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**‘The Development of the Taliban’s
Information Operations and Kinetic
Strategies Since 2001: A New or
Classic Approach?’**

Abstract

The conflict in Afghanistan is over a decade long, yet the literature surrounding the strategies of the Taliban is distinctly lacking. A few scholars, analysts and former military personnel have dedicated chapters or articles to various Taliban strategies, however, a lot of the information appears in a diffuse state or has rapidly become outdated with the contemporary nature of the conflict. This project will therefore address two of the Taliban's most important strategies. It will chronologically analyse the development of the information operations and the kinetic strategies of the organisation, investigating how the leadership has evolved the insurgency from an exiled group in Pakistan, into one that is able to operate and launch coordinated and sophisticated attacks in every province of Afghanistan by 2012. The importance of religion in the Taliban's messaging will be examined, along with the evolution of dissemination techniques, going from simple word of mouth and public letters known as 'shabnamah', to the incorporation of technology such as DVDs, websites and mobile phone media. The investigation into the chronological progress of the Taliban's kinetic strategies will show how they have effectively made use of denial, demoralisation, infiltration, interdiction and concentration against the Afghan and international forces. Finally, the theoretical debate of whether the Taliban is fighting a new or classic style of insurgency will be explored. It will demonstrate the futility of Hammes' argument that the Taliban is fighting a 'fourth generation war', and that Liang and Xiangsui's 'unrestricted warfare' is too complex for the Taliban to undertake successfully. The Taliban have adapted traditional approaches from historical Afghan conflicts into a style of warfare that best mirrors the classic strategies of a Maoist guerrilla war.

The word length of this dissertation is ...14,860...

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The Development of the Taliban's Information Operations and Kinetic Strategies Since 2001: A New or Classic Approach?

Introduction

The contemporary nature of the Afghanistan conflict means that any analysis or literature on the topic is out of date almost immediately because of the daily changes in the country. Nevertheless, there has been much public and scholarly debate regarding the counter-insurgency facets of the war. Comparatively though, the academic literature on the insurgency itself is distinctly lacking. The bulk of the post-2001 Taliban literature tends to focus on three areas: The links between the insurgent actors and Al-Qaeda, understandably seeing as the 9/11 attacks were the pre-text for the war; on the Taliban and Al-Qaeda's links to the drugs trade, with Gretchen Peters being the respected source on the topic;¹ and finally, on the history of the Taliban, documenting their rise to power in the 1990s and then offering some contemporary analysis on the insurgency itself. The strategies of the Taliban have been briefly discussed, most authoritatively in chapters by Antonio Giustozzi² and David Kilcullen³, including their approaches towards kinetic engagements, propaganda, organisation and shadow government to name but a few. These key texts though are already over three years out of date, and the Taliban of 2007, which fought a guerrilla war largely in the South and East, by 2012 has spread to every province in Afghanistan and is able to launch coordinated attacks in 'highly secure' urban areas due to widespread infiltration of the

¹ Peters G., *Seeds of Terror: How Heroin is Bankrolling the Taliban and Al-Qaeda*, (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2009)

² Giustozzi A., *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), pp.97-147

³ Kilcullen D., *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One*, (London: Hurst & Company, 2009), pp.46-63

Government of Afghanistan's (GoA) forces. The way in which the Taliban have developed their strategies has also led to debates as to whether they are fighting a new or classic style of insurgency. General Barno and Thomas Hammes believe that the Taliban is indeed fighting a new style of guerrilla war, along the lines of Hammes' 'fourth generation warfare', which targets the enemy's population and decision-makers in order to demonstrate to them that the price of victory will be too costly and will take too long.⁴ Other theories such as Taber's *War of the Flea*⁵, Liang's and Xiangsui's 'Unrestricted Warfare'⁶, and Mao's 'Protracted War'⁷ have also been described in reference to the Taliban's strategies of warfare. Although it must be remembered that every conflict is different, Mao's stratagems for insurgency do seem to best describe the Taliban's style of guerrilla war. Indeed, Mao is the only strategic literature known to have had at least an indirect connection with the Taliban leadership from the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) guidance of the *mujahideen* during their war with the Soviets.

This project aims to map the development of the Taliban's strategies from the beginning of the insurgency in 2001 to 2012 in order to address the small body of academic literature on the topic. To facilitate sufficient depth of analysis it will only focus on two areas of the Taliban's strategy. These will be the kinetic, and the propaganda and intimidation strategies of the Taliban. This is because these two areas best demonstrate the ability of the Taliban leadership to evolve and adapt to the situation at hand, and also, because it would seem that these two areas are a priority for the Taliban themselves, which is highlighted by the former southern Taliban commander Mansour Dadullah's statement to the Afghan people

⁴ Barno D. W., 'Challenges in Fighting a Global Insurgency', *Parameters*, Summer, 2006, p.17

⁵ Taber R., *The War of the Flea: A Study of Guerrilla Warfare Theory and Practice* (St Albans: Granada Publishing, 1977)

⁶ Liang Q. & Xiangsui W., *Chao Xian Zhan*, (Beijing: PLA Literature and Arts Publishing House, 1999) accessed online on 05/07/12 from <http://www.c4i.org/unrestricted.pdf>

⁷ Mao T. T., 'On Protracted War', May 1938, accessed online on 06/08/12 from http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-2/mswv2_09.htm

that, “they must continue to wage jihad, wherever they may be – whether it is jihad of the pen, of the tongue, of the sword, or of money”.⁸ The tactics of the Taliban will not be addressed unless, like suicide bombings, they can highlight some strategic thinking of the leadership. The development of these strategies will then be examined with reference to four insurgency theories to show that the Taliban are fighting a classic insurgency which is most in line with Mao’s theories. They are fighting a population-centric insurgency, cultivating or coercing support at a local level, and placing a primacy on the political aspects of the war, be it propaganda or the targets which they are attacking. First, though, the background and organisation of the Taliban will be detailed.

Since 2001 there has been a rapid increase in the amount of insurgent groups operating within Afghanistan, such as Hizb-i-Islami, the Haqqani Network, Al-Qaeda and the Tora Bora group. The Taliban, however, is by far the largest insurgent group operating within Afghanistan, and as such will be the sole focus of the examination. The Taliban ruled the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan from 1996 to their deposition in 2001. The group was created in late 1994, intended only to be a local solution to banditry and corruption in the provinces of Maiwand and Panjwai during the *topakiyaan* (time of men with guns) period.⁹ The group soon became a national phenomenon though, and grew from a small band of militia with little money, supplies and weapons, to the ruling government in under two years. After the group was ousted in late 2001 much of its leadership fled south into Pakistan, with the Taliban’s leader, Mullah Omar, reportedly riding out of Afghanistan on a motorbike in early January 2002.¹⁰ The leadership formed a *shura* (council) in Quetta, Pakistan, during 2002 and began

⁸ Dadullah M. Interview on Al-Jazeera, ‘New Military Commander of the Taliban Mansour Dadulla: Bin Laden is Alive and Well’, *Al Jazeera*, broadcast 17/06/07. Translated transcript from Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) TV, No. 1490

⁹ Zaef A. S., *My Life with the Taliban*, (London: Hurst, 2010), p.68

¹⁰ Bentham M., ‘Omar Flees by Motorcycle to Escape Troops’, *The Telegraph*, published 06/01/02, accessed online on 28/08/12 from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/afghanistan/1380552/Omar-flees-by-motorcycle-to-escape-troops.html>

sending insurgents back into Afghanistan as part of “vanguard teams” who were tasked with building support networks that could assist in future operations in the country.¹¹ Gradually these informal support networks have grown into rudimentary shadow governments in areas where the Taliban have been able to consolidate their gains. Here they have offered basic services such as a justice system based upon Islamic *Sharia* law, which is often preferred to the official justice system that is usually corrupt, slow and biased. The insurgency itself is organised around ‘core’ and ‘auxiliary’ units. The ‘core’ units are full-time fighters who travel around districts, and operate in accordance to the Quetta *shura*’s strategies, whereas the ‘auxiliary’ units operate on an ad-hoc basis and at a local level only, supporting the ‘core’ units. It is these ‘auxiliary’ units which Kilcullen describes as “accidental guerrillas”.¹² The leadership of the Taliban has placed a great emphasis on minimising the organisation’s vulnerability to counterinsurgency efforts by decentralising itself as much as it can, allowing field commanders to use their initiative at district and provincial levels in order to best serve the appropriate strategic orders which they have been given. This has led to claims, by Ben Smith for example, that the Taliban does not possess any strategic leadership at all and instead that the group is just an amalgamation of local level commanders who have similar goals.¹³ By analysing the development of the Taliban’s kinetic and propaganda strategies though, it will be shown that the Taliban does possess strategic leadership, able to evolve and react to changing conditions within Afghanistan, demonstrating the superficiality of Smith’s views. First though, a review and focus on the topic’s literature will be conducted.

¹¹ Giustozzi, *Koran*, p.99-102

¹² Kilcullen, *The Accidental*, pp.40-41

¹³ Smith B., ‘Afghanistan Where Are We?’, Central Asian Series, Conflict Studies Research Centre, June 2005, p.5

Literature Review

The literature regarding the war in Afghanistan is extremely disproportionate, with the majority focusing on the counterinsurgency effort and comparatively very little being dedicated to the understanding of the insurgency itself. The majority of authors who do write books and articles about the Taliban and insurgency are journalists who typically provide general overviews of the history of the Taliban during the 90s and then some analysis of the post-2001 organisation of the group. With the conflict still ongoing, these types of sources are very valuable for the information they provide, especially the likes of Ahmed Rashid¹⁴, Syed Saleem Shahzad¹⁵ and James Fergusson,¹⁶ who have contacts within the insurgency and therefore provide insights which some other authors could never gain. The major limitation for these sources is that they are designed for a wide readership and thus lack the analytical depth which is usually expected from academic texts. Shahzad also demonstrates some bias against the West in his text which obviously has to be taken account of when referencing him. With the contemporary nature of the war, journalists who regularly write in reputable media outlets are the major source of timely and accurate information allowing the developments of the Taliban to be monitored on an almost daily basis.

Of the academics that do write about the Taliban, Giustozzi is by far the most authoritative source on the topic. He has written numerous chapters and articles, however, the key text on the subject is his 2008 book *The Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop*.¹⁷ This text provides the first expansive examination of the Taliban's re-emergence after 2001, focusing on their recruitment, organisation, strategy, and tactics, and also the counter-insurgency effort. He successfully describes the broad development of the Taliban in the areas he focuses on,

¹⁴ Rashid A., *Taliban: The Story of the Afghan Warlords*, (London: Pan Macmillan, 2001), *Descent into Chaos: Pakistan, Afghanistan and the Threat to Global Security*, (London: Penguin, 2009)

¹⁵ Shahzad S. S., *Inside Al-Qaeda and the Taliban*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011)

¹⁶ Fergusson J., *Taliban: The Unknown Enemy*, (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2011), *Taliban: The True Story of the World's Most Feared Guerrilla Fighters*, (London: Corgi, 2011)

¹⁷ Giustozzi, *Koran*

although, as the text was published in 2008, there is now a literary gap of the development of the Taliban between late 2007 and 2012. Even though this book is by far the most useful scholarly text, Giustozzi's attempt to focus on so many areas of the Taliban does come at a disadvantage in that he tends to describe rather than analyse, for example, the strategy chapter is split into so many sub-sections that some of the depth of investigation is deficient. In one sub-section Giustozzi attempts to address whether the Taliban is fighting a theoretical 'new' or classic insurgency by comparing Hammes' 'fourth generation warfare', Taber's 'war of the flea', and Mao's 'people's war' to Taliban strategies since 2001. This section of the chapter though is where the text is weakest. He talks of Hammes' 'fourth generation warfare' as if it is a 'strategy' which can be followed, however, it is only a theory used to describe historical 'generations' of warfare. Coupled with this, he argues that the main reason why the Taliban is likened to a Maoist protracted war is because of "US Special Forces officers superimposing what they have learnt in Fort Bragg on to a rather messy reality on the ground".¹⁸ The Taliban's distinct phases of war, and the primacy placed on the political aspects of the insurgency though suggests that the similitude with Mao should not be dismissed so brashly. This therefore presents itself as a research question that can be examined. In order to achieve sufficient investigation, avoiding the pitfalls of Giustozzi's text, this project will focus on just two areas of Taliban strategy which will be outlined below.

Another source of literature on the Taliban comes from former military personnel, with the most authoritative resource being Kilcullen's text *The Accidental Guerrilla*.¹⁹ Kilcullen's book provides an excellent explanation of how the Taliban organises itself in the field, describing the differences between full-time "core" fighters and auxiliary "accidental guerrillas" who fight on a local basis due to family pride and honour.²⁰ One of Kilcullen's

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p.99

¹⁹ Kilcullen., *The Accidental*

²⁰ *Ibid*, p.48

main arguments is that the Taliban place a primacy on propaganda and information strategies over kinetic strategies, stating that “the insurgents treat propaganda as their main effort, coordinating physical attacks in support of a sophisticated propaganda campaign”.²¹ With the relatively limited academic literature on the Taliban there has not yet been any substantial investigation, other than Kilcullen’s into the comparative importance which the Taliban places on its information operations and kinetic strategies. This will therefore be another research question, and in order to facilitate its answer the two areas of Taliban strategy to be investigated will be the Taliban’s information operations and their kinetic strategies.

In terms of literature on the propaganda and intimidation strategies of the Taliban, there have been a few article length documents released by international organisations. The most important of these is the report released by the International Crisis Group titled ‘Taliban Propaganda: Winning the War of Words?’²² This document offers an extremely detailed examination of the Taliban’s propaganda, however, with it being published in 2008 it again leaves a gap for the subsequent years. Within this sub-field the primary documents released by the Taliban are of extreme importance such as ‘codes of conduct’ known as *layeha*’s, and ‘night letters’ called *shabnamah* which are sourced from the English language website of the Taliban²³, the Taliban linked twitter accounts and other sources after having been translated. These documents provide an insight into Taliban mindsets, but obviously have to be used in caution due to the fact that they are meant to be propaganda. Analysis of these primary documents and the information strategies of the Taliban are best provided by Thomas Johnson who has written a number of niche articles revolving around the *layeha* releases. Freelance analyst Tim Foxley is also an invaluable asset to the reader of Taliban information operations as his blog is regularly updated with discussions of contemporary propaganda

²¹ *Ibid*, p.58

²² International Crisis Group, ‘Taliban Propaganda: Winning the War of Words?’, *Asia Report No.158*, July 2008

²³ www.alemirah.info

issues, such as the ‘Twitter wars’ of 2012.²⁴ The release of Taliban documents and subsequent analyses has resulted in a nexus of niche articles which would benefit from a consolidated approach to illustrate the chronological development of the Taliban’s propaganda and intimidation strategies.

The basis of literature about the kinetic strategies of the Taliban revolves around articles and books by Giustozzi, Kilcullen, Shahzad and Rashid. However, the best illustration of the chronological development of the Taliban’s kinetic strategies comes from an amalgamation of the multitude of news articles and reports of incidents and trends since 2001. These news reports individually only provide a small frame through which to view the Taliban, yet when looked at in the context of each other they can provide important insights into the evolution of the Taliban’s strategies each year. Official reports and documents, such as the leaked NATO ‘State of the Taliban 2012’²⁵, the released US House of Representatives report ‘Warlord Inc’²⁶, and commercial documents such as the Indicium Consulting Paper²⁷ regarding Taliban infiltration, all provide imperative observations on various aspects of the Taliban’s overall kinetic strategy. Much as the case with the propaganda literature, the kinetic strategy literature also consists of numerous sources of information, with only Giustozzi attempting a fused analysis of development up to 2007. As such, this project will attempt to build on, and develop Giustozzi’s attempt, creating an amalgamated study of the Taliban’s kinetic strategies from 2001 to 2012.

²⁴ <http://afghanhindsight.wordpress.com/>

²⁵ NATO, ‘State of the Taliban in 2012’, leaked document sourced online on 10/08/2012 from <http://www.scoopit.co.nz/story.php?title=nato-report-state-of-the-taliban-2012-1>

²⁶ Tierney J. F., *Warlord, Inc.: Extortion and Corruption Along the U.S. Supply Chain in Afghanistan*, Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, U.S. House of Representatives, June 2010

²⁷ Kovanen S. And Guallar A., ‘The Rising Danger of Insurgent Infiltration within Afghanistan’s National Security Forces and Government: Methods, Tactics and Influences’, *Indicium Consulting Paper*, April 2012, sent via personal email from Tim Foxley

This literature review has demonstrated that the information regarding the Taliban is very diverse. As such there is a need to provide a fused analysis of the information and kinetic strategies of the Taliban and to show their chronological evolution. This will then allow a greater comparison of four theories which Giustozzi and Kilcullen allude to in order to assess whether the Taliban is fighting a new or classic form of insurgency. It will also allow the reader to decide whether the Taliban gives primacy to one area over the other. The research questions that will be addressed are thus as follows:

- What developments have the Taliban made in their propaganda and intimidation strategies?
- What developments have the Taliban made in their kinetic strategies?
- Does the Taliban give primacy to propaganda over kinetic engagements?
- Using the theories of Hammes, Liang and Xiangsui, Taber and Mao: Is the Taliban fighting a new or classic form of insurgency?

Information Operations

This section will deal with the Taliban's strategies relating to propaganda, media campaigns, and intimidation and psychological techniques. The Taliban engages in all of the above terms via a range of communications media, and as such pose a challenge in providing a single 'umbrella term' to cover them all. This difficulty is highlighted by Foxley who states that, "Taliban communications techniques do not lend themselves to precise descriptions such as 'information operations', 'propaganda', 'hearts and minds' or 'media campaign'...and in practice their activities usually fall between these terms".²⁸ The term 'information operations' has been chosen, however, as the title for this section because it encapsulates not just propaganda but psychological and intimidation techniques too. The developing content of what the Taliban has been saying since 2001 will first be examined followed by showing the diversification of the media types that they have employed.

Content

The Taliban has sought to gain legitimacy and support through its communications since 2001. As Foxley highlights, the Taliban leadership directs its information operations in accordance with two strategic goals: "The ejection of all foreign military forces and the re-establishment of the Taliban-run Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan", however, "the bulk of the media effort is directed at the former, rather than the latter, of the two strategic goals".²⁹ Since 2001 Islam has been the main justification that the Taliban leadership has offered for fighting. In late September 2001 Mullah Omar told the Voice of America that the friction with America is "an issue of Islam. Islam's prestige is at stake. So is Afghanistan's

²⁸ Foxley T., 'The Taliban's Propaganda Activities: how well is the Afghan insurgency communicating and what is it saying?', *SIPRI Project Paper*, June 2007, p.3

²⁹ Foxley, *ibid*, p.6

tradition”.³⁰ This point is further highlighted by a November 2002 *shabnamah* which was disseminated throughout Afghanistan and faxed to Pakistani journalists, stating that Mullah Omar had declared “‘jihad’ against the foreign forces in Afghanistan and the ‘proxy government’”.³¹ The rhetoric of using religion as a unifying force amongst the rank-and-file Taliban, and as a rallying call to increase the support for their cause, can be seen as a constant throughout the insurgency, right up until 2012. In 2008 Graeme Smith led a series of fact-finding interviews with Taliban insurgents in Kandahar province. When they were asked why they fought, the “majority used some variation of two lines: “Afghans must expel infidels” and “infidels enslaved the government”. Several others referred to religious teachings, quoting textual sources even though they are probably illiterate”.³² These interviews highlight that religion and *jihad* is still being used as the main justification for hostilities, and also due to a high proportion of the Taliban soldiers being illiterate, that word of mouth is an extremely important method of communicating their messages. The fact that the majority of the content of the Taliban’s communications are justified by, or related to, Islam also shows that the main target audience is the Afghan population and the wider Muslim world. This theory is further bolstered by pointing out that apart from an English language section on their website, and some Arabic language magazines and website section, the majority of the information operations is done in Pashtu.

This becomes even more interesting when it is considered what content the Taliban is *not* using in its information operations as a unifying factor, ‘tribalism’. Although the Taliban has used some tribal references in its communications, mainly ‘Pashtun’ related, in general the “tribal aspect of the war...seems to be a touchy subject for the Taliban leadership, which

³⁰ ‘Mullah Omar – in his own words’, translated transcript of a Voice of America interview, *The Guardian*, 26th September 2001

³¹ International Crisis Group, ‘Taliban Propaganda’, p.7

³² Smith G., ‘What Kandahar’s Taliban Say’, in *Decoding the New Taliban: Insights from the Afghan Field*, Giustozzi A. (ed), (London: HURST, 2009), p.198

prefers to describe religion – not tribe or ethnicity – as the insurgency’s unifying force”.³³

Despite the majority of the Taliban leadership being made up of tribal members belonging to the Ghilzai confederation, they try not to mention tribal denominations in propaganda at the strategic level, because, as the International Crisis Group’s report points out, “such labels risk becoming self-fulfilling and could marginalise and alienate some Pashtun groups even more”.³⁴

The content from the early stages of the insurgency, as well as revolving around religious rhetoric, sought to communicate the insurgent’s successes against their enemy forces. At the strategic level this was purported through a plethora of ‘authorised representatives’, such as Mohammad Mukhtar Mujahid in early 2003, or Hamed Agha in early 2004, however, it was Latifullah Hakimi, a Taliban era official, who became the Taliban’s most authoritative ‘spokesman’ for journalists to deal with.³⁵ These spokesmen would speak to journalists, mainly in Pakistan, and illustrate incidents which the Taliban had carried out, in order to demonstrate their growing strength. Another role they performed was to complain about the atrocities that the Karzai regime and Western forces carried out when civilian deaths occurred. Hakimi was arrested in 2005, and of his two successors, Qari Yousaf and Dr Hanif, the latter was arrested in 2007, so as Joanna Nathan explains, “presumably to spare such humiliation being repeated, the two main points of contact today – Qari Yousaf...and Zabihullah Mujahid...are aliases used by a variety of people according to journalists who deal with them”.³⁶

From 2005 onwards, when the Taliban began using DVDs and the internet more profusely they increasingly signed statements off, or described themselves as the ‘Islamic

³³ *Ibid*, p.198

³⁴ International Crisis Group, *op cit.*, p. 25

³⁵ Nathan J., ‘Reading the Taliban’, in *Decoding the New Taliban: Insights from the Afghan Field*, Giustozzi A. (ed), (London: HURST, 2009), p.26

³⁶ *Ibid*, p.26

Emirate of Afghanistan' to try to garner further legitimacy in the sense that they were a government in exile rather than an insurgency group. These new media forms allowed the content of Taliban information operations to address new and more complicated issues such as justifying suicide bombings, outlining atrocities by Christians in other Islamic states, revealing US soldiers desecrating Talib corpses, and atrocities against Islam at Guantanamo Bay.³⁷ David Grono, the Deputy President of the International Crisis Group, speaks of how the Taliban has increasingly pointed out the growing corruption in the Karzai government, as well as claiming that the Western nations' announcements of withdrawal is because the Taliban have "tired them out".³⁸ The increasing use of the Taliban's rhetoric regarding the Karzai regime's corruption carries legitimacy in the eyes of ordinary Afghans because the swift rise of the Taliban in 1994 was due in large part to the retributive justice they meted out on bandits and corrupt officials during the *topakiyaan* (time of men with guns) when almost every road across the country was manned by a warlord demanding a 'toll'.³⁹

In 2006 the Taliban attempted to develop their simplistic Islamic rhetoric into a more solid political foundation for its actions to be based on. Between 2006 and 2008 the Taliban directed their propaganda efforts around a series of five slogans: "Our Party, the Taliban; Our people and nation, the Pashtun; Our economy, the poppy; Our constitution, the Shari'a; Our form of government, the emirate".⁴⁰ As Kilcullen highlights, "these slogans provided a rudimentary *political* platform for insurgent activity and were used as a guide to structure messages to the population and manipulate public perception of the movement".⁴¹ This period demonstrated the Taliban's increasing development in their capability to formulate

³⁷ Giustozzi, *Koran*, pp.121-122

³⁸ David Grono interview, head of International Crisis Group's report on Taliban propaganda, 'NATO Review: Taliban, Televisions, Telephones and Terror 2/2', October 2008, accessed 22/06/2012 from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YH7bWYQQuDc&feature=relmfu>

³⁹ Fergusson, *Taliban: The Unknown*, p.27

⁴⁰ Kilcullen, *The Accidental*, p.58

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p.58

and direct information operations successfully at the strategic level, and according to Kilcullen, they made information operations their main effort, even directing their kinetic operations around these slogans.⁴² The content of these slogans allowed for a series of “rallying calls” which individually were “vague enough that [they could] be interpreted in numerous different ways by different components of the population”, which meant that from this point Islam was not the only unifying factor that the Taliban were focussing their rhetoric on.

Since the rise of social networks a number of Taliban accounts began appearing and issuing news reports and small statements, as well as publicly engaging ISAF and Afghan Government accounts. These social media accounts are probably not official Taliban run channels, however, they show the increasing ability of the organisation to influence a global audience and gain support worldwide. These accounts often engage in ‘twitter wars’ for example with ISAF related accounts. On June 17th 2012 one such spat occurred, when Lt Col’ Stewart Upton, a spokesman of ISAF Regional Command South West, challenged a prominent Taliban related account ‘@ABalkhii’ on the news that a Taliban IED had killed eight ISAF troops, he concluded that “by engaging them yesterday on their false claim, they were held to account for their post and forced to somehow try and validate it”.⁴³ However, as Foxley correctly points out, by engaging the Taliban on these types of social networks (where only 140 characters are permitted per post) the ISAF forces are surrendering the initiative because a rebuttal cannot be intelligently put across in such a small word limit.⁴⁴ The Taliban have been increasingly using such social media sites to espouse changes in strategy, issue incident reports, highlight their worldview and discuss internal dilemmas, whether or not the

⁴² *Ibid*, p.58

⁴³ Lt’ Col’ Upton quoted in Wright A., ‘U.S. Twitter war vs. Taliban flares during weekend’, *Politico website*, accessed 21/06/2012 from <http://hamptonroads.com/2012/06/us-twitter-war-vs-taliban-flares-during-weekend>

⁴⁴ Foxley T., ‘ISAF vs. Twitter vs. Intelligent Analysis’, June 20th 2012, accessed online on 20/06/2012 from <http://afghanhindsight.wordpress.com/2012/06/20/isaf-vs-twitter-vs-intelligent-analysis/>

content of these statements are legitimate or just attempts to deceive and confuse the Western and Afghan forces though remains to be seen.

Techniques

Alongside the content, it is also important to note the development of the means which the Taliban employs to disseminate their information. In 2001 the Taliban communications machine was very basic. Taliban propaganda was rumoured to be run by Qudratullah Jamal (aka Hamid Agha) who was the Information Minister when the Taliban was in power.⁴⁵ In the early days of the insurgency the communication methods that were used were very similar to those used in the 1980s *jihad* against the Soviets. Word of mouth was, and still is, a very important tool employed by the Taliban to spread their message. This is not least because of the extremely low literacy rates in Afghanistan, for example a CIA estimate in 2000 believed that just 28.1 percent of the population over fifteen years of age could read.⁴⁶ As such the Taliban has been using the verbal spread of supportive poems for example, which attempt to describe atrocities committed by the international forces as well as outlining issues of religion, nationalism, and even satirical poems mocking an intimate relationship between Presidents Bush and Karzai.⁴⁷ The poems are a traditional form of media which have been used for centuries in South Asia, and their continued use today is confirmed in Van Linschoten *et al*'s 2012 text *Poetry of the Taliban*, which is a collection of translated poems.⁴⁸

Another traditional method that is widely used by the Taliban is the use of 'shabnamah' (night letters) to intimidate or inform locals and officials on the views of the

⁴⁵ Giustozzi, *Koran*, p.120

⁴⁶ CIA World Factbook figure, accessed 22/06/2012 from <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/af.html>

⁴⁷ Satirical Poem from an unknown author dated December 2008, accessed 22/06/2012 from <http://www.thestar.com/news/world/article/1181768>

⁴⁸ Van Linschoten A. S., Kuehn F. & Devji F., *Poetry of the Taliban*, (London: Hurst, 2012)

Taliban. This method was used successfully throughout the *jihad* against the Soviets, and as such was adopted after 2001 as a proven, cost-effective and simple way of conducting information operations, be it to spread propaganda or threaten locals into not working for the Western forces or Karzai regime. Despite the lack of literacy noted above, the Taliban has successfully relied on the educated populace to read the letters to the illiterate sectors of society, which may explain why they are usually pasted to mosques and government buildings. The *shabnamah* have allowed the Taliban leadership to dictate the types of messages it wants spread to the Afghan population. Johnson has conducted one of the few in depth studies of *shabnamah* to date and believes that:

*“The Taliban night letters represent a strategic and effective instrument, crafting poetic diatribes which appeal to the moral reasoning of Afghan villagers. While many of the night letters represent overt intimidation, they also present important insights into who and what the Taliban represents”.*⁴⁹

For the early years of the insurgency word of mouth and *shabnamah* were the main tools which the Taliban used to target the Afghan and local population.

As the insurgency has developed, the Taliban tried to move away from intimidation techniques in order to ensure the support of villagers and townsfolk. One way in which this has occurred has been through the issuing of ‘*layeha*’, or codes of conduct, as an attempt to provide uniformity to the rank and file Taliban in the way they deal with the public, much like Mao did with his troops during the Chinese Revolutionary War. The first *layeha* appears to have been issued in 2006 by Mullah Omar in response to the resurgent Taliban organisation needing a set codification of its ideals, principles, and strategies.⁵⁰ Two more detailed *layehas* have been issued in 2009 and 2010, with the latter offering a very interesting insight into how the Taliban has adapted after a number of their mid-high level leaders were

⁴⁹ Johnson T., ‘The Taliban Insurgency and an Analysis of *Shabnamah* (Night Letters)’, *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, vol. 18, 2007, p.321

⁵⁰ Clark K., ‘The Layeha: Calling the Taleban to Account’, *Afghan Analyst Network Thematic Report*, 2011, p.2

captured or killed by the ISAF forces from 2009 onwards. The publication of the three *layeha*s further highlights the importance that the Taliban places on its own image, and according to the International Crisis Group, possibly indicates “frustration among the Taliban leadership and increasing attempts to exert control over what is said in its name”.⁵¹ Talking about the 2010 *layeha*, Johnson and DuPee point out that, “it appears that the Taliban have become particularly sensitive to local perceptions and increasingly rely upon traditional ‘population-centric’ lines of operation to consolidate their battle for ‘hearts and minds’ of the Afghan populace and especially the southern, rural, Pashtun”.⁵² In the 2009 *layeha* for example, the importance of understanding local grievances is emphasised when ‘mujahidin’ are advised, in point 63 to, “follow local dresses like shoes, clothes and hairstyle. [Because] It will enable them to get into the public and know their problems”.⁵³ The *layeha*’s effectiveness has been slow in developing because of the difficulty in enforcing its edicts, however, the impact of the 2009 and 2010 *layeha*s have begun to be noticed at the grassroots level. Alissa Rubin reported in the New York Times that rural tribal elders in Kandahar Province for example welcomed the Taliban’s strategic change to a less threatening approach, with one elder, Haji-Khan Muhammad Khan stating in 2010 that, “there is a tremendous change in the Taliban’s behaviour...now generally they behave well with people. They had to change because the leadership of the Taliban did not want to lose the support of the grass roots”.⁵⁴ Similar changes were noticed throughout Afghanistan from 2009 in the Taliban’s behaviour towards locals, with Mullah Omar even reportedly removing some of the most brutal commanders.⁵⁵ Despite these changes though it must still be noted that assassinations,

⁵¹ International Crisis Group, p.9

⁵² Johnson T. H. & DuPee M. C., ‘Analysing the New Taliban Code of Conduct (Layeha): an assessment of changing perspectives and strategies of the Afghan Taliban’, *Central Asian Survey*, 31:1, 2012, p.78

⁵³ Layeha, 2009, English translation published in Johnson T. H., ‘Analyzing the Taliban Code of Conduct: Reinventing the *Layeha*’, *Understanding Afghan Culture*, 2009, pp.29-38

⁵⁴ Rubin A. J., ‘Taliban Overhaul Image to Win Allies’, *New York Times*, January 20th 2010, accessed 01/06/2012 from http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/21/world/asia/21taliban.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all

⁵⁵ Rubin, *Ibid*

collateral damage from bombings, and threatening night letters are still widespread and harming the Taliban's public support and image throughout Afghanistan, with 2,332 of the 3,021 civilian deaths in 2011 being attributed to the Taliban, which was up 8 percent from 2010.⁵⁶ Alongside traditional methods of communication, the Taliban has embraced technology in an attempt to enhance the spread of its messages, not only to the Afghan population but to the global arena.

The Taliban have recognised growing trends in the use of technology in Afghanistan. The mobile telephone industry has seen exponential growth in the last 5 years. The Quetta leadership have deliberately targeted this growing market by sending out mass text, picture and video messages. The intent very much mirrors the use of *shabnamah*, in that they serve as a type of psychological warning to normal Afghans. From 2007 the Taliban have been attacking mobile phone network's masts mainly to extort money. However, after the US troop surge in 2011 the insurgents began suffering higher kill and capture rates due to locals informing the authorities when they were planting bombs or moving about at night. Therefore in 2011 the Taliban decreed that there be a night time ban in the South and East of network coverage by the mobile phone companies.⁵⁷ For a few months the telecommunications companies complied, however, in mid-2011 President Karzai warned the companies to provide full-time coverage or risk losing their licenses.⁵⁸ Because the companies have accepted Karzai's warnings the Taliban have drastically increased their operations against them, as Boone points out, "since mid-summer attacks have soared, with up to 30 towers being destroyed or damaged in one 20-day period. Previously a loss of five would be

⁵⁶ 'Datablog', lists of relevant statistics on the Guardian website, accessed 22/06/2012 from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2010/aug/10/afghanistan-civilian-casualties-statistics>

⁵⁷ Boone J., 'Taliban target mobile phone masts to prevent tipoffs from Afghan civilians', *The Guardian*, 11 November 2011, accessed on 28/06/12 from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/nov/11/taliban-targets-mobile-phone-masts>

⁵⁸ *Ibid*

considered a bad month”.⁵⁹ As well as serving to deny the ISAF and Karzai forces of information, the Taliban’s actions also serves the purpose of signalling the strength of the authority of the Taliban, or the inherent weakness of the Karzai regime in these areas.

Another way in which the Taliban has effectively made use of technology to target the Afghan population and beyond is in their increasing output of DVDs and videos. Rather than producing them themselves it seems that they have allowed sympathetic entrepreneurs to create and commercially manufacture them. Giustozzi outlines that the majority are made in Pakistan by Omat Productions, Manbaul-Jihad, Abdullah videos and As-sahab, and sold in bazaars throughout Afghanistan and Pakistan for a small price.⁶⁰ He furthers though that “later” (he does not specify a time frame, however, it was probably 2006 onwards) these DVDs were given away for free which would signify an increased funding into this type of activities by the Taliban.⁶¹ Another media type that has been increasingly outsourced to sympathetic entrepreneurs and linked via *Al Emirah* website is the production of magazines, in both physical and electronic formats. All of the magazines are either in Pashtu, such as *Srak* (Beam of Light) and *Shahamat* (Courage), or Arabic, such as *Al Somood* (Perseverance), and focus on a range of issues sympathetic to the Taliban cause.⁶² If the magazines, or groups producing them, do not reflect well on the Taliban then it seems that the Taliban remove the links from their website, as they did with the Pashtu *Tora Bora* magazine in 2008.⁶³

In mid-2005 the Taliban set up their website *Al Emarah*⁶⁴ (The Emirate) to provide a single source of output for its leadership to make statements, comments and news updates. Much as the *layehas* of 2006 onwards signalled a frustration at various sources speaking in

⁵⁹ *Ibid*

⁶⁰ Giustozzi, *Koran*, p.122

⁶¹ *Ibid*, p.122

⁶² Nathan, ‘Reading’, p.30

⁶³ *Ibid*, p.30

⁶⁴ www.alemarah.org

the name of the Taliban, the website can also be seen as an early attempt by the Taliban to provide a single legitimate source for their information output. The website has developed over the years, and at the time of writing (2012) provides daily updates in five languages (English, Farsi, Pashtu, Arabic and Urdu). It's news updates include information about the insurgency as to how many "puppets" or "minions" the Taliban have killed in operations on that day, as well as more in depth analysis of issues such as women's rights, the ISAF withdrawal and world views on political changes, such as the hopes for Dr Mohamed Mursi as the newly elected President of Egypt.⁶⁵ The website also re-posts analyses and news reports from Western media outlets if they are favourable to the Taliban or help them boast about their strength and achievements. This also serves as a type of propaganda coup to add legitimacy to their cause and actions as they can claim that the enemy's media is recognising the Taliban's growing strength. The target audience for the website is obviously not the majority of the Afghan population, because of the illiteracy issue, but also because in 2010 for example less than 10 per cent of the population possessed a computer and even less had access to the internet due to the poor infrastructure in Afghanistan.⁶⁶ The intended audience, as the five language options would suggest, is therefore international, with the aim of providing information from the Taliban's viewpoint for "interested individuals" or the "mainstream media" according to Nathan.⁶⁷

By examining the development of the Taliban's information operations it has been shown that the main justification for the insurgency is Islam, however, since 2006 they have tried to diversify their appeal by legitimising the conflict along other lines too such as nationalism. The Taliban see the Afghan population as the key target audience for their messaging, and traditional techniques such as word of mouth and *shabnamah* are still

⁶⁵ Taliban's English language website, <http://www.shahamat-english.com/> accessed on 27/06/2012

⁶⁶ U.S. Department of State, '2010 Human Rights Report: Afghanistan', accessed online from <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/sca/154477.htm> on 24/06/2012

⁶⁷ Nathan, 'Reading', p.29

effective at reaching this audience, although the diversification into more technologically advanced methods like the use of the internet, DVDs, magazines and mobile phones have allowed the Taliban to target the population on mass more easily, as well as a global audience. It is therefore apparent how important information operations are to the Taliban in legitimising the insurgency, however, a judgement on whether it takes primacy over kinetic strategies cannot be made until they have been looked at in turn.

Kinetic Strategy

Since 2001 the Taliban have not had one set strategy for engaging ISAF and GoA forces, but instead have developed and evolved their strategies to reflect the necessity of the geographical area, their own strength, and their enemy's strategies. This constant evolution, and sometimes revolution, in strategy has added to the Taliban's strength as it has caused problems for ISAF and GoA forces that then subsequently have had to alter their approach to the conflict. The following section will demonstrate that as the war in Afghanistan has continued, the Taliban have developed strategies which has seen the insurgency spread from a predominantly southern phenomenon in 2001, to a national insurgency which, according to Shehzad Qazi, by 2009 allowed them to "control and maintain heavy insurgent activity within 80% of the country"⁶⁸.

Between 2001 and 2002 there was no strategy from the Taliban leadership in engaging its enemy's forces. Engagements, as such, were limited to cross-border raids and some small scale use of long-range rockets which were little more than a nuisance for ISAF and GoA forces. These engagements mirrored the cross-border raids of the Afghan tribes into the North West Frontier during the nineteenth century, in that both were opportunistic, poorly organised efforts achieving relatively little more than signalling the tribal, or Taliban's, continuing existence on the other side of the border. The non-existent kinetic strategy during this period was primarily because the organisation was still re-grouping after the U.S. invasion, but more importantly the priority during this period was to 'infiltrate' Afghanistan using, what Giustozzi calls, "vanguard teams".⁶⁹ These 'vanguard teams' infiltrated villages throughout Southern and South-Eastern Afghanistan in order to spread propaganda, gain intelligence on Government collaborators, and attempt to gain popular support for the Taliban

⁶⁸ Qazi S. H., 'The 'Neo-Taliban' and Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan', *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 31, 2010, p.491

⁶⁹ Giustozzi, *Koran*, pp.100-102

in order to hide supplies and troops.⁷⁰ The success of these teams varied throughout Afghanistan, but by 2003 the Taliban had succeeded in creating a base of support in some southern provinces such as Helmand and Kandahar.

From 2003 the Taliban began attempting a ‘denial’ strategy in the areas where it had built up enough support to launch attacks. The aim of this strategy was to deny the Karzai Government a presence in rural southern Afghanistan by physically targeting Government officials such as diplomats, governors, policemen, doctors and teachers with *shabnamah* and an assassination campaign. As Shehzad Qazi highlights, the reasoning behind this strategy was:

*“to break down state control. The Government structure was already weak and lacked legitimacy. Targeting officials would then cause the former to flee, further reducing government or administrative control of an area. By further targeting government services and reducing the latter’s control, the neo-Taliban would ultimately gain increased control of society”.*⁷¹

The denial strategy was therefore an obvious extension of the infiltration period, with the aim of correlating the reduced ability of the Karzai Government to function at a local level, with an increased support for the Taliban.

By 2004 the Taliban had evolved its strategy to include a ‘demoralisation’ approach towards Government Forces in some areas, as an extension to its ‘denial’ approach. This strategy advocated relentless attacks upon single targets, such as militia or police barracks in order to demoralise these local forces and induce them to either abandon such bases, or simply fall back to them and adopt defensive tactics, allowing the Taliban to further increase

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, pp.100-102

⁷¹ Qazi, ‘The ‘Neo-Taliban’, p.492

its influence over rural areas. This strategy, according to Shahzad had showed early signs of success as it had allowed the Taliban to increase its hold over parts of Kunhar, Nanaghar, Paktia and Paktika by late 2003.⁷² According to Giustozzi, the strategy was effective in demoralising the poorly organised Government forces because the incessant attacks by the Taliban, despite their high casualty rates, signified that “the Taliban were in for the long run and that their determination was unshakable”.⁷³ As he continues, by 2004 the pro-government militias (AMF) had “stopped patrolling the countryside and confined their activities to the barracks and the administrative centres”, and by 2005-6 the Afghan police were “utterly demoralised” and were “losing any combat effectiveness”, apart from some exemptions to the trend such as in Zabul.⁷⁴ The adoption of the ‘demoralisation’ strategy was therefore paying handsome dividends for the Taliban, however, at the cost of increasingly high casualty rates.

In 2005 the Taliban attempted to address the high attrition rates of the denial and demoralisation strategies by adopting a drastically new tactic. This was the use of suicide bombs against government and military facilities, judges, religious leaders, police officers and NGOs.⁷⁵ As Griff Witte continues to explain, the use of suicide bombings in Afghanistan has “been relatively rare, despite a quarter-century of warfare” because of cultural, tribal, and religious beliefs, for as Nafisa Faqirzada, a 43-year-old high school teacher states in his article, “Afghans know that a suicide attack is forbidden in Islam”.⁷⁶ The new tactics therefore signified that the Taliban leadership were getting help from foreign advisers, which Shahzad sheds light on, claiming that during 2005 the Taliban partook in a “high-frequency exchange of training workshops with a group of emboldened veterans from the Iraqi

⁷² Shahzad S. S., ‘Taliban raise the stakes in Afghanistan’, *Asia Times*, published 30/10/03, accessed online on 09/07/12 from http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Central_Asia/EJ30Ag01.html

⁷³ Giustozzi, *Koran*, p.107

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 107-108

⁷⁵ Witte G., ‘Afghans confront surge in violence: Foreign support seen behind attacks that mimic those in Iraq’, *Washington Post*, published 28/11/05, accessed online on 10/07/12 from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/11/27/AR2005112700831.html>

⁷⁶ *Ibid*

resistance”.⁷⁷ From a strategic viewpoint, the use of suicide tactics from 2005 onwards can be seen as an extreme development in the demoralisation strategy if it is assessed using Thomas Schelling’s “rationality of irrationality”⁷⁸, which Robert Pape explains is “an act that is irrational for individual attackers [but] is meant to demonstrate credibility to a democratic audience that still more and greater attacks are sure to come”.⁷⁹ Thus 2005 can be seen as a continuation and extension of the previous strategies of Taliban.

In 2006 the Taliban radically changed their strategy. Rather than fighting a guerrilla war they adopted a conventional style of positional warfare, fighting the NATO and GoA forces in pitched battles in and around the more urban areas of Southern Afghanistan. There are many speculative reasons as to why the organisation opted for such a change in strategy, especially when the denial and demoralisation strategies seemed to be making major progress for them across the Southern region. One possible reason, Giustozzi suggests, is that the Taliban saw the handing over of Kandahar, one of their former strongholds, from U.S. troops to Canadian forces as a sign of weakness by the U.S. and a possible chance for the Taliban to make quick gains during the transition phase.⁸⁰ However, the levels of fighting that were seen in Kandahar were reflected throughout the southern provinces, in Helmand for example, and so this theory doesn’t really seem logical because the fighting in and around Kandahar was not an isolated event. The second reason which Giustozzi suggests is that the increase in kinetic activities was due to pressure being made on the Quetta Shura from “their Arab, Pakistani and other ‘donors’ to deliver a steady pace of advancement and some high profile victories”.⁸¹ Rashid, however, believes that the 2006 “Taliban Offensive” as he calls it, was carried out purely with the aim to “inflict such heavy casualties that Western publics would

⁷⁷ Shahzad S. S., *Inside Al-Qaeda and the Taliban: Beyond Bin Laden and 9/11*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p.21

⁷⁸ Schelling T., *Arms and Influence*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), pp.36-43

⁷⁹ Pape R., ‘The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism’, *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 97, 2003, p.344

⁸⁰ Giustozzi, *Koran*, p.123

⁸¹ Giustozzi, *Koran*, p.123

demand a recall of their troops".⁸² Rashid's argument does seem to follow suit with the previous Taliban strategies which placed a paramount importance on the psychological factor of their kinetic activities. In reality, the reasoning behind the 2006 Taliban 'offensive' seems to be an admixture of Giustozzi's second argument with that of Rashid's, but also of a possible naivety on the part of the Taliban of their own ability to engage with superior Western forces in conventional battles.

Throughout 2006 the number of insurgents which the Taliban were placing into battles was unlike anything of the previous years. NATO intelligence in 2005/2006 estimated that the total number of troops available to the Taliban throughout the whole of the South was just two thousand; however, in early 2006 Mullah Dadullah launched a failed bid to capture Sangin, in Helmand, with 300 men, and then in May they stormed towns in four southern provinces with nearly one thousand fighters.⁸³ Despite suffering losses in all of these engagements the Taliban were able to maintain, and even increase the number of fighters as the year progressed. For example, in September 1,500 Taliban fighters dug in and fought Canadian forces in Panjwai district, just south of Kandahar City, in a battle (named Operation Medusa by the Canadians) which lasted from 4th September to 17th September.⁸⁴ The Taliban suffered estimated losses of 1,100, with NATO reckoning that between 1,500 and 2,000 Taliban fighters were concentrated in the area throughout the battle, with reinforcements coming from Pakistan, which was by far the largest concentration of forces the Taliban had fielded since 2001.⁸⁵ With fighting raging throughout the year, 2006 was also the first time that the Taliban had diverged from its typical pattern of fighting during the Summer and regrouping during the Winter. Although it is without doubt that the Taliban was defeated tactically, it can be argued that the psychological effect that was felt throughout Afghanistan

⁸² Rashid, 'A Letter', p.20

⁸³ Rashid, *Descent*, p.359

⁸⁴ Rashid, *A Letter*, p.20

⁸⁵ Giustozzi, *Koran*, p.125

and the NATO governments could be likened to that of the Tet Offensive in Vietnam. Despite the astronomical casualty rates for an insurgent force, by 2007 in Panjwai district, for example, Seth Jones stated that “the levels of Taliban...were back up to pre-Operation Medusa”, showing that they had no problems replenishing their ranks.⁸⁶ Strategically, Shahzad argues that the 2006 offensive was a success as it allowed the Taliban to take control of key districts, facilitating the spread of the insurgency further North and West, as well as the ability to control key logistical routes between Pakistan and Afghanistan.⁸⁷ He visited Helmand province in November 2006 and claims that the Taliban had control of nearly every district, apart from Laskhar Gah and Greshk where British forces were based⁸⁸, thus even though the Taliban could not overcome the superior forces there, it successfully focused the attention of the NATO forces in and around these areas, allowing the infiltration and control of the rest of Helmand for example.

Despite the strategic gains of 2006, in 2007 they reverted back to a seasonal guerrilla approach. If 2006 can be characterised as an attempt to force a decision through a conventional approach, then the 2007 strategy of the Taliban was a regress to fighting a war of exhaustion. Rather than tackling NATO and GoA forces head on, they avoided large concentrations of troops and moved to areas where there was little government presence. For example, in Kandahar, NATO and GoA troops were still largely focussing on the defence of Panjwai and Kandahar City which left large areas in northern Kandahar undefended. The Taliban made use of this weakness and moved insurgents into Shah Wali Kot and Khakrez during late 2006, early 2007, and had free reign of the area until June 2007 when NATO

⁸⁶ Jones S. Quoted in ‘US Notes Limited Progress in Afghan War’, by DeYoung K., *Washington Post*, 26/11/07, accessed online on 10/07/12 from <http://tonyprudori.pbworks.com/f/NSCRepAfg-WaPo-25Nov07.pdf>

⁸⁷ Shahzad, *Inside*, pp.34-35

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, pp.34-35

launched an offensive on these areas, named Operation Andalat.⁸⁹ In an exception for 2007, the Taliban stood and fought for Khakrez, taking heavy casualties, but not losing total control of the area.⁹⁰ By October the NATO forces had withdrawn, not having the resources to support a ‘holding’ operation, and so the Taliban regained control, reportedly paying off the district and police chiefs of Khakrez.⁹¹ In accordance with the change in strategy to one of attrition, the Taliban attempted a number of simultaneous attacks on district centres which were lightly guarded compared to the urban areas they were trying to take in 2006. On June 16th they nearly succeeded in overthrowing a Dutch outpost in Chora District of Uruzgan; on June 18th they seized Mianishin district centre; and on June 19th they overran Ghorak district centre.⁹² Similar incidents occurred throughout the south of Afghanistan during 2007, which is demonstrated by a UN quarterly report which stated that as of August 2007, the average number of monthly incidents stood at 2,108, “up 39 percent from the same period a year earlier”.⁹³ It is interesting to note though that the Taliban seemed to be consolidating areas in the South rather than attempting any real push for new regions, for as one NATO source told the Guardian, “70 per cent of the incidents took place in just 10 per cent of the country”.⁹⁴

The aim of 2008 for the Taliban seemed twofold: firstly, to disrupt the supply lines of NATO and GoA forces; secondly, to expand the insurgency further east and north. As a Kabul Center for Strategic Studies report explains, in an interview with *Al Samood*, the Taliban’s Arabic monthly publication, Mullah Omar and his deputies outlined their military

⁸⁹ Forsberg C., ‘The Taliban’s Campaign for Kandahar’, Institute for the Study of War, *Afghanistan Report No.3*, Dec’ 2009, p.36

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, p.37

⁹¹ *Ibid*, p.37

⁹² *Ibid*, p.37

⁹³ Samoa News, ‘Violent Incidents Up 39 Percent in Afghanistan’, published September 2007, accessed online on 14/07/12 from <http://ip-208-109-238-104.ip.secureserver.net/viewstory.php?storyid=30717>

⁹⁴ Burke J., ‘Taliban attacks on allied troops soar by up to a third’, *The Guardian*, published on Sunday 3rd February 2008, accessed online on 14/07/12 from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/feb/03/afghanistan.nato>

objectives for the year which included seizing the highway between Jalalabad and Kabul.⁹⁵ The focus on supply routes was also signalled during April, in the opening weeks of the fighting season, when the Taliban took advantage of NATO's political inability to fight in Pakistan by destroying a key bridge on the Indus Highway in the North West Frontier Province.⁹⁶ This trend continued throughout the year, for example the Khyber Pass, through which 70 percent of NATO supplies travel, was closed six times between September 2008 and February 2009 due to attacks,⁹⁷ and in December 2008 alone Taliban attacks on NATO supply depots in Pakistan destroyed 300 cargo trucks and Humvees.⁹⁸ Within Afghanistan itself the Taliban expanded north and east during 2008, with Gilles Dorronsoro reporting a "fivefold increase" in incidents in Balk and Kunduz provinces in northern Afghanistan⁹⁹, and the Kabul Center for Strategic Studies reporting a 61% increase in incidents in eastern provinces in the first six months of 2008.¹⁰⁰ The Taliban were also demonstrating their ability to coordinate more complex attacks, sometimes simultaneously, signalling an increasing level of strategic planning capability. This capability was demonstrated in their timely assault on the Arghandab Valley after the death of prominent anti-Taliban commander Mullah Naqib, and by the sophisticated jail break in Kandahar city in June 2008 when they freed 1,100

⁹⁵ Kabul Center for Strategic Studies, 'Insurgency in the East: The Taliban's Military Strategy for 2008', accessed online on 16/07/12 from

http://www.kabulcenter.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=163:insurgency-in-the-east-the-talibans-military-strategy-for-2008&catid=53:current-articles-

⁹⁶ Shahzad S. S., 'The Taliban talk the talk', *Asia Times*, published 11/04/08 accessed online on 16/07/12 from http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/JD11Df02.html

⁹⁷ Roggio B., 'Taliban sever NATO supply line through Pakistan's northwest', *The Long War Journal*, published 03/02/09, accessed online on 16/07/12 from

http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2009/02/taliban_sever_nato_s.php

⁹⁸ Masood S., 'Bridge attack halts NATO supplies to Afghanistan', *New York Times*, published 03/02/09 accessed online on 16/07/12 from <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/04/world/asia/04pstan.html>

⁹⁹ Dorronsoro G., 'The Taliban's Winning Strategy in Afghanistan', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2009, p.27

¹⁰⁰ Kabul Center for Strategic Studies, 'Insurgency'

prisoners of which 400 were Taliban fighters.¹⁰¹ Thus 2008 seen the expansion of the Taliban north and east, and the attempt at hindering NATO supplies in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

2009 seen the continuation of the previous denial and demoralisation strategies, with the only real development being a greater emphasis on the interdiction of NATO supplies. This was carried out in three ways: officially the Taliban propagated the arrest and capture of supplies; unofficially, and more commonly the Taliban either set up checkpoints along the highways they controlled to collect tolls; or, increasingly planted IEDs to target both NATO supplies and personnel. The 2009 *Layeha* which was issued by the Taliban highlights the official line, which proposed the arrest of anyone found transporting “infidel” goods, or justified that “if a driver tried to run, the mujahideen are allowed to open fire on him”.¹⁰² It lays out strict instructions for the looting of NATO logistics, stating that the captured material called ‘*Ghaneemat*’ must be split, with 20 percent being sent to the ‘*Baitul Maal*’ (treasury, presumably at the district or provincial level) and the remaining 80 percent being distributed amongst the insurgents who fought in that particular battle.¹⁰³ However, a report by the US Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs believes that the Taliban are regularly extorting money from NATO logistics sub-contractors in return for safe passage through Taliban controlled areas, as Haji Fata, the CEO of Mirzada Transportation Company, was quoted in the report as saying in 2009, “every truck costs about \$200 as a bribe I pay on the route”.¹⁰⁴ Even by December 2009, Secretary Clinton stated to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that “one of the major sources of funding for the Taliban is the protection money”.¹⁰⁵ As well as targeting the NATO supplies through capture and extortion, the Taliban significantly targeted the NATO supply chain through the use of Improvised

¹⁰¹ Forsberg, ‘The Taliban’, pp.39-40

¹⁰² *Layeha*, 2009, point 20

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, point 22 and point 24

¹⁰⁴ Tierney, *Warlord*, p.34

¹⁰⁵ Clinton H., testimony to Senate Foreign Relations Committee on December 3rd 2009

Explosive Devices (IEDs) which were also used to target ISAF and GoA forces personnel. In 2009 the US military recorded 8,159 IED incidents throughout Afghanistan, compared to 3,867 in 2008, and 2,677 in 2007.¹⁰⁶

The Taliban, in 2010, seemed to focus their attention towards the foreign forces a lot more than in previous years. There are various possible reasons for this occurrence. The most likely could be that the Taliban seen the US troop surge of 30,000 extra troops to the south and Kabul as a metaphorical ‘last throw of the dice’, especially after NATO announced the handover of security to Afghan forces by 2014 at the Lisbon Summit in February. Statistics from the Canadian backed Human Security Report Project show that the Taliban increased its use of IEDs to target coalition troops, which is demonstrated by the fact that in 2009 there were 2,786 coalition forces personnel injured by IED attacks, whereas in 2010 the figure rose 45.5% to 4,054.¹⁰⁷ The Taliban seemed to fight sensibly in 2010 by trading space for time, ceding some areas in the south without a fight to the surge. They did stand and fight for control of some areas, for example in north-eastern Laghman province the ANA launched an offensive in August, but the Taliban beat back the offensive, with Dorronsoro describing it as “disastrous” for the ANA.¹⁰⁸ While the NATO and GoA were firmly focussed on controlling the south, the Taliban tried to consolidate its control of eastern provinces, which would allow them strategic staging posts for attacks on Kabul. By the end of 2010 they had control of Nuristan province¹⁰⁹, after NATO had ceased to defend it properly from 2009, and also of

¹⁰⁶ Whitlock C., ‘Soaring IED Attacks in Afghanistan Stymie U.S. Counteroffensive’, *Washington Post*, 18/03/10 accessed online on 17/07/12 from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/03/17/AR2010031703649.html>

¹⁰⁷ Human Security Report Project, IED figures accessed online on 18/03/10 from <http://www.conflictmonitors.org/countries/afghanistan/facts-and-figures/violent-incidents/ied-attacks>

¹⁰⁸ Dorronsoro G., ‘Think Again: The Afghan Surge’, *Foreign Policy*, 2010, accessed online on 19/07/10 from http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/10/07/think_again_the_afghan_surge?page=0,3

¹⁰⁹ Cavendish J., ‘First, Take Nuristan: The Taliban’s New Afghan Plan’, *Time*, 01/06/10

northern Wardak province¹¹⁰, both of which bordered Kabul and possessed strategic benefits for the Taliban.

In June 2011 President Obama announced his intentions to begin early troop withdrawals during 2011 and 2012, something which the majority of the other ISAF forces quickly followed suit in. Coupled with the Lisbon Summit announcement, the coalition forces began drawing down their rural bases and focussing on the defence of the urban areas, leaving the ANA to defend the countryside. As a result the Taliban increased its efforts to mount sophisticated attacks on urban areas in order to signal to coalition forces that they were not just going to ‘run the clock down’, and that the Taliban could retake ‘cleared’ areas if they wanted (although they could never ‘hold’ the areas which NATO forces wanted due to the overwhelming airpower they could bring to bear). Tony Karon likened this strategy to having the psychological effect of the Tet Offensive in Vietnam, in that the Taliban’s attacks signalled more and more their resilience, and reminded NATO and the GoA that “winning, for the Taliban, after all, is simply a matter of not losing”.¹¹¹ For example, in early May the Taliban fought a 36 hour pitched battle in Kandahar city after infiltrating hundreds of men and weapons into the city, then two days later mounted a large attack against GoA forces in Nuristan with 400 insurgents, as well as launching other similar attacks throughout the country.¹¹² A second development in Taliban strategy in 2011 was the greater emphasis put on infiltration of the GoA forces. Although the infiltration of, and incidents by, infiltration occur at the tactical level, they have serious strategic consequences such as “eroding the trust towards the ANSF in the eyes of international community and local population; demoralizing the ANSF and Afghan population’ and winning a propaganda victory in the local and

¹¹⁰ Fergusson J., *Taliban: The Unknown Enemy*, (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2011), pp.354-382

¹¹¹ Karon T., ‘Afghanistan: A Taliban Offensive Hopes to Repeat Vietcong’s Tet Effect’, *Time*, published 10/05/11, accessed online on 19/07/12 from <http://world.time.com/2011/05/10/afghanistan-a-taliban-offensive-hopes-to-repeat-vietcongs-tet-effect/>

¹¹² *Ibid*

international media”.¹¹³ The most common type of infiltration, but one that is usually ‘ad hoc’ and requires no strategic planning is the use of “turnarounds” where low level members of the GoA forces are offered rewards, or coerced, to smuggle equipment or material to the insurgents, provide intelligence on operations and locations, allow insurgents access to restricted areas, or even to carry out fratricidal attacks themselves.¹¹⁴ It is evident though that a number of pre-planned and sophisticated attacks were only possible in 2011 because of the use of infiltrated Afghan security personnel allowing insurgents through complex security cordons. For example, one of the major incidents which occurred in 2011 was the Taliban attack on the Intercontinental Hotel in Kabul on June 28th, when nine attackers were able to get through numerous ANP and ANA checkpoints throughout the city, and into a highly secure hotel through the service entrance at a time when it was accommodating “a high-level GoA delegation and other VIPs”.¹¹⁵ This attack is highly unlikely to have been able to have been mounted without inside information or knowledge of the security layout. In August 2012, Mullah Omar claimed that infiltration was indeed a plan from Quetta during 2011, stating that the insurgents had infiltrated GoA forces “according to the plan given to them last year”.¹¹⁶ This strategy has continued in 2012, with fratricidal incidents increasing on a weekly basis. The Taliban has even created a department to deal specifically with infiltration and ‘turnarounds’ known as the Department of ‘Call and Guidance, Luring and Integration’.¹¹⁷ Indeed, the impact that this strategy has had upon the GoA forces is demonstrated by the announcement from the US and GoA on 2nd September 2012 that they

¹¹³ Kovanen & Guallar, ‘The Rising’, P.5

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, pp.9-13

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*, p.7

¹¹⁶ Mullah Omar, ‘Eid ul-Fitr Message’, 16/08/12, translated by Uruknet.info, accessed online on 17/08/12 from www.uroknet.de/?p=m90397&hd=&size=1&l=e

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*

are ceasing the training of Afghan Local Police while they vet all current policemen in an attempt to root out Taliban presence.¹¹⁸

The Taliban also continues to focus its military attention to mounting sophisticated urban attacks, which is evidently aided by its infiltration of the GoA forces in previous years. For example, the opening move of the 2012 ‘Spring Offensive’ was a complex and coordinated attack in April where, as Jon Boone explains, “dozens of fighters launched gun, rocket and suicide attacks on embassies, Nato bases, parliament and government buildings in the capital, as well as Nato targets in three eastern provinces”.¹¹⁹ By using such low figures in the attack on Kabul it is evident that the Taliban were not attempting to gain control of the city itself, the attacks were largely ineffective in the physical sense, however, in terms of a psychological impact the Taliban demonstrated that it had the capability to attack supposedly one of the most secure districts of Afghanistan, the diplomatic district, at will. A number of other urban attacks have followed since this opening gambit, and it would also seem that the Taliban is attempting to reach into provinces and districts that have seen little violence since 2001. For example, in July 2012 the Taliban assassinated Uzbek member of parliament Ahmed Khan Samangani, then a few days later blew up 22 NATO tankers in Samangani province which had been “among the few relatively secure parts of Afghanistan”.¹²⁰ Similar incidents have occurred in other previously peaceful provinces throughout July, such as in Bamiyan province in the central highlands which was considered secure enough to be the first province handed over from NATO forces to the ANA in 2011.¹²¹ Throughout 2012 there

¹¹⁸ Colonel Collins T., ‘US Forces-Afghanistan statement on training of Afghan Local Police’, ISAF press statement, 02/09/12, accessed online on 02/09/12 from <http://www.isaf.nato.int/article/isaf-releases/us-forces-afghanistan-statement-on-training-of-afghan-local-police.html>

¹¹⁹ Boone J., ‘Taliban launches largest attack on Kabul in 11 years’, *The Guardian*, published 15/04/12

¹²⁰ Basharat J., ‘Taliban fighters destroy 22 NATO supply trucks, kill 12 Afghan troops’, *Washington Post*, 18/07/12 accessed online on 20/07/12 from http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/taliban-fighters-kill-9-afghan-soldiers-destroy-22-nato-supply-trucks/2012/07/18/gJQADeGYtW_story.html

¹²¹ Graham-Harrison E., ‘Afghanistan insurgency threatens previously peaceful Bamiyan province’, *The Guardian*, published 19/07/12

have emerged two distinct schools of thought on the issue of why the Taliban is now focusing on small numbered, coordinated urban attacks, and attempting to spread to areas of previous security. Dan Lamothe believes that the new Taliban strategy is because they have become weakened in the last few years due to increased counter-insurgency efforts, and because of a declining supply of equipment, manpower and support, thus they are forced to use low numbers in each attack, and are finding it increasingly necessary to carry out ‘spectacular’ attacks in order to maintain the level of media attention that they are used to.¹²² However, one of the main aims of the Taliban has always been to expel and fight the coalition ‘infidel’ forces, and as such since the end of 2011 NATO forces have been drawing down their rural bases and falling back to urban areas, for example Helmand province seen a reduction from over 200 bases at the end of 2011 to about 30 by June 2012.¹²³ It is therefore logical that in order to fulfil the Taliban’s aim of expelling foreign forces, they have to attack urban areas as this is where NATO targets are now situated. Secondly, the claim that the Taliban is running low on equipment, especially IED making equipment would seem to go against the statistics which show that 2011 seen a 11.46 percent increase in IED attacks on 2010, and initial reports would show that 2012 is no exception to the trend.¹²⁴

Now that the developments of the information operations and the kinetic strategies have been examined, the theoretical debate of whether the Taliban is fighting a new or classic insurgency will be engaged with.

¹²² Lamothe D., ‘Taliban Strategy Evolves as US Prepares for Handoff’, *Capital Insider Interview*, 07/06/12, accessed online on 01/07/12 from <http://www.tbd.com/blogs/capital-insider/2012/06/taliban-strategy-evolves-as-u-s-prepares-for-handoff-15764.html>

¹²³ *Ibid*

¹²⁴ Figures from <http://pakpotpourri2.wordpress.com/2012/04/01/study-ied-sufferings-in-af-pak/> accessed on 20/07/12

'New' way of warfare or 'classic' insurgency?

The Taliban's place in insurgency theory has not been afforded the attention it deserves. Some of the authoritative scholars on the Taliban, such as Giustozzi, have tried to frame similarities and differences of the Taliban strategies with various insurgency theories.¹²⁵ However, only a few scholars, such as Hammes and Kilcullen have overtly stated whether they believe the Taliban is fighting a 'new' way of warfare, or a 'classic' form of insurgency. This section will highlight the arguments of the 'new' way scholars, but ultimately show that the Taliban is fighting a classic style of insurgency by presenting the resemblance of the Taliban's insurgency with the mujahideen's war against the Soviets, and the cross-border raids carried out during the early Twentieth century along the Durand Line. Taber and Mao's theories will then be used to show the overwhelming similitude between their experiences and the Taliban insurgency.

New Approach?

Some veterans of the Afghan war, such as General David Barno, who commanded US forces in Afghanistan from 2003-2005, believe that the Taliban insurgency is a demonstration of Hammes' 'fourth generation warfare', which uses political, social, economic and military networks to achieve "victory by putting intense, unremitting pressure on adversary decisionmakers, causing them to eventually capitulate, independent of military success or failure on the battlefield".¹²⁶ Thomas Hammes argues that the Taliban is fighting this new style of warfare by placing a greater focus on political will, a trend which he believes has been increasing since Mao, but which also allows insurgents to organise their leadership around a flat based network which deflects their weakness to targeting by the enemy.¹²⁷ He

¹²⁵ Giustozzi, *Koran*, pp.123-129

¹²⁶ Barno D. W., 'Challenges in Fighting a Global Insurgency', *Parameters*, Summer, 2006, p.17

¹²⁷ Hammes T. X., *The Sling and the Stone: On War in the 21st Century*, (St Paul: Zenith Press, 2006), p.167

argues that the Taliban is targeting specific audiences with tailored messages in order to increase support, undermine the enemy and warn neutral spectators not to get involved, with the primary message attempting to persuade the ISAF decision makers that the war will be too long and too costly for them to win, due to the Taliban's "superior political will".¹²⁸

Hammes believes that fourth generation warfare is a type of linear progression, in that each historical period was defined by its 'generation' of warfare, and that since Mao there has been a transition period between third generation 'wars of manoeuvre' and fourth generation 'wars of wills', in which the Taliban firmly classifies as a fourth generation organisation.¹²⁹ This viewpoint, however, seems somewhat naive of Hammes' as it basically implies that no more than two 'generations' can coexist in each historical period, and that there is never a regression to a previous 'generation'. As such he states that the defining feature of insurgencies during the 'fourth generation' is that they place more emphasis on "destruction of the enemy's political will rather than the exhaustion of his conventional military power".¹³⁰ Again, this viewpoint is naive in implying that insurgencies previous to Mao lacked the political basis or understanding of war that is found in insurgencies today. As Clausewitz states, "the political object is the goal, war is the means of reaching it, and means can never be considered in isolation from their purpose".¹³¹

Hammes' believes that the Taliban understands the political primacy of fourth generation warfare, as he states that they targeted the 2004 Presidential elections because "they sought to undermine the legitimacy of whoever won the elections. Instead of defeating the government's security forces, they plan to destroy its legitimacy".¹³² Firstly, the Taliban

¹²⁸ Hammes T. X., 'Insurgency: Modern Warfare Evolves into a Fourth Generation', *Strategic Forum*, No. 214, January 2005, pp.1-2

¹²⁹ *Ibid*, p.3

¹³⁰ *Ibid*, p.3

¹³¹ Clausewitz C. V., *On War*, translated and edited by Paret P. And Howard M., (Guildford: Princeton University Press, 1984), p.87

¹³² Hammes, 'Insurgency', p.1

did not target the 2004 Presidential election at all because they did not want to alienate themselves from the population and local communities who wished to vote, for as Giustozzi furthers, “not a single polling station was seriously attacked anywhere in the country”.¹³³ Secondly, during this time the Taliban was attempting to destroy the legitimacy and psyche of the government’s security forces precisely by defeating them militarily, through their ‘denial’ and ‘demoralisation’ strategies which was sapping rural areas of government presence through assassination and *shabnamah*, and confining the AMF and ANP to their bases. This therefore shows that Hammes is trying to impose his theories on a situation without thorough research as to the realities on the ground, which ultimately undermines his argument that the Taliban is fighting a new way of warfare as his evidence is flawed.

Finally, Hammes’ argues that the Taliban fits the mould of fourth generation warfare as strategically they are primarily attempting to target ISAF in order to change “the minds of decisionmakers” into thinking that the war is too costly and will take too long to win.¹³⁴ This argument is true to an extent, as demonstrated by the Taliban’s English language website and the “propaganda of the deed” that Kilcullen talks about,¹³⁵ however, this is not the only aim of the Taliban. As a senior Taliban commander told Michael Semple in an interview published in the *New Statesman*, the Taliban will continue to fight after NATO has withdrawn its forces in 2014, and “over time they will become stronger than the Karzai regime”.¹³⁶ The argument that the Taliban is primarily targeting NATO decision makers is therefore ignorant of the Taliban’s complete aims, and short term in its outlook. Hammes’ arguments that the Taliban is fighting a ‘new’ approach, of fourth generation warfare, therefore, does not seem to hold up to detailed scrutiny.

¹³³ Giustozzi, *Koran*, p.114

¹³⁴ Hammes, ‘Insurgency’, p.1

¹³⁵ Kilcullen D., *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the midst of a Big One*, (London: Hurst & Company, 2009) p.58

¹³⁶ Taliban commander interview with Semple M., *New Statesman*, 16/07/2012, p.34

David Kilcullen alludes to the Chinese text *Chao Xian Zhan*(unrestricted warfare)¹³⁷ by Colonels Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui as a framework which demonstrates the Taliban's strategies as being novel out of necessity, because of the US and Western dominance of conventional warfare.¹³⁸ The Chinese colonels argue that the West, particularly the US, has come to dominate conventional warfare so much that they have, according to Kilcullen, "created a trap for themselves"¹³⁹, whereby no enemy should even attempt to fight by conventional military means because of the certainty of defeat. According to Liang and Xiangsui, the developments of globalisation, (for example technology, interconnected economies, mass media), has meant that "fields that were formerly isolated from each other are being connected. Mankind is endowing virtually every space with battlefield significance", and as such, in order for the enemies of the US to overcome its conventional military dominance, the Chinese authors propose that these new "omnipresent" battlefields need to be utilised to stand any chance of victory.¹⁴⁰ As Colonel Qiao said in an interview with the Chinese Communist Party Youth League newspaper, "the first rule of unrestricted warfare is that there are no rules, with nothing forbidden".¹⁴¹ Liang and Xiangsui therefore advocate the use of "combinations" of "military, trans-military, and non-military" means in order to overwhelm the opposition.¹⁴² With reference to the Taliban, Kilcullen believes that they are using a 'combination' of guerrilla and psychological means, with "propaganda as their main effort".¹⁴³ The Taliban's attacks on schools and their adoption of religiously and culturally controversial suicide attacks can arguably be said to demonstrate their willingness to overlook socially constructed rules and norms. Coupled with this is the Taliban's attempt

¹³⁷ Liang Q. & Xiangsui W., *Chao Xian Zhan*, (Beijing: PLA Literature and Arts Publishing House, 1999) accessed online from <http://www.c4i.org/unrestricted.pdf>

¹³⁸ Kilcullen, *Accidental*, pp.2-3

¹³⁹ *Ibid*, p.3

¹⁴⁰ Liang & Xiangsui, *Unrestricted*, p.43

¹⁴¹ Quoted in Kilcullen, *Accidental Guerrilla*, p.3, sourced from Foreign Broadcast Intercept Service (FBIS), translation of interview, June 28 1999, www.fbis.gov, document no. OW2807114599

¹⁴² Liang & Xiangsui, *Unrestricted*, p.146

¹⁴³ Kilcullen, *Accidental*, p.58

to take on ISAF and GoA in a propaganda war which uses the internet, global media and mobile communications as some of its vehicles, in keeping with Liang's and Xiangsui's arguments that technological developments have created "non-natural spaces" in which a conflicts can be carried out.¹⁴⁴ As the Chinese Colonels further, "war is no longer even war but rather coming to grips on the internet, and matching the mass media, assault and defense in forward exchange transactions, along with other things which we had never viewed as war".¹⁴⁵ Another way in which the Taliban could be said to be carrying out a version of 'unrestricted warfare' is through their ability to learn, incorporate and adapt their strategies, for as Liang and Xiangsui state with regards to strategy, "It should not be that type of single prescription for treating the symptoms and not the disease, but rather a hybrid type of learning widely from the strong points of others and gathering advantages so as to allow a pear tree to bear both peaches and apples."¹⁴⁶ In this regard, the Taliban can be seen to have learnt and incorporated successful strategies, such as 'denial', from the Mujahideen war, the effectiveness of IEDs and suicide bombings from Iraq, and the futility of fighting conventional pitched battles in 2006. The arguments put forward by Kilcullen, and the framework set up by Liang and Xiangsui are more convincing than those demonstrated by Barno and Hammes, nevertheless it is still dubious that the Taliban are fighting in a manner that can constitute a 'new way'. The authors of *Unrestricted Warfare* advocate the use of a large number of 'combinations', including financial, cyber, diplomatic and trade warfare to name but a few – the Taliban do not have the capability or means to carry out such complex diversification of methods. All that they have, and can manage, is the use of widespread propaganda and psychological warfare alongside guerrilla strategies, which is far from original, Mao in China and Giap in Vietnam demonstrate this. Moreover, just because these

¹⁴⁴ Liang & Xiangsui, *Unrestricted*, p.42

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p.141

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p.141

propaganda wars are being conducted in ‘non-natural spaces’, it does not detract from the fact that the purpose of this information is ultimately to persuade and coerce **people** into supporting (or not fighting) the relevant side, whether this is done by word of mouth, DVDs, or in cyber space, it is only the means, not the end that has changed. It will now be demonstrated that the Taliban’s insurgency is best viewed as a classic form of conflict.

Classic Approach?

The Taliban, as an irregular force revolving around religion in order to dispel foreign invaders and re-establish an Islamic form of government, is hardly a new form of warfare; it has been part of Afghan military culture for over two centuries. In 1815 Mountstuart Elphinstone wrote *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul*, in which he described that:

*“In foreign invasions, use might be made of the general rising of the people, called in the Afghaun country Ooloosee...they would be under no regulation on the King’s part, and no good could be expected, in regular actions, from so ungovernable a multitude; but if properly applied, this kind of force would not be without its advantages.”*¹⁴⁷

Elphinstone goes on to describe how “tribes” would rise in order to come “to the aid of their religion”.¹⁴⁸ These uprisings were used throughout the Nineteenth century against the British campaigns in Afghanistan. For example, the correspondence of Field Marshall Lord Roberts recounts the British Campaign of late 1879 and 1880 in trying to recapture Kabul and Afghanistan as a whole from an insurgent uprising. Although these insurgents lacked proper leadership they attempted to overwhelm and demoralise the British with their sheer numbers and relentless attacks, with Roberts describing a situation on 14th December 1879 where the British had to abandon their hill posts and retreat to Sherpur after encountering 30,000

¹⁴⁷ Elphinstone M., *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul*, Volume Two, 1815, (reprinted London: Oxford University Press, 1972), p.272

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p.272

insurgents.¹⁴⁹ Yuri Bosnin recites a similar situation occurring in July 1880 when insurgents “launched an offensive on Qandahar and inflicted a complete defeat on the British near the Afghan village of Maywand”.¹⁵⁰ This form of relentless attack upon an enemy does not sound dissimilar to the ‘demoralisation’ strategy of the Taliban which they used successfully against the ANP and AMF in 2004 and 2005. The insurgencies of the nineteenth century did not possess the comparative levels of organisation and experience that the Taliban retains today; however, it demonstrates that this method of fighting has been the typical style in Afghanistan for at least two centuries.

The two conflicts of the mujahideen war and the Taliban insurgency also offer a viable brief comparison to one another in order to demonstrate this Afghan style of war, not least because both contain adversaries with vast differences in force, finances, and firepower. Mohammad Yousaf, the former ISI Brigadier in charge of guiding the mujahideen’s policy against the Soviets, described their efforts as a strategy of a “thousand cuts”¹⁵¹, which could easily be used to describe the Taliban’s strategy against GoA and ISAF. With the Taliban leadership being made up of many former mujahideen warriors it is not surprising that many of their tactics and strategies mirror those of the Soviet era. For example, Yousaf explains that they had three main strategies: first was the cutting of supply lines; second, the assassination and sabotage of communist government officials and their supporters; and third, the use of long range weapons against Kabul and other cities, aiming to hit communist targets.¹⁵² The Taliban, from 2008, followed a similar targeting of ISAF’s supply lines, noting their vulnerability especially along the Afghan/Pakistan border. Yousaf describes a

¹⁴⁹ Correspondence of Field Marshall Lord Roberts to Brigadier-General Charles Gough, 14/12/1879, in Robson B. (editor), *Roberts in India: The Military Papers of Field Marshal Lord Roberts 1876-1893*, (Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1993), p.147

¹⁵⁰ Bosnin Y. V., ‘Afghanistan, resistance to 19th-century British invasion’, in Ness I. (editor), *International Encyclopaedia of Revolution and Protest*, (London: Blackwell, 2009), p.16

¹⁵¹ Yousaf M. & Adkin M., *Afghanistan - The Bear Trap*, (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Books, 2001), p.68

¹⁵² *Ibid*, pp.146-147

typical mujahideen attack in April 1984 where they blew up numerous road bridges and ambushed a convoy on the Salang Highway destroying 70 tankers,¹⁵³ an attack which would not be out of place in the reports coming out of Afghanistan after 2008. Also the ‘denial’ strategy that the Taliban have been using since the early days of the insurgency sounds remarkably similar to the second approach that Yousaf describes of targeting government officials and supporters. The strategies of the Taliban therefore can be seen to have their origins in the mujahideen’s war against the Soviets, and are not necessarily ‘new’ as Hammes and Kilcullen would have their readership believe.

As well as brief historical examples demonstrating that the Taliban is not fighting a ‘new’ way of warfare, some prominent ‘classic’ insurgency theorists also demonstrate the fact well. During the Taliban’s original rise to power in 1994 they used a ‘foco’ strategy, whereby a small group of guerrillas used violence against corrupt warlords to instigate support, which they continuously used throughout Afghanistan until they were able to take Kabul. It is easy to see why some authors, such as Sean Maloney, argue that the Taliban have been repeating this method since 2001;¹⁵⁴ however, the Taliban are in fact following a more population centric approach along the lines of Taber and Mao whereby the mobilisation of political support is a pre-requisite to violence, not the other way round as in a ‘foco’ insurgency. Therefore the thoughts of Robert Taber and Mao will be used to emphasize this point as their theories are the most similar to the modern Taliban. Up to the end of 2005 Giustozzi believes that Robert Taber’s ‘war of the flea’ best described the Taliban insurgency, but that during 2006, the “fighting around Kandahar represent[ed] a departure from that model”.¹⁵⁵ Nevertheless, after 2006 the Taliban did revert back to guerrilla strategies which

¹⁵³ *Ibid*, p.72

¹⁵⁴ Maloney S. M., ‘Taliban Governance: Can Canada Compete?’, *Policy Options*, June 2009, pp.63-66

¹⁵⁵ Giustozzi, *Koran*, p.137

would indicate a possible return to a ‘war of the flea’ approach. Taber describes this approach stating that:

“The guerrilla fights the war of the flea, and his military enemy suffers the dog’s disadvantages: too much to defend, too small, ubiquitous, and agile an enemy to come to grips with. If the war continues long enough – this is the theory – the dog succumbs to exhaustion and anaemia without ever having found anything on which to close his jaws or to rake with his claws.”¹⁵⁶

It is clear that the Taliban understand Taber’s protracted form of conflict, with Shaykh Mustafa Abu al-Yazid (Shaykh Saeed), a member of the Quetta Shura, telling Geo TV in 2008 that “you have the watches but we have the time”.¹⁵⁷ According to Taber, a guerrilla war is “the extension of politics by means of armed conflict. It follows that the extension cannot come logically until all acceptable peaceful solutions – appeals, legislative and judicial action, and the resources of the ballot box – have been proved worthless”.¹⁵⁸ This may explain why the Taliban did not attack any of the Parliamentary or Presidential elections in 2004 and 2005 respectively, as they wanted to allow the population to see for themselves the futility of such elections. After all, the Taliban had been using ‘denial’ and ‘demoralisation’ strategies throughout the rural areas of Afghanistan, so logically, regardless of who was voted in, the Taliban ensured that they made minimal impact in these areas anyway, adding to the population’s apathy towards democratic means and, as the Taliban hoped, added to the support for armed struggle. Taber outlines two ways in which the ‘flea’ can succeed, firstly by evolving through phases until it “has recruited enough men, and come into possession of enough arms, to build a revolutionary army capable of defeating the

¹⁵⁶ Taber R., *The War of the Flea: A Study of Guerrilla Warfare Theory and Practice* (St Albans: Granada Publishing, 1977), p.29

¹⁵⁷ Shaykh Mustafa Abu al-Yazid (Shaykh Saeed), Geo TV interview, aired June 21, 2008, quoted in Jones S., *In the Graveyard of Empires: America’s War in Afghanistan*, (London: Norton W. W., 2010)

¹⁵⁸ Taber, *The War of the Flea*, p.31

regular army in open battle”, or secondly, “it must continue until political developments resulting from the campaign have brought about the desired end: the rising of the masses of the people and overthrow or abdication of the discredited government”.¹⁵⁹ With the overwhelming firepower of NATO forces, the first option described by Taber would be undertaken in vein, as demonstrated in 2006, and so the Taliban fights the war of the flea in the hope that their propaganda and kinetic operations will increase support for its organisation resulting in a ‘rise of the masses’, or until they are strong enough to overwhelm the GoA forces after 2014. Taber’s ‘war of the flea’ does represent a persuasive framework when trying to analyse the Taliban’s strategies. However, it will now be shown that a classical Maoist approach offers greater resemblance to the modern Taliban.

Mao is not the father of guerrilla warfare, it was used before he wrote *On Guerrilla Warfare*, and it has been used since, as has been demonstrated by the Afghans during the Nineteenth Century and again against the Soviets in the 1980s. Although some small numbers of Taliban commanders may have read Mao (such as former Hizb-I-Islami commanders), it is without doubt that they would have learnt of at least some of his strategies indirectly from ISI guidance during the Mujahideen War against the Soviets, and from ISI contacts during this conflict. As Giustozzi reiterates, “the idea that some second – or third-hand inspiration was taken from aspects of Mao’s theories, purged of their People’s War content, received some confirmation already in the form of the phases of infiltration and of stronghold build-up”.¹⁶⁰ Mao’s strategies can therefore be seen as the closest scholarly framework through which to view the Taliban’s modes of warfare, as this is one with which the Taliban have most definitely had at least indirect contact with.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p.46

¹⁶⁰ Giustozzi, *Koran*, p.137

The first similarity between Mao's strategies and those of the Taliban revolves around the 'survivability' of the guerrilla organisation. The oft quoted phrase by Mao highlights the primary importance of organisational survival stating, "when guerrillas engage a stronger enemy, they withdraw when he advances; harass him when he stops; strike him when he is weary; pursue him when he withdraws"¹⁶¹, implying that the guerrilla should primarily play to the enemy's weaknesses in order to survive. This emphasis on survival can be seen in the decentralised nature of the Taliban's organisation. Although strategic decisions are made centrally by the leadership, commanders in the field are allowed tactical freedom in order to best respond to local and district level situations, but also in order to protect the higher echelons of the organisation from counterinsurgency efforts. Giustozzi makes a similar point by comparing the organisation of some Mujahideen parties of the Soviet war to that of the Taliban: he argues that the Taliban's leadership and organisation is a lot more sophisticated than the *Harakat-i Enqelab-i Islami* party from whose ranks many of the Taliban commanders "fought once"; however, compared to Hekmatyar's *Hizb-i Islami* party, which placed great emphasis on a centralised command and control structure which went right down to local levels, the "sophistication of Hizb's centralised system has not been equalled by the Taliban"¹⁶². Nevertheless, he continues that ultimately Hizb's complexity was "too sophisticated for Afghanistan", and that in truth the Taliban has purposely decentralised itself as much as it could, without negating its ability to conduct and disseminate its strategic decisions, for as he concludes, "faced with an adversary immensely more powerful, the priority for the Taliban was to be in a position to absorb as much damage as possible without compromising their operational capability too much"¹⁶³.

¹⁶¹ Mao T. T., *On Guerrilla Warfare*, edited and translated by Griffith S. B., (Baltimore: Nautical & Aviation Publishing, 1992), p.73

¹⁶² Giustozzi, 'Conclusion', in *Decoding the New Taliban*, pp.294-295

¹⁶³ *Ibid*, p.295

The second major similarity between the Taliban's and Mao's strategies is the appearance of distinct 'phases' of warfare. Mao wrote that:

*“Protracted war will pass through three stages. The first stage covers the period of the enemy's strategic offensive and our strategic defensive. The second stage will be the period of the enemy's strategic consolidation and our preparation for the counter-offensive. The third stage will be the period of our strategic counter-offensive and the enemy's strategic retreat”.*¹⁶⁴

The period immediately after the fall of the Taliban in late 2001 up until late 2004 is generally accepted as the Taliban's 'strategic defensive' stage by sources such as Giustozzi¹⁶⁵ and Ehsan Mehmood Khan¹⁶⁶. This stage is dominated by the establishing of support and “base areas”¹⁶⁷, which the Taliban did throughout the southern region during this period. After the first stage, authors begin to disagree on what years the Taliban progressed to the second and third stages. Khan believes that 2005 was characterised by “strategic stalemate” and “by the end of 2008, they had decisively entered the Strategic Counteroffensive Stage characterized by fluid hit-and-run operations and massive use of IEDs”.¹⁶⁸ Giustozzi on the other hand believes that as early as 2006, the battle at Panjwai near Kandahar city demonstrates an attempt by the Taliban to enter the 'third phase'.¹⁶⁹ Both of these arguments though seem somewhat superficial in their understanding of Mao. Firstly, Mao describes the third phase of protracted war as beginning with mobile warfare but through which “positional warfare will rise to importance”¹⁷⁰, and as such Khan's claim that 'hit-and-run operations' and IEDs can be seen as a signal of mobile or positional warfare is dubious because these

¹⁶⁴ Mao T. T., 'On Protracted War', May 1938, accessed online on 06/08/12 from http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-2/mswv2_09.htm

¹⁶⁵ Giustozzi, *Koran*, pp.123 &127

¹⁶⁶ Khan E. M., 'A Strategic Perspective on Taliban Warfare', *Small Wars Journal*, 2010, p.5

¹⁶⁷ Mao, 'On Protracted War'

¹⁶⁸ Khan, 'A Strategic', pp.5-6

¹⁶⁹ Giustozzi, *Koran*, p.137

¹⁷⁰ Mao, 'On Protracted War'

methods are more synonymous with guerrilla warfare. Giustozzi's claim that the Panjwai battle signalled a possible premature move by the Taliban to the third stage does hold more credit as it is possible that the Taliban underestimated ISAF strength and overestimated their own. Another possibility though is that the Taliban seen the hand over to Canadian forces in the area as a possible weak target. As Mao himself wrote, "although guerrilla warfare is the warfare of such dispersed units, it is sometimes desirable to concentrate in order to destroy an enemy. Thus, the principle of concentration of force against a relatively weaker enemy is applicable to guerrilla warfare".¹⁷¹ It is therefore perfectly acceptable in Maoist terms that the Panjwai battle, and the other similar battles which took place in 2006, can be seen as 'concentrations of force' rather than an attempt at a third stage transition. This argument fits better with the fact that before 2005, and since 2006, the Taliban has continued guerrilla warfare strategies which fit much better with Mao's second stage, described as "primarily guerrilla warfare, supplemented by mobile warfare".¹⁷² Even in 2012, where the Taliban has increasingly attempted to stage attacks in urban areas, none have been serious attempts at taking and holding these cities, demonstrating that they are still primarily fighting guerrilla rather than positional warfare. Despite Khan's and Giustozzi's claims, the Taliban is still fighting within the realms of a Maoist 'second stage', indeed, with the immense superiority of the ISAF forces it would be illogical for the Taliban to even attempt a transition to 'third stage' mobile and positional warfare before the 2014 withdrawal of ISAF.

¹⁷¹ Mao, *On Guerrilla*, p.118

¹⁷² Mao, 'On Protracted War'

Conclusion

Since 2002 the Taliban has directed both its kinetic and information operations in line with the two strategic aims of expelling foreign forces from Afghanistan, and restoring the Taliban-run Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. The majority of the Taliban's messaging to the Afghan public and wider world has, and continues to be, conducted through the vehicle of Islam. Although they use Islam as a tool to garner support, through the declaration of a *jihad* for example, it must be understood that to the Taliban it is more than just a tool. After all, the word 'Taliban' is the plural of the Arabic word *talib* meaning a student of Islam.¹⁷³ They legitimately see themselves as being religiously obliged to expel the *infidel* foreign forces, as demonstrated by statements at both the leadership level, and from Graeme Smith's interviews with the Taliban insurgents. By conducting their messages through religion, it also allows them to avoid the tribal issue at the strategic level, reducing the possibility of alienating specific tribal denominations. As the Taliban have developed though they have increasingly sought other ways to legitimise the content of the information they were purporting. By making statements in the name of the 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan' they attempted to play to nationalist sympathies, insinuating that they were a government in exile as a pose to an insurgent group. From 2006 onwards they have diversified from solely using traditional techniques of *shabnamah*, word of mouth and poetic diatribes, to using the internet, DVDs, mobile phones and magazines to spread their messages of information and intimidation, not only through Afghanistan, but also internationally.

The development of the Taliban's kinetic strategies shows that the Quetta *shura* has been more than capable of directing the insurgency to reflect the realities on the ground. They have effectively built upon the early gains in their denial and demoralisation strategies, increasing their control of rural areas especially. The 2006 concentration of forces is still seen

¹⁷³ Fergusson, *Unknown*, p.29

as somewhat of an enigma by analysts. However, it has been shown that a mix of naivety from the Taliban, pressure from external sponsors, and an acceptance of high casualty rates by the leadership in return for a greater psychological impact on the enemy, are the main reasons behind the concentration seen throughout the South in 2006. The regression in 2007 back to a war of attrition highlights the control that the Taliban leadership possesses over its organisation, choosing to adopt a classic approach of occupying areas not held by the enemy. Throughout the period of 2007 to 2011 the Taliban continued to trade space for time, especially during the 2010/11 ‘surge’ by the US. The Taliban gathered increasing momentum in rural areas, and interdicted NATO and GoA supplies in an attempt to increase pressure on their logistical lifelines. The Lisbon Summit announcement of an ISAF withdrawal by 2014 only served to signal a lack of resolve to the Taliban. They maintained the spread of the insurgency, and by 2012 the Taliban is carrying out operations in every part of Afghanistan. Their ability to infiltrate the GoA forces has provided them with numerous benefits, including their increased capability to launch coordinated and sophisticated attacks in supposedly secure areas of Kabul and Afghanistan.

The literature review posed the research question of whether the Taliban gives primacy to its information operations over its kinetic strategies. Kilcullen argues that “they made propaganda (including ‘armed propaganda’ and intimidation) their main effort”.¹⁷⁴ It can be argued that the information operations of the Taliban do supersede those of the kinetic strategies. For example, the denial and demoralisation approaches rely heavily on *shabnamah* and other intimidation techniques, as well as the actual physical violence in order to be effective. Furthermore, most of the kinetic strategies have relied on the coupling propaganda effort to attempt to legitimise and justify the violence which the Taliban uses. However, by placing the focus on the information operations, Kilcullen highlights the means which the

¹⁷⁴ Kilcullen, *The Accidental*, p.58

Taliban relies upon, rather than clarifying the ends which they are trying to achieve. The reason why the Taliban places such apparent emphasis upon its information operations is because of the psychological and political impact it is attempting to attain. All of the Taliban's information operations aim to decrease the legitimacy of its enemies and increase that of its own aims. Because they are fighting a war of attrition all of their kinetic strategies have had the aim of increasing, or appearing to increase the Taliban's strength, not only of physical capabilities, but also of psychological resolve. The only reason why the information operations of the Taliban are superior to the kinetic strategies is because, as Mao states, "politics is war without bloodshed while war is politics with bloodshed".¹⁷⁵ The importance of the information operations is therefore necessary to constantly show the centrality of the political aims of the Taliban, so as not to appear as mindless 'bloodshed', but instead as 'politics with bloodshed'.

Of the four insurgency theories and stratagems discussed, Mao is the most likely to have indirectly, or possibly directly, influenced the Taliban. General Barno's belief that the Taliban is fighting a war in line with Hammes' 'fourth generation warfare'¹⁷⁶ was seen to be unpersuasive. The argument that the Taliban is primarily targeting the foreign decision makers does not hold up to scrutiny when numerous members of the Taliban leadership have vowed that the war will continue after 2014, and the majority of the Taliban's information operations is directed towards the Afghan populace. The Chinese Colonels Liang and Xiangsui did offer a better strategy as a tool of analysing the Taliban, however, 'unrestricted warfare', as they envisioned it, involves a lot more combined aspects to it than simply 'guerrilla' and 'psychological' warfare. The historical examples from the nineteenth century and the Soviet War demonstrated that large aspects of the Taliban's style of conflict have evolved from these hostilities. Taber's 'war of the flea' does offer some useful sound-bites to

¹⁷⁵ Mao, *On Protracted*, point 64.

¹⁷⁶ Barno, 'Challenges', p.17

discuss the Taliban's approach with, however, ultimately Mao puts forward the best strategies through which to analyse the development of the Taliban. Mao's work was influential in the ISI's guidance to the mujahideen during the Soviet War, and as such it is highly likely that the Taliban leadership of today came into contact, at least indirectly, with his work. The Taliban's decentralisation, equating to its survivability; the distinct appearance of phased warfare, from infiltration through to a second phase guerrilla war; and the importance it places upon the political and psychological aspects of the war can all be seen as major aspects of Mao's work. It can therefore be seen that a Maoist viewpoint is useful in analysing the Taliban's approach to warfare. This can possibly be used in predicting that the Taliban will continue through phased warfare, not entering the third phase until after 2014 at least, as a way of achieving their aim of re-establishing the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

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