

The Battle for Hearts and Minds in Afghanistan: the effectiveness of Taliban Information Operations and related communications activities

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1. Introduction

...in one particular area [the Taliban have] had the better of 2008: information operations. They've beaten us to the punch on numerous occasions, and by doing so they've magnified the sense of difficulty and diminished the sense of progress. This is down in part to their skill, and in part to our own failings.

UK Chief of the Defence Staff, Air Chief Marshal Sir Jock Stirrup, December 2008.¹

In June 2007, the Stockholm International Peace Institute published a paper entitled “The Taliban’s propaganda activities: how well is the Afghan insurgency communicating and what is it saying?”² In it, it warned that, although Taliban communications strategies were not as sophisticated as many claimed, Taliban propaganda was not only aiding the insurgency campaign, but it also had real potential to improve. Since then, the communications arena has remained a crucial battleground in which the Taliban continue to make significant gains. The efforts of NATO and ISAF to counter such activity are frequently hampered by poor coordination, lack of understanding, a lack of pro-activity and the need to continually and painstakingly correct, check and confirm information before it can be released. The Taliban’s messages are simple, direct and generally well tuned in to local language, culture and popular grievances and they are also growing to understand and exploit the value of impact of wider, strategic messages and transmitting their statements beyond Afghanistan’s borders and into the international community to their opponents and supporters alike.

The earlier paper suggested the following ways in which the Taliban’s communications activities were likely to improve:

1. More effective and articulate media use, with more effective use of the Internet.
2. Combat actions on the ground coordinated with messages designed to influence the international community.
3. Better quality and content of video productions focusing on wider issues.
4. Better coordination of messages (with positive as well as negative incentives to the population) and better response to incidents.
5. More sophistication: growing understanding of the wider world and how to influence it—targeting particular nations, governments or NGOs—even civilian or military individuals.
6. Increased inclination to discuss wider political and strategic issues when challenged.
7. Increasing use of media methods used by Iraqi insurgents and other violent Islamic networks. This could involve more TV interviews, as well as staging incidents of kidnapping and torture.³

With the possible exception of a readiness to discuss wider issues, all these improvements have taken place – in part at least. More improvements along the same

¹ ‘Afghanistan: a journey, not a destination’, taken from a speech at the Royal United Services Institute, <http://www.govnet.co.uk/publications/defence/articles/afghanistan-a-journey-not-a-destination>

² Foxley, T., ‘The Taliban’s propaganda activities: how well is the Afghan insurgency communicating and what is it saying?’ *SIPRI Project Paper*, June 2007, <http://www.sipri.org/contents/conflict/foxleytaliban>

³ Foxley, T., ‘The Taliban’s propaganda activities: how well is the Afghan insurgency communicating and what is it saying?’ *SIPRI Project Paper*, June 2007, <http://www.sipri.org/contents/conflict/foxleytaliban>

lines are likely over the next few years. Although, at the local level, talking simply and directly to local tribal communities and young Afghan and Pakistani would-be Jihadis, is likely to have some positive results for the Taliban, it is hard to avoid the conclusion, when looking at Taliban IO activities in the round, that Taliban IO is still unsurprising, unimaginative and limited. Furthermore, there are numerous clues, in the IO strategies they employ, as to their weaknesses and vulnerabilities.

However, there is one crucial problem in our understanding and analysis of Taliban IO. Although it is quite easy to identify the media employed by the Taliban for their messages and relatively straightforward to collate and analyse the messages contained therein, it seems to this author to be extremely difficult to judge with any degree of certainty *just how effective are these messages?* This thought will be developed in more detail in this paper.

Furthermore, perhaps the biggest and most decisive IO weapon the Taliban possess is indirect: it is the almost entirely unintentional assistance the insurgency gets from the international media from a number of levels and from a variety of directions. Public political debates, media interviews with experts, academics and the Taliban, the airing of arguments and disagreements, concerns of the international community, statements from politicians, soldiers, NGOs, diplomats, the international institutions working in Afghanistan, the Afghan government and a wide range of academic and analytical articles. And this is not to say that these reports, statements and articles are wrong, but it may be helpful to understand and recognise that this arena is where most of the real IO work is being done for the Taliban – and with minimal Taliban effort. What the international community sees as full, frank and constructive discussion about genuine problems, the Afghan populace and the Taliban insurgency are perhaps more to be seeing as admissions of failure, weakness and reluctance to commit fully to Afghanistan. The Taliban are benefiting from a distortion of perceptions caused by this intensive and critical international airing of the issues. Opinion polls continue to highlight the unpopularity of the Taliban but a growing frustration and weariness with the international community effort.

The purpose of this paper is to build on the findings of the June 2007 paper and look at Taliban information operations strategies, particularly over the period 2007—2009, to examine how the Taliban have been developing and what their strengths and weaknesses might now be. It will also look at responses and strategies from the international community before making conclusions and recommendations as to the likely future direction for the communications war in Afghanistan. As a final caveat regarding my usage of terminology ('information operations', 'propaganda' and 'hearts and minds'), it remains as difficult as ever to define what the Taliban do as they attempt to communicate goals, objectives, threats, warnings and strategic statements and a range of other pieces of information. These terms have been used lightly where it is felt they might helpfully explain or scene-set. But any analysis of Taliban Information Operations very quickly spills into discussions on propaganda, hearts and minds, perception management, methods of media communication and the insurgent's combat operations themselves. It remains important to beware of the analytical risks implicit in assigning attributes and definitions to Taliban actions that would only really be appropriate to Western military and political understanding and practise. It is hard to see evidence the Taliban have an Information Operations 'doctrine' and a lot of what they do appears to be as driven by unfolding events as ISAF is.

2. Background

It is not the intention of this paper to re-examine in detail the origins of the Taliban's propaganda and information activities, but it is necessary to highlight some of the main factors at play in shaping the evolution of Taliban communications activity. The religious students of the original Afghan Taliban were the dislocated creations of the madrassas and refugee camps in north west Pakistan. Their religious ideology was a mutated and extreme version of Islam and their understanding of the wider world beyond the culture and traditions of the Pushtun tribes from which by far the majority of the Taliban originated was extremely limited. In essence, the Taliban 'world view' has been shaped by a combination of limiting factors: limited access to media, education, ideas of governance and conflict resolution, access to other countries and a limited tolerance of people of different ethnic, cultural, religious or geographic origin. Since their removal from power, the initially anti-modern Taliban have recognized that modern technology and media can be useful for their insurgency. At the end of 2001, the Taliban's crudely structured, but loosely conventional, military power was destroyed by a combination of a US-led international coalition and an indigenous Afghan coalition.⁴

What, in 2009, we now see as an effective insurgency was, in 2002-2003 a fragmented and incoherent movement. The speed of the Taliban's defeat had left them demoralised and there was perhaps even uncertainty as to their future in Pakistan given Musharraf's public siding with the US in the "War on Terror". If there was a significant opportunity to engage with the Taliban and bring them into the political arena it was probably then. These groups slowly regained strength and confidence between 2002 and 2005, primarily because they were allowed to regroup in the relative safe haven of the Pakistani Tribal Areas and, as they attempted to move back into Afghanistan they found that the Afghan government reach into the provinces was extremely weak.

From a limited base of knowledge and willingness, the broken remnants of the Taliban administration that was later to become a Taliban insurgency struggled from the outset to communicate. From a belief system that had actively rejected many of the trappings and processes of quick and effective communications, they had to learn to promote their ideology and values, to develop propaganda approaches and make statements and appeals to the hearts and minds of opponents, supports and potential supports of their movement. The Taliban have had to make some compromises and, as a result, have made some significant strides forward. Now, Taliban propaganda activities play an important part in shaping perception and support both inside and outside Afghanistan. Their efforts are becoming more effective each year. While Taliban efforts may not always secure direct support for the Taliban, they are helping their military and political goals in a number of ways.

A developing combination of "Hearts and Minds", information operations and propaganda activities is continuing to undermine the resolve of the population by confusing and casting doubts over the effectiveness of the international community and Afghan government's efforts. Taliban communications methods include old and new techniques and have been making use of a growing range of media and communications resources: (a) fax, telephone, mobile phone and satellite telephone;

⁴ Foxley, T., 'The Taliban's propaganda activities: how well is the Afghan insurgency communicating and what is it saying?' *SIPRI Project Paper*, June 2007, <<http://www.sipri.org/contents/conflict/foxleytaliban>

(b) radio and TV; (c) newspapers; (d) ‘night letters’; (e) direct contact with the population; (f) CDs/DVDs/videotapes; and (g) websites and the internet.

3. Analysis of recent Taliban IO strategies

The Taliban have strengths and weaknesses in their approach to information operations. In terms of strengths, they come from the same tribal and cultural base as their key target audience – the Pushtun tribes on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistan border. This gives them a significant advantage over ISAF and the international community as a whole. The Taliban do not have the same pressures that ISAF have to be accurate in their statements and claims and they present powerful and easy to understand messages to local audiences, portraying the international community as ‘infidels’ that cause collateral damage and threaten customs and livelihoods. Furthermore, the Taliban show potential to improve in their understanding of the international community and therefore ways in which they might better apply their IO activity—they appear to be learning, albeit slowly, from international media techniques. And finally, it seems easier for the Taliban to judge what impact they may be having with their IO campaigns specifically, by monitoring international media and the debates in national and international political and military circles—all of which are freely available to anyone with a laptop and internet access.

However, the Taliban still have some significant weaknesses and they are often in a position where they have to react to events, just as much as ISAF does. Taliban messages are frequently uncoordinated and contradictory. From their website claims and statements they continue to demonstrate an obsession with ‘body count’ and there is little if any attempt to address any issues that might be of interest to Afghans wanting more in their life beyond more conflict, such as education, accountable government, law and order, medical care, reconstruction and employment. They do not deal well with negative PR and have a suspicion of the international media that hampers their understanding of it and thus their efforts to exploit it.

What strategies have the Taliban employed and how effective have they been?

It is perhaps easy to identify Taliban IO strategies but, relatively speaking, much more difficult to assess how effective they are. In support of Mullah Omar’s stated Taliban objective that ‘foreign troops should leave Afghanistan and then the institutions they created should be dismantled’, Taliban Information Operations continue to try to undermine support for the international community and the Afghan government in a number of ways.⁵

Use of spokesmen to make claims, statements and to generally promulgate the Taliban message

Much Taliban communication activity comes through the use of spokesmen and this has been a standard Taliban method for communicating at the national, regional and international level. Spokesmen have come and gone – some arrested or killed – and it has remained difficult to confirm exactly who is purporting to speak for the Taliban, particularly where spokesmen’s statements are made via the internet. The names of the two current main spokesmen are given as Qari Muhammad Yousuf and

⁵ Khan, I., ‘Omar threatens to intensify war: Talks with Karzai govt ruled out’, *Dawn*, 4 Jan. 2007, <http://www.dawn.com/2007/01/04/top4.htm>.

Zabihullah Mujahid and both apparently pass messages, claims and information via telephone, radio and e-mail. Sometimes they will give longer statements or interviews and this is where contradictions and weaknesses in their messages can come to light. In a 45 minute pre-recorded radio phone-in interview with the BBC World Service in November 2008, Zabihullah Mujahid fielded a range of questions, mostly by avoidance or denial.⁶

Q: Would you allow al-Qaeda back in to Afghanistan if you were in power?

A: We cannot talk about that now, we are at war.

Q: What are your views on drugs?

A: We have never got money from drugs, we will never use drug money, we are against poppy.⁷

Q: What about education for women?

A: Now we are not in power. When we are in power we will decide after looking at conditions at the time.

Q: Are there any scope for negotiations with the Taliban?

A: Foreign troops must leave first and then talks can take place.

In other aspects of their IO campaign, the Taliban demonstrate an increasing understanding of the value of communicating to the international audience. Having gained unique access to a genuinely worldwide audience, the Taliban's inability or unwillingness to expound on their views, on this occasion at least, must be judged ineffective and a 'missed opportunity' for the Taliban.

Leadership/website statements

There has been an increasing use of statements attributable to the Taliban leadership – often promulgated via the internet. The subject matter covers a range of issues – NATO's failure to provide more soldiers, the US economic crisis, restrictions on the use of mobile phones for the Afghan population, treatment of Taliban prisoners.⁸ They particularly reflect a growing understanding of international politics and the value of being able to influence it. One particular address, attributed to Mullah Omar on the occasion of Eid and aimed at Taliban fighters, the Afghan population, Afghan government security forces, the surrounding region and the international community, was striking and of interest on a number of levels. Articulate and inspiring, it demonstrated a growing sense of confidence and developing understanding of the international community and their difficulties in Afghanistan is tangible - he even offers ISAF 'safe passage' to withdraw.

⁶ Author's notes (heavily paraphrasing) from a radio broadcast, BBC World Service, World Have Your Say interview with Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid, 13 Nov. 2008, <http://worldhaveyoursay.wordpress.com/2008/11/13/on-air-the-taliban-answer-your-questions/>.

⁷ UNODC press release, 'Drugs finance Taliban war machine, says UN drug tsar' quoting the Executive Director of UNODC, Antonio Maria Costa: 'With so much drug-related revenue, it is not surprising that the insurgents' war machine has proven so resilient, despite the heavy pounding by Afghan and allied forces', 27 Nov. 2008, <http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/press/releases/2008-11-27.html>

⁸ For a good flavour of the range of topics now being addressed by the Taliban, see <http://www.theunjustmedia.com/Afghanistan/Mujahideen%20operations/Homepage%20Mujahideen%20operations%20and%20Statements%20from%20Afghanistan.htm>

To quote a section:

...The current situation of our country are clear signs of Allah's help. America which never ever imagined its defeat due to its technological advancement, now everyday it welcomes the coffins of its soldiers and is facing great life and monetary losses. A few years back no one would have conceived that US and its allies will face such resistance in Afghanistan, which will compel their president to beg other countries to provide economical, military equipment and soldiers assistance to combat the resistance, furthermore no one is prepared to bring to light this unique development...This reality reveals the good news to the Ummah that if we adhere to our beliefs in our Lord and stick to the goals with one voice, than the day is near when these foreign intruders will run away. That destiny is very near now...⁹

The message to the Taliban fighters (or perhaps those opposed to the ISAF presence) is effectively: 'stay with it, we are winning'. With a clear awareness of media and presentational issues, it included strong warnings to Taliban fighters to avoid targeting/killing Afghan civilians – perhaps confirming Taliban sensitivities on this issue and suggesting an awareness that the international forces might be losing popularity as a result of their own misdirected air strikes. There was an intriguing appeal to 'those elders who call themselves Mujahideen'—perhaps suggesting an outreach to warlords and former members of the Northern Alliance—and calls for vigilance against ISAF 'trickeries'—which Omar seems to equate with ISAF/Afghan government media claims and assertions. In statements, the Taliban have appeared over-sensitive to charges of causing casualties amongst the Afghan populace and, more recently, suggestions that elements of the Taliban may be talking to the Afghan government.

Battle damage – claims of losses inflicted on international and Afghan government security forces

The Taliban have continued their practise of making unverifiable, highly inflated and even apparently completely fictitious claims of losses inflicted on their opponents.¹⁰ Taliban claims are interesting and worthy of study as they can give clues as to what the Taliban themselves think is important and important to have achieved. Their website—and those sites that carry Taliban messages—routinely claim to have killed ten, twenty, even thirty Afghan and international security force personnel, along with perhaps 2—4 'tanks' on a daily basis. The obsession with 'body count' criticism that is often levelled at ISAF could be much more accurately applied to the Taliban. The sheer numbers involved in the Taliban claims appear – to have increased significantly over the last two years. The most probable explanation for this is that given the numbers, size and scale of genuine incidents increase, so do the number of exaggerated claims. But, ironically, some of their claims are now so inflated that genuine incidents where ISAF have suffered multiple casualties can be overshadowed

⁹ Statement attributed to Mullah Omar, 30 Sep. 2008, <http://www.theunjustmedia.com/Afghanistan/Statements/Sep08/The%20pleasure%20of%20Eid%20al-Fitr.htm>

¹⁰ By way of comparison, icasualties.org identifies six British military personnel killed by hostile action in January 2009 (<http://icasualties.org/oef/byNationality.aspx?hndOry=UK>) and a website that regularly carries Taliban battle reports claims to have killed approximately 154 British personnel over the same one month period, (<http://www.theunjustmedia.com/Afghanistan/Mujahideen%20operations/Homepage%20Mujahideen%20Operations%20and%20Statements%20from%20Afghanistan.htm>). There may be some merit in the humorous comment made to the author by one former ISAF commander that Afghan numbers should be divided by ten and then halved to get the more accurate figure.

by fictitious Taliban claims.¹¹ This might actually undermine the Taliban's opportunities to capitalise on some undoubted military victories.

Highlighting of collateral damage caused by ISAF – in particular the use of air strikes

A strategy that does appear to be gathering momentum has been the highlighting of civilian casualties caused by ISAF in the course of counter-insurgency operations – in particular the damage that may or may not have been caused by ISAF use of airpower. The Taliban have, until recently, had no effective counter to ISAF's dominance of the skies and the devastating firepower that has caused the deaths of hundreds—if not thousands—Taliban fighters.¹² This is a reactive solution to a genuine problem for the Taliban who have now seen how friction between the Afghan government and ISAF can be created.¹³ They have also recognised that ISAF operations can probably be slowed or made more dangerous for ISAF as restrictions on the use of air power increase.¹⁴ Reports strongly suggest that reports of civilian casualties are being faked or exaggerated and Taliban are deliberately choosing buildings occupied by civilians from which to launch attacks. The difficulty for ISAF is that they do, from time to time, cause collateral damage and civilian deaths and it often takes a long time to sift through evidence to establish what actually happened and whether ISAF was in any part to blame. In the absence of Stinger missiles to drive airpower from the skies, the next best thing looks to be an information operation.¹⁵

However, because of the Taliban's focus on this issue, it is perhaps also possible to see suggestions of the Taliban's own problems and concerns regarding collateral damage. There remains a Taliban dilemma of killing Moslems in their attacks—particularly with suicide bomb attacks, which are much less discriminate in their targeting—and how to deal with this in a media context. In April 2007, the highly reputable international NGO, Human Rights Watch, accused the Taliban of indiscriminately targeting civilians.¹⁶ The Taliban's response then was to dismiss it as 'baseless disinformation and Western propaganda'. But at least one Taliban video subsequently purported to show an insurgent attack being called off because a civilian was in the line of fire and there have been several Taliban statements claiming they

¹¹ The Taliban battle statements for the day that ten French soldiers were killed (19 Aug. 2008) included claims to have killed: 54 Americans (and destroying 8 tanks and two helicopters), 11 Canadians, 6 British and 19 Afghan police. The Taliban claimed that 20 Frenchmen had been killed. <http://www.theunjustmedia.com/Afghanistan/Mujahideen%20operations/august08/19-08-08.htm>. By contrast, icasualties.org identifies only the ten French as ISAF casualties who died on that day (no data recorded for Afghan security forces), <http://icasualties.org/OEF/ByNationality.aspx>.

¹² Rashid, A. 'Nato's top brass accuse Pakistan over Taliban aid', quoted as: 'Nato officials now say they killed 1,100 Taliban fighters, not the 500 originally claimed. Hundreds of Taliban reinforcements in pick-up trucks who crossed over from Quetta – waved on by Pakistani border guards – were destroyed by Nato air and artillery strikes.' *The Daily Telegraph*, 6 Oct. 2006, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/1530756/Nato%27s-top-brass-accuse-Pakistan-over-Taliban-aid.html>

¹³ Boone, J., 'Karzai accuses US troops of killing civilians', *The Financial Times*, 26 Jan. 2009, http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/cadec530-eb4a-11dd-bb6e-0000779fd2ac.html?nclick_check=1

¹⁴ RFE/RL, 'NATO Troops To Retreat If Afghan Civilians At Risk', *Radio Free Europe*, 14 Oct. 2008, http://www.rferl.org/content/NATO_Troops_To_Retreat_If_Afghan_Civilians_At_Risk/1329749.html

¹⁵ An ISAF officer based in northern Afghanistan highlighted to the author incidents that he had direct knowledge of where claims for compensation appeared to have been falsified and in some cases Taliban forces might have been setting people up (through intimidation or bribes) to make some of these claims. Conversation with ISAF officer, summer 2008.

¹⁶ <http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2007/04/15/human-cost-0>

have been unfairly accused of causing civilian casualties—including an appeal for an independent body to investigate who has been causing such casualties.

Direct communiqués to individuals and nations in the international community

Direct communiqués—messages to individuals (such as US President Barack Obama) or nations (such as Canada and Korea) or to the international community as a whole have also risen in prominence. Most messages take the form of warnings or threats, but are sometimes phrased as appeals. The Taliban have started to understand the value of communicating in order to undermine the resolve of the international community's desire to remain in Afghanistan. The messages often attempt to bypass national governments and speak directly to the people of the nation concerned. However, their statements are very often reactive—and defensively so—to events that may have been beyond their control or that they feel may have damaged their image and credibility. The lack of effective language skills to speak to sophisticated audiences and the likelihood that the messages are not being particularly publicised by international media outlets, makes it difficult to see many of these communications as being particularly effective.

Another situation is worthy of closer examination. In an ambush in Logar province claimed by the Taliban on 13 August 2008, three unarmed female Western aid workers and their Afghan driver were shot and killed. On 17 August, the Taliban posted an open letter: 'to the Canadian people' about the incident and warning Canada not to continue its involvement in Afghanistan or to support 'the terrorists in [the] White House'. It was interesting to see the language used by the Taliban and the way it shifted over a four day period, in particular the way the Taliban spokesmen described the victims. Taliban's initial combat report—still available on at least one pro-Taliban website—described the incident as an ambush followed by a one hour firefight in which five Americans, including three women, were killed.¹⁷ The description went from 'terrorists' or 'spies', to 'soldiers' to 'female citizens', suggestive of some of the confusion the Taliban have in getting accurate information out and highlighting an apparent practice of creatively 'filling in the gaps' with stock phrases and descriptions ('terrorists', 'spies', 'their arms were booty'). Perhaps more significantly it probably also shows the recognition (perhaps because the Taliban spokesmen may have been in greater more demand for statements in the aftermath of this incident) that this was perhaps a more controversial incident that might impact upon the Taliban's international and local credibility.

Even so, the tone of the Taliban's open letter was not in any way conciliatory ('...we are not the aggressors but only reacting to what you have instigated...'). But there are also some interesting efforts to explain themselves and to appeal to Canada for understanding ('...if you freedom loving people were put in the same predicament, your reactions would be the same...you should not look at this incident in its isolation but look at the whole picture in trying to comprehend the atmosphere in Afghanistan in its totality...').

The Taliban have issued similar statements to clarify suggestions that they might have been at fault. In 2007, following the kidnapping of the South Koreans and media suggestions that they took payment in return for the hostages.¹⁸ In 2006 they stated

¹⁷ <http://www.theunjustmedia.com/Afghanistan/Mujahideen%20operations/august08/13-08-08.htm>

¹⁸ <http://www.theunjustmedia.com/Afghanistan/Statements/Islamic%20Emirate%20of%20Afghanistan%20statement%20concerning%20the%20Mainstream%20Media%20propaganda%20asserting%20that%20a%20som%20money%20was%20paid%20for%20the%20South%20Korean.htm>

that the blame for the collapse of the Musa Qala ‘deal’ in which British troops left the town in return for the peace to be kept by local elders (and, by implication, with Taliban consent) lay wholly with the British.¹⁹

‘Propaganda of the deed’ – high profile attacks and the attrition of regular small scale events

Arguably every military or terrorist action—or threat of action—attributed to the insurgency is, in some small way, an information operation. Taliban local IO—threats, warnings, night letters and other instructions—may only be effective if underpinned by more direct Taliban actions.

The Taliban have increased the size, scale and confidence of their attacks and choice of targets over the last two years. Reports on the number of insurgency-related security incidents in 2008 suggests an increase of between 40 and 50 per cent.²⁰ Kabul has had more than its fair share of security incidents because it is full of journalists, government, international forces and NGOs and almost certainly recognised by the Taliban as a valuable zone to make an impact in the media arena. Any incident gets a lot of media attention and is likely to be effective—disproportionate to the effort involved (usually only a handful of fighters)—in shaping the impression of the Taliban as a strategic and powerful force. On 14 January 2008, a suicide attack killed six in the supposedly well-protected Serena hotel. In April, President Karzai survived a rocket and small arms attack while he attended a Kabul military parade. The media footage of Afghan National Army soldiers running for cover on an important national day was probably the most successful Taliban information operation of 2008. NATO’s acting Senior Civilian Representative in Afghanistan, Ambassador Maurits R. Jochems, described the Taliban attack as ‘...militarily, not a very impressive operation...’, which was perhaps to miss the point. Most recently, in February 2009, three coordinated attacks, including suicide bombers, targeted government installations in the centre of the city, killing 20.

But effective and high profile Taliban ‘propaganda of the deed’ operations were not merely confined to urban areas and attacks of a more terrorist nature. The Taliban also improved their capabilities in more conventional attacks, killing 9 US soldiers in a coordinated and ‘complex’ assault that almost overran a small US army outpost in the eastern province of Konar and killing 10 French soldiers in a separate incident.²¹ A further attack—although a military failure for the Taliban as the attackers were identified and intercepted before they could get close—saw coordinated attacks of several suicide bombers attacking a US base in south-eastern Afghanistan. These incidents generated a myriad of very pessimistic assessments in the media about Afghanistan’s prospects.²²

¹⁹ <http://pda.kavkaz.tv/eng/content/2006/12/06/6712.shtml>

²⁰ Smith, G., ‘Taliban turning to more “complex” attacks’, *The Globe and Mail*, 26 Jan. 2009, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/story/RTGAM.20090126.wafghan26/BNStory/Afghanistan/home>

²¹ Rondeaux, C., ‘Nine U.S. Soldiers Killed in Firefight: Insurgents Attack E. Afghanistan Base’, *The Washington Post*, 14 July 2008, <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/story/2008/07/13/ST2008071302215.html> and ‘Afghan ambush kills French troops, BBC News, 19 Aug. 2008, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7569942.stm

²² Williams, M., ‘NATO flounders in Afghanistan’, *The Guardian*, 19 Aug. 2008, Lamb, C., ‘Taliban revival sets fear swirling through Kabul’, *The Sunday Times*, 28 Sep. 2008, Leithead, A., ‘Taliban at Kabul’s doorstep’, *BBC*, 13 Aug. 2008.

But it is not always clear whether the Taliban are driving the media agenda or reacting to events over which they have only limited control. In the past, the Taliban have quickly claimed attacks as their own work, only to make clumsy and naive retractions when it became apparent how many Afghan civilians had been killed.²³ In December 2008, Mullah Omar reportedly felt compelled to make the following statement in response to suggestions that the Taliban were engaged in talks in Saudi Arabia with the Afghan government:

Regarding the baseless rumours about negotiations...The enemy, or the media affiliated to it, directly spread rumours about talks between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and the opposition forces. However, the fact is that the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan has neither held talks in Saudi Arabia nor in the United Arab Emirates nor in any other place. I did not send a letter to the leader of the Islamic government of Saudi Arabia, the custodian of Haramain, Mr. Abdullah Bin Abdul Aziz, or to the opposition officials. Additionally, I have not received any formal message from any of the aforementioned entities. These reports are completely baseless and are part of a planned propaganda campaign created by the enemy.²⁴

In their statements, the Taliban have started to use the word ‘supply’ when talking about types of vehicles that they have attacked. This does not yet appear a widespread usage. It may be reflective of a wider Taliban military strategy to target NATO/ISAF supply lines—as seen by recent attacks on lorry parks and convoys of vehicles in Pakistan. More simply (and more likely, in this author’s view) it may be the Taliban recognition that this is what the international media has seized upon from a range of daily events and incidents and highlighted as a growing area of concern.

4. ISAF Information Operations and ISAF IO responses to the insurgency

...pedantic and rather naïve...

A former senior ISAF officer describes ISAF Information Operations in 2006-2007²⁵

Much of ISAF IO work is based around the promotion of ISAF and Afghan government narratives through TV, radio, internet, newsletters and face to face meetings. The work highlights ‘good news’ stories: a bridge built here, a school rebuilt there, a small child taken to hospital (perhaps injured by an ISAF air strike) in a military helicopter somewhere else. Expounding on key military and political developments, combined with exhortations to work with the government, resist corruption and avoid poppy cultivation also form strong themes. Other effort is devoted towards keeping its multinational contributions ‘on-message’, in other words,

²³ Mullah Dadullah: ‘...we will incorporate martyrdom-seeking operations in the new plan...As for the Spin Boldak [suicide] operation, it was the government that carried it out...This is not a martyrdom-seeking operation. Several innocent Muslims were killed. The top officials 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.’, Middle East Media Research Institute, ‘Taliban Military Commander Mulla Dadallah: We will continue to fight America even if it withdraws from Afghanistan’, quoting *Al Jazeera TV*, 13 Feb. 2006. <http://memritv.org/Transcript.asp?P1=1036>.

²⁴ <http://www.theunjustmedia.com/Afghanistan/Statements/Dec08/Regarding%20the%20baseless%20rumours%20about%20negotiations.htm>, 23 Dec. 2008. And see also ‘Statement of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan regarding the untrue news about peace talk’, 28 Sep. 2008, <http://www.theunjustmedia.com/Afghanistan/Statements/Sep08/Statement%20of%20Islamic%20Emirat%20of%20Afghanistan%20regarding%20the%20untrue%20news%20abut%20peace%20talk.htm>

²⁵ Comment made by a former ISAF officer to a SIPRI Afghan blog article on the Taliban attempt to assassinate President Karzai, 22 May 2008, <http://blogs.sipri.org/Afghanistan/that-assassination-attempt>

to ensure that nations are saying roughly the right thing at roughly the right time. Even at this seemingly straightforward level of message propagation there can be problems. On a recent trip to Afghanistan, this author was told of bundles of ISAF newsletters being thrown away undistributed, because for a local villager even to be seen to accepting one was a potentially hazardous statement of support for ISAF and the Afghan government. Furthermore, and on the same trip, one group within a Provincial Reconstruction Team appeared to have been deliberately putting up non-ISAF approved public information posters for no other reason than it was a poster that they had designed and produced themselves.²⁶

ISAF appears to have had great difficulty conducting information operations generally and confronting Taliban activities in this area—certainly if you listen to ISAF itself. Most of the reasons for this would be familiar to anyone with an awareness of the difficulties that all international institutions, military or otherwise, have struggled with in Afghanistan:

1. A lack of agreed strategy.
2. Problems with understanding what IO is and how to apply it.
3. Problems with understanding the culture, language and customs of the country.
4. Problems with co-ordination of contributions – with the Afghan government, individual nations, NGOs, aid agencies, the UN, the EU...
5. Regular rotation of personnel, resulting in loss of experience and fragmentation of effort.
6. The need, above all, to provide accurate and accountable information – which takes time.
7. The extremely high expectations on ISAF, from a variety of demanding, critical and ‘media-savvy’ audiences.
8. The key Taliban ‘safe havens’ across the border in Pakistan, where the Taliban find much support and conduct recruitment do not appear reachable by ISAF messages.
9. A lack of understanding of how the Taliban conduct IO, how to measure the effectiveness of Taliban IO and therefore which elements of Taliban IO are actually genuinely damaging, and how best to proactively tackle Taliban IO.

Has ISAF’s perception of Taliban IO capabilities outstripped Taliban IO capabilities?

Many of the criticisms of ISAF IO come from ISAF members themselves and, ironically, it appears that ISAF itself has managed to create the perception that its IO and perception-shaping abilities are poor.²⁷ ISAF does have several advantages over the Taliban—there is no obvious swing against ISAF from the Afghan populace and from opinion polls it appears that the Taliban, for all their military effectiveness are still not genuinely popular across the vast majority of the population. ISAF also has

²⁶ Author’s observations and discussions from field trip to northern Afghanistan, summer 2008.

²⁷ Naylor, D., ‘Advantage Taliban’, quoting an unidentified US General who had served in Afghanistan thus: ‘The Taliban and al-Qaida absolutely leave us holding our jockstraps in the information operations realm’, *Armed Forces Journal*, May 2008. More anecdotally, this author was initially drawn to analysis of Taliban IO and propaganda capabilities after four months working in the ISAF HQ in 2006, where it seemed the standard (and unchallenged) ISAF view was ‘well, of course, the Taliban have a much better IO capability than us’...

the support of the Afghan government and extensive finance, resource and intellectual advantages over the Taliban. Furthermore, for all the criticisms that the work of the international community is flawed, fragmented and uncoordinated, there are hundreds of small scale positive hearts and minds actions undertaken every day – by soldiers, civilians, NGOs, aid agencies and the Afghan government. Reconstruction, medical assistance, education, development and employment activities contribute, at the micro level, in a small way to winning hearts and minds of the population and certainly confirming for most of the country that this is no Soviet-style occupation to be resisted by Jihad. However, it seems that ISAF is spending an increasing amount of time reacting to Taliban IO initiatives, with perhaps little time for developing its own IO initiatives. The one Taliban information operation that seems to continually throw ISAF onto the defensive - is when they comment on, or invent, claims that, civilian casualties have been caused by ISAF military operations – in particular those caused during the course of ISAF air strikes.

How do the Taliban react to pressure in the information arena?

The Taliban show that they perceive the international media is actively working actively against them and they still do not appear comfortable, capable or confident when it comes to negative publicity. This paranoia is evident right at the top. Mullah Omar is credited with the following statement:

...our enemy due to its devilish nature is very clever in making trickeries. And at the time of its defeat it always put these trickeries to work. And Muslim Ummah often gets caught in these devilish trickeries...²⁸

Spokesmen do not appear to have developed the media skills necessary to debate or discuss fast moving events – particularly when accusations of any sort have been levelled at them – their default approach still seems to be to delay, deny or denounce.²⁹

The Taliban appear ‘over-sensitive’ to a range of issues:

1. Reports of Taliban operations killing of civilians, particularly when caused by questionable tactics such as suicide bombings.³⁰
2. That they take bribes or drug money.³¹
3. That there are splits or disputes within the Taliban and its leadership.³²

²⁸ Statement attributed to Mullah Omar, 30 Sep. 2008, <http://www.theunjustmedia.com/Afghanistan/Statements/Sep08/The%20pleasure%20of%20Eid%20al-Fitr.htm>

²⁹ ‘Mullah Dadullah Warns Media Against Publishing Lies’: ‘From today, I want to tell journalists that if in future they use wrong information from coalition forces or NATO we will target those journalists and media...We have the Islamic right to kill these journalists and media.’, 4 Sep. 2006, <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2006/09/04/5482.shtml>

³⁰ Mullah Dadullah again: ‘our operations do not kill civilians’, Al-Jazeera TV interview, 13 Feb. 2006.

³¹ Taliban statement: ‘...there is a devilish propaganda being orchestrated...by the mainstream media, which is propagating to the world that the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan was paid US 20 million in ransom money by the South Korean government to win the freedom of the South Koreans which is not true...’, <http://www.theunjustmedia.com/Afghanistan/Statements/Islamic%20Emirate%20of%20Afghanistan%20statement%20concerning%20the%20Mainstream%20Media%20propaganda%20asserting%20that%20ransom%20money%20was%20paid%20for%20the%20South%20Korean.htm>

4. That they are engaged in talks with members of the Afghan government or the international community.³³
5. Losses they have allegedly suffered.³⁴
6. Media stories portraying them badly, such as their treatment of the South Korean hostages.³⁵ In addition, in February 2008, Mullah Omar announced that beheadings of people suspected of spying for ISAF would stop.³⁶

This year, for the first time, the Taliban issued a statement outlining their assessment of casualties inflicted upon ISAF and Afghan National Security Forces. The statement is short, grossly inflated by any standards and makes no attempt to explain, justify or clarify:

...the fatalities of the invaders forces reached 5220, and the fatalities of their puppets Afghan army and police reached 7552. 2818 military vehicles belonging to the invaders forces and their puppet forces were destroyed, also 31 various aircraft were shot down...³⁷

It is likely that the Taliban continue to perceive that inflicting casualties on international and government forces is one of the most important aspects and measures of their campaign, but it may also suggest that they remain sensitive to the casualties they themselves are suffering. The Taliban do not yet appear to be in a situation where they genuinely want to issue 'real' figures and credibly contest the figures of ISAF. When the Taliban do feel they have a case to make (criticising ISAF air strikes and civilian casualties, denying that they are negotiating with the Afghan government, refuting the claim that they broke the Musa Qala deal...) they tend to expound in their media statements. In this instance, the brevity of the claim suggests that they might be uncomfortable if pressed to elaborate on the validity of the statistics and the sources. However, this will probably not matter to the Taliban. The figures may look good to important and perhaps susceptible audiences (and potential recruits) in Afghanistan, Pakistan and also to potential backers in these countries and the Middle East. They will also know that international media sources will pick up

³² Taliban statement: 'No official member of the Taliban is currently or in the past have negotiated with the US or the puppet Afghan government. A few former officials of Taliban who are under house arrest or have surrendered do not represent Islamic Emirate...' 28 Sep. 2008, <http://www.theunjustmedia.com/Afghanistan/Statements/Sep08/Statement%20of%20Islamic%20Emirate%20of%20Afghanistan%20regarding%20the%20untrue%20news%20abut%20peace%20talk.htm>

³³ Taliban statement: 'The mainstream media is reporting about a "peace process" between Taliban and Kabul puppet administration... Afghanistan Islamic Emirate leadership council consider such baseless rumours as a failed attempts of the enemy to create mistrust and concerns among Afghans and other nations and Mujahideen...', 28 Sep. 2008, <http://www.theunjustmedia.com/Afghanistan/Statements/Sep08/Statement%20of%20Islamic%20Emirate%20of%20Afghanistan%20regarding%20the%20untrue%20news%20abut%20peace%20talk.htm>

³⁴ Associated Press, quoting a statement attributed to Mullah Dadullah: '...They are saying that they have killed 200 Taliban but they did not kill even 10 Taliban... I want to tell journalists that if in future they use wrong information from coalition forces or NATO we will target those journalists and media...', *International Herald Tribune*, 4 Sep 2006, http://www.ihf.com/articles/ap/2006/09/04/asia/AS_GEN_Afghan_Taliban.php

³⁵ Taliban statement: '...the mainstream media have portrayed a image of us to you as the most tyrannical people in the world...', 30 Aug. 2007, <http://www.theunjustmedia.com/Afghanistan/Statements/A%20message%20to%20the%20people%20of%20South%20Korea%20from%20the%20Islamic%20Emirate%20of%20Afghanistan.htm>

³⁶ However, see Paracha, A., 'Taliban say behead Polish hostage in Pakistan', *Reuters*, 7 Feb. 2009, <http://www.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idUSTRE5161E420090207>

³⁷ Taliban statement: 'Statistics on the enemies fatalities for the year 2008'. 4 Jan. 2009, <http://www.theunjustmedia.com/Afghanistan/Statements/Jan09/Statistics%20of%20the%20enemies%20fatalities%20for%20the%20year%202008.htm>

and run with the story. Even if the media generally fails to be convinced by the accuracy of Taliban figures, the Taliban may have judged that some international audiences may find the figures useful to criticise or question the international military presence in Afghanistan.

5. Measuring the effectiveness of Taliban Information Operations

There are two complementary assumptions that go unchallenged and are routinely treated as fact—‘the Taliban have a very effective IO campaign’, and ‘ISAF has a very ineffective IO campaign’. But defining and measuring effectiveness is very hard and doesn’t appear to have been attempted other than anecdotally. Open source, media and academic works routinely avoid the question or skim over it:

‘Are the Taliban effective in their information activities? The short answer is yes’.³⁸

There was no long answer. If evidence is presented pertaining to Taliban IO effectiveness, it is generally localised, anecdotal and difficult to quantify. Wahee Mozhadah, a former Afghan foreign ministry advisor said in an interview: ‘The Taliban like to show themselves as powerful and their enemy as weak – I don’t know how much the people believe that in the villages’.³⁹ Thomas Johnson’s excellent analysis of Taliban night letters, although suggesting that such ‘Shabnamah’ could be ‘...devastatingly effective...’ in some areas, concluded, when discussing the support of the Afghan populace for the Taliban, that ‘...it is impossible to evaluate specifically how the Taliban’s night letter campaign contributed to this “support”...’.⁴⁰

It appears very difficult to make a judgement *either way* without some coherent means of measuring what the Taliban are doing. Assumptions that the Taliban IO is effective appear to be based almost entirely on the Taliban’s ability to do and say a lot of things very quickly (claiming attacks via spokesmen or websites, accusing ISAF of killing civilians) via late 20th century technology (the internet, DVDs and televised media). But how do we know that specifically *Taliban* claims or highlighting of civilian casualties are causing the rift between ISAF and the Afghan government or weakening the resolve of the international community? How do we know that Taliban claims to have killed over 5,000 ISAF troops and shot down 31 aircraft in 2008 is a) being believed by anyone and more crucially b) causing recruitment of would-be insurgents to increase or c) bringing on-board more financial support from the Middle East?

Furthermore, Taliban IO effectiveness is difficult to disentangle from other Taliban factors that influence behaviour and perception. In other words, is the refusal of a local village to engage with ISAF attributable to Taliban IO (e.g. night letters and face to face talks) which has convinced them to support the Taliban or because one of them was shot by the Taliban for talking to an ISAF patrol, or because they are

³⁸ Nissen, Thomas E., ‘The Taliban’s information warfare’, *Royal Danish Defence College Faculty of Strategy and Military Operations*, Dec. 2007, <http://cannoneer4.wordpress.com/2008/02/06/the-taliban%E2%80%99s-information-warfare/>

³⁹ MacDonald, H. ‘Taliban’s propaganda war in Afghanistan’ *Al Jazeera* 16 Oct. 07, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5jCUeUNbnQE>

⁴⁰ Johnson, T., ‘The Taliban insurgency and an analysis of Shabnamah (Night Letters)’, *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 1 Sep. 2007, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09592310701674176>

frustrated by international community failure to bring any benefit to their area or because ISAF air strikes killed local villagers last month? Is genuine IO at work, or is the Taliban physical presence, combined with physical violence still the key motivator for behaviour and the main driver of perception?

Measuring Taliban IO effectiveness at the local level

There are numerous possible indicators of Taliban IO effectiveness, but much of it will be anecdotal or unprovable. At the local, national and international level, a key indicator would appear to be whether there is a willingness or ability amongst a particular audience to demonstrate knowledge of Taliban information, claims and arguments, be able to repeat it in a favourable light and/or give credence to such information. At the local level, plausible and measurable indicators might include:

- Rise (or fall) in attack levels against ISAF and Afghan National Security Forces
- Willingness of local population to engage with ISAF/ANSF
- Level and nature of engagement with ISAF/ANSF – polite conversation, acceptance of handouts (e.g. ISAF newsletters, small gifts), attendance at ISAF/ANSF initiatives (local jirgas, medical care clinics...), provision of low level intelligence
- Opinions of local populace of Taliban
- Nature and level of engagement of local populace with the Taliban
- Physical evidence and frequency of Taliban IO activity – night letters, CDs/DVDs, flags, posters
- Awareness/repetition of local populace of pro-Taliban themes, orders, threats, instructions, information, perhaps including awareness of and willingness to repeat Taliban arguments and claims

It is likely that much of this information has already been/is being collected by different headquarters, battle groups, patrols, ANSF, PRTs, OMLTs, NGOs and international and local media. Databases are likely to be spread across Afghanistan and the international community. Pulling it together into an IO-specific context would be a significant challenge.

Discussing the Taliban with any Afghan is likely to be an emotive and difficult subject, particularly in areas where the Taliban have a significant presence. On this topic, any questionnaires, surveys, interviews and routine and regular conversations led by ISAF/ANSF/PRT personnel are, probably more than any other, likely to be significantly flawed. In other words, the accuracy of conversations and questionnaire responses is likely to be heavily determined by whether the responder feels they will have sufficient anonymity and/or protection to speak freely. Other factors – tribal or ethnic bias and perception of the longevity of the international community – are also likely to distort results.

Measuring Taliban IO effectiveness at the national/regional level

- Afghan and Pakistani press and media articles, editorials – favourable repetition of Taliban statements, policies and information.
- The manner in which Taliban information, statements and interviews are questioned or challenged.

- Political, military and key leaders (including warlords) – favourable repetition of Taliban statements, policies and information
- Media, international community, ISAF and Afghan government reactions to Taliban ‘propaganda of the deed’ – high profile attacks into Kabul and other key areas. Favourable repetition of Taliban statements, policies and information

Measuring Taliban IO effectiveness at the international level

- International community media, diplomatic, politic and academic debate – criticisms of policies towards Afghanistan, openness to working or negotiating with the Taliban in some way. Favourable repetition of Taliban statements, policies and information.
- The manner in which Taliban information, statements and interviews are questioned or challenged.

Opportunities to tackle the Taliban

In the last few years, there may have been many opportunities to proactively tackle the Taliban in the media arena – particularly when it comes to exploiting incidents or situations that were probably uncomfortable for the Taliban. As noted earlier, the Taliban do not appear to be good at dealing with negative PR and handle it in a clumsy way. Furthermore, they have an over-arching inability or unwillingness to discuss any wider vision for the future of Afghanistan beyond a Jihad and the need to kill infidels – no expounding of politics, accountable government, the economy, education or employment. The Taliban issued their new Afghanistan constitution in December 2006, but they have not pushed, promoted or even referred to it before or since. The theme is routinely: ‘Now we are at war. When we are in power, then we will decide...’.

The following is a selection of examples:

- In May 2005, Mullah Omar was stripped of the title ‘Leader of the Faithful’ by the same Kandahar shura that bestowed it on him in 1996.
- In March 2006, the Egyptian Grand Mufti ruled that suicide bombing was illegal – this was picked up by at least one Afghan newspaper, bemoaning the fact that this sort of crucial information was not being adequately promoted across the country.
- In November 2006, Ahmed Rashid highlighted a Pushtun peace jirga in Pakistan which rejected Taliban violence’.⁴¹
- There have been several instances where the Taliban have been spontaneously resisted by locals – including Pushtuns. In July 2008 in Faryab province, Pushtun villagers killed two Taliban – including a Taliban shadow provincial governor – who attempted to enter their village and abduct to aid workers.⁴² Brian Glyn Williams’ paper on Taliban suicide bombers highlights several anti-Taliban incidents as a result of such attacks.⁴³

⁴¹ Rashid, A., ‘Taliban drown our values in a sea of blood’, *The Daily Telegraph*, 22 Nov. 2006, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/1534887/Taliban-drown-our-values-in-sea-of-blood-say-political-leaders-from-the-Pashtun-tribes.html>

⁴² AP, ‘2 Taliban killed by group of Afghan villagers’, *USA Today*, 10 July 2008, http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2008-07-10-afghanistan-violence_N.htm

⁴³ Williams, B., ‘Mullah Omar’s missiles: a field report on suicide bombers in Afghanistan’, *Middle*

- An intriguing request – apparently to the international community - from the Taliban to form an independent investigation team, including a Taliban and NATO representative in each team, to conduct an Afghan-wide survey of civilian casualties through military action in Afghanistan.⁴⁴
- Excessive casualty claims by the Taliban – particularly the number of ‘tanks’ they claim to have destroyed.
- Mullah Mansoor, the replacement (and relative) of the notorious and effective Mullah Dadullah, was ejected from the Taliban in December 2007 for reasons that were unclear.⁴⁵

6. Conclusions

ISAF and the Afghan government seem to be losing the battle of perception – ISAF might actually be doing reasonably well compared to the usual performance of foreign armies in Afghanistan. But why? Taliban IO activities are actually unsurprising, unimaginative and limited. There is perhaps too much focus on the technological means the Taliban employ, rather than the content of what they say, which is still weak. It seems to be enough for them to use the internet or to give a live interview on the BBC for them to be declared ‘sophisticated’ and ‘effective’. It remains more important to look at the content of what they say and why they might be saying it. The biggest tool in the Taliban IO “box” is the unintentional assistance the insurgency gets from the international information arena—the international media and the natural airing of discussions, problems and issues concerning Afghanistan in national, international political, military and academic fora.

Despite routine claims from analysts, politicians and soldiers that the Taliban IO campaign is very effective, how do we actually know this? The biggest analytical problem appears to be *our inability to plausibly measure the effectiveness of the Taliban IO campaign* – when they post up another claim to have killed 50 ‘infidel invader terrorists’ along with 10 ‘tanks’, does this send recruitment soaring in the madrassas? Do local Helmandis start disengaging even further with the ISAF patrols? Do the messages on night letters intimidate or inspire, or is it the fact that Taliban fighters have been operating in the local area for the last three months and people have been executed for talking to an ISAF soldier? This is not to say Taliban IO is not effective, but simply that it is difficult to know how well it works - or which bits of it do work.

East Policy, Vol. XV, Winter 2008, see pp. 27, 35, 36, 37, 41, 42, <http://74.125.47.132/search?q=cache:Kx0tcliiKBoJ:www.carlisle.army.mil/ietcop/documents/MEP%20-%2520Mullah%2520Omar%2520Missiles%2520-%2520A%2520Field%2520Report%2520on%2520Suicide%2520Bombers%2520in%2520Afghanistan%2520-%2520Winter%25202008.pdf+Mullah+Omar%27s+Missiles&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=2&gl=us&client=firefox-a>

⁴⁴

Taliban statement, 20 July 2008, <http://www.theunjustmedia.com/Afghanistan/Statements/may08/setting%20up%20an%20independent%20investigation%20team%20on%20the%20killing%20of%20civilians.htm>

⁴⁵ Taliban statement: ‘Mullah Mansoor Dadullah is not obedience to the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in his actions and has carried out activities which were against the rules of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, so the Decision Authorities of 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 ways and no Taliban will obey his orders any more.’, 29 Dec. 2007, <http://www.theunjustmedia.com/Afghanistan/Statements/dec%202007/The%20Decision%20authorities%20of%20Islamic%20Emirate%20of%20Afghanistan%20removed%20Mansoor%20Dadullah.htm>

Although we have a reasonably good understanding of what the Taliban say and do in the IO arena, a secondary analytical issue that needs more study is why the Taliban say the things they say. It will have some bearing on understanding (and therefore being able to counter) their campaign if we know whether they say something because:

- they genuinely believe it,
- they don't believe it but it might help them in the short-term,
- they are deliberately lying,
- they don't know what is going on,
- they don't understand what is going on, or
- they are having to react to external factors (e.g. actions by ISAF) beyond their control

The major strength behind the Taliban's IO campaign is probably coming indirectly, through international media resources. Western culture insists on wide coverage to problems and for everyone to speak their mind and air disagreements. Last year, the UK Brigadier, Mark Carleton-Smith declared that: 'We're not going to win this war'.⁴⁶ These sort of statements must give a significant morale boost to the Taliban. The Taliban are making increasing comments on the relationship between NATO and the US—specifically the apparent reluctance of NATO to commit more soldiers to Afghanistan.⁴⁷ Taliban statements are picked up and instantly promoted around the world—they rarely go properly challenged—while, because expectations are so high and demand for results are instant, ISAF is scrutinised, criticised and held to account every step of the way – with its difficulties, failings, weaknesses and internal disputes continually highlighted in the media. Also of great value to the Taliban is the 'instant feedback' they get on many of their actions—including information operations—in the media.

Recommendations for ISAF

... We can seldom match the speed of Taliban disinformation. But we can, in information terms, switch the battle to ground of our own choosing...

UK Chief of the Defence Staff, Air Chief Marshal Sir Jock Stirrup, December 2008⁴⁸

Everything stems from the need to recognise that there is currently next to no means of measuring Taliban IO effectiveness. This needs to be addressed as a priority in order to have an understanding of which aspects of the Taliban IO campaign are damaging to the ISAF and Afghan government effort and therefore which aspects must be confronted—choosing the IO battlefields on which to fight.

⁴⁶ Lamb, C., 'War on Taliban cannot be won, says army chief', *The Sunday Times*, 5 Oct. 2008, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article4882597.ece>

⁴⁷ See Taliban statements entitled: 'Even the westerners believe that establishment of their style of democracy is impossible in Afghanistan', 'NATO member countries apparently not toeing US line' and 'NATO Emergency Meeting Ends With no Achievement', <http://www.theunjustmedia.com/Afghanistan/Mujahideen%20operations/Homepage%20Mujahideen%20operations%20and%20statements%20from%20Afghanistan.htm>

⁴⁸ 'Afghanistan: a journey, not a destination', taken from a speech at the Royal United Services Institute, <http://www.govnet.co.uk/publications/defence/articles/afghanistan-a-journey-not-a-destination>

There are several ways in which ISAF might look to enhance its ability to counter or mitigate Taliban information operations:

- A greater focus is needed on measurable data – much of which is already out there, but little appears to have been packaged to enable analysis of IO effectiveness.
- More developed understanding is needed of not only *what* the Taliban are saying, but *how* and *why* they are saying it.
- This analysis would greatly benefit from even closer involvement of local expertise – Afghans, Pakistanis, Pushtun and former Taliban – and a study of Afghan and regional media.
- Further to this, ISAF would benefit from greater understanding of the audiences that they and the Taliban are both trying to reach.
- ISAF needs to take a more proactive approach to countering Taliban IO – particularly looking to creatively exploit issues where the Taliban are on the defensive.

ISAF needs to challenge lazy assumptions and language it uses when it comes to the Taliban generally (for example, the use of the term ‘Spring offensive’ when describing Taliban activity implies certain levels of military capability) and their IO capability in particular. Above all, it needs to recognise that routinely declaring Taliban IO activity to be “sophisticated and effective”, particularly in the absence of convincing evidence, is in fact giving the Taliban an unnecessary IO victory.