long cultural tradition of travelling minstrels carrying news and opinions; indeed, there are examples today of such songs being memorised and passed along.

One cassette, “The convoy of martyrs (volume 1)”, contains songs such as “Let me go to jihad”; “My mother, I am going with your permission”; and “Convoys going to jihad, I am joining the martyrs”.¹¹⁵ Many people told Crisis Group that they enjoyed such music, even if they did not support the Taliban; others reported carrying the cassettes in their vehicles as “protection” if they were stopped at a Taliban checkpost. Popular tunes are available as ring tones for telephones.

The Taliban website also has a section devoted to literature and poetry, appropriating a popular culture based on pride, resistance and anger. One such poem says:

This would be new revolution in which each cruel person will suffer/Each criminal will be ashamed and taken to trial/This flood will clear out the dirt and will spread in every direction/The oppressed will become happy, and everywhere there will be freedom/Everyone will break their chains and every captive’s hand will be freed/In order to gain independence for the nation; the countrymen will smile”.¹¹⁶

¹¹²“Mullah Brader gives decisive declarations on jihadi developments in Afghanistan”, *Al Somood*, April 2008, p. 10.

¹¹³Taliban radio was reported to be broadcasting in Kandahar on 18 and 20 April 2008. Amin Tarzi, “Taliban radio back on air”, Radio Free Europe, 9 May 2005. In the south eastern provinces of Paktika, Paktia, Khost and Ghazni, where a spokesman said that there would be daily broadcasts, the sound quality was poor and the reception faint. Pam O’Toole, “Taliban radio station back on air”, BBC News, 21 June 2007. An organisation with projects in relatively remote areas also told Crisis Group that Taliban radio had broadcast to the eastern region. Crisis Group interview, Kabul, 11 May 2008.

¹¹⁴This is a long-used medium in the region; the Muslim Brotherhood, for instance, smuggled proselytising audio cassettes into Soviet Central Asia. Coll, op. cit., pp. 103-104.

¹¹⁵This production provided an address on GT Road, Mingora, Swat district, NWFP.

¹¹⁶“This country will be freed”, Al Emarah, 1 January 2007 (translation: AfghanWire).

IV. WHAT THEY SAY

While the medium is important to reach appropriate audiences, it is the message of the group that will determine if its ideas turn into actions. The Taliban seeks to exploit popular sentiment, drawing on local narratives, understanding that those ideas or grievances which already have some currency resonate the most. Although manipulated and exaggerated – often massively – Taliban propaganda usually has at its core real incidents or deeply felt issues. The mistreatment of Taliban prisoners or minority Pashtun communities in the north, for example, created an early well of resentment that the Taliban could tap.

After the Taliban's ouster, the Karzai administration and its international backers believed peace would have to come before justice.¹¹⁷ As a result, there was little community reconciliation to heal rifts created and exacerbated by years of conflict and human rights abuses. Alienation was further fuelled by the often high-handed tactics of the U.S.-led coalition forces, focused on eliminating Taliban and al-Qaeda remnants and conducting operations mainly in the Pashtun-majority south and eastern provinces. Such was the starting point from which the Taliban began its outreach, feeding on local grievances but increasingly showing confidence and a sense of momentum. Taliban statements and arguments may often appear contradictory and counter-intuitive – for instance highlighting the insecurity it does much to create.

The language the Taliban uses is also important. It continues to lay claim to being the "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan". While it has sought to distinguish itself from previous mujahidin factions, many of which are seen as brutal and self-serving, it also uses the term "mujahidin" for its fighters, aiming to tie itself with past conflicts that resound within Afghani-

¹¹⁷ President Karzai told the BBC: "We must first have peace, stabilise peace, make it certain, make it stand on its own feet and then go for justice....justice becomes a luxury for now. We must not lose peace for that". "Karzai sets out Afghanistan vision", BBC News, 14 June 2002. Similarly, asked about investigating mass graves, the then-Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General (SRSG) Lakhdar Brahimi said: "A very important point to remember here is that I think we have a responsibility, certainly to find out what has happened, but I am sure you will agree that our responsibility to the living has to have precedence as far as we, the United Nations, are concerned and we cannot take a risk of putting anyone's life in danger". Transcript of press conference, UN News Centre, 27 August 2002.

stan and appeal to Islamist extremists worldwide.¹¹⁸ In 2008 there were explicit appeals to those who claimed the title of mujahidin during the anti-Soviet jihad but who had not then joined the Taliban movement.¹¹⁹ In turn, members of the Afghan National Army (ANA) and the Afghan National Police (ANP) are dismissed as *munafiq* (hypocrite), and others in the administration are called *ghulam* (slave/servant), *ajir* (agent) and *gawdagai* (puppet).

Mixed messages have appeared in Taliban communications, signalling a diversity of views within the insurgent group and the difficulty of communication with a leadership in hiding. Taliban participation in the peace jirgas between Pakistan and Afghanistan was one very public subject of confusion. While a spokesman hinted that the Taliban could, with pre-conditions, participate in the talks,¹²⁰ Mullah Omar quickly ruled it out.¹²¹

The major themes discussed below are ones in which a general message is apparent and appears to resonate with sectors of the population.

¹¹⁸ "Until 2006, when the use of the Internet by the opposition became more organised and systematic, most violent activities were carried out under the 'Taliban' name. Beginning in 2006, the website purporting to represent the 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan' began referring to the opposition as 'mujahidin'. In the course of Islamic history, many groups have used the term to identify their struggles to defend Islam. It gained currency in Afghanistan during the 1979-1989 Soviet occupation". Tarzi, op. cit., p. 403.

¹¹⁹ "Some of the [anti-Soviet] jihadi leaders and commanders ... are now supporting the Americans in fighting against the people of Afghanistan; they are supporting the invaders, which is in contradiction of Islamic and Afghan values....there is no doubt that former jihadi commanders and leaders had given many sacrifices in the path of Islam and independence....if they find the truth, the Islamic Emirate can reconcile with them, and the Islamic Emirate's heart is open for them". "Statement by the Political Commission of the Islamic Emirate regarding certain developments in Afghanistan and the world", Al Emarah, 5 March 2008.

¹²⁰ Spokesman Qari Yousuf was quoted saying they had not been invited and would set conditions if they were, while warning: "If any group is ignored, it will be nothing but a political meeting". "Taliban flag joining Afghan peace talks", Reuters, 10 December 2006.

¹²¹ "Now the aggressor forces in our country want to entangle our valiant nation and tribes in their devilish trap by way of jirgas. But I am sure that no Muslim will participate in something that is created by aggressors and puppets", Mullah Omar in a taped message delivered to the Afghan Islamic Press Agency for the Eid holiday in December 2006. "Mullah Omar issues Eid message", Al Jazeera, 31 December 2006.

A. FOREIGN PRESENCE

When the Taliban was ousted, Afghans, desperate for some respite from violence, welcomed the foreign forces. The international community's failure to send troops in sufficient numbers countrywide as neutral peacekeepers in those early days lies at the root of many of the problems faced today. In recent years the numbers of foreign troops in the south in particular has risen dramatically. However, they now face a much tougher job, with popular disillusionment having set in as the same discredited local leaders are in power, and a peace dividend has failed to materialise.

This international intervention is quite different from previous ones, since it is in support of an elected Afghan government. The UN Security Council authorises the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) presence, while the separate U.S.-led coalition force, under Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), is the subject of a 2005 bilateral agreement.¹²² Yet, by stressing a long tradition of Pashtun nationalism, pride and resistance and exploiting suspicions about the motives of the foreign forces, the Taliban is attempting to gain legitimacy and support. A poem published on Al Emarah pledged:

I will never accept a life where I must bow to others/
I will never back the illegitimate for any money ...
I will not swear on Washington as my *Qiblah*
[direction to Mecca], nor will I bow to Bush ...
I will not kiss the hand of Laura Bush, nor will I
bow to Rice ... My beliefs and my Pashtun pride
teach me this/If I am chopped into pieces, I will
not beg to others.¹²³

Undermining the legitimacy of the foreign military presence and demonstrating its ability to attack them are central to the Taliban's appeals. DVDs nearly always show attacks on international forces, although the ANA and ANP are more regularly the targets of

¹²² A fuller explanation of the legal framework is provided in "Guidelines for Interaction and Coordination of Humanitarian Actors and Military Actors in Afghanistan", developed by the Afghanistan Civil-Military Working Group co-chaired by UNAMA and the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief (ACBAR), 20 May 2008, p. 4. While ISAF, now roughly 50,000 troops, has expanded to cover the entire country in five regional commands, a separate U.S.-led coalition force remains under Operation Enduring Freedom. It concentrates on high-value targets and counter-terrorism, is also responsible for much of the Afghan National Army and Police training and has been referenced in UN Security Council resolutions on continuation of ISAF since 2003.

¹²³ "Death is a gift", poem in Al Emarah, 5 January 2007 (translation: AfghanWire).

Taliban attacks. While the vast majority of Afghans are still far more concerned at what would happen if foreign forces left Afghanistan, actions and insensitivities of international players have created rising resentment and alienation that the Taliban seeks to exploit.

1. Guantanamo Bay and arbitrary detentions

Extrajudicial detentions at Guantanamo Bay and Bagram airbase,¹²⁴ along with ham-fisted or ill-informed raids, have undermined the perceived legitimacy of the foreign presence and have become enduring symbols of oppression, particularly among Pashtuns. At least two books by Afghans on experiences in Guantanamo have been widely circulated,¹²⁵ and the image of being imprisoned on a far-distant island has entered the folk culture. A *tarana* framed as a letter from a prisoner to his mother is popular on audio cassettes and MP3:

I am imprisoned in Cuba jail/I sleep neither during
the day nor during the night, my mother/It's
a piece of land amidst the ocean/This is Cuba
Island/There are detainees in it/It is surrounded by
bars/ There are cages/Which are very strong/They
are as small/as a human being/These are for horror/
These are for tragedy/These are for punishing the
poor nation.¹²⁶

Yasir delivered an audio homily about Guantanamo, which has also been distributed in a printed pamphlet stating: "This prison is being used as a psychological torture tool and as psychological warfare, to create terror amongst Muslims".¹²⁷ Taliban magazines regu-

¹²⁴ In early 2008, Bagram had 630 prisoners, more than twice the 275 at Guantanamo, and up from 100 in early 2004. Tim Golden, "Foiling U.S. plan, prison expands in Afghanistan", *The New York Times*, 7 January 2008.

¹²⁵ Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef (former Taliban ambassador to Pakistan, now reconciled with the Karzai administration and living in Kabul) authored *A Picture of Guantanamo*, published in mid-2006, with editions in Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and Malaysia. He described being shackled, hooded, deprived of food and water, kicked and beaten, deprived of sleep and subjected to forced nudity. Two brothers, Abdul Rahim Muslim Dost and Ustad Badr ul-Zaman, published *Broken Shackles* the same year.

¹²⁶ Extract from a version obtained in Nangarhar in March 2008. The song had been circulating for at least a year.

¹²⁷ "Guantanamo Prison", speaker: Ustad Mohammad Yasir; writer: Mullah Khabir Mujahid (listed in *Murchal* magazine as its chief editor); publisher: Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan Cultural Affairs Commission (2,000 copies), 1385 (21 March 2006-20 March 2007), p. 10.

larly carry “letters” allegedly from inmates of Guantanamo or Bagram.¹²⁸

DVDs showing examples of raids and cultural misunderstandings are used to depict the international military presence as an occupation – some even pirated from Western news productions. An Australian documentary showed the then Uruzgan governor Jan Mohammed using filthy language and sexual slurs as he detained a young villager while supported by a group of marines.¹²⁹ The version circulated by the Taliban was subtitled: “The Americans want to strengthen human rights in Afghanistan? You should judge”.

Detentions and raids by foreign troops are eroding local support for the intervention. Agreements which outline the responsibilities and obligations of international forces and include mechanisms to address allegations of abuse are vital. Detention issues are complex, as the Canadians have found. Like many ISAF nations reluctant to get into detentions themselves, they handed prisoners over to Afghan authorities, only to then be accused of turning a blind eye to torture.¹³⁰ There must be a greater focus on the wider rule of law in Afghanistan, including public trials, if Taliban propaganda is to be negated.

2. Civilian casualties

International efforts in Afghanistan have relied heavily on aerial bombardment; 3,572 bombs were dropped by NATO in 2007.¹³¹ Civilian deaths resonate enormously in communities, particularly given terrible memories of Soviet bombing campaigns. Reports of

alleged abuses or overreaction by international forces are regularly found in Taliban magazines and online publications. These are usually exaggerated, but incidents such as the April 2007 deaths, when marines shot civilians in Nangarhar following a suicide attack on their unit, are repeatedly cited, and the lack of public accountability is a subject of local outrage.¹³² Noting the media interest in civilian casualties, the Taliban has aggressively pushed the issue, attempting to depict an indiscriminate occupation force:

[O]ur oppressed nation is still under the brutal occupation of aggressors, and their homes and harvest come under the crusader army’s bombardment everyday and every minute. They kill children, old people and women and violate Islamic sanctities and national customs.¹³³

Independent verification is often all but impossible, since most conflict-related deaths take place in remote areas, made too dangerous by militants to check numbers and civilian/combatant status. However, in July 2008, after the American military’s media centre had said a number of militants were killed in the eastern province of Nangarhar, an international media correspondent found evidence that members of a wedding party had been bombed, as locals – and the Taliban – had claimed.¹³⁴ The UN estimates at least 1,500 civilian casualties in 2007 – although the numbers of those killed by ISAF or by the Taliban is unclear.¹³⁵ Civilian

¹²⁸“My young countrymen, I want to share many things with you, write many things to you, but I am afraid that those soldiers with big shoes and long hair would come again to me and take me to a separate room, torture me and deprive me of sleep for a few nights as punishment”, signed “An Afghan prisoner, metal cage no. 434, Camp Delta, Guantanamo, Cuba”. “Letter of a Prisoner”, *Srak*, December 2007-January 2008. *Tora Bora* carried a letter allegedly written by a woman in Bagram prison. “I don’t want to write in the letter about what happens to me in prison – which would break hearts – because of my Afghan pride....They have snatched my honour in prison”. *Tora Bora*, March 2008.

¹²⁹Carmela Baranowska, “Afghanistan – Taliban Country”, Journeyman Pictures, 16 August 2004.

¹³⁰Stephanie Levitz, Brian Laghi, Campbell Clark and Paul Koring, “Kandahar governor denies torture claim”, *Canadian Press* and *Globe and Mail*, 2 February 2008. See also Ian Austen, “Canada again transfers Afghan prisoners”, *The New York Times*, 1 March 2008.

¹³¹Lt. Gen. (Rtd.) David W. Barno, “House Foreign Affairs Committee Testimony”, U.S. House of Representatives, 2 April 2008, p. 4.

¹³²The Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission reported that twelve civilians were killed by a marines special operations unit following a suicide attack attempt on the main road outside Jalalabad. The marines said that they had come under small arms attack after the bombing. The unit was withdrawn from Afghanistan, and a special tribunal considered whether charges should be pressed. In May 2008 it was decided there would be no charges. See Carlotta Gall, “Marines actions in Afghanistan called excessive”, *The New York Times*, 15 April 2007; and Rahim Faiez, “Many Afghans outraged At U.S. decision on Marines”, Associated Press, 24 May 2008.

¹³³“US, allies ‘are the true terrorists’ – Afghan Taliban leader’s Eid message”, AIP, 12 October 2008 (translation: BBC Monitoring).

¹³⁴“Several militants killed with precision airstrikes Nangarhar province”, Bagram Media Center, 6 July 2008. “Bride Among 30 martyred in American occupation air strike”, Al Emarah, 6 July 2008. Alastair Leithead, “Afghan survivors tell of wedding bombing”, BBC News, 13 July 2008. Some of the complexities and ambiguities of exactly who is a civilian in a conflict of loose and fluid alliances are examined in Leithead’s subsequent “Doubts over US Afghan operation”, BBC News, 17 July 2008.

¹³⁵“The Situation in Afghanistan and Its Implications for International Peace and Security”, A/62/722-S/2008/159, 6 March 2008, p. 4.

deaths at the hands of foreign forces – whatever the reason – are not only tragedies but also feed into perceptions of an occupation force – and motivate those seeking revenge to join insurgent ranks.¹³⁶

The Taliban shows far less care about civilian lives than foreign forces, who insist that the insurgents actively seek out civilian shields.¹³⁷ Anti-government groups killed over four times more civilians in the first three months of 2008 than international forces according to Afghanistan NGO Safety Office (ANSO) figures.¹³⁸ Afghanistan has not seen the large-scale suicide bombings of Iraq in civilian centres; most attacks have targeted the military and police,¹³⁹ but insurgent groups have shown little concern for innocent bystanders. The first twenty suicide attacks of 2008 killed six times as many civilians as the first twenty attacks of 2007.¹⁴⁰ The July 2008 bombing at the Indian embassy ripped through crowds of Afghans queuing for visas and entering the nearby school and shops, killing over 40. The Taliban denied involvement, as it does in most bombings that kill large numbers of bystanders.¹⁴¹

This follows experiences in which large-scale civilian deaths in suicide attacks have rebounded. Hundreds of protestors chanted “Death to Pakistan, death to al-Qaeda and death to the Taliban” following a 2006 explosion in Spin Boldak which killed over twenty people.¹⁴² Mullah Dadullah quickly moved to shift the blame:

¹³⁶ Almost a third of the 42 insurgents interviewed by the *Globe and Mail* in Kandahar province claimed to have had at least one relative killed in aerial bombardments by foreign forces. Graeme Smith, “Talking to the Taliban: A poll from the frontlines”, *Globe and Mail*, 22 March 2008.

¹³⁷ See, for instance, Rahim Faiez, “U.S.: Taliban Used Kids as Human Shields”, Associated Press, 19 September 2007.

¹³⁸ Its figures show the top nine causes of civilian deaths with around 55 people killed by international military force protection shootings, air operations and ground operations compared to around 235 in anti-government firing, assassinations, roadside bombs and suicide blasts, ANSO Quarterly Data Report, 1 January-31 March 2008, p. 10.

¹³⁹ According to UNAMA estimates, 43 per cent of suicide attacks in 2007 were directed at international forces; 24 per cent at government and civilian/political targets; and 33 per cent at ANP and ANA. “Suicide attacks in Afghanistan 2001-2007”, UNAMA, 1 September 2007, p. 45.

¹⁴⁰ ANSO, op. cit., p. 9.

¹⁴¹ “Taliban denies role in Kabul blast”, Agence France-Presse, 8 July 2008. Zabihullah Mujahid told the news agency: “We wish we had carried out this attack ... since India has been the enemy of the Islamic Emirate”.

¹⁴² “Afghans protest at bomb attacks”, BBC Online, 18 January 2006.

This is not a martyrdom-seeking operation. Several innocent Muslims were killed. The top officials [of the government] sacrificed some of their own people in order to distort the image of the Muslims and of the Taliban. Our operations do not kill civilians.¹⁴³

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid blamed youth and inexperience for civilian deaths in such attacks: “A lot of people are coming to our suicide bombing centre to volunteer. We have a problem with making sure they attack the right targets, avoiding killing civilians. It takes time to train them properly”.¹⁴⁴

Karzai has repeatedly and publicly called upon the international forces to exercise more care.¹⁴⁵ Those foreign forces indeed must appreciate that it is not just the military requirement or legal justification that has to be considered for each bomb, but also the potentially wider psychological and strategic impact. At the same time, to ensure a true picture of what is happening on the ground, much greater attention needs to be given to the insurgents’ deliberate conduct of operations in areas with civilians, their targeting of civilians and the hypocrisy behind their finger-pointing at foreign forces.

3. Xenophobic appeals

The Taliban aims to exploit suspicions about the foreigners’ intentions in Afghanistan. A night letter widely distributed in the east, for example, simply repeated what many local rumours already said:

The colonial forces have once again attacked this country to loot the wealth and kill the people...Do you know why?...Afghanistan is full of valuable mines; if a true Islamic and independent Afghan

¹⁴³ Mullah Dadullah interview aired on Al Jazeera 13 February 2006 (transcript and translation: Television Project, Middle East Media Research Institution (MEMRI), clip 1036).

¹⁴⁴ “Transcript: BBC Taliban interview”, BBC Online, 21 June 2007. This contradicted an earlier statement by the then spokesman, Dr Hanif: “There is no need for training somebody to carry out a suicide attack. A *fidayee* [dedicated soldier] is ready to die for his religion. He just puts bombs around himself, and he is giving up his soul to God. There is no need for training”. “In interview, Taliban official defends suicide attacks”, *Christian Science Monitor*, 3 February 2006.

¹⁴⁵ See, for instance: “Our innocent people are becoming victims of careless operations of NATO and international forces...we are thankful for [the international community’s] help to Afghanistan, but that does not mean that Afghan lives have no value. Afghan life is not cheap, and it should not be treated as such”. Aryn Baker, “Backlash from Afghan civilian deaths”, *Time*, 23 June 2007.

administration is established and the rich mines are explored, Afghanistan will compete with the developed countries of the world.¹⁴⁶

Much is made of the Afghans' historic resistance to outside forces, including invocations of the rout of the British in 1880: "We will remind them of [the Battle of] Maiwand, and we will reach Washington/We are the soldiers of Islam, and we are happy to be martyred",¹⁴⁷ goes the refrain of one nationalist song.

Mullah Omar released a statement on national day claiming:

The 88th anniversary of independence comes at a time when Afghanistan once again has returned back to the colonisation of those occupying forces, as a result of which our houses are destroyed, our children are orphaned, our brave and courageous combatants either are martyred very ruthlessly or are sent to jail.¹⁴⁸

The overthrow of the brutal Soviet occupation (with the role of foreign backers expunged) is highlighted in a magazine article as yet another episode in the mighty resistance to outsiders:

We are the sons of Ahmad Shah and Akbar Khan; our fathers knocked down great, great forces in history with the help of God. In this century our grandfathers gave a jaw-breaking response to England and our fathers to the Russians, and God willing we will give the Americans a similar response.¹⁴⁹

Much is also made of Western decadence, in particular the "corrupt" lifestyle Westerners have allegedly brought to Afghanistan. This picks up on local resentment at the perceived flashy lifestyle of some foreigners but is distorted and exaggerated, such as in this statement on Al Emarah:

Except videos, movies, TVs, containers of pornographic DVDs, CDs, cosmetics, and other corrupting items, nothing else has been imported to Afghanistan. Similarly no other things were exported except narcotics day and night by American

airplanes to the West and Europe from Bagram, Kandahar, Mazar and Shindand airports.¹⁵⁰

Qudratullah Jamal similarly condemned the "fast" lifestyle allegedly foisted by foreigners on Afghans today, in particular equating the small gains made by women (such as appearing on television) with immorality:

We see today that all media and propaganda tools in Afghanistan, including TV, radio and newspapers, aim at spreading obscenities, alcohol and Western habits that are contrary to Islam. The crusaders built several centres with different names in Kabul and the provinces' capitals to spread such habits. We can find today a Hollywood branch in Kabul. These centres try to use Afghan girls to produce those movies, and there are serious efforts to build internet centres and CD shops and bordellos.¹⁵¹

Many Afghans, particularly at a local level, do not understand the different forces in their country. However, stories and statements in Taliban publications play up the debates in Western capitals to highlight a perceived lack of resolve and short-termism, and dissuade Afghans from throwing in their lot with the Karzai government. Articles emphasise contradictory policies and actions, particularly relations with neighbouring Pakistan:

Like a dizzy patient they do amazing and strange activities. Sometimes they announce to the whole nation the end of mujahidin resistance; sometimes they talk about negotiation and reconciliation; sometimes they start mass killing of innocent prisoners; sometimes they accuse neighbours of interfering in Afghanistan's internal affairs; and sometimes they hold joint meetings with them.¹⁵²

Apart from exaggerating lifestyle changes in Afghanistan – and particularly Kabul – the main theme being perpetuated is that the Taliban will outlast the foreign presence and will punish those associated with it or their "foreign ways". The response this requires from foreign leaders is a delicate balance in statements to emphasise to the Afghan people that the troops are present to support the Karzai government and will stay as long as necessary but not forever. But it also demands more than words, including a redoubled effort to build

¹⁴⁶ Distributed in the name of the Tora Bora Nizami Mahaz in Nangarhar province in June 2007, op. cit.

¹⁴⁷ "We are the soldiers of Islam", song lyrics published on Al Emarah, 1 January 2007 (translation: AfghanWire).

¹⁴⁸ "Message of the Islamic Emirate in honour of the 88th Anniversary of Independence in Afghanistan", Al Emarah, 18 August 2007 (translation: AfghanWire).

¹⁴⁹ "Sacrifice", *Murchal*, September 2006 (translated from Pashtu).

¹⁵⁰ "U.S., NATO and puppet administration achievements in the past year", weekly commentary, Al Emarah, 6 January 2008.

¹⁵¹ Ahmad Mukhtar, "Interview with Qudratullah Jamal", op. cit., p. 11.

¹⁵² "Interview with the deputy and exalted mujahid of the Islamic Emirate Mullah Brader", Al Emarah, 27 September 2007.

local security forces and putting them at the fore to counter perceptions of a “foreign invasion”.

B. LEGITIMACY AND POWER

Insurgents do not need to win militarily; they often just need to outwait their opponents. Hence depicting themselves as unflagging and their ultimate victory as inevitable is crucial to securing advantage. The Taliban seeks to portray itself as steadfast and its violence as legitimate. Growing popular discontent with the corruption of those in power only helps fuel grievances, even among those for whom the Taliban holds no natural appeal.

1. Corrupt government

The international community’s decision, after the Taliban’s ouster, to co-opt many unpopular commanders and warlords into the new administration – and the failure by Karzai and his international backers to stand up to them today – has had far-reaching implications for the administration’s legitimacy and its ability to deliver good governance and services to the population.¹⁵³ In the 1990s, the Taliban’s original appeal was that of a “purifying force” against abusive power-holders who had destroyed much of Kabul in their quest for power. Many of them are back in power today.

Taliban propaganda often focuses on the role of these mujahidin factional leaders in the fratricidal civil war after the Soviet withdrawal. A DVD, referring to warlords and commanders now back in power, asked:

... who is responsible for this tragedy and difficulty? The ordinary mujahidin or these educated leaders and professors? And was it these ordinary mujahidin leaders who issued the decree of jihad against each other or these educated leaders and professors?¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³For previous Crisis Group analysis on the linkages between co-option, governance and popular disillusionment, see Asia Briefing N°17, *The Loya Jirga: One Small Step Forward?*, 16 May 2002; Asia Report N°56, *Afghanistan’s Flawed Constitutional Process*, 12 June 2003; Report, *The Problem of Pashtun Alienation*, op. cit.; Asia Briefing N°35, *Afghanistan: Getting Disarmament Back On Track*, 23 February 2005; and Report, *Countering Afghanistan’s Insurgency*, op. cit.

¹⁵⁴“The scale of bravery”, DVD distributed by Ghairat Studio, undated, obtained in Jalalabad, March 2008.

Another statement sought to strip them of the right to claim the title mujahidin:

Those former mujahidin, who at present are serving the infidels in the Kabul administration, should no longer be called mujahidin. On occasions when they are criticised, then the word jihad should not be used to describe them so as, God forbid, not to insult the innocent mujahidin and the sacred jihad against the communists, and not to put us in the same category with those wretched people who consciously are and were against the past sacred jihad, and who try to tarnish the sacred name of jihad in the minds of the public.¹⁵⁵

The Karzai administration is also derided as a puppet of the Western powers, with much imagery based on the “green dollars” paid to those who work with the international community. This picks up on local anger at the large amounts of money the favoured few receive in contrast to those who earn meagre local salaries:

We will never forgive those people who brought the Americans to our territory and those who entered Kabul supported by American warplanes, because the nation will never forgive them: they have sold their Afghan identity and freedom.¹⁵⁶

2. Projecting power

An increasingly assertive insurgency is seeking to project its power to both domestic and international audiences. Statements of casualties, updated online several times a day and emailed, telephoned or sent as text messages to journalists, highlight individual incidents. There is aggressive hyperbole: “American Christian *kafir* [disbeliever/infidel] terrorist occupation military to send 3,000 more of its terrorists to Afghanistan to be killed by mujahidin”.¹⁵⁷ Journalists realise that the tolls are exaggerated¹⁵⁸ – but there is usually an incident at the core of reports to follow up on.

¹⁵⁵“Advice by the Cultural Affairs Commission of the Islamic Emirate to poets and singers”, Al Emarah, 5 May 2008 (translation: BBC Monitoring Service).

¹⁵⁶“Declaration of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan on the parliamentary amnesty of the puppet regime”, 4 February 2007 (translation: AfghanWire).

¹⁵⁷Headline of statement on Al Emarah in response to the U.S. announcement of sending 3,000 additional soldiers to Afghanistan, 11 January 2008 (translation: AfghanWire).

¹⁵⁸Apart from inflated daily tolls, *Al Somood* publishes a monthly count that blames all civilian casualties on the international and Afghan security forces. In March 2008, when the Afghanistan NGO Safety Office recorded five suicide

Roadside and suicide bombings are techniques particularly suited to seizing media attention. Targets such as Kabul's five-star Serena Hotel in January 2008 and the military parade attended by the president in April 2008 grab global media headlines and raise doubts among Afghans about the capacity of local security forces. Increasingly, attempts are made to depict such attacks as strategic, with the announcement of "operations" such as "Operation *Kamin*" (Ambush) in May 2007¹⁵⁹ and the 2008 spring offensive, "Operation *Ibrat*" (Lesson) by Mullah Brader. Announcing the latter, he declared:

We will continue our holy jihad until we topple the slave administration in Kabul and establish an Islamic system in an independent Afghanistan. All mujahidin should carry out activities in line with the plan given to them. The enemy has lost its morale and does not have the spirit to fight the mujahidin face-to-face. Therefore, arbitrary bombing raids have destroyed people's homes and crops, and they think they can achieve victory by carrying out such acts.¹⁶⁰

In a 2007 interview, Brader laid out Taliban strategy for the coming year, emphasising an increasing use of roadside bombs and suicide attacks in Kabul and surrounding provinces:

operations and the UN six, *Al Somood* reported thirteen. ANSO records showed eighteen international troops killed in March and the UN fifteen, compared to 93 claimed by *Al Somood*. *Al Somood* claimed 101 "martyred mujahidin" in the month. Interestingly, the number of operations recorded by *Al Somood* (171), was much smaller than the UN's total of 345 anti-government initiated actions, suggesting that the magazine either simply makes up the numbers, or has links to only some of those involved. "Table of statistics on operations for the month of March 2008", *Al Somood*, April 2008. The slight difference in the Gregorian and Islamic calendars would not account for the large differences in numbers for the month.

¹⁵⁹ "Based on the decision of the military and jihadi council of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, *Kamin* military operations began today... as part of the *Kamin* military operations, all enemy forces will be eliminated or a stop will be put to the enemies' military operations... according to military tactics in such operations, guerilla fighting and pitched battles are deemed to be of great importance and, God willing, we will sabotage all the goals and plans of the enemies". "Kamin operations declared against domestic and external operations", Al Emarah, 27 May 2007 (translation: AfghanWire).

¹⁶⁰ "Afghan Taleban announced launch of new operation in spring", statement by Mullah Brader emailed on his behalf by Zabihullah Mujahid, AIP, 25 March 2008 (translation: BBC Monitoring Service).

1. Our military operations will focus on the capital cities of the four regions of the country including Kabul.
2. Most of these operations will be allocated to martyrdom-seeking attacks and roadside blasts, as these tactics are the most effective at inflicting the most losses upon the enemy.
3. The primary target of our attacks are the Crusader invading forces and then secondly the high-ranking officials of the Karzai administration.
4. In order to keep national and foreign forces surrounded in Kabul, the initial stage of surveillance/control of roads leading to Kabul from Maidan Shar (capital of Maidan Wardak), Kapisa and Char Asiab, has begun. This tactic will soon be put to the test in the Maidan Wardak and Sarobi areas.
5. Before the implementation of this military strategy, all members of the slave army of the Karzai administration are notified to leave and join the mujahidin.¹⁶¹

The 2008 campaign of targeting mobile cell phone towers demonstrated an ability to conduct an orchestrated operation combining communications with military actions. Announcements calling on mobile phone companies to switch off telephone towers at night were followed by targeting of those that did not comply.¹⁶²

3. Justifications for jihad and suicide attacks

The Taliban seeks to justify the current fight as a duty incumbent on each Muslim. While major scholars and religious figures have not declared that the Taliban is

¹⁶¹ "Interview ... Mullah Brader", Al Emarah, op. cit.

¹⁶² "The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan has decided to give three-days' deadline to all mobile phone companies to stop their work from five in the evening until seven in the morning every day so that by stopping work in that period the enemies' illegal and unethical detection activities [it was alleged that mobile phones were being exploited to track Taliban commanders] will be stopped and huge numbers of civilians and mujahidin will be protected from their oppression". "The announcement of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan about mobile phone activities in Afghanistan", Al Emarah, 25 February 2008. There were many suspicions that the Taliban had economic motives behind the demands. A night letter in the Sayedabad district of Wardak, in the name of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, for instance, warned: "As you continue to operate in the area, we are expecting you to provide financial support for the Taliban stationed in Saidabad district. If you cannot, then you should stop your work. Otherwise you have no right to complain in the future (we are warning you of future incidents)". Reprinted in Informed Consent Blog, Barnett Rubin (translation: Mohammad Omar Sharifi), 31 March 2008.

waging a jihad, the movement's commanders, such as Mansoor Dadullah, attempt to rouse the population by declaring:

I have a message to the Afghan people and to all Muslims: They must continue to wage jihad, wherever they may be – whether it is jihad of the pen, of the tongue, of the sword, or of money. What is important is that they continue with the jihad, because it is an individual duty incumbent upon all Muslims.¹⁶³

Appeals are made to families – particularly mothers – to encourage or even to just allow their sons to fight. In a fiercely delivered oration, Yasir declared: “The mother of jihad and the mother of the Pashtun has not yet become sterile. This mother can give birth to martyrs, youths and people who have guns to sacrifice their lives”.¹⁶⁴ He outlined the glories – and military advantages – of martyrdom:

By killing them (foreigners), the door of paradise opens to us. When they kill us, the door of paradise will also open to us. They are the secret of our success in this world and the world hereafter. Our success both in this world and the world hereafter lies in their fight. When both death and life ... are success, it is difficult to fight such a nation.¹⁶⁵

Yasir claimed a large number of volunteers – including females – were available for suicide bombings,¹⁶⁶ a tactic previously unknown in Afghanistan and one that most Muslims, as in Pakistan, consider a deadly sin. The Taliban has, therefore, devoted much effort to justifying their use. Widely circulated DVDs show Mullah Dadullah personally congratulating young male volunteers. There are also DVDs featuring alleged final interviews with bombers – usually young

– and recorded tributes to “martyrs”.¹⁶⁷ Pages are regularly dedicated to “martyrs” in Taliban publications, and suicide attacks receive special attention on the website. If cults of martyrdom were not found in the past in Afghanistan as in some other conflict areas,¹⁶⁸ the Taliban certainly seems bent on creating them.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶³ “New Taliban military commander Mansoor Dadullah: Bin Laden is alive and well”, interview with Mansoor Dadullah, Al-Jazeera TV, 17 June 2007 (translation: Special Dispatch, Jihad & Terrorism Studies Project, no. 1630, 21 June 2007).

¹⁶⁴ Yasir speaking on a DVD distributed in February 2008. It is not branded, but he speaks before a Taliban flag.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ “When people saw the acts, the ethics, and the martyrdom of our *fedayi*, when our youth saw it, the lists [of suicide bombers] reached such an extent that we cannot provide enough [suicide] waistcoats. We have one *fedayi* for each tank; we have one *fedayi* for ... each vehicle of NATO and American forces....[S]ometime back I went to a girls' madrasa to give a speech on jihad. The girls [afterwards] sent a list of those ready for sacrifice operations”. Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ A series filmed in June and July 2006 showed males, who appeared to be teenagers or in their early twenties, seated in front of a Taliban flag as they spoke, with the makings of suicide bombs displayed before them. They read prepared comments slowly, having trouble with the words – at least two read the same speech.

¹⁶⁸ A UNAMA report noted that “in Afghanistan this public culture of suicide attackers as martyrs has not developed, and while videos of assassinations are commonplace, videotaped wills of attackers are very rare. Because these rituals, ceremonies and practices are critical to the founding and maintenance of a culture that venerates and even sustains suicide attacks and their perpetrators, attention and care is needed to retard or preclude the development of such a culture in Afghanistan”. See “Suicide Attacks in Afghanistan”, op. cit., p. 29. Cults of martyrdom exist from some other periods of Afghanistan's history. Al-Qaeda graves are venerated in Khost, for example. See Nick Meo, “Praying for a miracle at the shrines of al-Qaeda”, *The Independent* (UK), 28 October 2004. Taliban graves from the time of the regime's overthrow in Kunduz were pointed out to Crisis Group as a site of local pilgrimage in 2007.

¹⁶⁹ Brian Glyn Williams, “The Taliban Fedayeen: The World's Worst Suicide Bombers?”, *Terrorism Monitor*, 19 July 2007.

V. WHAT THEY DO NOT SAY

This section briefly outlines issues that have a bearing on the present conflict – or that some commentators argue do – but which do not appear on the Taliban’s public agenda. Some issues are not highlighted because they reflect badly on the movement or risk creating divisions. Interestingly, although the Taliban was virulently anti-Shia after taking power, statements today – particularly from the leadership – do not address this and even seek to emphasise communal harmony. This may be in a deliberate attempt to preclude Shia opposition at this stage. There is also rarely talk about narcotics, an obviously sensitive topic, since the *haram* (religiously forbidden) trade helps provide financing for the insurgency.¹⁷⁰ When challenged on this point, the Taliban tends to refer to the final year of the regime, when production – although not trafficking – was banned. Mansoor Dadullah argued:

When we were in power we eliminated the opium problem with one single command. Since our country was wrested out of our hands, the farmers have begun cultivating opium again. Karzai and 42 coalition countries cannot stop them.¹⁷¹

The Taliban understandably strongly denies criminal activities attributed to the movement. For instance, stories about an alleged \$20 million ransom for Korean hostages were denounced as “devilish propaganda”.¹⁷²

Given the Taliban’s abhorrent record on women’s rights and access for women and girls to education and health services during their tenure in power, there would seem to be a clear case for the Karzai government to highlight its improvements in women’s con-

ditions. Sporadic and regional advances in political participation by women and school attendance by girls have however been offset by a failure to insist on accountability for those whose forces committed sexual violence during the years of conflict – and continue such abuse today – but have been given positions of power. Further, women suffer broadly from the recent lack of security, corruption, rights abuses and civilian casualties. Finally, the administration has failed to publicly articulate a vision of women’s rights, participation and protection that is both home-grown and consistent with traditional Afghan Islamic society. Thus, the debate has been ceded to those who erroneously argue that such efforts are an alien concept imposed on Afghanistan by foreigners and their Afghan “puppets”.

A. TRIBALISM

Taliban statements do not use tribal vocabulary. The Taliban is certainly predominantly Pashtun, but Pashtun tribal and sub-tribal loyalties and divisions do not shape the movement. Indeed, it emerged during the anti-Soviet jihad largely as a post-tribal grouping, the years of conflict and displacement breaking down previous ties and hierarchies.

The Ghilzai and the Durrani are the two largest and historically antagonistic Pashtun tribal confederations. The Durrani dynasty created the modern state of Afghanistan and remained the dominant political actor until the PDPA takeover in 1978. President Karzai belongs to the Popalzai sub-tribe of the Durrani. Although Mullah Omar is a Ghilzai, the Taliban movement originally centred on the Durrani heartland of Kandahar, with the southern city becoming its de facto capital and remaining of importance to the movement. The Taliban leadership today is largely Ghilzai but also has Durrani members. It is wrong and even counterproductive to call the insurgency a Ghilzai uprising, a designation that appears to be gaining some currency. Such labels risk becoming self-fulfilling and could marginalise and alienate some Pashtun groups even more, thus undermining national reconciliation.

Local dynamics, particularly of district and provincial administrations, better explain why certain tribes have joined and others have rejected the Taliban. Recruits are not attracted because of the insurgents’ overall appeal to a certain tribe or group, rather the very opposite: some have joined because of exclusion of their tribe or community at a local level in the current political set up. Since 2001, for example, the Zirak wing of the Durrani, including the Barakzai, Alokzai and the Popalzai has dominated local administrations in

¹⁷⁰ See, for instance, Kate Clark, “Taliban’s ‘\$100M opium takings’”, BBC News, 24 June 2008.

¹⁷¹ “Transcript: Die Weltwoche interview with Taliban commander Mansoor Dadullah”, 7 June 2007, www.counterterrorismblog.org. The number of troop-contributing countries given by NATO-ISAF is actually 40. ISAF Placemat, last updated 10 June 2008, www.nato.int/ISAF.

¹⁷² “[T]here is a devilish propaganda being orchestrated against the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan by the mainstream media, which is propagating to the world that the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan was paid \$20 million in ransom money by the South Korean government to win the freedom of the South Koreans, which is not true. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan released the remaining South Koreans as a goodwill gesture”. “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan statement concerning the mainstream media propaganda asserting that ransom money was paid for the South Korean[s]”, released 31 August 2008.

the south. Many of the Noorzais (of the Panjpai wing of the Durrani) around Panjwayi who saw the militia of rival tribes sent into their area as police in mid-2006, consider that they are simply fighting back with the only ally available – the Taliban. By definition they become “anti-government”.¹⁷³

In a system that is largely based on patronage networks rather than representative and meritocratic institutions, the use of force much too often becomes the only recourse available for excluded and marginalised communities and groups. Tribalism is a reaction to the lack of democracy and to a system in which the centre provides access to power and resources to a favoured few “trusted” groups, while deliberately excluding others.

B. WIDER WORLD

When in power the Taliban had little interest in the outside world beyond the quest for legitimacy. Olivier Roy observed: “The Taliban ... express a deep rejection of the Western cultural model, but no strategic opposition to the West”.¹⁷⁴ This changed somewhat as the leadership grew close to al-Qaeda, and UN sanctions were imposed after the regime’s refusal to hand over bin Laden. However, even today the Taliban focus is firmly internal. When it has ventured into the wider realm of global politics, it has usually sought to emphasise respect for other countries’ sovereignty. Mullah Omar has proclaimed:

The Islamic Emirate never interferes in other countries’ domestic affairs, nor can it tolerate the interference of other countries in our domestic affairs. We are making efforts to free our beloved Afghanistan with all our strength from the occupation of the invaders and to prepare free and liberated conditions for our people to live in.¹⁷⁵

A rare statement on international affairs in the name of the Taliban “political commission” asserted:

The Islamic Emirate is eager for good relations with all foreign countries and neighbours and wants to live with them in peace, in the light of the provisions of the holy religion of Islam. Similarly the Islamic Emirate expects that all other countries

will reciprocate good relations... The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan considers the ongoing invasion of the Israeli usurper regime as against human rights and any other humane norms, especially their recent barbaric operations in Gaza.¹⁷⁶

The statement also recognised the importance of good relations with Afghanistan’s neighbours and condemned UN Security Council resolutions on Iran’s (Shia) regime, thereby apparently causing quite a stir in cyber-space among more global Islamists who reject the concept of nation states and condemn many regimes in the region as illegitimate.¹⁷⁷ Mullah Dadullah was one who sought to widen the Taliban cause, telling the U.S. network CBS: “Even if they [American troops] go back to America we will take revenge... America has humiliated our country and our people. We will never negotiate”.¹⁷⁸ As yet, however, there is no evidence of Taliban operations outside the region, and the vast majority of statements are inward-looking.

Although the Taliban does not recognise the validity of the Durand Line, the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan drawn by the British in colonial India days and an issue that strained relations with Islamabad when it ruled in Kabul,¹⁷⁹ there is little evidence that it is pursuing irredentist goals. However, while the Taliban is unlikely to directly challenge the Pakistani military and so put at risk its vital cross-border sanctuaries, the Taliban’s ideological and ethnic ties with Pakistan tribal militants, who have pledged allegiance to Mullah Omar and call themselves the Pakistani Taliban,¹⁸⁰ undermine the stability and security

¹⁷⁶ “Statement by the Political Commission ... about certain developments”, op. cit.

¹⁷⁷ Ron Synovitz, “Al-Qaeda Bloggers’ Sparring With Taliban Could Signal Key Differences”, Radio Free Europe, 12 March 2008.

¹⁷⁸ “Taliban leader vows to force U.S. troops out”, CBS News, 29 December 2006.

¹⁷⁹ In May 2000, for instance, Taliban’s ambassador in Islamabad, Mohammad Haqqani, strongly rejected reports that visiting interior minister Mullah Razzaq had even held talks on recognising the Durand Line with the Pakistan government. “Taliban deny Mullah Razzaq discussed Durand Line with Pakistan”, Afghanistan News Centre, 23 May 2000.

¹⁸⁰ Said a long-time Taliban watcher: “They are Taliban in the sense that they share the same ideology as the Taliban in Afghanistan and see them as their allies. If you ask them, ‘Who is your leader?’ they will say the Afghan Taliban emir Mullah Mohammad Omar. They also fight alongside the Taliban in Afghanistan”. Quoted in Graham Usher, “The Pakistani Taliban”, Middle East Report Online, 13 February 2007. Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid, when asked if the Afghans worked with their Pakistani counterparts, replied: “No. The mujahidin of Afghanistan do not have any

¹⁷³ See Graeme Smith, “Inspiring tale of triumph over Taliban not all it seems”, *The Globe and Mail*, 23 September 2006.

¹⁷⁴ Olivier Roy, “Has Islamism a Future in Afghanistan?”, in Maley, op. cit., p. 210.

¹⁷⁵ “Message of *Amir ul-Momineen* to the nations of Afghanistan and Iraq”, op. cit.

of Pakistan's Pashtun-majority NWFP and FATA as well as its Pashtun belt in Balochistan. Encouraged by the Taliban resurgence in Afghanistan, in which they are active participants, Pakistani Taliban groups are bent on creating a Taliban-style state in Pakistan's Pashtun heartland.¹⁸¹

Outsiders have always fuelled Afghanistan's internal conflict. The Taliban is, however, quick to deny any such support, emphatically denouncing reports of Iranian assistance:

The Iranian road mines which are found in Afghanistan come from the puppet police and Northern Alliance Hazara (Shia *kafirs*),¹⁸² who have a very close relationship with Iran. Iran is and has always been a number one enemy of the Taliban, so it is absurd to claim that Iran is supporting the Taliban.¹⁸³

Far more obvious – and vital – are the enduring ties within the Pakistani security organs and the flourishing extremist environment in that country. But this continues to be denied. The reports in May/June 2008 of a sharp increase in cross-border activity from Pakistan, after the military there resumed negotiations on peace deals with pro-Taliban Pashtun militants, were summarily rejected:

Peace in any part of the world is in the interest of humans, and the deal in Pakistan has in no way any effect on the jihad in Afghanistan. Afghanistan is a sovereign country, which is currently being occupied by invaders....America and its puppets linking the increase in mujahidin operations in Afghanistan to the peace deal in Pakistan is once again diverting the attention of Afghans and the rest of the world from [their] humiliating defeat.¹⁸⁴

The Taliban similarly angrily rejected accusations by the Afghan government of Pakistani intelligence

service involvement in the Serena Hotel and military parade attacks: "Both the attacks were planned and carried out by the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan's special Al-Hamza martyrdom-seeking battalion ... the martyrdom-seeking mujahidin were all Afghans".¹⁸⁵

C. GOVERNANCE

The Taliban's internal workings remain largely opaque. The movement is certainly keen to portray itself as far more organised and internally cohesive than it actually is. The "dismissal" of Mansoor Dadullah of the wing more closely linked to al-Qaeda was one internal squabble which, unusually, became very public. A statement on the website announced:

Mullah Mansoor Dadullah is not obedient to the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in his actions and has carried out activities which were against the rules of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, so the decision [-making] authorities of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan have removed Mansoor Dadullah from his post, and he will no longer be serving the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in any way, and no Taliban will obey his orders any more.¹⁸⁶

Dadullah's personal spokesman rejected this, telling reporters: "Mullah Mansoor Dadullah is still Taliban commander and has never been sacked", adding that the statement was "rather a conspiracy by some elements within the Taliban movement against Mansoor Dadullah. They want to weaken the Taliban movement".¹⁸⁷

Widely reported in 2006 was a Taliban *Layeha* (Code of Conduct), "from the highest leader of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan" largely focused on mediating relations between groups under different commanders¹⁸⁸ as well as the behaviour of individual mem-

involvement in the crisis in Pakistan. The Afghan Taliban have concentrated on Afghanistan; they do not interfere in Pakistan and nor do they need to. We have our enemy in Afghanistan, so there is no need to interfere in Pakistan, nor to cooperate with the Pakistani Taliban in fighting against the military government". Claudio Franco, "Exclusive interview with Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid", NEFA Foundation, 25 January 2008.

¹⁸¹ See Crisis Group Report, *Pakistan's Tribal Areas*, op. cit.

¹⁸² This is one of the few examples of anti-Shia language in Taliban statements.

¹⁸³ "Clarification of statement regarding Iranian support of Taliban", Al Emarah, 25 December 2007 (translation: AfghanWire).

¹⁸⁴ "Statement of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan regarding peace deal in Pakistan", 7 June 2008.

¹⁸⁵ "Islamic Emirates response to the statement by Sayed Ansari, spokesman to the intelligence network of the Karzai puppet administration", Al Emarah, 27 June 2008.

¹⁸⁶ "The decision by authorities of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan to remove Mansoor Dadullah from his position as the Commander in Charge of the Taliban", Al Emarah, 29 December 2007 (translation: AfghanWire).

¹⁸⁷ "Taliban member dismisses 'sack' claim", Agence France-Presse, 30 December 2007. Mansoor Dadullah was quoted in a Pakistani newspaper saying, "I have not been expelled from the movement. I have served the Taliban, and without me the movement would stand nowhere". Alamgir Bhattani, "Dadullah says he is indispensable to Taliban", *Dawn*, 9 January 2008.

¹⁸⁸ "9. If a Taliban fighter wants to move to another district, he is permitted to do so, but he must first acquire permission

bers.¹⁸⁹ It had been circulating since late 2005 and offered a rare glimpse into the movement's internal workings. However the Taliban leadership has never had a coherent plan for wider governance and development. Just as in the 1990s, when ministers would disappear to the frontlines, the Taliban remains largely a warrior force, with little in terms of a political structure that is separate from the military. Nearly all those named as "shadow governors" today are commanders, not ideologues, and their functions are unclear.

It is hardly a government-in-waiting and indeed, during the time it was in power, displayed little interest in providing for the population, rather leaving this to NGOs and the UN. Schooling does appear to be one area where it has felt it necessary to make some public statements. In 2007, Mutmain declared that the Taliban had earmarked \$1 million to set up schools in southern Afghanistan,¹⁹⁰ although there is no evidence this actually happened. In fact, the Taliban has conducted a sustained campaign of intimidation, targeting school buildings, teachers and students.¹⁹¹ The *Layeha* spelled out strict penalties for those working in schools:

Anyone who works as a teacher for the current puppet regime must receive a warning. If he nevertheless refuses to give up his job, he must be beaten. If the teacher still continues to instruct contrary to the principles of Islam, the district commander or a group leader must kill him.¹⁹²

While the Taliban might be motivated by the desire to destroy educational institutions which, in their view, teach Afghans foreign values, it is still difficult to justify targeting civilian institutions that teach children, and the leadership has made contradictory statements. Dr Hanif has denied such violence: "[T]he Taliban are supporters of education. And the people who burn schools, they are not the Taliban. They are the enemies of Islam, they are the enemies of the Taliban.... Burning schools is not allowed under Islam".¹⁹³

of his group leader....12. A group of mujahidin may not take in mujahidin from another group to increase their own power. This is only allowed where there is good reason for it, such as a lack of fighters in one particular group. Then written permission must be given and the weapons of the new members must stay with their old group". "A New *Layeha* for the Mujahidin", *Sight and Sound*, 29 November 2006.

¹⁸⁹"6. Taliban may not use jihad equipment or property for personal ends....17. Mujahidin have no right to confiscate money or personal possessions of civilians....19. Mujahidin are not allowed to take young boys with no facial hair onto the battlefield or into their private quarters". Ibid.

¹⁹⁰M. Ilyas Khan, "Taliban 'to build Afghan schools'", BBC News, 23 January 2007. On Al Emarah it was stated: "The Taliban's move to improve education undermines the ongoing smear campaign against them. Their enemies depict the Taliban as hostile towards education and have even accused them of burning schools and killing teachers....The Taliban garnered wide support with this latest initiative on education. If the Taliban were to issue further reassurances, they would be able to secure support on a national scale. The Taliban need to remove any remaining fears and ambiguities by clearly stating their intentions, and responding to the allegations made by the enemies of Islam". "Taliban issues new school curriculum", Al Emarah, 16 January 2007 (translation: AfghanWire).

¹⁹¹Opening the parliament in 2008, Karzai noted that 300,000 children in southern Afghanistan now stay home because of the threat – up from 100,000 the previous year. "Afghan strife keeps children home", BBC News, 21 January 2008.

¹⁹²New *Layeha*, op. cit.

¹⁹³"In interview, Taliban official defends suicide attacks", *Christian Science Monitor*, 3 February 2006.

VI. COHESION OR COMPETITION?

A. ALLIED AND COMPETING VOICES

The insurgency is not driven by a strong, coherent organisational structure; on the contrary, it is a loose alliance of groups fighting alongside a variety of fellow travellers. At the heart of it is the Taliban, but even during its previous regime several of the groups co-opted into its movement maintained distinct networks. Particularly post-2001, broader coalitions are often tactical alliances of convenience. Amid these fluid relationships the Taliban has tried to project itself as the rightful rulers, while other, smaller groups have sought shelter under the Taliban umbrella to legitimate their own actions. The Taliban attempts to project a more cohesive structure and coordinated strategy than the reality, in which it has struggled to exert authority over its field commanders, as recognised by spokesman Qari Yousuf:

On fundamental issues, all orders and decrees are coming from the centre, all mujahidin are bound by the stance of the leadership, although in some daily, simple affairs and issues the commander of each area can himself make decisions...because the resistance is step by step being strengthened, and as our areas of control expand, the leadership's watch improves and stances become coherent, having control over simple issues becomes possible too.¹⁹⁴

Uncoordinated efforts in its name by sympathisers which have diluted the Taliban "brand" have apparently caused frustration, as indicated by an April 2008 Taliban announcement:

Recently a number of writers, religious scholars and poets have compiled books, jihadi CDs and recorded taranas and publicly distributed them. They referred to their personal work in the name of the Islamic Emirate, in particular the Cultural Affairs Commission, while they had not informed any authorised official of the Islamic Emirate. The Islamic Emirate hails their efforts, however recommends that those who compile books, jihadi CDs or songs and want them to be released in the name of the Islamic Emirate should get the approval of the Islamic Emirate Cultural Commission ... otherwise they should not use the name of

the Islamic Emirate for their own gain....In addition, the Islamic Emirate expects and asks respected poets to write poems which stimulate the jihadi morale of the public and help the oppressed nation, give tribute to thoughts of freedom, reveal the devilish plans of the enemies; and instead of admiring tribal, personal and narrow interests, they should appreciate Islamic and national values.¹⁹⁵

Even more damaging is competition for attention among different groups. There regularly are contradictory claims of credit for attacks, such as the suicide bombing in Kabul's Wazir Akbar Khan district in November 2007. The Taliban claimed it had organised this, as did Hizb-e Islami (Hekmatyar).¹⁹⁶ Asked whether the Taliban and Hizb-e Islami had cooperated in the attack on the Kabul's Serena hotel in January 2008, Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid replied:

Contact among the mujahidin does exist. As far as coordination in operations is concerned, that is different. The mujahidin of the Islamic Emirate have their own strategy and tactics. There is no such coordination among them on operations; however their aim, too, is to fight the Crusaders.¹⁹⁷

The following anti-government groups are noticeable for maintaining their own propaganda operations in the national and international media and thus creating distinct "brands". Smaller local groups tend to communicate at the more grassroots level, while the more criminal ones, linked to the drugs trade, understandably seek anonymity:

The Haqqani Network. Jalaluddin Haqqani, a former member of Hizb-e Islami (Khalis) faction, long known for his links to Arab foreign fighters, joined the Taliban regime as a minister. Haqqani, however, always maintained his own distinct networks in south-eastern Afghanistan, with strong cross-border links, particularly to Pakistan's FATA region.

For several years, it was believed that Haqqani had died, and his organisation was now run by his son

¹⁹⁴ "Detailed Interview with Qari Yousuf Ahmadi, Official Spokesman of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan", republished on Al Emarah, June 2008 (in Pashtu), from East and West website.

¹⁹⁵ "The announcement of the Afghanistan Islamic Emirate Cultural Affairs Commission", Al Emarah, 8 April 2008.

¹⁹⁶ Qari Mansoor, who introduced himself as the Hizb-e Islami (Hekmatyar) spokesman in the central Kapisa province, claimed Kabul resident Qari Ahmad Jan had carried out the attack on the group's behalf. If true, it would have been the latter's first suicide attack. Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mansoor rejected this as "baseless". "Taliban also claim responsibility for attack in Afghan capital", Pajhwok Afghan News Agency, 27 November 2007.

¹⁹⁷ Claudio Franco, "Exclusive interview with Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid", op. cit.

Sirajuddin, who ranks high on the U.S. list of most wanted terrorists. In March 2008, however, a DVD showed an elderly Jalaluddin alive, although apparently unwell, speaking for 30 minutes. He referred to a hotel attack – presumably that on the Serena, which many Western security officials believe his network facilitated, and a suicide attack on a joint US-Afghan base in Sabri, Khost. Footage of this large truck bomb attack, apparently carried out by a German-Turk,¹⁹⁸ was spliced into the DVD, which was distributed under the *Manba al-Jihad* (Source of Jihad, in Arabic) label, which claims to have permission from the Taliban cultural commission. During the years of anti-Soviet jihad, Haqqani had a glossy monthly magazine, *Manba al-Jihad*.¹⁹⁹

A well-known personality from the years of the anti-Soviet jihad, Jalaluddin Haqqani had occasionally appeared in Taliban-linked publications prior to this. In one such interview, in 2006, the cohesion of the insurgents was emphasised:

After the Russians left Afghanistan, there were fifteen very different political parties in the country. Each of these parties had dreams of political power and for different political reasons....right now in Afghanistan we have the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan instead of fifteen different parties. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, according to its previous attempt to control the country and fulfil the wishes of jihad, came out on top.²⁰⁰

Interestingly, while his name and his son's name have appeared over the years in various observers' accounts of Taliban leadership councils, neither was named in the March 2008 *Al Somood* organisational structure. In his appearances in the Taliban media,

¹⁹⁸For more on the DVD and Haqqani, see Carlotta Gall, "Old-Line Taliban Commander Is Face Of Rising Afghan Threat", *The New York Times*, 17 June 2008; for more on the possible origins of the suicide bomber, see Matthias Gebauer, Yassin Musharbash and Holger Stark, "Germany's First Suicide Bomber in Afghanistan?", *Spiegel Online*, 15 March 2008.

¹⁹⁹The founder was listed as Jalaluddin Haqqani, with the magazine based in Peshawar. Two separate editions regularly appeared one in Pashtu and Dari (founded 1368, 21 March 1989 – 20 March 1990), the other in Arabic (founded in 1369, 1990). These contained photo galleries, editorials, political commentaries, poetry, book reviews and world news. There is currently also a largely defunct website, www.murchal.8rf.com, bearing the name *Manba Al Jihad*, which linked through to *Al Emarah*.

²⁰⁰The interview was originally published in Arabic in *Al Somood*, November 2006, and appeared the following month on *Al Emarah* (translation: *AfghanWire*).

Jalaluddin has been introduced by his past deeds rather than an explicit current title,²⁰¹ leaving his position within the movement's structures unclear.

Hizb-e Islami (Khalis) – Tora Bora Nizami Mahaz (Tora Bora Military Front). Mawlawi Khalis, the head of the mujahidin faction Hizb-e Islami (Khalis), centred in eastern Afghanistan around Nangarhar province, was co-opted into the Taliban when the movement was in power. Following the Taliban's ouster, some members joined the Karzai government's administrative structures. However, he went underground and in 2003 released an audio cassette calling for a "jihad" against foreigners in Afghanistan.²⁰² When he died in 2006,²⁰³ the Taliban released a condolence message in the name of the media commission:

We consider the death of the late Mawlawi Khalis as a big loss for the Islamic world, particularly the Afghan nation; at the same time we hope his successor and son, Mawlawi Anwar ul-Haq Mujahid, will be helped by Allah to follow the jihadi, academic and religious path of his father and strengthen that sacred path.²⁰⁴

Following an apparent power struggle, Anwar ul-Haq Mujahid formed the Tora Bora Nizami Mahaz.²⁰⁵ It uses the same logo as *Tora Bora* magazine, estab-

²⁰¹For instance in the reproduced "Audio Message: Whoever stands by the Americans under any name will be absolutely treated like them". *Istiqamat*, May-June 2006, he is described as "a well-known victor in Afghanistan's Islamic jihad and a respected jihadi personality". In "An Interview with Jalaluddin Haqqani", he is described as "the strong commander of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan", *Al Emarah*, 25 December 2006.

²⁰²Rahimullah Yusufzai, "Khalis Goes Into Hiding After Calling For Jihad", *The News* (Pakistan), 31 October 2003.

²⁰³Khalis was in his 80s. His son Mujahid announced his death but without details on how and where he died. Zubair Babakarkhail, "Mawlawi Younus Khalis passes way", *Pajhwak Afghan News*, 24 July 2006.

²⁰⁴Describing the Taliban's relationship with Khalis, the statement said, "when the Taliban Islamic movement was established under the leadership of *Amir ul-Momineen*, the late Mawlawi, like some other jihadi leaders, pledged *bayat* [fealty] to the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan". Media committee of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, *Al Emarah*, 24 July 2006.

²⁰⁵Rahimullah Yusufzai, "New Taliban group named after Tora Bora Setup", abcnews.com, 26 February 2007. Spokesman Qari Sajjad was quoted as saying that Mujahid was the leader of Hizb-e Islami (Khalis) but had formed the new group because it had become faction-ridden and weak. The new group was formed prior to the announcement. He added: "We have now decided to step up our operations and approach the media to publicise our cause".

lished in 2004.²⁰⁶ Through its spokesman, Qari Sajjad,²⁰⁷ the group has claimed responsibility for a number of attacks in the east, including the March 2007 bombing of a U.S. marine unit outside Jalalabad.²⁰⁸ It maintains allegiance to the Taliban, with Mujahid's spokesman having described him as "also head of the Taliban shura for his native Nangarhar. He is very much part of the Taliban movement".²⁰⁹ The front also appears to maintain links with al-Qaeda. *Tora Bora*, for instance, interviewed al-Qaeda's Abu Yahya al-Libi after his escape from Bagram prison, and he in turn appeared to endorse it:

Get your information about the mujahidin [from *Tora Bora*] and support it to the best of your ability with money, articles and reports, and by distributing it among the people, in order to bring the voice of the mujahidin to as many Muslims as possible in Afghanistan, Pakistan and the rest of the countries around the world.²¹⁰

The front appears particularly active in the propaganda sphere, with the magazine and a well-maintained *Tora Bora* website (currently toorabora.com), across which a banner runs proclaiming: "In the hope of the victory of the Islamic Emirate".²¹¹ It includes video footage – one clip apparently shows the trial of a "spy" before

he is shot – and hyperlinks through to the Al Emarah and Manba al-Jihad websites.

Hizb-e Islami (Hekmatyar). The post-2001 relationship between the Taliban and its former rival, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar – who fled as they marched on Kabul – has been unclear. The players themselves send different signals. Asked in a December 2007 interview about his relationship with the Taliban, Hekmatyar replied: "[We] have neither [a] problem nor coalition with the Taliban...[I] have not met Mullah Mohammad Omar Akhund yet. I respect him and all those fighting against the invaders, even if they had enmity with us in the past".²¹² He added: "[We] do not have any relationship with al-Qaeda".²¹³ An analyst has suggested that given the previously adversarial relationship, the Taliban's "agreement with Hizb-e Islami in 2002 appears to have been more of a matter of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's willingness to emerge from obscurity than the result of a genuine interest on the part of the Taliban leadership".²¹⁴

Its communication apparatus is certainly separate from that of the Taliban. While Hekmatyar's spokesperson, Haroun Zarghoon, arrived relatively late on the scene in 2006, the faction's long-running newspaper *Shahadat (Martyrdom)* still appears in Pakistan; its well presented web-version, *Shahadatnews.com*, is updated regularly and operates apparently uninterrupted. Evidently created and designed in Pakistan, it posts a Pakistani telephone contact. Its coverage focuses on exaggerated versions of Hizb-e Islami actions, with the organisation claiming credit for attacks throughout Afghanistan, and featuring Hekmatyar's interviews with various national and international media, including most recently the American CBS. Given the party's origins among the educated and the intellectuals, it is less emotive and more analytical than Taliban media.

Al-Qaeda. The relationship between al-Qaeda and Taliban is also fluid and opaque. Osama bin Laden has reaffirmed his support for Mullah Omar as *Amir ul-Momineen* (Commander of the Faithful) and like his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, has mentioned Mansoor Dadullah and before him his brother, Mullah Dadullah, several times – although ignoring most other Taliban leaders.²¹⁵ Mansoor Dadullah in turn has not

²⁰⁶ Founded by Ghazi Ajmal and edited by Mawlawi Hatem Tayy, the magazine's first issue featured a detailed and illustrated article on Guantanamo Prison. Stephen Ulf, "New jihadi magazine for Afghanistan", *Terrorism Focus*, 6 August 2004.

²⁰⁷ "Qari Sajjad informs the media about the operations of the Tora Bora Front and gives formal statements on various issues and military affairs". "Statement by the leadership of Hizb-e Islami on the comments of detained Taliban spokesman Dr Mohammad Hanif", op. cit.

²⁰⁸ "Wounded Afghans say U.S. forces fired on civilians after suicide bomb", Associated Press, 3 May 2007.

²⁰⁹ "New Taliban group named after Tora Bora setup", op. cit. Later in the year, however, Mujahid lost a large number of men in an operation around Tora Bora. In October there were reports that Mawlawi Abdul Kabir had been appointed military commander of the eastern zone, whether as a replacement for, or a superior to, Mujahid is unclear. "Taliban Appoint Mawlawi Kabir as New Zonal Chief", *Pajhwok Afghan News*, 20 October 2007.

²¹⁰ Interview with Yahya al-Libi originally conducted by Mawlawi Hatem Tayy for *Tora Bora*, which then appeared in April 2006 on Islamist websites (translation: MEMRI, special dispatch series no.1160, 10 May 2006).

²¹¹ Another banner states: "This Islamic website is being run by the mujahidin of Hizb-e Islami Khalis to publish jihadi news, issues, statements and interviews with well know jihadi personalities. Any writing and reports are welcome from jihadi groups, personalities and writers and will be published".

²¹² "Brother Hekmatyar, Emir of Hizb-e Islami Afghanistan's interview with Ariana Television (Afghanistan)", reproduced on *Shahadatnews.com*, 14 December 2007 (translated from Dari).

²¹³ *Ibid.*

²¹⁴ Giustozzi, op. cit., p. 129.

²¹⁵ "[T]oday they [Afghans] are fighting America and its agents under the leadership of the Commander of the Believ-

been averse to making his relationship with al-Qaeda public. In one interview, he said, “the most recent proof that Osama bin Laden is alive and well is that he sent me a letter of condolence after my brother’s martyrdom and advised me to follow in the footsteps of my brother, Mullah Dadullah”.²¹⁶ Both he and Yasir have appeared in output of the local al-Qaeda media wing, Al Sahab (The Clouds).

Al Sahab²¹⁷ has produced considerable material on Afghanistan. In May 2007 it announced Egyptian and original al-Qaeda member Mustafa Abu al-Yazid as the head of the organisation in Afghanistan in an official video recording which appeared on Al Jazeera.²¹⁸ In several audio and video appearances since then, he has made special appeals for funding and trained personnel for Afghanistan. Libyan Abu Yahya al-Libi has also been a prolific speaker on Al Sahab and other al-Qaeda outlets since his escape from Bagram prison in July 2005, including about Afghanistan. Unsurprisingly, al-Qaeda material is far more professional than local Afghan productions, although the latter appear to be learning from it fast. It also appears al-Qaeda has its own Arabic-language magazine *Vanguards of Khorasan* (a historic name for Afghanistan) circulating on jihadi forums which focuses on “affairs of the jihad and mujahidin in Afghanistan”. Its existence highlights the importance of the area to the organisation. The relationship between the Taliban and al-Qaeda works both ways. The Taliban, or individual members of the movement, seeks resources, support and volunteers from al-Qaeda; the stateless transnational movement, in turn, seeks to tie Afghanistan into its wider narrative of a war between the West and Islam.

B. WHAT DOES IT WANT?

The Taliban aim is simple: to capture the state – a very secular goal – and then impose, as in the past, its

version of Sharia. The Taliban is also adamant that foreign troops must leave, an essential precondition if it is to win power. While it does not directly threaten the outside world, the Taliban certainly poses a threat by its willingness, as in the past, to enter into alliances of convenience with radical Islamist forces – Afghan, regional and transnational.

The Taliban appears to have no strategy beyond the use of violence to achieve the dual goals of state capture and imposition of its version of an Islamic order. Given the autonomy that Taliban commanders and allied networks enjoy, the leadership might exercise little control over everyday military operations, but there are some broad trends that include:

- hindering government outreach and, as a result, undermining Kabul’s legitimacy, by preventing through violence and intimidation the population – and in particular women – from utilising the few services that exist, such as schools and health clinics;²¹⁹
- eroding public support in Western capitals, through attacks on foreign forces and a constant drumbeat of aggressive rhetoric that emphasises the Taliban’s staying power;
- undermining the morale of Afghan security forces, through attacks on them as well as threats which further erode public confidence in the ability of Kabul to provide security;
- demonstrating their reach with complex attacks on high-profile targets which seize headlines, even in areas where they do not have much popular support; and
- targeting pro-government local community leaders who speak against the movement and closely monitoring and responding to the media to try and shape coverage.

ers, Mullah Omar, may Allah protect him, and under the command of the knight of the field, Hajji Mansoor Dadullah. I ask Allah, the most high to grant them victory and resolve”, “Osama bin Laden: Message to the Peoples of Europe”, Al Sahab, released 29 November 2007. Transcript NEFA Foundation.

²¹⁶“New Taliban military commander Mansoor Dadullah: bin Laden is alive and well”, aired on Al-Jazeera TV, 17 June 2007 (translation: MEMRI special dispatch series, no. 1630, 21 June 2007).

²¹⁷See Craig Whitlock, “Al-Qaeda’s Growing Online Offensive”, *The Washington Post*, 24 June 2008. This noted that in 2007 Al Sahab released 97 original videos – a six-fold increase from 2005

²¹⁸“Al Qaeda’s Afghan head ‘named’”, Al Jazeera, 24 May 2007.

²¹⁹According to a spokesman of the public health ministry, 40 health workers were killed or kidnapped while delivering services in the past two years; and at least 36 health facilities were shut down in the east and south due to the insecurity. “Over 360,000 affected by reduced health service”, IRIN, 14 May 2008. While Afghanistan still has one of the world’s highest maternal mortality rates, health is a field where there have been noticeable gains, with 15,000 health workers by 2007, 49 per cent of them women. “United Nations Human Development Report 2007”, op. cit., p. 28. The health minister said that coverage by a basic package of health services has increased from 9 per cent of the population in 2003 to 82 percent in 2007. “An Interview with Dr Sayed Mohammad Amin Fatimi”, June 2007, International Development Association, World Bank.

The movement uses communications as a force multiplier and is quick to claim actions even when the facts are not established in a bid to appear all-powerful and set the agenda. It further understands that even implied threats and grandiose rhetoric can impact on the population's perceptions and calculations. The increasing use of very public attacks has had a striking effect on morale far beyond the immediate victims. Images, for instance, of (unarmed) soldiers fleeing the parade ground in Kabul in the face of gunfire had profound influence on the population. Such strategies do not require huge resources in terms of manpower or military hardware.

While there is more and more talk within Kabul and among some Western capital of dialogue and negotiations with the Taliban, there is little softening in the rhetoric of the movement's leadership, which still insists that the withdrawal of foreign troops is an essential precondition for any negotiations. According to Mullah Dadullah:

Our terms for ending the war are that America withdraws from Iraq and Afghanistan, and that it unconditionally stops harming the Muslims. Then we will consider negotiating with them.²²⁰

Karzai's dismissal has appeared as another precondition:

If Karzai has the power to fulfil the first condition of the Islamic Emirate, then the Islamic Emirate is ready to negotiate on other issues, but Karzai is never in position to fulfil the first condition of the Islamic Emirate. Because he was installed after foreign forces came to Afghanistan ... he must leave before the foreign forces leave.²²¹

Indeed, given the insurgency's current momentum, the Taliban leadership would appear to have little incentive to negotiate. This does not, however, necessarily preclude talks with mid-level commanders who have not joined the Taliban for ideological reasons. Moreover, many foot soldiers just want a fairer deal under any government. At the same time, Kabul and the international community must also realise that unilateral concessions to those Pashtun commanders who have benefited by the rule of the gun could fuel another round of conflict should their equally well-armed ethnic adversaries see their interests threatened or the perception be created that violence brings rewards.

VII. CONCLUSION

The Taliban seeks to create the illusion of inevitability and invincibility, while trying to defend the legitimacy of its actions. It has succeeded in conveying an impression of coherence and momentum far greater than reality, both within Afghanistan, among a population that is weary of war, and outside, with those in Western capitals also weary of commitments to a far-distant conflict. The insurgents cannot win on the battlefield, but they do not have to. All they need to do is wear out their opponents – and influencing perceptions at home and abroad are a vital component of this strategy. The Afghan and other governments engaged in the Afghanistan endeavour have failed to communicate robustly and honestly with their populations in a way that would help build and sustain popular will for a long-term endeavour.

The Taliban has proved adept at fuelling existing grievances, suspicions and perceptions in its attempt to drive a wedge between the Afghan people and the Karzai government and its international supporters. Kabul has not managed in a firm and coherent way to undermine the Taliban's legitimacy through consistently highlighting its violent tactics and links to criminal groups. Instead, it has too often simply sought to crack down on the local media, which, admittedly, in its fledgling state and in the absence of other narratives, has often portrayed the conflict naively.

Both Kabul and its international supporters need to respond in a timely, coordinated manner if they are to effectively counter Taliban allegations. They must also focus, far more than is presently done, on the human costs of insurgent violence. The members of the multilateral coalition must also realise the importance of communicating exactly what is at stake in Afghanistan to their domestic constituents.²²² This should not be so difficult; 11 September 2001 demonstrates the importance of ensuring that Afghanistan does not once again become a failed state that hosts extremists.

Above all, there is an urgent need for deeper-rooted change, not just cosmetic tinkering. The Afghan government must be truly accountable, bound by the rule

²²⁰ Mullah Dadullah's interview, 2006, op. cit.

²²¹ "Mullah Brader gives decisive declarations on jihadi developments in Afghanistan", op. cit., p. 18.

²²² In the words of a Canadian government-mandated inquiry, "to put things bluntly, governments from the start of Canada's Afghan involvement have failed to communicate with Canadians with balance and candour about the reasons for Canadian involvement, or about the risks, difficulties, and expected results of that involvement". "Independent Panel on Canada's Future Role in Afghanistan", January 2008, p. 20.

of law, acting in the best interests of the people and capable of providing services and security. Military means alone will not succeed in countering the insurgency. Instead, by building institutions and offering the services that give the Afghan people a better life, the government can gain public support, thus denying the insurgents opportunities to exploit local grievances and thereby gain a modicum of legitimacy.

The insurgents, of course, understand the importance of violently disrupting the government's capacity to provide security and services. Since the Afghan security forces still lack the ability to counter the insurgents on their own, the security umbrella provided by the international community remains vital if Afghanistan is to stabilise. While it is necessary to emphasise that foreign troops will stay as long as needed, the international community must prioritise the building of Afghan security and administrative capabilities and assure the Afghan people that there are no long-term designs on the region. Any talk of long-term U.S. bases would, for instance, feed into nationalistic resistance as well as neighbours' apprehensions. International forces must also demonstrate that they are

accountable, by putting in place more transparent systems to investigate and report on civilian casualties and other complaints. Only then will they succeed in neutralising the Taliban's attempts to paint the foreign intervention as an invasion and foreign troops as an occupation force.

The Afghan government must seek to improve ties with the democratically elected government in Pakistan. The international community would be best served by encouraging this dialogue process, even as it pressures the Pakistan military to end a policy of appeasing pro-Taliban militants and Afghan insurgents operating from Pakistani territory.

The Taliban is a violent, minority movement which holds out no genuine hope to Afghanistan but is growing through tapping into diverse grievances and resentments. Countering it requires strategic purpose, not just tactical tinkering, so as to better meet the expectations of the people. Ultimately, if the violence is to be defeated, the need is for actions and not just words.

Kabul/Brussels, 24 July 2008

APPENDIX A

MAP OF AFGHANISTAN



Map No. 3958 Rev. 5 UNITED NATIONS
October 2005

Department of Peacekeeping Operations
Cartographic Section

APPENDIX B

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