

Department of International Relations

Chair of Comparative History of Political Systems

Terrorism in the digital era: Taliban's propagandistic exploitation of the Wide Web and social media

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Abstract

The Taliban has proven to be ever-more alarming in light of their capacity to appear as a versatile, ingenious, and tenaciously frightening organization, leveraging upon approaches from operations in Iraq, Pakistan, and Afghanistan to pursue an effective and lengthy tactical jihad. The Taliban's grave aptitude to adapt tactically and strategically is demonstrated by the development of improvised explosive devices, suicide bombers, and, more lately, a rising incidence of assassinations (Afsar, Samples, & Wood, 2008). These advances are considerably more significant when one observes the Taliban's – terrorizing - insistence in transcending cultural, societal, and ideological hurdles to include hitherto forbidden behaviors like suicide bombing in their arsenal. Assessing insurgent innovation in Afghanistan delivers valuable clues into the warfare the US-led coalition is currently facing and how it might be waged in the future.

In this vein, the Taliban employment, or better said their “advantageous misuse” of the Internet is testament of the said, inherent, tendency of the organization to successfully “acclimatize” with respect to current scenarios and associated requisites. Yet, in a first instance the regime notably forbade the internet when it first settled on Afghanistan, having used social media to suppress opposition and promote their propaganda (Iyengar, *The Taliban's social media dilemma*, 2021). Conversely, these subjects are currently deploying thousands of Twitter accounts — some official, some anonymous — to appease Afghanistan's scared but more tech-savvy urban base now that they have taken control of the country.

The aim of this thesis unravels the underpinnings of the Taliban's media usage and coverage, in the face of continuing repressions and human rights aberrations. Thus, I will attempt to validate my initial thesis – the Taliban's social media conundrum, the latter embodying the insurgents' social media strategy's historical and empirical progression, as well as its analytical and interpretive understanding - via the contemplation of a detailed scrutiny, examining the multitude of feasible scenarios stemming from the period of the first regime, to the recently achieved occupation, while attempting to maintain an intentionally interdisciplinary frame of analysis as my main *modus operandi*. The aforementioned theme will serve as the foundation for our initial thesis, which will emphasize the Taliban's intrinsic adaptability, whose supposed "sophistication" in terms of military and socio-political assets is becoming increasingly alarming. Indeed, it emerges that the Taliban's present attitude toward media and technology is diametrically opposed to the previous occupation during the 1990s and early 2000s. Conclusively, this paper aims at researching the hypothesized bias polluting the mainstream media's depiction of religious matters. In this vein, one shall agree on the necessity to hold the media accountable, for instance, as regards to fallacious narratives concerning particular religious groups, consequently obfuscating the veracious epitomes of authoritarian, repressive and hazardous (religiously affiliated) regimes.

Introduction

Insurgents in Afghanistan have been in a permanent state of conflict since 1978, confronting two occupying forces with modernized, highly effective military and a variety of numerical and technological advantages. Due to the sheer asymmetry of these confrontations, insurgents engaged in a dynamic cycle of adjustment and development, which continues to this day (Johnson H. T., 2013). The Taliban's war strategy and governance approach focuses on rallying against political weakness and establishing straightforward, rigid, and seemingly functional leadership at the local and provincial tiers. Evidently, Afghanistan's continual state of conflict since 1978 has resulted in massive social, political, and economic upheavals and dislocations. Although the battle has taken a tremendous physical toll on Afghanistan's infrastructure, the deep-rooted turmoil and partial eradication of Indigenous Afghan values, traditions, and customs has left a similarly debilitating scar on society and government institutions. Two invading powers have attempted to solidify authority and bolster feeble regimes in Afghanistan's modern history: the Soviets between 1980 and 1989 and the US–NATO alliance between 2001 and 2011, which is still underway. Both of these invading forces were up against insurgent groups who were highly adaptable to improvise on the battlefield in response to their opponents' strengths and shortcomings. 'A weaker foe adopting unorthodox means, stratagems, or niche capabilities to overcome a bigger power,' is a popular description of both the anti-Soviet Mujahedin and the Taliban (Aljazeera.net, 2017). These tactics, ploys, and capacities were frequently predicated on adaptive reactions to battlefield limits that often surprised those who were targeted.

One of the goals of this dissertation is to evaluate some of the battlefield adaptations and innovations (Alston, 2009) deployed by today's Afghan insurgents, particularly the Taliban, in response to the US and its

coalition partners' overwhelming military capability. The discussion will scrutinize the Taliban's military strategy and evolving government approach as a broader paradigm for the disturbing degree of sophistication in terms of not only military skills, but also regarding the venal profiteering of media usage vis-à-vis the wider public. The Taliban, it will be contended, has proven to be an extremely, yet dangerously, entrepreneurial group that has deployed a gamut of tactics and technologies from battlefields throughout the world in Afghanistan.

Afghans have been compelled to use their limited capabilities in adaptable and imaginative ways to fight their foes due to the fact that they have been in near continual conflict for the past 35 years against adversaries with a wide range of skills. For Afghan insurgents, adaptation and ingenuity have become a way of life (Press., 2011). While many of these tactics were developed on other battlefields, the Taliban has been ominously resourceful in their readiness to adapt new tactics for use in Afghanistan from the perspective of an Afghan insurgent. Once a novel approach has proven to be effective, the Taliban refines it to match their specific circumstances before immediately launching it at the operational level, culminating in an organizational innovation.

A survey of the literature reveals evidence of Taliban innovation and adaptability in a variety of areas, ranging from information to economics and ideology. The Taliban have displayed their aptitude to alter their message in an exploitative and propagandist fashion, as well as the ways by which it is disseminated. The then Communication and Cultural Minister Abdul Sattar Maiwandi, who managed the Taliban's ever-expanding media channels, has been in charge of the Taliban's information machine (Barker, *Improvised Explosive Devices in Southern Afghanistan and Western Pakistan*, 2009). The Layeha, Ummat Studios, Radio Shariat, and Alemaraweb, which serves as the Taliban's official website and provides information in Dari, Pashtu, Arabic, and English, are now among the Taliban's media outlets (BBC, *Kabul's Intercontinental Hotel Attacked by Gunmen*, 2011).

As of 2010, the evolving Taliban Layeha, which serves as a Taliban insurgency guidebook, is in its third version and has been extensively examined and written on by both Johnson and DuPee and Clark (Clark, 2011). This code of conduct acts as a field manual for Taliban leaders, outlining political procedures, governance priorities, Taliban "rules of war," and the expected circumstances of engaging with Afghan residents, among other tasks and goals.

Giustozzi also discusses the Taliban's employment of singers, radio broadcasts, cassettes, the Internet, and DVD manufacturing (Giustozzi A. , 2012) (Giustozzi A. , 2007).

On the purely economic side, the Taliban have produced worrying results in terms of economic development and overseeing the seeming mismatch between their Islamic beliefs and the illicit drug trade.

Notably, opium is a major source of revenue for the Taliban. In 'From Islamic Warriors to Drug Lords: The Evolution of the Taliban Insurgency,' Farhana Schmidt examines the Taliban's participation in and dominance of the global opium market, demonstrating how the Taliban has benefited financially and changed organizationally in order to capitalize on the opportunities associated with poppy cultivation (Schmidt, 2010) (DuPee, 2011). The Taliban have effectively controlled international heroin pricing to their benefit, instructing farmers to produce or not grow poppies based on requirements and hoarding thousands of tons of opium to hedge the market and protect themselves against coalition intervention operations (DuPee, 2011). As of 2005, the Taliban's annual income was estimated to be between \$90 and \$160 million, (DuPee, 2011), which was then utilized to fund activities by paying militants and acquiring weapons and explosives.

In sum, the incorporation substantial modifications in technology and procedures at the tactical level to boost lethality as well as the deployment of alternative techniques that constitute organizational breakthroughs and are a significant departure from previous patterns of behavior by Afghan rebels, thus aggravating their overall lethality, will be examined in this piece.

The government also imposed restrictions on television and the still-developing internet, claiming that the latter was necessary to "regulate all those things that are incorrect, obscene, immoral, and against Islam." For this purpose, thus, the academic voyage for understanding the religious realm – broadly intended- and the numerous facets the latter contains, is shaped vis-à-vis the development of our own thought process. The study will also seek to answer questions about the factors that influence the success or failure of battlefield inventions, as well as the jeopardous timeliness of Afghan advances.

Following this thread of thought, the subsequent chapters will peruse the Taliban's social media dilemma – the latter encapsulating the historical and empirical evolution as well as the analytical and interpretive understanding of the insurgents' social media strategy. The aforesaid topic will emerge as the pivotal source of our initial thesis – asserting the inherent adaptability of the Taliban's organization, whose alleged “sophistication” in terms of military and socio-political assets emerges as ever-more disturbing. The focus of this study has been on gathering and examining English-language media and communications published by rebel groups operating in Afghanistan, particularly material disseminated directly on the Internet. This method enables researchers to conduct study using primary sources rather than depending on data acquired by a third party in the nation or interpretations of foreign language content. As a result, there is now a larger collection of primary source information.

Chapter 1: The Taliban's ascent to power: an historical *iter* of analysis

1.1 Factual background from 1978-2001

Assessing the role of media and propaganda in the Afghan insurgency necessitates some familiarity of said insurgency's chronology and structure.

This section will offer insight on how the present insurgency in Afghanistan arose, how this has impacted the insurgency's architecture, character, and image today, and how insurgent forces' use of media and propaganda has progressed throughout the fight.

The Taliban have been a part of Kandahar's 'Quran Belt,' which literally means "students of Islam" or "seekers of knowledge," for generations (Coll, 2005). They were bereavement counselors, conflict mediators, and instructors. They might become mullahs, or knowledge "givers," after finishing their theological studies. In the absence of a state, said organization served as an Islamic civil service (Coll, 2005).

Although Afghanistan's modern history extends back to the early 18th century, the current scenario in the country began in 1978 when a radical Afghan communist government was founded in Kabul (Dorransoro, *Revolution unending : Afghanistan, 1979 to the present*, 2005). The leaders of this new administration failed to recognize the perils of forcing rapid modernization on an Afghan populace that is exceedingly traditional and conservative, and issued a series of laws targeted at modernizing rural Afghanistan shortly after taking office (Barfield, *Afghan Customary Law and its Relationship to Formal Judicial Institutions*, 2003).

Afghan communists immediately realized the fundamental limitations of central government power in Afghanistan, and they were met with instant and violent opposition, particularly from conservative rural areas. Afghan government military officials and soldiers began abandoning the Communists in force as the Mujahideen opposition gained in strength. In December 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan to defend the collapsing Afghan Communist administration, anticipating the fall of a friendly Communist government on its southern border. The Soviet occupation of Afghanistan lasted a decade, until the Soviets were forced to leave in 1989 by a loose coalition of Mujahideen rebels based in Pakistan, who were funded and armed by the US and a number of Sunni Arab states (Coll, 2005). The Mujahideen's structure would have a profound impact on the country after the Soviet withdrawal, as these heavily armed factions fought for control in a post-Soviet Afghanistan. In order to strengthen Pakistani influence in Afghanistan after the Communist government was deposed, the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), which was in charge of militarizing and arranging the Mujahideen, favored the more violent, fundamentalist Mujahideen commanders, such as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. The Afghan Communist regime was able to fend off Mujahideen attacks on Kabul after the Soviets left in 1989 until 1992, when it was finally defeated. The Afghan civil war reached a new level of devastation with a furious battle for Kabul between Hekmatyar's primarily Pashtun forces and Ahmed Shah Massoud's predominantly Tajik forces. Hekmatyar, Massoud, and a cast of other former Mujahideen commanders fought for control of territory across Afghanistan for the next four years, massacring civilians who supported direct competitor commanders and further demolishing an Afghan civil society and infrastructure that had already been ravaged by more than a decade of war. Lawlessness and banditry thrived in Afghan provinces where the feuding Mujahideen armies were not present, and insecurity grew.

In 1996, a group of Islamic students from the predominantly Pashtun southern region of the country, known as the Taliban, sprang up amid this vacuum of lawlessness, earning widespread sympathy from a war-weary

population by executing a gang of criminals in retaliation for a series of violent acts (Rashid, 2010). Beginning in the south and heading north, the Taliban, commanded by Mullah Mohammed Omar and assisted by the Pakistani ISI's financial and military backing, stitched together a series of swift victories against Mujahideen commanders and warlords. The Taliban had taken control of the majority of Afghanistan by 1996, including Kabul. The Northern Alliance, a largely Tajik militia led by Tajik commander Ahmed Shah Massoud, was the last group to stand up to the Taliban. During this time, the Taliban formed a loose alliance with Osama bin Laden and his Al-Qaeda terrorist network, allowing them to train and operate from within Afghanistan. These camps were used to plan and support parts of the terrorist attacks on September 11th, 2001 (Coll, 2005). Following the September 11 attacks, the United States demanded that Osama bin Laden be extradited and prosecuted by the Taliban authority. The Taliban refused to accept this. Taliban troops crumbled and dispersed across the country and across the Pakistani border after a campaign of surgical air strikes and special forces support to Northern Alliance fighters in December 2001. Despite the fact that Northern Alliance commander Massoud was assassinated by al-Qaeda agents two days before September 11, 2001, his men were able to expel the Taliban and force their withdrawal using American technology. The victory was rapid and decisive, with American and ally forces capturing and occupying major cities across the country in just a few days. As US and coalition forces worked with Northern Alliance Afghan partners to track down al-Qaeda terrorists fleeing to Pakistan, a new leadership vacancy arose in Afghanistan, with new and old figures jostling for position in the post-Taliban era.

1.2 Afghanistan from 2001 onwards

Since the assault and ejection of the Taliban and al-Qaeda, the US and the international community sought to cover the political void in Kabul as swiftly as possible with a pro-Western central government. As Thomas Barfield reminds out, the goal of this decision was to return Afghanistan to the strong central control system that evolved only after the second Anglo-Afghan war in the late 1800s (Barfield, 2010). In Afghanistan, central authority did not have a lengthy history, and the thirty years of practically continuous conflict before to the Taliban's departure had further divided the country's political power and organization. As previously stated, many Mujahideen commanders who earned power and authority during the anti-Soviet jihad extended that authority into the post-Soviet civil war power vacuum, carving out areas of relative autonomy as more strong power brokers fought for control of Kabul. While the Taliban may have co-opted or repressed several of these militia commanders, when international forces ousted the Taliban from power, a number of them were able to quickly reclaim power. The United Nations called a summit in Bonn, Germany in November 2001, just one month after the Taliban were deposed, to form a transitional government for Afghanistan and allocate senior roles. The Taliban were obviously excluded from the meetings, as were the majority of important Afghan power players. Hamid Karzai, a Pashtun from the Popalzai tribe who was not involved in the anti-Soviet insurgency or the Civil War, was chosen as the interim government's president. Most of the ministries were entrusted by leaders from various factions of the Northern Alliance, which is predominantly non-Pashtun.¹

The Bonn Process culminated with the intent of convening a nationwide loya jirga vote of approval on the provisional government within a year.

Following the establishment of the temporary government in Bonn, Afghanistan went through a series of loya jirgas and elections in the years that followed, with the aim of implementing a durable and respectable central government. An emergency loya Jirga was convened in June 2002 to deliver the provisional administration another two years to draft a new constitution and hold national elections. The major political and ethnic factions from across Afghanistan were addressed, but in the end, heavy US pressure was needed to ensure Karzai's continued presidency, which foretold his waning legitimacy among Afghans.² Another loya jirga accepted a new Afghan constitution in December 2003. In October 2004, the first national election was held, with Hamid Karzai being elected president of Afghanistan in what was widely regarded as a rather fair election.

Given the country's long history of prominent levels of violence and warfare, Afghanistan appeared to be reasonably peaceful and secure in the years following the Taliban's defeat and the installation of the post-

¹ Ibid., 284.

² Ibid., 297

Bonn Karzai government. Despite a purported historical reluctance to foreign forces, the Afghan public initially welcomed international soldiers into the country.

Many Afghans prioritized security and protection from the myriad internal factions that had wreaked havoc on the country for a decade, and the public reluctantly accepted the notion that American and multinational soldiers might offer that stability.³ However, the new Afghan government's relative stability and support would be fleeting. While the new Afghan government proceeded to follow the processes laid out by the international community and the Afghan elite in order to gain legitimacy, its ability to govern and function on the ground became increasingly insufficient. As the Karzai government sought to gain support through patronage and co-option of influential militia leaders, corruption, a scourge of the civil war period, resurfaced from the top down. As extensive government abuse and mismanagement became more common, while economic and basic living circumstances remained unchanged, the Afghan people's patience began to wear thin. The lack of resources, investment, and security, particularly in rural sections of Southern and Eastern Afghanistan, where strong affiliations to various Taliban forces had prevented officials from that area out of the post-Bonn power structure, prepared the groundwork for lingering anger and volatility. Despite the fact that Karzai's Durrani Pashtun ancestors came from Eastern Afghanistan, his government was inadequate to submit enough development or aid money to the region to significantly improve economic conditions or mitigate the negative effects of a succession of corrupt and inept government leaders.⁴ According to some sources, the Taliban organized a revival in the eastern provinces of Kunar, Paktia, Paktika, and Khost as early as late 2002. Given the mountainous and permeable frontiers between those provinces and the ungoverned spaces in western Pakistan, those provinces served as an accessible entrance point, as Antonio Giustozzi points out (Giustozzi A. , 2010). Given the limited presence of US forces in the region and the lower risk of hitting less capable Afghan targets, the initial attacks exclusively targeted Afghan police and military units. The first IED strikes in Afghanistan were reported as early as late 2002. The resurgent Taliban's first recorded stronghold in the post-2001 era was the Dai Chopan area of Zabul province in the east, and by 2003, insurgent factions were said to have nearly complete control of Zabul and Eastern Paktika.⁵

By early 2003, media attention on the Afghan conflict had waned significantly since the September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States and the ensuing invasion of Afghanistan. The invasion of Iraq by the United States in Spring 2003 further obscured Afghanistan in international news in the United States and Western countries.

During this time, however, the insurgency grew in strength as an under-resourced and under-committed coalition army, as well as a corrupt and ineffectual Afghan government, failed to maintain security or meet the expectations of an increasingly skeptical population.

By 2007, the Afghan insurgency had entrenched itself in large areas of the country's southern and eastern regions. Taliban insurgents largely controlled the southern regions of Helmand and Kandahar, and NATO sources reported insurgent activity even in previously stable Western and Northern areas.⁶

The insurgent force that began to reassert itself in Afghanistan was also not a homogeneous group. Various organizations that had fled to Pakistan in 2001 have begun to return to their former control areas. Insurgents who returned to the Southern provinces were more intricately linked with Mullah Omar's former Taliban government.

Anti-Soviet Mujahideen commander Jalaluddin Haqqani and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hizb-e-Islami were frequently linked to insurgents returning to the East. They challenged and gradually displaced the corrupt Afghan government for authority and control in the South and East, regardless of leadership or organization. Hamid Karzai was re-elected President of Afghanistan in a highly rigged election in the fall of 2009, plagued by a lack of security at the polls and low voter turnout (Boone & MacAskill, 2009). This second presidential election was significantly less genuine and secure than the first five years prior, highlighting the major governance and development failures that had marked the preceding years.

³ Ibid., 277.

⁴ Ibid., 322-324

⁵ Ibid., 2-5.

⁶ Ibid., 5-6.

A run-off election between Karzai and his closest competitor, Abdullah, was arranged under considerable US pressure, but Abdullah eventually withdrew, awarding Karzai his second term in what was considered as a huge blow to his legitimacy at home and internationally.

By this time, the degree of violence had risen to disturbing new heights. By Fall 2009, the number of IED incidents had more than tripled from 2007, the size of IEDs deployed by insurgents had grown significantly, and NATO assessments revealed insurgents acting with strong or demonstrated capabilities in approximately 200 areas across the nation (Cordesman A. H., 2010). Afghan security forces were unable or unwilling to halt the insurgency's advance, and international forces were mainly unsuccessful due to a lack of mission and workforce. Because the US military was primarily focused on the war in Iraq from 2003 to 2009, troop deployments to the Afghan theater were restricted, with only 33,000 troops deployed in October 2008, the highest level of the war up until that moment (PBS, 2008). Despite being brutal and effective in cleansing parts of the nation of Taliban terrorists, US forces were unable to achieve long-term gains.

Towns and towns that had been cleared of rebels would be re-infiltrated as soon as US soldiers left.

President Barack Obama requested an increase in force levels almost immediately after taking office in January 2009, and by November 2009, there were 68,000 US troops in the country (Montopoli, 2009).

Obama and his national security staff conducted a review of US and coalition policy in Afghanistan at the end of 2009, and the President outlined a new route ahead in December 2009.

The President pledged an additional 30,000 troops to Afghanistan, bringing the overall number of troops in the country to its highest level since the conflict began. These additional troops were supposed to conduct a refocused counterinsurgency strategy that aimed to keep the insurgency at bay long enough for the Afghan government's legitimacy to strengthen and security to be handed over to Afghan security and military forces. Obama has set a July 2011 deadline for the commencement of combat force withdrawals from the nation.

To appease both those on the left who oppose the war and those on the right who are concerned about abandoning the Afghan mission, the President attempted to strike a middle ground by stepping up pressure on the Taliban to gain the upper hand, followed by a gradual withdrawal and handover to Afghan forces.

The July 2011 deadline has since been criticized as playing into the hands of insurgents, who can exploit ordinary Afghans' worries that the US and its allies will forsake their country. Since then, the US has worked to convince Afghan friends and residents that the withdrawal date will not result in an immediate withdrawal and loss of support. Despite the Taliban's seeming propaganda success, the flood of fresh combat troops has allowed US, Afghan, and NATO forces to boost kinetic pressure on Taliban units. Over 7,000 special operations raids on Taliban targets were reported by NATO ISAF in the second half of 2010, killing or arresting more than six hundred Taliban leaders (Roggio, Special operations forces deal blows to Taliban's ranks, 2010). The Southern and Eastern regions of Afghanistan have seen the most insurgent fighting. According to Anthony Cordesman of the CSIS, in a 2010 analysis of the Afghan war, 80 percent of IED activity in Afghanistan took place in five provinces in the south and east: Helmand, Kandahar, Uruzgan, Ghazni, and Khost in March 2010 (Cordesman, 2010). The deployment of more NATO troops in Kandahar and Helmand, as well as an increased operations tempo aimed at Taliban commanders and soldiers, has had some success in discouraging insurgents and driving them towards Pakistan (Gall & Khapalwak, NATO Push Deals Taliban a Setback in Kandahar, 2010).

At the same time, reports from Afghanistan's northern districts reveal deteriorating security and a growing Taliban presence (Rubin, 2010). The counterinsurgency efforts were given some breathing room in November 2010 during a NATO conference in Lisbon, Portugal, when the US and its partners framed the policy to look toward 2014 as the year of full security transition to Afghan authority (Barno & Exum, 2007). President Hamid Karzai has also stated that Afghan forces will assume responsibility for the country's security in 2014. Despite security achievements and a projected transition plan, the Afghan people's opinions and patience are a major source of concern. Over 7,000 special operations raids on Taliban targets were reported by NATO ISAF, with over six hundred Taliban leaders killed or captured. The Southern and Eastern regions of Afghanistan have seen the most insurgent fighting. According to Anthony Cordesman of the CSIS, in a 2010 analysis of the Afghan war, 80 percent of IED activity in Afghanistan took place in five provinces in the south and east: Helmand, Kandahar, Uruzgan, Ghazni, and Khost in March 2010.

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1.3 2021–present: Return to Power

The US and the Taliban signed a peace accord in Doha, Qatar, on February 29, 2020, formally dubbed the Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan (BBC, 2020).

The agreement called for the removal of all American and NATO forces from Afghanistan, as well as a Taliban vow to prevent al-Qaeda from functioning in regions controlled by the Taliban and talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government. If the Taliban keeps its pledges, the US will reduce its force level from 13,000 to 8,600 troops by July 2020, followed by a full withdrawal of US troops within 14 months (BBC, 2020). China, Russia, and Pakistan were all in favor of the deal, which did not include the Afghan government (Manish, 2020). As part of the Doha Agreement between the US and the Taliban, the Afghan government freed approximately 5,000 Taliban inmates in September 2020, including four hundred who were accused and convicted of grave offenses such as murder (Nayanima, 2020). Many of the released "experts" returned to the battlefield, strengthening the Taliban's power, according to Afghanistan's National Security Council (Mashal & Faizi, 2021).

Both the Pentagon and the Afghan government expected that sustained US military support to Kabul would be required in early 2021. Despite the Afghan government's continuous reliance on US labor and military backing, President Biden continues to adopt President Trump's strategy of moving the US away from an indefinite foreign war (Sanger & Cooper, 2021). In April 2021, the Biden administration announced that the withdrawal will be extended beyond the original deadline, with a projected completion date of September 11, 2021 (MSNBC, 2021). Biden announced on July 8 that the US exit deadline would be pushed up to August 31 (APNEWS, 2021). On May 1, 2021, the Taliban and affiliated militant organizations launched a massive onslaught, coinciding with the withdrawal of most US soldiers from Afghanistan. The Afghan National Army was left in shambles after its swift defeat across the country, with just two formations still functioning by mid-August: the 201st Corps and the 111th Division, both based in Kabul. After Taliban troops conquered Mihtarlam, Sharana, Gardez, Asadabad, and other cities and districts in the east, the capital city was left besieged. On August 15, 2021, Taliban militants captured Kabul, the capital city. President Ashraf Ghani had fled the country when he was apprehended.

Prior to May 2021, variables here included the Taliban's effectual utilization of internet communication and media (Zucchini, 2021), its strategic choice of attacking northern provinces (Zucchini, 2021) (AAN, 2021), and the Taliban's freedom of movement on the main Afghan highways, which came as a result of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) following the US-recommended strategy of sacrificing rural areas in favor of defending key urban centers (Trofimov, 2021; Seldin, 2021). The decline in US support between February 2020 and April 2021, when the Afghan National Security Forces, i.e. the ANSF, had been trained to rely on technical, proprietary software, and logistics support, particularly aerial support, that it had been trained to rely on, was one of the factors contributing to its loss to the Taliban (Sadat, I Commanded Afghan Troops This Year. We Were Betrayed, 2021) (Borger, 2021). Errors in US coalition training of the ANSF, as well as Afghan police extorting villagers and military officers supporting themselves by producing phantom soldiers, were cited as factors (Sisk, 2019), as well as the months of unpaid ANSF salaries following the transfer of their salary management to Afghan military administration in April 2021. Cronyism in ANSF military appointments, as well as President Ashraf Ghani's incapacity to build a strong national consensus and persuade local warlords, were considered as crucial factors in its overall collapse. Eventually, the American invasion of Iraq and subsequent change in focus to that region has been blamed for the Taliban's comeback in the mid to late 2000s (Reuters, Key dates in U.S. Involvement in Afghanistan since Sept. 11, 2001, 2021). Following the February 2020 US–Taliban agreement, key processes in the 2021 Taliban offensive began, including a bottom-up succession of negotiated or paid Taliban surrenders from village level upwards, (George, Afghanistan's military collapse: Illicit deals and mass desertion, 2021), the Taliban's effective use of online social media and its strategic choice of attacking northern provinces, (George,

Afghanistan's military collapse: Illicit deals and mass desertion, 2021) (Zucchini, 2021), and the Taliban's freedom of movement on the main Afghan highways, which resulted from the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) allowing both the drop in US support in February 2020 and changes in US support beginning in April 2021, which harmed the ANSF's effectiveness by removing technical, proprietary software, and logistics support, particularly aerial support, after the latter had been trained as a military force heavily reliant on high-tech aerial infrastructure (Borger, 2021) (Sadat, 2021). Errors in the ANSF's US coalition training, as well as Afghan police extorting villagers and supporting themselves by fabricating phantom soldiers, were also accused (Sisk, 2019). The abrupt transfer of ANSF wage management to Afghan military administration in April 2021 resulted in months of unpaid ANSF salaries (France24, 2021). Cronyism in ANSF military appointments, as well as President Ashraf Ghani's incapacity to build a strong national consensus, were considered as important factors in the ANSF's defeat (Sadat, 2021) (Tollast, 2021). Lack of trust in national government leadership contributed to local warlords' willingness to negotiate with or surrender to the Taliban (Borger, 2021).

1.4 Taliban's plan: a series of surrenders that have been arranged or paid for

Beginning in early 2020, the Taliban began a bottom-up negotiation campaign with the lowest-ranking government officials in rural communities. The agreements that resulted were dubbed "ceasefires" by officials. The term "ceasefire" was misleading, according to Afghan and US sources interviewed by Susannah George of The Washington Post, because the officers were paid by the Taliban to transfer ANSF weaponry to the Taliban (George, Afghanistan's military collapse: Illicit deals and mass desertion, 2021). Each subsequent surrender, which lasted until mid-2021, was used to persuade additional governmental and local leaders, as well as grow up in size to district level, allowing the Taliban forces to gain control of most of Afghanistan without fighting (Zucchini, 2021). The chain of surrenders accelerated with US President Biden's April 2021 announcement guaranteeing a full, unconditional US withdrawal, scaling up to province-level surrenders. The series of surrenders resulted in more government vehicles being available to transport Taliban forces.

Some of the surrenders were motivated by the cash, while others were driven by opportunism - the desire to be on the winning side that became credible following the February 2020 US–Taliban deal, according to Afghan special forces officers interviewed by Susannah George. Former US State Department official Elizabeth Threlkeld stated the Taliban's quick advance and quiet surrender of several Afghan army units had inspired many more to follow suit (TOLONews, 2022).

1.5 What is the role of Taliban's on the internet?

The Taliban exploited online social media to persuade Afghans that "the government was illegitimate" and that the Taliban would take control of Afghanistan. The Taliban's "outreach was significant," according to TOLONews' Saad Mohseni, who added that they "capitalised on intratribal, ethnic, religious, and ideological divides to win over people" and exploited popular complaints against the government.

The Taliban's claims to maintain "ancient moral precepts" were contrasted by the Washington Post with its "strikingly savvy social media strategies to build political momentum." Themes posted by Taliban social media users attempted to counteract the Taliban's brutal reputation while adhering to social media norms. According to the Washington Post, the Taliban, like corporate and political actors, were counseled by a public relations firm. The Taliban's online social media audience was considered as transnational – expatriate Afghans and "Western powers" – as well as local. In mid-2021, the messaging was "a friendlier, more reassuring face of the Taliban." Suhail Shaheen, a Taliban spokesperson, has 350,000 Twitter followers.

Much of the Taliban's social media communication took place on Twitter and WhatsApp, with WhatsApp being used to urge Taliban help in local concerns. By 2019, the Taliban had perfected the efficient use of hashtags (Timberg & Lima, Today's Taliban uses sophisticated social media practices that rarely violate the rules, 2021), a phenomenon which will be analyzed in more detail throughout this dissertation.

1.5.2 Consequent Reverberations

Because they cooperated for the US government, more than 300,000 Afghan civilians are at risk of Taliban reprisal (Jordan, 2021). Around 11,000 Americans were stranded in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan as of August 17, 2021, (Mitchell, 2021).

Hundreds of Afghan refugees began crossing into eastern Turkey from Iran in late July. At least 1,500 migrants were caught near the Iranian border, and Turkey intercepted two hundred Afghan refugees en route to Europe. Turkey has announced the construction of a border barrier between Iran and Turkey, where many refugees pass through on their way to Europe (Erkoyun, 2021).

Despite considerable Taliban victories, six European Union (EU) member states, including Germany, requested the European Commission to keep deporting rejected asylum applicants back to Afghanistan on August 5 (DW, Six countries urge EU to continue Afghan deportations, 2021). After Taliban insurgents took additional territory, Germany and the Netherlands temporarily halted the deportation of Afghan refugees (DW, 2021).

In early August 2021, a problem erupted when a group of 32 Afghans and 41 Iraqi Kurds arrived outside the Polish settlement of Usnierz Górny on the Belarus–Poland border and were denied entry to either nation, resulting in lines of military forces on both sides isolating the camping migrants. Their arrival follows an influx of thousands of mostly Middle Eastern migrants who crossed the border from Belarus into Poland and other eastern European Union (EU) members Latvia and Lithuania in the months leading up to Kabul's fall, with the EU accusing Belarus of orchestrating the migration in response to EU sanctions. While the Belarusian authorities refuted the charge, Poland described it as a "hybrid attack" on the EU, claiming that the refugees should not be allowed to enter because they are still technically in Belarus. The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) summoned Poland and Latvia to provide them with "food, water, clothing, adequate medical care, and, if possible, temporary shelter" for three weeks after the migrants requested asylum, according to a statement released by the court on August 25. Neither country was ordered to allow the migrants to cross the border (Anon, 2021).

The Canadian government declared on August 13 that it will resettle more than 20,000 Afghan civilians from organizations it regards to be Taliban targets. The UK has announced that 20,000 Afghans will be allowed to reside in the country, while the US is expected to relocate up to 30,000 Afghan SIV candidates to the US (TheGuardian, 2021). More than 3,000 Afghan refugees are expected to be resettled in Australia (Galloway, 2021), while Germany had stated that it would take in about 10,000 Afghans (Blasshofer, 2021). However, some governments have begun to express hostility against refugees. (Mirovalev, 2021) (Reuters, 2021) (Pikulicka-Wilczewska, 2021).

Namely, French President Emmanuel Macron declared in a press conference that France needed to "predict and safeguard itself from a tsunami of migrants" (Gatinois, 2021) (Willsher, 2021).

Thousands of Afghans wanting to flee the country flocked to the airport when Kabul fell in mid-August. Several passengers clung to the edge of a US military plane out of desperation, falling to their deaths as the plane took off. Warning shots were eventually fired by US troops to clear paths for the planes carrying Afghan government leaders. By September 1, 2021, the total number of evacuees had risen to 124,334 people, with 2,461 American service members and staff killed in action and more than 20,000 Americans wounded in battle (PBS., 2021). The number of contractors and allied forces killed in battle, as well as the tens of thousands of Afghan National Security forces and civilians killed in the fight, are not included in these figures.⁷

1.5.3 Establishment of a new state

More than three weeks after the fall of Kabul, the new Taliban authorities proclaimed the formation of an Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan government cabinet. The government is entirely composed of men and is highly dominated by ethnic Pashtuns, with only three members from other ethnic groups. Acting Prime Minister Hassan Akhund was appointed (Reuters, 2021). No government had yet formally recognized the Taliban's new state as of December 2021 (Saul, 2021).

⁷ US Secretary of Defense, Lloyd Austin, US: Pentagon delivers first remarks since end of Afghan mission on YouTube, US Department of Defense release / 1 September 2021, minutes 03:30–05:15.

1.6 Reactions on the international and local levels

Gul Agha Sherzai, the former governor of Nangahar province, and other Afghan politicians allied to the US-backed Afghan government congratulated the Taliban on their triumph (George, et al., 2021).

Iran's president, Ebrahim Raisi, stated that the United States' "loss" in Afghanistan could provide an opportunity to "revive life, security, and long-term peace" in the country (Motamedi, 2021). Raisi also stated that Iran desires good relations with Afghanistan and that Iran is keeping a careful eye on the situation there (AFP, 2021).

Afghans have shed the "shackles of servitude," according to Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan (Dawn, 2021) (TheHindu, 2021) (Muzaffar, 2021). Pakistan's National Security Committee (NSC) reaffirmed Pakistan's desire for an inclusive political settlement in Afghanistan that includes all Afghan ethnic groups. Pakistan would continue to collaborate with the international community and all Afghan parties to support an inclusive political settlement in Afghanistan, according to the committee (Yousafzai A. A., Pakistan seeks peace in Afghanistan as Taliban take over: NSC. , 2021) (Yousafzai A. A., 2021). Pakistan's foreign minister expressed "alarm" over the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan but insisted that the country has no plans to close its embassy in Kabul (Qureshi, 2021). Faiz Hameed, the head of Pakistan's intelligence agency, traveled to Kabul and met with Taliban officials as well as other Afghan politicians, including former Prime Minister Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. In the absence of an Afghan administration, the meeting was considered as an unusual avenue of communication between the two countries (Reporter, 2021). The purpose of the visit was ostensibly apt to secure Haqqani berths in the new government, proving their "clout" over the Taliban (Roy, 2021). The Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate, according to the Carnegie Endowment Center, has an indisputable link with the Taliban, particularly the Haqqani network (Chaudhuri & Shende, 2020). President Joe Biden claimed that he had to either stick to the bargain reached with the Taliban by his predecessor and continue to pull out or send in more troops and risk their lives (Baker, 2021).

"The US and its allies are to blame for the calamity in Afghanistan," the Chinese state-run Global Times reported. The Taliban's triumph was linked to the Taliban's alleged adoption of Mao Zedong's "people's war" strategy of gathering rural support while dragging the enemy deep into the countryside, according to the Communist Party's People's Daily (Campbell, 2021).

It is time for national reconciliation, according to Russia's UN representative, with peace and order returning to the streets and "the end of many years of carnage."

"It is critical not to enable terrorists to spread into neighboring countries," Russian President Vladimir Putin warned. President Putin's special envoy to Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, said the Taliban were easier to engage with than exiled President Ashraf Ghani's previous "puppet administration" (Kozlov & Rynda, 2021).

Finally, the European Parliament issued a resolution on September 14 condemning the Taliban for using force to take over Afghanistan, for failing to keep promises for an inclusive government, for violating the Afghan people's their rights and freedoms, and for battling the NRF.⁸

1.7 The Afghan Insurgency's Contents: a comprehensive rehash

The insurgents in Afghanistan have been, and still emerge as hardly united. While the insurgency is frequently depicted in Western and international media as being fought by a single "Taliban" enemy, the identities of those who oppose coalition forces and the Afghan government in Kabul are diverse and fractured, frequently shifting between cooperation and confrontation depending on the interests of the day (Tarzi, The Neo-Taliban," in *The Taliban and the Crisis of Afghanistan*, 2008). The varied parts of the insurgency's allegiance and goals are typically highly localized, shifting from one area or village to the next. Nine years of conflict have also splintered the insurgency across generations, as young men who were children when the Taliban ruled have now grown up and joined the battle, developing their own visions of Afghanistan and attitudes toward the Afghan government and its Western partners (Yousafzai & Moreau, 2010). The distinct groups and individuals who are bundled together under the label of "Taliban" frequently have nothing more than a shared adversary. In order to "recognize that this new phenomenon comprises both the past and new agendas, participants, and engagement techniques," Amin Tarzi invented the term "neo-Taliban."⁹

⁸ "MOTION FOR A RESOLUTION on the situation in Afghanistan". www.europarl.europa.eu.

⁹ Tarzi, "The Neo-Taliban," 309.

The term "Taliban" is most commonly linked with the group that rose to prominence in the 1990s under the leadership of Mullah Mohammed Omar. While the Taliban movement began as a group of religious students attempting to confront the criminality that had taken hold in post-Najibullah Afghanistan, by 2001 it had morphed into a much more fragmented movement. The Taliban had mainly purchased and bargained their way to control of most of the country by bribery and bargains since their founding in Kandahar, co-opting previous warlords and Mujahideen into their rigid Islamist dictatorship. Terror and fear were used to keep people loyal to Mullah Omar and the movement, and Omar's decision to declare himself Amir ul-Momineen (Commander of the Faithful) and separate himself from ordinary Taliban members behind a wall of secrecy may have already started eroding his image before the American invasion.¹⁰ The Taliban regime began referring to itself as the "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan," or IEA, during its final years in power. Many members of the defeated IEA military and administration either returned to their homes in rural Afghanistan or escaped across the border to Pakistan after the American invasion in 2001. Many of these former Taliban returned to fight the Afghan government and its Western supporters as the Afghan insurgency got stronger in the years after the invasion. Mullah Omar issued an audiotape statement in 2003 announcing the formation of a ten-member Leadership Council to "plan resistance to foreign soldiers commanded by the United States in Afghanistan."¹¹ Eight of Omar's leadership council members were from Kandahar, while the other two were from Khost and Paktia in the eastern regions. This council claimed to be the leader of the "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan," a moniker that was frequently used by Taliban officials prior to their overthrow. The Quetta Shura Taliban (QST) is the name given to this branch of the insurgency, which is thought to be led by Mullah Omar and his Leadership Council and is named after the Pakistani city of Quetta, where Omar and other Taliban commanders are claimed to have sought asylum after fleeing Afghanistan. Taliban militants loyal to the Quetta Shura operate mostly in the Southern area, where a majority of the Leadership Council has roots in the predominantly Pashtun provinces of Afghanistan. Throughout the battle, the QST leadership council has sustained significant losses, with members being killed or captured. The capture of Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, Mullah Omar's top deputy and the man considered to be in charge of military operations in Afghanistan, in February 2010 was the most significant of these occurrences (Roggio, 2010). In January 2011, two replacements for Baradar were named, continuing the leadership council's change (Moreau, Taliban Anoints Two New Leaders, 2011). While Mullah Omar had been in hiding since his departure from Afghanistan in 2001, he epitomized a symbol of great power over the various sections of the insurgency (Stenersen, 2010), at least until his death. On April 23, 2013, he died in Zabul. Taliban leaders kept his killing a secret for two years, until Afghanistan's National Directorate of Security announced it in July 2015. Some commentators have interpreted generational shifts within the Taliban ranks, which have been attributed to the attrition of older, more senior members, as an indication of influence shifting away from former regime leaders headquartered across the Pakistani border (Yousafzai & Moreau, 2010). The IEA's extremely public feud with Mansur Dadullah in 2007, which resulted in Dadullah's dismissal from his leadership post, was a rare instance of internal conflict at the organization's highest echelons.¹² The covert organization's public face portrays little disagreement among the insurgency's leaders. Jalaluddin Haqqani, a former Mujahideen commander who rose to prominence in the anti-Soviet fight, was the Khost member of the initial Leadership Council. Haqqani and his followers have a history dating back to the early 1970s, when they flew to Pakistan for training to battle the regime of Mohammad Daud Khan, who had toppled Afghan King Mohammad Zahir Shaw in a 1973 coup that foreshadowed the next three decades of practically continual conflict (Dressler, 2010). While serving on the QST leadership council, Jalaluddin Haqqani and his son Sirajuddin run their own insurgent network in Eastern Afghanistan, known as the Haqqani Network, with ties to Pakistan. Siraj Haqqani claimed to being on Mullah Omar's QST leadership council and openly coordinating with al-Qaeda in an interview with the jihadist al-Balagh media station in April 2010, a relationship long disputed by the other Quetta Shura leadership (Haqqani, 2010). Western security experts have frequently identified the Haqqani Network as the most deadly and professional aspect of the Afghan insurgency (Roggio, 2010). Hizb-e-Islami Gulbuddin (HiG) is the third major insurgent group, led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a former Prime Minister of Afghanistan for a brief

¹⁰ Ibid., 291-292.

¹¹ 8 Rahimullah Yusufzai, "Taliban Leader Mullah Mohammad Omar has Named a 10-Member Leadership Council to Organize Resistance to the US-Led Foreign Troops in Afghanistan," *The News* (Islamabad, June 24, 2003), (accessed December 20, 2010).

¹² 3 Stenersen, *The Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan - Organization, Leadership and Worldview*, 46.

spell in the 1990s and another former Mujahideen commander who fought against the Soviet Union in the 1980s. During the anti-Soviet jihad, Hekmatyar was a favorite of Pakistan's ISI, and as a result, he received funds and weaponry from the US. Hekmatyar escaped to Iran during the Taliban's rise to power in the 1990s, where he remained until evicted by Tehran in 2002, when he returned to join the rebel fight against Hamid Karzai's Afghan government and the Western coalition (BBC, 2010). Hekmatyar's relationship with the Quetta Shura Taliban is shaky at best and mostly opportunistic at worst.

While Hekmatyar has denied any ties to the Quetta Shura Taliban,¹³ in a 2006 video, he purportedly expressed his sympathy for Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda (BBC, 2006). Aside from these three main factions, the insurgency has a number of minor groups, including Hizb-e-Islami Khaliq and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, an al-Qaeda-affiliated extremist group made up mostly of Uzbek militants (Cordesman, 2010). In addition to the Afghan Taliban, Pakistani Taliban, and other extremist organizations such as the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Lashkar-e-Tayyiba operate close across the border (LeT). Many historical, social, and political factors have contributed to the diversification of the insurgency among diverse factions. It has also been linked in part to the original Taliban's desire, under Mullah Omar's leadership, to create footholds in the North and East, where they had previously had little or no influence, by forming partnerships with other disgruntled militia groups (Synovitz, 2008). Pakistan also plays a significant role in the Afghan conflict. For rebels and international radicals alike, Pakistan has served as a safe haven over the Afghan-Pakistan border. Many mujahideen built close ties to Pakistan during the anti-Soviet struggle. During that fight, the Pakistani ISI offered direct operational support to the mujahideen, with funds and equipment coming from the US and Saudi Arabia. While this study does not expressly address Pakistan's role in the Afghan conflict, most of the Taliban's propaganda has originated in Pakistan, particularly in the years following the Taliban's departure from power. The use of the term "Taliban" to refer to the whole Afghan insurgency ignores the vast distinctions in identity, organization, and interests among the various actors and groups involved in the fight. In terms of vocabulary, the author will use specific group names where appropriate throughout this thesis, distinguishing between the numerous insurgent organizations as relevant. The name "Taliban" will be used largely to refer to the Quetta Shura Taliban, led by Mullah Omar. When the precise source of a speech or action is unknown, the term "Taliban" will be used instead, as it is the largest faction within the insurgency and, at least symbolically, leads the fight against the Afghan government and Western forces. Estimating the number of Taliban fighters operating in Afghanistan is exceedingly difficult. Their numbers were believed to be between 20,000 and 30,000 fighters in an August 2010 assessment (Roggio, 2010). Afghanistan has a population of over twenty-nine million people as a point of reference.¹⁴ In 2008, Antonio Giustozzi, an Afghan researcher with extensive field experience, estimated that there were 17,000 in total, with 6,000-10,000 actives at any given moment (Giustozzi A. , 2007). However, as Gilles Dorronsoro has pointed out, the numbers vary significantly depending on whether full-time or part-time fighters are being assessed, and seasonal changes also have an impact on estimations, as many Taliban only fight during the summer months, returning home the rest of the year. Furthermore, because of the porous border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, the numbers can fluctuate as reinforcements are transferred from Pakistan to meet the insurgency's needs (Dorronsoro, 2009). Not all of the rebels fighting the Afghan government and NATO forces share the Taliban leadership's ideological motivations and ambitions. Many are compelled to fight for a variety of reasons, including fear of retaliation, the desire to provide for their families, the need to defend their homes or livelihood against a corrupt Afghan government, or the need to seek vengeance for family members killed by coalition forces. The "Accidental Guerrilla syndrome," as described by David Kilcullen, occurs when members of the public are pushed into insurgency by a heavy-handed intervention force, who in this case invaded in the first place to target a tiny group of ideologically driven radicals (Kilcullen, *The accidental guerrilla : fighting small wars in the midst of a big one* , 2009).

Many Afghans who may not have initially backed the Taliban have been compelled to join the resistance after over a decade of NATO engagement and corrupt and incompetent governance by the Karzai administration. Afghan society is mostly rural and ethnically diverse. More than three decades of conflict have shattered it. The Pashtuns are Afghanistan's most populous ethnic group, accounting for 42 percent of the country's population and primarily inhabiting the country's southern

¹³ Stenersen, *The Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan - Organization, Leadership and Worldview*, 59.

¹⁴ CIA World Factbook, "Afghanistan," CIA - The World Factbook, March 22, 2011.

and eastern provinces. Tajiks are the country's second-largest ethnic group, accounting for 27% of the population and largely residing in the northeast and northwest. The Hazaras and Uzbeks, who inhabit in the central and northern regions, respectively, make up 9% of the population.¹⁵

A variety of smaller ethnic groups also dwell in the country, mostly in the northern regions. Within each of these ethnic groups, there are numerous tribal and clan divisions that play a significant role in Afghan identity.

Beyond these schisms in identity, history has only worked to exacerbate them via bloodshed. Those who supported the Communist regime and those who fought with the Mujahideen were divided by the Soviet occupation (Kemp R. , 2008). Fear and mistrust exist among Afghans of all ethnic groups as a result of the civil war, which was fought mostly between Mujahideen factions founded along ethnic lines. The Taliban's ascendancy resulted in "social scars" between those who supported them and those who opposed them.¹⁶ Years of constant violence have destabilized even the historically robust tribal systems among Afghan ethnic groupings. The Taliban movement has been dominated by ethnic Pashtuns from its inception. Mullah Omar and many of his initial inner circle come from the Ghilzai Pashtun tribal confederation, which has traditionally clashed with portions of the Durrani confederation, from which Hamid Karzai's Popalzai tribal heritage descends.¹⁷ Despite the fact that President Hamid Karzai is a Pashtun, the alienation of the Pashtun ethnic community as a whole has had a substantial impact on the expansion of the insurgency in Afghanistan since 2001. The presence of non-Pashtuns in positions of power in the post-Bonn government, particularly Tajiks from the erstwhile Northern Alliance, left many Pashtuns feeling disenfranchised from having a say in the governance of the country they had ruled for virtually all of its modern history. This created a situation, according to Amin Tarzi, "ideal for the revival of the former regime or groups within it."¹⁸ The insurgency's nature is influenced by Afghanistan's rural makeup and high percentage of illiteracy.

In 2010, just twenty-three percent of the population was predicted to dwell in cities, with the rest residing in villages and rural areas.¹⁹ Furthermore, only around a quarter of the adult population was estimated to be literate in 2007, with only two percent reporting to read newspapers on a daily basis.²⁰ Even fewer people have access to the Internet, with estimates ranging from 1.6 percent to 3.6 percent sixty-five of the population. While mobile phone usage has risen rapidly since the Taliban's fall, it remains concentrated in urban areas, and the Taliban have frequently destroyed communications equipment and threatened phone companies in an attempt to prevent civilians from reporting insurgent activity (Lakshmanan, 2009).

The Taliban's messaging to the Afghan people is defined by the high degree of illiteracy, lack of Internet access, and linguistic distribution. When it comes to digital media, English-language messages sent via the Internet are unlikely to reach many Afghans.

Taliban insurgents in Afghanistan are diverse and fractured. The Taliban is most commonly associated with the group that rose to prominence in the 1990s under Mullah Omar. In order to "recognize that this new phenomenon comprises both the past and new agendas, participants, and engagement techniques," Amin Tarzi invented the term "neo-Taliban". The Quetta Shura Taliban (QST) is the name given to this branch of the insurgency, which is thought to be led by Mullah Omar and his Leadership Council. A majority of the Leadership Council has roots in the predominantly Pashtun provinces of Afghanistan.

Throughout the battle, the QST leadership council has sustained significant losses, with members killed or captured. Jalaluddin Haqqani, a former Mujahideen commander who rose to prominence in the anti-Soviet fight, was the Khost member of the initial Leadership Council. Mullah Omar's QST leadership council has little disagreement among the insurgency's leaders. The IEA's extremely public feud with Mansur Dadullah in 2007, which resulted in his dismissal from his leadership post, was a rare instance of internal conflict at the organization's highest echelons. Western security experts have frequently identified the Haqqani Network as the most deadly and professional aspect of the Afghan insurgency (Roggio, 2010).

¹⁵ CIA World Factbook, "Afghanistan."

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Barfield, *Afghanistan: a cultural and political history*, 284.

¹⁸ Tarzi, "The Neo-Taliban," 291.

¹⁹ CIA World Factbook, "Afghanistan."

²⁰ 3 Taliban Propaganda: Winning the War of Words? Asia Report (International Crisis Group, July 24, 2008), 9, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/158-taliban-propagandawinning-the-war-of-words.aspx>.

Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hizb-e-Islami Gulbuddin is a former Prime Minister of Afghanistan for a brief spell in the 1990s.

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan is an al-Qaeda-affiliated extremist group made up mostly of Uzbek militants. Many historical, social, and political factors have contributed to the diversification of the insurgency among diverse factions.

It has also been linked in part to the original Taliban's desire, under Mullah Omar's leadership, to strengthen the Afghan Uzbek alliance.

Chapter 2

The Taliban evolution, adaptation and remodeling of media and military operations vis-à-vis the wider public

2.1 The Taliban (military) modus operandi: exploitation of peoples in front of political weaknesses

The Taliban's manner of fighting emerges as archaic and verbose, yet this does not elicit a lack of military expertise on their part. On the battlefield, outgunned and outmaneuvered, the Taliban continues to exploit the ultimate vulnerability of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) and the coalition led by the United States: political instability. The Taliban, indeed, are not as politically vulnerable as their foes and are frequently able to use the fundamental and historical narrative that is "against the invader" to shift the pivot of attention away from their actions. Afghans have long conducted, at the strategic level, what Taber has named the "war of the flea" by employing the tactics, strategies, and procedures given by guerrilla warfare (Taber, 2002).

The Taliban, like the Mujahedin before them during the anti-Soviet jihad, have sought to maintain the initiative in battle by operating in small groups and attacking targets of opportunity, such as supplies convoys and remote outposts that are poorly guarded and isolated. On October 3rd, 2009, for instance, the Taliban assaulted the Combat Outpost Keating in the hamlet of Kamdesh, Nuristan. The fighting was so intense that the outpost was effectively overrun, with eight Americans dead and twenty-two injured. This proved to be an exceptional rather than outstanding attack.

Subsequent large-scale or "massing" strikes by the Taliban resulted in catastrophic losses of militants, demonstrating that the Taliban are incapable of fighting the coalition on a conventional level and encouraging the use of more effective guerrilla methods. After these defeats, the majority of the tactics moved to indirect or harassing fire on combat outposts, the deadly leveraging of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and suicide bombers.

The Taliban have sought to maneuver the operational tempo of the battlefield and force the United States and NATO to commit errors that they may use to their advantage. This is particularly true on problems of collateral damage. On several instances, including concerns like indirect fire and air assistance, the Taliban have intentionally sought to exploit US and NATO rules of engagement (ROEs). The majority of NATO nations have chosen ROEs that are bound by the immediacy of the threat to civilian life, arguing that it is more important to win "hearts and minds" by avoiding terrifying innocent bystanders than to eliminate every possible threat. The Taliban view this as a limitation imposed by NATO and a chance to exploit the ROE limits. One observer has asserted, "Militants play civilized nations for fools by pressuring them to take exceptional measures of conformity with international law while they themselves refuse to abide to the Queensbury rules of combat" (King, 2011). The Taliban are teaching Americans and ISAF forces the same lessons about collateral damage that they taught the Soviets nearly 40 years ago.

While the death of noncombatant civilians has always been a part of warfare, the death of Afghan civilians has become a key aspect of the insurgency and counterinsurgency in Afghanistan.

Operations resulting in the death of Afghan civilians have proven to be problematic for the coalition and have sparked violent protests against foreign soldiers and calls for the resignation of President Hamid Karzai. In the 1980s, it was a popular tactic of the anti-Soviet Mujahedin to blast Soviet garrisons and firebases in an attempt to provoke a Soviet retaliatory attack on population centers and villages where the Mujahedin were hiding, resulting in the murder and injury of Afghan civilians. The Mujahedin understood, as do the Taliban now, that when foreign invaders kill an Afghan civilian, particularly a woman or kid, the community swiftly turns on the perpetrator and becomes a permanent adversary. It has been argued for years that increasing civilian casualties from US and NATO airstrikes against the Taliban weakens Kabul's aim, so aiding the insurgents in recruiting new members (Loney, 2007).

As former US and ISAF commander General McChrystal stated in 2009, 'we risk strategic failure by pursuing tactical victories at the expense of civilian lives or unnecessary collateral damage,' the Coalition is well aware of this problem (McChrystal, 2009).

Although some Western observers have portrayed the Taliban as mindless zealots, this petiotization is not empirically sustained. The Taliban have demonstrated a prominent level of sophistication and are conducting an active and sustained defensive jihad. In fact, some Western intelligence officials have speculated that a 'new' Taliban has emerged, as evidenced by the following:

- often seeking refuge in Pakistani cities like Karachi.

They regularly perform "circling runs around the Karzai government" as a result of their superb public relations and communications activities.

- bringing the conflict to Kabul and NATO by increasing the use of IEDs.
- establishing a 67-article code of conduct for its combatants and mandating that they protect civilians.
- establishing shadow government entities to provide Islamic law to rural regions where government officials are notoriously corrupt (Gutman, 2010).

The Taliban have learnt to avoid "symmetrical fighting" at all costs, which involves direct unit-on-unit clashes. They are well aware that the United States and NATO have equipped them. Instead, the Taliban concentrate on attacking "soft targets," such as supply convoys, ambushes, et similia. According to USMC Helmand After Action Reports (AARs), the Taliban's increasing level of tactical competence is shown by the following techniques:

- Fire control: The direct and deliberate employment of high casualty generating weapons to build ambushes, as illustrated by the deployment of bursts of machine gun fire followed by volleys of RPGs (rocket-propelled grenades) on high-value targets. Multiple firing positions from which RPGs are fired in a coordinated and disciplined salvo against selected targets.

Engagements have lasted between two and forty hours, demonstrating the Taliban's capacity to field, use, and sustain combat troops through the disciplined and controlled application of resources.

- Interlocking fields of fire: fighting positions created in places where they can help one other in the event of an assault.
- Combined arms: Coordinated machine gun fire to neutralize targets so that RPGs, rockets, and mortars may attack them.
- Fire and movement: RPG and machine gun fire is used to pin down the enemy as fighters advance to the flanks.
- Anti-Armor Tactics: The use of RPGs to disable and stop armored vehicles with "mobility kills" rather than attempting to breach them. When crew members exit a disabled vehicle, they become the focus of small weapons fire. This demonstrates a precise comprehension of the limitations of their weapon systems and a comprehensive understanding of our armor's weaknesses.
- Cover and concealment: The use of combat positions constructed within 'Karez' irrigation ditches, which give excellent cover and camouflage for maneuvering across the battlefield and attacking Marines. Water is utilized by Taliban forces to reduce the dust signature surrounding their fighting positions, making it difficult to detect enemy firing positions among the chaos of battle.
- Defense in depth: The Taliban have constructed their fortifications with depth and mutual support in mind, demonstrating an awareness of how U.S. troops would respond once engaged and demonstrating their ability to plan operations effectively (Smith, 2009).

2.2 Recent military adaptations

While there is nothing fairly advanced about many of the methods listed above, especially when compared to the tactics of modern armies, these observations do imply that the Taliban have borrowed ideas and technologies from battlefields across the globe for use in Afghanistan. As will be revealed, the Taliban have definitely adopted methods from the conflict in Iraq, the Afghan civil war of the 1990s, and from Pakistani and al Qaeda agents. More recently, it appears they may even be fielding new inventive strategies based on coalition efforts. The introduction of suicide bombers and IEDs are two examples of tactics which were mimicked or refined in Iraq and adopted by the Taliban for use in Afghanistan.

An increase in killings of government officials and civil-society leaders has also received recent notice. These new Taliban techniques, as will be argued below, have been dramatically effective. In the fall of 2005 a team of Iraqi insurgency leaders traveled to the Pakistan FATA to meet with Afghan Taliban leaders.²¹ At this meeting, the Taliban were exhorted to replicate methods utilized by the Iraqi militants against US and coalition forces in Iraq. Maulvi Mohammad Haqqani, a Taliban official who recruits fighters on both sides of the border, has recounted that around 2004, "Arab and Iraqi mujahedin began visiting us, transferring the latest IED technology and suicide-bomber tactics they had learned in the Iraqi resistance during combat with U.S. forces." What the Taliban acquired, it appears, were 'new weapons and techniques: improved IEDs for roadside bombings, and suicide attacks (Barker, 2010). Hence, two of the major techniques that the Taliban were urged to employ were the use of suicide bombers and IEDs. As will be demonstrated below, Afghanistan suffered a considerable surge in suicide bombings and IED use starting in 2006. Prior to this period the employment of suicide bombers was a technique unheard on the battlefields of Afghanistan partly because of the cultural antipathy and traditional aversion of Afghans vis-à-vis suicide (Witte, 2006). The growing use of suicide bombs and IEDs coincidentally surged when the Taliban were also expanding their organization (Johnson H. T., 2013). From 2002, after retreating to Pakistani soil, through mid-2005, a substantial majority of Taliban actions were based on cross-border harassments and long-distance missile assaults. By late 2005 the Taliban had reassembled and began to organize in rural Afghanistan, notably in the border districts in the east and south.

Here Taliban vanguard teams and clerics started to propagandize and frighten villages through direct involvement and the use of shabnamah (night letters) and other propaganda tactics (to be further analyzed below).

"In its simplicity and efficacy, the dependence on small teams of militants to enter communities and weed out pro-Kabul forces was to prove one of the greatest features of the Taliban strategy."²² These measures not only proved the Taliban's acknowledgment of the crucial role the Afghan rural population would play in their insurgency/jihad, but it also allowed them to store their weapons near these communities.

Supposedly, the ultimate 'purpose of the suicide assaults are not to scare the public, but to highlight the Taliban's dedication and resolve in their struggle'²³ and to raise questions about the government's capacity to safeguard normal Afghans. Suicide strikes, like most of the other measures that the Taliban adopt are pursued, in part, for their propaganda value. The Taliban are intimately aware of the essential role of the information war for their insurgency and jihad and attempt to reaffirm to the populace themes such as:

- Taliban victory in this cosmic struggle is inevitable.
- Islam cannot be defeated.
- The Taliban are 'national heroes,' eager to sacrifice all for Allah.
- Afghans have a long and noble history of defeating invading foreign infidels.
- Foreign invaders as well as their Afghan proxies are aiming to undermine Afghan religion and traditions; and
- All Afghans have an obligation to join the war against the invaders and apostates (Johnson & Waheed, 2011).

2.3 Military-Media junction: paradigms and challenges of the Jihadi web world

Individuals, organizations, and networks from all ideological stripes have used developing technology to further their political and social goals throughout history. The printing press, cassette tape, and fax machine have each spurred revolutions in thoughts and actions at contrasting times. The Internet presently reaches all levels of society while being exposed to few restraints.

By bypassing more traditional media, the Internet creates not just the tools, but an altogether new venue for raising global awareness of issues that is not confined by political censorship or traditional cultural standards.

Various groups and movements have leveraged the Internet over the last decade to: "coordinate movement activities, events, and actions; " discuss topics of interest and news with movement participants; "

²¹ Thomas H. Johnson interview with Senior US Intelligence Official, spring 2006, Monterey California.

²² Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop*, 102.

²³ Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop*, 109.

disseminate propaganda, educational, and training materials; " identify, recruit, and socialize new membership; and " find and exploit information about their opponents.

In fact, the use of the Internet for social and political activity has spawned a whole genre of research within the sociology and political science disciplines.'

Notwithstanding this, extensive misconstructions vis-à-vis the terrorist movement's use of technology have excessively shifted the pivot of attention towards the broader public (and thus policy) realm on the more sensational aspects of jihadi Internet activity, such as the online deluge of Iraqi attack videos, and not enough on the more important aspects of the movement's use of technology (Brachman, 2006). The more banal components of the jihadi web world, including jihadi arrangements similarly to web forums, are the more mundane, yet deserving of consideration, aspects of the jihadi web world. Any meaningful debate on al-Qaeda's use of the Internet by other movements must first delve into virtual presence, while attempting to precise such inexactitudes. The jihadi digital world is constructed similarly to that of any other virtual presence, except it is greatly volatile. Web forum sites such as the "AI-Hesbah Discussion Forum" and the now-defunct "Syrian Islamic Forum" emerge as initial entry points from which interested viewers from all over the world may learn about breaking news from Iraq, follow links to attack videos from active fihad campaigns, view motivational imagery of martyr operatives in heaven, and even install preplanned catch phrases about the religious justifications for perpetrating violent jibad. Some of these boards even have job postings for jihadists (Brachman, 2006).

However, due to conflicts with their service providers or antagonistic conduct against them, these sites alternate between active and inactive states. They constantly alter their web addresses, making them extremely difficult to follow for those unfamiliar with the jihadi digital world.

Google's Orkut software—a popular, international Internet service—provides a valuable tool for people seeking a more accessible way to contact with those who have a similar enthusiasm for jihad and al-Qaeda (Hunt, "Osama bin Laden Fan Clubs Build Online Communities", 2006). This online community has aided in the rallying of support for Osama bin Laden and has facilitated the global transmission of jihadi movies and communicate with non-Arab jihad followers.

Interested viewers encounter a plenitude of opportunities for acquiring the latest news and current events from a jihadi perspective. They can access a series of al-Qaeda-friendly news broadcasts (dubbed "Voice of the Caliphate") via web discussion forums, which highlight recent assaults, criticize Arab governments for cooperating with Jews and Christians, and discuss the jihadi movement's future aims.' Those interested in receiving daily jihadi news updates can easily sign up for one of the many jihadi email lists serve organizations, many of which use the "Yahoo!" online site.

They can also join up for the free "lightning" mobile Internet service, which allows users to access a limited amount of news material via their phones. Individuals interested in forming their own terrorist cells, such as the ones behind the Madrid train attack, can get more than just news updates on the internet. Jihadi web forums include links to al-Qaeda periodicals that detail how to communicate with cell members, refine tactics and procedures, and construct bombs, among other things. One can even find the jihadi "Yahoo!" Group that carries the Encyclopedia of Preparation, a massive training manual for everything from kidnapping officials to developing nuclear weapons, with relative ease. ' Those who monitor Islamist websites are increasingly retrieving detailed instructional texts and videos explaining how to use specific software packages or access specific types of internet assets. These courses come include a "jihadi-approved" version of the software to download, which frequently comprises video editing and webpage design applications (Brachman, 2006). To that purpose, extremist computer engineers have released new stand-alone online browsing software that works similarly to Internet Explorer but only searches specific websites.

Such systems enable the intellectual detachment of jihadi visitors from the chaos of cyberspace by restricting their ability to travel to other online places. Yet, these criteria used to define and bind terrorist ideology may emerge as rather fruitless.

As ideologues seek dominion over this technology, the speed, which is important for jihadi success given the diversity of competing ideas available online, is predicted to pick up.

The al-Qaeda library site, which includes over 3,000 books and monographs from notable jihadi thinkers, is a dramatically optimal locus to facilitate the learning process concerning jihadi philosophy. Tajd id al-Islami, a radical Islamic discussion forum, recently posted an example of how jihadi-themed books may now

be found. "With the exception of books, anyone can download destinations, such as propaganda and recruitment films, instantly onto their mobile devices" (Brachman, 2006).

The jihadi online world from the turmoil of cyberspace, like other web-based movements, would not exist if not for the urbane efforts of its technological gurus and webmasters who maintain these sites. Babar Ahmad, a British citizen, and information technology professional utilized his computer abilities to run one of the first English-language pro-jihad websites from his home in south London. His website featured jihad-related news and extremist images in the hopes of raising awareness among potential members about the movement's goals (BBC, 2006). These technical professionals play a critical role in ensuring that movement participants have access to the most up-to-date information and computer technology. Al-use Qaeda's of the Internet, as demonstrated by Ahmad and the virtual army of other computer-savvy jihadi youth around the world, is consistent with a broader pattern of grassroots activity spreading across the globe; nevertheless, jihadi use of technology elicits significant dangers.

2.4 The Cyber warfare of the Internet

Albeit jihadi websites have just lately gained widespread public prominence, pro-jihad webmasters have been maintaining websites even before the September 11, 2001, attacks. Senior al-Qaeda commanders did not find themselves in a hurry to keep their cause energized and coherent until the United States and its allies deposed the Taliban in Afghanistan. As a result, they used the Internet to re-establish their leadership, reunite their crippled organization, and rebuild their dismantled training camps. Although virtual combat classrooms do not completely replace physical training camps, they do alter the nature of instruction, indoctrination, and participation.

Al-Qaeda has become increasingly reliant on the Internet to direct military operations on the battlefield. Iraqi rebels use a number of venues, including the Internet, to convey their warfare skills to a bigger audience as they refine them. Military leaders are increasingly reporting that Iraqi rebel methods are being copied in Afghanistan.²⁴ The Taliban's employment of remote-triggered improvised explosive devices (IEDs), for example, represents a significant advancement over their earlier usage of hard-wired detonators. As a result, Thai government officials have observed a comparable increase in the technical proficiency of radical Islamic Internet techniques used to replace its rebels in the country's south (Hick & McNutt, 2002). Thai security forces credit these appealingly overnight advances, notably in terms of how guerrillas are wiring organization and deploying IEDs, to a combination of tactics apt to reconstitute their leadership, including the availability of jihadi training manuals in CD-ROM and print form, which they have discovered in safe homes, and direct teaching from Thai jihadis with al-Qaeda training camp expertise (Wiktorowicz, 2003).

In recent years, a growing web network of "resistance sites" has evolved to help people interested in joining the insurgency in Iraq by giving precise directions, guidance, and maps.²⁵

Facilitators lead interested participants from Saudi Arabia or Europe into the heart of the war via a convoluted underground railroad of safe houses and friendly mosques, suggesting routes via Syria. Jihadi media brigades also use a steady supply of emails, propaganda movies, and photos to raise awareness about their cause (McCaughy & D. Ayers, 2003).

Jihadis aggressively employ the latest Western software, such as Windows Movie Maker and Adobe Acrobat, to make anti-Western products intended to motivate their followers and shame their opponents. These al-Qaeda-affiliated or inspired news organizations have discovered a wealth of pictures from Western news channels, which they use to create their own propaganda products. Over the last year, this imagery has become progressively frighteningly vivid in its portrayal of wounded and dead American soldiers (Hunt, 2006).

²⁴ Abu Musab al-Suri, a senior jihadi strategist, dedicated his most recent book, *Da'wah lil- Muqawamah al-Islamiyyah al-'Alamiyyah* (A Call to Global Islamic Resistance), to sparking a global Islamic revolution through modern media technologies, particularly the Internet and satellite television. At the height of his career as a director and thinker about jihad, he published the book online in 2004.

²⁵ In a posting titled "The Way Towards the Country of the Two Rivers," "Al-Muhjir al-Islami," a member of the online radical discussion forum "Firdaws," described in great detail how "the central border area between Syria's Dir al-Zur province and Iraq's al-Anbar province is the entry point most used by the mujahadeen."

The dark humor that frequently accompanies this visual is perhaps even more unsettling to Western listeners.²⁶

A new al-Qaeda propaganda effort spotlighting sniper operations in Iraq has raised public awareness of the jihadi movement's doctrinal triumphs in the West and the Muslim world. On hostile websites, a series of films, images, and talks regarding supposed strikes conducted by jihadi heroes known as the "Baghdad Sniper" and the "Sniper of Fallujah" have been circulating (Ulph, 2005). The recordings show sniper strikes on American forces in Iraq, each of which ends with a successful hit on a soldier. The dramatic contrast between the intimidating Islamist sniper and the suffering American soldier fits perfectly with the movement's goals: giving people sympathetic to the jihadi cause a sense of meaning and proof of victory. These types of propaganda materials are generally burned to CD-ROM and given by hand to jihadi activists as well as anyone interested in the movement. These videos are sold in markets and beneath the counters of select shops throughout the Middle East and Southeast Asia. For some Iraqis, the sniper has become a folk hero. They may not belong to Islamist ideology, but they identify with the sniper's aggressive fight against what they see to be imperialism. - Available in markets and allistic US forces, as well as behind the counters of select businesses.

These videos can be used for education and indoctrination purposes in addition to being used in technology stores. Jihadi groups have also used this technology to revolutionize the way their supporters participate in the war in the Middle East and Southeast, where they were purchased. For example, in November 2005, the communications bureau of "The Army of the Victorious Group," a Sunni rebel group active in Iraq, advertised a competition for developing the organization's website on many extremists' Islamic websites (Brachman, 2006). The victor would not only have his idea executed, but he would also be given the ability to fire missiles remotely from a US army facility in Iraq. Secondly, "The winner will launch three long-range missiles at an American army base in Iraq by pressing a button [on his computer] with his blessed hand, utilizing technology developed by jihad fighters, Allah willing." By emphasizing the "opportunity for our brothers outside of Iraq to join their brothers on the front lines[s] in Iraq, the land of the frontier and of jihad, and [participate in] destroying the strongholds of polytheism and heresy," "The contest sponsors demonstrated their belief that technology is an important part of the educational and indoctrination process. Using technology in this manner, anyone who wishes to join the Iraqi insurgents can do so without having to physically present herself on the battlefield.

Importantly, Islamist web users have become increasingly aware of government attempts to track their online activities. Jihadis have recently written rules for safe ways to employ technology in order to ameliorate operational security in the usage of technology. For example, a jihadi discussion site has published a tutorial to accessing the Internet safely and secretly.²⁷ The article describes how governments identify individuals, how they use software chat programs like Microsoft Messenger and PalTalk to identify them and warns readers not to use Saudi Arabian email addresses (those that finish in ".sa") since they are not secure. Rather, the author of this instruction advises jihadists to create anonymous accounts with commercial email providers such as *Hotmail* or *Yahoo!* (Brachman, 2006).

2.5 Jihad and video games

While counterterrorism analysts should focus on how jihadists use recent technologies to further their operational goals, they shall also concentrate their focus on how technology might be used strategically to cultivate mass ideological support among Muslim youth. Although the rising Islamist video game business has had negligible impact on policymakers to date, it does show a growing effort by radical Islamic propagandists to reach out to a younger generation with their message.

Before we go any further, it is worth noting that many video games available to children in the West are just as violent as terrorist versions. Furthermore, there is no clear consensus among experts on whether playing violent games encourages people to do violent acts in real life (Brachman, 2006).

²⁶ Goafalaldyn.com, "The Sarcastic Bloody Comedy Video Tape Hidden Camera of the Mujahideen in Iraq," September 6, 2005, (Currently inaccessible).

²⁷ "A Guide for Internet Safety and Anonymity Posted to Jihadist Forum," SITE Institute, 24 March 2006, (accessed March 27, 2006).

Despite these restrictions, the nature of the assumptions that Islamist games seek players to adopt makes them particularly troublesome. Take, for example, this fictitious environment from a real Islamist video game that can be downloaded from the Internet:

It is the year 2214. Soldiers of Allah, united under the flag of Islam, have successfully conquered the world, reestablishing the global Caliphate. The ummah, or global community of Islamic believers, is no longer threatened by infidel forces. The seductive forces of commercialism and sexuality no longer attract "decent" Muslims. By selecting "New Game," this puritanical Islamic utopia is thrown into disarray as it prepares to defend itself against infidel space invaders. Only "you" have the power to save it.²⁸

Children who play this game are expected to believe that Muslims conquered the world at some point in history and slaughtered or converted all those who opposed them. While players may be aware that such games are based on fiction, it is possible that playing them enhances their willingness to accept ideologies with extreme ambitions, such as the construction of a universal Islamic caliphate (Brachman, 2006).

Most game-savvy Western youngsters would lack amazement vis-à-vis these types of extremist Islamic video games. Their aesthetics are basic, and their gameplay is rigid. Jihadi games pallid in comparison to any commercial action game in the West, or even video games used by the US Army to enhance predisposition of youths to military duty. When one observes past the graphic interface, however, a coherent and ideological world of ideas emerges. In the jihadi games, Muslims must defend themselves against a variety of aggressors, including the US military, alien invaders, Israeli settlements, and even killer robots, all of whom must be defeated for the cause of Islam. Beyond the game's main plot—assassinating Israeli political officials, clearing Israeli colonies, or learning facts about early Christian invaders—would-be gamers are expected to be well-versed in the relevant information base before even starting. As a result, when the user interacts with the game, the game's premise is intuitive.

Players adopt the role of "Ahmed," a young Palestinian man tasked with conveying "a compilation of essential concepts in the history of the Palestinian Cause" in the games "Under Ash" and "Under Siege." Players take on the role of Ahmed, who goes from stone-throwing to face-to-face fighting. Prospective participants are reminded on the game's website that:

A nation is being uprooted in Palestine: their homes are being demolished, their businesses are being destroyed, their lands are being occupied, their trees are being cut down, their property is being confiscated, their cities are being besieged, their schools are being closed, their sanctuaries are being violated, their sacred structures are being allowed, their children are being beaten, their hands are being broken, and their bones are being broken.

Not all games with a radical Islamic bent are as blatantly brutal as this one. A set of mini games published under the title "The Islamic Fun!" and manufactured by Innovative Minds, for example, is aimed at giving children with a secular video game alternative (Brachman, 2006). This CD-ROM is described by Robert Spencer as follows: Its games include "Fishing Bear," "Tree Hop," and "Two Bunny Race," among others. A tiger bounds atop a series of trees in search of a beach ball in "Tree Hop." A bear wearing green pajamas (complete with nightcap) with a big grin is depicted in "Fishing Bear."

There is a game called "The Resistance" tucked behind in this collection of seemingly harmless games. Players aged five to seven are transformed into farmers in South Lebanon who join the Islamic struggle against the invading Israelis. Their goal is to annihilate all invading "Zionist armies."

Like other popular media, video games become a part of a culture's discourse. The latter, unlike other resources such as pamphlets, books, or websites, allow for two-way participation in a virtual world—both intellectual and physical. In order to initiate a violent action, players synchronize their movements by pressing keys or clicking buttons.

Players between the ages of five and seven develop advanced visual clues by combining physical action with intellectual activity. The farmers in South Lebanon's connection between thinking and action is reinforced by repeated play, which joins the Islamic between intent and implementation (Brachman, 2006).

Video games serve as a record of popular Israeli emotion and, as a result, influence how people see historical events for those who play them. Game makers can regulate the "world" in which players engage by drawing choosing historical lessons, spotlighting specific characters, or reproducing specific conflicts.

²⁸ This is a paraphrasing of the first few minutes of the video game "Ummah Defense." When you buy "Maze of Destiny" from the website, you can get the games "Ummah Defense" and "Ummah Defense 2" as a bonus (accessed March 26, 2006).

The less mismatch players perceive between the game and the environment around them, the more realistic these games become. Whether the game is designed to pass the time or radicalize youth, the possibility of players being lulled into a notion that the game harmonizes with reality is a very hazardous proposition. The use of websites, chat rooms, and video games by the jihadi movement cannot be dismissed as an ad hoc result of globalization or technological development. Al-use Qaeda's of technology, as seen in the following sections, was a determined strategic move with the purpose of catalyzing awareness of the need for Muslims to "resist" and creating supplementary methods for them to participate in that resistance. People's minds have been awakened by the revolution in communications, as well as global satellite channels and the Internet (Brachman, 2006).

2.6 Abu Musab-al Suri ²⁹

Jihadi ideologues have spent substantial time and effort in recent decades promoting an aggressive, historically informed, and generally applicable strategy for spreading their geographical and ideological power. This group of Islamic fanatics' senior thinkers' author copious papers describing their aims. These grand-strategy classics, however, do not receive the attention they deserve from Western politicians because of their obscure historical meanderings and opaque syntax. Jihadi propagandists, on the other hand, eagerly absorb these writings and use technology in novel ways to spread their message to a large audience, as stated in the preceding sections. ³⁰

Abu Musab al-Suri, a top al-Qaeda theorist, is widely regarded as the creator of the group's current Internet program. As a result, in order to comprehend the rationale that underpins the jihadi use of technology, one must become intimately acquainted with the guy who orchestrates this technological movement.

Mustafa 'Abd al-Qadir Mustafa Husayn, also known as Umar 'Abd al-Hakim and Mustafa Setmariam Nassar, is a Syrian jihadi known as Abu Musab al-Suri. He is a lifelong jihadist who is devoted his time fighting, training, and writing about violent jihad." " Suri's unique personal past influences his approach to social transformation, especially when it comes to the function of strategic communication and propaganda. Jihadi ideologues have spent a great deal of time and effort promoting an aggressive, historically educated, and universally applicable approach for increasing their power.

He is said to be fluent in a number of languages, including Spanish, French, English, and Arabic, his native tongue. He is said to be a black belt in judo (a martial art that emphasizes on using an opponent's strength against them) and to be an adept in guerilla warfare.

His perspective on the spread of the jihadi movement is worldwide in scope, having lived in both Arab and Western civilizations. Suri claims that jihad should be viewed as a multifaceted conflict in which fighters use military, political, media, civic, and intellectual means. Suri is an enthusiastic fan of the internet.

Suri claims that jihad should be viewed as a multifaceted conflict in which fighters use military, political, media, civic, and intellectual means. Suri believes that the Internet and other media resources should be used to assist build "resistance blockades" to prevent the enemy (Western culture) from using technology to further corrupt Islamic institutions, organizations, and ideas. Suri proposes that jihadists capture electronic communication tools and utilize them to radicalize Muslim populations—a guerilla battle of ideas as well as bloodshed.

Suri is a propagandist who is both a student and a master. He traveled to England in the early 1990s to help build the Armed Islamic Group's media department (GIA). He contributed to a number of jihadi periodicals, including the Algerian A1-Ansar newsletter, the Libyan AI-Fajr newsletter, and the Egyptian Mujahidun newsletter, all of which were published in Europe at the time. He was detained by Algerian security authorities, although he denied any affiliation with the GIA and condemned the group for killing Muslims in its attacks. Fearing arrest, Suri decided to devote his time to writing and independent media, receiving the moniker "pen jihadist" from US counterterrorism agents (al-Zawahiri, 2001).

²⁹ Al-Suri, A Call to Global Islamic Resistance.

³⁰ Yusuf al-Ayiri, a now-dead terrorist propagandist, was one of the most well-known jihadis capable of engaging in high-level doctrinal debates and translating his beliefs into propaganda aimed at the Muslim masses. Until his murder in June 2003, this powerful Saudi worked as an ideology, recruiter, and webmaster for al-initial Qaeda's website, al-Neda.com. Within the jihadi movement, he is widely regarded as a role model for narrowing the divide between intellectual thinkers and combatants on the ground.

Suri is said to have founded the Bureau for the Study of Islamic Conflicts in London in 1996. The office is arguably most known for allowing two BBC and CNN news interviews with Osama bin Laden. Suri was apparently planning to study journalism and political science at university level in the United Kingdom at the time, but he went to Afghanistan in 1997 after being pressured by British intelligence forces, where he resided until the country's fall in December 2001. Suri built the Al- Ghurabaa terrorist training camp in Kabul's infamous Qarghah Military Base with the cooperation of the Taliban's Ministry of Defense from 1997 to 2001. In 2000, he pledged allegiance to Taliban leader Mullah Muhammad Omar from here. Suri was a writer for the Taliban's official publication, Shari'ah, and served in the Taliban's Ministry of Information. He also assisted in the preparation of Kabul's radio station's Arabic-language programming. Suri launched a new "Al- Ghurabaa" (currently known as the "Center for Islamic Studies and Information"), published the Concerns of the Defenders of Truth journal, and penned a number of books, including a 1,600-page tome dedicated to creating a "Global Islamic Resistance" during that time (al-Suri, 2004). Suri has made it his life's mission to bring jihad to the people. Al-founding Qaeda's and assaults around the world—particularly those on September 11, 2001--were significant, yet not crucial, steps toward sparking the global Islamic revolution he envisions. Suri has a very clear sense of what the movement needs to do in order to be successful, drawing on the operational, tactical, and strategic lessons of previous jihadi movements, including his experience working with the Algerian jihad and several attempts to overthrow the Syrian government in the 1980s. Suri's obvious next step was to build an international intellectual, cultural, and military guerrilla movement.

2.6.2 Suri's Method: to create a preparation culture

Suri was well aware of the potential of the Internet and innovative technologies to empower the masses to conduct their own research, interact with one another, and identify with an idea larger than themselves, even though he only used them in a limited fashion himself.

Suri frequently depicts the Internet and satellite television, as well as computers in general, as crucial vehicles for instigating a global Islamic resistance in his most recent essay, *A Call to Global Islamic Resistance*.

He claims that such inciting can only occur if a truly effective grassroots campaign relies on the masses understanding the problems they confront and why technology, utilized in needed to overcome them. Suri small-scale, directed, on the other hand, takes an oddly process-based approach to defining incitement, arguing that people cannot fully comprehend the number of people, political repression, and economic exploitation they face unless they engage in resistance activities, which could range from accessing and disseminating jihadi propaganda to actively fighting against the West.

Suri contends that a truly effective grassroots campaign relies on technology, which is used in small-scale, directed activities by a substantial number of people. Propaganda should, for example, be distributed to personal email contact lists. He argued that jihadi movement members should have utilized computers, CD-ROMs, and DVDs to circulate copious amounts of jihadi information—in the form of books, essays, brochures, photographs, and videos—in a highly compressed format (Brachman, 2006). Those who realize the need to join the Global Islamic Resistance, according to Suri, should work in tiny propaganda cells to: deploy written declarations calling on Muslims around the world to join the Global Islamic Resistance in every conceivable publication; publish works on military and training curricula to inform the general public; translate those works into Turkish, Urdu, Indonesian, and other Muslim-majority languages; and disseminate any scholarly writing that supports the spirit of resistance, including senior scholarly opinions on jihad's enemies and writings identifying unbelievers and boycotting cooperation with them.

According to Suri, Muslim children should learn to use computers at a youthful age so that they can access and share information utilizing innovative technology. Suri points out that one of the most important ways to create a historical record of the jihadi movement on the military, social, media, and ideological fronts is to use the Internet. Suri claims that the Internet helps wannabe jihadists learn how to deliver talks in an "acceptable" manner by making terrorist films easily available.

The purpose of this segment was to introduce readers to the diverse ways in which the jihadi movement uses communication and digital technologies.

Its goal was to show the strategic importance – and associated periculosity- of these technologies in creating an organic, global jihadi movement that can adapt to environmental changes and counterterrorism tactics.

These are just a few of the ways that this rising army of jihadi propagandists—skillful in the use of computers and acutely aware of the Internet's power—leverage technology to spread their ideology around the world. Scholars and academics charged with gaining a deeper understanding of the strategic goals of various intellectuals in the movement must consequently follow sites like al-Qaeda's technology. The discussion forums are a suitable place to keep track of how conceptual thinking is converted into popular action. Senior jihadi strategists like Abu Musab al-Suri, who have urged propagandists to not only promote the doctrine, but also to train others on how to become propagandists themselves, appear to be impinging on how the movement employs technology. Jihadi usage of modern technology must thus be closely observed by bureaucracies tasked with combatting jihadi terrorism, not solely to gather operational information, but also to halt the greater process of indoctrinating a generation of young jihadi troops around the globe. Unless international agents devise a strategy to thwart long-term ideological radicalization among vast numbers of Muslim youngsters, the "Long War" against terrorism will remain just that (Brachman, 2006).

2.7 The Significance of Information and Media in Insurgency

This research is focused on the targeted use of information by elements within the Afghan insurgency. The argument of this study centers on facets of the Afghan insurgency's targeted use of information. Whether the term propaganda, media operations, information operations, or others is utilized, what is being described is the deliberate dissemination of information, whether true or false, to a large, target audience with the goal of furthering the originating group's goals or objectives by influencing the target group's beliefs or actions. While the methods of delivery vary, from handwritten Pashto letters left on Afghan schoolteachers' doors to English-language websites instantly accessible around the world, the goal remains the same: to use information – ideas, facts, stories, decrees, commands, images, or others – to impact behavioral patterns and, ultimately, the course of the conflict. Understanding the role of information and deception in insurgencies, particularly this one, prepares the ground for a consideration of how the Taliban's use of English-language media fits into the greater struggle. Afghanistan's climate is perfect for deception, as the population is mainly uneducated and isolated, relying on interpersonal networks for news and information. Fear has become even more strong as a result of three decades of shifting war and violence. Information has become the most powerful weapon of the insurgency, especially when combined with cultural and historical ignorance on the part of the West, which can lead to negative judgments. While this study focuses on the Internet and English-language messages, it is also vital to understand the effect of information on the ground.

On the basis of existing knowledge, an insurgency emerges, endures, and thrives. An insurrection, more than any other type of warfare, relies on the successful use of communications to construct and uphold sustainment for its considerably smaller forces in the face of the adversary's stronger conventional capabilities. The ultimate goal of an insurgent force is to conquer public consensus and legitimacy at the expense of the recognized government, and effective propaganda is a force multiplier for an insurgency, expanding the actions of a small group in one location to touch the minds of a much larger population group through fear, outrage, or inspiration. Information is the ultimate asymmetric tool, holding enormous power over real events while being completely free to develop and limited only by the creators' imaginations (Bobbio, 1980).

With technologies like YouTube, Internet forums, websites, Skype, and numerous more enabling global instantaneous communication and information sharing at insignificant cost, modern information technology has made the diffusion of information cheaper and easier than ever before. When faced with an asymmetric supply of military expertise, insurgents draw from targeted violence and propagandistic agency to undermine the legitimacy of the government and foreign forces. Whether it is the perception of personal safety, government excesses and corruption, or Western abuses and attacks against civilians, perception is ultimately more significant than empirical acts. While insurgents are not held accountable for their use of information, true instances of government atrocities or civilian deaths serve as a foundation for an information campaign aimed at driving the public away from the government. "The insurgent, having no accountability, is free to use every trick; if required, he can lie, cheat, exaggerate," observed David Galula, a French military officer who fought as a counterinsurgent for the French colonial administration in Algeria in the mid-nineteenth century.

“He is not required to demonstrate; rather, he is judged on what he promises rather than what he does. As a result, propaganda is a potent tool in his arsenal. The insurgency may still prevail with no positive policy but good publicity” (Galula, 2006). On the other hand, the government is required to uphold legitimacy and ought to be held accountable both at home and abroad if it fails to do so.

To an insurgent, perception is far more important than fact, and spreading rumors and fabrications efficiently may develop a rift between the public and the authorities (Bobbio, 1980). Taliban commanders in Afghanistan who report attacks on coalition forces or civilian losses as a result of coalition bombings have no obligation to verify their allegations. The impression of the population that is the intended audience of their assertions, whether distant Western publics or adjacent Afghan people, is important to their progress. Many Afghans are significantly more likely to believe Taliban rumors conveyed by word of mouth than official government or NATO declarations.

Although people in the West are unlikely to accept whatever the Taliban says, its rhetoric has the potential to impact public opinion. In Afghanistan, the insurgency is a complicated combination of a localized, nationalist insurgency among a traditional, rural Pashtun populace and a global, technologically advanced Islamist enterprise.

Current warfare, according to Thomas Rid and Marc Hecker, is "War 2.0," in which information technology, particularly its social aspect, has given structure to modern rebel and terrorist groups and boosted their capability (Rid & Hecker, 2009). The fight is transnational for current or potential jihadists around the world who become connected to the Afghan insurgency through films, photographs, or words uploaded by militants online, and they have joined the insurgency's "War 2.0" component. The battle is absolutely local and entirely Afghan for the Afghan farmer in rural Afghanistan, who must choose between producing poppy or wheat, or whether to allow his daughters to attend school and face Taliban retaliation. T.X. Hammes claims that modern warfare has evolved into a fourth generation in the last fifty years, in which political will and effective use of networks and information can enable militarily weaker opponents to beat far more powerful foes. The current fourth generation of warfare, according to Hammes, began seventy years ago with Mao Zedong's guerilla struggle against and eventual defeat of Chinese nationalist forces. Mao's use of social networks in rural Chinese society, as well as his effective mix of guerrilla warfare and political legitimacy among the rural population, signaled a shift in modern warfare.

In fourth-generation warfare, an insurgent force's primary aim is not the military of their foes, but the political leadership that must support the fight in order for it to develop. These fourth-generation opponents, according to Hammes, use "all available networks — political, economic, social, and military – to persuade the enemy's political decision makers that their strategic aims are either unattainable or too costly for the apparent value" (Hammes, 2006). Fourth-generation battles can last for years, if not decades. They are waged on multiple levels: political, social, economic, and military. Although kinetic power and attrition are key aspects of the combat, the final decisive factors are information and narrative. The political will in question in Afghanistan today is that of the American public, which has been backing a nearly decade-long war despite questionable progress or aims. Through an on-going stream of news coverage, images, and videos, modern information technology today ensures that the American audience is instantly connected to the battle from afar. This is the network that a fourth-generation opponent can use to destroy a much more powerful nation-political state's will.

Modern fourth-generation adversaries, while capable of effectively destroying the political will of much larger foes, are incapable of posing an existential threat to Western nation-states in the form of a conventional military engagement, according to Hammes.³¹ Rid and Hecker make a similar point, citing transnational jihadist networks' geographic dispersion and significant disparity in military capability as fatal flaws.³² While this is unquestionably good for the US in terms of its survival, it does not bode well in terms of defeating a growing Afghan insurgency.

The American public has long debated whether or not to support a war that is a war of choice from the standpoint of nation-state existence. When the state's survival is not in jeopardy, it appears improbable that support for continued loss of life and resource consumption will be sustained. The only true path to victory for the diverse parts of the Afghan insurgency may allegedly be the removal of Western military supporting the current Afghan government.

³¹ Ibid., 211.

³² Rid and Hecker, War 2.0: irregular warfare in the information age, 220.

When fighting the Soviet Union in the 1980s, conventional parity with the Najibullah administration arrived only after Soviet forces left the country, and even then, it took the Mujahideen forces three more years to seize Kabul and depose Najibullah.

The Taliban can continue to operate as guerrilla forces, even providing government-like services in some areas of the country, without the withdrawal of military and technologically superior Western forces, but they will not be able to gain total control, operate freely, or seek international legitimacy. This is the foundation upon which understanding the insurgency must be built.

Given the foregoing, the Taliban's information efforts have essentially two distinct aims.

The first is the local Afghan populace, which they recruit in order to collect support against the government, either passively through shelter and protection or proactively via membership, finance, and intelligence. The people of Western democracies whose forces are helping the Afghan government are the targeting reticle.

By focusing on the former, tactical, and operational victories can be achieved against considerably superior armed forces and the weak government they back. The strategic success of the withdrawal of foreign forces can be achieved by focusing on the second. Operations centered towards the initial target are virtually indistinguishable from those aimed at the second, and vice versa. Because of illiteracy and lack of Internet connection, digital media posted on the Internet is aimed towards Western/external audiences.

Due to the paucity of access to rural Afghanistan and the absence of communication, most of what happens there is also hidden from view in the West. At the local level, the population's sense of security and governance influence who they support. "In irregular conflicts, the local armed actor that a given population perceives as most capable of establishing a normative system for resilient, full-spectrum control over violence, economic activity, and human security is most likely to prevail within that population's residential area," according to David Kilcullen's theory of competitive control (Kilcullen, 2010). In Afghanistan, the lack of competent local governance, combined with insecurity in areas where Western soldiers are not concentrated in large numbers, makes it difficult for the Afghan government to offer "resilient, full-spectrum" control. When the Taliban can give a sense of security and a working, albeit harsh, court system, it becomes difficult for the public to accept the Afghan government, even if they are not committed Taliban ideological supporters. The use of English-language media in Afghanistan, particularly on the Internet, is definitely not directed at the local level. The purpose of English language media campaigns is to destroy foreign support for the coalition mission and the Afghan government itself, given the strategic requirement of being viewed as the most genuine local force for security and justice (Calvin, 2011). At the operational and tactical levels, the potential recruitment of foreign fighters and fundraising through English-language materials provides valuable external support but deteriorating Western public opinion toward the war itself contributes to the ultimate strategic goal of forcing Western abandonment of the Karzai government.

The term "narrative" refers to a story or account of events surrounding a particular event or subject, regardless of how accurate it is. In an asymmetric war, influencing the dominant narrative about the war's progress entails using the inherent uncertainties of war and controlling information in order to mold how it is seen by the numerous audiences interested in its result. All rebel activities should consequently be seen through the lens of shaping the war's narrative (Calvin, 2011).

Attacks on Western personnel or Afghan police are intended to generate a media craze and erode public support for the war and the Afghan government. Messages sent in the name of Mullah Omar and the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan were intended to portray the insurgency in a positive light and provide a narrative of events on the ground. The English-language website serves as a direct link to Western audiences as well as a method of influencing how those audiences see their country's role in the war; all of these factors influence how the war is perceived and, ultimately, the decisions taken on all sides.

The focus of this study will be on the Afghan insurgency's English-language propaganda, with particular attention paid to their use of the Internet. As previously indicated, the rebels' localized propaganda efforts in Afghanistan, which include handwritten letters known as *shabnamah* and threats conveyed by word of mouth, are immensely persuasive and effective (Calvin, 2011). Positively researching these efforts, however, necessitates knowledge of the Afghan languages, Pashto, and Dari, as well as knowledge of Afghan culture and history, as well as access to the areas and people affected by the propaganda, none of which this researcher has. The statements and reports posted in English on the Internet, on the other hand, are openly available since they only have value if their target audience – English speakers with Internet access – can reach them. Furthermore, as we will see later, the true impact and influence of the Taliban's English-

language propaganda is entirely unknown. If the Afghan insurgency's ultimate strategic goal were to compel the withdrawal of Western soldiers from the country and weakening Western popular sentiment of the war is one approach to do so, it is indeed crucial to determine whether media operations aimed at Western public opinion are efficaciously functioning at present.

Chapter 3

The Taliban's Online *persona*: a closer inspection on its construction and public fruition

When discussing the evolution of Taliban propaganda, it is indeed vital to distinguish between the various actors, channels, and audiences who belong under this umbrella term. While current communication technology makes it possible to obliterate the barriers between local and global, Western audiences are different from Afghan villages. The insurgency's tactics to tailor communications to these very distinct targets are, obviously, varied. In certain circumstances, the distinction between local and global propaganda is evident, such as in the case of letters written in Pashto and distributed at night in Afghan villages, or Taliban messages intended at the American people posted online in English. With other circumstances, the line is less apparent, as in Taliban commanders calling Western journalists from the field to make a report on a recent combat. The propagandist in this case may be a local commander speaking about local events, but the aim is international because the Western media is approached as a publication channel. The international media lies somewhere in the middle, as it acts as a buffer between local officials' words and the global audiences who might read them. The available literature on Taliban media comes from a tiny group of experts and researchers who focus on the Afghan conflict. Late in the fight, the most detailed pieces began to emerge. *The Taliban's propaganda activities: how successfully is the Afghan insurgency communicating and what is it saying?* was released in June 2007 by Tim Foxley of the SIPRI research department.³³ One of the earliest detailed assessments on the Taliban's coordinated and outward-facing communications operation, this was one of the first. In 2008, Crisis Group Asia, a conflict and stability research organization, released a paper titled *Taliban Propaganda: Winning the War of Words?* which expanded on Foxley's findings with more sourcing and a more extensive examination of the topics emphasized in insurgent propaganda.³⁴ Joanna Nathan, who was involved in the 2008 Crisis Group Asia report, published a chapter titled *Reading the Taliban* in Antonio Giustozzi's compilation *Decoding the New Taliban* in 2009, in which she further decoded and clarified the often confusing and misrepresented mix of actors and timelines that make up the Taliban's media efforts over the last ten years (Nathan, 2009). The most recent comprehensive review was published in February 2010 by Anne Stenersen of the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment. The study of the Taliban movement and its philosophy by Stenersen focuses on a qualitative investigation of official statements and publications of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in Arabic and English.³⁵ Other researchers, such as Amin Tarzi, Thomas Johnson, Antonio Giustozzi, and a variety of soldiers, bloggers, and scholars, have discussed and contributed to the topic, but these books represent the most thorough efforts on the topic today. The extant literature has steadily developed upon prior works as new events in the Afghan conflict have occurred, as is the nature of trying to understand and convey in writing the evolution of an ongoing struggle. The Afghan insurgency's propaganda tactics are a moving topic for scholars as the insurgency becomes more active in foreign communications each year. With over one hundred comments released online in the name of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in 2010, 2010 has been one of the busiest years for Internet releases of statements made in the name of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. The pace has continued in the first few months of 2011, with at least thirty-eight announcements issued by the middle of April 2011.

This section will examine the current literature on the subject, providing context for the evolution of Taliban media activities, before expanding on that research with new sources that have just become available with the recent Taliban's rapprochement in Afghanistan.

³³ Foxley, *The Taliban's propaganda activities: how well is the Afghan insurgency communicating and what is it saying?*

³⁴ *Taliban Propaganda: Winning the War of Words?*

³⁵ Stenersen, *The Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan - Organization, Leadership and Worldview*, 12.

3.2. The Taliban's Media Operations Begin

When the Taliban first appeared in 1994 during the Afghan Civil War, their sole propaganda efforts were local and largely a byproduct of their military and political actions, with stories of their conquests and plans to restore security, stop rampant criminality, and impose Sharia law spread primarily by word of mouth. Modern technology was formerly rejected by the Taliban as a dangerous Western influence. In July 2001, the Internet was outright prohibited in order to limit access to supposedly "anti-Islamic" material (BBC, 2001). Under Taliban rule, television and cinema were also forbidden, and the Taliban government employed radio and state-controlled print media to propagate its rigorous doctrine.³⁶ Only after 2001 did they begin to make more sophisticated use of information technology as a method of disseminating their message. Members of the insurgency are definitely attempting to reach audiences outside of Afghanistan by using English and Arabic language Internet media and reaching out to Western journalists. Over the last decade, they have made a determined decision to transition from a theological and ideological opposition to information technology to a pragmatic and strategic use of it to achieve their goals. The addition of new languages to the publication mediums represents a purposeful decision to reach a bigger audience. There are several theories as to why this choice was made.

The outreach to Western audiences, according to Gina CairnsMcFeeters, is an attempt to "raise the likelihood of generating a disproportionate response from Western governments and media" (Cairns-McFeeters, 2010).

The purpose of expanded media efforts, according to Rid and Hecker, is to reach a bigger Muslim community.³⁷ In practice, it is likely a blend of all of these goals, with execution dependent on resources and demands. It is worth noting that this section traces the Taliban's use of media and technology for propaganda purposes across time. Since their inception, the Taliban have excelled at using more conventional and local techniques of propaganda dissemination, such as personal networks and word of mouth. This expertise, however, does not necessarily translate to how they use the Internet and other information technology. "It should be stressed that the IEA's interaction with local populations in Afghanistan is a complex process that cannot be understood solely by considering Internet-based propaganda," Anne Stenersen writes.³⁸

The research's specific scope and restricted application to the situation on the ground must be kept in mind throughout.

The Taliban insurgents first used electronic media to interact with the traditional media in November 2002, when a message was sent to Pakistani journalists and published as a "night letter" within Afghanistan. Mullah Omar has declared war against foreign forces in Afghanistan, as well as the "proxy government" of then-Interim President Hamid Karzai, according to the said letter.

Mullah Omar had also nominated two deputies, Mullah Brader and Mullah Obaidullah Akhund, both former Taliban officials, according to the fax.³⁹ This was one of the first evidence of organization within the insurgency's expanding ranks.

The emergence of an organized media effort by the Taliban insurgency did not occur until 23 September 2002, when the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan established a "unit consisting of journalistic cadres who formerly occupied important media positions within the Government of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan", according to statements made by the Taliban themselves.⁴⁰

This account is based on an article published in the December 2008 issue of *al-Somood*, an Arabic monthly journal first published by the Taliban in 2006.⁴¹

Since its inception in 2002, the media unit has allegedly been involved in a variety of activities, according to the article. The development of a website to speak for the Islamic Emirate, as well as the printing of a number of journals and newspapers, were amongst the activities.

³⁶ Taliban Propaganda: Winning the War of Words? 4-5.

³⁷ Rid and Hecker, *War 2.0: irregular warfare in the information age*, 177.

³⁸ Stenersen, *The Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan - Organization, Leadership and Worldview*, 31.

³⁹ Taliban Propaganda: Winning the War of Words? 7.

⁴⁰ "The Media Activities of The Taliban Islamic Movement," *Al-Somood Magazine*, January 2008, <http://worldanalysis.net/postnuke/html/index.php?name=News&file=article&sid=731>, (accessed April 15, 2011).

⁴¹ 4 Stenersen, *The Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan - Organization, Leadership and Worldview*, 34.

The Taliban's increased use of information technology to disseminate their message contrasted sharply with several of their anti-technology laws implemented during their rule. "Their embrace of technology is certainly a result of seeing other ongoing insurgencies (primarily in Iraq), but it is also a product of the expanding accessibility of such technologies and their increasing ease of use," according to Tim Foxley.⁴² The transfer of knowledge from lessons acquired in the Iraq war was made possible by historical and operational relationships with al-Qaeda members, and the low cost and high accessibility of technology made it easier to rapidly adopt technologies that had been scorned a decade before. Taliban official Mansoor Dadullah was asked about the insurgency's use of information technology in a 2007 interview with a Swiss journalist, in contrast to the Taliban's hostility to technology during their period in power. "Television and the medium of mass communication have become important tools in our quest to get our message out to a wide audience," Dadullah responded. We use them with caution and solely for the purpose of touching Muslim hearts." It emerged as a pragmatic and utilitarian decision rather than a true shift in belief or ideology (Kohlmann, 2007).

3.2.3 Night Letters and Local Propaganda

An awareness of local propaganda activities is useful for comparison before discussing the Taliban's online propaganda initiatives. In stark contrast to the Taliban insurgency's relatively crude media operations, which the group just begun to undertake in earnest during the last decade, the group's local propaganda efforts appear quite effective and sophisticated.

Local propaganda relies mostly on word of mouth, a thorough understanding of culture and social structures, fear, and intimidation, whereas Internet-based propaganda relies on both literacy and Internet access, neither of which are common in much of Afghanistan (Calvin, 2011). The Afghan people are the objective of these initiatives, which are limited to specific locations. These attempts are described by David Kilcullen as "armed propaganda," in which rebels utilize a combination of "word of mouth and rumor" to influence local officials and a "combination of coercion and persuasion" to influence local officials (Kilcullen, 2009). In this vein, Kilcullen mentions multiple examples of sophisticated murder plots against provincial-level officials in order to persuade other authorities not to collaborate with the government or coalition forces.⁴³ The Taliban, thus, emerge as clearly adept at manipulating local views and conducting targeted attacks on individuals in order to instill terror in specific segments of the populace.

Yet, their English-language Internet messaging lacks the sophistication and depth of comprehension of the target demographic, which in this case is Western or other English-speaking populations. The Taliban's local propaganda efforts rely heavily on night letters, or *shabnamah*, which are distributed to rural populations by posting messages in public places such as mosques or schools during the night (Calvin, 2011). In 2007, Thomas Johnson published a study on *shabnamah* in Afghanistan, which looked at their significance in Afghan history and society, as well as their evolution and influence in the present struggle (Johnson T. H., 2007).

Even though a major portion of Afghan population is illiterate, particularly in rural areas, night letters nonetheless reach a big audience since they are often put in public places and delivered to the rest of the community by a literate inhabitant.⁴⁴

While the night letters are written, they are based on an oral history of Afghanistan that is told through stories, poems, and music. Johnson cites a letter prepared and distributed in Kandahar in 2004, early in the conflict, in which famous and powerful Afghan monarchs of the past are invoked. Calling him "ancestor and hero," the letter recalls the memory of Ahmad Shah Durrani, the founder of the 18th century Sadozai dynasty that would become the Durrani Afghan kingdom centered in Kandahar.⁴⁵ Looking farther, the said letter mentions Afghan dynasties from the 11th and 12th centuries, whose traditions are still alive and well in Afghanistan's present culture. Some *shabnamah*, such as this one from Kandahar, also feature popular Afghan poems, providing another link to Afghan heritage and culture. The anti-Soviet jihad is regularly mentioned in Taliban *shabnamah* as another source of Afghan cohesion and emotion.⁴⁶

⁴² Foxley, The Taliban's propaganda activities: how well is the Afghan insurgency communicating and what is it saying? 6.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 319.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 323.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 324-325.

The struggle against the Soviet Union and the government it supported is a rallying cry for all Afghans, and by evoking these memories against the current "invaders" and the "puppet regime" they support, these letters bridge ethnic and political barriers in building a compelling narrative of resistance. Some night letters have exploited Afghanistan's history of colonialism and resistance to rally the people and turn them against Western forces and the Karzai administration. Others use fear and pressure to manipulate the public. Many *shabnamah*, which are delivered at night to public venues including as schools or mosques, contain death threats against Afghans who collaborate with Western soldiers or Hamid Karzai's central government. Johnson offered the following translation of a night letter written in 2003 to the inhabitants of Ma'ruf and Arghistan, both in Kandahar province. The said translation being: "We warn individuals in the Maroof district who serve Americans twenty-four hours a day and show them the Mujahedeen's hideouts, as well as those who disrespect the country's sincere Muslims, that American guards will not always be present, and we can catch you at any time."

And it continues with "We know every person's identity and location; take a lesson from those who were faithful to the Russians; (if God wills), you will soon be under the knife or bullet of the Mujahedeen. (October 2006, Farid Mohammad provided the translation)".⁴⁷

This night letter builds on existing fears among neutral or undecided Afghan civilians that the insurgency will know if and when they try to support the government or its Western backers. It is clearly an attempt to prevent the population from informing American or Afghan security forces about the locations or actions of Taliban insurgents. The letter puts the remembrance of the Mujahedeen against those who would "dishonor honest Muslims" with the prospect of death, recalling the anti-Soviet jihad and Islam itself. While many *shabnamah* are sent to communities, letters are frequently sent to individuals. Following the publication of confidential military papers from the Afghan theater by Wikileaks in 2010, the Taliban declared that they would kill those identified in the documents as collaborating with Western forces. The targeting began with seventy elders in the Panjwaii district receiving night letters (Moreau & Yousafzai, 2010).

The short notes, written on the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan's letterhead, indicated that the recipient had been sentenced to death and given them five days to flee the country. The Taliban's influence has been particularly strong in targeting education, particularly co-ed or females' schools, through this "armed propaganda."

Moreover, the Human Rights Watch reported 204 attacks against teachers, students, and schools between January 2005 and June 2006, many of which were preceded by night messages left on the schools. Without actual attacks, the nocturnal letters and threats included therein were sometimes enough to discourage pupils from attending school or teachers from teaching.⁴⁸ This has been going on for a while now, and it has expanded to other sections of the country. Despite the fact that the school was supported by the central government, the Taliban placed a message on the wall of a school in the village of Chawni in eastern Afghanistan in December 2010 specifying the curriculum to be taught (Rivera, "Taliban Challenge U.S. in Eastern Afghanistan, 2010). Albeit the methods and targets are extremely specific, there is evidence of common themes among Taliban militants throughout Southern Afghanistan.

The Globe and Mail conducted a series of interviews in Kandahar in 2008, and the commonalities in responses by different low-ranking Taliban militants revealed consistent message themes.⁴⁹ Another example of persistent and successful propaganda, according to David Kilcullen, is the Taliban insurgency's employment of a simple "five-line information strategy" in early 2006. "Our party, the Taliban"; "Our people and nation, the Pashtun"; "Our economy, the poppy"; "Our constitution, the Shari'a"; and "Our form of administration, the emirate" were the core five slogans used in this campaign.⁵⁰ As Kilcullen points out, these slogans were straightforward and unifying, plainly aimed at the government and Western intervention troops but ambiguous enough not to alienate any particular insurgent party, with the stress on Pashtun nationalism being the possible exception. In recent years, the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan has begun to use cell phone videos and texts to attack the local population. In an interview, the administrator of the Taliban's al-Emarah website stated that news and messages are sent to Afghan civilians via SMS messages,

⁴⁷ Ibid., 327.

⁴⁸ Lessons in Terror: Attacks on Education in Afghanistan (Human Rights Watch, July 2006), 4.

⁴⁹ Taliban Propaganda: Winning the War of Words? 1

⁵⁰ Kilcullen, the accidental guerrilla: fighting small wars in the midst of a big one, 58-59.

and that violent videos and images are also sent to Afghan civilians as warnings of the dangers of cooperating with the Afghan government and NATO forces (Gwakh, 2011).

The US government, as well as the international community, has recognized the power of this rapidly growing messaging medium, with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stating that the administration is considering cell phone space in its efforts to counter insurgent propaganda and reach people who are already being targeted by the insurgency.⁵¹ This study does not look into the role of cell phones in the Taliban's propaganda effectiveness because, for the time being, this medium is primarily used to influence the local information space. While this thesis focuses on the Taliban's use of English-language Internet media, their employment of night letters, SMS messages, and other local coercion tactics is crucial to understanding their goals, methods, and sophistication within the insurgency's local context. On this note, it is true that the root of the conflict in Afghanistan is local, with people forced to choose between backing the Afghan government or the resurgent Taliban.

In essence, while the Internet has strategic implications, it is a world apart from the world of *shabnamah* and Afghan poems and songs, which are utilized to sow terror or generate resistance among the Afghan community (Calvin, 2011).

3.4 Taliban Online: High-tech trepidation

The first website in the name of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan was www.alemarh.com, which was up and running by July 2001, well before the American-led invasion.⁵² The site's name, "alemarh," is most likely a botched translation of the Arabic word Al Emarah, which means "The Emirate." While that site has now been decommissioned, a picture of it can be found on www.archive.org dating back to September 23rd, 2001. The site, which still represented a Taliban army in control of most of Afghanistan, was written in Arabic rather than Pashto and was extremely basic and amateurish, consisting primarily of a banner and a few images with links to a few articles, photos, and interviews. One "interview" on this site may have been intended to build international credibility for the Taliban regime, as it denied government corruption, claimed support for women's rights and drug eradication, and claimed Taliban control over ninety-five percent of the country.⁵³ From the translation, it is unclear who is being interviewed. Because the site was created and posted in Arabic, it was either targeted for potentially favorable Arab Muslim viewers or written and posted by someone who spoke Arabic natively. By September 2002, nearly a year after coalition forces overthrew the Taliban, the website at www.alemarh.com had been updated, with far more content than it presented in September 2001. While still in Arabic, a quick glance at the main page revealed a diverse range of content, including fatwas issued by Islamic scholars, a link to an interview with a "survivor of the massacre of Mazar-e Sharif," presumably referring to the coalition invasion, and a quote by Mullah Omar describing America's lack of understanding of Afghanistan's history, a country "not amenable to foreign invader[s]."⁵⁴ After September 2002, no further archives of the site are available, possibly because it was taken down.

In addition, there are no known records of websites run in the name of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan after the site at alemarh.com was shut down at the end of 2002, until April 2005, when a new site at www.alemarah.com was set up.

This new website, dubbed "Voice of Jihad," was written in Pashto rather than Arabic and featured news and statements related to the current insurgency.⁵⁵ Since then, the "Voice of Jihad" website has remained mostly unaffected, migrating from domain to domain as other sites have been taken down or disabled for short times, likely by foreign governments, independent "hacktivists," or web providers who have learned of their

⁵¹ "Clinton Tells US Losing Media War in Afghanistan, Pakistan."

⁵² The domain name had reportedly been assigned on August 31, 2000, according to www.dnscoop.com, however no photographs of the site were viewable on archive.org before July 2001.

⁵³ "(Interview) "#\$%&'," <http://web.archive.org/web/20010810132518/www.alemarh.com/omar/muqabla2.htm>, (accessed January 16, 2011).

⁵⁴ www.archive.org accessed the site on January 13, 2011. On September 25, 2002, www.archive.org recorded a snapshot of the site. The text elements of the page were translated from the original Arabic into English for interpretation via Google Translate. Since the machine translation of much of the material on the page was problematic to comprehend, it was primarily used to search the site for basic notions and keywords.

⁵⁵ www.archive.org accessed the site on January 15, 2011. Between April 2005 and June 2008, images of the site were recorded by www.archive.org.

clients' names.⁵⁶ Researchers' accounts of websites are heavily influenced by when they attempted to access the most recently active website link, or Uniform Resource Locator (URL), within that time period. In June 2005, the first website representing the "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan" was launched in both Pashto and Arabic, albeit only the Pashto was maintained on a regular basis, according to Amin Tarzi. He mentions the addition of Persian, Urdu, and English resources in 2006, with only Pashto and Persian being updated on a regular basis. He claims that all materials were constantly updated in mid-2006, followed by the site's blocking in late 2006 (Tarzi, 2008). Other academics, such as Stenersen, Foxley, and the Crisis Group Asia, have written about other timings, and sites claiming to be affiliated with the IEA have resurfaced after Tarzi's 2006 suspension.

Within the existing literature, there is currently no clear picture of the evolution of the IEA websites. In December 2010, the Taliban released an interview with Abdul Sattar Maiwandi, the alleged administrator of the al-Emarah website, in al-Somood, their Arabic-language monthly magazine. The Taliban's English-language website did not upload an English version of the interview until February 17, 2011, after which it was re-posted on a number of Taliban sympathizer and Western national security websites.⁵⁷ This interview has offered researchers the most detailed insight into the Taliban's intentions for their online presence. The Al-Emarah website, according to Maiwandi, "specializes in conveying field reports from fighting zones and publishing the pronouncements of the Ameer ul-Momineen and the declarations of the Command Shura Council concerning various subjects relevant to Jihad, as well as essays and official analyses." They offer a lot of different areas, such as an Islam website, a magazine page, and a page for movies made by official studios. We also produce and disseminate periodicals and statements in popular circles both at home and abroad... Maiwandi goes on to say that the Taliban's media committee receives news from correspondents "from all of Afghanistan's provinces" and posts them on the website. He further claims that media are initially produced in Pashto, then translated and distributed in Persian, Urdu, Arabic, and English, despite the fact that many Arabic-language products, such as al-Somood, have more substantive content and depth than what is subsequently translated into English. For unclear reasons, the Pashto language site was hosted at <http://alemarah-iea.net> as of April 2011, while the English, Persian, and Urdu varieties were presented at <http://shahamat.info>.⁵⁸

Unfortunately, the IEA websites' ephemeral nature makes it difficult to compile a comprehensive record of website content dating back to the first English-language material in 2006.

Indeed, the bulk of the stored content from the previous version is lost each time a version of the site goes down and re-emerges at a new URL.

For example, as of April 2011, the current version only has archive data going back to late May 2010, whereas the previous version, released in early 2010, had archive data going back to July 2009.

While the original "Voice of Jihad" website was only available in Pashto, additional versions in Arabic, Urdu, Farsi, and English have subsequently been built, as Abdul Maiwandi confirmed in his December 2010 al-Somood interview. The readership of the Pashto website seems doubtful, given Afghanistan's lack of Internet connectivity and high rate of illiteracy. The Pashto site's material has grown in size and quality since its beginning, but the English-language site's content has consistently grown in quantity and quality since its debut (Stenersen, 2010). The website's initial purpose was to disseminate updates on tactical developments in the nation, typically exaggerated stories of attacks by coalition forces, and to share infrequent pronouncements allegedly delivered by IEA leadership.⁵⁹

Since the website's inception in 2005, the Pashto content has been the most substantial and consistently updated, but the Arabic-language content, which is clearly targeted at a different demographic than the Pashto material, has been a close second.

⁵⁶ Rusty Shackelford, "Buh-bye Taliban Website *Bumped*," Blog, The Jawa Report, July 31, 2007, <http://mypetjawa.mu.nu/archives/188900.php>, (accessed April 15, 2011).

⁵⁷ Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (The Taliban): 'Interview with the Administrator of the Islamic Emirate Website, Esteemed Brother Abdul Sattar Maiwandi'" (NEFA Foundation, February 17, 2011), <http://nefafoundation.org//file/TalibanMaiwandi0311.pdf>.

⁵⁸ Shahamat translates into "bravery" in Pashto.

⁵⁹ Stenersen, The Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan - Organization, Leadership and Worldview, 11-12.

Since at least 2006, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan has published al-Somood, Arabic for "Standing Firm/Perseverance," in addition to the Arabic version of the "Voice of Jihad."⁶⁰

Given the importance of outside assistance to the insurgency, whether human or financial, a strategic concentration on Arabic, which can reach a much larger and wealthier section of the Islamic world than Pashto, Farsi, or Urdu, makes sense. The Taliban's concentration on Arabic-language content could be due as much to alliances and circumstance as to any serious strategic thinking on their part. According to several academics, al-Qaeda was the Taliban's first source of media competence and training.⁶¹

Al-Qaeda, a worldwide network with few members that has no headquarters and operates in the shadows, survives, and grows through spreading its ideology through the use of media and information technologies. Al-Qaeda apparently assisted the publishing of an Arabic monthly, Al-Imarat-ul Islamic, and an English monthly, The Islamic Emirate, in Kandahar during the 1990s, but both were supposedly produced with little or no assistance from the Taliban leadership in Kabul.⁶²

It is presumable that, as an insurgent organization, a situation has arisen in which al-Qaeda-directed insurgent sympathizers are releasing information in Arabic as a means of spreading propaganda throughout the Arabic-speaking Muslim world. The English-language content has been far less polished than the Arabic-language content. Tim Foxley, in a 2007 evaluation of the Taliban's propaganda activities, cites the lack of professionalism and linguistic skills on the English-language edition of the website as evidence of the group's lack of concern for the English-speaking world and its messaging.⁶³ While the English language used on the site has improved slightly in terms of vocabulary and grammatical faults since 2007, it is still elementary and is either machine-translated or produced by someone with basic language abilities.

Hanna Rogan outlines the primitive nature of the issues covered in Taliban products, which were particularly devoid of more advanced concepts or vocabulary, in a 2007 review of the Taliban's media operations.

The main focus appeared to be on promoting the Mujahideen's actions and denigrating the Afghan government and coalition soldiers (Rogan H. , 2007). Whether due to a lack of finances or a lack of interest, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan's official website has an extremely limited reach and complexity, especially when compared to the media operations of organizations such as al-Qaeda. The identities of the individuals who actually wrote the content of the IEA remarks are unknown, with the exception of an interview with Abdul Sattar Maiwandi, the administrator of the al-Emarah website. Statements are issued in the name of the IEA or in the name of Mullah Omar himself, and they are posted on the "Voice of Jihad" website and emailed to journalists and sympathizers. While Mullah Omar's and other members of the IEA leadership's initial messaging and pronouncements are uploaded on the official IEA websites, much of the redistribution of the messaging online is done by followers on independent websites or discussion forums. Since 2007, one such website, www.theunjustmedia.com, has reposted all statements made in the name of the IEA leadership. This site also keeps track of daily attacks. The proprietor of theunjustmedia.com's identity is unknown, but he or she is certainly a supporter of the Taliban and other Islamist movements. Despite publishing the same content as the Taliban's own "Voice of Jihad," this site has stayed up since its inception in October 2001 (Calvin, 2011).

The website at theunjustmedia.com is the most continuous and steady of the online sympathizer websites that distributes IEA content, however there are many more who post IEA messages along with supplementary commentary on occasion.

Without more comprehensive collecting and analytical skills, determining the reach of the IEA messaging on the Internet is challenging. The now-defunct Yahoo! Site Explorer tool could have been used to see how many webpages contain direct links to the IEA's official and sympathizer websites. The English language sub-site of the Taliban's current Voice of Jihad website, shahamat.info/english, had only 407 "in-links" from external websites as of April 2011, according to Yahoo! Site Explorer (Calvin, Taliban, The Use of English-Language Internet Propaganda by the Insurgency in Afghanistan, 2007–2010, 2011).

An "in-link" is a hyperlink inserted on another website that leads to the original page, in this example the al-Emarah website. There were approximately 5,000 in-links on the entire shahamat.info website, which comprises Arabic, Farsi, and Urdu pages as well as English. For instance, the website unjustmedia.com had

⁶⁰ Nathan, "Reading the Taliban," 30.

⁶¹ Rid and Hecker, War 2.0: irregular warfare in the information age, 169.

⁶² Taliban Propaganda: Winning the War of Words? 6.

⁶³ Foxley, The Taliban's propaganda activities: how well is the Afghan insurgency communicating and what is it saying? 6.

almost 16,000 in-links, however some of these were to portions of the site that were not about Afghanistan. The types of websites that link to the stories on the al-Emarah website or theunjustmedia.com are mostly blogs and sympathizer websites, not ones with a large audience in the Western world. Websites like Islamic-intelligence.blogspot.com and revolutionmuslim.com are among them. None of these sites has been as constant as theunjustmedia.com in re-posting IEA pronouncements and messages over time (Calvin, 2011). The Taliban's online rhetoric has grown in popularity over the previous few years on modern social media sites. Abdul Sattar Maiwandi, the administrator of the IEA website, specifically names Western networks Facebook and Twitter in a 2011 al-Somood interview, where the Taliban allegedly "post the news every day and reach thousands of people." (Maiwandi, 2011).

Sites like this give insurgent groups the ability to communicate directly with sympathetic audiences and perhaps spread their messages much further.

The Taliban's Twitter presence appears to be confined to the user account "alemarahweb," which reposts news headlines from the al-Emarah website in Pashto.⁶⁴ However, they have a considerably larger presence on Facebook. There were six different Facebook pages titled "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan" as of April 5, 2011. Despite Maiwandi's assertions, none of these appeared to be an "official" page run by the same company that runs the al-Emarah website. These pages appear to have been set up by Taliban sympathizers to share links, photographs, and videos, as well as applaud and discuss the Taliban's efforts in Afghanistan. As of April 2011, the most popular page on Facebook had only 313 "likes," indicating the size of its audience. It is possible that a significantly higher number of people are just casual observers, unwilling to link their Facebook profiles to the page by "liking" it. This page's information section included connections to all of the IEA Voice of Jihad websites, including shahamat.info's English language version. For the month of April 2011, there was a consistent stream of videos and user-submitted remarks in the comment part of the Facebook page termed the "wall," with roughly two to three posts every day. Users have reproduced statements from Taliban spokespeople Zabihullah Mujahid and Qari Yousuf Ahmadi in its entirety in some circumstances. On the group wall, at least one link to an article on theunjustmedia.com was also posted. While the majority of the discourse was in English, there were also photographs of articles printed in Pashto on the wall.

With only ninety-one fans, the other IEA-related Facebook groups featured comparable material. On the wall of another organization, also called "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan," were solely links to films, nearly half of which were titled in English.

The majority of the recordings depicted attacks against NATO or Afghan soldiers. The "info" part of the page concentrated mostly on Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), a Pakistani militant organisation, and the link between this group and the IEA was unclear. The Taliban's presence on Western social media sites such as Facebook looks to be even more insecure than running their own website, as the owners and administrators of these networks appear to erase information and remove user accounts for violating their terms of service. There were other comments on the above-mentioned "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan" Facebook page concerning the page administrators being "deleted," presumably because of their online activity. Bashir Ahmad Gwakh of RFE/RL undertook a similar review of Taliban-related Facebook groups in March 2011 and discovered a hugely different picture than our research uncovered even one month later. Gwakh allegedly uncovered a Facebook profile for the "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan" with over 1,000 followers. This page, which was no longer available in April 2011, was controlled by Muhammad Zaib Khan Mujahid and listed the location as "International Falls, Minnesota (Gwakh, 2011)." According to the SITE Intelligence Group, Facebook shut down this site, as well as a number of others that were rapidly launched in its stead.⁶⁵ The insurgency's use of video has been a source of concern for military and policymakers, with reports of Taliban members orchestrating attacks on coalition forces in order to capture film and broadcast it around Afghanistan and on the Internet.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ "Social Jihad Network: Taliban Twitter," SITE Intelligence Group, February 21, 2011, <http://news.siteintelgroup.com/component/content/article/8-Social%20Network%20Jihad/438-talibantwitter>, (accessed April 15, 2011).

⁶⁵ "Taliban Propaganda on Facebook (Part 1)," SITE Intelligence Group, February 15, 2011, <http://news.siteintelgroup.com/component/content/article/415-social-network-jihad-taliban-propaganda-onfacebook-part-1>, (accessed April 15, 2011).

⁶⁶ Rid and Hecker, *War 2.0: irregular warfare in the information age*, 182.

The Taliban's video releases were initially published by Arab media groups with more experience and skill, rather than by the Taliban themselves, according to Anne Stenersen.

During the Afghan struggle in 2006 and 2007, Al-as-Sahab Qaeda's production business issued at least fifty operational films, as well as a number of videotaped interviews with Taliban officials and spokespeople.⁶⁷ The Taliban's Voice of Jihad website has a separate video section as of April 2011, with embedded movies showing rebel operations in Afghanistan, interviews with militants, footage of captured American soldiers, and death messages from suspected suicide bombers.⁶⁸

The majority of the website headlines and video titles looked to be in Pashto. Many of the videos linked to the site were no longer online, and it was unclear whether those that were made by the IEA or with the assistance of Arab or other foreign violent groups. While this is not the subject of this study, it is worth noting that these videos have a large online presence, both on social media sites like Facebook and on video sharing sites like YouTube. YouTube videos appear to have a considerably greater reach than Facebook groups like the ones indicated above in many circumstances. A YouTube channel called "News4U100" that claims to be affiliated with theunjustmedia.com has posted a number of videos showing militant strikes in Afghanistan as well as videos that express the same message as the main theunjustmedia.com website. A movie named "Mujahideen of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan operations stat's for AugSep" was posted in October 2009, and it includes statistics on insurgent attacks against Afghan government and NATO forces in Afghanistan, as well as audio and animations.⁶⁹

As of April 2011, this video had been seen 6,500 times. In December 2009, YouTube user "Alemarah11" posted a video showing militant attacks in Afghanistan's Nuristan province.⁷⁰

Moreover, as of April 2011, this video received over 11,000 views. However, the video's description was written in Arabic, with links to different IEA websites and phone numbers for Taliban spokespeople Qari Yousuf Ahmadi and Zabihullah Mujahid (Calvin, Taliban, The Use of English-Language Internet Propaganda by the Insurgency in Afghanistan, 2007–2010, 2011).

3.5 Stakeholders and speakers: what is the Taliban's message and how is it conveyed?

The distinction between the many components within the Afghan insurgency, all of which are frequently bundled under the heading of "Taliban" by Western media, policymakers, and analysts alike, was made previously in this thesis. The previous section then returned to the overall category of Taliban to cover the insurgency's use of propaganda. As the topic of who genuinely speaks for the "Taliban" insurgency is addressed, the essential distinction between elements within the insurgency is underscored once more.⁷¹ While some members of the Quetta Shura Taliban and its leadership claim to have a media council that oversees the resistance's media activities, there is no unified organization that speaks for the insurgency. Furthermore, because there is no recognized body to hold the insurgency accountable for misleading or exaggerated assertions, messages and claims sometimes have little or no link to the facts on the ground. Individuals on the ground, in a position to really contest the reality of the messaging, are unlikely to have the access, language, or literacy abilities to do so when the communications medium is English or Arabic language media. The remarks made in the name of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and posted on the al-Emarah website were thought to reflect Mullah Omar's and the Quetta Shura Taliban's views. While some messages are released under Mullah Omar's name, the majority are ascribed to Taliban spokespeople. According to one story, Abdul Latif Hakimi, who was chosen immediately after the Taliban rule fell apart, was the first of these spokespeople to emerge.⁷²

⁶⁷ Stenersen, *The Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan - Organization, Leadership and Worldview*, 34.

⁶⁸ <http://shahamat.info/movie/>.

⁶⁹ News4U100, *Mujahideen of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan operations stats for Aug-Sep*, YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Aq5rkKwWdek>, (accessed April 15, 2011).

⁷⁰ Alemarah11, *NORISTAN NEW VIDIO PART 2*, YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UNvjDwU1Mqk>, (accessed April 15, 2011).

⁷¹ The domain name had reportedly been assigned on August 31, 2000, according to www.dnscoop.com, however no photographs of the site were viewable on archive.org before July 2001.

⁷² Foxley, *The Taliban's propaganda activities: how well is the Afghan insurgency communicating and what is it saying?* 5.

According to certain sources, Muhammad Mokhtar Mujahed was the first. Mujahed originally made an appearance in June 2003, when he delivered a message from Mullah Omar announcing the formation of a new IEA executive council (Tarzi, 2005).

The list of supposed spokespeople has grown substantially in the years thereafter. During the battle, Hamid Agha, Mullah Abdul Samad, Muhammad Amin, Saif al-Adl, Ustad Muhammad Yaser, and Muhammad Hanif all talked to the media on behalf of the IEA.⁷³

On the IEA website, two official spokespeople are listed: Qari Mohammed Yousuf and Zabihullah Mujahid. The risk of appearing as a spokesperson for the insurgency movement is obvious, as many of these figures have been detained or slain. In October 2005, Hakimi was apprehended in Quetta, around the same time as Dr. Mohammed Hanif. Hanif was apprehended in 2007.⁷⁴

The current "spokesmen," Qari Mohammed Yousuf and Zabihullah Mujahid, are likely aliases used by numerous individuals, either concurrently or as their predecessors are murdered or captured, maybe as a result of the arrests of anyone claiming to be the Taliban's spokesperson.⁷⁵

Qari Mohammad Yousuf and Zabihullah Mujahid give the vast majority of the statements made online and in touch with Western and international journalists. Since 2003, other rebels posing as Taliban officials have begun conducting interviews with journalists. A November 2003 item in *The Observer*, for example, features a Mullah Abdul Rauf, whose name does not appear in any other recorded Taliban comments, providing analysis on the insurgency's evolving situation. (Burke, 2003).

Given the insurgency's splintered nature, the growing presence of communications technology in Afghanistan, and the movement's growing propagandist sophistication, low and middle-level commanders are likely to approach media representatives on their own to offer statements. Maintaining control of the Taliban's messaging has evidently been crucial to Mullah Omar or those currently speaking in his place. Omar has made statements in the past criticizing those who speak in the name of the insurgency and the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan without permission from the insurgency's leadership.

In February 2004, a fax was sent to many news organizations in the name of Mullah Omar, contradicting claims made in the media by Saif al-Adl. Hamid Agha was designated as the only authorized spokesperson in the same fax.⁷⁶

Mullah Omar then issued a statement on behalf of the IEA in 2007, endorsing only those statements released by "official spokesmen and [the] Al Emarah web website."⁷⁷ Mansoor Dadullah, a former high-ranking Taliban member, was purportedly ousted from his position by Mullah Omar for making statements to the media that contradicted Mullah Omar's and the other Taliban leadership's views.⁷⁸ Amin Tarzi cites internal discrepancies among insurgents speaking to the media dating back to 2004 in his evaluation of the Neo-Taliban.⁷⁹

Tarzi continued to write about severe message inconsistencies up to 2006, this time between statements made by alleged Taliban representatives and the IEA website. In one case, a suicide strike on an Afghan government official's funeral was criticized by an insurgent speaking to the media while also being claimed – and praised – by the Voice of Jihad website.⁸⁰

Tarzi also points to perceived disparities in the underlying objectives of individuals speaking in the Taliban's behalf. Hamid Agha, a Taliban representative, said in a fax to a Pakistani daily newspaper in April 2004 that Karzai should beg the US to withdraw troops, stop bombing Afghan villages, and stop victimizing Taliban supporters.⁸¹ These are very patriotic aspirations, as Tarzi points out, and they are limited to the Afghan theater. In contrast, a March 2004 tape issued on the Center for Islamic Studies and Research website, an al-Qaeda-affiliated site, claimed to speak on behalf of the Taliban but focused considerably more on the global Islamist agenda and the greater war against the US and the West.

⁷³ Tarzi, "The Neo-Taliban," 295-296.

⁷⁴ Stenersen, *The Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan - Organization, Leadership and Worldview*, 33.

⁷⁵ *Taliban Propaganda: Winning the War of Words?* 11.

⁷⁶ Tarzi, "The Neo-Taliban," 296.

⁷⁷ *Taliban Propaganda: Winning the War of Words?* 11.

⁷⁸ Stenersen, *The Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan - Organization, Leadership and Worldview*, 46.

⁷⁹ Tarzi, "The Neo-Taliban," 294.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 295.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 292-293.

It is crucial to remember that statements made in the name of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan are made in the name of Mullah Omar and the Quetta Shura Taliban leadership, whether they emerge as real or otherwise.

The leadership of that country is mostly based in Pakistan, far from the actual fighting in Afghanistan. Separated from the battlefield, the leadership is said to be kept up to date through officials stationed around Afghanistan. The claims and news items on the al-Emarah website are very certainly based on secondhand information from the field. The extent of contact with militants on the ground, however, is unknown. The Taliban leadership's English language messaging is almost certainly influenced by the international political context and media attention as much as by the conflict's occurrences. While the IEA spokesmen's statement seems to speak for the entire insurgency, it is actually merely one component of a much wider, divided insurgency. The Haqqani Network and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hizb-e-Islami, for example, do not issue statements or contact with the media in the same way. Jalaluddin and his son Sirajuddin, who now purportedly controls the Haqqani Network's activities, have given interviews to al-Qaeda-affiliated media production businesses on occasion, but their statements are attributed to them as individuals rather than being made in the name of the shadow IEA government. HiG insurgents or leadership may speak to the media on occasion, although remarks made in Hekmatyar's or his Hizb-e-Islami's are rare, and they do not have a website like the Quetta Shura Taliban. The Quetta Shura Taliban has dominated the English-language online propaganda space. Other insurgent groups in Afghanistan have let the Quetta Shura Taliban take the lead, whether because they believe open divisions within the insurgency will harm the overall campaign against the Karzai government and Western forces, or because they believe Internet media provides little value while carrying operational risk. As a result, the messaging examined in this study will come from Taliban spokespersons and propagandists speaking on behalf of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and Mullah Omar.

Mullah Mohammed Omar was the Taliban's chief commander until his death in 2013.

Mullah Akhtar Mansour was elected as his replacement in 2015, (BBC, 2000) (BBC, 2015), and Mawlawi Hibatullah Akhundzada became the group's leader after Mansour was killed in a May 2016 US drone attack (BBC, 2015). Afghans were initially sympathetic to the Taliban, who were tired of the warlords' corruption, violence, and incessant warfare.⁸² This appeal did not extend to everyone, notably non-Pashtuns.

De jure, the Taliban controlled eighty-five percent of Afghanistan in 2001. The territories under its direct authority were, in fact, mostly Afghanistan's major cities and highways. Tribal khans and warlords presided over a number of small cities, villages, and rural areas in de facto direct control.

"A hidden society run by Kandaharis... strange, secretive, and authoritarian," Rashid said of the Taliban government (Rashid, 2000). As their representative said, Sharia prohibits politics and political parties. That is why we do not pay officials or military salary, instead providing them with food, clothing, shoes, and weaponry. We want to live like the Prophet did 1400 years ago, and we have the right to wage jihad. We want to replicate the Prophet's time, and we are merely doing what the Afghan people have been asking for the past 14 years.⁸³ They based their decision-making on the Pashtun tribal council (*jirga*), as well as what they thought was an early Islamic paradigm.

Following the discussion, the "believers" came to an agreement.⁸⁴ There was talk of standing aside once a government of "decent Muslims" took power and law and order were restored before seizing Kabul. As the Taliban's dominance rose, Mullah Omar began making decisions without consulting the *jirga* or other sections of the country. During his time in power, he only went to Kabul twice. Their leader's legitimacy stemmed from an oath of allegiance ("Bay'ah"), in imitation of the Prophet and the first four Caliphs, rather than an election. For the first time in 60 years, Mullah Omar had "the Cloak of the Prophet Mohammed" removed from its shrine on April 4, 1996.

He appeared on the roof of a building in Kandahar, shrouded in the relic, while hundreds of Pashtun mullahs below chanted "Amir al-Mu'minin!" (Commander of the Faithful), pledging their allegiance. Mullah Wakil, a Taliban spokesperson, indicated that decisions are made based on the advice of the Amir-ul Momineen. Consultation is not required for us. This, we believe, is in accordance with Sharia law. We concur with the

⁸² Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim world / editor in chief, Richard C. Martin, Macmillan Reference USA: Thomson/Gale, c2004.

⁸³ Rashid 2000, p. 43 Interview with Mullah Wakil, March 1996.

⁸⁴ Rashid 2000, p. 95.

Amir's point of view, albeit he is the only one who holds it. A head of state will not be present. There will be an Amir al-Mu'minin instead. Mullah Omar will be the ultimate authority, and the government will be unable to conduct any decisions of which he does not agree. Sharia law does not enable for general elections. The Taliban were adamant about not sharing authority, and because their ranks were largely Pashtun, they reigned as overlords over the other sixty percent of Afghans. Even when the Pashto-speaking Taliban could not converse with the nearly half of the people who spoke Dari or other non-Pashtun tongues, Taliban adherents, not locals, dominated local governance, such as Kabul city council⁸⁵ or Herat Critics⁸⁶ claimed that the Taliban appeared to be an occupying army due to a "lack of local representation in urban management."⁸⁷

As of today, the situation has changed quite substantially, especially since the death of Mullah Omar in 2007. As of August 2021, the Taliban's senior members as an insurgency are the following (ABCNews, 2021). Since 2016, Haibatullah Akhundzada, a religious scholar from Kandahar province, has served as the Taliban's Supreme Leader. As of March 2022, Abdul Ghani Baradar, a co-founder of the movement with Mohammed Omar, was the deputy Prime Minister (Anderson, 2022). He was arrested in Uruzgan province and incarcerated in Pakistan before being released at the behest of the US. Mohammad Yaqoob, the Taliban's military operations chief and son of the group's founder Mohammed Omar.

As of February 2022, Sirajuddin Haqqani, the leader of the Haqqani network, is acting interior minister, with supervision over the police and intelligence services. He is in command of the group's financial and military resources between Afghanistan and Pakistan. A \$10 million reward has been promised by the US government for his apprehension.

Former chief of the group's Doha political office, Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai. He is a corpsman at the Indian Military Academy and holds a master's degree from a university in Logar province. Stanekzai being replaced in 2020 by Abdul Hakim Ishaqzai, the group's chief negotiator in Doha. Heads the Taliban's influential religious scholar's council. Suhail Shaheen, Taliban candidate for UN Ambassador; former spokesperson for the Taliban's Doha political office. He was a deputy ambassador to Pakistan in the 1990s and was a university graduate from Pakistan. He was publisher of the English-language Kabul Times at the time. Since 2007, Zabihullah Mujahid has been the Taliban's spokesperson. After the group's conquest of Kabul in 2007, he made his first public appearance in 2021.

The Taliban's political elite is composed entirely of ethnic Pashtuns, principally those from the Ghilzai alliance (Mili & Townsend, 2009).

In terms of structure and government, the early Muslims' governance was characterized by the absence of state institutions and "a methodology for command and control," both of which are now commonplace, even in non-Westernized countries. The Taliban did not deliver press releases or policy pronouncements, and they did not hold press conferences on a regular basis. As a consultant to the Taliban's leadership, Grand Mufti Rashid Ahmed Ludhianvi's Obedience to the Amir served as the foundation for this organization (Semple, 2014). Because photography was prohibited, the outside world and the majority of Afghans had no idea what their leaders looked like.⁸⁸

With barely 25,000 troops, the "regular army" resembled a lashkar, or traditional tribal militia force (of whom 11,000 were non-Afghans).

Mullahs with a "madrasah education" served as cabinet ministers and deputies. Several of them, including the Minister of Health and the Governor of the State Bank, were essentially military commanders who abandoned their administrative offices to fight whenever necessary.

The disarray in the national administration was exacerbated by military reversals that imprisoned them behind enemy lines or resulted in their deaths.⁸⁹ On a national scale, ""All senior Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara bureaucrats, whether qualified or not, were replaced with Pashtuns." As a consequence, the ministries "mostly ground to a halt."⁹⁰ There was no budget and no "competent economist or banker" in the Ministry of Finance. Mullah Omar gathered funds without monitoring the latter.

⁸⁵ Rashid 2000, p. 98.

⁸⁶ Rashid 2000, pp. 39–40.

⁸⁷ Rashid 2000, pp. 101–102.

⁸⁸ Rashid 2000, p. 5.

⁸⁹ Rashid 2000, p. one hundred.

⁹⁰ Rashid 2000, pp. 101–102

In essence, one may suggest that the premise developed in this work sheds light on the Taliban insurgency's English-language propaganda tactics as being rather confined in scope and ineffectual when judged per their aims, as they mostly comprise reactive and bombastic assertions with hardly any potential to disrupt the media agenda, at least in the first historical conquest carried out by the organization. A review of the tropes revealed in the Taliban's English language propaganda is conducted to assess the supposed veracity of said theory. Battle reports, articles slandering the adversary, reasons for the IEA's war, and denials of purported IEA atrocities are the four main topics of the Taliban's online propaganda, according to Anne Stenersen.⁹¹ The news stories issued on the al-Emarah website, which Stenersen refers to as "war reports," were included in this assessment. Date, location, and death numbers from Taliban strikes on NATO or Afghan government forces are routinely provided in these reports, which are usually two-to-four words long. The following is a description of a statement from June 24, 2010: In Logar, seven American invaders were killed when an enemy tank was disabled. On Wednesday afternoon (June 23), virtually three American Marines were murdered, and three others were seriously injured when their tank was blown up by an IED attack in Logar's Charkh region. Zabihullah Mujahid filed this report (Mujahid, 2010). These news reports, in terms of performance, outnumber the IEA's promotional material. Although the volume of assertions made each month is often less than ten, hundreds of news items are produced each month. These briefings offer clarity into the Taliban's vision for the conflict's development on the ground, in addition to supporting as a barometer of total propaganda effort. Returning to Anne Stenersen's phrase "battle reports," these papers do fact focus nearly entirely on the insurgency's battlefield gains. This focus can be seen in the terms used by the IEA in these reports. After deleting filler terms like "the," "and" as well as "were," as well as other phrases repeated throughout each report, such as "Islamic," "emirate," and the names of IEA spokespeople. NATO personnel are referred to as "terrorists" and "invaders," while Afghan government forces are referred to as "puppets." The high frequency of the words "tank" and "vehicle" is due to numerous news stories alleging the annihilation of Western weaponry as well as the fatalities of enemy troops. The IEA devotes nearly all of its attention in these studies to presenting insurgent groups' battlefield accomplishments. The choice was reached not to look into the precise death counts reported in the news since they are far higher than what is actually possible given the number of US and NATO troops in the nation. Surprisingly, the geographic distribution of the provinces indicated in the media reports closely matches what is happening on the ground. Provinces in the SouthEast and South-West areas, which include the Taliban's initial heartland in Kandahar, accounted for sixty-three percent of all province references in IEA news reports from 2007 to 2010 (Calvin, *The Use of English-Language Internet Propaganda by the Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan, 2007–2010*, 2011).

Upon correlating the frequency of province designations to the series of assaults on the battlefield, the IEA's attention is drawn to these specific areas. According to the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), fifty-two percent of assaults in Afghanistan originated in the South-East and South-West regions over the same time frame. Despite the reality that the fatality counts it releases are greatly overstated, Taliban propaganda does not boast reach beyond where it is already functioning in terms of spatial dispersion. When it comes to the areas of the attacks that have been made public, they appear to keep remarkably close to their true range. The other three elements that Stenersen identified in IEA communications – pieces defaming the adversary, reasons for the IEA's fight, and rejections of claimed IEA atrocities – are mostly found in the al-Emarah website's longer propaganda statements. As previously stated, the insurgent message evaluated herein was mostly gathered from theunjustmedia.com, a Taliban apologist website, with data from Afghanwire.com supplementing this core sample for part of 2007. The IEA produced approximately 4.5 announcements per month from 2007 to 2010, presenting a gradual increase in term of propaganda activities. The US and its NATO allies, the Karzai government, the United Nations, and the Western "mainstream" media are all targets of IEA remarks. The most common and predictable criticisms are of US and NATO forces, as well as the Karzai government. The emphasis on the Karzai government's malfeasance and unconstitutionality was especially intense in the months leading up to presidential and parliamentary elections. The August 2009 Presidential election was the subject of three different IEA statements, while the October 2009 run-off election, which was called in reaction to worldwide denunciation of anomalies in the primary election and then cancelled, was the subject of four further IEA declarations. IEA demagogues exhibit a briefed position in the international outcry against the preliminary deceitful presidential races and the heavy Western

⁹¹ Stenersen, *The Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan - Organization, Leadership and Worldview*, 35.

influence that pushed for the runoff elections in a message captioned "Statement of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan Regarding the Runoff Elections," released on October 25, 2009. Karzai is described as a "besieged sad president" with a "suffocated voice" and a "pale complexion" in the face of widespread siege (Calvin, *The Use of English-Language Internet Propaganda by the Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan, 2007–2010*, 2011).

The September 2010 Parliamentary elections received even greater attention, with four of the eleven comments published that month centering on the Karzai government's mismanagement and ineptitude, as well as the Afghan police and army. The accent of all these remarks was on the deviance of the votes and the insurgency's attempts to sabotage them, including a breakdown of assaults on polling sites by province. According to the study, there were 739 attacks throughout thirty-one provinces, far more than the 303 violent occurrences documented by NATO (Sommerville, 2010). Over the last four years, the IEA has focused its attention on the UN, which has been chastised for its lack of impartiality and backing for NATO's military action in the country. In specific, UN reports decrying mass casualties covered by the Taliban guerrilla warfare unearth superior resistance from the IEA.

In recent years, the Western media has emerged as especially notable recipient of IEA remarks. The IEA recognizes the crucial function performed by the Western and foreign press in molding perceptions of the conflict in Afghanistan, as illustrated by accusations of prejudice and disinformation from "mainstream media" and "Western media outlets." Their criticisms of mainstream coverage of Taliban misdeeds are provocative and critical, but they reveal that the Taliban keep a close eye on the major English-language news agencies covering the war. In IEA pronouncements, *The New York Times*, BBC, CNN, *Time* magazine, and *The Washington Post* have all been named by reference. In July 2010, the Taliban suffered a major propaganda setback when a horrific photograph on the cover of *Time* magazine depicted the damaged face of a young Afghan woman who was purportedly chastised on the instructions of a Taliban leader. In early August, the Taliban issued a statement separating themselves from the narrative and denouncing the photos as "desperate propaganda."⁹²

In a December statement headlined "Poor Aisha or a patsy in US political ploys and propaganda machine," Aisha claimed that the incident was staged by the Western media due to the absence of documentation in her case.⁹³

The reminder of the Soviet Union's defeat by Afghan Mujahideen in the 1980s is another recurring topic in IEA comments. The US is regularly likened to the Soviet Union, with the International Energy Agency claiming a comparable united opposition to the current occupation as the Soviets encountered over two decades ago. In the accessible data set of IEA remarks, the phrase "Soviet Union" appears fifty-nine times, which is a substantial number given that these are all historical parallels to a political body that no longer remains. The IEA also allocates a sizable portion of its communications production to refuting media reports that the Taliban and Hamid Karzai's Afghan government are in talks. Several times in the last four years, rumors have surfaced that "secret discussions" between Afghan administration and Taliban leaders were progressing toward a peaceful resolution. The IEA has repeatedly replied by openly refusing to engage in negotiations. In September 2008, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan issued a statement titled "Statement of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan on false rumors of peace talks,"⁹⁴ which was followed by a statement titled "No discussions with occupiers and their puppets" in March 2009.⁹⁵ Similar statements were issued in April, May, October, and December of 2010, the latest of which referred to a media revelation that a Taliban "official" with whom US and Afghan government leaders had been engaging was allegedly an interloper.⁹⁶

⁹² www.theunjustmedia.com, August 7, 2010. Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, "Response of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan over a picture released by Time magazine".

⁹³ "Poor Aisha or a patsy in US political ploys and propaganda machine," Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, www.theunjustmedia.com, December 11, 2010.

⁹⁴ www.theunjustmedia.com, September 28, 2008. Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, "Statement of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan on the erroneous rumors of peace talks".

⁹⁵ "No agreements with invaders and their henchmen," Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, www.theunjustmedia.com, March 16, 2009.

⁹⁶ "Statement of the Leadership Council of the Islamic Emirate Regarding Recent Propaganda About Negotiation," Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, "Statement of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan about the Maldives Talks," www.theunjustmedia.com, April 20, 2010.

The Taliban's "viewpoint" is congruent with what Anne Stenersen has called as their "strong concentration" on denying any political solutions or discussions with the Karzai regime. The IEA's narrative, according to Stenersen, has a persistent theme: "the sole answer to Afghanistan's issues is violent resistance against the invaders and their local acolytes, until an Islamic rule is re-installed in Kabul." ⁹⁷

Regardless of the fact that the Karzai government is the Taliban's actual political rival in Afghanistan, the availability of international military forces is among the most constant and recurrent topics in IEA rhetoric. The opposition realizes that foreign army and political backing would be the only thing holding the fraudulent Afghan government in power, therefore mobilizing against foreign involvement gives a solid platform for Afghan resistance to coalesce against the IEA's foes. The Taliban spokesman openly addresses the issue of Afghan unity in a November 2010 statement titled "Open Letter of Qari Mohammad Yousuf Ahmadi, to Members of the American Congress": You should be aware of the fact that the Afghan war is a losing one, conducted by the indigenous people, not just by a single party or tribe, but by a rest of the country with a 5,000-year history; a nation that regards triumph and sacrifice in the struggle against your armies as treasured wishes for prosperity not only in this world, but also in the next.

Ahmadi ignores the historical development of civil conflict and internal strife amongst those fighting for control of Afghanistan, citing the Afghan nation's "5,000-year-old history." According to Ahmadi, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan played no part in the September 11 terrorist attacks that culminated to the invasion of Afghanistan, even saying that "engagement in operations on foreign soil" is against IEA policy. Regardless, the Afghan people were forced to "throw up opposition... out of mere nationalism to defend the nation and religious sanctity" as a result of the Western presence. The role of al-Qaeda, the Northern Alliance, and significant public disapproval of the Taliban in surveys, naturally, do not factor into this story. Together with the premise of countering foreign interference, the IEA's messaging places a particular emphasis on the US policy discussion over troop pullout dates. The judgment to prolong the withdrawing troops dateline to 2014 was described as an "irrational decision" in a November 2010 declaration labeled "Response of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan as regards Lisbon Meeting," because it will only postpone the process while guaranteeing sustained violent behaviour in the meantime. ⁹⁸ In its reasons against extending the conflict, a July 2010 statement titled "US has to pull out, why not now" even cited the background of the Vietnam war and a supposedly recent survey in which "85 percent of the Afghan populace back their Mujahideen brothers."

Each year, the IEA issues the most detailed and lengthy pronouncements in the name of Mullah Omar on the celebration of Eid ul-Fitr, the three-day Muslim festivity that marks the conclusion of Ramadan. Eid ul-Fitr falls on a different schedule for the Gregorian calendar each year because it is based on the Islamic calendar. Over the last four years, it has taken place in October and September. Mullah Omar has released remarks on this event to the IEA at least three times, in 2007, 2009, and 2010. Mullah Omar's words have been directed at a wide range of audiences, notably Afghans, the Islamic Ummah, and even Americans. Several of the same topics as those mentioned above, such as condemnation of the United States and NATO, are present. However, since 2007, these statements have had a more policy-centric focus, uttered nationalist themes, and mentioned "neighboring countries," denying any transnational aspects in Taliban aims or doctrine. Other Taliban pronouncements largely lack these more strategic notions, leaving only Mullah Omar's messages to paint an outward-facing picture of the IEA's policies. Most of the above-mentioned themes and remarks are reactionary in character, made in response to Western media condemnation of the insurgency or denials of reports of bipartisan settlement and dialogue with the Afghan government. The story of an Afghan uprising against unlawful foreign intervention is coherent and may resonate with local spectators, however its influence on Western readers is likely limited.

3.6 The Taliban increased complexities in media usage

In recent years, certain more sophisticated themes have found their way into IEA propaganda, as evidenced by the rare cases of modest changes in media coverage of the Taliban's discourse. Mullah Omar's sermons on the Muslim holiday of Eid ul-Fitr, in particular, appear to be the principal forum for discussion of the

⁹⁷ Stenersen, *The Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan - Organization, Leadership and Worldview*, 51.

⁹⁸ www.theunjustmedia.com, November 20, 2010, Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, "Response of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan as regards Lisbon Meeting."

organization's vision of post-NATO administration, despite the fact that this vision is ambiguous and primarily focused on the role of Sharia in that government.

Despite the fact that these new themes have attracted the attention of the Western press and have the potential to soften the Taliban's current ruthless and unsophisticated image, there are little signs that the IEA has learned its lesson and is making significant changes in communications.

Albeit their messaging has contained few remarks that could improve their image as an organization seeking to improve its legitimacy and perception among the populace, the Taliban have performed activities that, if successfully communicated, could help them achieve this goal. The Quetta Shura Taliban leadership published a code of conduct book to its fighters in Afghanistan in July 2009. The code of conduct book, according to a copy obtained by Al-Jazeera, has thirteen chapters and sixty-seven articles with explicit directives describing the actions that Taliban fighters can and cannot perform. This code of conduct, titled "The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan Rules for Mujahideen," emphasizes the importance of limiting civilian casualties, orders the disbandment of any "unofficial groups or irregular battalions" that refuse to join the Taliban's formal leadership structure, and encourages the selective use of suicide bombing for important targets only (AlJazeera, 2009) (Tarzi, 2008).

A translation of the document released by the NEFA Foundation reveals that much of the advice it offers could help Mullah Omar's insurgency become more unified and coordinated if followed.⁹⁹ Maintaining and controlling the Taliban's image in an overly complicated warfare context where criminals can readily operate under the Taliban banner to seek protection from other insurgents is exceedingly challenging, especially when seeking to do so from across the Pakistani border.

Tim Foxley developed a prior Taliban attempt to release a similar code of conduct in a June 2007 review of Taliban propaganda.¹⁰⁰ This previous code of conduct, which contained thirty points rather than sixty-seven, had a similar focus on controlling the behavior of Taliban soldiers in the field, but it plainly did not have the impact that the organization's leadership hoped for. Despite the release of the code of conduct, the insurgents "had not promoted or even referred to it before or afterwards," according to Foxley, who pointed out a similar propaganda failure to that addressed here in 2007.¹⁰¹

While the preparation and distribution of this code of conduct was clearly a substantial strategic initiative, the 2009 version appears to have been treated in the same way as the 2006 version, with no mention of the new regulations controlling the insurgent group in the IEA's English language pronouncements. This is not surprising, given the Taliban's history of secrecy and lack of transparency. The acceptance of the code of conduct could be interpreted as acknowledgment of the flaw that led to its formation. Ironically, the insurgency's leadership's move demonstrates a level of coordination and sophistication that could help to improve the insurgency's image.

Despite the IEA propaganda's silence, the Western press and national security sectors noticed the code of conduct announcement and gave it a lot of attention. Rather than being a sign of weakness, the Taliban squandered an opportunity to strengthen their organization's legitimacy.

The IEA's Arabic-language propaganda, which has traditionally had more depth of argument and discussion, has highlighted difficulties of governance that are not addressed in the English-language propaganda. While the articles in al-Somood magazine focus on battlefield victories and insurgent control of territory, they also publish interviews with Taliban officials and commanders that cover topics other than attacks on NATO soldiers or criticism of the United States and its allies.

"Your answer to every offer of peace is usually negative, and instead you highlight the use of force," the interviewer asks Maulavi Abdul Kabir, a member of the Leadership Council of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, in an al-Somood interview from October 2010. Do you not believe that your posture reveals your diplomatic weakness?"¹⁰² Kabir responds to the question in a roundabout way, reiterating his demand for the departure of foreign forces. Islamic governance systems are viable, but only after foreign powers have been removed. Later in the discussion, a question particularly addressed Taliban rule and administration in Afghanistan.

⁹⁹ Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, *A Book of Rules (Translation)*, Translation (NEFA Foundation).

¹⁰⁰ Foxley, *The Taliban's propaganda activities: how well is the Afghan insurgency communicating and what is it saying?* 14.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, "Peace Talks in Conditions of the Presence of Foreign Forces are Meaningless and Futile," www.theunjustmedia.com, October 19, 2010.

Kabir further responds in greater detail and specificity than most prior IEA releases, referring to the structure of the former Taliban administration and claiming that "professional individuals were not disregarded but had participation in the government" during that period (Calvin, Taliban, The Use of English-Language Internet Propaganda by the Insurgency in Afghanistan, 2007–2010, 2011). Taliban and religious experts were the only ones chosen to higher positions. The remainder were government employees who were doing their jobs."

He goes on to say that if the Taliban retake power, they will use the same method, with "piety and capability" as the prerequisite for government. The IEA's November 2010 statement, this time in English, places a greater emphasis on pragmatic and constructive political topics.

According to the IEA, the organization has "formulated [a] comprehensive policy for the future Afghanistan, for efficient governance, security, Islamic justice, education, economic advancement, national unity, and a foreign policy that will ensure the country's protection against any harm from others and convince the world that the future Afghanistan will not harm them," according to the statement.¹⁰³ The statement was made in reaction to a NATO summit in Lisbon, Portugal, when the mission's extension and troop pullout timelines were debated. Making remarks aimed at portraying the Taliban as a legitimate ruling force demonstrates acknowledgment of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, "Response of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan as regards the Lisbon Meeting." There is a link between NATO countries leaving Afghanistan and the Taliban's image as a genuine negotiating partner. Taking the concept of governance even further, a January 2011 article in the Arabic-language al-Somood magazine titled "The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and Its Successful Administrative Policy" devotes a full-length article to discussion of the Taliban's administrative structure in the areas under its control.¹⁰⁴ The paper, written by Ikram Miyundi, an unnamed member of the al-Somood production business, discusses the Taliban's system for regulating Afghanistan's religious validity and credentials.

It goes beyond just declaring that Sharia will be used to govern and examines the country's administrative structure, conflict resolution techniques, the several leadership committees involved in governance, and the need of choosing competent and specialized personnel to lead. While it was first published in Arabic in al-Somood, a translation appeared in late January 2011 on the al-Emarah website's English-language "weekly analysis" section and on theunjustmedia.com. The incorporated social media feature on the al-Emarah website showed that it had been "shared" twenty-six times by Facebook users. It is worth noting, though, that the original publication was in Arabic rather than English, and the English translation and publication came later. Although not all of al-writings Somood's are translated and published in English, the IEA chose to do so with this one.

Despite this unusual concentration on governance and nation-state relations at the close of 2010 and the beginning of 2011, there are no analogous remarks or interviews in the IEA statements for February, March, and April 2011. Instead, the messages have resorted to the same old themes of blaming NATO forces for civilian losses, equating the United States to the previous Soviet Union, and repeating arguments made in the Western press criticizing American war policy. There could be strategic reasons for the IEA's decision not to further project a vision for administering Afghanistan, presuming it has the capability to do so. When the Taliban came to power in the 1990s, their goal was not to rule the country, but to rid it of the corrupt warlords who were in charge at the time, according to Stenersen. This theme of fighting corruption has persisted to the present day, and it appears to be part of the reason for the group's lack of detail in terms of how it would govern once in power. According to Stenersen, this could be intentional in order to avoid outlining plans for post-NATO governance, which could "sow fissures in the movement." According to Stenersen, the lack of governance discussion "indicates that the 'occupation rhetoric' has far greater mobilizing force among potential supporters than the idea of reviving the Taliban state or restoring Mullah Omar to power."¹⁰⁵ While divisions within the greater insurgency are unavoidable if it ever succeeds in gaining control of the country, the Taliban's members are not. The presence of foreign forces is the greatest hindrance to attaining its goal, according to Stenersen, A philosophical dispute amongst power brokers in the

¹⁰³ Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, "Response of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan as regards Lisbon Meeting."

¹⁰⁴ "Taliban media: The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and Its Successful Administrative Policy (Translation from al-Somood article)," Intel Trends, January 27, 2011, <http://inteltrends.wordpress.com/2011/01/27/the-islamic-emirate-of-afghanistan-and-its-successful-administrative-policy/>, (accessed April 18, 2011).

¹⁰⁵ Stenersen, The Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan - Organization, Leadership and Worldview, 52-53.

insurgency over government or administrative policies is a topic with which they should be less concerned. The IEA's continual attention on the withdrawal of international military backing for the Karzai regime demonstrates their understanding of its strategic relevance. Escalating violence, rising insecurity, and the Afghan government's failure to provide efficient governance have all been contributing to a decline in Western public support for the war.

Much of what prevents the public from supporting a restored Taliban involvement in administering Afghanistan is the people's perception of the Taliban as an extremist, fundamentalist movement that brutalizes women and formerly provided a safe haven for al-Qaeda. The Taliban have demonstrated a lack of capacity to construct messages that are more appealing to Western audiences. While the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt is considerably different from the Taliban in many ways, it is an example of an Islamist organization that understands the importance of controlling and shaping its image as it is communicated to the rest of the world. Concerns were voiced in Western policy circles and the media during the public revolts that led to Hosni Mubarak's overthrow in the Spring of 2011 after three decades as Egypt's President, about the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood's potential role in a post-Mubarak Egypt. Critics of the Brotherhood pointed out that Osama bin Laden's deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, was a former member of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.

While the party had long played a nonviolent political role in Egypt, the prospect of an anti-American Islamist government in a strategically important Middle Eastern country garnered a lot of attention in Washington and other Western capitals.¹⁰⁶ Recognizing this, Muslim Brotherhood members went to great lengths to avoid giving the appearance that Egypt's popular revolution was in any way an Islamist revolution. The Brotherhood reserved backing for the upheavals until they had achieved enough traction, and even then, it deferred to Mohammed ElBaradei, a secular figure, as the movement's face (Hamid & Brooke, 2011). Essam El-Erian, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood's Egyptian guidance council, even wrote an op-ed piece for The New York Times titled "What the Muslim Brothers Want," in which he stated the Brotherhood's goal as "achieving reform and rights for all: not just for the Muslim Brotherhood, not just for Muslims, but for all Egyptians (El-Erian, 2011)". The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the Taliban in Afghanistan are two extremely different organizations with vastly different histories, ideology, and goals. The Muslim Brotherhood, in particular, has moved away from its violent Islamist past and embraced a new position as a peaceful political organization, according to numerous sources. Despite their differences, they both fall into the camp of Islamist movements and hence attract much of the same mistrust in the West. While the Taliban proudly use violent Islamist revolutionary rhetoric in the face of Western condemnation, the Muslim Brotherhood is well aware of the disadvantages of being dubbed an Islamist movement and has worked hard to change its image. Ironically, the translated autobiography of a former Taliban official, Mullah Zaeef, has been one of the most complete and accessible counter-narratives to the conventional image of the Taliban as a backward and inflexible movement of fanatical¹⁰⁷ extremists. "My Life with the Taliban," a book he wrote with the help of two Western journalists, was released by Columbia University Press in 2010. Through his own engagement with the movement from its inception, the book relates the tale of the Taliban's development, rise, and eventual loss of power of Afghanistan. Zaeef, who claims to be a neutral party at the time of its release, offers a humanized perspective on a secretive religious institution that appears to lack empathy in all of its previous encounters with the outside world. The book does not provide any insight into the genesis of the present Taliban insurgency because it chronicles Zaeef's own life, including his confinement in Guantanamo Bay following the start of the current battle. However, in his account of the organization's rise to power in the 1990s, he presents a picture of a movement that was attempting to deal with the issues of administering a country that had been in conflict for nearly two decades. Zaeef claims to have been responsible for effective advancements in Afghanistan's industrial sectors as a member of the Taliban government, despite efforts by Iran and Pakistan to undercut it. He speaks at length about the value of human life and provides a unique glimpse into the cultural and historical richness of the Afghan people, connecting the Taliban to that history in direct contrast to the confrontational division between the two that often emerges in Western accounts of the insurgency. While much of Zaeef's story is unverified and debatable, it demonstrates the importance of communicating one's story and crafting a

¹⁰⁶ Global Trouble Spots Top Public's News Interests (Pew Research Center for The People & The Press, February 24, 2011),

¹⁰⁷ Press Coverage and Public Interest (Pew Research Center for The People & The Press, January 11, 2011), <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1850/public-media-priorities-comparison-2010>, (accessed March 15, 2011).

powerful, human narrative. The Taliban's usual information operations to the English-speaking world, which take the form of statements and reports posted on its website, utterly overlook this aspect of ¹⁰⁸ connecting with the rest of the world. Zaeef's biography does not condone the Taliban's violence in the past or present, but it will compel many readers to see the Taliban in a far more complex and nuanced light after reading it. Zaeef, who was once a member of the Taliban's inner circle, demonstrates that Taliban fighters can present a more compelling story than the insurgency has thus far. While he worked with two Western journalists and avoided many of the more contentious aspects of the Taliban's past, constructing a narrative may be as much about fiction and perception as it is about reality.

While there is evidence that the IEA is honing its messaging with more complex themes that move away from its regular drumbeat of bombastic assertions and loud rebukes, these signs are transient.

3.7 The voice of civilians vis-à-vis the Taliban's narrative in traditional media

The following section will look more closely at the interaction between IEA messaging and the Western and international media, specifically as it relates to the question of civilian casualties.

Denials of claimed insurgency atrocities are one of the primary IEA messaging themes highlighted by Anne Stenersen and noted above. In an irregular conflict like Afghanistan, killing civilians is the most heinous crime, and civilian deaths committed by either side play a key role in both insurgency and counterinsurgent media efforts. The number of civilians killed by NATO, according to Rid and Hecker, is "by far the most crucial target of Taliban propaganda campaigns." ¹⁰⁹

The insurgency portrays coalition troops' deaths of civilians as a symbol of foreign imperialism and the government's and its backers' inability to safeguard the population. Civilians killed by the insurgency, according to the Afghan government and NATO forces, are a sign of the insurgency's savagery and lack of care for the Afghan people's well-being. The death of civilians is one of the simplest ways for the government and NATO forces to turn public sentiment against them and their supporters. The all-too-frequent incidents of civilian casualties from NATO airstrikes lend credence to insurgent claims of civilian casualties. Let us now examine how media coverage of civilian casualties in Afghanistan has changed over time, looking for indicators of an insurgency focus on the issue as a possible leading signal for mainstream media coverage. The frequency of the n-gram terms was taken from the media data sets and aggregated to construct a "basket" of n-gram terms that indicated debate around the theme of civilian casualties. While the n-gram basket approximation of civilian casualty mentions for this sample set varies significantly from month to month, the yearly average of mentions for 2010 has actually declined by twenty-five percent from 2009's four-year peak (Calvin, 2011). To compare trends in media reporting, the same basket of phrases was retrieved from the combined collection of IEA statements and press reports. Unfortunately, the number of mentions in IEA media content was far too little to detect any major trends. Insurgent propaganda rarely mentioned civilian losses, and when it did, it was negligible compared to the insurgency's much more prominent focus on supposed fighting gains. For the period 2007-2010, the average total number of mentions in both IEA statements and press stories was little more than three each month. With such a low degree of concentration on IEA messaging, only a few months had any significant message to evaluate. According to our study, the focus on ninety-nine civilian casualties in IEA messaging peaked in January 2010, accounting for roughly thirteen percent of the total retrieved mentions across the four-year timeframe. A sample of posts was hand-analyzed to assess the sort of language and word choice used by insurgents to address the slaughter of civilians by coalition and Afghan government forces, to see if these results were genuinely reflective of the content of IEA messaging.

The term "civilian casualties" and other comparable terminology and phrases that emerge more frequently in standard English language reporting do not appear as prominently in rebel communications.

Instead, the insurgents employ language like "martyred twelve people," "ambushed civilians," and "bombed civilian dwellings." To account for this discrepancy while still being able to assess trends, the analysis was repeated using only the terms "civilian" and "civilians" within IEA messaging, assuming that insurgent messaging is specifically targeted against coalition and Afghan governments, with a high likelihood that any mention of civilians would be attributed to negative actions taken on behalf of those groups. The terms "civilian" and "civilians" appear frequently in IEA communications (Calvin, Taliban, The Use of English-

¹⁰⁸ Jurkowitz, Rosenstiel, and Mitchell, *A Year in the News 2010*.

¹⁰⁹ Rid and Hecker, *War 2.0: irregular warfare in the information age*, 179.

Language Internet Propaganda by the Insurgency in Afghanistan, 2007–2010, 2011). The phrases "civilian" and "civilians" were analyzed again, and January 2010 was found to be one of the most popular months for civilian-related marketing (Calvin, 2011). When examining the message content in January 2010, the rise was concentrated in two remarks written in response to a United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) report on civilian casualties released that month. According to a UNAMA assessment from 2009, the insurgency is accountable for sixty-seven percent of all civilian deaths in the country, which does not include the 8% of deaths for which the responsible party is unknown.¹¹⁰ The report's release on January 13 was preceded by UN Secretary General Ban ki-moon's at the United Nations on January 7 (UNAMA, 2010) (Burgard H. , 2010).

The IEA's initial response was two days after Banki Moon's according to the date mentioned on the website posting. Their subsequent statement was published two days after UNAMA released its report. The insurgents challenge Ban ki-moon's in the IEA reaction to his UN statements, saying he "brazenly tramples on UN rules of neutrality by his remarks in order to please the White House overlords."¹¹¹

The message goes on to name particular incidents in which American attacks are said to have resulted in civilian casualties, such as the deaths of school pupils in Kunar province's Narang area a week ago. This charge was made in response to recent accusations that US-led soldiers killed eight Afghan children in a night-raid at the end of December. The raid was stated to be against an IED production cell by a NATO official, although the official did not provide the "details regarding what actually happened" (Starkey, 2009). The letter goes on to say that claims of Taliban attacks on civilians are part of a Pentagon-led propaganda campaign orchestrated by the "Psychological Warfare and Lies Fabrication Department," which has influenced and skewed the UN's assessment against the insurgents (Burgard H. , 2010) (Calvin, 2011). The answer to the UN report, which came out a week later, was far more explicit in its rebuttals of the UN charges. According to the IEA, the Western media is inaccurately reporting on Afghan civilian deaths. In prior instances, we were able to appreciate how the Western media often published partial and farcical claims on invading Americans' civilian casualties. For example, the Western media had reported in previous years that thirty-five terrorists from the armed opposition were killed by American troops in Dai Chopan, citing American spokespeople (Calvin, 2011).

It was later determined that all of the victims were civilians murdered as a result of the American bombardment.

To this day, no reporter or UN official has visited the area to investigate the tragedy.¹¹² Dai Chopan is a district in Zabul province, Afghanistan's southeast. On the NATO ISAF website at the time, the single press release for Zabul recounted an event in which six injured civilians reported to an ISAF forward operating base after an engagement between ISAF forces and armed militants. The incident was not described in any additional detail. There were no independent accounts of the occurrence. The remark casts doubt on the UN's capacity to collect accurate data from the country's rural or "war-torn" areas.

It reminds out that significant swaths of rural Afghanistan have been essentially under Taliban rule for some time, making UN employees inaccessible. They claim that the UN "patched up the report in the UNAMA Guest House in Kabul, cramming the desired facts into it that is politically digestible." The IEA then goes on to mention "overlooked" house raids, highway killings, "blind bombardments," and Predator strikes in Kunar's rural areas (Calvin, 2011). The provinces of Nooristan, Laghman, Kunduz, Logar, Paktika, Helmand, Farah, and Uruzgan are all in Afghanistan. However, no exact dates or evidence are given for these occurrences. While the UN's access to data from the country's rural and generally inaccessible parts is a fair concern, the statement is an unspecific and overly reactionary response to the UN's efforts, which discredits the insurgency. Aside from these direct comments, the UN report prompted a seemingly reflexive increase in focus on civilian losses in other pronouncements and press reports during this time period. In

¹¹⁰ Annual Report on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict in Afghanistan, 2009, UNAMA Reports on the Protection of Civilians (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), January 2010), <http://unama.unmissions.org/Portals/UNAMA/human%20rights/Protection%20of%20Civilian%202009%20Report%20English.pdf>.

¹¹¹ Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, "Response of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan to Banki Moon Assertions About Civilian Casualties in Afghanistan," www.theunjustmedia.com, January 7, 2010.

¹¹² Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, "Response of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan to UN Report on Civilian Casualties," www.theunjustmedia.com, January 15, 2010.

both January and February 2010, the mention of civilians in IEA news stories that predominantly focus on insurgent attacks against NATO forces increased significantly (Calvin, 2011).

By March, the numbers had started to decline once more. The normalized frequency count displays the number of times the selected terms appeared in relation to the total number of words in that month. This information can be used to determine whether the patterns observed over time are merely the result of an overall rise in message volume. When the normalized frequencies of those terms are considered, January and October 2010, which had the greatest total counts, are considerably closer to the remainder of the data set. Over the last four years, the IEA media organization has maintained a mostly consistent focus on the topic of civilian casualties, with periodic rises owing to external circumstances like as the UN report rather than developments on the ground. The real UNAMA data on civilian casualties serves as a context for examining media reportage and IEA messaging tendencies. While the UN civilian casualty data's exact accuracy is unknown, this analysis assumes that it is the most accurate and neutral evaluation available. The data demonstrate that during the summer months of each year, when violence between rebels and pro-government forces escalates, there is a cyclical spike in civilian deaths. According to a UN assessment from 2010, the number of civilian deaths attributed to Afghan government and ISAF forces declined in 2010 compared to prior years, leaving the insurgent forces responsible for the vast majority of civilian deaths. The estimation of media reporting on civilian casualties was compared to the civilian casualty statistics for the three different actor groups identified by the UNAMA report, AGE, PGF, and Other, using a standard statistical correlation coefficient calculation. This was done to see which casualty set corresponded most closely to the topic's reporting. According to UNAMA statistics, the result of the correlation calculation is a number between -1 and one that represents the linear relationship of two variables, in this instance media reporting on civilian casualties and civilian casualties committed by various parties in the Afghan conflict. For AGE and Other casualty statistics, the correlation values were 0.14 and 0.20, respectively (Calvin, 2011). However, the correlation coefficient for PGF-related civilian casualties is 0.51, indicating a substantially stronger statistical association between media reporting and civilian losses caused by pro-government troops. The correlation coefficient between media reporting and total UN reported casualties is only 0.38, indicating that the media's focus is much more closely matched with instances involving Afghan government and NATO forces killing civilians than occurrences involving other parties. The stronger association between media reporting on civilian deaths and data attributing civilian deaths to pro-government troops indicates that Western and international media may be biased in reporting on deaths caused by Western and Afghan government forces. While this is a very rudimentary correlation calculation based on a lot of assumptions, it does show that civilian casualties in Afghanistan are most closely aligned with civilian casualties caused by pro-government forces. This analysis merely demonstrates linear similarity across data sets over time and is not a causality assessment in any way (Shackleford, 2007). One plausible reason is that journalists are denied access to many rural or insurgent-controlled areas of the nation, where the Taliban are more prone to attack civilians. Insurgents are unlikely to allow foreign or Afghan journalists into areas under their control to report on atrocities committed against the population, as evidenced by their quick and coordinated propaganda response to the UN report that placed heavy blame on insurgent forces for civilian deaths. Insurgents understand the danger of being associated with civilian casualties, so they are unlikely to allow foreign or Afghan journalists into areas under their control to report on atrocities committed against the population. According to Amnesty International, the Taliban increased attacks on Afghan journalists in 2010 and prohibited reporting in areas controlled by the insurgency.¹¹³ When contacted by journalists, Taliban spokespeople regularly deny assaults that kill civilians (Khan, 2009). The insurgency's concerted efforts to warn international journalists when NATO or Afghan government forces murder civilians could be a second factor driving this trend in reportage. The analysis above revealed that the Taliban's English-language media output, in the form of statements and news reports, did not devote much attention to this issue. Other scholars and journalists have noted evidence of Taliban field representatives being far more active and successful in directly contacting media, through phone or SMS, following instances in which coalition raids or bombings have resulted in genuine or fabricated civilian casualties. Rid and Hecker emphasize on the Taliban's ability to swiftly contact journalists after an incident of interest in their assessment of the Taliban's media efforts. Before coalition forces can release their account of events, it will be. According to Rid and Hecker, Taliban spokespersons usually contact the international press ninety minutes after the start of a

¹¹³ Afghanistan - Amnesty International Report 2010 (Amnesty International).

major military action.¹¹⁴ Many journalists notice the falsehood of these comments on a daily basis, but the insurgency is still able to use this capability to routinely inform the media when NATO missions result in civilian casualties. The past insurgency has been able to shift media attention away from international forces and onto civilian casualties by denying access to Taliban-controlled regions and a determined effort to warn the media when coalition forces inflict civilian casualties. This appears to have been done entirely on the ground, with no help from the organization's web operation, which was more reactive in character, responding to worldwide charges against the insurgency rather than driving the narrative on that crucial topic. Instead, a focus on combat exploits dominated the online messaging.

In many cases, allegations of NATO forces killing civilians were buried beneath a deluge of exaggerated press reports of insurgent strikes, a strategy that ultimately failed to reach a wider audience or have any impact on the narrative around civilian losses.

3.8 “Terror impends over Afghanistan’s internet”

As the Taliban extends its hold on Afghanistan, the extremist organization has implemented its views on a new violent conquest: the internet and digital infrastructure, which has supplied free information to many Afghans for the previous two decades (Cerulus, 2021).

It seems to be uncertain how the new regime would police internet access now that Taliban leaders have taken over state services and agencies in Kabul, the country's capital, and whether it will capture political opponents and curtail freedom of speech and expression online.

The Taliban's early reservations to the internet as a whole have already been disregarded. As the US began to withdraw from the country, the Islamist organization created a tech-savvy social media strategy that it heavily relied on.

Former officials, though, are concerned that the Taliban will not allow others to utilize the internet in the same way they have.

"In Afghanistan, the internet is under threat," Mohammad Najeeb Azizi, a former chair of the Afghanistan Telecom Regulatory Authority, warned (ATRA). The Taliban is "ready to exploit the internet to their advantage, but it will be their desire not to allow [political opponents] to spread information in the future," according to the report.

While internet access in Afghanistan remains reasonably accessible, the Taliban's ascendancy has already made civilians cognizant of their online footprint. Many Afghans have hastened to erase or destroy social media profiles and online content that could be employed to link them to the former regime or NATO forces, fearful that such ties could place them at peril with the Taliban.

Several global digital rights organizations released a statement at the time of the upheaval, urging international organizations and commercial vendors to shut down or adequately encrypt biometric databases that collect retina or fingerprint scans. According to the NGOs, some are already in the hands of the Taliban and might be used by the new authorities to set up surveillance programs and track down targets.

There are longer-term issues beyond the Taliban's first web search for allies. While the gang is unlikely to sever internet lines as it did when it was in power in the 1990s, it may strive to censor information, restrict access to particular groups or regions, or intimidate international telecoms companies that run Afghanistan's network. Taliban officials also met with ATRA, the Afghan telecoms regulator, as they continue to exert influence over all state agencies.

"They don't want the internet to go away," Raman Jit Singh Chima, Asia policy director at digital rights group Access Now, said. "But sooner rather than later, they'll try to make it clear that they're the new sheriff in town, that they're in charge of all decisions in the telecoms sector and space."

However, merely because the Taliban has a competent social media operation does not indicate they have expertise drafting a censorship system. The new regime will find it difficult to impose China-style controls on online information, according to Chima, but it can take more targeted measures such as cutting internet access in strategic locations or requiring internet service providers to impose limits on accessing certain parts of the internet, similar to policies used by other Gulf states, Iran, Myanmar, and other countries.

There remains additional pressing concern for Afghan civilians.

¹¹⁴ Rid and Hecker, *War 2.0: irregular warfare in the information age*, 179.

When the Taliban seize control of the country's telecommunications infrastructure, they may indeed be able to intercept internet access to particular groups including diplomats, NGOs, and the media, as well as acquire information on who is seeking for exit visas.

"These telcos will come under pressure in the next weeks for access to data records, communications logs, and more," Chima warned, adding that telecoms companies must prepare for the Taliban attempting to gain control of their data.

3.8.2 The international appeal of the telecoms sector

Over the last two decades, foreign governments have invested in Afghanistan's digital infrastructure, notably the United States through its USAID program and the World Bank through its IDA initiative.

It enabled the formation of a fledgling digital economy, with startups and online businesses being touted as the country's economic future, by expanding internet services and mobile connections in many corners of the country (Cerulus, 2021).

Initially, internet service was administered by Afghan Telecom, a state-owned company that built 2G and 3G networks in collaboration with Chinese vendor ZTE.

However, since the mid-2010s, the country has begun to open up to private telecom operators. Operators such as MTM Group of South Africa and Etisalat Group of the United Arab Emirates have invested and established networks, while Telia of Sweden, which had a long-term interest in local operator Roshan, only sold its stake in 2020.

Requests for comment from MTM Group, Etisalat, Afghan Telecom, and Roshan were not returned.

Continued reliance on foreign telecom companies, according to Azizi, who oversaw the country's telecoms regulator from 2015 to 2019 and now works for the United Nations' International Telecommunications Union (ITU), might put a damper on the Taliban's dreams of controlling the internet: When things get serious, when we recognize censorship is coming, outside groups could "have leverage to demand some type of respect toward freedom and respect for human rights," he warned (Cerulus, 2021).

Nonetheless, Etisalat, a major player, has expertise imposing censorship in its home nation, the United Arab Emirates.

Another concern for Afghans wishing to stay connected is how long operators will want to keep their networks up and running in the face of Taliban threats or even damage. Hundreds of antennae were targeted for destruction by the Taliban in June, leaving many Afghans without internet access.

For some businesses, the best approach may be to simply leave Afghanistan and follow the Americans. MTM Group announced last week that it was "considering our alternatives for exiting Afghanistan and Yemen." Since last year, the company, which has more than 6.3 million customers in Afghanistan, has been reducing its operations outside of Africa.

Rights activists say they still have a duty to safeguard Afghan rights while telecom corporations consider pulling out of Afghanistan. "Under international law, they have a responsibility to try to alleviate human rights violations," Chima added.

3.9 Taliban 2.0: noticeably enduring, more sagacious, and increasingly artful

The Taliban have long wished to elicit the impression that no injustice is being perpetrated within their realm, and in doing so, they have sought to persuade, proselyte and exhort their adversaries via propagandistic tactics endowed on social platforms.

It is indeed a tall order for militants who are known for conducting gruesome murders in football stadiums to attempt to pass themselves off as a recognized government, but they have now honed their political acumen over the last two decades. The Taliban are trying to create a new vision of themselves as advocates of women's and religious minority' rights who grant amnesty to their foes, according to a clever media effort (Saeed, 2021). Their detractors point out that the Taliban made available a comparable amnesty in 1996, the last time they managed to enter Kabul, prior to actually deploying a virulent wave of retaliation, but international governments have been taken aback by the Taliban's quick victory — and are eager to avert a refugee crisis — that they are indicating that they are now prepared to accept the pardons. The fact that the rebranding is gaining popularity is a remarkable turnaround for a ruthless dictatorship that previously barred women from civic spaces and obliterated cultural artifacts such as the Bamiyan Buddhas. By simply perusing the Taliban's Twitter and other social media platforms, one may easily realize that their bleak epoch

is far less perceivable. Following their entry into Kabul, the militants began posting videos and images of their fighters exercising hard, eating ice cream, and looking terrific. In other web films, protective Taliban check in with minorities including as Shiite Hazaras and Sikhs, claiming to be out to safeguard them. Sunni Taliban leaders even attended a huge Shiite memorial service. To calm fears that women will be removed from Afghan public life again, one authorized Taliban Twitter handle broadcast a video of girls enrolled in school after the takeover in Herat. The Taliban's spokesperson stated emphatically that the country will not be utilized as a launching pad for terrorist organizations in the future. The core aim, as argued by many, is that of gaining visibility (Saeed, 2021). China, for instance, is a major objective of the charm drive, with assurances from the Taliban that they will no longer back Uyghur insurgents in Xinjiang, in western China. This is all about maintaining Iran pleasant by being courteous to Hazaras. Iran, which is mainly Shiite, has entered a fragile period of collaboration with the Taliban, with whom it was unified against a mutual US foe, but any replay of the Taliban's prior atrocities against the Shiite minority may rekindle Tehran's animosity rapidly.

3.9.2 Twitter resorption

The public relations onslaught is already showing signs of success in foreign capitals (Saeed, 2021). In an interview, Pakistan's Ambassador to the EU, Zaheer Aslam Janjua, stated, "The messages coming out of Afghanistan are optimistic." "The Taliban have announced amnesty [for former government officials] and are pressuring women and others to return to work, which I believe is one of the international community's major concerns. "Given the Taliban's guarantees, Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi declared the Taliban's "propaganda" to be untrue. "The Taliban have begun maintaining social stability and repeated their pledges of safety for local inhabitants and foreign diplomatic posts," the Russian foreign ministry said. The Taliban's words were "encouraging," according to a senior envoy from the United Arab Emirates, who spoke to Reuters. (Along with Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and the UAE were the only countries to recognize the last Taliban government in 1996). China is perpetrating its usual stance of neutrality vis-à-vis the affairs of the international community in exchange for the Taliban ceasing to assist extremists in Xinjiang. Even Iran, historically the Taliban's most adamant foe, is keeping its cards close to its breast when it comes to whether it will henceforth tolerate the Taliban, but it has showed signals of being open to considering a reformed Taliban.

Indeed, the Taliban's rapid rise appears to have caught Western administrations off guard. Rather than immediately labeling them as serial killers predicated on their history, it appears they are being offered the chance to redeem themselves (Saeed, 2021). "We will judge this regime based on the choices it makes and by its actions rather than by its words — on its attitude to terrorism, crime, and narcotics, as well as humanitarian access and the right of girls to receive an education," British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said in parliament shortly after the seizing of power by hand of the Taliban.

It is indeed a stance shared by France, whose Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian stated that while the Taliban's vows to human rights are encouraging, "they must confirm it."

In all circumstances, London and Paris are extending a fair opportunity to the Taliban.

3.9.3 Undeserving assurance of trust?

"You simply cannot trust the Taliban's political front," Ansari concluded. "You simply cannot believe their promises because they either don't have control over their troops or pretend to."

Furthermore, the Taliban's claims have been accompanied by alarming qualifiers. In a press conference held on the very first weeks of power, its spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid stated that women's rights will be maintained "within the boundaries of Islamic law." Other pledges to fundamental rights were cloaked in similar, ambiguous terms. Mujahid revealed minute details on the Taliban's next move, stating solely that the group is in "serious talks." This is where the Taliban's plan is starting to fall apart. While the Taliban can present a polished version of their activity on social media and in some districts of Kabul, carnage is difficult to conceal. According to news sources, the Taliban have already assassinated a well-known poet and a relative of a DW journalist. The Taliban shot on protestors in the cities of Jalalabad and Asadabad, and women were pulled off the air. Other film shows people being apprehended and abused in the streets. The removal of a statue of one of its leaders, who was murdered by the Taliban, has enraged the Hazara community.

Despite assurances that there would be no retaliation, the BBC reported. "What we've seen is that the Taliban have a more improved intelligence apparatus in anticipation of marching into all major cities in Afghanistan, not just Kabul," Christian Nellemann of the Norwegian Centre for Global Analyses told the BBC.

"Hard to imagine they've changed," one EU ambassador said, "I don't see.... steps in that direction." Previous resentments are likely to resurface once the Taliban can earn worldwide legitimacy.

On a different note, it emerges that Afghanistan's technology result was confirmed by the Taliban, not the West.

The US-led coalition had superior weaponry and financial resources. The Taliban, on the other hand, benefited the most from technological development (Saeed, 2021).

Wars are frequently moments of technological progress, despite or perhaps because of their awful human costs.

The Napoleonic Wars gave us tinned foods, and the American Civil War pushed submarine development. In the meantime, the Second World War began with spitfires, infantry assaults, and horse-drawn wagons and finished with radar, V2 rockets, fighter jets, and atomic bombs. (Perhaps most importantly, the war ushered in the beginning of the technology revolution by breaking German codes at Bletchley Park).

According to the narrative, the faction with the most technological advancements triumphs. These forces can adapt to changing situations thanks to new innovations, new systems aid in tracking down their targets, and new weapons allow them to destroy the enemy more effectively than before. However, Afghanistan is a unique situation. There has been technological advancement, such as the advent of drone warfare. However, the US and its allied forces have not achieved as much progress as in the past, nor have they been as significant as some experts have suggested. In reality, contrary to widely held belief, technological advancements have benefited the Taliban more than the West during the course of the conflict's 20 years. They started this battle with AK-47s and other simple, conventional weaponry, but today they use mobile telephony and the internet to upgrade their weapons and command-and-control systems, but more importantly, to conduct tactical messaging and impact campaigns.

Which reasons for said lackluster and unequally distributed technical progress?

Let us examine the aforesaid inquiry.

3.9.4 Nihilistic vs. "choose-your-own-adventure" combat: a cogent query

For the Taliban, the conflict in Afghanistan has dichotomously represented a matter of life and death. As discussed above, the criminal organization has dramatically managed to adjust, resist, and survive in the face of hundreds of thousands of foreign troops from NATO countries, as well as being chased on the ground and from the air. While the majority of their combat gear has remained modest and modest maintenance (often a Kalashnikov, some ammunition, a radio, and a headscarf), they have had to pursue modern technologies from other insurgent organizations or design their own.

Improvised explosive devices, commonly known as IEDs, are one such example. Many affiliated casualties were caused by these basic weapons than by any other. Initially triggered by pressure gradient, similar to mines, they had developed by the war's midway so that the Taliban could trigger them off with cellular telephones from anyplace with a cell service. The Taliban's inventions are all the more impressive since their technological baseline was originally lower (Brachman, 2006).

However, the Taliban's genuine scientific breakthrough occurred at the tactical level. They have endeavored to overcome the flaws of their previous tenure in office, despite being keenly aware of their prior inadequacies. Between 1996 and 2001, they favored secrecy, and only one photo of their leader, Mullah Omar, was known. The Taliban, on the other hand, have created a savvy public relations team that uses social media both at home and abroad. IED attacks were typically videotaped and distributed to one of the Taliban's many Twitter feeds to aid recruitment, funding, and enthusiasm. Another example is the practice of systematically searching social media for catchphrases such as "ISI support"—a reference to Pakistan's security service, which has ties to the Taliban—and then deploying an army of internet bots to relay texts attempting to rebrand the organization. Things were considerably different for the coalition. Western forces did have access to a broad variety of innovative equipment, ranging from space-based surveillance to remotely piloted robotics and drones. The war in Afghanistan, on the other hand, was not a war of necessity for them; it was a war of aggression. As a result, most of the equipment was developed with the goal of

lowering the incidence of fatalities rather than attaining complete victory. Air power, drones, and technology that may speed up the supply of rapid medical treatment were all substantially invested in by Western forces. Gunships, body armor, and roadside-bomb detection have all been prioritized by the West as ways to keep the enemy at bay or shield soldiers from damage. The West's overriding military objective has always been elsewhere: in the conflict between major powers. In terms of technology, this may entail developing hypersonic missiles to compete with those developed by China or Russia or developing military artificial intelligence to try to fool them.

Drawing on the statement claiming that “Technology is neither a cause of war nor a guarantee of success. Instead, it acts as a facilitator,” one may discuss further as follows (Saeed, 2021).

As it was wedged between these two realities, the Afghan government wound up getting more in affinity with the Taliban than with the alliance. This was not a war of aggression; it was a fight of necessity. However, the government was unable to progress at the same rate as the Taliban, due to the fact that foreign militaries provided the majority of the technologically advanced forces. Although the Afghan army and police have undoubtedly contributed bodies to the battle (with many lives sacrificed in the process), they have not been able to develop or even run modern systems on their own. Western countries were wary of arming Afghans with innovative armaments, worrying that they would be neglected or fall into the hands of the Taliban.

In this vein, the Afghan air force may epitomize such instance. Roughly two dozen propeller aircraft were handed to it, and it was trained on them. This allowed for some close air assistance; however it did not emerge as particularly “avant-gard.” Working with the US also ensured that Afghanistan was unable to seek knowledge transfer from other countries, thereby constraining it in an alleged development halt. Thus, what sort of conclusion can we draw from the said events? One may claim that technology is neither a catalyst for conflict nor a guarantee of success. Instead, it acts as a facilitator. In the hands of eager, disciplined humans who are ready—and able—to achieve whatever advance is required, even simple weaponry can win the day. It also suggests that future battlefields will resemble Afghanistan: there will be fewer traditional computational fights won by the military with the most firepower, and more old and recent technology deployed alongside each other. It appears that way in disputes like the one between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and this is a paradigm we will be likely to encounter more of in the future. Technology may no longer be able to win conflicts, but ingenuity may, especially when one side is struggling for survival.

3.9.5 Afghanistan's critical electricity and IT infrastructure are being targeted by the Taliban.

The Afghan IT field, among the few bright spots in the war-torn country, is now under threat from the ongoing violence (Kumar, 2021).

According to a 2012 USAID assessment, Afghanistan's telecommunications sector had grown to become one of the greatest profitability industries, with a per year revenue of \$139.6 million, amounting for more than 12% of overall government revenues (Kumar, 2021).

Many observers consider Afghanistan's IT sector to be amongst the rare bright spots in the war-torn country. "It was one business where the government and private sector were able to work together to deliver services to Afghans while also producing revenue for the government and private enterprises," said Mohammad Najeeb Azizi, former chairperson of the Afghanistan Telecom Regulatory Authority (ATRA). However, as the crisis in Afghanistan deepens, with US-led forces departing and the Taliban reclaiming a foothold in a country they once dominated with an iron hand, this promise is swiftly dwindling.

Afghanistan's IT and other essential infrastructure have been targeted frequently as the Taliban has made sweeping strides across the country in the early months after their insurgency.

Taliban attackers blew up fiber optic equipment and system components in Islam Qala, Herat province, on July 5th of last year. Islam Qala is also a migrant passage where a majority of foreign non-governmental organizations (NGOs) engage with thousands of deported refugees on a daily basis.

Residents in the city now have no access to the internet, according to the ATRA. Initially after their advent, twenty-eight telecommunication antennas have been disrupted across the country, while another twenty-three have been partly harmed due to the ongoing conflict, negatively impacting digital and mobile communication services in the country, the impoverished nation's electricity infrastructure has been taken out, making power supply extreme. "In the previous six months, thirty-nine energy pylons that transport

supplied power into Afghanistan have been damaged," according to Sangar Niazi, spokesperson for Da Afghanistan Breshna Sherkat (DABS), the country's main power supplier.

Via these power poles, Afghanistan absorbs roughly 70% of its 1,600 megawatts of electricity from neighboring nations (Kumar, 2021).

"Some were fully demolished, while others were partially damaged, causing power outages in the provinces of Kunduz, Baghlan, Kabul, Nangarhar, and Parwan," Niazi declared (Kumar, 2021).

Consulting firms in Afghanistan worry that if the fighting continues at its current pace, the increased infrastructure costs and hazards would deter new investment. "When fighting factions shut down services, it has an impact on these companies' revenue creation and makes it harder for them to justify the costs." It could lead to a decision to shut down sites proactively or limit expenditure in their care, depriving people of these vital services," stated ATRA ex-chairman Azizi.

Evidently, the Taliban assaults on IT and energy infrastructure have a budgetary impact on more than just private firms. The cost of restoring the electricity power poles has been rising, according to DABS spokesperson Niazi, placing pressure on the government's economy. "It costs roughly \$100,000 to put a pylon back up after it has been completely damaged. Other minor losses cost between \$500 and \$5,000," he added, furthering the notion that Afghanistan's national electric utility had spent about \$1 million in the last six months alone (Kumar, 2021). According to Azizi, ordinary residents are the ones who suffer the most from infrastructural degradation.

"Afghans employ telecommunications services not just to enhance their life, but also to keep in touch with their family members at such trying times," he explained. "Mobile operator is a basic demand of the Afghan people and a public service infrastructure." "Protect key services that are used not only by regular folks but also by the warring parties," Azizi urged the fighting sides. The Taliban attackers, according to Niazi, are "adversaries of light" who are turning a vital infrastructure into yet another war fatality. It constructs an endeavor which is prone to plunge the country not solely into physical but also intellectual oblivion, as finally stated by spokesperson Niazi (Kumar, 2021).

Chapter 4

The Taliban Online: A movement founded on old moral norms has mastered the use of new communication technology developed in the West.

The Afghan Taliban has employed startlingly sophisticated social media strategies to generate political momentum and, now that they are in power, to make a public argument announcing they are ready to run a modern nation state after virtually twenty years of conflict, despite their adherence to ancient moral norms. Taliban supporters typically challenge the West's dominant image of the group as illiberal, vitriolic, and hunched on vindictiveness, whilst also remaining within the progressing frontiers of liking and information that technology companies utilize to police user activity, in accounts bulging across Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram — and in group chats on apps such as WhatsApp and Telegram.

Experts assume at least one public relations company is advising the Taliban on how to convey pivotal points, magnify messages across channels, and create potentially viral photos and video clips, much like business and political campaigns do throughout the world.

Militant shooters clothed in camouflage and carrying machine weapons appear undisturbed in an eastern province not far from Kabul, amid a lovely pink and blue sky, in one shot from a video shared online in Afghanistan.

Prior to the emergence of cellphones, Internet connections, and free social media sites, widespread distribution of such propaganda material would have been virtually impossible for an insurgent force in Afghanistan a generation ago. Although the country trails behind the rest of the globe in terms of Internet connectivity, it has risen rapidly over the last decade as a result of a flood of foreign investment. However, the target audience for most — if not all — of what Taliban sympathizers post on social media is unmistakably international. This includes Afghans living in other countries, potential allies abroad, and even the deeply skeptical Western powers that have poured hundreds of billions of dollars into seeking to form a

long-term, yet now-defunct, Western-style democracy in Afghanistan since the Taliban were deposed in 2001 by a US-led invasion.

In recent months, there has been an uptick in online messages offering a gentler, more reassuring face of the Taliban, whose viciousness during its previous reign over the country was notorious, with mass executions, repressive moral codes, and the exclusion of women from schools and workplaces. On this note, Taliban spokesperson Suhail Shaheen tweeted, "The Islamic Emirate has commanded its Mujahideen and once again tells them that no one is permitted to enter anyone's residence without permission." "No one's life, property, or honor shall be damaged; the Mujahedeen must safeguard them."

Shaheen has over 350,000 followers on Twitter (Timberg & Lima, 2021).

"Today's Taliban is incredibly tech-savvy and social media smart — they're nothing like the Taliban of 20 years ago," said Rita Katz, executive director of SITE Intelligence Group, which tracks online extremism. At a time when an organization that previously sheltered Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda reintroduces itself to a wary world, analysts warn that assertions of a more mature and accepting Taliban should not be taken at face value.

Many Afghans with more modern views are leaving in panic by whatever means available since the Taliban adheres to a deeply orthodox interpretation of Islam.

Simultaneously, the Taliban's and their sympathizers' ability to operate mostly within the restrictions of businesses like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube has left Silicon Valley vulnerable to escalating political tensions: Conservatives in the United States have questioned why former President Donald Trump was banned from Twitter, but other Taliban officials were not.

The explanation, according to observers, could be as simple as Trump's posts challenging platform rules banning hate speech and encouraging violence for years. The Taliban of today, for the most part, do not.

"The Taliban is definitely threading the needle in terms of social media content policies," Katz said, "and hasn't yet crossed the noticeably clear policy-violating lines that Trump has."

"This doesn't mean the Taliban shouldn't be removed from social media," Katz cautioned, "because the waves of propaganda and messaging it's spreading — permissible as it may appear by some content policy standards — is fueling a newly emboldened and extremely dangerous global Islamist militant movement." Afghanistan's potential next leader is a once-defeated guerrilla.

The challenge for American technology companies is exacerbated by evolving geopolitics as the Taliban seizes power, despite differing designations from the US government. The State Department has recognized the Pakistani Taliban as a foreign terrorist organization, but the Afghan Taliban has not received the same designation. The Afghan Taliban, on the other hand, has been designated as a sanctioned entity by the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC).

Facebook has branded the Taliban as a "dangerous group" based on those judgements, giving it a policy-based lever to use when deciding to remove accounts — regardless of the content of the posts. This week, Facebook-owned WhatsApp shut down a popular hotline set up by the Taliban for people to report incidences of violence, looting, and other atrocities.

That decision has sparked outrage among many who have worked in the country and witnessed how effective WhatsApp has been in Taliban operations as the group attempts to function as a government rather than an armed insurgency. WhatsApp, which serves as the primary means for Afghans to communicate with one another in a country with limited telecommunications infrastructure, has allowed people in areas controlled by the Taliban to register complaints and concerns with the group, including about civilian deaths, for several years (Timberg & Lima, Today's Taliban uses sophisticated social media practices that rarely violate the rules, 2021).

"Now that they've taken over the entire country, it's much more difficult to shut down everything associated to them because, ultimately, Afghans suffer," said Ashley Jackson, author of "Negotiating Survival — Insurgent Relations in Afghanistan," a new book.

Such WhatsApp setups were common even before the Taliban gained power, according to Daniel Knowles, a foreign correspondent for the Economist magazine. "I'm a little irritated that I didn't write about these WhatsApp helplines a long time ago," he remarked after learning of the hotline's closure. "However, they weren't 'helplines' when I first heard about them."

It was more equitable since your local Taliban could be reached via WhatsApp and would settle problems if you called. It's just the way they run things."

Facebook knows that US sanctions date back to President George W. Bush's administration and has sought additional direction from OFAC, according to a source familiar with the company's deliberations who spoke on the condition of anonymity to speak freely.

For specific circumstances, OFAC has issued carveouts in the punishment lists in the past. OFAC is housed in the Treasury Department, which has declined to comment.

YouTube also stated that it will continue to erase accounts "believed to be owned and operated by the Afghan Taliban" in order to comply with US sanctions.

However, Twitter, like a number of other corporations, is giving the Afghan Taliban additional leeway by refusing to remove accounts claiming to speak for them. In public statements, US officials have been careful to state that the administration has not made a decision on whether or not to recognize the Taliban authority. The Taliban, like other Islamist organizations such as the Islamic State and al-Qaeda, have long seen an opportunity to use Western communication technologies against them — and have done so with a dexterity that has vexed those tasked with shutting down or blunting their communications.

Even in the early years after U.S. forces drove the Taliban out of Kabul, Afghanistan's capital, the group used blog entries to spread propaganda, according to Emerson Brooking, a resident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab. According to Brookings, the Taliban was on Twitter by 2011 and Telegram by 2014. In 2016, the Taliban took over a crucial location in a northern region for just a few minutes to film a propaganda movie that went viral on social media. By 2019, the Taliban had figured out how to "take over" hashtags, or inject a popular hashtag with its own messaging, a type of "spammy" conduct that can result in internet companies taking action (Timberg & Lima, Today's Taliban uses sophisticated social media practices that rarely violate the rules, 2021).

The Taliban and its followers, like other operators of sophisticated social media campaigns, have a vast number of accounts linked across multiple platforms to ensure that their communications apparatus is not easily squelched by the actions of one or two tech corporations.

According to Darren Linnell, chief researcher for the Clemson University Media Forensics Hub, "based on the sheer volume of output, numerous of the accounts are controlled by individuals whose primary employment may well be social media." "These accounts aren't maintained by Taliban officials or fighters; instead, they're run by people who have constant Internet connection on both a desktop and a mobile device, as well as adequate English language skills."

The Taliban's methods became even more sophisticated as it became evident in recent months that the Americans would ultimately withdraw, with statements praising each advance on the battlefield and promising a better Afghanistan ahead.

In April, a post on the Taliban's English-language website called feminism a "colonial instrument" that "attacks the institution of family in a family-centric Muslim society." The next month, another spoke for press freedom, calling it "vital for every culture and country."

The Taliban's latest social media techniques can be considered as part of a larger charm offensive, which includes recent public statements about pardoning individuals who collaborated with Americans and pushing competent people not to abandon the country.

Analysts, on the other hand, are suspicious of the Taliban's use of social media to rebrand itself. "We should be quite wary about it," Brooking added (2021).

4.2 The Taliban Social Media Quandary

In response to a comment on freedom of speech, the Taliban used their first news conference just days after taking control of Afghanistan earlier this month to take a jab at Facebook.

"This question should be directed at those who profess to be proponents of freedom of expression yet refuse to allow the publication of all facts," said Zabihullah Mujahid, the group's spokesperson. "I may inquire on Facebook... This is the type of inquiry that should be posed to them."

The response, which implied that Facebook was restricting free speech, revealed an odd power dynamic: even as the Taliban pushes for US troops to leave Afghanistan, it relies on American social media companies like Facebook (FB) and Twitter (TWTR) to spread its message both within and outside the country.

Multiple Taliban spokespeople, notably Mujahid and Suhail Shaheen, maintain active, unverified Twitter accounts with over 300,000 followers apiece.

However, several of these sites, like Facebook and its subsidiary WhatsApp, have stated that accounts controlled by or endorsing the Taliban would be blocked. The Taliban's efforts to fight or avoid limitations on its online operations show how reliant the terrorist organization has become on Western tech companies and the internet in general — and point to a possible shift from the group's reign decades ago, when the internet was openly prohibited (Iyengar, 2021).

Zabihullah Mujahid, the current Taliban's spokesperson, talks at his first press conference at the Government Media Information Center in Kabul, Afghanistan, on Tuesday, August 17, 2021.

"Overall, numerous social media platforms and messaging apps have played a crucial part in the Taliban's media strategy," said Weeda Mehran, a lecturer and Afghanistan expert at the University of Exeter who studies extremist propaganda.

As the Taliban retakes control of Afghanistan, such platforms are becoming increasingly essential. Much of the group's attention thus far has been on building a more sanitized and rehabilitated image than it was known for during its previous reign of terror. According to Safiya Ghori-Ahmad, a director at policy consulting company McLarty Associates and a former State Department adviser on Afghanistan, platforms like Facebook and Twitter are critical to that endeavor both inside and outside the nation (Iyengar, 2021)

"The Taliban are making a concerted effort to modify their narrative and the way they're seen," she added. "As a result, I believe you're starting to see a shift. Much of it has to do with the widespread usage of cellphones and the fact that many Afghans now own them. They've recognized that you can truly distribute your message using these tech platforms."

From enforcing internet censorship to circumventing it, the Taliban's tactic has dramatically evolved in line with current times and requisites.

The Taliban's present attitude toward media and technology is diametrically opposed to that of the Taliban while it was in power in the 1990s and early 2000s (Iyengar, 2021).

The Taliban later imposed television and internet bans, claiming the latter was necessary to "control all those things that are wrong, obscene, immoral, and against Islam." According to Mehran, the Taliban's online presence in its current form began after the militant group was ousted from power in 2001, when the militant group began posting videos and sharing messages online. Since then, it has avidly embraced sites like Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Telegram, none of which existed during its previous administration (Iyengar, 2021).

Over the last decade, Afghanistan's adoption of the internet has coincided with a growth in internet usage. According to the latest available numbers from the country's Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, the country has almost ten million internet users and around twenty-three million mobile users in 2019, with eighty-nine percent of Afghans having access to telecommunication services. According to the government, Facebook Messenger has about three million users in Afghanistan¹¹⁵.

As a result, rather of implementing internet restrictions, the Taliban is attempting to circumvent them – at least for the time being.

4.2.2 The dramatic brunt of the Taliban usurpation on social media

While the US administration and the rest of the world debate whether or not to accept the terrorist organization as Afghanistan's formal government, several Silicon Valley firms have stepped in to help. Facebook's long-standing prohibition on the Taliban was reaffirmed across all of its platforms, including Instagram and WhatsApp, the latter of which apparently took down a Taliban helpline in Kabul as well as numerous other Taliban accounts (BBC, 2021).

"We have banned the Taliban from our services under our Dangerous Group policy because they are sanctioned as a terrorist organization under US law," a Facebook spokesperson stated. WhatsApp declined to comment on the hotline restriction, but claimed it was "obligated to comply with US sanctions regulations," which included "banning accounts that appear to identify themselves as official Taliban accounts."

YouTube has stated that it will continue to "delete" Taliban accounts. Although Twitter has not explicitly blocked Taliban accounts, a spokesperson for the company stated that "keeping people safe is our top concern, and we stay watchful."

On August 16, 2021, Taliban militants keep watch along a street in Kabul.

¹¹⁵ *ibid*

"At the end of the day, I don't think [the Taliban] want the internet to be prohibited. I do not believe they want YouTube to leave the nation, nor do they want Google to go, nor do they want Facebook or Twitter to simply pack up and leave "According to Ghorī-Ahmad.

If the Taliban gains official recognition from the international diplomatic community, the connection between the Taliban and the internet platforms may become even more problematic — a decision that will be based in large part on the current shape of the Afghan government.

"If the Taliban allows for an inclusive government and them... being a part of that government, then they have effectively earned their legitimacy in Afghanistan, for want of a better phrase," Mehran added. If this occurs, it may be more difficult for companies like Facebook and YouTube to justify keeping the violent organization off their platforms.

Hence, the future of online expression is uncertain.

The true test of the Taliban's internet strategy may not be what the group says, but what the Afghan people are allowed to say.

There has already been a flutter of discontent online, with recordings of rallies in Kabul's streets and of the Afghan capital's circumstances being extensively shared on social media. However, if the discontent grows, the Taliban may become more forceful in restricting internet access for the people it intends to rule.

"In the future, the Taliban will almost likely wish to exploit technology for public relations and propaganda. However, now that it has gained control of Afghanistan, it would very certainly try to restrict Afghans' use to social media in order to limit their access to information "Madiha Afzal, a foreign policy scholar at the Brookings Institution, agreed. "Platforms like Twitter and WhatsApp will have to find out how to deal with Taliban propaganda while also ensuring that Afghans have access to these platforms if the Taliban tries to restrict access."

At the same time, the Taliban requires that online material adhere to Islamic law, which analysts believe will only add to the difficulty platforms will have in continuing to operate in the nation. "I believe it will be a very difficult and delicate balance for a lot of these digital businesses to find out how to traverse that market," Ghorī-Ahmad said.

On August 17, 2021, Taliban militants keep watch at an access gate outside the Interior Ministry in Kabul. Aside from that, there is already widespread concern that the Taliban may utilize social media in a more nefarious way, such as to track down and assassinate Afghans who worked for the US government or military.

According to Facebook's head of security policy Nathaniel Gleicher, the firm provided a one-click mechanism for Afghan users to lock their profiles and is releasing pop-up notifications on Instagram in Afghanistan describing how to secure one's account. "We're collaborating closely with our business, civic society, and government colleagues to give any assistance we can to help safeguard individuals," Gleicher added.

Twitter is collaborating with the Internet Archive to respond to user requests to erase earlier tweets and has provided the option of temporarily suspending accounts if Afghan users are unable to delete information. "We've taken some interim measures, such as restricting the display of connections and assisting members in the nation in understanding how to hide their profiles from public view," LinkedIn added.

"If the Taliban silences it and makes it inaccessible to them, then that should tell the tech businesses a lot about the Taliban," Mehran added. "They should take it into account when deciding whether the Taliban should be allowed to have a presence on such platforms."

4.2.3 Taliban's international cognizance: intense propagandistic action vis-à-vis the English-speaking audience

The Taliban's English language messaging is developed in English and geared for an English-speaking audience, as evidenced herein. While the English language material is invariably a mere translation of information initially conceived in Pashto or Arabic, the substance of many of the communications suggests that they are deliberately intended for international audiences. Insurgent demagogues consistently opine on current affairs that are consuming the Western media scene, in addition to the expected attention on developments within Afghanistan. Notwithstanding its belligerent tone and glaring English language faults, the relative performance of the argumentation and commentary supplied reveals a purposeful attempt to

reach the international English-speaking community on themes that they anticipate will evoke some level of reaction.

The format, tone, and substance reveal that the statements are not destined for an Afghan viewing audience, and as formerly stated, the Taliban's night letters are considerable in terms of culturally and tactical expertise than their Internet propaganda. Rather, at least to some degree, these English language messages epitomize a purposeful endeavor to impact the English-speaking public. The traditional media, which functions as a buffer between occurrences and rhetoric on the ground and viewers around the world, is the bridge between the online Taliban and the local Taliban. It is indeed far more than a basic dispersal or repetition. It is a distinct entity with a separate culture and set of goals from the other parties involved in the process. The Western media provides the primary optic through which most Americans and members of other Western countries discover and interpret the conflict. It is also the default method for rebel messaging to permeate the English-speaking world, as just a small proportion of Western nationals consult the Taliban's official websites. The motivation behind this investigation of media coverage of the Afghan conflict is to learn how frequently traditional media reports mention statements made by Taliban representatives. While the analysis is primarily concentrated on the online posts mentioned earlier, the resistance in Afghanistan has also endeavored to disseminate its messaging through immediate communication with members of the media.

Taliban remarks or messages find their way into stories disseminated by major Western or worldwide media outlets in a variety of ways (Stelter, 2010). Journalists on the ground in Afghanistan have observed that the Taliban are incredibly simple to contact for comment, whether by phone, SMS, e-mail, or even instant messenger.¹¹⁶ Taliban spokespersons routinely contact journalists in an attempt to relay their version of events on the ground prior to the Afghan government or coalition troops can. Journalists interested in finding Taliban remarks or learning more about their strategic messaging can go to the same insurgent and sympathizer websites examined in this study.

Like intercontinental participation, the Taliban organization has recently issued a public statement regarding the political and military turmoil occurring in Ukraine, whose war horrors have been unceasingly perpetrated by Russian forces operating under Putin's command. As Russian forces pushed into Kyiv, the Taliban authority in Afghanistan claimed it was "closely observing" developments in Ukraine and advocated for a "peaceful dialogue" between the two parties. "All sides must stop from taking positions that could escalate violence," the Taliban warned in a statement.

The Taliban further demanded that Afghan students and migrants in Ukraine be protected. "The Islamic Emirates also urges on all parties to the situation in Ukraine to devote special attention to the safety of Afghan students and migrants," the statement added.

The Taliban leadership has recognized the *Voice of Jihad* website as the sole communication protocol for delivery of its pronouncements and news bulletins, despite it being frequently out of operation. Furthermore, websites established by Western scholars, defense analysts, and bloggers, such as jihadology.net, the NEFA Foundation, and the SITE Intelligence Group, often repeat insurgent communications, often with commentary and analysis. However, in many situations, it is ambiguous how or where correspondents acquire the Taliban leaders' remarks that they have used in their reports.

Acknowledgement is more likely when a statement is taken from a recognized Western security or defense analytical website, such as the NEFA Foundation. In a 2009 Associated Press article about a message from Mullah Omar on the occasion of Eid ul-Fitr, Kim Dozier credited the SITE Intelligence Group with acquiring and disseminating a duplicate of the insurgent message (Dozier, 2010). In most cases, however, the included message is attributed to an unidentified "Taliban spokesman." Zabihullah Mujahid and Qari Yousuf Ahmadi, the two most prominent Taliban spokespersons, are commonly credited, however even these identities are said to be pseudonyms employed by a variety of people.

It is therefore unknown how many of these connections are established over the phone, SMS, e-mail, or other forms of communication. In the absence of being able to analyze the incidence of Taliban contact with the media at the source, another option is to check for Taliban messages in the message content itself. The goal of this analysis is not to identify minor distortions or deliberate shifts in journalists' language as a result of engagement with the Taliban.

¹¹⁶ Gwakh, "Taliban Employs Modern Weapons In 'War of Words'."

This kind of content analysis exceeds the focus of this research, and it would necessitate admission to journalists and a considerably larger dataset than is publicly available. Instead, a surface-level analysis is being used in this case.

Hand-coding the sample corpus of media news stories on Afghanistan to look for direct quotations would be the most accurate way to conduct this analysis. Given the complexity of conducting such an analysis on thousands of tales over a lengthy period of time, a news sources were utilized to conduct the analysis. Currently popular incidences of n-grams commonly associated with a story that includes a statement from a member of the insurgency, such as "Taliban spokesman" or "Mullah Omar said," provide a coherent and elevated criterion of the involvement of Taliban demagoguery in mainstream media news stories over time, albeit it is not as precise as hand-coding.

4.3 Taliban's Information Delivery Methods: a disclosed inspection

Many of the Taliban's operations and control areas are ungoverned (at least from a Western perspective) territories where tribal autonomy from the state is prized. Segmentary societies, such as the Pashtuns, primarily inhabit these locations. Lindholm's description of segmentary societies (Lindholm, 1977) lends credence to the idea that tribal organizational and normative characteristics, such as those cited by the Taliban, obstruct the creation of state power. Segmentary societies are distinct from other types of civilizations in that they prefer to join only when they believe they are losing control over their own manner of living. During the Taliban's early ascent to power in 1994–6, when Afghans were battle-weary and yearning to reclaim control of their lives that had been lost during two decades of conflict, as well as during the archaic and ineffective Mujahidin administration following Najibullah's collapse, the Taliban were adept at exploiting such sentiments. The Taliban leadership promised stability, which the Afghans eagerly accepted (at least until they recognized what the Taliban ultimately represented). In their strategic communication efforts, the Taliban use the media discussed in this chapter to achieve simple goals such as "forcing the invaders to withdraw" and "re-establishing Shariah throughout Afghanistan." Many Afghans militant groups subscribe to these two fundamental goals, defying Western conceptions of the Taliban.

In fact, Afghan militants avoid intricate message tactics that risk alienating their target audience, which is generally impoverished, illiterate, and conflict-weary Afghans, by using a simple and convenient strategy. The brevity of their strategic goals is reminiscent of their early triumphs when they swore to achieve (and mainly did) two highly wanted goals: establishing security and enforcing law and order through fast Islamic-based justice.¹¹⁷ Although the Taliban's communications and narrative universe are limited, their information assets are plentiful. Within a particular outline, the number of objectives, messages, and narratives can be defined and framed. The Taliban will now be able to "insert" this information-message/story-narrative treasure chest into the litany of delivery mechanisms accessible to them.

Notwithstanding the misapprehensions of technology such as cell phones and the internet, the Taliban and other Afghan insurgent organizations have successfully embraced contemporary communication and technology to their advantage. The Taliban currently use modern delivery means to convey their thoughts and opinions, including video productions, Disks and Albums, internet site pages, text messaging, Twitter, and Bluetooth transmission of audio and video data.

Despite an intensive endeavor by Afghan rebel organizations to assert control over territory, groups such as the Taliban lack the people and material required to impose a large-scale occupation of area within Afghanistan. The International Crisis Group stated in 2008 that the Taliban "continues to send inconsistent messages that reveal internal rifts and the insurgency's diffuse nature" (ICG, 2008).

The lack of effective government counterattacks and the dispersion of jihadist messages through local and foreign media sources aided the Taliban in propagating their messages. The Taliban have taken advantage of this scenario by creating multilingual websites, militant periodicals, and a variety of other media, all of which are addressed in this and other chapters and allow the Afghan insurgents to compete in the hearts and minds combat space.

¹¹⁷ Early accounts from the Taliban's formation suggested that the movement's main goal was to restore law and order in Kandahar province.

In essence, the Taliban's use of the internet, social media, radios, films, and other storage media to advance their agenda has enabled them to appeal directly to the public without the need for a mediator who may alter or filter their voice.

Furthermore, due to the sheer prevalence of illiteracy, particularly in Afghan rural community, this format attracts more attention than published works. A generous portion of this media production is not only purchased, but also supplied to journalists. Archive footage from the struggle against the Soviets, videos of guerrilla training, attacks on government and multinational forces, and the devastation or seizure of enemy equipment constitute the majority of the material. Ultimately, one of the most common routes for these photos and films to reach their Afghan targets is through mobile phones.¹¹⁸

This segment explores a range of Taliban IO delivery methods, some of which have yet to be evaluated by academics. Since the creation of their flagship webpage, Alemarah, the Taliban have had a significant presence on the internet. This site has grown in sophistication over time and is now available in Pashto, Dari, Urdu, Arabic, and English. As a result, the site caters to a wide range of audiences, including worldwide visitors as well as Afghans, Arabs, and Pakistanis. The Taliban also have a sizable social media presence, with accounts on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. They also convey their messages via films and DVDs. They have "media studios" linked with them, such as Mana-ul Jihad, al Hijrat, and El Emarah, which are detailed in the book. They also deploy "spokesman" on a regular basis to communicate with local and international media. Finally, they broadcast their narratives and related stories on a variety of radio stations. Finally, graffiti is used to connect with target populations (Jonhson, 2018).

4.3.2 The internet

Alemarah, the Taliban's official website, initially surfaced on the Internet in mid-2005 and is the Taliban's primary source of information for both domestic and foreign audiences. This is a straightforward website with well-articulated religious, ethnic, historical, and sociopolitical commentary. Alemarah publishes comprehensive and up-to-date reports on the Taliban's actions in Afghanistan. Islam, news, opinion, announcements, poems, taranas [chants], essays, books, journals, and a connection to Shar'iaht Voice, an online Taliban radio station, are among the sections. Alemarah is indeed blue and white, with labels for the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and the Voice of Jihad on the main page, as well as their logos and a white flag. It operates as a virtual public relations hub for the Taliban and its audience, providing Afghan combat information in five languages (Pashto, Dari, Urdu, Arabic, and English). The website's text is written in effortless syntax for the most part (Jonhson, 2018).

The website's Pashto and Dari parts are aimed at Afghan citizens as well as Pashto and Persian-speaking people of neighboring nations like Pakistan, Iran, and Tajikistan. Although many Afghans, particularly in rural areas, are illiterate and have limited internet access, Alemarah's Pashto and Dari webpages are utilized to facilitate communication with local media, the schooled public, and to a lesser degree the urban community.

The educated population, in turn, disseminates Taliban messages to the general public via conversational exchanges and other media outlets such as radio, newspapers, television, and online websites. In contrast, audiences in adjacent countries, like as Iran and Pakistan, have a significantly greater access to the internet, allowing the Taliban to entice them with provocative anti-Western and anti-Afghan government issues in their public relations campaign. Political cartoons are becoming a forum for disseminating general anti-Western attitudes to the Afghan constituency, despite the fact that they are exclusively found on the Taliban website.

4.3.3 Urdu, Arabic, and English sections:

In addition to Dari and Pashto, the Taliban have intentionally selected foreign languages to reach out to some crucial populations outside of Afghanistan. Urdu is a widely spoken language in Pakistan and other South Asian countries, as well as being the official language of Pakistan. The use of this language on the website reflects the Taliban's deliberate effort to reach out to its Urdu-speaking supporters. To put it differently, the Taliban's reliance on Pakistani supporters emphasizes the use of an Urdu portion on the website.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 14–15.

The Taliban obtain sanctuary, private money, and, as the world media and US military sources have increasingly revealed, government subsidies and guidance, particularly from Pakistani intelligence (Gopal, 2015) (Waldman, 2010) (Tomsen, 2011) (Gall, 2014).¹¹⁹

Those who actively support the Taliban with asylum, finance, and ammunition can expect the Taliban to keep them updated on military progress on the battlefield, similar to the patron–client relationship. In this scenario, a website is an efficient and accessible means of disseminating information and communicating. Meanwhile, Alemarah's inflated news and other publications highlight the Taliban's ongoing effort to appease and amaze its international audience and supporters with their victories over Afghan and international forces on the ground. A same logic can also be applied to the Arabic language on the website. The Taliban's commitment to make the website appealing with a variety of material, along with a monthly Arabic magazine called *Al Somood*, can be seen on the Arabic webpage, which is one of the most updated areas of the website. Interviews with key Taliban officials, military operation reports, Taliban biography, a martyrs' list, and the quarterly regional military operation selection are all included.¹²⁰ The Taliban recognize that their authority and viability are reliant on Muslim constituencies within the Islamic community. The Taliban's legitimacy may be gained by public support for the insurgency, and its success will be attained with access to rich financial resources throughout the Arab world; nevertheless, the English webpage's intended audience may differ significantly from the Urdu and Arabic ones.

The English language is a worldwide form of communication, and as such, it acts as a conduit for Taliban messages to reach the Western world. The majority of the publications are intended to demonstrate the Taliban's strength while also portraying foreign forces' failure in the Afghan conflict. They are used to talking with the West and putting government pressure on leading nations to withdraw their troops from Afghanistan. The Taliban intended, and continually attempted, to distort the popular view of the conflict in the West by using disproportionate displays of authority, fear, and a functional shadow government. The downfall of the Dutch government in February 2010 was the first European and NATO government to fall as a result of the war in Afghanistan (Traynor, 2010). Similarly, providing reports in English aids the Taliban in demonstrating the failings of international forces who are constantly attempting to halt the insurgency's growth. Although there are fewer websites that disseminate Taliban statements in English, the Taliban do try to design English declarations and "war updates" on their official website (www.alemarah.info), Twitter, and some jihadist magazines, such as *In Fight*, an online photo essay publication that contains high-resolution photos of combat in Afghanistan superimposed with English statements detached from the Alemarah website. In conclusion, through their website Alemarah, the Taliban have welcomed the usage of the internet.

The website has been blocked on several occasions and has existed under a variety of addresses, but it currently transfers between service providers. Dari, Pashto, Urdu, Arabic, and English are the five languages covered. Its reports include multiple attacks against the United States, the Afghan government, and their allies, as well as collateral damage caused by foreign air strikes. The Arabic-language magazine *Al Somood*, for example, has connections to authorized magazines and sections devoted to official articles and remarks. The magazine should be accessible in both PDF and hard copy formats.

It includes in-depth studies, tactical data, and discussions with field commanders and other key personalities in the military. There are also video snippets of recent activities accessible. However, unlike several other Islamist websites, Alemarah lacks discussion forums, while some unofficial pro-Taliban forums do exist. It also lacks instruction manuals and does not link with other jihadist groups in other theaters, which sets it apart from other jihadist websites. Alternative sites, such as those that broadcast Taliban pronouncements, live alongside discussion forums.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ For example, the 92,000 US military intelligence files "leaked" in the Wikileaks incident in the summer of 2010 revealed Pakistan's complicity in the Afghan conflict, namely state-provided backing for the Taliban and the Haqqani Network.

¹²⁰ Former Taliban "shadow" governors interviewed comprise Qari Omar Farouq (Faryab 2009), Mauluvi Raz Haider (Balkh), Nur Mohammad (Wardak), Mawlawi Muhammad Muhsin Hashimi (Takhar), Mullah Shahabuddin Ghorri (Herat, 2010), and Qari Mohammad Ismail Siraji (Jawzjan), to name a few.

¹²¹ International Crisis Group, "Taliban Propaganda: Winning the War of Words?" *Asia Report* 158 (July 2008): fifteen.

4.3.4 Social networking: FaceBook, Twitter, and YouTube

In December 2010, the Alemarah website aired an interview with Abdul Satar Maiwandi, the site's editor, in which he stated explicitly: "Wars nowadays cannot be fought without media." The heart, rather than the body, is the target of media, and once the heart is beaten, the battle is won." This interview was particularly fascinating since it was the first time the Taliban media commander expressly detailed the Taliban's information operations' venues and goals, which included email, texting, tweets, blogs, YouTube, and Facebook. Maiwandi stressed the importance of the main Taliban website as well as increased use of social media, particularly Facebook and Twitter, to spread Taliban messaging.

While the Afghan government in Kabul is noticeably absent from social media, the Taliban have been Afghan innovators in establishing Facebook and Twitter profiles and using them to promote their propaganda narratives, particularly those directed at Afghan youth and young adults. The Taliban used to just use jihadi websites and blogs to discuss their viewpoints and spread their ideologies and self-perceived accomplishments online a few years ago. Owing to its simplicity and the multi-tasking capabilities of social networking media, these forums have lost some of their utility as social networking sites have started to dominate the industry. The Taliban have taken note and responded appropriately, demonstrating that they are cognizant of the consequences of their actions.

There were barely 2,000 internet users in Afghanistan before the US invasion in 2001; by 2010, the country had a slew of internet providers and a million customers (1,000 per cent growth in the past ten years).¹²² Mr. Amirzai Sangin, the Afghan Minister of Communications and Information Technology at the time, predicted that there will soon be over two million Afghan internet users.¹²³ According to some estimates, Afghanistan has around 155,000 Facebook users. This figure is projected to rise as Afghanistan invests heavily in information technology.¹²⁴

The Taliban are actively using Facebook to communicate their message to specific groups, where they have a sizable "network of friends." Over 2,000 people "like" the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan page, which appears to be the Taliban's official Facebook page, while other Taliban members and supporters each have hundreds of Facebook friends with whom they can share pro-Taliban messages. (As this book was being completed, Facebook officials appeared to have banned or removed the most significant Taliban page.) However, it appears that the Taliban continue to publish and network under the names of individuals.) They look to be adaptable and enthusiastic about building their social media network.

Taliban Facebook profiles, such as the Taliban's official website, Alemarah, are crammed with hundreds of Taliban videos, images, and tales. Their website offers up-to-date news, videos, chants, images, and discussions on a variety of themes. The Taliban viewership is currently restricted to a few thousand people. However, with the availability of online connectivity in Afghanistan, it is likely to rise.

Despite the fact that there are specific pages dedicated to disseminating Taliban propaganda on a daily basis, many Taliban supporters share Taliban messaging through their own profiles in order to reach as many people as possible.

Numerous al-Qaeda and Taliban-related content are frequently found on their profiles.

Apart from the Taliban's official Facebook page, there are a plethora of other Facebook pages with Taliban-related news and propaganda under various identities. The Taliban can also use these platforms to broaden their reach and interact with their intended demographic. The Taliban, meanwhile, has an official Twitter account with over 5,600 (and growing) "followers." Multiple US invaders killed and wounded, two tanks damaged in Logar combat," "4 puppets killed in confrontation with Mujahidin," and "Mujahidin kills 12 US-Afghan cowardly forces in martyr attack" are just a few examples of the Taliban's inflated and propagandized "military victories."

The Taliban have also employed a network of Twitter accounts to retread pieces from the Alemarah website, and the official Taliban Twitter accounts contain the table below.

¹²² Internet World Stats: Afghanistan Country Profile, <http://www.internetworld-stats.com/asia/af.htm>; Index Mundi, Afghanistan: internet users, <http://www.indexmundi.com/facts/afghanistan/internet-users>; World Bank Data: Internet users (per 100 people), <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.P2>.

¹²³ Policy statement, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, H. E. Mr Amirzai Sangin, Minister, Ministry of Communications, and Information Technology (MCIT).

¹²⁴ "SEAF-AGF & RANA Technologies Enterprises Partner to Expand Internet Service in Afghanistan," 24 January 2011, <http://www.afhangrowthfinance.com/detail.asp?CatID=18&ContID=44>.

Table 1.1: Primary Taliban Twitter accounts (as of summer 2011)

| User account | Number of followers | Number of Tweets | Status |
|------------------|---|------------------------------|---------------------------|
| @Alemarahweb | Over 5,500 followers as of August 2011 | Over 1,626 as of August 2011 | Active |
| @Alemarahwebsite | Only fifty-eight followers as of August 2011 | Over 384 as of August 2011 | Active |
| @Alemarahmedia | Only twenty-three followers as of August 2011 | Only 36 as of August 2011 | Inactive since March 2011 |

Secondary Taliban Twitter accounts (as of summer 2011)

| User account | Number of followers | Number of Tweets | Status |
|-----------------|---|----------------------------|-------------------------|
| @Ahmadkhan111 | Over 171 followers as of August 2011 | Over 180 as of August 2011 | Active |
| @ABalkhi | Over 141 followers as of August 2011 | Over 367 as of August 2011 | Active |
| @GhazniwalTariq | Only thirty-six followers as of August 2011 | Only 4 as of August 2011 | Inactive since May 2011 |

The above shown figure illustrates screen dumps of the most followed and active Twitter accounts attributed to the Taliban: @Alemarahweb and @adamkhan11. Both accounts were still active on 17 August 2011.

Dr. Tariq (also known as Azam Tariq), Mostafa Ahmedi, Zabihullah Muhajid, and Qari Yousaf Ahmadi are the Taliban account managers for the Alemarah website; the monikers or egos of Dr Tariq, Abdul Qahar Balkhi, and Mostafa Ahmedi maintain the network of Taliban Twitter accounts as well. Before YouTube canceled the video account in the summer of 2011, the Taliban Twitter account, @Alemarahmedia, broadcast Taliban indoctrination videos via YouTube. Although the @Alemarahmedia profile has been dormant since March 10, 2011, a number of the YouTube video links posted to it are still active. The YouTube account (FreedomIsOur1) purports to advocate the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, broadcasting a range of anti-Western and extremism video clips affiliated to the @Alemarahmedia account. Notwithstanding these misapprehensions of technology such as cell phones and the internet, the Taliban and other Afghan militant groups have enthusiastically embraced contemporary communication and technology. The lack of substantial Kabul government (or US/NATO) counterattacks aids the Taliban in spreading their messages. The Taliban have taken advantage of this by developing a multi-media strategy that allows them to be a dominant participant in the "hearts and minds" combat area, an odd reality given the old-guard Taliban's doctrinal underpinning (Jonhson, 2018).

4.3.5 DVDs and videos

The Taliban were eager to adopt methods and strategies used by other insurgent organizations for message distribution, including leveraging the internet and releasing DVDs containing clips of insurgent operations, executions, and sermons. By 2006, when a plethora of Taliban "media studios" sprouted out, the ubiquity of Taliban-produced videos was obvious. The media wing of al-Qaeda, As-Sahab Media, released speeches ascribed to al-Qaeda ideology Dr. Ayman al Zawahiri in 2006, and was responsible for the majority of the early versions of Taliban-produced movies. At first, Taliban agents purportedly disseminated the DVDs for free, dispersing them across village areas like flyers and shabnamah (Watson, 2006).¹²⁵

Across both Afghanistan and Pakistan, DVDs are marketed in kiosks and distributed to reporters (both Western/international and local). Most of these videos have the following goals: recruitment, morale boosters, religious indoctrination, and delegitimization of the incumbent Afghan regime and the global community that supports it. Scenes showing militant planning and practice (such as showcasing weapons platforms), attacks, venerating "martyrs" murdered in these activities, conversations with Taliban leaders

¹²⁵ According to anecdotal evidence, the Taliban strewn hundreds of DVDs across the town of Niyazi, which is less than 3 miles from Kabul's center, in 2006.

and/or Taliban religious scholars, and commentary on the Taliban's "state of things" are typical video footage. Footage of Taliban fighters infiltrating abandoned or deactivated US and NATO bases have recently become widely circulated.

4.3.6 Productions by the Taliban and other guerrilla video companies

There are indeed a multitude of Taliban-affiliated "media studios," and Taliban propaganda videos are no longer completely dependent on the As Sahab media wing. Mana-ul Jihad, al Hijrat, and El Emarah are among the studios that produce and distribute Taliban videos that have been formally sanctioned by the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. This section covers a lexicon of video production models that feature the Taliban and other militant groups in Afghanistan. Many of the video producers are in frequent contact with one another, either locally and worldwide (often overlapping in terms of subject elements) and communicate a consistent message of jihad versus the West, notably the United States.

4.4. Afghanistan's Islamic Emirate

A media unit of the Afghan Taliban devoted to the removal of all foreign soldiers from Afghanistan and other Muslim nations. Qari Muhammad Yousuf Ahmadi and Zabihullah Mujahid, who have successfully exploited social media to connect other Mujahid factions, lead this organization. The video presentations are incredibly well-made and serve to justify the jihadist agenda. American Reconstruction, for example, modified the studio's propaganda tactic by emphasizing on the effects of the Afghan–NATO military assault on Kandahar's civilian population. Interviews with Afghans were conducted in order to portray the havoc perpetrated by American soldiers and thereby to entice residents to embrace the jihadist organization. The guerrilla groups spoke Dari, Pashto, and English, and subtitles were supplied in English. The studio is also quite active on the internet, posting tributes, military actions, and solicitation for potential jihadists, similar to As-Shahab.

Many regional Taliban video production studios collaborate with international video production studios to improve reliability and competence in disbursing persuasion and enrolling jihadists around the world. These video production studios use a variety of languages to reach out to demographic profiles and attract new jihadists from the Arabian Peninsula, Somalia, and Turkey to join the movement in Afghanistan. Loyalists can readily become radicalized, and ideologues can persuade others to enter the movement by citing their own struggles, accomplishments, and dedication. Proficient video producers can develop the backstory and emotive allure to condemn the US and bolster jihadist courage, whereas Taliban video producers can only provide video material. Taliban representatives

The Taliban have mastered the art of using the media to publicize themselves. The Taliban have cultivated ties with journalists from radio, television, and newspapers, and they use these connections on a regular basis to conduct their awareness campaign. The Taliban have established spokespeople as contact points for worldwide and regional media in this endeavor. Zabihullah Mujahid and Qari Yousuf Ahmadi, for example, are two famous spokespeople.

These representatives communicate with the media on a frequent basis by email, SMS, and phone calls, and they post incident reports online. Journalists have noted that, unlike the government and international representatives, Taliban spokespeople are available 24 hours a day. However, the international community has previously received contradicting accounts from Taliban spokespeople or those who are not affiliated with the Taliban (Jonhson, 2018).

Mujahid and Ahmadi, the Taliban's full-time spokesperson, operate as propaganda outlets for the Quetta Shura and will take responsibility for assaults blamed on the Haqqani Network. It remains disputed whether these spokesmen's names correspond to individual people or to a group of people who issue pronouncements under one of the two names (Shah, 2007) (Rivera & Gall, 2011).

Some semi-autonomous mahaz (groups) have their own spokesmen, and some greater insurgent commanding officers utilise local spokesmen to symbolize their groups, such as Mauluvi Sangeen's spokesmen Abdullah Jalali and Muhibullah Mahajir, and former Taliban commander Shah Mansoor Dadullah's spokesmen Abdullah Jalali and Muhibullah Mahajir (NBC, 2009) (AssociatedPress, 2007).

Local, regional, and international journalists can readily reach Taliban spokespeople via their email addresses or mobile phone numbers, which are prominently listed at the bottom of the Alemarah website (Jonhson, 2018).

"Official" Taliban statements can now be observed in virtually every significant news article about the Taliban, and newsletters attributed to the IEA are often distributed to locally and internationally journalists working in Afghanistan, all of which are generally translated into English, Arabic, Pashto, Dari, and Urdu. The Taliban currently has the opportunity to interact effectively with the rest of the world, as well as influence the narrative around events, as it has done for years at home and abroad via a flood of social media messaging. Experts claim it successfully circumvented the Afghan government via a relentless public relations effort that exploited misinformation and a dearth of media competence. While photographs and videos from journalists and civilians in Kabul show chaos and futile attempts to evacuate, Taliban-controlled accounts claim the city is "entirely stable and normal."

4.4.2 Shar'iah Zhagh (Shariah Radio's Voice)

Whilst the Taliban's primary sources of communication remain modest, such as night letters, word of mouth, and their website, they have frequently attempted to extend their footprint on Afghanistan's radio airwaves. With a rural populace that is largely illiterate, radio programs in Afghanistan remain a viable means of communicating and transmitting information. Unauthorized or "rogue" radio transmissions, on the other hand, are largely a consequence of the Taliban's low-tech message dissemination strategy. The majority of FM radio emitters are created or acquired in surrounding countries, such as Pakistan, which is also dealing with a surge of unregulated Taliban radio programs based on basic apparatus that can be produced or purchased for a few hundred dollars.

Several mobile communication equipment affiliated to the Pakistani Taliban were identified, seized, and annihilated in Pakistan. In both Pakistan and Afghanistan, blocking pirate transmissions has proven difficult because to the low cost and accessibility of easily obtainable gear that can be swiftly updated and dispatched back into the field. Since declaring the restart of Shar'iah Zhagh (Voice of Shar'iah) from Kandahar, their erstwhile enclave in the south, in 2005, the Taliban movement has revived its radio program in sporadic bursts (through pirate broadcasts). The sporadic transmission, which lasted over an hour each night, was thought to have been transmitted by mobile antennas installed on the backs of pickup trucks.

Although corroboration of preceding Taliban broadcasts was quasi non-existent following the Taliban regime's dismissal in October 2001, the former Taliban spokesperson Mufti Latifullah Hakimi informed the Pakistan-based Afghan Islamic Press news agency in April 2005 that Radio Shar'iah Zhagh was back on the air after a six-month hiatus. The 2005 broadcast lasted an hour and was televised in both Dari and Pashto between 06.00 and 07.00 local time. Similar media claims from 2007 claimed that Taliban radio programs could be heard in sections of four south-eastern provinces: Paktika, Paktia, Khost, and Ghazni, but local officials claimed that reception was still poor.

Correspondingly, between February and December 2007, when the Taliban occupied Helmand's northern region of Musa Qala for ten months, the Taliban's Voice of Shar'iah could be audible all across the province. Versions of the Qur'an calls for war, and religious programming were among the transmissions. The radio station had five personnel, as per a local Taliban spokesperson, and transmitted on an FM channel with the customary Afghan rhythm of non - peak transmissions. Media coverage of the Taliban's radio broadcasts had intensified by 2009, implying that the Taliban had endeavored to improve their broadcast capacities and broadcast area.

Since 2009, however, there is scant evidence that the Taliban have succeeded in launching any pirated radio shows. The internet is yet another instrument being used by the Taliban for broadcasting. In June 2009, the Taliban's Pashto-language website Shahamat (Valour) released an online edition of Voice of Shariah (previously at www.shahamat.org). The internet-based radio station transmits news, commentary, and jihadist music, with morning and evening programs updated daily. When asked how they built up these radio stations, Hakimi told the Afghan Islamic Press, "We bought the equipment from overseas and Afghan engineers here put up the stations." "The Taliban operate three radio stations," Hakimi continued. One has reopened, and the others will be operational soon" (Tarzai, 2005).

The media treatment of the Taliban's radio broadcasts has increased significantly in the past decade, implying that the Taliban have improved their broadcast skills, extended their service area, or that the media is simply reacting to or generating the appearance of a pattern. In August 2009, rumors appeared that the Taliban were airing two-hour programs in Ghazni province, implying that the Taliban have increased their transmitting skills and are providing more programming (Xinhua, 2009).

The Taliban founded the Duond Jokanyanam radio station in 2005, as well as a covert radio station that transmitted anti-Afghan government (GIROA) programs and Islamic hymns. This radio station, Voice of Shar'iah, is said to broadcast twice a day from Loya Kandahar: 6–7 a.m. and 6–7 p.m.¹²⁶

4.4.3 Taliban radio in Lower Helmand province

"Recent times, the Taliban have established their own radio station in the valley, transmitting from a secluded spot further south," Reuters reported in July 2009, referring to the pursuits of a British-funded PRT (Provincial Reconstruction Team) radio network at an outpost in Garmsir, in the south of Helmand province¹²⁷. However, it does not broadcast music, and the DJs of [PRT's] Radio Garmsir do not regard it as a threat" (Dreazen & Gorman, 2009).

4.4.5 Radio Shar'iah, Ghazni province

Radio Shar'iah in Ghazni province, according to Pajhwok, is a "standard Taliban propagandist" (Haider, 2009). Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid informed Pajhwok in August 2009 that the radio station was "the combatants' most efficient medium of communication," stating that the Taliban owned ample ground in Ghazni to run the FM radio station "unreservedly." On 88 MHz FM, Radio Shar'iah broadcasts in Pashto to the regions of Qarabagh, Giro, and Andar. Commentaries, religious programs, poetry honoring the Prophet Muhammad, pro-Taliban songs, and admonishments to Afghans "to remain away from the voting process" were among the initiatives broadcast. The Pakistani daily newspaper Nawa-i-Waqt stated in August 2009 that the substance of Radio Shar'iah's broadcasts was "anti-government." Radio Shar'iah, which was aired from a truck parked in a remote location, could be heard over a 50-kilometer radius from the province capital, according to Mujahid. He continued by stating that the Taliban had positioned analogous radio channels in the provinces of Paktia, Paktika, Konar, and Nuristan.

4.4.6 Taliban radio stations in Khost, Paktia provinces

A Taliban radio station began transmitting in Khost province in August 2009, according to the Pashto-language website benawa.com. Locals said it aired Taliban announcements and urged people to vote in the approaching elections. The Taliban transmission, according to several inhabitants of Khost province, instilled dread in the populace. They also stated that they had no understanding how or where the transmission originated. Taliban radio stations were functioning in Ghazni province and Zormat, per the benawa.com source (a district in Paktia province).

4.4.7 Taliban radio station in Nuristan province

In September 2009, CBS TV news observed from the command post of a US PRT radio station in the mountainous Nuristan province that "a fight of the airwaves" had erupted because "another villager was listening to a Taliban radio station" in conjunction with the PRT radio station. They had sprung throughout the country, physically assaulting anyone who cooperates with international forces." According to CBS, US officials stated that residents may listen to the Taliban on their new radios (provided by US forces), but that if offered the opportunity, Afghans would prefer positive material.

4.5 Programming synopsis

In the spring of 2005, the Taliban's Radio Shar'iah reappeared and began producing "structured" programming that lasted an hour at first and eventually approximately three hours. Both Dari and Pashto are used in the broadcasts. According to reports, Radio Shar'iah was transmitted in Paktia, Paktika, Farah, Ghazni, Helmand, Konar, and Nuristan by 2009. In 2007, the program was televised in Kandahar and Helmand, two southern provinces. The radio transmission systems are stated to be "portable," meaning they are positioned on the backs of pickup trucks. Within Afghanistan, "engineers" are believed to assist with the technical features of operating the apparatus. The Qur'an is translated, jihadi calls are made, and religious programs are broadcast. Harassment against people voting in August 2009 elections or favoring the government/Coalition are also widespread.

¹²⁶ [Radioinfo.com.au](http://radioinfo.com.au), <https://www.radioinfo.com.au/news/taliban-launch-secret-radio-station>

¹²⁷ Excerpt taken from OSC: Caversham BBC Monitoring in English

The Taliban radio broadcasts in southern Helmand do not have any DJs or music. On programs broadcast in the east, poetry, pro-Taliban music, or music with no lyrics are occasionally played (Ghazni). The Taliban have expanded on its website by including a 24-hour Radio Shar'iah livestream. It is said that the program is updated on a daily basis.¹²⁸ Residents in the area appear to enjoy radio broadcasts in general, but they seem to prefer stations that play music, and a varied range of music is even better. During the Taliban era, musical instruments were used to accompany the reading of sections from the Qur'an. Ziaullah, an inhabitant of Ghazni's Giro district, told Pajhwok news that he listens to Taliban transmissions every night because "he enjoys listening to music on the radio." Amir Ahmed, a citizen of Farah region, expressed similar feelings, saying, "The only thing I don't like is the Taliban-style music." I would rather listen to jazz. Something to pique our interest" (Truscott, 2006).

4.5.2 Graffiti

Graffiti with threatening messages and promises of support to Taliban officials can be discovered on the exterior of urban and rural residences and buildings in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Graffiti language, on the other hand, is more common on the Pakistani side of the border, with slogans endorsing multiple political parties adorning practically every possible inch of wall space in some areas. The Afghan Taliban has been erratic in their employment of this distribution system, especially in southern Afghanistan and the cities of Lashkar Gah, Spin Boldak (Wesh), and Kandahar City. Taliban graffiti principally tries to indicate areas favorable or receptive to the Taliban's mission and aims, comparable to hoisting the Taliban's signature white flag, whereas objectionable graffiti (menacing words) seeks to intimidate or "designate" indecisive or pro-government groups (Jonhson, 2018).

4.6 Taliban's social media strategy: a practical scrutiny

As widely discussed above, after 20 years of the War on Terror, it appears that history is reliving itself: the Taliban has retaken control of Afghanistan.

Notwithstanding the (ubiquitously refuted) pledges from the group — repudiated by the US State Department as having "one of the worst human rights records in the world" and providing safe haven to al Qaeda — the development is alarming and disconcerting.

One difference from the previous time the group was in control is the widespread use of social media and the influence that comes with having a mostly unfettered propaganda forum (Thorbecke, 2021).

Experts say the Taliban's recent online broadcasting of messages that seem at odds with the ruthlessness and oppressive policies they were known for is part of a sophisticated social media strategy that is aimed at deceiving the West and vying for legitimacy on the international stage after the unexpectedly swift collapse of the Afghan government in recent days (Thorbecke, 2021).

"The Taliban has had a social media strategy for many years now ... they use multiple social media platforms to get their messages out," Tom Joscelyn, a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, a nonprofit think tank in Washington, D.C., told ABC News. "They're responding faster -- more quickly than even the Afghan government did to events."

"Another key point is that they are very attuned to Western ears and know how to play to journalists, know how to say things that sound appealing to Western ears, and that are quite deceptive," he added.

4.6.2 A flood of messages

According to the World Bank's most-recent data from 2017, only 11.4% of the population of Afghanistan were using the internet -- a sharp increase from the 0% figure when the Taliban was last in power, but still lagging behind much of the rest of the world's 49% benchmark. It also suggests that the Taliban's target audience is actually outside of the nation (Thorbecke, 2021).

Their local audience, meanwhile, is victim to Afghanistan's dilapidated media infrastructure, which makes it difficult for fact-checkers on the ground to effectively counter false statements put out by the party in power. Moreover, as with many parts of the world, researchers have said poor internet literacy in the region compounds the risk of propaganda being taken for fact.

¹²⁸ View <http://www.shahamat.org/>

Joscelyn said the group's spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid -- who held a widely viewed press conference Tuesday -- has been active on Twitter for years. The Taliban also issues messages online in multiple languages on a regular basis, Joscelyn said, including English, Arabic, Pashto, and Urdu.

"In fact, I think they probably publish messages in more languages on daily basis than maybe even the [U.S.] State Department," he said.

While crackdowns on extremism online have pushed many bad actors associated with terrorist groups to the fringes of the internet, the Taliban operates largely unhindered on Twitter. The U.S. State Department has not designated the Afghan Taliban as a terrorist group (a label that would more explicitly break policies), and private firms largely take their cues from the government on these matters, putting social media firms in often difficult-to-navigate situations. The high-profile decision of multiple platforms to ban former President Donald Trump, for example, drew fire from even vocal critics of Trump as the nation mulled over social media's double-edged sword that some say democratizes free speech and others say weaponizes it.

In contrast to Twitter, Facebook says the Taliban has been banned on its platform for years under its "dangerous organizations" policies, citing how the U.S. sanctions the group as a terrorist organization despite not including them on the State Department's separate list. Facebook said accounts maintained by or on behalf of the Taliban are removed, and a team of multilingual local experts are working to identify emerging issues on the platform.

"Facebook does not make decisions about the recognized government in any particular country but instead respects the authority of the international community in making these determinations," the company told ABC News in a statement. "Regardless of who holds power, we will take the appropriate action against accounts and content that breaks our rules."

4.6.3 Inexpensive and effective: the outcome

Meanwhile, there are half a dozen Taliban officials active on Twitter, with a combined one million followers, according to data from Adrienne Goldstein, a research assistant at the German Marshall Digital Fund think tank. Their recent tweets largely seem to be trying to cast the Taliban as peaceful, stable, and overall more palatable to the West -- messages that the group's leaders have repeated in press conferences. While many may assume their Tweets are rife with disinformation and propaganda, a September 2020 study published in the peer-reviewed journal *Media Asia* supported this by examining the Taliban's use of Twitter and their attempts in framing what was unfolding in Afghanistan compared to information being put out by media outlets and advocacy groups.

The study, conducted in 2018, long before the current crisis, found that in the Taliban posted more messages on Twitter than the Ministry of Defense, and in more languages. Moreover, the analysis found vast discrepancies in what the Taliban said happened on Twitter and what media and civilian protection groups stated (Thorbecke, 2021).

"Belligerents are actively using online platforms where they do not hesitate to frame and disseminate disinformation that suit their desired intention," the study stated. "Observing discrepancy in terms of the number of casualties between the parties and mainstream media shows propagandistic traits."

The study suggested that the Taliban has capitalized on social media in part because its use does not require advanced infrastructure or media expertise. Having comparatively limited resources, the Taliban makes up for it by posting and sharing online more often than the Afghan government did. The study warned of the potential dangers of their "disinformation" in a region where many are not equipped with media and information literacy.

Interestingly, the research also noted that during the Taliban's previous governance from 1996 to 2001, internet use of any kind was strictly prohibited.

4.6.4 Calls for a crackdown

Joscelyn maintained that the issue of vulnerability to disinformation extends outside of Afghanistan -- and that is something the Taliban capitalized on. "They know a lot of people are gullible, and that a lot of people will just repeat what they say without thinking." He thus believes Twitter "should have been cracking down on the Taliban a long time ago."

"I think they allowed the Taliban to develop a sophisticated social media ecosystem," Joscelyn continued. "I mean in a lot of ways, they were ISIS before ISIS in terms of the behavior and what they do, from suicide bombings to the oppression of women to the harsh Sharia law they're going to implement."

"All the nasty things that are associated with ISIS, the Taliban did before them and yet -- if ISIS popped up on social media sites or Twitter feeds or Telegram channels, or any of these different platforms, generally they're more receptive to shutting them down," he added. "But with the Taliban, they're allowed to exist for years on end with the same handles, same channels."

Twitter told ABC News in a statement that they "remain vigilant" about the situation in Afghanistan in response to an inquiry about why these accounts are allowed to operate.

"The situation in Afghanistan is rapidly evolving, and we're witnessing people in the country using Twitter to seek help and assistance," the company said. "Twitter's top priority is keeping people safe, and we remain vigilant. We will continue to proactively enforce our rules and review content that may violate Twitter Rules, specifically policies against glorification of violence and platform manipulation and spam."

As the Taliban rapidly seized power, Joscelyn argued the group's social media strategy has helped contribute to the Afghan's suffering by sowing disinformation that is repeated without question by global media outlets. "They want to speak the West's language to lull the West to sleep, and they've been very successful with that," he said. "There are a lot of people who've been gullible and who have parroted Taliban talking points without any thought."

Many political figures and analysts have made statements regarding their skeptical eye towards the progressive sentiments being shared on social media platforms by the Taliban. Yet, the terrorist group is still able to post freely facing barely any difficulties. The mass amounts of Taliban propaganda being spread online may increase the group's political popularity, expand their member-base as well as international support, and ultimately, solidify their control in Afghanistan. The Taliban's utilization of media platforms could potentially ignite a revitalized global Islamist militant movement and must be taken more seriously by social media companies (Thorbecke, 2021).

4.7 The Taliban's sly social media engagement: a topical snapshot

Twitter, Facebook, and Youtube did not subsist when the Taliban ruled Afghanistan, and only 0.01 percent of the population had internet access (Heyes, 2021). The country now has around 4.40 million followers (Kemp S. , 2021), giving the Taliban a new and dangerous opportunity to influence media channels to their benefit. As soon as the Taliban took control of Afghanistan, they launched a major social media campaign (Atiq, 2021).

Throughout their persistent insurgency over the past two months, the organization has harnessed social media to disseminate a narrative of regularity in Afghanistan and portray themselves as a newly designed governing body in comparison to the deadly Taliban regime that ruled Afghanistan two decades ago. To avoid being readily suppressed by the acts of one or two digital companies, the Taliban, and its followers, like other organizers of savvy media campaigns, have a myriad of accounts associated across multiple platforms (Timberg & Lima, 2021). The organization has been seeking to depict itself as a legitimate authority institution to Afghans and a worldwide audience by attracting attention to its conversations with governments throughout the world, such as in Beijing and Moscow.

Ignoring the fact that the Taliban's new appeal has garnered worldwide condemnation, they have responded with messages underlining their yearning for peaceful coexistence (Atiq, 2021). The Taliban accuses America and other outsiders for the turmoil in Afghanistan, and they have used terrible photographs from Kabul airport to back up their claim. "I sobbed hard to witness your plight," Qari Saeed Khosty, a well Taliban supporter, wrote on Twitter. We have cried for you, the occupation's friends, for the past 20 years. "We told you Tommy Ghani will never be loyal to you," said former President Ashraf Ghani, using slang for someone who mimics Western ideas and customs. "I swear to Allah, we have forgiven you. We are here to help."

4.7.2 Response from Social Media Companies or Lack Thereof

Throughout the insurgency, the terrorist group was able to maintain a steady presence on a variety of platforms, reaching both Afghans and the rest of the planet.

Despite the fact that the group has been blocked on massive social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube, they have created dozens of new profiles that allow them to continue to actively further their propaganda-driven schemes (Heyes, 2021).

The Taliban's social media effort is mostly focused on Twitter, where they are not explicitly prohibited. Twitter has declared that it will continue to uphold its regulations against "glorification of violence, platform manipulation, and spam," (Ortutay, 2021) although these policies do not necessarily target the Taliban's marketing content that include promises of peace and equality (Mozur & ur-Rehman, 2021).

Facebook has barred the Taliban under its "dangerous organizations" regulations (Ortutay, 2021), and it has established a team of Afghanistan specialists who are native linguists of Dari and Pashto to help give cultural context and warn the firm to emergent difficulties, according to a statement. While Facebook's approach is firmer than Twitter's, its company WhatsApp, which the Taliban extensively relies on for communications (Bateman, 2021), is a more difficult scenario to navigate because the program encodes messages so that only the sender and receiver can see them. When questioned if confirmation of the Taliban's ongoing use of the messenger app implies that such safeguards are inadequate, a WhatsApp spokeswoman replied that the business depends on computer vision and user analytics to show Taliban-linked accounts (Bateman, 2021).

4.7.3 Potential Ramifications of Letting the Taliban Post Without Constraint on Media Platforms

The Taliban will most certainly gain electoral favor, considerably grow their loyal following as well as international recognition, and ultimately secure their power in Afghanistan through disseminating false information. It is quite likely that the terrorist group will build a legitimate government and create a worldwide Islamist militant movement if social media firms do not take early and unambiguous steps to identify and ban accounts affiliated with the Taliban. Afghanistan would subsequently be thrown into a condition of political upheaval, bloodshed, isolation, and conflict, especially if the Taliban were to shelter other violent factions within the country.

The Taliban have urged women to join their government, stated that women's rights will be respectfully upheld (Krauss, 2021), made a pledge to avert Afghanistan from being used as a foundation for attacks on other countries, condemned Islamic State (IS) attacks on Afghanistan's Shiite minority group, and produced other declarations that characterize them as more liberal. The Taliban, however, have instituted their own brand of local administration based on their understanding of Islamic Sharia law wherever they have conquered territory, much like they did soon before their 1996 takeover. Extrajudicial killings have been conducted (Neuman, 2021), women have been beaten, schools have been closed, and clinics and infrastructure have been blown up. The Taliban is also said to have distributed flyers in parts of the districts they control, instructing civilians to follow their orders (Niazman & Noorzai, 2021).

The longer the Taliban can freely sell and pitch their false promises on social media, the less likely it is that peace talks, discussions, humanitarian relief, or long-term stability will materialize in Afghanistan. The Taliban may soon be able to use their standing as a legitimate governing authority to warrant their deletion from special categorization lists for hazardous organizations. This renders it far more difficult for social media firms to exclude the Taliban from their platforms because they will not be able to use their dangerous organization list company standards to justify prohibiting the group's media activities.

Regardless of the fact that many political officials and analysts throughout the world have voiced reservations about the Taliban's constructive rhetoric, no effective measures have been implemented to combat the dissemination of falsehoods. The words that the Taliban has been propagating through social media platforms have the ability to re-ignite a worldwide Islamist terrorist movement, and social media corporations must take them more seriously. A Taliban official was shown in one video assuring female health workers that they will be able to keep their employment. In another, militants assured Sikhs, a religious minority, that they were safe and secure. Others warned that looters and thieves will be held at gunpoint by Talib fighters in Kabul, Afghanistan. The Taliban, who barred the internet when they initially took control of Afghanistan, have dramatically managed to reach their objectives again.

4.8 Analytical lenses: How adept in messaging is the Taliban organization?

Although it is arduous to ascertain the Taliban message's efficacy, it is indisputable that their insurgency message's legitimacy has been bolstered by their efforts to withstand a foothold across southern Afghanistan despite Afghan Government and ISAF attempts.

When engaging with Pashtun tribes on both sides of the border, Taliban initiatives are most effective—their message is approachable to a public wary of the international community. The Afghan Government and ISAF had endured a torrid season of 2007 and 2008, although the violence has not expanded far beyond the country's south and east (areas where the Taliban have secured via either support or acquiescence). This shows that rebel military and media actions have yet to cause a large-scale shift in the Afghan population's mood (General Richard's 'tipping point').

Notwithstanding diminishing optimism and mounting concerns about security and the Afghan government's mediocre performance, the public was, prior to the insurgency, not overwhelmingly averse to international military forces, according to Western surveys.¹²⁹ However, further heavy Taliban pressure and scant demonstrable betterment in the lives of ordinary Afghans, this may quickly reverse. When it comes to dealing with larger strategic matters, the Taliban propaganda effort is most efficient at the community scale. Young, destitute Afghan or Pakistani would-be jihadists, particularly refugees, are likely to be receptive to the constant images of ambushes, night attacks, and improvised explosive device (IED) strikes obtainable on video, CD, and the Internet. The dearth of additional substance beyond this message, on the other hand, is noticeable. Little attention is paid to: (a) what messages they could or should send to the West; (b) publicizing their own political and organizational plans; (c) intending to appeal to a wider Afghan and regional audience; (d) arranging operations (e.g., suicide attacks) for a more efficacious media impact; and (e) interpretation and leveraging the intercontinental community's misgivings and hardships.¹³⁰

4.8.2 Propagandistic expediencies

Notwithstanding the arrest of Taliban media spokespeople in Pakistan on two unique occasions, the Taliban have been able to spread their message thanks to a fairly secure foothold in Pakistan among a population that is either supportive or obsequious (Constable, 2006). The Taliban are renowned for being eager to accept an assault and have done so on the Internet in the past. 'Today at midday in Hazrat Jai Bab region... of Kandahar city... Abdul Rahim of the same province launched a sacrificial attack,' for example, or 'Yesterday evening Mujahideen of the Islamic Emirate shot on a plane of British invaders with anti-aircraft weapon'.¹³¹ While Taliban media officials make a concerted effort to check material they receive, they are not under the same strain as ISAF (which is answerable to a number of stakeholders).

ISAF frequently deems it difficult to compete. The Taliban's communication efforts are most successful at the local level, notably via night letters and face-to-face engagement with the population. Insurgents are typically from the same tribes as the local people, and they are fully embedded in terms of culture and language, as shown by the Pashtun tribal law code, Pashtunwali. Many tribes are still more likely to communicate with Taliban officials than they are with the central Afghan government, or indeed foreign civilian or military people, just from a socio-cultural perspective. The Taliban deploy simple, compelling communications to underscore local concerns including civilian casualties and damage to poppy harvests and tribal rituals.

The Taliban benefit from the collateral damage and civilian casualties caused by ISAF military operations as well as the impression of lack of respect for people, property and tribal customs unwittingly created by Western military tactics that prioritize force protection.

Calls to jihad, the depiction of ISAF forces as infidels, and the characterization of the Afghan government as a stooge of the West are all central threads.¹³² In Afghanistan, factual data is meager: elevated levels of

¹²⁹ 5 In the poll, sentiments in 2006 were compared to those in 2005. '59 percent believe the parliament is functioning for the Afghan people's benefit, down from 77 percent... Positive views of the United States' performance in Afghanistan have dropped 11 points to 57 percent... Life is particularly challenging in Helmand and Kandahar, where 80 percent of residents evaluate their security as poor, and 60 percent think it is worse now than it was prior to the Taliban's rule. 'Strife erodes Afghan optimism five years after the Taliban's collapse,' ABC News/BBC World Service poll, December 7, 2006, URL <http://www.abcnews.go.com/Politics/PollVault/story?id=2702516&page=1>.

¹³⁰ 'The Taliban spokesperson... confirmed that the Italians were not a particular target: "Infidels are infidels to us." They will remain our opponents as long as they are American allies'. 'Mullah Omar's spokesperson referenced on attack on Italian forces in Afghanistan,' Il Giornale, 7 May 2006. Bahram, R. and Biloslavo, F.

¹³¹ Taliban website, 3 Dec. 2006, and 8 Mar. 2007

¹³² E.g. 'As a result, the Afghan Muslim Mujahids have begun their sacred Jihad to free our beloved homeland from the crusader forces.' The Jihad will last until the crusaders' army is defeated and a genuine Islamic state is established.' Human Rights Watch is a non-profit organization that promotes.

illiteracy, along with restricted access to communications, contributes to an over-reliance on word-of-mouth transmission, culminating in knowledge that is generally erroneous, out-of-date, or indirect. Any Taliban claims of military victory (such as the destruction of an ISAF helicopter or coalition 'tanks') will be taken seriously by this audience. Afghans are utilitarian and versatile in their affiliations; therefore their evaluation of the Taliban's power is crucial in understanding whether they might take a pro-, anti-, or neutral posture toward the group.¹³³ The public has indeed proven to be susceptible to Taliban messaging ensconced in local cultural terms as a result of the Afghan government's and security authorities' activities, particularly with relation to corruption and the ineptitude of local police units.

4.8.3 Indoctrination febleness:

The Taliban's power to persuade the Afghan people suffers from a plenitude of limitations. The knowledge of the techniques of true support for them is at the heart of everything. People in the country's northern half, particularly Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras, have little sympathy for the Taliban. Many tribes in the Pashtun belt in the south of the nation are equally partitioned. The Taliban appear to lack a broad initiative-taking strategy. Both their insurgent acts and the substance of their communiqués confirm this (Foxley, 2007). With the probable exception of Iraq, the Taliban have minimal or hardly any concern in or awareness of rising issues that could help them. Returning to the belief that 'Allah will take care of everything,' the Taliban do not appear to believe that matters like as governance, economic management, reconstruction, and growth of the country are especially notable. Although many Afghans may not appreciate, or even fully comprehend, the concept of a centrally controlled Afghan state based on Western democratic values (which is in many ways unimportant to Afghan realities on the ground), the Taliban's loss of enthusiasm in providing optimism, affirmation, or alternative solutions for the future is unlikely to achieve broad public support the second time around.

The Taliban's grasp of the media's power has improved, but it is still restricted. Mullah Dadullah, the Taliban's former senior leader, said a few years before his death that "we have the Islamic right to kill these journalists and media" because he was dissatisfied with the way a specific press story had been oversaw.¹³⁴ While the Taliban has become more adept at using modern communications technology, they are still having difficulty tailoring their message. The Taliban are amazingly comfortable speaking in terms of violence and vengeance; their website focuses on bloodshed and does not provide the kind of dialogue that a credible 'government-in-waiting' would.

The Taliban published a new constitution in December 2006, but it has never been promoted or even mentioned thereafter.¹³⁵ The Taliban seem not to comprehend how the media impinges on domestic opinion in Western countries, which in turn alters government policy (Coker, 2006).

As a result, they are unable to properly exploit any such sensitivity. The Taliban's messages are frequently ambiguous and inconsistent. One spokesperson may claim an attack, only for another spokesperson to contradict the story, especially if civilians were injured. Hakimi, the Taliban's then-spokesman, denied that the Taliban had conducted a suicide bombing on a burial at a mosque in Kandahar that killed at least 20 Afghans in June 2005, but claimed to have assassinated the initial target for whom the funeral was being held.¹³⁶ There was some doubt recently over whether or not the Taliban would participate.

Steadily for the last several period, a Taliban spokesperson indicated the insurgents might participate in tribal councils planned by Pakistan and Afghanistan on both banks of the porous frontier. Other Taliban members, on the other hand, promptly dismissed the possibility of the insurgents convening the councils. In a letter, Taliban commander Mullah Mohammed Omar was alleged to have blasted the scheduled meetings as an American ruse (Achakzai, 2007). 'The Taliban are proponents of education... the people who burn

¹³³ 'I was never frightened about my family when the Taliban were here... every single minute of the last three years I have been tremendously worried.' Perhaps the Americans will come to my house tonight and molest my wife and children before arresting me.' 'We want the Taliban back, say ordinary Afghans,' C. Sands, *The Independent*, April 8, 2007.

¹³⁴ Associated Press, *International Herald Tribune*, encounter with Mullah Dadullah, 4 September 2006, 'Top Taliban military leader denies NATO casualty allegations, cautions journalists'.

¹³⁵ Asian News International, 'Taliban issues its own constitution and code of conduct,' *Yahoo News*, 9 Dec. 2006.

¹³⁶ Associated Press, *International Herald Tribune*, 1 June 2005, 'Suicide bomber blasts Afghan mosque'; and Hub in Disaster Risk management and Emergency Relief, 3 June 2005, 'Violence rages in southern Afghanistan'.

schools are not the Taliban,' stated ¹³⁷ Taliban spokesman Mohammed Hanif in an appearance in early 2006, after four years of assaulting schools and teachers, depicted as Islam's adversaries (Baldauf, 2006). They purported to campaign for a Taliban instructional program on their English portion of their website, in an effort that was reactionary, muddled, and hardly plausible given their track history in the 1990s. They can be rapidly put on the defensive, even if they have the press lead when it refers to alleging attacks. When a spokesperson, Mohammed Hanif, was jailed in January 2007 for allegedly making claims concerning Taliban divisions, the website's reaction was almost absurdly enthusiastic to dispute the remarks. ¹³⁸ Notwithstanding Afghan losses and mass casualties produced as a result of often extremely aggressive combat activities, both ISAF and the wider civilian foreign force operating in Afghanistan are demonstrating that they are accomplishing plenty to win hearts and minds. Large swaths of the neighborhood had received reconstruction, food, and medical assistance. This reveals the Taliban's disinformation campaign: they are apparently inept or reluctant to furnish or debate the equivalent degree of professional and constructive aid in any of the media they employ. Even the most alienated and bigoted locals appear to know that what is taking place in their territory is not a "Soviet-style" harsh conquest. Despite growing worries among Afghans about poor protection, dearth progress, and bad administration, the majority of the population—even in the Pashtun south—has been accommodating of foreign military presence since the recent occurrences. The Taliban may not appear to be able to sell their concept of jihad to the general public at the moment, but this is not a cause for complacency, especially in light of the current state of affairs. ¹³⁹

4.9 What will their future propaganda effort entail?

The Taliban seem not to comprehend how the media is capable of forging domestic opinion in Western countries, which in turn alters government policy (Coker, 2006). As a result, they are unable to properly exploit any such sensitivity. The Taliban's messages are frequently ambiguous and inconsistent. One spokesperson may claim an attack, only for another spokesperson to contradict the story, especially if civilians were injured. Hakimi, the Taliban's then-spokesman, denied that the Taliban had conducted a suicide bombing on a burial at a mosque in Kandahar that reportedly killed 20 Afghans in June 2005, but claimed to have assassinated the initial target for whom the funeral was being held. ¹⁴⁰ There was some doubt recently over whether or not the Taliban would partake a) more efficacious and cogent media use, including improved Internet use; b) battle actions on the ground orchestrated with messages designed to persuade the international community, such as eliciting the Tet offensive; missile attacks against civilian aircraft; multiple overlapping suicide attacks against international targets; ¹⁴¹ (d) strategic alignment of messages (with both positive and negative incentive schemes to the population) and stronger response to incidents; (c) improved performance and composition of video productions centered on broader issues; (e) improved selection and content of video productions focusing on broader issues; (f) better quality and content of video productions focusing on broader issues; (g) better quality and content of video productions focusing (e) increased sophistication: a better awareness of the larger world and how to influence it, such as by targeting specific countries, governments, or non-governmental organizations—even individual civilian or military individuals; (f) a greater willingness to discuss broader topics when confronted: the Taliban have already demonstrated that they are capable of doing so. (f) elevated utilization media methods in use by Iraqi insurgents and other violent Islamic networks—this could include more TV interviews, as well as staging kidnapping and torture incidents; and (g) enhanced use of media methods used by Iraqi insurgents and other violent Islamic networks—this could include more TV interviews, as well as staging incidents of kidnapping and torture (Coker, 2006).

¹³⁷ Several examples of Taliban night letters aiming at teachers and schools can be retrieved at the Human Rights Watch source.

¹³⁸ Alemarah.com [Taliban website], Jan. 2007.

¹³⁹ 'Sentiment is also firmly against the Taliban: not only do 89 percent of people think it is unfavorable in general, but 76 percent think it is "extremely" unfavorable'. Langer (note 104).

¹⁴⁰ Associated Press, 'Suicide bomber strikes Afghan mosque,' International Herald Tribune, 1 June 2005; and Centre of Excellence in Disaster Management and Humanitarian Assistance, 'Violence rages in southern Afghanistan', 3 June 2005.

¹⁴¹ During the Vietnam War, the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese army launched a series of offensives known as the Tet Offensive. Although the Viet Cong were defeated tactically, the Tet offensive harmed American civilian enthusiasm and led to the retreat of American soldiers from the country, making it an emblem of US political scene.

Chapter 5

Conclusions and probable analysis

The Taliban's utilization of modern telecommunication accoutrements cannot obscure the fact that their interface and signal quality are still inadequate, poorly conceived, and dogmatic. The Afghan government and ISAF, on the other hand, are not making much progress in winning over the public (Leithead, 2007). ISAF and the Taliban trading death numbers in the media on a 'tit for tat' basis is still not achieving the public perception struggle in Afghanistan: the various communities to whom the information is being delivered will, for the most part, have already formed up their minds about the outcome. The Taliban are susceptible to a concerted media effort because of their extreme techniques and intransigence and discrepancies in their approach (Foxley, 2007).

A multitude of political leaders and chiefs from Pashtun tribes living on Pakistan's Afghan border have convened a peace jirga, or tribal council, for the first time, demanding an end to Taliban violence, whereby tribal chiefs, religious scholars and young political activists sat together to demand that the Pashtun tribes' peaceful traditions, which are 'being drowned out in a sea of blood,' be revived. The Taliban media strategy appears to be focused with inflicting casualties and gaining and retaining terrain, based on their website, communiqués, and pronouncements (ironically one of the standard accusations levelled at ISAF). The Taliban are uninterested in articulating their vision of how they will administer the country, engage with other ethnic groups, or offer restoration and employment. They are not attaining a jihad in the style of the Soviet Union. The lack of a popular uprising against ISAF contrasts significantly with the Afghan reaction to the Soviets in the 1980s, implying that the people is at the very least accepting of the foreign military involvement. A media campaign with a strong Afghan 'face,' paired with interaction on the Pakistani side of the divide (with Pashtun tribes and Pakistani media), should elicit and stimulate a broader debate. The Taliban must be pressed to explain what they are doing, the techniques they are employing (especially suicide strikes), and why they are doing so. Specific issues could call into question the Taliban's authority, Islam's, and the Koran's interpretations, what constitutes jihad, and the ethics of murdering civilians. By broadening the conversation and pressuring the Taliban to speak about politics, economy, human rights, education, and reconstruction, the Afghan government and the global community could do a lot to reclaim the minds and hearts initiative. For this to work, communication must come from persons and organizations that are significant to probable Taliban militants and the Pashtun population on both sides of the border, rather than from official ISAF spokespeople. This entails participating in mosque and madrassa discussions and foisting notifications through tribal elders, mullahs, former Taliban, Afghan national and provincial governments, and the security forces that represent them (primarily the police and army). The Afghan government and its international backers must be seen to be doing what they say they will do to underlie all of this. This entails admitting errors when they occur.

Counseled procedures to initiate a positive reformation:

The following are recommendations for the global community, ISAF, the Afghan and Pakistani governments, and the Afghan people seeking to offset the effects of Taliban propaganda. They can be implemented in place of (or as a counterpart for) efficient state security, restoration, and governance initiatives.

Short term propositions:

- A more thorough examination of Taliban communiqués, including their proposed constitution, is required. This will aid efforts by the Afghan states and the central community to comprehend and confront them.
- The Taliban is far from a unified and cohesive force. In this vein, the Taliban leadership's internal and external fragmentations should be highlighted.
- There should be continual media recalls of what the Taliban did during their reign of terror, and hence what to expect if they reclaim power.
- Steps should be taken to entice the Taliban to anticipate bigger concerns like population management, politics, rehabilitation, and prosperity. The discussion should be made public, and the lack of goals for the nation should be exposed.

- Force the Taliban to justify their methods (suicide bombings, attacks against civilians and schools, and attitudes toward poppy growing) in order to highlight their arguments' inconsistencies.
- The Afghan government must be more prominent and engaged in troubled areas on a regular basis. More effort should be made to speak honestly and openly with tribal elders and villagers in attempt to comprehend their worries and issues and strictly adhere to solve them. This must be an Afghan-led initiative rather than one spearheaded by outside forces.
- In order to help 'manage expectations,' greater explanations of initiating the process and results should be presented to the Afghan people by both international humanitarian development agencies and the Afghan government. It is necessary to avoid making promises that cannot be kept. This should be accompanied with affirmations of the international community's genuine problems, the practical constraints of its work, and the fact that only the Afghan people can ultimately propel change.
- Key Pakistani and Arab news outlets that publish Taliban interviews and messaging should be aggressively targeted to guarantee that the Afghan Government and ISAF are portrayed, preferably prior to the Taliban getting their narrative across.

Mid to long term motion:

- Ultimately, success against the Taliban will be determined by real and visible advances in safety, administration, and socioeconomic factors across Afghanistan and Pakistan.
- The Afghan government's reputation must be improved. The public mood in the country's south, where the administration is often regarded as corrupt or non-existent, has proven susceptible vis-à-vis the Taliban reach. The Taliban are creating parallel judicial systems centered on Sharia law in some locations. The government needs to be seen. Official law enforcement and legal systems must be perceived as active, and most of all, impartial givers of fairness and security.
- Across both banks of the channel, the Taliban acquisition base must be engaged in order to distance it from the hierarchy by presenting more appealing alternatives.

Furthering the discussion: conclusive remarks & reflections

Operating on the ground, the Taliban have manifested their gradual capacity, in terms of adaptivity, to navigate the complex Afghan social landscape aiming to spread fear and effectively challenge the Karzai government through the sophisticated use of information and story. Their understanding of and access to their distant audiences though are limited and largely ineffective, which is reflected in their English-language propaganda (Calvin, 2011). The objective of this analysis was to assess the role and influence of the Taliban's English-language information operations in Afghanistan. English-language media that has a global reach is important to the Taliban insurgency at the strategic level. The success of the insurgency ultimately depends on the withdrawal of Western forces from the country, and the support of the war effort by Western populations largely determines how and when that withdrawal could occur. Over the past decade of conflict, the Taliban insurgency has adapted from a fundamentalist organization that outlawed most uses of technology to one that now hosts modern websites in multiple languages that update daily, initiates contact with international journalists via satellite phone within hours of events on the ground, and shares battlefield videos to sympathizers worldwide on social media sites like YouTube. Despite this drastic shift to embrace the asymmetric power of information technology, the insurgency has been largely ineffective in its use of these capabilities to engage Western populations through the use of English-language media. One way in which Taliban representatives are able to spread their messages to English-speaking populations is through citations or inclusion in the stories of journalists covering the conflict. The data analyzed here show that over the past four years, the Taliban have been unable to improve their ability to capitalize on this media channel. The high mark for Taliban presence in coverage of the war came during the 2007 South Korean hostage crisis, and, from a sheer volume perspective, insurgent messaging has never since been given as much coverage (Jurkowitz, Rosenstiel, & Mitchell, 2010).

Qualitatively, the image of the insurgency that has been conveyed through contact with Western media has not changed from the image of the Taliban that dominated the American perception of the group following the September 11 attacks. The near constant emphasis on exaggerated violent attacks against Afghan government and NATO forces has failed to penetrate into mainstream media for more than a short quote to verify responsibility for an attack. In this light, the Taliban operate in a manner similar to al-Qaeda, with

whom they have historical and operational ties. Al-Qaeda has made no attempts historically to minimize its ideological rhetoric in order to gain credibility and potentially more influence within the existing system to further its agenda. In its radical opposition to the international system itself, the ideologues of al-Qaeda have refused to pragmatically soften their message. In doing so, they have pushed themselves to the margins, arguably handicapping their influence and ability to generate profound change through their own hyper-radicalization.¹⁴² In today's media environment, it is often the free and open Western press exposing the lack of progress in the war, the mistakes of US and NATO forces, and the ineptitude of the Afghan government that drives Western opinions of the war, without any assistance from the propaganda efforts of the insurgency. Substantial coverage of the divisions within the military and political leadership, like the 2010 Rolling Stone magazine article that led to the removal of General Stanley McChrystal from command, call into question the strategic reasons for America's involvement in the war. Images and stories like those of rogue "kill teams" within the Army murdering Afghan civilians, seem to erode international and domestic support for NATO and US war efforts far more than a poorly written and minimally distributed Taliban rants against US colonialism. This argument is not meant to undermine the efforts of Western and international journalists to paint as accurate a picture of the war as possible for readers worldwide. This is a job of critical importance, and they ultimately do both Afghanistan and the West a service in exposing the mistakes that will, in the end, surface to do their damage anyway. The argument here is that the Taliban insurgency, while highly effective at the manipulation of information at the local level, has still, after nearly a decade, largely failed to engage in any substantial way with the foreign populations on whom the future of the insurgency depends. Through a lack of cohesion and consistency and a fundamental misunderstanding of their own image and how it is perceived, they have failed to shape the narrative towards the insurgency and those involved in a way that grants their goal of ruling Afghanistan any reasonable credibility. If the Taliban do learn and begin to convey a more organized and legitimate image to the world, it does not necessarily mean that they will have made the ideological and structural changes to match that new image. It is possible that the movement could hide its draconian policies and failed governance under a cloak of nicely worded news statements or video clips for an abbreviated time, but they would be unable to do so forever. If compromise and progressive governance do accompany a change in messaging, then perhaps negotiation could lead to a reasonable drawdown of more than three decades of war in Afghanistan. If the violent, uncompromising, and unsophisticated English language messaging generated by the Taliban is any sign though, the organization has not evolved much beyond its radical and fundamentalist roots.

Evidently, the Afghan government and the Taliban make significant use of social media to spread war-related information. The government did not have the authority to ban social media, nor they wished to. In other words, online media and activity used to be unrestricted in Afghanistan. Both sides have been presenting information which has neither been corroborated nor validated by mainstream media. To further their desired goals, the belligerents disseminate and inflate the amount of fatalities they claim to have incurred on each other. This is referred to as misinformation. That is what the propaganda theory claims: a multiplicity of cues that elicit the intended reaction (Lasswell, 1927).

Given that they are at odds with one another, propaganda, and disinformation via whatever means feasible, notably social media, should not be regarded as a novel or unusual phenomenon. In other terms, indoctrination appears to be commonplace throughout wartime. However, this study supports the notion that social media is susceptible to manipulation and deception. Furthermore, in a predominantly illiterate community, such proliferation and distribution of disinformation has the potential to mislead the population. It also demonstrates that, unlike in conventional or regular methods, propaganda may be conducted without a large amount of money and property. The factions have previously realized the need of offering target audiences in the information age (Castells, 2010). Nevertheless, because the digital site does not define vetting mechanisms to restrict or discern between certified and false, the PM "strainer" on social networks, at least at the micro level, cannot assist in understanding propaganda on social media, as noted by Allcott and Gentzkow (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Anyone with simple connectivity to a social internet platform can transmit information, particularly propaganda and deception. As involved factions, the Taliban and Afghan government distribute material that is not endorsed by mass press due to a lack of third-party validation or "filtering," competence, and technological capabilities.

¹⁴² Rid and Hecker, War 2.0: irregular warfare in the information age, 217.

Such inconsistencies, unsubstantiated numbers, and content corroborate our proposed argumentation and support the idea that social media is abused for disinformation campaigns, primarily when leveraged by belligerent actors. This has been reported.

Furthermore, neither party has ever publicly apologized for innocent casualties; for example, the Taliban unequivocally and adamantly refuted civilian deaths in Kabul incidents in January, despite reports from the media and the UN Assistance Mission for Afghanistan (UNAMA) that they were largely noncombatants. In terms of morbidity and mortality, the assaults were the deadliest. According to media sources, the Kabul Intercontinental Hotel attack killed twenty-five people on January 20, 2018, and three days later, an ambulance filled with explosives and a suicide attacker targeted government buildings in Kabul, killing 103 and injuring 205 people. This supports the propaganda theory, which states that influences that cause unwanted responses should be eliminated (Lasswell, 1927). Social media platforms are sites where people develop, evaluate, and modify the significance of emblems and assertions (Spier, 2017). The combatants presented the material in specific frames by looking into their language, or terminist screens as Rogan calls it (Rogan R. G., 2010). The Taliban have been attempting to project themselves under the mujahidin - Jihadi frame, whilst the government has been portraying the Taliban as terrorists and insurgents using the terrorism chassis. The administration was considered a puppet regime by the Taliban. Both sides have focused on "how" (accent frame) rather than "what" (Scheufele & Iyengar, 2014). Each side tries to present a situation using the elements mentioned by Lasswell (1927) and Scriver (Scriver, 2015). The hazard of spreading misinformation and deception is enormous in a setting where aggressors have no accountability to anyone. In a culture with a low literacy rate, such a behavior may easily utilize the networked public realm. Advertising and media exposure, according to Allcott and Gentzkow (2017), are "highly related" with headline truth and falsehood. People in Afghanistan appear to be more prone to the direct consequences and susceptibility of propaganda and disinformation since they have one of the weakest literacy rates in the developed world and the concept of digital literacy is essentially non-existent. The findings support Lippmann's thesis (Herman & Chomsky, 2018) that persuasion becomes "a regular organ of popular government," which is not restricted to the state in this case. In this scenario, the Taliban are abreast of the government with regard to using social media. The organization has sent out more tweets than the government. Although the mainstream media did not give a unified image of all sides' statements, it was used as a benchmark or 'ground truth' for this study. Nonetheless, they presented a new story that differed both the government's and the Taliban's. Amongst the explanations for this could be the variance in their venues and their ability to keep their viewers captivated with their major pillars (television and newspaper). Variability is also conceivable if specialized prejudice prevails, but without a complete analysis of the mainstream media for bias, it is too premature to assess. In Afghanistan, no similar study has ever been undertaken. The fact that the mainstream media consistently reports lower numbers for both parties support the idea that each outlet has a core platform that represents its own identity. Nevertheless, the media paradigm suggests that the country's national media occupy a middle ground, while it is too necessary to ascertain their situation in terms of party bias, neutrality, and variability via successive investigation.

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Prospectus

The Taliban's "advantageous usage" of the Internet demonstrates the group's capacity to "acclimate" to current conditions and their accompanying requirements. The purpose of this thesis is to deconstruct the roots of the Taliban's media usage and coverage in the context of ongoing persecution and human rights violations. The Taliban's social media conundrum encapsulates the insurgents' historical and factual growth in terms of social media strategy, as well as their analytical and interpretive grasp of the Afghan struggle. In this sense, the Taliban's use of the Internet, or more accurately, their "advantageous misuse" of the latter, exemplifies the aforementioned, inherent inclination of the Taliban.

Thus, the ultimate purpose of this dissertation is to investigate the alleged bias in the mainstream media's portrayal of religious issues in Afghanistan. At the municipal and provincial levels, the Taliban's war strategy and governance approach concentrates on rallying against political weakness and building simple, strict, and seemingly effective leadership.

Since 1978, insurgents in Afghanistan have been locked in a persistent battle with two occupying forces. The Taliban in Afghanistan is a highly entrepreneurial, though dangerously so, outfit that has brought a wide range of tactics and technologies from battles throughout the world to Afghanistan. Adaptation and creativity have become a way of life for Afghan rebels.

The Taliban's military strategy and developing government approach will be examined in this piece as a broader paradigm for the Taliban's alarming level of military and media sophistication. A Review of the Literature on the Taliban in Afghanistan uncovers evidence of Taliban creativity and adaptability in a range of areas. The Taliban have demonstrated their ability to exploit and propagandize their message, as well as the methods by which it is delivered. The Taliban's media channels include the Layeha, Ummat Studios, Radio Shariat, and Alemaraweb, which acts as the Taliban's official website and delivers information in Dari, Pashtu, Arabic, and English. Giustozzi also argues on the Taliban's use of singers, radio broadcasts, cassette tapes, the Internet, and DVD production.

On a purely economic level, the Taliban have achieved alarming results in terms of economic development and oversight of what appears to be a mismatch between their Islamic ideals and the illicit drug trade.

Notably, opium is a significant source of revenue for the Taliban. Farhana Schmidt examines the Taliban's participation in and dominance of the global opium market in 'From Islamic Warriors to Drug Lords: The Evolution of the Taliban Insurgency,' demonstrating how the Taliban has benefited financially and changed organizationally in order to capitalize on the opportunities associated with poppy cultivation (Schmidt, 2010) (DuPee, 2011).

In summary, the use of significant changes in technology and procedures at the tactical level to increase lethality, as well as the rollout of different approaches that comprise managerial breakthroughs – the latter constituting a significant departure from previous patterns of behavior by Afghan rebels - will be investigated.

The government also imposed limits on television and the internet, arguing that the latter was required to "control all those things that are erroneous, indecent, immoral, and against Islam." As a result, the academic journey to grasp the religious universe – broadly defined – and the many dimensions it encompasses is fashioned in relation to the growth of our own thought process. The research will also look into the elements that impact the success or failure of battlefield technologies, as well as the Afghan advances' risky timing. Along this line of thought, the following chapters will look at the Taliban's social media conundrum - the latter encompassing the insurgents' social media's historical and empirical evolution, as well as analytical and interpretative understanding.

The aforementioned theme will serve as the foundation for our initial thesis, which will emphasize the Taliban's intrinsic adaptability, whose supposed "sophistication" in terms of military and socio-political assets is becoming increasingly alarming. The goal of this research has been to collect and examine English-language media and communications produced by Afghan rebel factions, particularly information transmitted directly on the Internet.

Let us now briefly outline the historical *iter* and associated evolution of the Taliban organization.

The Taliban have been a part of Kandahar's 'Quran Belt,' which literally translates to "students of Islam" or "seekers of knowledge," for generations. The current scenario in Afghanistan began in 1978 when a radical Afghan communist government was founded in Kabul. The leaders of this new administration failed to recognize the perils of forcing rapid modernization on an Afghan populace that is exceedingly traditional

and conservative. In 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan to defend the collapsing Afghan Communist administration.

The Soviet occupation of Afghanistan lasted a decade, until the Soviets were forced to leave in 1989 by a loose coalition of Mujahideen rebels backed by the US and other Sunni Arab states.

In order to strengthen Pakistani influence in Afghanistan after the Communist government was deposed, the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) favored the more violent, fundamentalist commanders, such as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Ahmed Shah Massoud. The Northern Alliance, a largely Tajik militia led by Tajik commander Ahmed Shah Massoud, was the last group to stand up to the Taliban, who had eventually taken control of the majority of Afghanistan by 1996, including Kabul. During this time, the Taliban formed a loose alliance with Osama bin Laden and his Al-Qaeda terrorist network. The Northern Alliance helped expel the Taliban and force their withdrawal using American technology.

Hamid Karzai, a Pashtun from the Popalzai tribe, was chosen as the interim government's president. The Taliban were excluded from the meetings, as were the majority of important Afghan power players. The Bonn Process aimed to return Afghanistan to the strong central control system that evolved only after the second Anglo-Afghan war in the late 1800s. After the Taliban's defeat and the installation of the post-Bonn Karzai government, the Afghan public initially welcomed foreign soldiers into the country. As the new Afghan government sought to gain support through patronage and co-option of militia leaders, corruption resurfaced from the top down.

Moreover, the lack of resources, investment, and security in Southern and Eastern Afghanistan prepared the groundwork for lingering anger and volatility. According to some sources, the Taliban organized a revival in the eastern provinces as early as 2002. Given the mountainous and permeable frontiers between those provinces and the ungoverned spaces in western Pakistan, those provinces served as an accessible entrance point for the Taliban.

By 2007, the Afghan insurgency had entrenched itself in large areas of the country's southern and eastern regions. Hamid Karzai was re-elected President of Afghanistan in a highly rigged election in the fall of 2009. By Fall 2009, the number of IED incidents had more than tripled from 2007 as Taliban insurgents largely controlled the southern regions of Helmand and Kandahar.

Despite being brutal and effective in cleansing parts of the nation of Taliban terrorists, US forces were unable to achieve long-term gains. These additional troops were supposed to conduct a refocused counterinsurgency strategy that aimed to keep the insurgency at bay long enough for the Afghan government's legitimacy to strengthen and security to be handed over to Afghan security and military forces. The Southern and Eastern regions of Afghanistan have seen the most insurgent fighting. Eighty percent of IED activity in Afghanistan took place in five provinces in the south and east: Helmand, Kandahar, Uruzgan, Ghazni, Khost and Khost in March 2010.

Furthermore, the US and the Taliban signed a peace accord in Doha, Qatar, on February 29, 2020. The agreement called for the removal of all American and NATO forces from Afghanistan, as well as a Taliban vow to prevent al-Qaeda from functioning in regions controlled by the Taliban. On May 1, 2021, the Taliban launched a massive onslaught, coinciding with the withdrawal of most US soldiers from Afghanistan. After Taliban militants captured Kabul, the capital city, President Ashraf Ghani had fled the country when he was still president.

The decline in US support between February 2020 and April 2021 was, arguably, one of the factors contributing to the Afghan National Security Forces' (ANSF) loss to the Taliban. Errors in US coalition training of the ANSF, as well as Afghan police extorting villagers and military officers supporting themselves by producing phantom soldiers, were cited as factors. Cronyism in ANSF military appointments and President Ashraf Ghani's incapacity to build a strong national consensus were considered as crucial factors in its overall collapse. Following the February 2020 US–Taliban agreement, key processes in the 2021 Taliban offensive began, including a bottom-up succession of negotiated or paid Taliban surrenders from village level upwards, (George, Afghanistan's military collapse: Illicit deals and mass desertion, 2021), the Taliban's effective use of online social media and its strategic choice of attacking northern provinces, (George, Afghanistan's military collapse: Illicit deals and mass desertion, 2021) (Zucchini, 2021), and the Taliban's freedom of movement on the main Afghan highways, which resulted from the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) allowing both the drop in US support in February 2020 and changes in US support beginning in April 2021, which harmed the ANSF's effectiveness by removing technical, proprietary

software, and logistics support, particularly aerial support, after the latter had been trained as a military force heavily reliant on high-tech aerial infrastructure (Borger, 2021) (Sadat, 2021).

Attempting to estimate the number of Taliban fighters operating in Afghanistan emerges as exceedingly difficult. The name "Taliban" largely neglects the vast distinctions in identity, organization, and interests among the various actors and groups involved in the fight. Afghan society is mostly rural and ethnically diverse. The Pashtuns are Afghanistan's most populous ethnic group. The Hazaras and Uzbeks, who inhabit in the central and northern regions, make up 9% of the population. Within each of these ethnic groups there are numerous tribal and clan divisions. The Taliban movement has been dominated by ethnic Pashtuns from its inception. Mullah Omar and many of his initial inner circle come from the Ghilzai Pashtun confederation. President Hamid Karzai's Popalzai tribal heritage descends from this region.

Evidently, the insurgency's nature is influenced by Afghanistan's rural makeup and high percentage of illiteracy. Indeed, the Taliban's messaging to the Afghan people is defined by the high degree of illiteracy, lack of Internet access, and linguistic distribution. The Quetta Shura Taliban (QST) is the name given to this branch of the insurgency, which is thought to be led by Mullah Omar and his Leadership Council, a majority of which has roots in the predominantly Pashtun provinces of Afghanistan. Mullah Omar's QST leadership council has little disagreement among the insurgency's leaders. Jalaluddin Haqqani, a former Mujahideen commander, was the Khost member of the initial Leadership Council. Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hizb-e-Islami is an al-Qaeda-affiliated extremist group made up mostly of Uzbek militants.

Outgunned and outmanned on the field, the Taliban is continuously prodding at the ultimate weakness of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) and the US-led coalition. The Taliban are not as politically susceptible as their foes and are able to exploit the basic and historic narrative of 'fighting the invader' to override issues surrounding their activities. Like the Mujahedin before them during the anti-Soviet jihad, they have attempted to hold the combat initiative by operating in small units and targeting targets of opportunity such as convoys and outlying stations that are lightly defended and isolated. The Taliban are teaching the same lessons of collateral harm to the Americans and ISAF soldiers as they taught to the Soviets nearly 40 years ago.

Operations resulting in the murder of Afghan civilians have proved difficult for the coalition and have provoked fierce rallies against foreign forces and even calls for President Hamid Karzai's resignation. In the 1980s, the Mujahedin tried to rile the Soviets by bombing Soviet garrisons and firebases in hopes of inciting the Soviets to respond in kind. Growing civilian losses from US and NATO air strikes against the Taliban are weakening Kabul's objective, which in turn is helping the terrorists recruit more recruits. The Coalition is fully aware of this dilemma, as former US and ISAF commander General McChrystal noted in 2009: 'we face the danger of strategic failure by seeking tactical triumphs that involve civilian lives or avoidable collateral damage'.

On a related note, some Western intelligence officials have suggested that a 'new' Taliban has developed as proven by regularly 'running circles around the Karzai government'. These include direct and purposeful use of high casualty-producing weaponry to establish ambushes. The Taliban also employ anti-armor tactics to disable and stop armored vehicles with 'mobility kills' as opposed to attempting to breach them.

Suicide bombers and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) are two examples of methods developed in Iraq and adopted by the Taliban. Although modern army tactics are not particularly advanced when compared to those of modern armies, these findings suggest that the Taliban have taken ideas and technologies from battlefields around the world and applied them to the Afghan Taliban. Beginning in 2006, Afghanistan had a significant increase in suicide bombings and IED use, as mentioned below. The ultimate goal of the suicide attacks is to showcase the Taliban's determination and resolve in their fight, as well as to raise questions about the government's ability to protect ordinary Afghans.

Overall, individuals, organizations, and networks from all ideological stripes have used developing technology to further their political and social goals throughout history. Web forum sites such as the "AI-Hesbah Discussion Forum" and the now-defunct "Syrian Islamic Forum" serve as initial entry points from which interested viewers from all over the world can read about breaking news from Iraq.

The jihadi digital world is constructed similarly to that of any other virtual presence, except it is far more unstable. Web forum sites such as the "AI-Hesbah Discussion Forum" and the now-defunct "Syrian Islamic Forum" serve as initial entry points from which interested viewers from all over the world can read about breaking news from Iraq, follow links to attack videos from active fihad campaigns, see motivational

imagery of martyr operatives in heaven, and even install preplanned catch phrases about the religious justifications for perpetrating violent jihad. Google's Orkut software provides a valuable tool for people seeking a more accessible way to contact with those who have a similar enthusiasm for jihad and al-Qaeda. Jihadi web forums provide a variety of possibilities for getting the latest news and current events from a jihadi perspective. Extremist computer engineers have released stand-alone online browsing software that works similarly to Internet Explorer but only searches specific websites. Al-Qaeda library includes over 3,000 books and monographs from notable jihadi thinkers. Babar Ahmad, a British citizen, and information technology professional ran one of the first English-language pro-jihad websites from his home in south London (BBC, 2006). As ideologues seek dominion over this technology, the speed of jihadi success is predicted to pick up.

In the wake of 9/11, al-Qaeda has become increasingly reliant on the Internet to direct military operations on the battlefield. In Iraq, a growing network of "resistance sites" has evolved to give precise directions, guidance, and maps to people interested in joining the insurgency in Iraq. In recent years, a growing web network of "resistance sites" has evolved to help people interested in joining the insurgency in Iraq by giving precise directions, guidance, and maps. Jihadi media brigades also use a steady supply of emails, propaganda movies, and photos to raise awareness about their cause (McCaughey & D. Ayers, 2003). A new al-Qaeda propaganda effort spotlighting sniper operations in Iraq has raised public awareness of the jihadi movement's doctrinal triumphs in the West and the Muslim world.

The recordings show sniper strikes on American forces in Iraq, each of which ends with a successful hit on a soldier. These types of propaganda materials are generally burned to CD-ROM and given by hand to jihadi activists as well as anyone interested in the movement. These videos are sold in markets and beneath the counters of select shops throughout the Middle East and Southeast Asia. Jihadi groups have used this technology to revolutionize the way their supporters participate in the war in the Middle East and Southeast. In 2005, a Sunni rebel group active in Iraq advertised a competition for developing the organization's website. The winner would be given the ability to fire missiles remotely from a US army facility in Iraq. Using technology in this manner, anyone who wishes to help the Iraqi insurgents can do so without having to physically present herself on the battlefield. The rise of Islamist video games shows a growing effort by radical Islam to reach out to a younger generation of Muslim youth in the West. On a related note, the nature of the assumptions that Islamist games seek players to adopt makes them particularly troublesome, writes Frida Ghitis. She points out that there is no clear consensus among experts on whether playing violent games encourages people to commit violent acts in real life.

In the jihadi games, Muslims must defend themselves against a variety of aggressors, including the US military, alien invaders, Israeli settlements, and killer robots, all of whom must be defeated for the cause of Islam. According to experts, Jihadi games pale in comparison to any commercial action game in the West, or even video games used by the US Army to predisposition youths to military

In essence, thus, video games serve as a record of popular Israeli emotion and, as a result, influence how people see historical events for those who play them.

As mentioned in the earlier sections, Afghanistan's climate is optimal for deception as the population is mainly uneducated and isolated, relying on interpersonal networks for news and data gathering. Information has become the most powerful weapon of the insurgency, especially when combined with cultural and historical ignorance on the part of the West, which can lead to negative judgments. The ultimate goal of an insurgent force is to gain public support and legitimacy at the expense of the recognized government, and effective propaganda is a force multiplier for an insurgency. Understanding the role of information and deception in insurgencies, particularly this latter one, prepares the ground for a consideration of how the Taliban's use of English-language media fits into the greater struggle.

Indeed, in Afghanistan, insurgents use targeted violence and propaganda to undermine the legitimacy of the government and foreign forces. Militants are not held accountable for their use of information, but true instances of government atrocities or civilian deaths serve as a foundation for an information campaign aimed at driving the public away from the government.

Although people in the West are unlikely to accept whatever the Taliban says, its rhetoric has the potential to impact public opinion. Many Afghans are significantly more likely to believe Taliban rumors conveyed by word of mouth than official government or NATO declarations. To an insurgent, perception is far more

important than fact. The impression of the population that is the intended audience of their assertions, whether distant Western publics or adjacent Afghan people, is important to their progress.

In this vein, as Thomas Rid and Marc Hecker have explicitly stated, Information technology has given structure to modern rebel and terrorist groups. The fight is transnational for current or potential jihadists around the world who become connected to the Afghan insurgency through films, photographs, or words uploaded by militants online. The battle is absolutely local and entirely Afghan per se, the latter strongly impinging upon the Afghan farmer in rural Afghanistan, who must choose between producing poppy or wheat.

Fourth-generation opponents use a plenitude of available networks to cajole the enemy's political decision makers that their strategic aims are either unattainable remarkably or costly. The political will concerned in Afghanistan today is that of the American public, which has been backing a nearly decade-long war despite questionable progress or aims.

Modern fourth-generation adversaries, while capable of effectively destroying the political will of much larger foes, are incapable of posing an existential threat to Western nation-states in the form of a conventional military engagement, says Hammes.

The Taliban is incapable of posing an existential threat to Western nation-states in the form of a conventional military engagement, according to Hammes, Rid and Hecker.

The only true path to victory for the diverse parts of the Afghan insurgency may allegedly be the removal of Western military supporting the current Afghan government, whose claim has historically demonstrated its empirical validity in reference to the current state of affairs.

The American public has long debated whether or not to support a war that is a war of choice from the standpoint of nation-state existence. When the state's survival is not in jeopardy, it appears improbable that continued loss of life and resource consumption will be sustained. In Afghanistan, the lack of competent local governance makes it difficult for the Afghan government to offer "resilient, full-spectrum" control. When the Taliban can give a sense of security and a working, albeit harsh, court system, it becomes hard for the public to accept the government.

The use of English-language media in Afghanistan, particularly on the Internet, is definitely not directed at the local level. The purpose of English language media campaigns is to destroy foreign support for the coalition mission and the Afghan government itself. Western abandonment of the Karzai government is the ultimate strategic goal of the media campaign. Attacks on Western personnel or Afghan police are intended to generate a media frenzy and erode public support for the war and the Afghan government.

Messages sent in the name of Mullah Omar and the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan portray the insurgency in a positive light. The website is a direct link to Western audiences as well as a method of influencing how those audiences see their country's role in the war. Furthermore, as we will examine further, the true impact and influence of the Taliban's English-language propaganda is entirely unknown.

On this note, Tim Foxley's main publication - *How successfully is the Afghan insurgency communicating and what is it saying?* - was one of the earliest detailed assessments of the Taliban's communications operation. The available literature on Taliban media comes from a tiny group of experts and researchers who focus on the Afghan conflict. The most recent comprehensive review was published in February 2010 by Anne Stenersen of the Norwegian Defense Research Establishment. Western audiences are different from Afghan villages, and the Taliban tries to tailor communications to these very distinct targets.

In certain circumstances, the distinction between local and global propaganda is evident, such as in the case of letters written in Pashto and distributed at night in Afghan villages, or Taliban messages intended at the American people posted online in English. Stenersen focuses on a qualitative investigation of official statements and publications of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in Arabic and English. Modern technology was formerly rejected by the Taliban as a dangerous Western influence. Members of the insurgency are definitely attempting to reach audiences outside of Afghanistan by using English and Arabic language Internet media and reaching out to Western journalists. This section will examine the current literature on the subject, providing context for the evolution of Taliban media activities.

This is an attempt to "generate a disproportionate response from Western governments and media," according to Gina Cairns Mcfeeters.

In practice, it is likely a blend of all of these goals, with execution dependent on resources and demands. Since their inception, the Taliban have excelled at leveraging more conventional and local techniques of

propaganda dissemination, such as personal networks and word of mouth. Taliban insurgents first used electronic media to interact with the traditional media in November 2002. The emergence of an organized media effort by the Taliban insurgency did not occur until September 2002.

The media unit of the Taliban in Afghanistan has allegedly been involved in a variety of activities since its inception in 2002. The development of a website to speak for the Islamic Emirate, as well as the printing of a number of journals and newspapers, were amongst the activities. "We use them with caution and solely for the purpose of touching Muslim hearts," said one Taliban official. As claimed by Kilcullen, the Taliban are adept at manipulating local views and conducting targeted attacks on individuals in order to instill terror in specific segments of the populace. Yet, their English-language Internet messaging lacks sophistication and depth of comprehension of the target demographic, which in this case is Western or other English-speaking populations.

The Taliban's local propaganda efforts rely heavily on night letters, or Shabnam, which are distributed to rural populations by posting messages in public places such as mosques or schools during the night. Looking farther, the said letter mentions Afghan dynasties from the 11th and 12th centuries, whose traditions are still alive and well in Afghanistan's present culture. Some night letters have exploited Afghanistan's history of colonialism and resistance to rally the people and turn them against Western forces and the Karzai administration. Many shabnamah, which are delivered at night to public venues including as schools or mosques, contain death threats against Afghans who collaborate with Western soldiers or Hamid Karzai's central government. *"We warn individuals in the Maroof district who serve Americans 24 hours a day and show them the Mujahedeen's hideouts, as well as those who disrespect the country's sincere Muslims, that American guards will not always be present, and we can catch you at any time,"* one letter says (Calvin, 2011).

This night letter builds on existing fears among neutral or undecided Afghan civilians that the insurgency will know if and when they try to support the government or its Western backers. Shabnamah is an attempt to prevent the population from informing American or Afghan security forces about the locations or actions of Taliban insurgents. The letter puts the remembrance of the Mujahedeen against those who would "dishonor honest Muslims" with the prospect of death, recalling the anti-Soviet jihad and Islam itself. The Taliban's influence has been particularly strong in targeting education, particularly co-ed or females' schools, through this "armed propaganda".

The Human Rights Watch reported 204 attacks against teachers, students, and school in Afghanistan between 2005 and 2006. Without actual attacks, the nocturnal letters and threats included therein were sometimes enough to discourage pupils from attending school or teachers from teaching. Albeit the methods and targets are extremely specific, there is evidence of common themes among Taliban militants throughout Southern Afghanistan. As Kilcullen points out, these slogans were straightforward and unifying, plainly aimed at the government and Western intervention troops but ambiguous enough not to alienate any particular insurgent party, with the stress on Pashtun nationalism being the possible exception.

In recent years, the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan has begun to use cell phone videos and texts to attack the local population.

This study does not look into the role of cell phones in the Taliban's propaganda effectiveness because, for the time being, this medium is primarily used to influence the local information space. On this note, it is true that the root of the conflict in Afghanistan is local, with people forced to choose between backing the Afghan government or the resurgent Taliban.

The first website in the name of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan was active and operative by July 2001. The site, which still represented a Taliban army in control of most of Afghanistan, was written in Arabic rather than Pashto. By September 2002, nearly a year after coalition forces overthrew the Taliban, the website had been updated with far more content. In June 2005, the first website representing the "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan" was launched in both Pashto and Arabic. Since then, the "Voice of Jihad" website has migrated from domain to domain as other sites have been taken down or disabled for short times.

Amin Tarzi claims that all materials were constantly updated in mid-2006, followed by the site's blocking in late 2006. There is currently no clear picture of the evolution of the IEA - i.e., Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan - websites. He claims that all materials were constantly updated in mid-2006, followed by the site's blocking in late 2006 (Tarzi, *The Neo-Taliban*, in *The Taliban and the Crisis of Afghanistan*, 2008). For unclear reasons, the Pashto language site was hosted at <http://alemarah-iea.net> as of April 2011. The

Taliban's English-language website did not upload an English version of the interview until February 17, 2011.

Many Arabic-language products, such as al-Somood, have more substantive content and depth than what is subsequently translated into English. The bulk of the stored content from the previous version is lost each time a version of the site goes down and re-emerges at a new URL. The IEA websites' ephemeral nature makes it difficult to compile a comprehensive record of website content back to the first English-language material in 2006. The Pashto site's material has grown in size and quality since its beginning, but the English-language site's content has consistently grown in quantity and quality since its debut (Stenersen, 2010). While the original "Voice of Jihad" website was only available in Pashto, additional versions in Arabic, Urdu, Farsi, and English have subsequently been built, as Abdul Maiwandi confirmed in his December 2010 al-Somood interview.

Virtually since 2006, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan has published al-Somood, Arabic for "Standing Firm/Perseverance". The Taliban's concentration on Arabic-language content could be due as much to alliances and circumstance as to any serious strategic thinking on their part. Al-Qaeda apparently assisted the publishing of an Arabic monthly, Al-Imarat-ul Islamic, during the 1990s. The English-language edition of the website has been far less polished than the Arabic language content. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan's official website has an extremely limited reach and complexity.

The identities of the individuals who actually wrote the content of the IEA remarks are unknown. English language sub-site of the Taliban's Voice of Jihad solely contained 407 "in-links" from external websites as of April 2011, according to *Yahoo! Site Explorer*. The *shahamat.info* website, which comprises Arabic, Farsi, and Urdu pages as well as English, had almost 16,000 in-links. The Taliban's online rhetoric has grown in popularity over the previous few years on modern social media sites. Abdul Sattar Maiwandi, the administrator of the IEA website, specifically names Western networks Facebook and Twitter in a 2011 al-Somood interview.

As of April 2011, the most popular page on Facebook had only 313 "likes". Despite Maiwandi's assertions, none of these appeared to be an "official" page run by the same company that runs the al-Emarah website. This page's information section included connections to all of the IEA Voice of Jihad websites, including *shahamat.info*'s English language version. There were six different Facebook pages titled "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan" as of April 5, 2011.

The Taliban's presence on Western social media sites such as Facebook looks to be even more insecure than running their own website. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan Facebook page, which was no longer available in April 2011, had over 1,000 followers and listed the location as International Falls, Minnesota (Gwakh, 2011). According to the SITE Intelligence Group, Facebook shut down this site, as well as a number of others that were rapidly launched in its stead. The majority of the recordings depicted attacks against NATO or Afghan soldiers. The Taliban's video releases were initially published by Arab media groups with more experience and skill, rather than by the Taliban themselves.

Al-as-Sahab. Qaeda's production business issued at least fifty operational films. The Taliban's Voice of Jihad website has a separate video section. YouTube videos appear to have a considerably greater reach than Facebook groups like the ones indicated above in many circumstances. In December 2009, YouTube user "Alemarah11" posted a video showing militant attacks in Afghanistan's Nuristan province.

As of April 2011, this video had been seen 6,500 times. A movie named "Mujahideen of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan operations stat's for AugSep" was posted in October 2009. This video includes statistics on insurgent attacks against Afghan government and NATO forces in Afghanistan.

The Afghan Taliban has employed startlingly sophisticated social media strategies to generate political momentum and, now that they are in power, to make a public argument announcing they are ready to run a modern nation state after nearly 20 years of conflict, despite their adherence to ancient moral norms. The group's supporters challenge the West's dominant image of the group as illiberal, vitriolic, and hunched on vindictiveness. But they also remain within the progressing frontiers of liking and information that technology companies utilize to police user activity. Taliban supporters typically challenge the West's dominant image of the group as illiberal, vitriolic, and hunched on vindictiveness, whilst also remaining within the progressing frontiers of liking and information that technology companies utilize to police user activity, in accounts bulging across Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram — and in group chats on apps such as WhatsApp and Telegram.

Taliban spokesperson Suhail Shaheen has over 350,000 followers on Twitter. Analysts warn that assertions of a more mature and accepting Taliban should not be taken at face value. Many Afghans with more modern views are leaving in panic since the Taliban adheres to a deeply orthodox interpretation of Islam. The Taliban operates mostly within the restrictions of businesses like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. The Afghan Taliban has been designated as a sanctioned entity by the US Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC).

Facebook-owned WhatsApp shut down a popular hotline set up by the Taliban for people to report violence, looting and other atrocities. OFAC has a policy-based lever to use when deciding to remove accounts – regardless of the content of the posts. OFAC is housed in the Treasury Department, which has declined to comment. Facebook and Twitter are giving the Taliban additional leeway by refusing to remove accounts claiming to speak for them. YouTube will continue to erase accounts "believed to be owned and operated" by the Taliban.

However, Twitter, like a number of other corporations, is giving the Afghan Taliban additional leeway by refusing to remove accounts claiming to speak for them. Such WhatsApp setups were common even before the Taliban gained power, according to Daniel Knowles, a foreign correspondent for the Economist magazine.

The Taliban, like other Islamist groups such as the Islamic State and al-Qaeda, uses social media to spread propaganda. The group was on Twitter by 2011 and Telegram by 2014, according to Brookings Institution's Digital Forensic Research Lab. By 2019, the Taliban had figured out how to "take over" hashtags or inject a popular hashtag with its own messaging. The Taliban's methods became even more sophisticated as it became evident in recent months that the Americans would ultimately withdraw, with statements praising each advance on the battlefield and promising a better Afghanistan ahead. Taliban's English language messaging is developed in English and geared for an English-speaking audience.

Analysts, on the other hand, are suspicious of the Taliban's use of social media to rebrand itself. Insurgent demagogues consistently opine on current affairs that are consuming the Western media scene, in addition to the expected attention on developments within Afghanistan. Analysis of media coverage of the Afghan conflict is to learn how frequently traditional media reports mention statements made by Taliban representatives. Traditional media functions as a buffer between occurrences and rhetoric on the ground and viewers around the world.

The Taliban's utilisation of new telecommunications tools cannot hide the fact that their interface and signal quality are still insufficient, poorly designed, and dogmatic. On the other hand, the Afghan government and ISAF (International Security & Assistance Force) are making little headway in gaining public support (Leithead, 2007). ISAF and the Taliban trading death counts in the media on a 'tit for tat' basis is still not resolving Afghanistan's public perception problem: the various communities to whom the information is conveyed will, for the most part, have already made up their minds about the outcome. Because of their harsh tactics, rigidity, and disparities in their approach, the Taliban are vulnerable to a coordinated media campaign (Foxley, 2007).

Based on their website, communiqués, and announcements, the Taliban media strategy appears to be centered on inflicting fatalities and conquering and keeping terrain (ironically one of the standard accusations levelled at ISAF). The Taliban have shown no interest in outlining their vision for how they will run the country, engage with other ethnic groups, or provide restoration and employment.

The lack of a popular rebellion against ISAF compares sharply with the Afghan response to the Soviets in the 1980s, showing that the Afghan people are at least receptive of foreign military intervention. A prominent Afghan 'face' in the media, combined with interaction on the Pakistani side of the split (with Pashtun tribes and Pakistani media), should elicit and promote a broader discourse. The Taliban must be challenged to explain what they are doing, the tactics they are using (particularly suicide attacks), and why they are doing it. The Taliban's authority, Islam's, and the Koran's interpretations, the essence at the core of jihad, and the ethics of murdering civilians could all be called into question by specific circumstances. Yet, the Afghan government and the international community could surely intervene to recapture the minds and hearts initiative by extending the debate and pressing the Taliban to delve into politics, economy, human rights, education, and reconstruction. This, however, will only succeed if communication comes from people and organizations who holds some sort of significance to potential Taliban fighters and the Pashtun populace on both sides of the border, rather than from official ISAF spokespersons.

The latter statement practically translates into taking part in mosque and madrassa talks and informing tribal elders, mullahs, former Taliban, Afghan national and provincial administrations, and security forces who represent them (primarily the police and army). To maintain credibility, the Afghan government and its international sponsors shall demonstrate validity and legitimacy as regards their political agency.

On this note, let us outline a series of procedures which are encouraged to establish a constructive restoration. The following are suggestions for the international community, ISAF, the Afghan and Pakistani governments, and the Afghan people who want to counteract the Taliban's propaganda. They can be used instead of (or in addition to) effective state security, restoration, and governance efforts.

As regards the propositions for the short term, it appears necessary to conduct a more detailed investigation of Taliban communiqués, including their proposed constitution. This will help the Afghan states and the international community in their quest to understand and tackle them. Indeed, the Taliban is far from being a cohesive and unified force. The internal and external fragmentations of the Taliban leadership should be underlined in this context. Steps should be attempted to persuade the Taliban to consider larger issues such as population control, politics, rehabilitation, and wealth. The debate should be made public, and the country's lack of goals should be revealed. In this vein, one shall compel the Taliban to justify their tactics (suicide bombings, attacks on civilians and schools, and attitudes toward poppy cultivation) in order to expose the flaws in their reasoning.

Ultimately, as regards the palatable suggestions vis-à-vis a mid-to-long term scenario, one may argue that genuine and visible improvements in safety, administration, and socioeconomic issues across Afghanistan and Pakistan will determine victory against the Taliban. The image of the Afghan government must be improved. The general mood in the country's south, where the government is frequently viewed as corrupt or non-existent, has proven vulnerable to the Taliban's influence. In some areas, the Taliban are establishing rival legal systems based on Sharia law. The government must be visible. The Taliban acquisition base must be engaged on both sides of the channel in order to separate it from the hierarchy by giving more tempting options. Finally, official law enforcement and legal systems must be regarded as active, and most importantly, unbiased givers of fairness and security.