Afghanistan and the Battle for the Control of Public Perceptions: Understanding the Insurgents' "Strategic Communications" Campaign

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Resumo

O Afeganistão e a Batalha pelo Controlo das Percepções do Público: Como Compreender a Campanha de Comunicação Estratégica dos Insurgentes

O autor pretende contra-argumentar relativamente a alguma da opinião pública formada que defende que os insurrectos afegãos não possuem uma abordagem sistémica às actividades de informação, ao advogar que a estrutura e estratégia da insurreição revelam um adversário plenamente empenhado no planeamento estratégico e na coordenação de actividades em todos os domínios, em particular no plano da comunicação estratégica, a qual tem um papel central em todas as fases das suas operações.

Os insurrectos planeiam de forma activa e deliberada as suas acções de combate em apoio da sua campanha mais abrangente de forma a afectar o domínio cognitivo da audiência-alvo. Ao fazê-lo, criaram um sofisticado aparelho destinado a ganhar a batalha da influência e controlo das percepções da opinião pública afegã, muçulmana e mundial sobre o desenvolvimento da guerra, através da articulação da sua narrativa com base em temas e mensagens cuidadosamente seleccionados.

Abstract

The author wants to counter some of today's informed opinion, especially where that tends to be dismissive of the afghan insurgents' systematic approach to information activities, when argues that the structure and strategy of the insurgency reveals an adversary fully engaged in strategic planning and coordination action in all domains, in particular in strategic communications, which plays a central role in all stages of their operations.

The insurgents actively plan their kinetic actions to support the non-kinetic campaign deliberately to function in and affect the cognitive domain. In doing so, the insurgents have created a sophisticated apparatus to engage in the battle for the control of public perceptions of the war. The insurgents fully articulate their narrative with well-chosen themes and messages, which intend to reach out and influence Afghan and Muslim population minds worldwide.

> *"…Wars today cannot be won without media. Media aims at the heart rather than the body, [and] if the heart is defeated, the battle is won…"*

Abdul Sattar Maiwandi[1]

Introduction

While many aspects of the insurgents' *modus operandi* in Afghanistan have received major attention and analysis, their information activities have frequently been treated in a simplistic way by commentators. Some refer to the insurgents' apparent lack of doctrine; others put stress on their inability to distinguish between what to a western observer are the strategic and operational levels of the war (Foxley, 2007); many dismiss such activities as mere propaganda (ICG, 2008); and some (perhaps more careful) analysts prefer to reflect a more structured approach and go as far as to call up such terms as Information Operations (Nissen, 2009).

Although many of these commentators are to a certain extent correct, they miss a crucial point: insurgent groups clearly think in terms of relationship between ends, ways and means. Their information activities in fact cover a broad range of the vital functions of any effective communications campaign.[2] They certainly deliver in systematic fashion, segmenting the audience, developing different themes and messages per segment which they deliver through appropriate means with deliberate intention.

In wishing to counter some of today's informed opinion, especially where that tends to be dismissive of the insurgents' systematic approach to information activities, this paper argues that the structure and strategy of the insurgency reveals a resilient adversary, fully engaged in strategic planning and coordination action (Dorronsoro, 2009). This is evidenced in all domains, in particular in strategic communications. In doing so, the insurgents have created a sophisticated

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1 Interview published on the *Taliban website Al-Emarah*. Maiwandi is the editor in chief of *Al-Emarah* (Gwakh, 2011).

2 For the sake of simplicity, undifferentiated terms such as insurgent are used here – rather than *Taliban* or similar – to refer to the most important insurgent groups: the *Taliban*, the *Hezb-e-Islami Gholboddin* (HiG) and the so called *Haqqani* network. Despite being the single most important grouping, the *Taliban* movement certainly does not have a monopoly where the insurgency is concerned.

apparatus that in key areas allows them to outperform the international forces' efforts, in the battle for the control of public perceptions of the war. This holds true not only within Afghanistan itself, but is to a considerable degree also true worldwide.[3]

The insurgents have understood that communications are strategically vital to success. As holds true for NATO and the wider (western) international community, the insurgents' strategic communications (StratCom) effort also plays a central role in all stages of their operations (ACO, 2009). It is an effort to elaborate to be simply considered the mere exercise of propaganda or information operations, and such an approach neither provides sufficient explanation nor understanding of what are truly holistic efforts.

We also argue that the insurgents actively plan their kinetic actions to support the non-kinetic campaign, and – reportedly – plan and use in an appropriate and well-coordinated fashion all their communications' activities and capabilities[4]. These actions are deliberately conceived to function in and affect the cognitive domain, and are not standalone capabilities. They are very well integrated into the insurgents' operational planning and execution.

The insurgents fully articulate their narrative with well-chosen themes and messages, which intend to reach out and influence Afghan and Muslim population minds worldwide. Their core narrative resonates with their audiences, and their operations and actions are consistent with that narrative,[5] with some effort being made to ensure a clear linkage between the two.

The term "strategic communications" has been deliberately chosen in the title of this essay, directly attaching it to the insurgents – perhaps provocatively – in order to underline disquiet with those who depict a complex process as basic and

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3 We can try to "measure" the international support to the war in Afghanistan through public opinion surveys. The information available allows us to identify trends. According to surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center since 2007 up to the time this article was written, the support to the war has been diminishing. In June 2009, there was already a majority opposing the war in every one of the NATO countries surveyed: Germany (63% opposition), France (62%), Poland (57%), Canada (55%), Britain (51%), Spain (50%), and Turkey (49%). Surveys held in the second semester of 2011 confirmed this negative trend. Even in countries like the US and the UK we can find a majority against the war: 58% of Americans oppose, while only 37% favor it; 57% of Britons want their soldiers out of Afghanistan; more than two-thirds of Germans are against; 76% of people in France oppose their country's military involvement in Afghanistan; 75% of Canadians think that the war in Afghanistan has not been worth its financial cost. For a résumé on the evolution of the support to the war see, among others: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_public_opinion_on_the_war_in_Afghanistan.

4 Wording from AD 95-2.

5 Idem.

unsophisticated[6]. Even if we are able to avoid incursions into the conceptual domain, it is possible to provide additional explanation in justification of our standpoint.

Despite considerable and even exhaustive effort by many talented individuals, StratCom remains something of a disputed concept, and without a single definition. According to Halloran (2007), StratCom is a way of persuading others to accept one's ideas, policies, or course of action; it means persuading adversaries that one has the power and the will to prevail over them. Such formulation blurs the differences between StratCom and Information Operations that yet other analysts have tried to explain, with equally little precision or success.[7] However, all available definitions of StratCom share one common major theme, in focusing on an ability to affect the perceptions, attitudes and beliefs of key audiences in support of specific interests, policies and objectives[8]. Since this is exactly what the insurgent groups are doing through their information activities, we may apply the term StratCom, even if acknowledging at the same time that the insurgents do not separate the "informing" part from the "influencing" piece as NATO does. Such a stretched concept of StratCom presents no difficulty for the author, and should not for the reader.

Below, we aim to present and put into context the ends, ways and means adopted and the associated methods, techniques and procedures used by the insurgents in Afghanistan in their communications campaign. It is not our intention to com-

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6 Classification of insurgents' information activities has not gathered consensus among academics. Nissen (2007) states, for instance, that can be no question that the *Taliban* conducts "information warfare" in Afghanistan and worldwide. What is debatable in his eyes, however, is how the *Taliban* achieves this, not least in comparison with NATO/ISAF Strategic Communications and Military Information Operations. Nissen questions what terminology should NATO use to describe the *Taliban's* activities in order to distinguish them from NATO information operations.

7 On this discussion see, for instance Murphy (2008) or more recently the testimony of Rosa Brooks (2011) before the House Armed Services Sub-Committee on Evolving Threats and Capabilities, where she discusses the often confused use of StratCom together with and in place of related terms such as "information operations,' "public diplomacy" and "communications". She asserted the need "to draw some distinctions between these concepts, however, since otherwise we can start getting very muddled up".

8 For instance, Allied Command Operations (ACO) Directive 95-2 (ACO Strategic Communications), 2 November 2009 (UNCLAS / Releasable) states that StratCom has a central role to play through all stages of operations and managing public perceptions. It is also stated that StratCom takes in all components of the information campaign; even if direction on public diplomacy and political guidance is to remain the responsibility of NATO HQ (public diplomacy is an activity to be conducted only at the strategic-political level). NATO StratCom is therefore the coordinated and appropriate use of NATO communications activities and capabilities, i.e. all of Public Diplomacy, Public Affairs (PA), Military Public Affairs, Information Operations (Info Ops) and Psychological Operations (PSYOPS), as appropriate – in support of Alliance policies, operations and activities, in order to advance NATO's aims.

pare what the insurgents and the International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF) and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIRoA) do relative to one another. On occasion, however, such comparisons can happen since StratCom is a holistic approach that requires a holistic understanding that must also include cross reference to others. That the insurgents do not constitute a homogeneous body of opinion does not and should not prevent us from recognizing their adoption of a strategic and coordinated approach to communications[9].

Kinetic Actions in Support of a Non-Kinetic Campaign

The planning of kinetic actions to support the non-kinetic campaign is a particular feature of the insurgency strategy. Such kinetic operations can be seen to be specifically designed to influence wider attitudes or perceptions (International Crisis Group, 2008). The reason for that resides in the fact that insurgents are cognizant that they cannot win on the battleground (and that they do not have to). They do not need to defeat militarily either the Afghan government or the forces of ISAF in order to win. Central to their strategy is that they simply need to wear out their opponents, including by influencing perceptions at home and abroad.

That strategy intends to bring decision makers to believe that their objectives are either unachievable, or too costly for the perceived benefit. Insurgency/counter--insurgency is a type of conflict where cognition plays a decisive role. Being fully aware that the potential of combat is measured not only in economic and military power, the insurgents deliberately try to debilitate and destroy their enemy's political will to continue fighting. Time would indeed appear to be in their favor, and they appear highly conscious of how difficult it is to maintain the political will needed to sustain a decades-long effort[10].

Several instances illustrate this argument. Among many, we have chosen the Serena Hotel suicide attack of January 14th, 2008, and the assassination attempt on President Hamid Karzai on April 27th, 2008, at a military parade in Kabul. These

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9 As Dorronsoro (2009) has pointed out, the diversity of the insurgency confuses many foreign observers. The *Taliban's* structure is centralized enough to be efficient, but flexible and diverse enough to adapt to local contexts. The local autonomy of *Taliban* commanders is necessary due to the nature of the guerrilla warfare they are engaged in. The *Haqqani* network is not independent of the larger *Taliban* network, and does not have an autonomous strategy.

10 This is particularly true given the practical necessity, for electoral purposes in modern democracies, to put emphasis on short term political drivers at the expense of arguably larger but longer term issues. As the insurgent leaders are reported to have repeatedly taken as their maxim: "you (the international community and its forces) may have the watches, but we have the time".

audacious events did not produce significant casualties or damage, but did get the global media headlines they were designed for: to raise doubts among Afghans about the capacity of Afghan security forces, and conveyed both locally and internationally the requisite messages of strength and deterioration.

Similar intent lay behind the attacks on the US embassy and ISAF Headquarters, on 13 September 2011, also in Kabul. These underscored the insurgents' desire to dominate the media, and to overshadow the West's proclamations that the Afghan government and security forces would soon be able to handle the insurgency. Though not significant militarily, such spectacular attacks nonetheless serve to weaken trust in the Afghan government and offered a demonstration that the *Taliban* could outmaneuver their opponents at will (Rubin, Rivera and Healy, 2011). Invariably, the perpetrators of these actions are all killed and the physical damage they cause is relatively insignificant. The real impact and damage is on the populace's perceptions, and in undermining belief in any process of transition.

The insurgents combine traditional insurgency methods with modern communications systems to disseminate the results of their actions, deliberately attacking the mind of decision makers further afield (Hammes, 2004). In a deliberate strategic option, they engage their adversaries in the field where they can have competitive advantage. They explore and feed the appetite of western media outlets for spectacular events, and use them to provoke psychological impact in western decision makers and public opinion. It is not only a matter of tactical details: they also focus on areas of truly strategic effect, seeking to discredit the legitimacy of the Afghan government, and to portray an image of chaos in the country and incapacity of the government forces.

Stratfor (2011a) provides a similar explanation for these actions:

> "…There are however many ways tactical engagements can contribute to larger, strategic ends. Taliban efforts must be viewed not simply in terms of casualty metrics but also in terms of their impact on psychology and perception. Thus, any headline-grabbing attack that shifts perceptions within the occupier's domestic populace can have a strategic impact, even when tactically the attack is ineffective…"

The Implicit Assumptions of the Insurgents' StratCom Campaign

We argue the insurgents have designed their StratCom campaign taking into account two crucial implicit assumptions: the rural nature of the insurgency and the literacy level of the population. The themes and messages chosen and the ways and means employed by the insurgents reflect these two factors.

The insurgents' communications campaign was "designed" against the truism that the Afghan insurgency was to be (and still is) mainly rural. This is why their main target population remains rural Afghanistan, and it will be in the rural, not in the urban areas that the war is to be won. This understanding has shaped their communication efforts, and the center of gravity of their communications effort can be seen to be located in rural areas. This very principle also drives their military strategy, especially when we speak about the creation of rural bases, crucial not only for provision of intelligence but also for logistic support and as a base for recruitment.

Many members of the insurgent groups are from the same villages where they operate and are active. This gives them a major competitive advantage in gaining intelligence, particularly given the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) demographics and since the international forces are alien in every sense of the word, and in the absence of effective leadership in establishing social and other bonds with the local people. The insurgents have the required experience and background for the design and implementation of village-oriented psychological operations. The Afghan Government and its supporters among the international stakeholders have in direct contrast been targeting primarily the urban population – who though inclined to support the central authorities and reap the economic and other benefits that come with it, are not vital in winning the war.

Despite the lack of accurate data, a number of experts and studies (MDGR, 2005) estimate the literacy rate in 2004 of those aged 15 and above was 34% (50% for men and 18% for women). In rural areas, where 74 percent of all Afghans live, however, an estimated 90 percent of women and 63 percent of men cannot read, write or carry out simple computation (the rates are only somewhat better in urban areas). According to an ICG report (2008), less than a quarter of the Afghan adult population is estimated to be literate, with only two percent claiming to read newspapers regularly. Around a third of households have a television and 88 per cent radios, while only a tiny fraction of the population has access to the internet. It is interesting to note that the use of SMS text messaging to access news and information has risen dramatically (from 9% in 2007 to 10% in 2008, to 19% in 2009 and 25% in 2010).[11]

Understanding such social realities determines the insurgents' communications focus, and will be covered below. Insurgent channels of communication indeed do make intensive use of visual and audio mediums in order to reach the largest possible rural population, in detriment of written forms such as magazines and other

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11 For more detailed information on this topic see chapter 12.5 "Sources of information on local events" of the *Asia Foundation's* report "Afghanistan in 2010. A Survey of the Afghan People": http://asiafoundation.org/resources/ pdfs/Afghanistanin2010survey.pdf.

publications more oriented to external audiences.[12] In addition, insurgents' StratCom campaign is also designed around an all-Muslim call than can overcome inter-ethnic rivalries and prejudices, and unite every Muslim against the common enemy[13]. As we will see, the Islamic messages avoid any reference to regions, ethnic groups, languages or individuals (ISAF, 2008).

Ways and Means to Reach Different Segments of the Audience

The insurgents have broken down their potential audience into different segments and have identified their separate information requirements. To reach each of them, they have developed tailored themes and messages, and use different means of delivery, all adapted to the requirement. They differentiate between the rural – their priority target – and urban populations, while avoiding communication policies oriented on an ethnic group basis.[14] Externally, there is a suitably defined differentiation between regional and international target groups[15]. The criterion for this differentiation is done through the idioms they use to convey their messages.

To communicate with the most backward segments of the society, with little or no access to print media, television or internet (accessible only to a minority almost exclusively urban population), the insurgents use the so-called "traditional" methods of communication[16]. This is where the insurgents arguably have their greatest

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12 Notwithstanding, the insurgents have developed some magazines like the Arabic-language *Al Somood* (Standing Firm) and a few publications more closely linked with global issues and movements, aimed at building wider support and getting recruits and financing.

13 This call exposes a crucial political contradiction that insurgents were not yet able to solve: how can revolutionary ethnic Pashtun-based group, whose social base of support lies basically in the *Pasthun* tribes living in the South and East of the country, call for the unity of all Muslims to fight for the establishment of an Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan? The *Taliban* have their center of gravity among the *Durani* tribes like *Norzais*, Barekzai, *Popalzai*, *Alekozai* and *Eshaqzai*, in the southern Afghanistan, particularly in the provinces of Helmand, Kandahar, Zabul and Oruzgan; the HiG is active mainly in the provinces of Kunar, Nuristan, Laghman, Paktya, Paktika and Khost. The *Taliban* are also active in these areas but are not as entrenched as they are in southern Afghanistan.

14 It is important to note that insurgents have also subdivided their segments. They differentiate between the rural populace and their leaders, the latter deserving special treatment. In NATO's jargon, the actions oriented to engage with tribal elders are called Key Leaders Engagement.

15 Other authors have chosen other ways of audience segmentation. The ICG (2008) has identified four types of insurgents' distinct audiences: supporters, the mass of undecided population, the coalition decision-makers and the transnational extremist networks from which the insurgents aim to draw resources, building on the three types Hammes (2004: 209) has identified supporters, undecided population, coalition decision-makers.

16 This designation is challenged by some authors. We use it for the sake of simplicity.

strength. Inability to read and write among the majority of the population necessarily reinforces the importance of the oral forms of communication such as one-on-one, face-to-face, engagement with tribal elders, and with poets and singers as forms of communication among Afghans.

The insurgents use them extensively as channels of communication to strengthen their relationship with the population. These actions nearby the population are normally complemented by CIMIC-like measures, which permit to establish a direct relationship between social action and psychological operations.[17]

In rural areas, bazaars play a very important role in the circulation of information, and are used to spread rumors and advertise the insurgents' activities. Especially in the South and East of the countries, insurgents have been intensively using the bazaars to convey their messages. Night letters (*shabnamah*) are another element in the insurgents' communication armory, and are used to intimidate and coerce – again mainly in rural areas. They consist of printed and often handwritten messages, delivered to a specific person with the intent of influencing his behavior (Nissen, 2007).

Notes scattered in or near villages, or pushed under doorways by insurgent militants during the night threaten lives if they cooperate with foreign forces and the government (Baker, 2008). This tactic is understandably very effective, and is carefully targeted: teachers have been chosen as a preferred target, but also those working with the international forces or the government. Discouraging the population, especially females, to attend schools is also high on the insurgent agenda.

Poetry remains a major oral tradition. Poetry and songs play also an important role in the war on hearts and minds. Poetry and songs plays are means insurgents to get their messages out and have several roles: national exaltation, to recruit fighters, funding and raise public support[18]. Within the past three decades of war and political turmoil, poetry has been greatly politicized. Subsequently, it has played a prominent role in shaping and the expression of political views among Afghans (Shaaker, 2009).

The insurgents also pay special attention to other groups with social leverage, such as religious hierarchies. They have understood the central role that Mullahs and Mosques can play in the battle for perceptions, especially in rural populations. Young Pakistan-trained Mullahs are brought in to spread their messages, as a strategic tool

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17 We mean as social action the support provided to the population by the insurgents, to help solving their most urgent needs such a medical and financial support, among other issues.

18 Brown and Sagalyn (2011) tell the story of a chant about Malali, an Afghan woman war hero who fought against the British a century ago, encouraging people to join today's war against foreigners.

for propaganda and brain washing of the communities. Mosques serve as much today as a tipping point as they have been in the moments of major political crisis of the past three centuries of Afghan history. Yet they have arguably never been as crucial in winning the StratCom battle as they have been in the past thirty years[19].

In terms of engaging the urban population, the insurgents have developed some video and audio material. CD's, DVD's and audio cassettes contain messages calling for recruitment and boosting morale; songs and poetry sympathetic to the insurgency are passed on, particularly religious songs and *taranas*, and martial, nationalist songs with high emotional sentiment.[20] Some are "…tied closely to Afghan imagery and history, not necessarily produced by the *Taliban* but aimed at building wider sympathy for the insurgency within the population. While some songs refer directly to *Taliban* activities, they mainly simply aim to heighten resistance to foreigners and appeal to nationalism…" (ICG, 2008: 16).

DVDs nearly always show attacks on government, international forces and equipment seized or destroyed[21]. Instances of raids, especially where there has been cultural disrespect, are used to portray the international military presence as an act of occupation. Many of these are also either sold or distributed to journalists in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

In the last years, non-Afghan audiences – regional and international – have increased in importance in the insurgents' priorities. More than in the 1990s, the *Taliban* today are connected to international *Jihadist* networks, and seek political support by opposing foreign occupation (Dorronsoro, 2009). Cyberspace has become a preferred channel for such communications with foreigners, and immense progress has been made in this domain.[22] More technically sophisticated means like Internet, Facebook and Twitter are no longer only for the very few, and it is originally surprising how a movement that completely banned photography, music, television and the use of the internet on the grounds of being un-Islamic, rapidly came to understand and reap the benefits of these tools (Gwakh, 2011). The *Taliban* have been present in cyberspace through a website since mid-2005.

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19 Mosques play, to a certain extent, the same social role factories played in the beginning of the industrial era, as underscore by Karl Marx, or the Facebook in the information age: gather the masses with a common reason and permits the communication. It provides the psychological sense of togetherness.

20 *Tarana wauniki* means in *Pasthun* those who sing without being accompanied by musical instruments.

21 Many other topics are included: archival footage from the fight against Soviet forces and the Soviet-backed regime, images from Iraq, insurgent training, etc.

22 Even Mullah Mohammad Omar has his own fan page.

The importance the insurgents give to international audiences is also evident in the number of languages they use for communication on their websites. Each language has a specific target audience in mind: English has gained more significant prominence and is used to reach international audiences and get global attention. It is also used in the dealings with international media outlets; *Pashtu*, *Dari* and *Urdu* are aimed at regional groups, especially those living in Pakistan; and Arabic is used to communicate with appropriate wider transnational networks.

The *Taliban* possess several internet domains, which host official content and have backup domains in case of an attack on the main website (Gwakh, 2011). Messages are now much more coherent than in the past, and distant are the days when the rudimentary English used in their websites was difficult to understand. After the *Taliban* assault to the US Embassy in Kabul drew to a close, insurgents prolonged the engagement with international forces in cyberspace, on Twitter and exchanging words directly[23], demonstrating considerable affinity with text-speak[24].

The insurgents have equally shown a capacity to learn from their experiences and mistakes. Initially, their website was fairly basic including only updates on the military situation, normally providing only their exaggerated versions of events and with posts only in *Pashtu* and Arabic. In 2006, material in *Dari*, *Urdu* and English was added; only the pages in *Pashtu* and *Dari* were updated regularly. From mid-2006 the website was being updated daily, and often more than once per day (Tarzi, 2009: 399).

Today, the website is updated several times a day in five languages and has turned into a propaganda machine[25]. Beyond military events, the site also includes leadership statements, literature, poetry, interviews, extended articles and commentary, as well as links to affiliated magazines. Insurgents use also their websites to direct poets and singers the content of the messages they should include in their poems and songs. The so called Cultural Affairs Commission of the Islamic Emirate advises poets and singers on their website they have an Islamic duty in order to make their mission more effective.[26]

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23 For a *tour d' horizon* over this discussion see Siddique (2011). One of the topics was a dispute on statistics of civilian casualties caused by each side.

24 The *Taliban* uses several Twitter accounts, in English (@alemarahweb) and in Arabic (@alsomood).

25 Although the *Taliban* has numerous blogs and websites, *Al-Emarah.net* and *Shahamat.info* (mostly videos) are considered the official websites and the source of "certified" propaganda.

26 "…It would be ideal if our poets and singers write and sing poems that raise the morale, patience and sentiments of the nation and which becomes a thorn in the eyes of the enemy. They should avoid poems and songs that do not have the message of comfort; patience and determination for the grief stricken mojahed family and which on the contrary increase their grief and pain or signal lack of patience and weakness on the part of the mojahedin…efforts should

The *Taliban* has nowadays numerous accounts on Twitter which they fill with their own brand of exaggeration. In a new move, in 2010 English also became the language of the insurgents' Twitter account. This change provoked significantly increased followers. However, it is not used to interact with those same followers, because it works mainly as a one-way dissemination tool. Like the websites, the majority of the *Taliban* "Tweets" are about attacks against international troops or afghan soldiers and police. As on some Facebook accounts, they also provide links to videos of suicide bombings and insurgents' attacks on Afghan and international forces.

YouTube has also become a new battlefield for the insurgents. They handle video cameras as weapons. Insurgents have shown a great ability to broadcast videos, sometimes only one hour after an event has occurred. They are able to upload the internet with the images of their attacks with an astonishing speed using them, among other things, to boost the morale of their supporters.

Over the past decade, the insurgents have dramatically improved their public relations skills[27]. The insurgents communicate with journalists on a daily basis, through several ways: e-mails, spokespersons and targets stringers[28] via texts to mobile phones. Their various spokespersons maintain regular contacts with journalists by phone, through emails, SMS, provide online reports on incidents and respond to queries around the clock.

The insurgents have shown an incredible capacity to put out its story rapidly. The media becomes frequently aware of attacks via the insurgents and not through Afghan or NATO officials[29]. Such speed is explained because they do not need to

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be made to write poems that have a clear jihad and national message, lesson and aim and are not just useless lamentations or statements in praise of individuals, a region or language. They should signal profound asocial meaning and inspirations…" (ISAF, 2008).

27 On this issue see "*Taliban* propaganda goes from strength to strength" posted on the blog *Circling the Lion's Den*.

28 A stringer is a type of freelance journalist or photographer who contributes reports or photos to a news organization on an ongoing basis, but is paid individually for each piece of published or broadcast work. As freelancers, stringers do not receive a regular salary and the amount and type of work is typically voluntary. However, stringers often have an ongoing relationship with one or more news organizations, to which they provide content on particular topics or locations when the opportunities arise. Afghanistan territory is covered by a good network of local stringers.

29 But sometimes speed has its inconvenient: discredit when more than one insurgent organization claims the authorship of the same attack or tells contradictory stories, which happens frequently. It happened with the assassination of Rabbani, the High Peace Council chairman, when the same spokesperson claimed in three successive days competing versions of the event via different means. Roughly three hours after the assassination, *Taliban* spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid claimed the responsibility on behalf of the *Taliban* while speaking to a Reuter's reporter over the phone. However, a day later, the same Mujahid made another statement, this time published on the *Afghan Taliban Voice of Jihad* website, repudiating his earlier claim of the Taliban's responsibility. A message on the *Taliban Twitter* account *@Abalkhi* on the same day also denied

establish facts. Whereas international forces normally must investigate the veracity of the claim before going public with details, the *Taliban* version of the same incident is already circulating[30] and the message gaining momentum.

One stringer working for Reuters said that every time the *Taliban* launch an attack or troops call in an air strike, he gets a message (Kevin, 2008). In other cases, they take the initiative to phone the offices of the news agencies in Kabul within moments of a NATO air strike. Independent verification of the facts takes time. In many cases, this is not possible to conciliate with the pressure media outlets are submitted. The battle of competing press statements often leads them to publish the insurgents scoops without cross checking. The difficulty is because the international forces have to provide responses on due time that favors the insurgents.[31]

The *Taliban* has created an infrastructure to support this effort. This includes a body – a so called Media Committee – that supervises and controls the implementation of their plans; and several production studios.[32] The quality of the films produced in these studios has been improving immensely, and from there the films are distributed on *Taliban* websites, passed from mobile phone to mobile phone (now very fashionable), and reaching broader audiences through other channels, such as *Facebook*, *Twitter* and *YouTube*. By benchmarking the Iraqi insurgents' experience, the Afghan insurgents have taken full advantage of the widespread use of mobile phones throughout Afghanistan to spread their message or to deliver threats.

The Themes and Messages

The insurgent StratCom campaign is centered on a number of core themes developed in the different messages they convey to all audiences through the different channels of communication at their disposal.[33] Their messages are very similar to

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that Mujahid had spoken to Reuters and, in statements posted online and sent by email, the group accused Reuters of publishing "baseless news." Reuters then issued an article on the conflicting Mujahid claims. The wire service claimed that Mujahid called a third time on Tuesday to tell the reporter that *Taliban* leadership was in disagreement over whether to provide the names of those responsible for the attack, as it could create problems for some people in the movement. See Georgy (2011) and Stratfor (2011).

30 Investigation of deaths is not an easy job, especially when the event has occurred in remote areas. According to the Islamic tradition the corps has to be buried before 24 hours the dead has occurred making the forensic analysis impossible.

31 For an informative discussion on this issue, see Kevin (2008).

32 One of the most important studios where videos are made is *al-Sahab*, the *Taliban's* media center in Quetta, Pakistan. When finalized, videos become immediately available in the internet.

33 We consider "themes" those overarching ideas that must be sent to the target audiences. Within each Theme support messages will be derived. Those are more detailed ideas that reinforce the theme. For detailed information on this topic see, for instance, Bragg (2009: 329).

those employed by the national liberation movements of the fifties and sixties that fought colonial empires, notably in Africa. We classify the themes in two major groups: one with ideological flavor which constitutes the backbone of their argumentative narrative; and other, more contextual and circumstances driven, which results from the attempts to capitalize from the perceived government and international forces wrongdoings.

Central to their argumentation is the accusation that foreigners are colonial powers which are in Afghanistan to loot the wealth of the country. The international forces are epitomized as invaders. This accusation is supplemented by a strong ideological ingredient, not Marxist as old revolutionaries did, but religious in nature. This leads us to a second theme: international forces are not only invaders but also infidels; therefore, the international intervention is just a chapter of a wider war against Islam. The infidels are crusaders who want to convert Muslims to Christianity and to abandon their religion in exchange for dollars.[34] This theme is developed through messages with an intense historical narrative made of a number of sketches about the fight against the infidel invaders: the insurgents will remain in Afghanistan after the departure of the international forces; Afghanistan is a graveyard of empires, etc.

Also in the ideological realm, the exacerbation of Afghan nationalism is other frequent theme: "…We [*Taliban*] will never forgive those people who brought the Americans to our territory and those who entered Kabul supported by American warplanes, because the nation will never forgive them: they have sold their Afghan identity and freedom…" (ICG, 2008: 22).

As mentioned before, the insurgent movement is deeply opposed to the Afghan tribal system and is focused on the rebuilding of the Islamic Emirate. An all-Muslim call that can overcome inter-ethnic rivalries and prejudices, against the common infidel enemy has always been present in their messages. According to a post on the *Taliban* website, the Cultural Affairs Commission of the Islamic Emirate advises poets and singers "…to avoid the aspirations of the jihad to the achievements of a region, language or individual…and to avoid damage to the lofty interests of the country and Islamic unity…" and proceeds "…mentioning individuals in songs may on occasions be harmful to them and can also pave the way to ill feelings and rivalry, and thus should be avoided…" (ISAF, 2008).

Without intending to be comprehensive, we will hereafter present the most used contextual and circumstances driven themes that insurgents use trying to capitalize from the perceived government and international forces wrongdoings. One frequent

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34 Interview of *Taliban* spokesperson Mohammad Yusof Ahmadi to the *Taliban* website, 10 May 2008, and published by the *Taliban Voice of Jihad* website on 11 May.

theme is to portray Karzai and his administration as puppets of the foreign powers. Building upon this theme and exploiting local disenfranchisement and disillusionment, the insurgents build messages on the widely perceived corruption of the Afghan government, and their incapacity to deliver basic services to the people.

Two other recurrent contextual driven themes that have been present in the insurgents' StratCom campaign[35] and that shaped the information battlefield are the civilian casualties allegedly caused by military action of international forces, notably through the use of air power; and the disrespect and aggression to the Afghan culture and traditions caused by night raids on Afghan residences. As pointed out in the ICG Asia Report (2008), civilian deaths resonate enormously in communities, particularly given the terrible memories of the Soviet bombing campaigns. Statements of alleged abuses and casualties caused by overreaction of international forces, updated online several times a day and emailed, telephoned or sent as text messages to journalists are regularly found in *Taliban* magazines and online publications.

Insurgents try to benefit from the malign impact that arbitrary detentions and night raids have on the population, using them in their information war against the Afghan government. Night raids have produced a bitter sentiment in the presidential palace and are responsible for some President Karzai's anti-western declarations, in an attempt to appease his constituents.[36]

Key in the insurgents' StratCom campaign is the need to present themselves more stronger and skilled than the Afghan and international forces, capable of inflicting heavy losses on the enemy. This theme in its various facets has been used as a "force multiplier". Exaggerations and lies in their reports, claiming victories and successes of facts that were in most cases not yet established, and hiding their own military losses serve the purpose to show themselves as a powerful, skilled and victorious force capable of shaping the battlefield.

In one or another way, all these themes and messages have contributed to erode and damage popular support for the intervention. The insurgents were able to develop themes and messages that are, in the majority of the cases, acts of propa-

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35 On the insurgent's ability to manipulate the issue of civilian casualties allegedly caused by coalition forces and on the damage it is causing on afghan and international public opinion see, for instance, Naylor (2011).

36 Karzai often receives in the Presidential Palace delegations of tribal elders from the provinces complaining of international forces' lack of respect for the Afghan culture and traditions. See, for instance Farmer (2003). President Karzai public appeals to the international forces to treat religion and traditions of the country with respect are frequent. He has been claiming for the need to "change behaviour and to stop knocking on people's door in the night time, entering people's homes by force and arresting civilians."

ganda warfare built upon the legitimate complaints of the populace. They were capable to fuel existing grievances, suspicions and perceptions and have contributed to driving a wedge between the Afghan people and the Karzai government and its international supporters.

Final Remarks

In this essay, we tried to explain that insurgents have indeed a StratCom strategy. They approach strategic communications in a systematic manner. Insurgents have a structure and have developed a strategic planning capacity. Portraying the insurgents as a disperse network of fighters without a centralized command is not correct and is not useful at all. It is not true either in the operational or in the communications fields. We can perfectly identify in the communications domain the paradigm of a strategy planning with the development of clear, logical and practical goals and the creation of a relationship between *ends, ways and means.*

The objective – the end – they want to achieve with the strategic communications campaign is threefold: to gain the support of the Afghan population, regardless of their ethnic or religious background, to establish an Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan which is subordinate to *Sharia* Law; to gain the support of would-be regional supporters; and erode domestic public support of the international forces' continuation of the military campaign. To achieve this, they have segmented their target audiences in several segments, as mentioned in the text, and used different ways and means to reach each of them.

The form used to pursue their strategy – the ways – was using kinetic operations in support of the non-kinetic campaign. Because the insurgents are cognizant that they cannot win international forces on the battleground, they opted by wearing out their opponents, including by influencing perceptions at home and abroad. This fundamental reasoning influenced their military strategy. Kinetic operations can be seen to be specifically designed to influence wider attitudes or perceptions.[37]

The ways considered by insurgents are very much adapted to the different segments they want to target. In the largely illiterate rural Afghanistan, insurgents prefer to use the so-called "traditional" methods of communication such as one-to--one and face-to-face in the villages and in the bazaars, and engagement with tribal elders. We can also include night letters, poetry and songs in this chapter

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37 From our view this is valid for both insurgencies and counter-insurgencies. Not only the insurgency but also the counter-insurgency has to be recognized as primarily an information war supported by military action.

although they are not exclusively used to influence only a single segment.[38] Those methods are accompanied by physical and other psychological methods of intimidation and coercion.

Although we can notice sometimes some overlap, to engage urban, regional or international audiences the methods are quite different. The insurgents have recognized the modern technology and media can be useful for the insurgency. They have demonstrated in the last decade a tremendous capacity to learn and adapt quickly to changes in the situation.[39] To reach urban population they used CD's, DVD's, audio cassettes and mobile phones. But in regards to reaching more geographically distant segments, the internet plays a crucial role. Websites, *Facebook*, *Twitter* and *YouTube* became common ways to convey their messages.

The insurgents have also a large arsenal of resources – means – to conduct their StratCom campaign capable to cover all the target segments. Like bazaars, mosques also play an undisputed StratCom role in rural Afghanistan. That is why there is a well-orchestrated campaign to bring into Afghanistan young Pakistan-trained *Mullahs* and remove those who are pro-government in the districts and provinces. Tribal elders, poets and singers are also elements of the informational engine.

The insurgents have created an organizational structure to support those activities. Different functions are the responsibility of different bodies. The Cultural Affairs Commission of the Islamic Emirate is the top body responsible for planning and supervision of the communications activities. The implementation is in the hands of several studios that prepare the different products and send them to the final consumers.[40] This is a machine which operates with a high level of synchronization.

This is particularly evident in the speed which incidents, sometimes in remote areas, are addressed by the insurgents' spokespersons and passed to the media. This requires discipline and the operation of a network of experienced and skilled operators. It does not simply happen by chance. It is a systematic effort involving many dimensions, following a rational and serving a purpose, in profit of a very well defined overall goal, only possible to achieve if subordinate to and consistent with a very well established strategy.

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38 Insurgents invest heavily in the village level engagement expecting that micro level effort bears strategic results.

39 Like westerns, they have also incorporated in their practices procedures already tested in Iraq.

40 See, for instance, *Taliban* Media Production Centre: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E2I juNYAF4Y.

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