



2009-07-01

Can You Hear Me Now? Telecommunications Remain Resilient in War Torn Afghanistan

DuPee, Matthew C.

Naval Postgraduate School (U.S.)



Calhoun is a project of the Dudley Knox Library at NPS, furthering the precepts and goals of open government and government transparency. All information contained herein has been approved for release by the NPS Public Affairs Officer.

**Dudley Knox Library / Naval Postgraduate School
411 Dyer Road / 1 University Circle
Monterey, California USA 93943**



- ⌘ Program for Culture & Conflict Studies Home
- ⌘ About Us
- ⌘ Provincial Overview
- ⌘ Journal
- ⌘ Research
- ⌘ CCS People
- ⌘ Contact Us



[Home](#) | [Admissions](#) | [Academics](#) | [Research](#) | [Technology](#) | [Library](#) | [Administration](#) | [About NPS](#)

[CALENDAR](#) | [DIRECTORY](#) | [SEARCH](#)



⌘ [Home](#) >> [Culture & Conflict Studies](#) >> Welcome

THE CULTURE AND CONFLICT REVIEW



Can You Hear Me Now?

Matthew C. DuPée, 7/1/2009

Telecommunications remain resilient in war torn Afghanistan

The power of telecommunications, brought to Afghanistan six years ago, has helped connect millions of Afghans while effectively transcending regional, religious, and ethnic divides to do so. Unlike most development projects in Afghanistan which tend to be focused on the major urban centers, (Kabul alone receives 50 percent of all reconstruction aid), both urban and rural Afghan communities have benefited significantly from the implementation of reliable communications. During the Taliban regime's reign of power only a single telecommunications company existed. There are now six major telecom firms competing in Afghanistan's expanding digital market place.

Telecommunications is the largest legitimate enterprise in Afghanistan's economy and it continues to expand at a break neck speed. Roshan, Afghanistan's largest wireless provider, now provides coverage to over 226 cities and towns across 33 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces in Afghanistan, according to a statement issued on Roshan's webpage. MTN, the second largest telecommunications company in Afghanistan, currently provides service in 27 provinces and 241 cities and towns, according to MTN spokesperson Ms. Nozipho January-Bardill.

"There are approximately 5.17 active subscribers in Afghanistan and the market is growing faster than ever," said Farah Kurji, a public relations specialist for Roshan. "Mobile penetration rates have risen from approximately 0.25% in June 2003 to about 16.58% in August 2008. In the last quarter, Roshan has had the best months in terms of customer acquisition and we expect the market to continue this rapid growth over the coming 24 months."

Although most Afghans revel in their new found freedom with wireless communication, the success of Afghanistan's telecoms industry has endured its share of bumps and bruises. Afghanistan's telecoms industry has been met with both fascination and resentment by the Taliban, who previously banned such technology as television, photography, and the Internet during their time in power. The Taliban have long accused the five largest telecoms companies of colluding with foreign intelligence agencies, insisting the companies pass along the mobile phone numbers of various Taliban commanders to NATO and coalition security forces, a notion that gained street credit after a rapid series of high-profile coalition assaults killed several top Taliban leaders in late 2006 and early 2007.

The Taliban first threatened the companies in May 2007 soon after a daring raid led by British commandos killed Mullah Dadullah, the Taliban's top military strategist, and again the following February; however, this time was followed up with a series of destructive attacks against cellular towers in seven provinces. By the first week of March 2008, five cellular towers lay in ruins across southern Afghanistan to the tune of \$2 million in damages. The Taliban succeeded in their quest, wireless service was cut during the night throughout most of southern Afghanistan by April 1.

"At the beginning the Taliban threat derived by the failure of some local commanders to understand how mobile phones work and that the Americans can intercept their communications regardless of what the companies do," said Antonio Giustozzi, an Afghanistan expert at the London School of Economics. "Then the Taliban could not entirely backtrack without losing face; it is also likely that they might have seen the possibility of profiting from the situation to make some money. I think initially their popularity in

the south was hurt, but since the government has been unable to exploit the opportunity, the people have adjusted to the situation.”

In early February, the Taliban reissued a warning to Afghan wireless providers to cut service between 5PM and 6:30AM in the southern province of Helmand or face “strict consequences for noncompliance,” according to a Taliban statement posted on their webpage. Although wireless providers have again conceded to the Taliban’s demands by temporarily restricting nightly service, the telecoms industry remains resilient despite the destruction of dozens of mobile phone towers by Taliban and criminal vandals in at least eight provinces since last year.

In fact, the industry is continuing to expand and improve the lives of ordinary Afghans. “MTN Afghanistan has improved the security at sites in the risk areas around Afghanistan. In addition to increasing the security at the high risk sites, we are also trying to get more involved with community upliftment programs in rural areas,” Ms. Adill added.

Roshan, the largest taxpayer in the Afghan economy, has adopted similar strategies to help improve the social conditions needed for security to flourish especially in rural communities near the locations of cellular infrastructure. “Roshan has invested over US\$340 million in Afghanistan since its inception six years ago and is deeply committed to Afghanistan’s reconstruction and socio-economic development,” spokesman Farah Kurji noted.

“Roshan’s social programs department engages in a variety of activities that utilize the company’s expertise in technology, employee skill base and its market power to independently and in partnership with Profit and Not-for-Profit institutions to further the humanitarian efforts in Afghanistan. Apart from contributing to the development of infrastructure, job creation, stimulation of the economy and through providing communication enabling the reconstruction effort, Roshan sets aside an annual budget for social programs in the areas of health, education, commerce and social outreach.”

Wireless technology continues to increase its presence throughout the war torn nation and beginning last summer, Roshan launched MPAISA, a mobile banking product, in conjunction with Vodafone and BlackBerry service. That service is now provided in ten provinces. The virtual explosion of Afghanistan’s digital revolution six years ago marks the single greatest infrastructure project undertaken in a country ripped apart by decades of war and destruction.

Matthew C. DuPée is a Research Associate for the Program for Culture & Conflict Studies at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California. He is currently working on his M.A. in Regional Security Studies at the Naval Postgraduate School while conducting research on the Afghan insurgency and narcotics industry.

[Contacts](#) | [Employment](#) | [Copyright/Accessibility](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [FOIA](#) | [Intranet Access](#)

This is an official U.S. Navy website.

All information contained herein has been approved for release by the NPS [Public Affairs Officer](#).
[Contact the Webmaster](#)