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AN ANALYSIS OF TALIBAN PROPAGANDA AND PERSPECTIVES ON VILLAGE STABILITY OPERATIONS FROM JANUARY 2011 TO JANUARY 2013

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Zusammenfassung:

EINE ANALYSE DER TALIBAN-PROPAGANDA UND DER VILLAGE STABILITY OPERATIONS IN AFGHANISTAN, 2011-2013

Der Artikel beschäftigt sich mit der Propaganda der Taliban in Afghanistan von Januar 2011 bis Januar 2013. Weitere Schwerpunkte bilden die unterstützenden Maßnahmen der NATO und deren Befriedungsprogramm namens Village Stability Operations (VSO). Dessen Ziel besteht darin, die Landbevölkerung in die Lage zu versetzen, der Infiltration seitens der Taliban sowohl physisch als politisch standzuhalten. Die Inhalte der Taliban-Propaganda werden vor allem hinsichtlich des Einsatzes in den Paschtunen-Gebieten im Süden und Osten des Landes beschrieben. Auffällig ist, dass die Inhalte seit der sowjetischen Invasion von 1979 weitgehend unverändert geblieben sind; es gibt allerdings auch einige, hier erläuterte Abweichungen. Zum Einsatz kommen nach wie vor traditionelle Kommunikationsmittel wie die „Night Letters". Als Feindbild dienen die NATO und deren Aufbaumaßnahmen im Land, insbesondere die Schulung der NATO für die afghanische Polizei und das Militär, deren Angehörige üblicherweise als „Arbakis" bezeichnet werden. In der gegen sie gerichteten Propaganda kommen neuerdings soziale Medien wie Facebook und Twitter zum Einsatz. Durch die Verbreitung des Internet wird diese Form der Propaganda künftig noch an Bedeutung gewinnen. Insgesamt wird eine Fallstudie zu weiteren Konflikten, die durch islamistischen Extremismus entstehen, geboten.

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the use of Taliban propaganda in Afghanistan during the period of January 2011 through January 2013. Specifically, it focuses on the NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) advisory effort in Afghanistan and the NATO-sponsored pacification program entitled Village Stability Operations (VSO). This program was designed to help rural Afghans develop the training and means to resist Taliban infiltration both politically and physically.

This paper initially presents a detailed summarization and background for the research. It describes how the Taliban develop and implement their propaganda and narrative themes among the Afghan populace, especially in the Pashtun-dominated areas of southern and eastern Afghanistan. This discussion enables this article to function as a case study for other conflicts in which Islamic-based extremism seeks to take root. The paper then examines Taliban baseline, historical and evolving narratives. These narratives are core messages that have remained consistent since the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. However, significant variations upon these themes are also examined. For example, there are many evolutions to baseline narratives associated with anti-Afghan Government

narratives and there are also many evolutions to grievance-based narratives. This section of the paper provides analysis on how the Taliban express these narratives through different propaganda mediums, such as Night Letters, and other traditional forms.

In section two of the paper, the means with which the Taliban disseminate and spread its propaganda are examined in depth. This section focuses, for example, on how Taliban propaganda attempts to negatively portray the NATO advisory effort. This is a significant matter because NATO advisers train Afghan militias (traditionally referred to as "Arbakis" in Afghanistan) that are to replace NATO troops. Regarding Taliban messaging dissemination on the subject of militias, significant evolutions are examined. These are demonstrated through the proliferation of Social Media, especially Facebook and Twitter. As the number of users (especially of Facebook) expands through increased internet access in Afghanistan, this is a development that is critical to current and future studies on propaganda. For example, the use of Social Media is significant with not only the Taliban, but also groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham (ISIS) in Iraq and Syria. It is expected that use of Social Media will greatly increase among insurgent groups in the immediate future. The reasons for this growth are discussed in section two of the paper.

The paper concludes with an analysis on the Taliban's propaganda effects on the NATO advisory mission and especially on the Village Stability Operations (VSO) training program. This analysis acts as a case study on how the Taliban developed and implemented their propaganda. It also examines the levels of success Taliban propaganda has achieved in certain areas in the Pashtun dominated areas of south and east Afghanistan.

BACKGROUND

Bernard Fall once observed "when a country is being subverted it is not being outfought; it is being out-administered."[1] This is a maxim worth remembering when assisting a country struggling with an insurgency. In the case of Afghanistan, NATO has developed a significant number of programs to increase the administrative effectiveness and security of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIRoA); foremost of these are Village Stability Operations (VSO). However, critical questions remain.

Has VSO successfully assisted sustainable GIRoA governance as well as the development and security of lines of operation? To what extent has VSO countered Taliban subversion of GIRoA? Due to troops-to-task planning requirements, will VSO remain viable when and after NATO personnel levels are determined for a potential post-NATO mission? How has the Taliban adapted to pacification and security efforts such as VSO? How has the Taliban manipulated historical narratives in their condemnation of NATO-Afghan programs such as VSO? In 2014, these questions remain important as NATO reduces its forces and as final troop numbers and organizations are determined and structured. While logistic support and training is admittedly more important in the short term, how Afghan Security Forces adapt to and address Taliban propaganda is already critical. This may also indicate Afghan Security Forces' success and legitimacy in the long term.

This paper addresses these questions and issues by analyzing the Taliban's perspective conveyed through its issued statements, propaganda instruments and other messaging systems. The purpose for providing analysis of this perspective is to better understand NATO's main adversary and how the achievement of stability in Afghanistan may be more effectively pursued. Primary sources for the study include statements produced by the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan's website (shahamat-english.com) as well as other, more traditional sources such as Night Letters. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan's "Voice of Jihad" (its website) is particularly important because it presents not only the Quetta Shura's topical analyses of events in Afghanistan, but because it also promulgates the Shura's long-term and holistic ideological framework. Secondly, the website demonstrates how the Taliban has developed its use of Social Media and energized its propaganda capabilities as Afghanistan's media infrastructure has evolved.

Previously abhorring technology, the Taliban has embraced new media such as Twitter, Facebook, and cell-phone based messaging while also maintaining its traditional messaging systems such as Night Letters and the use of Taranas, a mixture of chants and poetry. These developments are important and are discussed in depth. For now and before presenting the paper's structure, it is worthwhile to briefly discuss Taliban messaging and the Taliban's perspective on VSO generally.

Clearly, there is significant Taliban condemnation of NATO-trained local militias and other efforts to support local security initiatives. Importantly, although VSO is a NATO-led effort to create and sustain local militias, these militias have, in cases, problematically become amorphous organizations when sponsoring units responsible for training of the militias, such as US Special Forces, re-deploy to the United States or move to other areas of operations. In extreme cases, some Afghan militias have become renegades that prey upon the villages they were originally pledged to protect. However, and despite such instances of aberrant militia activity, VSO has achieved an amount of success based, primarily, on anecdotal evidence. Although undetermined quantitatively, this is based on the content of significant numbers of Taliban statements issued through its published propaganda. It is highly likely, therefore, that the Taliban's tactical attacks and its vociferous statements against local militia efforts, such as VSO, indicate that such efforts are achieving success in support of GIRoA-led governance.

What is the content of the Taliban's statements? Often, the Taliban attempts to directly convince Afghan citizens that these programs will not succeed and to provide rationale for why they will fail. Such statements are often disseminated in coordination with tactical attacks on GIRoA/NATO supported militias as proof of the militias' weaknesses and to demonstrate the Taliban's strength and resolve. However, in contrast to offensive tactical tools such as Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) which are commonly cited indicators of Taliban activity, the effectiveness of the Taliban's messaging is difficult to assess quantitatively. This is particularly true when the Taliban issue statements solely through its website that are not issued in coordination with a specific attack. Exceptions to this, as will be shown below, apply in the case of spectacular attacks intended to generate international media attention. Examples of such spectacular attacks include those in 2011 against highly significant targets such as the US Embassy in Kabul, NATO bases, the US and Indian Consulates, and other high-visibility targets.

At this point, background information may be useful. A great deal of Taliban propaganda is crafted for specific locations and targeted towards specific individuals as amply demonstrated by the Taliban's effective use of Night Letters. These intimidating messages are a traditional mainstay for the Taliban

and carry weight due to their being delivered to influential (and literate) members of communities such as teachers or religious figures, including mullahs. Useful for the purpose of analysis, instances of such localized propaganda are often referred to through the Taliban's website and are reported for audiences beyond the original intended individual or community. These situations provide excellent material for discussion as case studies on how the Taliban present their perspective. As a result, this paper utilizes many such examples to present the Taliban's perspective on VSO. It also presents examples that demonstrate how the Taliban perceives, criticizes, and confronts VSO in its online messaging and through its more traditional propaganda mediums such as Night Letters. Although the Taliban's online products sometimes target specific events, or focus upon certain provinces or districts, the statements still provide and contribute to a thematic aggregate that is useful for determining Taliban perspectives.

It is important to note here that my use of the Taliban specifically refers to those individuals and collectives directly sponsored and controlled by the Quetta and Peshawar Shuras. Similarly, all statements and media referred to within this paper, such as those produced by the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan's website, are those sponsored and directed by the Quetta and Peshawar Shuras. Affiliates such as Hezb-e-Islami, the Haqqani Network, Terhrik-e-Taliban Pakistani or other organizations' propaganda efforts and statements regarding VSO were not included in this analysis.

Translation: "Widows, orphans, mourning, tears, poverty, unemployment, lack of basic needs and facilities; are these gifts from every invasion to Afghans?" Logo in upper left-hand corner is the Islamic Youth Party of Hezb-e-Islami. Words above the book are "Allah Akbar". This print artifact has been found reproduced in digital copies of *Tanweer* (a Hezb-e-Islami magazine) and is believed to have been also reproduced in hard copies of that publication. It plays upon grievances of Afghan civilians. Source: Islamic Youth Party (Tanzeem) of Hezb-e-Islami.

Returning to our subject, understanding the Taliban's perspective and accounting for its messages to the Afghan Population may help assist NATO and VSO planning efforts. This increased understanding may also enable NATO to compete more effectively in the information arena. This is a critical component of contemporary warfare and is an area where NATO and the US Military remain at a disadvantage for numerous reasons.[2] As an often neglected indicator, greater understanding of Taliban statements may provide context that complements more commonly studied quantitative indicators such as IED incident-rates.

Naturally, VSO planners and proponents view their efforts in a positive light and look for examples of success. This, however, indicates an endemic problem in counterinsurgency efforts. Although difficult to assess, theorists such as Bernard Fall and others stress that counterinsurgent efforts are only as successful as deemed so by local inhabitants and perhaps most importantly, by the enemy.[3] It is important to note that NATO is currently transitioning from counterinsurgency efforts towards Counterterrorism (CT).[4] It is furthermore transitioning from being the lead agent for offensive operations while Afghan National Security Forces are increasingly tasked with Afghanistan's security. While this transition is evolving and force commitments remain to be finalized, pacification efforts currently remain in place and have historically required a large number of support troops such as those deployed to Afghanistan from late 2009 through 2011.

A few words on the advisory effort, VSO, are in order. VSO came into place in late 2009 as an effort to prevent the widening of local security gaps and as a pacification effort. Although the resurgence of what Antonio Giustozzi has called the "Neo-Taliban" became evident as early as 2006, insufficient NATO troops were in Afghanistan to adequately support a VSO-type effort at the time. The implementation of VSO in 2009 was, therefore, enabled by the surge of NATO personnel although it has been argued that VSO may have been introduced too late to be adequately effective.[5] It is reasonable to conclude that VSO may only remain viable in 2014 and beyond if adequate numbers of troops remain in Afghanistan to support the program. Further, it is expected that NATO training efforts will remain focused on the training of Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), Afghan conventional forces, and its special-operations counterpart, the Afghan Commandos. It is likely,

therefore, that VSO may recede in importance, especially with regard to the troubled history and track record of militias in Afghanistan. Still, a goal of this paper is to present analysis and some ideas regarding how VSO may be supported in a more limited way. This analysis is provided, therefore, to assess ways in which NATO-supported militias are successful in their efforts to achieve local security and stability as perceived by the Taliban. These efforts might then serve as a model on which to continue and build upon.

On the negative side, the dismantling of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), along with diminishing public support for operations in Afghanistan, indicate that VSO and other advisory efforts may decline.[6] This is a troubling development as current problems in Iraq, due to a security vacuum caused by political discontent and lack of unity, strongly demonstrates. To conclude this section, and to present the Taliban's perspective on VSO, this paper is organized into three sections. First, the paper provides background on the Taliban's baseline, historical, and evolving narratives during the period of January 2011 to January 2013. These specific narrative types are important to address in-depth because they indicate the Taliban's ideological framework and message construction and content at local levels where VSO operates.

The second section provides analysis of select statements issued by the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan on the topic of anti-Taliban militias (Arbaki) and VSO. As a note, the Taliban do not refer to VSO by name. The selected Taliban statements address what are highly likely but are not guaranteed to be VSO efforts. The author's experience as a US Army Psychological Operations officer, along with extensive time researching Taliban propaganda, is one basis for citing specific Taliban statements as references to VSO efforts. A second basis is identifying where VSO has been implemented and matching it with Taliban-issued statements within the same province, when possible. The specific period of time researched for this report is January 2011 through January 2013. This period was selected because the author was deployed to Regional Command-East during 2010 through early 2011 and, post-deployment, continued analysis of Taliban propaganda at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California. More importantly, the period of 2011 was a dynamic period for VSO development and implementation in Afghanistan. By June 2011, for example, VSO consisted of 61 sites.[7]

In the third and last section of the paper, an assessment of VSO is provided. Also included is a discussion of conventional troops' capability to conduct VSO. These troops are critical because not enough Special Operations Forces exist to achieve troops-to-task ratios needed to extensively implement and maintain the program. This topic will remain important for VSO's viability as NATO force levels are determined in 2014. For example, it is unlikely that adequate NATO troops will remain in Afghanistan to sustain VSO beyond 2014. If not, what positive lessons may be gained through the development of VSO as a program if needed for future contingencies elsewhere? Before moving on, it is important to note, again, that not all local security militias are directly connected to the central government. Some belong, for instance, to local security initiatives not sanctioned by the government while others are rogue groups in the truest sense of the word and are predatory in nature. For purposes of this paper, VSO concerns those militias which directly support, and are supported by, GIRoA and NATO both politically and materially.

THE TALIBAN'S BASELINE, HISTORICAL AND EVOLVING NARRATIVES

The period between January 2011 and early 2013 was significant in that NATO surge forces were at peak levels in 2011 with planned troop personnel drawdowns occurring through 2014. During this period, a number of trends in Taliban messaging and tactical operations were observed that differed from earlier periods. Most prominent of these, along with associated messaging, were increases of "Green-On-Blue" insider attacks, increased assassination attempts on GIRoA officials, increased complex and spectacular attacks, the issue of prisoner exchanges, and diplomatic negotiations to end the conflict. Secondary effects of tactical operations also continued to gain prominence, especially with regard to the problem of civilian casualties. With this issue, the Islamic Emirate (The Taliban's ideological headquarters) directed that Taliban-caused civilian casualties halt; preventative emphasis was notable in Mullah Omar's Eid-Al-Fitr and Eid-Al-Adha 2011 statements in particular. Similarly, other grievance-based issues related to a Koran burning incident at Bagram Airbase, the desecration of insurgents by NATO personnel, alleged "Kill Teams", and an alleged mass murder of Afghans by a US Army Staff Sergeant in Kandahar Province, to name a few, also provided a significant source of material for Taliban Propaganda. These grievances were particularly notable for ISAF personnel involved with VSO and those personnel serving as advisors to Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) because they were often primary targets for insider attacks.[8]

Facebook quickly became a favorite vehicle for dissemination of propaganda by not only the Taliban, but also with other insurgent groups such as ISIS/ISIL and the Nusra Front in Syria and Iraq. Source: Unknown, but likely Taliban-sanctioned.

Grievance-based issues arguably received greater attention during this period than in years past. This claim is grounded in several rationales that have drawn public attention to the conflict in Afghanistan: the ongoing debate regarding ISAF's future presence in the country; the possibility of a bilateral, potential status of forces agreement and, last, the transition to GIRoA-led governance. Another reason why grievance-based events received greater attention is that they were more vigorously and broadly publicized than in earlier years. The ability to more widely broadcast grievances, or any message, is indicated by an evolving trend that became evident in Afghanistan during the period of 2011 through 2012: the increased use of Social Media by the Taliban, primarily You-Tube, Twitter, and Facebook. The use of such Social Media is most noticeable in the events of the Koran burning at Bagram Air Base and a significant attack on the US Embassy in 2011. These forms of message dissemination focused significantly on promoting the causes of grievances and offense, particularly in the case of the Koran burning event. The Taliban previously abhorred technology and was infamously known, for example, for smashing television sets when they were found. In a dramatic change, the Taliban embrace multiple forms of technology and have successfully exploited them to increase the reach of their messages. These messages, importantly, are replicated in multiple social-media-based forums. The Taliban's success in delivering its message through Social Media has certainly been studied by groups such as Jabhat-Al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham (ISIS) in Syria and Iraq.

The attack on the US Embassy in 2011 revealed the Taliban's initial use of Twitter as a medium for the organization's message dissemination. During the attack, Twitter was used by both the Taliban and NATO to chart steps during the attack and each side reported its respective progress, along with its opponent's success and failures, throughout the event. The Taliban's use of Twitter was significant because it indicated an evolution of the Taliban's media toolkit and, possibly, its overall media strategy. Certainly, the use of this social media demonstrated openness to types of technology and message dissemination channels that the Taliban previously condemned not many years ago. Additionally, the use of Social Media indicates a partial departure from more traditional modes of propaganda such as Night Letters and Taranas although both of these remain influential,

especially in rural areas. Taranas, religiously-inspired and highly emotional chants, however, represent an interesting example. Indeed, Taranas became perhaps more widely influential during the period in question as they now commonly accompany insurgent videos posted through Social Media, particularly Facebook. This is a dynamic phenomenon because when Taranas are produced exclusively for dissemination through Social Media, they become a hybrid propaganda product that combines traditional content with new, technology-based, innovation in delivery. This growth is a significant development and a powerful one. Similarly, the combination is noteworthy because Taranas, as emotionally charged religious chants, resonate strongly not only with Afghans but also with audiences beyond Afghanistan. Thus, the distribution of traditional Taranas through Social Media sites is not only novel but also a powerful tool through which to promote grievance-based narratives and message themes far more widely than in earlier times.[9]

Taliban and other insurgent videos provide another interesting example. Previously, insurgent videos were distributed through file-sharing services which were relatively easy to monitor and sanction if necessary. Restrictions imposed on the file-sharing site Mega-Up-Load indicate such sanctions and their success at closing sites down.[10] On the other hand, access to Social Media sites, and the file-sharing that may occur through them, is very difficult to restrict. Most important to the use of Social Media is the anonymity that media platforms such as Twitter, YouTube and Facebook provide. The distribution of Taliban propaganda through Social Media forums provides a greater amount of proponent anonymity that is otherwise unavailable to individuals personally distributing handbills and leaflets in a village, even if masked. Along with Social Media's international reach, this anonymity is a major factor in how and why Social Media is transforming the landscape of propaganda. While it remains to be seen how the Taliban's content may develop or branch out from previous and current salient themes, it is expected that its dissemination practices will certainly evolve further as communication platforms and users (such as Facebook users in Afghanistan) also grow in number.

BASELINE NARRATIVE THEMES

The Taliban have adapted several basic narratives that were used when the Mujiahideen fought the Soviet

Army. These narratives re-emerged in prominence once the Taliban began to reform in 2005 and 2006 after being initially dismantled by US-led operations in October 2001. Importantly, they are variants on themes that have been utilized for generations in Afghanistan. They particularly impact VSO at local levels due to their prevalence and historical resonance for Afghans throughout the Pashtun-dominated belts of eastern and southern Afghanistan. These narratives include the following prominent examples:

- The United States (and NATO) is an invader/ occupier
- The Taliban are fighting a religious war of Jihad against occupation
- The Taliban will prevail over the current invasion as they prevailed over Soviet and British invasion and occupation
- GIRoA is a puppet/stooge government (comparisons to other past puppet governments include, for example, Naijibullah's, Soviet-supported, government)
- NATO are waging a war against Islam.

While there are multiple variations on these themes, a significant majority of Taliban messaging is based in these primary narratives. For example, anti-collaboration messages that target ANSF personnel or local educators and administrators are invariably linked to the "GIRoA is a puppet/stooge government" narrative. This is particularly relevant for VSO efforts due to Taliban intimidation of local Afghans and their instructions to either not participate in local militias trained by VSO personnel, or to infiltrate VSO efforts specifically to conduct insider attacks. Although these narrative themes have evolved somewhat over the past ten years, they remain identifiable in a majority of Taliban propaganda through the period of 2011. Most importantly, these themes grew during the period of January 2011 through early 2013. This is likely due to the transition from ISAF to GIRoA-led Security, Development, and Governance lines of operations. Another possible cause for the growth of these themes may be the bottom-up efforts of connecting rural villages to district governance which is the modus operandi of VSO. Therefore, although an indirect indicator, the growth in anti-collaboration messages issued by the Taliban is a potential indicator of VSO's impact. It is expected that messages utilizing anti-collaboration themes will continue to grow in number and frequency and will remain staples of the Taliban's overall media campaign through 2014. It

is worthwhile to continue monitoring the growth of anti-collaboration themes issued by the Taliban in conjunction with either the continuance of the VSO effort or in the event that VSO is discontinued or significantly reduced. This may also provide further evidence that either supports VSO as a viable practice or indicates its possible ineffectiveness. An alternate view is that the Taliban have and will continue to issue anti-collaboration statements regardless of NATO efforts and as long as they perceive GIRoA as a capable and credible threat. This, however, is arguably contingent on the perceived success of GIRoA at district and sub-district levels. It is also expected that these themes will provide motivation for Taliban-sponsored insider attacks. However, grievance-based causes are assessed to be the most significant cause of such attacks.

During 2011, growth in narratives associated with GIRoA as a puppet government, and anti-collaboration narratives more generally, were prominent.[11] This growth may be the result of the US Presidential statement made in October 2009 regarding the withdrawal of NATO Forces by 2014 and the transition of governance (thus, also development and security) to GIRoA. Therefore, it is likely that GIRoA and Afghan security forces are now viewed as a longer term foe by the Taliban, as opposed to NATO forces, because of their withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Other events, such as the perceived failure of an effective Wolesi Jirga (a representative assembly of the Afghan Government) election in the fall of 2010, along with ongoing controversies regarding corruption by GIRoA officials, have also contributed to effective anti-collaboration themes. Regarding VSO efforts, it is difficult to quantitatively assess the extent to which VSO has contributed to Taliban anti-collaboration narratives. A possible exception is through the Taliban's reference to Arbakis and other local, NATO-trained militias in its statements.

To support these conclusions, the author compiled an analytical database for the Program for Culture and Conflict Studies at the Naval Postgraduate School. The analytical database contained a total sample of 192 artifacts (examples include leaflets, Night Letters, and Internet statements) distributed by the Taliban between the period of January 2011 to January 2013. Out of that total, 83 artifacts contain references to GIRoA as a puppet government along with other closely related anti-collaboration themes. Of those 83 artifacts, 20 were disseminated between January and July 2011.
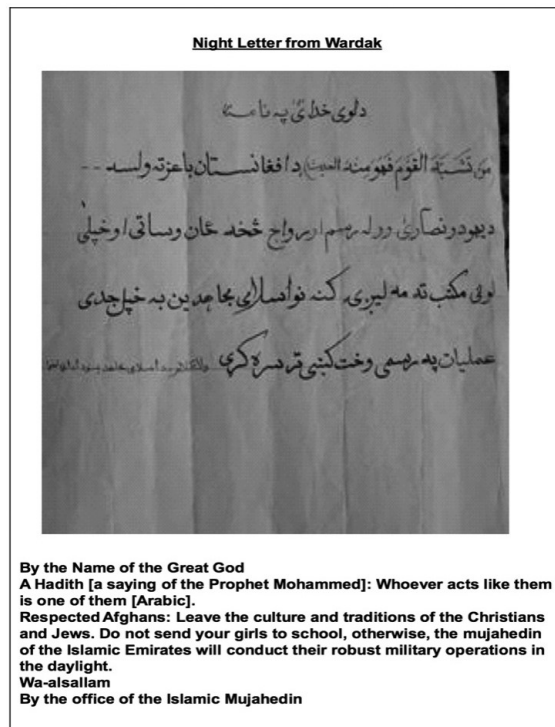
The remaining 63 were disseminated between July 2011 and March 2012. These artifacts represented a cross sampling of videos, Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan statements and weekly analyses, Taranas, Night Letters, and others. The growth in Anti-GIRoA propaganda (GIRoA as a puppet government and anti-collaboration themes generally) is supported by the template's database sample. There are limits to the database sample due to the difficulty of collecting Taliban propaganda from the field in a conflict zone. Concerted effort was made to gather a wide variety of propaganda that included propaganda distributed in the field of Afghanistan itself and from the Internet. While certainly not exhaustive, the database represents a cross-section sample of a wide range of propaganda artifacts gathered from around the country with an emphasis on the eastern and southern areas of Afghanistan.

Returning to the topic of anti-collaboration themes against GIRoA, the Taliban prolifically generate statements. Similarly, the Taliban distribute anti-collaboration statements through multiple media channels and through many varying propaganda platforms, or types. One example from the database includes a Tarana (American Joray Idaray tha; America created this administration).[12] Below is an excerpted example from a statement disseminated by the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan on 27 April 2011.

"Last week, during a press conference, the Head of the Kabul Puppet Administration, Karzai, said that he would hand over the task of endorsement of a strategic partnership agreement with America, to a grand assembly (**Loya Jirga**) to be convened within the next two months. It is not clear what will be the content of the agreement which is going to be signed between America and the stooge administration, but it can be drawn from the assertions being made by the officials of the Kabul Puppet Regime that establishment of the permanent bases is among the main objectives of the document. It is also clear they have reached a key understanding as regards this wicked relationship."[13]

Assassinations are another powerful anti-collaboration tool used with great effect by the Taliban. Regarding assassinations of GIRoA officials and local governing actors (tribal and GIRoA-affiliated), there is significant evidence that indicates assassination rates are a growing trend.[14] Assassinations invariably act as anti-collaboration armed propaganda and in US Military terminology are regarded as PSYACTS (Psy-

chological Actions). As examples, the assassinations of Bernahuddin Rabbani and Ahmad Wali Karzai in 2011 are two of the more prominent assassinations during the time period between 2011 and 2013. While more difficult to track compared to physical artifacts such as Night Letters, assassinations rates are relevant indicators of anti-collaboration efforts.[15] In close relation, Night Letters are consistently disseminated as a warning to halt GIRoA collaboration and often precede physical attacks. These warnings are problematic for VSO personnel to track as local Afghans may or may not want to bring them to VSO personnel's attention for fear of Taliban reprisal. It is helpful to recall the insurgency is locally based where familial and tribal ties abound – many villagers are thus "caught in the middle" when VSO is introduced into communities. This is supported by the introduction to one Night Letter, found in Ghazni Province, which starkly indicates: "Greetings toward the respected director [of education] of Ghazni Province, Fatima Moshtaq. I have one request, that you step aside from your duties. Otherwise, if you don't resign your position and continue your work, something will happen that will transform your family and you to grief. I am telling you this as a brother, that I consider you a godless person."[16]

Night Letter from Wardak

By the Name of the Great God
A Hadith [a saying of the Prophet Mohammed]: Whoever acts like them is one of them [Arabic].
Respected Afghans: Leave the culture and traditions of the Christians and Jews. Do not send your girls to school, otherwise, the mujahedin of the Islamic Emirates will conduct their robust military operations in the daylight.
Wa-alsallam
By the office of the Islamic Mujahedin

The Taliban produce Night Letters by the thousands and they target specific individuals and specific circumstances and events. They are a traditional main-stay or propaganda vehicle of the organization. Source: Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (Taliban).

In summary, anti-collaboration products, actions, and narratives are a trend that grew between the period of January 2011 and January 2013 when compared to previous years. At this point in the analysis, it is worthwhile to provide a contrast between anti-collaboration themes just discussed that grew, and narrative themes that remained fairly consistent over the course of the same period (historical narratives).

HISTORICAL NARRATIVE THEMES

The Taliban consistently reference Afghan history in their statements and propaganda products. Largely consisting of anti-invasion themes and, perhaps more importantly, Afghans' past triumphs against foreign occupation, historical narratives certainly deserve attention. Importantly, they function in a manner similar to, and are often disseminated in conjunction with, anti-collaboration narratives. Historical narratives are critical because they closely relate to narratives of jihad, and evoke other historical incidents which required jihad. In many regards, historical narratives serve a purpose similar to anti-invasion and anti-occupation themes in the sense that they seek to provoke an emotional response from Afghan, and especially Pashtun, audiences. As a matter of clarity, jihad in the sense it is used here, does not refer to the personal, religious struggle of Islam but refers to the manipulation of this term into political-military manifestations. In a perhaps obvious, well-known and certainly important sense, resisting invasion and occupation by foreign forces is invariably construed as a religious duty in which actions are framed as jihad. More recently, this framing figured prominently in the case of the Mujahideens' war with the Soviet-supported Afghan Government of Najibullah and remains a consistent theme in the Taliban's current propaganda.

As a result of the October 2001 invasion by US-led forces, the Taliban emphatically attempted to portray the United States, and subsequent NATO and GIRoA efforts, as only the most recent iteration of a problem that has plagued the country since its invasion by Alexander the Great. Moreover, they sought to frame their efforts in terms of a cosmic historical framework in which they should be regarded as freedom-fighting Mujahideen in much the same way that the Mujahideen of the Afghan-Soviet War were regarded as freedom fighters. The Taliban's branding of itself as an organization of freedom fighters manipulates history and the facts. This is quite obvious to western audiences. More important, however, is how Afghan and rural Afghan audiences in particular, perceive the Taliban's portrayal and whether they accept the Taliban as credible or not. While it is true that the Taliban came into being as a militia organized to prevent the depredations of former Mujahideen groups and leaders, the Taliban have long been known as anything but a friend of free and progressive society. Steven Tanner noted that this irony was not lost on the departing Soviets, although some may argue that it was indeed lost on American forces who would later find themselves grappling with issues and narratives created by the Taliban in a manner similar to the Soviets' experience in Afghanistan. In his book *Afghanistan*, Tanner writes that in the years of civil war following the Soviet departure "turmoil in Afghanistan seemed to verify the Soviet Union's point of view that the Mujahideen, upon gaining power, would prove disastrous for the country, and that instead of leading it into the modern age, would drag it backward into the medieval period from which by the late twentieth century it had only barely emerged."[17] One might easily replace Mujahideen with Taliban in Tanner's statement. However, one difference, of the many that exist, between the Mujahideen and the Taliban concerns the subject of propaganda.

Translation: "Afghan and Muslims national bravery and strength are like determination, stability, patriotism, and Islamic values. These have resulted in the crusading invaders' defeat. God willing, the crusaders will face the bitter consequences of their illegitimate invasion." This message and image are powerful in combination because of multiple levels of potential meaning. The message conveys tried and true narratives including the argument that NATO forces are the following: 1: Crusaders (i.e. attacking Islam) and 2. Invaders/Occupiers (i.e. attacking Afghanistan). Source: Islamic Youth Party (Tanzeem) of Hezb-e-Islami.

The Taliban's facility with adapting its statements and propaganda displays a sophistication that did not clearly exist during the time of the Mujahideen. For the Mujahideen an outside force was required as a target to rail against in a propaganda sense as is common with the development of propaganda. In other words, once the Soviets were driven through the Salang Tunnel and back into what the Mujahideen certainly regarded as atheistic Russia, there was no outside force with which to contend except for those who did not share Pashtun ethnicity. Tragically, this led to targeting the unfortunate Hazara minority and other, smaller ethnic outsiders once the Soviets were expelled. This ethnic tension continues to wreak havoc upon the notion of a stable and unified GIRoA, especially in a potential, post-NATO supported Afghanistan. These types of schisms, such as the sectarian divisions in Iraq, continue to be problematic across central Asia and the Middle East.

As noted earlier, the Taliban have assumed, or tried to assume, the mantle of religious jihadists, a new Mujahideen, against an opposing and, crucially, infidel force. They have had mixed success because of their own depredations and rigidly fundamentalist religious outlook. However, their efforts in the field of propaganda display a complexity with not only a great depth of historical references that are uniquely Afghan, and especially Pashtun, but also demonstrate sophisticated adaptation and use of technology. One of the most useful books on the Taliban's sophistication and development is Antonio Giustozzi's *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop*. Giustozzi reminds readers that the Taliban "have absorbed from their foreign jihadist allies a more flexible and less orthodox attitude towards imported technologies and techniques. Not only have they expanded their investment in the production of tapes containing jihadist songs (without musical accompaniment), which they had already begun using in the 1990s, but they have even ventured into the world of video production."[18]

When this adaptation of technology is combined with traditional Pashtun cultural codes, such as Pashtunwali, powerful results and possible trends emerge. This is most clearly indicated through the growing problem of insider attacks and the exploitation of grievances which provide a rationale for such attacks. Linking grievances as a rationale and cause for revenge-based violence, however, is not new. According to Martin Ewans, the Taliban's manipulation of historical narratives that include the problem of

long-remembered grievances is a feature of Pashtun culture since at least the Second Anglo-Afghan War. It is almost certainly much older.[19]

In addition to the importance of history to Afghans, another critical cultural consideration should be kept in mind when discussing propaganda in Afghanistan. This is the fact that Afghanistan remains a tribal-based society and this has a significant bearing on how the Taliban manipulate grievances into calls for action against GIRoA and NATO forces. Importantly, Pashtuns are one of the largest remaining ethnicities within this tribal-based society, and the importance of credibility and honor is a critical characteristic of this predominate constituent of Afghan society.

Invariably, offenses and grievances inflicted upon Pashtuns are taken seriously and are nimbly manipulated by the Taliban. This is done primarily through manipulation of Pashtunwali cultural codes which stress revenge, known as Nidal in Pashto. Giustozzi notes that the crisis of the tribal system has also contributed significantly to Taliban recruitment.[20] Together, these factors amplify how the Taliban manipulate well-worn but still relevant historical narratives that have not required substantial change in content.

For VSO this is especially problematic. When grievances are present and exploited by the Taliban through historical references, training is predictably difficult to conduct, and this is due to loss of trust between training forces and local Afghans. Powerful examples of exploited grievances include the accidental burning of Korans at Bagram Airbase in February 2012 and the alleged mass civilian killings committed by a US Army Staff Sergeant in Panjhwai, Kandahar in March 2012.

Anti-collaboration themes and grievance-based arguments, combined with historical narratives, are important examples to consider when discussing Taliban propaganda. This matter is discussed here because NATO soldiers must personally account for grievances in local contexts with the Afghans they seek to train, protect, and support, regardless of the grievance cause. Deep understanding of Pasthunwali, along with skilled negotiation and conflict-mitigating capabilities are therefore critical for NATO personnel to possess as they are often the closest and most vulnerable targets for grievance-based reprisal and "Green-on-Blue" attacks. Insider attacks are often motivated by grievance-based issues and are exploited by the Taliban. For a period in 2013, insider attacks

were a strategic problem covered by international media. Andrew Exum pointed out that the decision of the French Government to withdraw French troops from Afghanistan was directly related to the problem of insider attacks.[21] In sum, Taliban narratives and themes are a "call to arms" that NATO personnel conducting VSO must thoroughly recognize and remain aware of while training and interacting with Afghans.

A few, final words regarding propaganda artifacts which emphasize historical narratives are in order. Of the total sample in the Naval Postgraduate School Analytical database this author compiled (the database contained 192 artifacts), 29 artifacts disseminated by the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan specifically refer to the Soviet War and occupation that lasted from 1979 to 1989. 19 of those 29 artifacts are from 2011 while 7 were disseminated in the period of January to April 2012. The number of disseminated statements remained fairly level and occurred to commemorate specific historical events. This contrast suggests a possible correlation. In the former case of historical narratives, two artifacts provide examples of what the Taliban have issued to commemorate historical events. These include: "27 APR 2011 – Statement of Condemnation by the Islamic Emirate Regarding the Thirty-Third Anniversary of the Soviet Coup d'Etat" and "28 APR 2011 – Statement of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan regarding the 19th Anniversary of the Victory of the Mujahideen in Afghanistan."[22]

This graphic depicts a common product that the Taliban disseminate through their website. During 2011 through 2013, the Taliban provided weekly analysis on specific events on a consistent basis; this example provides detail about events in Logar Province during October 2011. Source: Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

TALIBAN PROPAGANDA ADAPTATION AND SYNERGY

In addition to baseline and historical themes, there are a number of other themes demonstrated through tactical events that have evolved significantly since late 2010 through January 2013. Before discussing newer and evolving narrative themes in detail next however, it is worthwhile to briefly discuss the synergy between Taliban operations and their messages. The Taliban is highly proficient at synchronizing messages and operations efficiently and quickly. In many ways, the Taliban's most significant evolution as an organization is its adaptation and use of multiple, new media formats. This is an important step that works in concert with traditional propaganda forms, such as Night Letters and the politically-laden chants and lyrical songs called Taranas. These latter songs typically accompany insurgent video propaganda. Importantly, the Taliban mix both the new and the old and they mix them with tried and true messages. The goal, quite certainly, is to connect with Afghans through new technologies while retaining message content that resonates with the Afghan population, regardless of age.

The speed with which the Taliban disseminate messages is due to a strongly networked and decentralized approach to operations and messaging. The Taliban, like many insurgent organizations, do not have bureaucratic mechanisms that needlessly prevent or obstruct timely and effective synchronization and propaganda publication. Conversely, in the case of NATO, message creation, product development, and its related approval process can often takes weeks to complete. From 2006 onward, the Neo-Taliban, as Giustozzi notes, "strengthened the role of propaganda in their war effort. Their task was facilitated by the weakness of the psyop effort on the NATO/US side."[23] When compared to NATO as an organization and NATO's Psychological Operations' approval procedures, the Taliban possess clear advantages in its capacity to connect messages with tactical operations. The Taliban's lack of bureaucratic constraints is one important difference. Another is the type of psychological operations the Taliban undertake without adherence to laws of warfare or the Geneva Conventions. These include operations such as assassinations but also spectacular attacks including as examples, the Taliban's spring "offensives" which included Operation Badr in 2011 and Operation Al-Farooq in 2012.[24] Notably, the Taliban have demonstrated a consistent lack of care for Afghan civilians who are often casualties of Taliban operations.

VSO and local advisory efforts, however, are a vehicle through which NATO/GIRoA messaging may become significantly more effective. This potential exists due to the content of messages being based within local conditions that may be directly disseminated by NATO personnel and Afghan counterparts. Afghan-created products may also legally circumvent the bureaucratic approval process that currently cripples US psychological operations. Important elements that may additionally assist in successful NATO-sponsored psychological operations include specifically tasked personnel and appropriate equipment such as vehicle loudspeaker systems and adequate print capability. Increased resorting to advisory effort in this area may also mitigate some grievance-based issues at local levels that lead to insider attacks.

EVOLVING NARRATIVE THEMES

The use of grievance-based narratives, and the flexibility of the Taliban to manipulate them, is one of the most dynamic and evolving narrative structures that they employ. Regarding the exploitation of grievances, the most significant indication of connections between messaging and operations may be insider attacks. What is notable with these events is that the attacks themselves are the message: they ostensibly destroy trust between ANSF (Afghan National Security Forces) and NATO forces while also killing or wounding NATO personnel. Insider attacks have proven to be problematic for VSO and other advisory efforts in particular and insider attacks have been arguably evident since late 2010. Similarly, so called "Green on Green" attacks, which are attacks between Afghan Security Forces, have also become problematic. Despite the reality that insider attacks have become a dangerous trend, they were still referred to as "isolated events" by NATO spokesmen in early 2012.[25] This NATO narrative has been changing as it is clear that such attacks are not isolated and are, indeed, a growing trend. Importantly, the Taliban have increasingly referenced grievances caused by NATO personnel through statements issued by the Islamic Emirate's website. Returning to the Naval Postgraduate School database, out of 192 samples,

over half (104 samples) specifically refer to grievances caused by NATO and suffered by Afghans. The Taliban's successful exploitation of grievances, as demonstrated by the growth in insider attacks, is one of the most substantive trends and developments during the period between January 2011 and January 2013. Furthermore, evidence suggests that insider attacks are not isolated events and have trended upward since 2010 as one study indicates. This study is "A Crisis of Trust and Cultural Incompatibility: A Red Team Study of Mutual Perceptions of Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and US Soldiers in Understanding and Mitigating the Phenomena of ANSF-Committed Fratricide-Murders" by Dr. Jeffrey Bordin.[26] Bordin's work was prompted by an Afghan soldier's attack on NATO personnel in early 2011. This insider attack resulted in the death of six US Soldiers in Khogyani district. This district is in east Afghanistan, southeast of Kabul and shares a long border with Pakistan.

Bordin's study indicated personal animosity and cultural incompatibility as a primary cause for insider attacks as opposed to their occurring as isolated incidents. Discussion of this topic is relevant because it demonstrates the Taliban's interest and ability in exploiting potential rifts that may prove detrimental to the NATO mission and doing so tactically through its messaging. Most critically, it demonstrates that grievances caused by NATO personnel are arguably one of the most substantive motivating factors for both the Taliban's messaging and its offensive operations. These grievances may be caused by numerous actions including unauthorized house searches, and poor public behavior such as public urination and yelling at Afghan citizens. They include far more egregious grievances caused by actions that result in civilian causalities. To address this problem, NATO policy changes regarding interaction between NATO and Afghan Security Forces have been implemented. This policy change is referred to as the "Guardian Angel" approach. It also potentially demonstrates the Taliban's success with regard to dismantling trust between NATO and Afghan Security Forces.[27] This is a key element in theTaliban strategy for eroding Afghan support for VSO and NATO efforts and contributes to the subversion of GIRoA-security and governance.

Over half of the Naval Postgraduate School analytical database sample consists of grievance-based messages/products that are clearly disseminated to

incite Afghan Security Forces (as well as fence-sitting Afghans) to attack NATO personnel. Major incidents such as the desecration of the Koran in February 2012 were heavily exploited by the Islamic Emirate's website. Not only condemnations of the incident are provided though, but also guidance and directives for conducting protests and exhortations for follow-on attacks. Such attacks are directed as implied Muslim obligations which include target audiences that are both Afghan civilians as well as Afghan Security Forces. One excerpt from the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan's statement of 23 February 2012 reads: "As the repeated desecration and burning of the Holy Quran of the Muslims at the hands   of the Crusaders is the natural and deliberate act of these infidels, then as part of our defense of our sacred book, we should not be satisfied with mere protests and empty slogans but the military bases of the invaders, their military convoys and their troops should become a target of our courageous attacks. Kill them, beat them, take them as prisoners and teach them such a lesson that they never summon the courage to abuse the Holy Quran again."[28]

Translation: "I will shoot you in the head you pig" (Pashto). This graphic demonstrates a common propaganda tactic: simple manipulation of images. However, among a populace that may or may not have regular access to other news sources, it potentially boosts anti-coalition attitudes by Afghan youth especially. Source: Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (Taliban), Facebook Page, Accessed 11 November 2011.

This excerpt also demonstrates highly proficient command of Pashtunwali-based narratives such as revenge, shame and dishonor. The inclusion of historical narratives and themes with Pashtunwali-inspired messages is also an important intersection that influences Afghan perceptions. Given the increased number of prominent grievance-based events during 2011-2012, when compared to an earlier period such as 2008-2009, it is arguable that the increased number of NATO troops, also commonly known as

the "surge", may have contributed to inadvertent destabilization, rather than stabilization, of the security situation in Afghanistan. Furthermore, the emphasis on training ANSF as a method to complete the NATO mission is a vulnerability that the Taliban exploit, and may continue to exploit, with high degrees of success.[29] These points are certainly controversial and warrant debate. Still, it is reasonable to assess that increased NATO training of ANSF has resulted in an explosive growth of insider attacks. This trend is the most prominent example of how the Taliban exploit grievances through extensive messaging and how they then manipulate those grievance into actions. In other words, exploiting grievances provides significant rationale for attacking NATO personnel for both civilian Afghans and ANSF. It, obviously, bolsters Taliban motivation as well.

Exploiting grievances is further compounded when propaganda using "anti-invasion/occupation" baseline themes is disseminated by the Taliban. As we have seen with insider attacks, most problematic is that the exploitation of grievances specifically provides rationale for Taliban infiltration via recruitment channels into ANSF. Such infiltration obviously occurs in order to specifically conduct insider attacks and indicates troubling issues. The multiple cases of fratricide between NATO and ANSF documented by Bordin indicate that this is exacerbated by highly flawed ANSF recruiting processes and vetting systems. Afghan Local Police (ALP), also known as Arbaki and recruited at local levels for VSO efforts, may also contribute to the insider attack issue.[30] In the case of powerful grievances, a number of specific events have been cited in Taliban statements during the period of March 2011 to March 2012. These events listed below are prominent examples that the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (The Afghan Taliban) has exploited to incite revenge attacks through both conventional attacks on NATO personnel as well as insider attacks:

- March 2011 – Koran burning at church in Gainsville, Florida, US
- September 2011 – U.S. Kill Team incident (Logar Province)
- October 2011 – UN Report on NATO Detention Centers
- January 2012 – Alleged molestation of Afghan youth by British troops
- January 2012 – Desecration of insurgents by US Marine Corps Personnel
- February 2012 – Desecration of Koran at Bagram Airbase
- March 2012 – Panjhwai, Kandahar Massacre by a US Army Sergeant

In addition, many other incidents are cited in Taliban propaganda; prisoner mistreatment at the Pul-e-Charki detention facility; ongoing civilian casualties; and drone strikes (related to civilian casualties) in particular have become prominent. In many cases, statements celebrating historical events were also manipulated as go-to propaganda material between the above listed events. These were also augmented by Mullah Omar's annual Eid-Al-Adha and Eid-Al-Fitr statements which capitalized on both baseline and evolving narratives during the period.

The exploitation of grievances by insurgent groups is nothing new. However, in the tribal-based culture of Afghanistan where blood-feuds and cultural-based mores such as Pashtunwali predominate, grievances are highly exacerbated when compared to more secular societies contending with an insurgency. Whether or not VSO has effectively mitigated grievance-based events through close working relationships between VSO personnel, local Afghans, and local ANSF is difficult to determine in a holistic sense although successful cases of grievance mitigation may exist. The motivation for insider attacks includes prominent grievances listed above in a macro-sense but also on micro and personal-levels. In sum, therefore, evolving trends in messaging from the period of January 2011 through January 2013 are based primarily in the exploitation of grievances that are tempered and shaped by baseline and historical narratives described above. The Taliban have also evolved its brand through innovative, technologically-based dissemination practices for its propaganda, such as Social Media, and this is a growing trend. Additionally, the Taliban have sought to portray themselves as a more flexible, and open-minded organization with regard to education and negotiations.

As 2011 and 2012 progressed, however, events on the ground discredited Taliban claims and narratives of being more moderate when compared to earlier periods of time. This is demonstrated by continued attacks on schools, continued undermining of progressive rights for women, and continued public executions meted out by Taliban shadow justice systems. These justice systems are prevalent and operate in provinces close to Kabul. They also prominently exist in the light of day in Nuristan Province

and Kunar Province, particularly in the Pech Valley and its tributary valleys such as the Korengal Valley. These shadow justice systems demonstrate how the Taliban subvert GIRoA by out-administering it and are indicative of how the Taliban remain a rigorously brutal organization. As Bernard Fall observed during the French-Indochina and Vietnam Wars, the ability to out-administer a government is a notoriously difficult political problem that presents a complex set of security issues.

TALIBAN PERSPECTIVES ON ARBAKIS AND VILLAGE STABILITY OPERATIONS

Arbakis are independent local militias that are more widely known as Afghan Local Police (ALP). The ALP is an organization under the supervision of the Afghan Ministry of the Interior officially, although there is a much looser organizational tie between the ALP and the Afghan Ministry of the Interior when compared to the Afghan National Police (ANP) and the Ministry of the Interior. Many Arbakis are drawn from districts in which VSO and its related operations are conducted. They are also incorporated into local operations in an ad-hoc manner by ANSF (i.e. the Afghan official army) which partially explains the desire on the part of NATO forces to more effectively and officially develop Arbakis as local security providers. The often disjointed incorporation of Arbakis into operations has been consistently problematic as Arbakis are, in some cases, relatives of the Taliban and are widely known to abuse local communities. Paul Wood discussed the incorporation of Arbakis into an operation in Baghlan Province, which was led by Afghan Army General Mahamood Daoud Daoud: "He [Daoud] had one last thing to say: 'Don't worry. I will send our police [the ANP], not the local police, not the Arbakis.' That last part was important. According to one estimate, 80 percent of the Taliban fight within walking distance of their homes. This is a local insurgency, often with local causes: a corrupt district governor, predatory police, or abuses by the local militias, the Arbakis. Many people would rather live under Taliban rule than have to deal with the local police and the militias, one human rights campaigner in Kabul explained to me."[31]

While this short excerpt is anecdotal, it is indicative of a larger problem. This problem is that Arbakis are problematic in the rural-based insurgency of Afghanistan despite their latent role as a component to the overall security of a local area. Due to their practical tendency to switch allegiances to the Taliban, or to official GIRoA security forces when it suits their interests, gaining a more viable commitment from Arbakis to GIRoA is important. In such tribal societies as Afghanistan, shifting of alliances is common, especially among Pashtun tribes. However, in an attempt to develop and increase local forces' commitments to GIRoA, the VSO program was initiated. As a recent analysis of VSO describes, "VSO involves embedded SOF [US Special Operations Forces]-led teams conducting intense village engagement with the goal of stabilizing the village and connecting them to the Afghan government. SOF-led teams affect a 'bottom-up' solution to security gaps by growing ALP forces from local resources."[32] Importantly, VSO is driven by an overall conceptual sequence in line with counterinsurgency precepts:

- The shape phase begins with an assessment of candidate villages and ends with SOF elements embedded inside the village. Key accomplishments include assessing, mapping, and engaging village elders to gain entry into the village.
- The hold phase focuses on protecting the population. This phase includes building and training the ALP, and teaching ALP how to resist insurgent influence.
- The build phase focuses on linking rural villages to their government via the district.
- The transition phase focuses on village leadership connected to the district leadership, and the local populace supporting their new ALP.[33]

As a program, VSO may be modified according to local circumstances but clearly requires supervision and relationship building through training and capabilities such as Foreign Internal Defense (FID) conducted by US Special Forces. In a comparative sense, VSO shares similarities with the United States Marine Corps' efforts during the Vietnam War through the Combined Action Patrol program.[34] Regarding the relationship between VSO forces and ALP/Arbakis, useful historical perspectives could further be drawn by the development of a comparative analysis between the Combined Action Patrol/ Vietnamese Popular Forces and Arbakis/VSO forces. This recommendation aside, there are many papers written describing VSO and analyzing its capabilities. However, what is the Taliban's perspective on Arbakis and VSO efforts?

Drawing from the author's analytical database, readers may recall the database sample consists of 192 Taliban propaganda artifacts. Of that sample, 33 directly refer to Arbakis and local militias sponsored and trained by NATO personnel. There are numerous other artifacts within the general theme of anti-collaboration and anti-GIRoA narratives, but these do not explicitly or indirectly reference VSO or Arbakis. Of the 33 samples that do specifically refer to Arbakis, it is useful to draw attention to a selection of the most prominent Taliban statements that specifically condemn Arbakis and VSO-related efforts. On 17 December, 2011, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan published an article through its website entitled, "Statement of the Islamic Emirate Regarding the Expansion of Local Militias by the Invaders." While it is one of many Taliban statements that condemn Arbakis, and the training of local militia through VSO, it best represents primary thematic content of the Taliban's perspective on this subject: "One of these infamous processes is the creation of 'Arbakis' which was also used as a war stratagem by the stooge regime at the time of the Soviet invasion for its own survival and for fragmenting the united Afghan people. The atrocities perpetrated by the 'Gilam Jam' and other hired militias is vividly remembered by every Afghan. The Russians created these hired militias yesterday under the name of tribal contingents and the defeated America is trying to create and expand it under the banner of local police and 'Arbaki'. The purpose behind this colonial process by both Russia and America is one and the same which is to strike Afghans by the hands of Afghans; the continuation of its stooge regime and then utilizing them to commit those crimes which they are no longer able to do themselves. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan condemns this ominous plan of the enemy with the strongest of words and considers it as a push of our country towards destruction. We shall take every viable step in order to stop this program and alongside this we call on all the international human right groups and organizations to prevent the occupying countries from leaving behind discord in our country as they face defeat."[35]

This statement is important in many regards. First, it invokes comparisons between NATO and the Soviet Union and describes both as invaders. Second, it seeks to portray Arbakis and other NATO-sponsored forces as mercenaries that may be potentially manipulated by warlord elements. A related portrayal is depicting Arbakis as lackeys of what the Taliban considers an apostate organization, the Afghan government of GIRoA, led by Hamid Karzai. The resurgence of the Taliban in 2005 and 2006, after their dismantling in late 2001 and early 2002, is worth considering further and has bearing on the development of Arbakis. After the initial defeat of the Taliban and the subsequent disbanding of the Northern Alliance, warlords and their militias became increasingly predatory among Afghan communities. This is a recurring problem in Afghan history and it was a particularly notorious problem during the civil war that occurred after the Soviet Union departed Afghanistan. It should be remembered that the Taliban initially came about as a militia organized to thwart predatory former Mujahideen warlords in Kandarhar Province. Ironically, the Taliban re-emerged in 2006 as a formidable organization in order to, once again, thwart local warlords and re-establish Sharia and Taliban governance in communities, particularly in Pashtun-dominated areas. Giustozzi's work on the Neo-Taliban's resurgence in Paktia Province focuses on this ironic and important phenomenon.[36]

When considering larger historical trends, the United States may be viewed as just one more actor, although a powerful one, in a recurring, political, Afghan tragedy. However, the United States' efforts, in developing Arbakis through VSO, acts as an intervening force that plays an important role in Afghanistan, and one with historical, culturally accepted, antecedents. Arbakis, in the past, have acted as private militias for local power brokers, and are now a factor that currently contests the Taliban for power at local levels; it is this resource into which VSO taps. However, Arbakis are not currently recruited through adequate vetting processes nor are their allegiances clearly delineated. This is demonstrated through incidents of Arbaki/ALP-led insider attacks which deserve military leadership and policy-makers' attention.[37] In one sense, the Islamic Emirate's statement cited above is credible in its portrayal of Arbakis as mercenary forces that de-stabilize local Afghan communities and as forces manipulated and controlled by local warlords. As Rustam Qobil describes Arbakis, "Many ordinary Afghan people are terrified of them. They say the commanders extort money and food, grab land, assault people – and sometimes kill."[38] This portrayal of Arbakis is promoted by the Taliban through its narrative of anti-collaboration. Based on articles such as Qobil's, the Taliban's branding of itself as a force

to counter predatory militias is credible. At the very least, it is a negative indicator for sustainable conflict resolution in Afghanistan. In some cases, it may cause average Afghans to question which is worst, Arbakis or the Taliban?

This problem is demonstrated further by a November 2012 article about GIRoA's Minister of Energy and Water, Ismail Khan. In the article, Khan, a former Mujahideen leader and former member of the Northern Alliance, called for a reorganization of the Mujahideen to fight the Taliban once NATO forces leave Afghanistan in 2016. The article is noteworthy because Khan, himself a member of the GIRoA-government, is essentially conducting recruitment speeches for organizing militias outside of GIRoA-control and in very public forums.[39] As is well-known among analysts focused on Afghanistan, Ismail Khan, Ahmad Shah Masood, Rashid Dostum, and others, fought the Taliban as members of the Northern Alliance prior to events of September 11. Except for Masood, they continue to contest the Taliban politically as current members of GIRoA's administration. In Dostum's case, he was a vice presidential candidate for presidential candidate Ashraf Ghani during the 2014 presidential elections in Afghanistan. Returning to the figure of Ismail Khan and his speech that called for a return of the Mujahideen to fight the Taliban, Khan's speech provides a strong indication that renewed civil war could reignite if NATO completely withdraws from Afghanistan and is unable to provide stability. Regardless of potential civil war occurring or not, Khan's statements certainly do not indicate faith in GIRoA's capability to withstand the Taliban through its centralized military should NATO completely withdraw from Afghanistan. The promotion of Arbakis sponsored by the GIRoA and NATO, despite their endemic presence in Afghan society, is potentially a counter to Taliban power but also, as discussed, a problematic option.

Returning to Taliban perspectives on Arbakis and the ALP, an interview with Jalaluddin Haqqani, the leader of the insurgent group, the Haqqani Network, presents a Taliban-oriented perspective. The article was originally published in the magazine *Al-Samood* and re-disseminated through the Islamic Emirate's website on May 4, 2011. In the article, Haqqani targets Arbakis and "awaking councils". Haqqani's statement notably indicates that he regards these efforts (which are a primary objective of VSO) as threatening. One pertinent excerpt from the interview

states: Question: "Your excellency sheikh! The Americans and their allies speak of changing their strategy in Afghanistan after the passage of more than seven years. Additionally, the global media has turned the eyes of the people to the rumor of negotiations being conducted between the Taliban Movement and the lackey Karazi government. What is your view of this issue?" Answer: "Yes! After more than seven years, the Americans understand that their current strategy in Afghanistan is ineffective and must be changed. It appears that these changes include different aspects which are: First: Increasing the number of American troops deployed in Afghanistan. Second: Sowing ethnic disputes among the Afghan tribes and clans and pitting some against others, or establishing ethnic awakening (councils) among them. Third: Conduct negotiations with the Mujahideen. They have pursued these first two items for a long time but they have not yielded any positive results worth mentioning. Now they are trying to implement the third item, which is to negotiate with the Mujahideen."[40]

In the top right: *Tanweer* (magazine name). The text begins with "another bright star of Jihad and preach passed away". The martyrdom story of Mohammad Asif Mukhbat by one of his companions; Cultural Jihad against communism and crusade; America to implement (remainder of text illegible to translator); Mujahiden and the concept of revenge; How Americans reached Osama? A number of propaganda magazines were a common method of disseminating messages and news. Examples included Inspire, *Al-Samood* and *Tanweer* but social media has often replaced them. Source: *Tanweer* (Hezb-e-Islami Magazine), 21 May 2011.

This example indicates a clear awareness of VSO-related efforts by the Taliban. The fact that Haqqani references them in terms of "awakening councils" is also a possible indicator of their impact. More generally, it is a straightforward condemnation of GIRoA collaborators by Haqqani which certainly includes the training of Arbakis/ALP. When Haqqani's statement is considered in context of former anti-Taliban leaders such as Ismail Khan, noted above, a possible trajectory towards civil war in which GIRoA unravels is certainly plausible. Regarding the interview statement with Haqqani, it is also worth noting that it is one of several statements issued by the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan that focus on the region of Paktika, Paktya, and Khost Provinces. In the period of January through May 2011, a total of five statements focusing on this region were issued through the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan's web-site. This specific focus is notable and it is likely due to this region's importance as NATO sought to increase the "hold" and "build" stages of the VSO effort in these provinces. A statement released on January 31, 2011 is one example that exclusively focused on Paktika. That statement is titled "A Brief Glance at the Jihadist Situation in Paktika Province." A useful citation from this detailed statement is provided here: "Despite all the efforts of the enemy to control Paktika Province and annihilate the Mujahideen, the Mujahideen, through the grace of the All-powerful and Omnipotent, have liberated a large area of this province from the filth of occupations and its lackeys. The flag of the Islamic Emirate flutters in the sky over 85% of the lands of Paktika, praise be to Allah. The occupiers and their lackeys have become besieged in their bases and even the areas adjacent to these bases are under the control of the Mujahideen."[41]

This excerpt, along with the entire statement, is assessed to be a defensive narrative. This may indicate that VSO implementation and ALP development in Paktika was perceived as a threat to the Taliban. Due to increased efforts on the part of the NATO Forces, which was deployed to Paktika, Paktya, and Khost Provinces during the time period of 2010 through early 2011 and their development and implementation of VSO in those provinces, there may be a correlation between NATO VSO efforts and the Taliban's statements regarding that area of Regional Command-East.[42]

ASSESSMENT OF VILLAGE STABILITY OPERATIONS AND CONCLUSION

VSO attempts to address one of the most problematic tasks of counterinsurgency in Afghanistan: encouraging Afghans' acceptance of, and allegiance to, the supported government of GIRoA. Additionally, VSO contributes to effective Counter-Terrorist efforts (CT) through gathering critical intelligence at local levels. This process of building relationships and trust with local Afghans, while simultaneously developing a capacity to conduct intelligence-driven operations through partnering with local forces, is a hallmark of counterinsurgency efforts.[43] As a matter of contrast, it is worthwhile to briefly consider differences between the US Marine Corps and the US Army when undertaking village-centered pacification efforts. Historically, the US Marine Corps has successfully instituted pacification programs such as the Combined Action Patrol (CAP) Program which operated in Vietnam from 1965 to 1972.

In the *Small War Journal*, Brooks Brewington describes the history and success of the US Marines' pacification programs. He also compares the Marine's efforts with the pacification work conducted by the US Army during the Vietnam War. The differences he analyzes are based on organizational differences as well as the Marines' more extensive historical experience with such programs. He also notes: "The historical background of Army and Marine counterinsurgency operations, the perceived enemy center of gravity in Vietnam, the strategic aim, and identified critical enemy factors are key to understanding Marine versus Army operational differences in conducting the 'Other War'."[44] These contrasts indicate gaps between the organizations' approaches to counterinsurgency. They may also indicate areas and opportunities for greater sharing of institutional memory, historical studies, and lessons learned.

In the case of the US Army, one of their critical areas of operation in 2011 and 2012 consisted of the important provinces of Paktika, Paktya, and Khost in eastern Afghanistan. With the development of VSO in these provinces, the pacification program demonstrated a positive trajectory in the achievement of security at local levels.[45] Further, the development of VSO also indicates key lessons learned from the Marines' success with historical antecedents such as CAP.

Indeed, the most significant feature of VSO is the emphasis on partnering with host-nation security forces, and assessing local needs and unique village-specific characteristics. Also, it emphasizes implementing relevant forces as needed to achieve clearly defined goals in the VSO unit's area of operations. These are elements that the US Army has successfully harnessed in areas such as Paktika, Paktya and Khost Provinces.

Organizational challenges exist, however. For example, VSO should further include Department of State personnel to help advise and implement bilateral NATO and GIRoA-led governance initiatives from village to district levels of administration. In turn, more robust links between district and provincial support nodes are needed. VSO is also dependent on consistent deployments of personnel who remain at specific village sites to ensure that they transition to GIRoA-supported governance in a viable and sustainable manner. This is currently problematic due to the small numbers of Special Operations personnel available. Further, dismantling of the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) program also creates a vacuum in the deliverance of development programs. For VSO, problems persist that both directly and indirectly affect and challenge its potential positive impact. Foremost of these challenges are grievances, especially civilian casualties, which are caused by NATO and fuel the Taliban's portrayal of NATO as an occupation force. Tension between President Karzai and the US leadership also complicates and undermines trust between Afghans and US military personnel and may additionally contribute to insider attacks.[46]

Village Stability Operations (VSO), in conclusion, serve as a positive model that incorporates many hallmarks and characteristics of successful counterinsurgency theory and practice. While it certainly has limitations, it deserves further analysis for other, future contingency operations, even if no longer employed in Afghanistan after 2014. Evidence gathered through the Taliban's statements and propaganda efforts indicate that VSO has achieved success. These positive efforts, however, may be of a limited nature and at the district level within provinces, especially in southeastern Afghanistan. Still, long-term obstacles that may prevent the Taliban from reasserting itself in Afghanistan will primarily depend on the credibility of the Afghan Government and its ability to extend its reach to key provinces and districts. The lack of political unity among a struggling government, as we have seen in Iraq during 2014, serves as a dire warning and should be heeded in the case of Afghanistan. VSO and other pacification programs are important, but, unfortunately, have little discernible impact on political processes in Kabul and VSO success remains at local levels.

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