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# The Taliban Insurgency and an Analysis of *Shabnamah* (Night Letters)

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**ABSTRACT** The Taliban has recently re-emerged on the Afghan scene with vengeance. Five years after being defeated in Afghanistan by a US coalition, the resurgent Taliban, backed by al-Qaeda, are mounting an increasingly virulent insurgency, especially in the east and south, near the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. The Taliban now represents a significant challenge to the survival of President Hamid Karzai's government. This article assesses the narrative strategy the Taliban has employed to garner support with the Afghan people. Specifically, this paper assesses the narratives of Taliban *shabnamah*, commonly referred to as 'night letters' in an effort unravel what the Taliban represents.

## Introduction

The last two years have witnessed some of the fiercest and most sustained fighting in Afghanistan since the Taliban regime was toppled in November 2001. Some analysts are now contending that the conflict situation in Afghanistan is a 'stalemate' between Taliban insurgent forces and the United States and their NATO allies.<sup>1</sup> There is no doubt the Taliban has staged a significant resurgence and is now a major threat to any semblance of a stable and democratic Afghanistan. Leo Docherty, aide-de-camp to the commander of the British task force in southern Afghanistan, recently resigned his position, describing the failed campaign against the Taliban as a 'textbook case of how to screw up a counterinsurgency ... having a big old fight is pointless and just making things worse'.<sup>2</sup>

The re-emergence of the Taliban can be attributed to three major factors:<sup>3</sup> first, the lack of state-building and the inability of the Afghan government to establish a significant presence throughout the country; second, the failure to secure and stabilise the rural areas of the country

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# Report Documentation Page

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so that development and reconstruction can proceed, and; third, the lack of any significant material improvement in the lives of most Pashtuns in the south and east of the country since the demise of the Taliban regime. These three factors have all had a significant impact on the failure of the Karzai regime to engender support and have contributed to making the Taliban a viable alternative to what is perceived as a failed Kabul regime.

While the lack of Afghan state-building and reconstruction and the failure of Kabul to reconcile with the rural Pashtun peoples of the south and east of the country have all been critical factors in the re-emergence of the Taliban, these factors alone do not explain how the Taliban have been able to capture the imagination of large swaths of Pashtun areas with a resonating message of violent extremism. How has the Taliban been able to re-emerge when only a few years ago it seemed destined for the trash bin of history?

The purpose of this paper is to make sense of Taliban ‘culture’ or world view and its implications for the insurgency that is gripping Afghanistan. The research reported here focuses on the narrative strategy the Taliban has employed to garner support with the Afghan people. Specifically this paper assesses the narratives of Taliban *shabnamah*, commonly referred to as ‘night letters’ in an effort to unravel *what* the Taliban represents.<sup>4</sup> As will be demonstrated below, night letters have played a critical role in the information campaign employed by the Taliban in an effort to establish a popular base for its insurgency against the Karzai regime in Kabul.

### Taliban Narrative Analysis

Night letters have been a traditional and common instrument of Afghan religious figures, jihadists and rebels to encourage people, especially (but not exclusively) rural populations to oppose both state authority and regulations. Dupree, in his seminal work on Afghanistan, suggests that such ‘framing’ instruments, often in the form of folklore, performed a variety of significant functions to include ‘social control’ where individuals are told by illustration what they should or should not do and what rewards or penalties they will incur for those not following these directives.<sup>5</sup> Taliban *shabnamah* serve the same purpose.

### *Nuances of Taliban Culture and Narratives*

Franz Boas, an early-twentieth-century German cultural anthropologist, suggested that culture is ‘the system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviours, and artefacts that the members of society use to cope with their world and with one another, and that are transmitted from

generation to generation through learning'.<sup>6</sup> This definition highlights several important concepts that will be central for our assessment of the Taliban. First, culture is something that is shared between a self-identified group of people such as the Taliban. Second, culture has a psychological component as well as material manifestations (such as produced artefacts); and third, culture is essentially adaptive and is transmitted through some process to others. This operationalisation suggests the importance of artefacts that are used to transmit Taliban world views or, to borrow Edwards's terminology, the underlying structure of the Taliban's 'moral systems' as portrayed by narratives.<sup>7</sup>

A narrative often represents a 'story' and reflects foundational beliefs that articulate a group's views towards the world. As Turner notes, a '[s]tory is a basic principle of mind. Most of our experience, our knowledge, and our thinking are organised as stories.'<sup>8</sup> There is ample evidence that such artefacts have an effect on our capacity to recall events, motivate action, modulate our emotional reactions to events, cue certain heuristics and biases, structure our problem-solving capabilities and ultimately influence our very identity.<sup>9</sup> The framing of narratives will have critical importance as to how Taliban messages *resonate* to greater or lesser degrees with target audiences.<sup>10</sup>

Traditionally, story-telling and narratives, especially oral history and *shabnamah*, have been extremely important to the peoples of Afghanistan as well as to the tribes in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border area. Unique and pervasive themes are found throughout Afghan poetry and literature that resonate with Afghans. In many respects Afghanistan's literature, arts and music have been critical dynamics for Afghan perseverance and adaptation. Narratives also serve an important role in Afghan social mobilisation, be it peaceful or violent. This has been especially true when tribal collective actions have intersected with political opportunities.<sup>11</sup> During the British colonialism period, for example, anti-colonial literature encouraged rebellion against the British and their patrons.

Night letters and oral narratives were important instruments used by the *mujahedeen* against their Soviet occupiers.<sup>12</sup> Resistance literature called for total opposition against the Soviets and their 'puppet' Afghan leaders and support for the *jihad* to establish an Islamic order. While a variety of means were used to deliver such messages to the Afghan public, particularly powerful media, especially in the rural areas, were poems and music.

Below is an example of a widely circulated Pashtun folk poem that was used to transmit a narrative characterising Soviet-installed Babrak Karmal as a traitor:

O Babrak! Son of Lenin  
You do not care for the religion and the faith  
You may face your doom and  
May you receive a calamity, o! son of a traitor.  
O! son of Lenin.<sup>13</sup>

Narratives were also used by the *mujahedeen* against King Zahir Shah and the royal family, as illustrated by a popular *mujahedeen* folk song presented below. This narrative contrasts the sacrifices made by the anti-Soviet *mujahedeen* with the exiled life of the Afghan king and how he had forsaken his legacy and ultimate rewards:

You have none of your family fighting in Afghanistan,  
Only the brave are here, you are  
Enjoying life in Italy.  
Wind of the morning, go tell Zahir Shah  
There is no *halwa* (sweetmeat) for you in Afghanistan  
The graves of your ancestors are here,  
But there will be no grave for you in Afghanistan.<sup>14</sup>

Night letters were a particularly useful *mujahedeen* influence and intimidation technique. In Nelofer Pazira's biographical story called *A Bed of Red Flowers*, she describes night letters used to coordinate shop closings or other activities designed to create solidarity among the anti-Soviet Afghan population. One activity coordinated by the nocturnal campaign was a concert of 'Allahu Akbars' (God is Great) shouted from the rooftops of village houses. This created a *levee en masse* effect towards the Soviet invaders and reminded the secular Communists of the unifying power of Islam:

The next day we are tired but, as if concealing our night's secret from the light of day, we don't talk about *Allahu Akbars*, until Uncle Wahid arrives with the news. In a silent rejection, all Kabul shopkeepers decided to keep their stores closed yesterday, February 22, 1980; they designated the night as the time to voice that day's protest. An anonymous nightly letter had been spread all over Kabul, asking people to cry *Allahu Akbar* after dark, says Uncle Wahid. For the following two days, Kabul shops remain shut, and for the third night in a row we are standing on the roof, joining in this religious symphony. Until dawn we chant, 'God is great.' We are all so caught up in this rotation of rhythm and order that no one complains about the lack of sleep ... this is our welcome, Afghan-style, to the Soviet Invasion.<sup>15</sup>

### *Taliban Night Letters*

The Taliban has adopted *shabnamah* as a well-tested, cost-effective method of instruction and intimidation. The Taliban regularly posts such letters or leaflets during the night, warning of the 'wrath' villages will face if they cooperate with US forces (the 'Christian invaders') or the

Karzai regime ('a US puppet').<sup>16</sup> The Taliban relies on the educated populace to transmit the *shabnamah* to illiterate villagers. Often these 'letters' are pasted to the walls of mosques and government buildings and promise death to anyone who defies their threats or instructions. They are typically aimed at symbols of authority and supporters of the Karzai government and often read as the following: 'Once this government falls, we will be in power. We will have your documents, your résumés, your names and your addresses. We will come and punish you.'

The Taliban has thus far been true to its word in sowing doubt and fear among Afghans.<sup>17</sup> As reported by *Time Magazine*:

Night letters left across southern Afghanistan, the Taliban's stronghold, have slowed government services and brought reconstruction projects to a halt. In Qandahar province, many police officers have quit, and after letters appeared threatening employees, two medical clinics were shut down. In the past two months, insurgents have burned down 11 schools in the region. Some of the attacks were presaged by night letters warning parents to keep their children home.<sup>18</sup>

The Taliban night letters represent a strategic and effective instrument, crafting poetic diatribes which appeal to the moral reasoning of Afghan villagers. While many of the night letters represent overt intimidation, they also present important insights into who and what the Taliban represents. The quality and use of these letters have impressed professional US information and psychological operations (PYSOP) officers, who consider them 'eloquent and impressive' and subsequently more effective than the vast majority of US information operation artefacts.<sup>19</sup>

Figure 1 presents a Taliban night letter<sup>20</sup> distributed in Kandahar in 2003 entitled 'Message to the "Mujahed" Afghan Nation!' and is a good example of the Taliban's literal eloquence and poetic approach to persuasion that originated in historical intercultural communications found throughout Afghanistan and Iran.<sup>21</sup> This *shabnamah* references Afghanistan's grand history and the threat that Americans and their 'cronies' pose to a historically great Islamic Afghan government. The proclamation is addressed to the 'Mujahed People' of Afghanistan, intimating the notion that the country itself is engaged in a *jihad* or lawful war against infidels and an apostate government. The label 'Mujahed,' as used in this narrative, does not apply solely to the Taliban but rather to the Afghan population as a whole. The message suggests that *all* Afghans have a role in this campaign against a *common* enemy of Islam and Afghans have an obligation to join the fight against the infidels.

The posting is a well-prepared narrative reflecting on the 'illustrious' history of rule of three particular Afghan leaders who harnessed the power of Islam. The first 'ancestor and hero' mentioned is Ahmad Shah

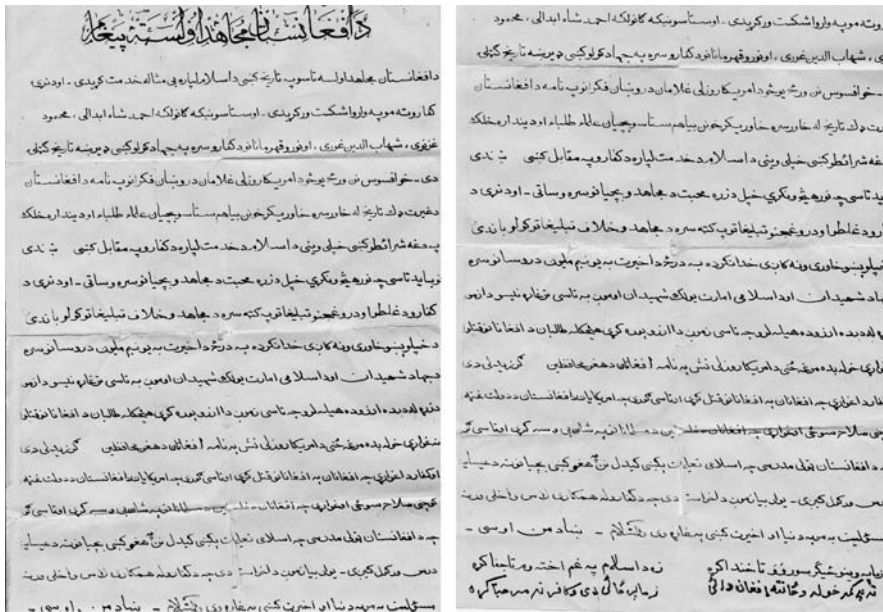


Figure 1. Kandahar 2003 Taliban Night Letter 1

**Translation: Message to the ‘Mujahed’ (freedom fighter) Afghan Nation!**

You have served Islam a great deal throughout history and have defeated the non-Muslims of the world. Your ancestors such as Ahmad Shah Abdaali, Mahmood Ghaznawi, Shahaabuddin Ghorī and other heroes have recorded a great history in fighting against non-Muslims, but it is a pity that today some America-trained servants under the name of bright-minded have destroyed the honoured history of Afghanistan. Today once again your sons, clerics and Taliban and the faithful people in these circumstances are fighting against non-Muslims and are serving Islam. If you don't do anything else, at least support your Mujahedeen sons and do not be impressed by the false propaganda of non-Muslim enemies. God forbid one and half million martyrs of Jihad (religious Islamic fight) against Russians and one hundred thousand of martyrs of Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan (martyr Taliban) will ask you for the cost of their martyrdom, so we hope that you meet our expectations. They're stopping the Islamic education and instead are teaching Christianity to your children. Taliban never want to kill common civilians, but unfortunately some so-called Afghans have become the supporters of our enemies. Non-Muslims want to kill and pit Afghan against Afghan and in the name of Talib they are attacking everybody and they are killing Afghans and destroying your houses and they are destroying Islamic *madrasahs* (Islamic schools) in Afghanistan. They burn their Afghan arms and ammunitions. They want to make Afghanistan as helpless as Palestine. You have seen that in all *madrasahs* nowadays they teach Christianity to your children. Once again, we request you not to support non-Muslims, otherwise you will have the whole responsibility here and hereafter.

Be happy



Figure 1. (continued)

*Poem*

I was so sad you laughed  
I was caring for Islam and you betrayed  
How do you call yourself an Afghan  
Instead of me you supported a non-Muslim

(Translation provided by Amin Tarzi, interview 14 July 2006, and Farid Mohammad, September 2006)

Durrani (Abdali) the founder of the Sadozai dynasty of the Abdali who would establish the Durrani Afghan Empire in Kandahar in 1747. He is considered by many as the 'father' of modern Afghanistan. While Ghilzai members of the Taliban have long disdained the Durrani, Ahmad Shah is revered by all Afghans. Sykes in his *History of Afghanistan* calls Ahmad Shah 'a monarch whose high descent and warlike qualities made him peculiarly acceptable to his aristocratic and virile Chiefs, as well as to his warlike subjects in general. In short, he possessed all the qualities that enabled him successfully to found the Kingdom of Afghanistan.'<sup>22</sup>

The second 'ancestor and hero' referenced is Sultan Mahmud Ghaznawi, a young Turkic (non-Afghan) king who ascended the throne around the year 1000 and embarked on Ghaznavid empire-building that represented 'one of the great renaissances of the Early Islamic period'.<sup>23</sup> Mahmud was considered a great general who conducted at least 17 successful campaigns against India. According to Dupree, 'He added northwest India and the Punjab to his empire, and enriched his treasury by looting wealthy Hindu temples. Probably more important, Mahmud's mullahs converted many Hindus to Islam.'<sup>24</sup>

Historians such as Caroe trace the origin of the Ghilzai nation to the Turkish tribes of the Ghaznavid Empire.<sup>25</sup> Hence, the reference to Mahmud could be alluding to the glorious genealogy of the Ghilzai – a very important Taliban dynamic.

The Taliban primarily consists of rural Pashtuns from the Ghilzai nation<sup>26</sup> with some support from the Kakar tribe of the Ghurghusht nation.<sup>27</sup> The Ghilzai, who are descendants of the great nomad clans (*powindah*) of Sulaiman Khel and the Aka Khel, are the largest Afghan tribal confederation and include the tribes of Sulaiman Khel, Ali Khel, Aka Khel, Taraki, Nasirs, Tokhis, Hotaks and Khototi.<sup>28</sup>

Much of the original Taliban leadership, including Mullah Mohammed Omar, comes from the Hotak Ghilzai tribe that held power in Afghanistan in the eighteenth century and for a time even possessed the throne of Isfahan (Persia). The Hotaki Ghilzais under Mir Wais Ghilzai achieved historical fame as the liberators of Kandahar

from Safavid control in 1709. In 1722 the Hotaki served as the leading tribe in the invasion of Persia and destruction of the Persian Empire.<sup>29</sup> The importance, remembrance and implications of such proud history in tribal Afghanistan are dynamics that stupefy many Western analysts.

The Ghilzai regime was ended by Nadir Shah in 1737. After the assassination of Nadir Shah in 1747, the first 'modern' government was established in Kandahar by the Afghans as they elected Ahmed Shah Durrani as their ruler. The Ghilzai have traditionally held a strong animosity towards the Durrani Pashtuns, who took power from the Ghilzai and have held it almost continuously for the last 300 years.<sup>30</sup> The Durrani have provided *all* of Afghanistan's modern kings, a fact not lost on the Ghilzai. Only three times have the Ghilzai seized national power: in 1721, when Mir Wais took the throne; in 1978, after a coup against Mohammed Daoud by Marxist military officers, who immediately handed over power to the Marxist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan leader Nur Mohammed Taraki;<sup>31</sup> and again in 1996, when Mullah Omar came to power. Since the demise of Mir Wais Ghilzai and his empire, the Ghilzai have hated the Durrani, their arch-rivals and the tribe of Hamid Karzai.

The divisions between Durrani and Ghilzai Afghans have been at the root of centuries of conflict and intrigue in Afghanistan. Such issues were intimately involved in the demographics of Peshawar politics during the anti-Soviet *jihad*.<sup>32</sup> In fact, a case can be made that the politics of the Afghan war were a virtual Ghilzai affair. Khalq's Ghilzai leaders, Hafizullah Amin and Muhammad Taraki, began the process with the 1978 coup. The Afghan military forces were dominated by Khalqi officers, many of whom were Ghilzai. Babrak Karmal (with Durrani connections) was replaced by Najibullah, one of the few Parchamis with Ghilzai roots. Except for Babrak Karmal, the great Durrani-Pashtun confederation had little representation on either side of the conflict. Khalqi members of Peoples' Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) were committed to break the established tradition of Durrani rule.<sup>33</sup> Some spoke of the Marxist usurpation and the war as Ghilzai revenge against Durrani dominance. On the resistance side, as suggested above, nearly all of the key *mujahedeen* parties were led by or had strong ties to the Ghilzai. Ethnic rivalry, perhaps more than Islamic ideology, was even responsible for the refusal of the Peshawar parties to accept Zahir Shah into *mujahedeen* politics.<sup>34</sup>

The Taliban insurgency of today is just the most recent manifestation of Ghilzai-Durrani rivalry – with the majority of the Durrani supporting the Hamed Karzai regime and the majority of the Ghilzai supporting the Taliban.<sup>35</sup>

The final 'ancestor and hero' reference in the night letter of Figure 1 is to Shahab al-Din Ghuri, of the Ghurid Dynasty who ruled from 1173

to 1206 and controlled the entire eastern caliphate, encompassing much of Afghanistan, eastern Iran and modern Pakistan.<sup>36</sup> His numerous invasions of India and his powerful rule helped construct a widespread and long-lasting historical memory framed by heroism and sacrifice through generations of oral transmission. Although Ghaznawi and Ghuri were not Afghan by birth, history granted them an Afghan pedigree and the two kings are still honoured as heroes. Hence the Taliban night letter uses the collective historical memory of Afghans handed down through generations to frame the intellectual argument against popular support of the Karzai regime and American forces. The *shabnamah* narrative glorifies those who have fought and converted infidels to the righteous path – the goal of the Taliban.

This *shabnamah* represents a clear challenge to the Karzai regime and its expatriate members and proffers that 'it is a pity that today some American-trained servants . . . have destroyed the honoured history of Afghanistan'. The letter also follows the time-honoured Afghan practice of attacking foreign influence – a xenophobic message that has historically resonated with the Afghan people – which the Karzai government and the Americans represent in the eyes of the Taliban.

A clear distinction is made between 'Muslims' and 'non-Muslims' as the Taliban appeals to true Islamic believers and decries the 'false propaganda of non-Muslim enemies'. The letter appeals to the population's gratitude and appreciation for the 'martyrs' of the Soviet occupation and the Taliban's battles during Operation Enduring Freedom, even citing casualty statistics. The letter states that the Taliban is against killing common citizens, but at times it cannot be avoided. On the other hand, the *shabnamah* argues that supporters of the Karzai regime and the Americans are not 'Afghans' and open targets.

It is interesting to note that this night letter made its appearance during the height of the demobilisation, disarmament and reorganisation (DDR) campaign, aimed at ridding the country of weapons and to convince reluctant and recalcitrant regional and warlord militia members to support the Karzai regime. The letter states that 'non-Muslims want to kill and pit Afghan against Afghan . . . [and] burn their Afghan arms and ammunitions'. The author of the letter obviously believes that disarmament is ludicrous while Afghanistan's enemies are 'killing' Afghans. During the 1990s there were more personal weapons in Afghanistan than in India and Pakistan combined: 'By some estimates more such weapons had been shipped into Afghanistan during the previous decade than to any other country in the world.'<sup>37</sup> Afghans and especially the Pashtuns revel in a 'gun culture'. One of the first sounds an Afghan male infant hears after he is born, immediately after praise to Allah, is the firing of guns celebrating his birth. An appeal against the DDR campaign is not only a clear indication that the Taliban tracks

aspects of the Bonn process, especially those that have the potential to impact their insurgent actions, it is also, more importantly, a recognition that the Taliban understands that taking away a Pashtun's gun is equivalent to taking away his manhood. While the Taliban undoubtedly does not want Afghans, especially its supporters, to give up their weapons and become 'helpless', the narrative is appealing to a deeper characteristic that resonates with nearly every Pashtun. Indeed guns are intimately related to the Pashtun tribal code of *Pashtunwali* and 'as a result . . . most [Pashtun] males become acquainted with weapons in their early childhood and develop a keen sense of marksmanship'.<sup>38</sup> The Pashtun's affinity for weapons has traditionally plagued every state's attempt to enforce its own rule of law over the top of *Pashtunwali*.

The document does not communicate any direct threat against the US military, but it does insinuate that Americans destroyed mosques and *madrasahs* in order to re-educate Afghan children about Christianity. Such a narrative is presented to create mistrust and apprehension among the Afghan population. Afghanistan is 99 per cent Muslim and religion is and always has been a central characteristic of the Afghan people.

The letter warns that the enemies 'want to make Afghanistan as helpless as Palestine'. An emphasis on the plight of the Palestinians has been a central focal and rallying point for Islamists for decades. In the past, Islamic struggles outside Afghanistan have not been an explicit mantra of the Afghan resistance. The *mujahedeen*, for example, had a more immediate and limited goal of liberating Afghanistan from the Soviets and fighting the puppet government they installed in Kabul; 'They had no intention or desire to turn their country into a theatre or camp from which to wage global jihad against either other Muslim governments or Western states.'<sup>39</sup> It is interesting that the Taliban, which in the past has never represented a transnational jihadist organisation, would focus on more global struggles, even indirectly, in their *shabnamahs*.

The letter concludes with a poem that is aimed at invoking respect and striking a chord in the receivers' historical memory. Through repetition, poetry provides a way to remember facts or messages and enhances the delivery method with emotion anchored in cultural traditions. It is likely this proclamation was read aloud by an educated village elder to illiterate members of the local populace, emphasising the poem at the end of the letter, possibly even reading it twice to allow the audience to experience the power of the poem.

Figure 2 presents a *shabnamah* that is an example of a warning letter targeted at the populace of the Kandahar province towns of Ma'ruf and Arghistan.<sup>40</sup> Unlike the night letter examined above, this letter appears quickly constructed and warns the Afghan population against supporting the Americans.

The letter was written in Pashto and warns the residents of Ma'ruf and Arghistan against cooperating with the Americans. It explicitly suggests that the Taliban will kill all those who cooperate with the Americans once the Americans leave. The point is emphasised by asserting that 'the Americans will not always be there' to protect those who chose to cooperate. Moreover, the letter states that the Taliban 'knows' the names and location of collaborators and compares these present-day collaborators with those who were 'loyal' to the Russians during the anti-Soviet *jihād*.

Such a message is typical of messages delivered by Taliban *mullahs* speaking to rural village elders. They are fond of saying that 'the Americans have the wristwatches, but we have the time'. The simple message they deliver in person or by night letter such as the one presented in Figure 2 is one of intimidation: 'The Americans may stay for five years, they may stay for ten, but eventually they will leave, and when they do, we will come back to this village and kill every family that

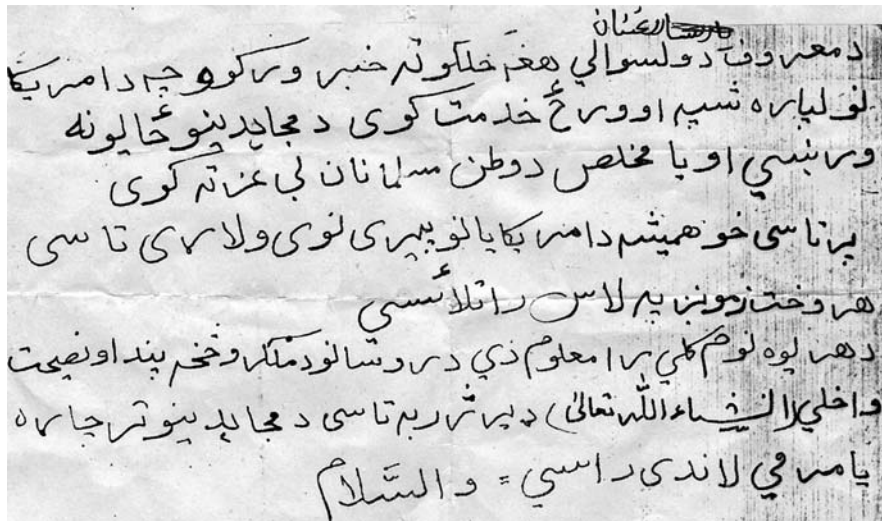


Figure 2. Taliban Night Letter: Warning letter to the people of Ma'ruf and Arghistan, two towns within Kandahar province

**Translation:** We inform those people of Maroof district that serve Americans day and night and show the places of the *Mujahedeen* to them or those who dishonour sincere Muslims of the country that American guards will not always be there and we can catch you any time.

We know the name and place of every person; learn a lesson from those who were loyal to Russians; (if God wills) soon you will come under the knife or bullet of *Mujahedeen*. (Translation provided by Farid Mohammad, October 2006)

has collaborated with the Americans or the Karzai government.’ Such a message is devastatingly effective in these areas where transgenerational feuds and revenge are a fabric of the society. It is also an effective message to keep NGOs and reconstruction activities out of areas controlled by the Taliban.

If one assumes that the centre of gravity for both the insurgency and counterinsurgency is popular support and that for the Karzai government to succeed it must deliver reconstruction, infrastructure and services to the hinterlands (areas that have thus far received virtually nothing) then the Taliban’s strategy has proven a very effective. The three fundamental problems in Afghanistan that have allowed the Taliban’s reemergence are:

- the inability of the national government since 2001 to establish a politically significant presence throughout the country;
- the failure of the international community to create a secure rural environment in the south conducive to development and reconstruction; and
- the virtually complete lack of meaningful improvement in the lives of the great majority of the people in the southern half of the country.<sup>41</sup>

The insurgency and counterinsurgency presently engulfing Afghanistan will not be won kinetically. Ultimately, the winners will be those that have the support of the population; this support will not be realised by the Karzai government if it does not deliver a better life and stability to the countryside as well as to the urban areas. The hinterlands of the east and south remain impoverished wastelands with few schools and roads and little prospect of a better life for the vast majority of the populous. A poll conducted in 2005 showed that six out of ten Afghans still have no electricity and only three per cent have it consistently.<sup>42</sup> The Taliban is well aware of this and will continue to put up obstacles to inhibit Kabul or the international community to better the lives of the average Afghan villager. Whole districts in provinces such Helmand, Oruzgan, Zabol, Paktika, Ghazni, Wardak and Logar are essentially war zones with virtually no chance of rehabilitating fractured infrastructures – *a prerequisite for the counterinsurgency*.

Figure 3 presents a recent Taliban night letter from the Wardak Province and authored by ‘the Mujahedeen of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan’. This *shabnamah* is significantly different from the other night letters examined here. This narrative uses language that mimics that regularly used by transnational jihadist organisations and intimates that the ultimate goal of the Afghan insurgency has a global dimension. This message is in stark contrast with the *shabnamah* presented in Figure 1 written in 2004. The significant differences in these two letters

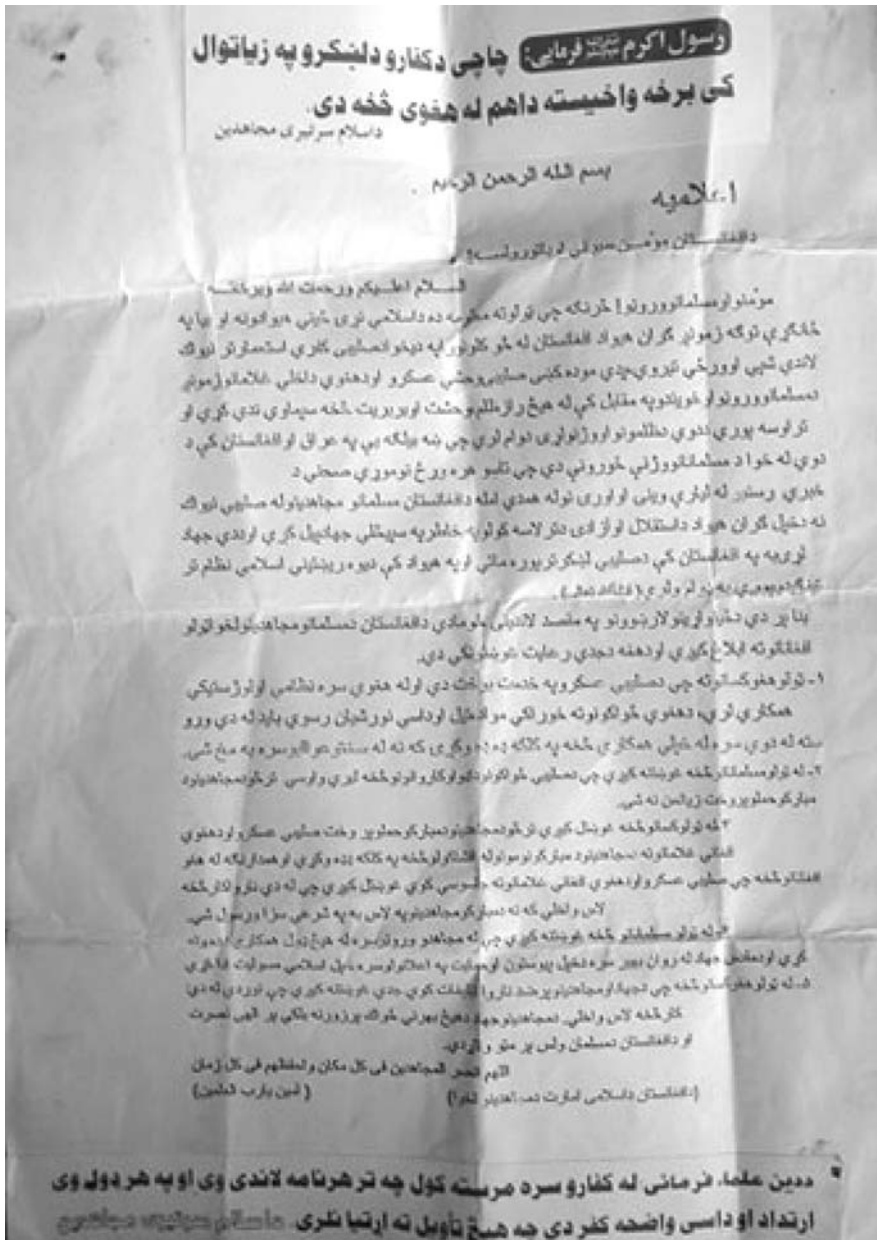


Figure 3. Wardak Night Letter

Translation:

The Prophet of God Mohammed (peace be upon Him) says: One who lends a hand to infidels to transgress [against Muslims] is one of them.

Figure 3. (continued)

By the Islamic Devoted *Mujahedeen* In the name of Allah, the most merciful and most compassionate

*Statement*

Pious Afghans, brave and courageous people! Accept our greetings;  
Dear Muslim and devout brother! As you all know some countries in the Islamic world and specifically our dear country-Afghanistan are spending day and night under the grip of the crusaders in the last few years. During this time the cruel crusaders' army and their domestic servants have committed grave atrocities, barbarity and savagery against our innocent brothers and sisters. Their cruelties have not ceased. You have watched and heard of their ongoing savagery in Afghanistan and Iraq, the two best examples that have been exposed by the international media. Therefore, the Afghan Muslim *Mujahedeen* have initiated their sacred Jihad to gain the independent of our beloved country from the crusader powers. The Jihad will continue until the end – until defeat of the crusaders' army, and till the establishment of a pure Islamic state (*Inshallah*).

Therefore the Afghan Muslim *Mujahedeen* state the following related guidelines to ensure obtaining our goals, and ask earnestly all Afghans to respect them seriously:

1. All those who work and are at the service of the crusader army, cooperate military or logistically with them and carry oil, food and similar things for them, are warned strongly to stop cooperating with them promptly; otherwise, they will face serious consequences.
2. All those who do business with the crusaders are asked to avoid doing business with them, so as not to suffer during the exalted strike of the *mujahedeen* on the crusaders.
3. We seriously ask all persons not to expose the holy names of the *mujahedeen* to the crusaders' army and to their Afghan slaves during the exalted strike of *mujahedeen* on them, and likewise, we ask those Afghans who spy for Americans and for their Afghan slaves to stop doing this evil act, otherwise, they will be punished at the hands of the holy *mujahedeen* according to Shariah.
4. We ask all Muslims to cooperate whole-heartedly with their *mujahedeen* brothers and to join their ranks and to support jihads, so as to perform their religious duty properly.
5. We ask all those who spread false allegation against *mujahedeen* to stop their evil acts.

The *mujahedeen*'s power is not based on any foreign support, it is founded on Allah's blessing and the will of the Afghan Muslim people. (God grand success to the *mujahedeen* everywhere and always).

The Mujahedin of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan

Religious scholars say: Cooperation with infidels, under any circumstance and for any reason or excuse, in any form, is an open blasphemy that needs no deliberation. Afghanistan's Devoted *Mujahedeen*.

Source: Human Rights Watch, <http://hrw.org/campaigns/afghanistan/2006/education/letter8.htm> [accessed 25 Aug. 2006].



suggest that the Afghan insurgency might very well be morphing into a campaign with more transnational concerns.

One theme of the letter is: do not associate or help the Karzai regime and coalition forces or you will be judged as one of them ('One who lends a hand to infidels to transgress [against Muslims] is one of them'). This message of intimidation, as we have seen before, is clearly a cornerstone of Taliban night letter narratives.

This letter, like many other Taliban *shabnamah*, has considerably more Islamic references than the narratives assessed above (or below). Juergensmeyer suggests that religious tropes are more likely to play a narrative role if the confrontation between two groups can be characterised as a 'cosmic struggle or battle'. This is most likely in the following circumstances:

- If the struggle is perceived as a defense of basic identity and dignity;
- If losing the struggle would be unthinkable;
- If the struggle is 'blocked' and cannot be won in real time or in real terms.<sup>43</sup>

The first two circumstances are valid for the Taliban. The Taliban views this insurgency, as evidenced in its *shabnamah*, as a struggle over basic questions of identity and culture. It must be won, losing is not an option. The third circumstance was probably also valid until mid-2004. Since, however, the emboldened insurgency has shown real signs of success.

The *shabnamah* invokes the name of Allah via a standard greeting and begins by rallying the population against the 'crusaders' and 'their domestic servants'. The use of the term 'crusaders' is significant. This terminology is used by Osama bin Laden when he refers to the conflict in Afghanistan as a battle between 'a crusader army' and Islam.<sup>44</sup> The use of this terminology suggests that the United States and its allies are waging a crusade against Islam and this 'aggression' is not an isolated conflict, but rather the latest episode in a long chain of conflicts that have been targeted at Muslims. While there is no evidence suggesting that this letter was written by al-Qaeda or an Afghan-Arab, the language used is very similar to the regular terminology used by al-Qaeda. It proclaims a clash of civilisations.

The declaration accuses the 'crusaders and their domestic servants' of unceasing 'atrocities, barbarity and savagery against our innocent brothers and sisters' in both Afghanistan and Iraq. Both of these conflicts represent, in the eyes of the Taliban, defensive *jihads* against a Christian onslaught that will continue until the 'defeat of the crusaders' army' and 'the establishment of a pure Islamic State'. This *jihad*, according to the narrative, is a collective responsibility of *all* Muslims and the *shabnamah* instructs Afghans to:

- offer no assistance or cooperation to US or Afghan National Armed Forces or ‘face serious consequences’;
- not divulge the identity (‘holy names’) of the insurgents;
- end the ‘evil act’ of spying for the enemy or ‘be punished at the hands of the holy *mujahedeen* according to *Sharia*’; and
- cooperate and join the Taliban ‘so as to perform ... religious duty properly’.

The letter concludes by suggesting that those that ignore the advice and instructions of the *shabnamah* will be dealt with swiftly without deliberation. Such a response, claims the night letter, has been sanctified by ‘religious scholars’ – a powerful message to Afghans.

Many of the Islamic underpinnings reflected in this *shabnamah* have been a component of the past Afghan resistance movements. For example, Hazarat Shaib or Mullah Shor Bazar (a member of the Mujadidi family), was an important Afghan religious figure whose Ghilzai tribal army or *lashkar*<sup>45</sup> inflicted heavy losses on the British during the third Anglo-Afghan war of 1919. Hazarat Shaib would later defeat the Afghan reform-minded King Amanullah Khan and assisted Nadir Kahn to overthrow Bacha Saqqao in 1929.<sup>46</sup> Other religious leaders such as Mirwais Khan Hotaki and Mullah Mushki Alam also organised *lashkars* that fought against the British occupation of Afghanistan. And of course during the anti-Soviet *jihad*, *talibs* (or religious students) regularly fought alongside the *mujahedeen*, mainly under the leadership of Mohammad Nabi and his *Harakat-i-Inqilab-i-Islami* and *Hizb-i-Islami* (Khalis). But none of these movements had explicit global goals aimed at the Islamic *ummah*.

The role of the Taliban in the larger global Islamist *jihad* has been a question that has baffled researchers. Most would agree with Fawaz Gerges when he suggests that Afghan resistance has never been focused outside the Afghan border.<sup>47</sup> The message conveyed in the *shabnamah* (Figure 3), however, indicates that this position may be changing as the Taliban garners strength and other international events turn against the West (e.g., Iraq, Lebanon). There is ample evidence to suggest that Mullah Omar appeals to the global *ummah*<sup>48</sup> but he, as well as the Taliban, has traditionally not pursued actions directly and explicitly aimed at this audience.

Figures 4 and 5 present night letters that represent messages of intimidation against schools and teachers involved in female education. The Taliban’s strict views against female education are related primarily to its views concerning the ‘protection’ of a woman’s honour that emanates from the code of *Pashtunwali*, where women are forbidden to participate in most events and processes outside their kin group. The authority of the kin is a male prerogative. Gulick describes such kin relations as an ‘expression of the ‘peril and refuge mentality’. He observes

د افغانستان طالبانو اسلامي تحریک  
د پروان او کاپیسا ولایت نمایندگی  
نیتہ اختار لید

ټولو هغه بي غيږه تنانې څو له جملې څخه اوډه جملې نه معلومو څخه چې  
اطلاع وركړې چې من بعد له تدريس دانا شو څخه جدا هډو داري  
وكړې تراد د معلومانو بعضو له هغه كسانو څخه چې طبعه دانا شو  
ته درس وركوي چې له هغه څخه نه شي ډډه كولو له د منكر كار  
څخه ډډه وكړي په هورت تعلق كې حق وشكايه نلري  
۳- هو هغه كسان چې ښيږي په ملتبه كېني مشان كړي كړي  
اطلاع وركول كېږي چې له ملتبه تعلق څخه ډډه وكړي په هډو  
د هغه تعلق كېني مشان داخل د ملتبه كېني اعتبار هډو  
بيدالېرې بيا حق وشكايه نلري

Figure 4. Taliban Islamic Movement Representative of Parwan and Kapisa Provinces Warning

Translation:

Taliban Islamic Movement Representative of Parwan and Kapisa Provinces: Warning  
This is a warning to all those dishonourable people, including *ulema* and teachers, not to teach girls. Based on the information given to us, we strongly ask those people whose names been particularly reported to us, not to commit this act of evil. Otherwise, it is they who bear all the responsibilities. They have no right to claim that they have not been informed.

This is to inform all those who have enrolled at boys' schools to stop going to schools. An explosion might occur inside the school compounds. In case of getting hurt, it is they who bear all the responsibilities. They have no right to claim that they have not been informed.

Source: Human Rights Watch, <http://hrw.org/campaigns/afghanistan/2006/education/letter5.htm> [accessed 25 Aug. 2006]

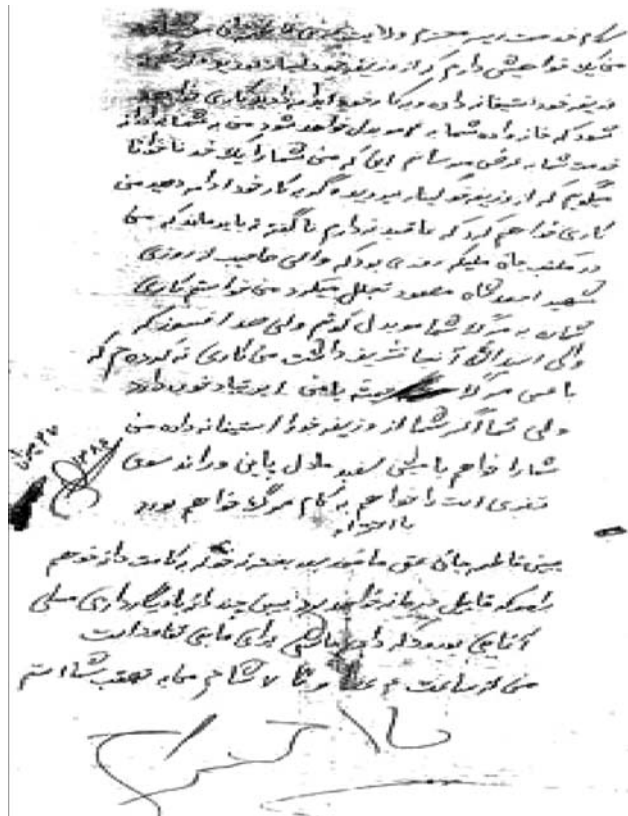


Figure 5. Taliban night letter from Ghazni

**Translation:**

Greetings towards the respected director [of education] of Ghazni province, Fatima Moshtaq. I have one request, that you step aside from your duties. Otherwise, if you don't resign your position and continue your work, something will happen that will transform your family and you to grief. I am telling you this as a brother, that I consider you a godless person. I am telling you to leave your post and if you continue your work, I will do something that doesn't have a good ending. It should not be left unsaid that one day in the Jan Malika school I heard Wali Sahib praise Ahmad Shah Masood, I wanted transform your life to death and with much regret Wali Assadullah was present there and I didn't do anything to cause your death. But if you don't resign your work, I will attack you and take you to death.

With respects,  
27 Meezan 1384

At the bottom (last paragraph):

Look, dear Fatima, consider your poor employee who will suffer. He was in front of the house; look at how many bodyguards you have for instance the one who was there but if

Figure 5. (continued)

you have them it doesn't matter to us. I was following you from four in the afternoon until seven at night.

With Respects.

Source: Human Rights Watch, <http://hrw.org/campaigns/afghanistan/2006/education/letter3.htm> [accessed 25 Aug. 2006].

that the kin who provide a person with social, emotional and, if necessary, armed support are also competitors for the same resources. In the case of women, the same brothers and father with whom they are so close and who are their protectors are also their executioners, should the males doubt the daughter's or sister's chastity. These are also the relatives who know the person best and to whom he or she is consequently most vulnerable'.<sup>49</sup>

The Taliban has recently accelerated its campaign against female education by burning schools and attacking teachers. The Afghan Ministry of Education has reported that 267 schools have been forced to stop classes – a third of them in the south because of Taliban intimidation.<sup>50</sup> The draconian writs against female education during the reign of the Taliban are well documented and portend to continue into the future.

Figure 4 presents a letter from 2005 found in Kapisa posted to a tree three days before a school in the area was set on fire. The letter was apparently posted by the 'Taliban Islamic Movement Representative of Parwan and Kapisa Provinces' and represents a 'warning' against female education. According to Human Rights Watch other *shabnamahs* were also found in the school. The *shabnamah* warns both *ulema* and teachers alike not to attempt to educate girls. It suggests that the Taliban knows who is presently violating this edict and that they will be appropriately dealt with.

Taliban incidents such as the burning of tents and school buildings, explosions near schools and threats to female teachers are well documented and were a focus of international concern during the reign of the Taliban. Threats such as those delivered in the narrative of this night letter cannot be taken lightly. In January 2006 Malim Abdul Habib, the headmaster of Shaikh Mathi Baba high school, which is attended by 1,300 boys and girls, was stabbed eight times before he was decapitated in the courtyard of his home in Qalat, Zabul.<sup>51</sup>

The second part of the letter warns students not to go to boy's schools: 'an explosion might occur inside the school compounds. In case of getting hurt, it is they who bear all the responsibilities. They have no right to claim that they have not been informed.' This threat levied at a boy's school that was constructed by a US provincial reconstruction team

(PRT) represents an additional indication of the Taliban's strategy of negating any and all reconstruction and infrastructure development in the Afghan hinterlands.

The *shabnamah* presented in Figure 5 is an example of Taliban intimidation directed at a specific individual – Fatima Moshtaq, the Ghazni Province Director of Education. Threats were apparently directed against Moshtaq because of her role in female education. She is warned that both she and her family are in grave danger. The letter calls on her to resign her position – in the eyes of the Taliban, a position that should never be held by a woman. Similar threats have been directed at numerous government officials by Taliban night letters.

Local education officials in Ghazni blame the Taliban for scores of the attacks on educational institutions. According to Human Rights Watch during 2004–5, 31 per cent of students officially enrolled in Ghazni schools were girls. The two of the 18 provincial districts that happen to lie in southern Ghazni and are areas of significant insurgent activity have no girls enrolled in school<sup>52</sup> – yet another indication that the Taliban intimidation campaign is succeeding.

Finally, Figure 6 presents a 2003 Kandahar *shabnamah*. After the recitation of a Koranic verse ('*Jihad* is a right in Allah's Path – Jihad yesterday, Jihad until the Day of Judgement'), this proclamation, authored by 'Jamiat-e Jaish al Muslemin', presents a series of specific actions and instructions that Kandaharis presently working with the Karzai government ('American puppets') are to follow:

- immediately quit your government or NGO job;
- do not use government vehicles and do not go to areas where such vehicles have been damaged or destroyed;
- never go to a feast where government officials are to be present;
- *ulema* as well as community leaders should not attend governmental *shuras*;
- woman and girls are forbidden from educational participation;
- Muslim cars should not use the roads used by government officials;
- do not transport American equipment; and
- avoid hotels frequented by Westerners.

These instructions represent an integrated program to obstruct government operations in Kandahar.

The letter, written in 2003, appears to foreshadow the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs) as well as suicide bombings – presently a grave concern and a tactic previously unknown in Afghanistan. Despite a quarter-century of war, suicide attacks in Afghanistan have been relatively rare. As Esther Pan has noted 'suicide is not a characteristic



Figure 6. Night Letter from Kandahar

Translation

*Jihad is a right in Allah's path – Jihad yesterday, Jihad until the Day of Judgment* (Arabic Koranic verse):.

Jamiat-e Jaish al Muslemin, Announcement

Date: 24 Moharram 1424 [23 April 2003]

1. This letter aims to address those who are Muslim but work with the current American puppet government, either for money or, assuming they serve Islam, to abandon their jobs immediately,
2. Muslims do not use government vehicles
3. Whenever a governmental vehicle is exploded or damaged by any means, Muslims do not go there in order to have a look at the site.
4. Where there is a feast, Muslims should not go there with government officials, because danger may threaten them.
5. A respected Muslim does not go to [illegible] because whoever goes there commits double sins: first, they commit [illegible] and, second, they rescue government officials.
6. *Ulema* and influential leaders of the community should not go to the governmental *shura* [council].

Figure 6. (continued)

7. Those women who are teachers and adult girls who are students should not go to schools.
8. Muslim cars should not use the roads used by government officials' cars.
9. All Muslims should desist from transporting American equipment and oil in their cars.
10. Muslims should avoid going to places where foreigners stay, such as hotels, etc.
11. Muslims should not work in organisations [NGOs] because Americans use those NGOs for their own purpose.
12. Muslims' sons who are working with the current infidel government should get out of it immediately. Those, however, who act in opposition to the above-mentioned rule bear the mortal and eternal responsibilities.

Al-Salaam

Source: Human Rights Watch, <http://hrw.org/campaigns/afghanistan/2006/education/letter9.htm> [accessed 25 Aug. 2006].

tactic of the Afghan people . . . they have a cultural aversion to it.'<sup>53</sup> Only five suicide attacks – none of which targeted civilians – were reported during the first three and a half years after the Taliban were driven from power.

The recent use of IEDs has demonstrated an unusual level of internal coordination and a growing technological sophistication in the Afghan insurgency. Since the summer of 2004, a variety of guerrilla tactics, including assassinations and kidnappings, in Afghanistan<sup>54</sup> suggest that insurgents are borrowing tactics from Iraq.<sup>55</sup> In the first six months of 2006, Afghan insurgents set off 32 suicide bombs, killing 82 people and wounding 244, six more than in all of 2005.<sup>56</sup> Since 1 July 2006 to the time of writing, militants have staged 27 suicide bombings, killing 98 people and wounding 188. According to NATO officials a total of 173 people, mostly citizens, had been killed in the first eight months of 2006 by suicide attacks.<sup>57</sup> Mullah Dadullah, formerly a primary spokesman (now deceased) for the current insurgency in Afghanistan and one of the most combative commanders of the Taliban, claims that the Taliban has registered 500 Afghans ready to be used as suicide bombers against 'the intruders who have occupied our Islamic country' and that Taliban fighters from outlying districts had entered cities to launch attacks. 'Now we are going to change our tactics, using a new weapon we did not have in the past, to target US and allied forces . . . We will create a big problem for them.'<sup>58</sup>

The great majority of the suicide attacks carried out during the last two years appear to be 'outsourced' to non-Afghans, most often to Punjabis from the south of Pakistan and young foreign Islamists recruited from radical groups in the Middle East. Recently, such attacks have targeted government officials such as Hakim Taniwal, the governor



of Afghanistan's Paktia province; during his funeral another suicide bomber detonated an explosive device, killing at least an additional six people. Recent attacks have also targeted US and coalition forces. The quote of Mullah Dadullah cited above would seem to suggest that suicide bombings will be used as a regular Taliban tactic in the future.

### **Implications and Conclusions**

Analysts and observers have recently argued that 'the Taliban are now drawing increasing support from the Afghan population'.<sup>59</sup> While it is impossible to evaluate specifically how the Taliban's night letter campaign has contributed to this 'support', Taliban narratives have clearly resonated; where their messages have not resonated with the populace, the Taliban has compensated by waging an effective intimidation campaign.

The Taliban's narrative themes can be summarised as:

- an appeal to past Afghan struggles against 'foreign invaders' – The Taliban regularly play on how foreign powers have been historically defeated by the peoples of Afghanistan.
- the battle between the Taliban and the Karzai 'puppet' regime and its foreign coalition represents a 'cosmic conflict' between the 'righteous' and the infidel. Afghans have a collective religious responsibility to fight the apostates and invaders;
- the Taliban's enemies represent 'crusaders' who are promoting Christianity and attempting to destroy Islam;
- the power of 'martyrdom': brave Afghans will sacrifice themselves to save Afghanistan;
- the fight against their enemies involves saving honour;
- supporting the enemy is prohibited. The penalty for ignoring the warnings is usually death.

The network of Afghan ethnic and political affiliations and loyalties is complex and continuously changing. It is difficult, if not impossible, to capture local and provincial alliances and refer to them as definitive lasting relationships. This factor works against US strategists, who find it easier to plan an operation targeting a fixed population with clearly delineated alliances, rather than shifting loyalties and politicisation resulting from personal or tribal feuds. Operation Enduring Freedom was a particular challenge to US information operation message strategists in that it was vital to have an intimate grasp of ethnic and local relationships on the ground. The vast majority of these analysts were virtually clueless in their understanding of the Taliban's environment. Although taking Kabul was a politico-strategic victory for coalition forces, the countryside was still fragmented and ethnic-alliance topography had yet to be mapped

by special operations forces (SOF) in the areas. Afghan geography created impassable barriers for tactical PSYOP, which made radio or leaflet campaigns the only hope for getting messages to the rural population. But our messages have not resonated and the Taliban has clearly taken an immeasurable lead in the information war. Night letters such as those analysed here have become a central component of its strategy.<sup>60</sup>

The level of US cultural intelligence prior to and even during the initial campaign fell short of adequate and could not compete with the Taliban information campaign, which made use of its indigenous grasp of local, provincial and national themes to render its message more powerful among its audience. Some of the US narratives have been downright silly and an embarrassment.

Understanding the Taliban and its tribal roots more precisely could enable a better calibration of information and psychological operations, a more nuanced understanding of the battlefield and the human terrain by US and NATO forces, and would suggest a realignment of reconstruction priorities based on historical models to isolate the movement and prevent its further mobilisation. Assessing their night letters is one small way to do this.

Much of the area of Taliban operations and control is ungoverned spaces (at least from a Western perspective), where tribal independence from the state is highly cherished. These areas are primarily inhabited by segmentary societies, such as the Ghilzai. Lindholm's characterisation of segmentary societies<sup>61</sup> supports the notion that tribal organisational and normative factors, which the Taliban is quite familiar with, impede the establishment of state authority. Segmentary societies differ from other forms of society in that they only tend to unite when they feel they are losing influence over their own way of life. The Taliban was brilliant in exploiting such sentiments during its initial rise to power in 1994–96, when Afghans were extremely war-weary and seeking to extend control over their lives that was lost over two decades of war as well as during the archaic and ineffectual *mujahedeen* rule after the fall of Najibullah. The Taliban under its Ghilzai leadership offered stability and the Afghan people welcomed it with open arms (at least until they recognised what the Taliban ultimately represented).

The Taliban through its present night letter campaigns is mimicking its successful strategy of 1994–96 but with a series of modifications. The narratives of the night letters represent the preservation of traditional Pashtun values and society at the expense of modernity. Night letters used in urban areas by the Taliban, not assessed by the analysis presented here, directly confront some of the ills of modernity, such as alcohol, pornography and prostitution that are now very visible in urban areas such as Kabul and which the average Pashtun abhors.<sup>62</sup> Expect to see more such letters targeting urban areas and a more

sophisticated campaign against modernity as the Taliban insurgency pushes north – a phenomenon that we started to witness in 2006.

The Taliban, as well as the Ghilzai society, have deep interests in preserving traditional social structures and organisations and preventing social change. Maintaining the social status quo is an explicit goal of a segmentary society.<sup>63</sup> These root goals and world views are clearly evidenced in Taliban *shabnamahs* and they severely hamper Kabul's ability to offer social or economic progress as an incentive to accepting state authority. Moreover, through its intimidation campaign the Taliban has been able to scare off those few NGOs and humanitarian organisations that could deliver on Karzai's wishes. This is proving to be a brilliant strategy to defy Kabul and the counterinsurgency. This has clearly presented a dilemma for the Karzai government as well as US and coalition counterinsurgency strategies.

Ghilzai Pashtuns highly value and have grown accustomed to their independence; they have preserved their way of life for centuries, despite the efforts of some very powerful forces to alter it. Though there have been times when parts of this tribal society have experienced short durations of subjugation by alien forces, they were permitted to conduct their lives in accordance with *Pashtunwali*. Even today, the federally administrated tribal areas (FATAs) of Pakistan, which are predominantly inhabited by the Pashtun, are exempt from Pakistani law. Independence is the historical norm for the Ghilzai and the Taliban night letters dwell on this fact. The desire for continued independence is one theme of the *shabnamahs* assessed here. The risk of losing tribal independence to 'infidels and puppets of the West' outweighs the possibility of improving tribal social welfare or increasing economic opportunities that would probably be gained by accepting state authority. Any concession in tribal independence should exceed any compensation offered in return for submission to state authority. Kabul as well as the US and its coalition partners have failed miserably to understand this. Ultimately all of this is academic, if the Taliban is successful in its insurgency.

#### NOTES

1. STRATFOR, 'The Afghan Stalemate', Geopolitical Diary, 14 Sept. 2006, [http://www.stratfor.com/products/premium/read\\_article.php?id = 275232&selected = Analyses](http://www.stratfor.com/products/premium/read_article.php?id = 275232&selected = Analyses) [accessed 15 Sept. 2006].
2. Anna Badkhen, 'Afghan Government Failure Reopens Door to the Taliban', *San Francisco Chronicle*, 17 Sept. 2006, p.A1.
3. See Thomas H. Johnson and W. Chris Mason, 'Understanding the Taliban and Insurgency in Afghanistan', *Orbis: A Journal of World Affairs*, 51, no. 1, (2007) pp. 71–89.
4. This analysis represents research in the spirit of David Edwards's *Heroes of the Age: Moral Fault Lines on the Afghan Border* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996). Using oral narratives and other documentation, Edwards examined the lives of a variety of important

Afghan figures including Sultan Muhammad Khan (a tribal chief), Amir Abdur Khan (the 'Iron Amir' of Afghanistan), Najmuddin Akhundzada (the Mullah of Hadda) as well as the 'the mad Fakir of Swat'. His sophisticated and fascinating use of narratives and stories to uncover cultural artefacts and the underlying structure of the 'moral systems' of these Afghan characters has served as the impetus and guide for the research presented here.

5. Louis Dupree, *Afghanistan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973), p.114.
6. See: Daniel G. Bates and Fred Plog, *Cultural Anthropology*, 2nd edn (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), p.7.
7. See Edwards, *Heroes of the Age*.
8. Mark Turner, *The Literary Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.1.
9. See, for example, Alicia Juarero, *Dynamics in Action* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999); Troy S. Thomas, William D. Casebeer and Stephen D. Kiser, *Warlords Rising: Confronting Violent Non-State Actors* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005); A.C. Graesser and G.V. Nakamura, 'The Impact of a Schema on Comprehension and Memory', in G.H. Bower (ed) *The Psychology of Learning and Motivation*, vol. 16, (New York: Academic Press, 1982), pp.16, 59–109; Maybel Chau-Ping Wong, 'The Effects of Story Schemata on Narrative Recall' (2004), <https://repository.ust.hk/dspace/handle/1783.1/1337> [accessed 6 Sept. 2006]; and Daniel Dennett, 'The Self as Center of Narrative Gravity' (1992), <http://ase.tufts.edu/cogstud/papers/selfctr.htm> [accessed 6 Sept. 2006].
10. See D.A. Snow and R. Benford, 'Ideology, Frame Resonance, and Participant Mobilization', in *From Structure to Action*, vol. 1, edited by B. Klandermans, H. Kriesi and S. Tarrow (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 1988), pp.197–217.
11. For example, see: Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald, eds., *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), or Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly, 'Toward an Integrated Perspective on Social Movements and Revolution', in *Comparative Politics: Rationality, Culture and Structure*, edited by Mark I. Lichback and Alan S. Zuckerman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
12. The use of oral narratives for the transmittal of instructions and legends is crucial, especially in rural Afghanistan, when you consider that the vast majority of the rural population is illiterate. Night letters are generally posted at mosques or delivered to a literate village member and read to the community during a mass meeting.
13. Hafizullah Emadi, *Culture and Customs of Afghanistan* (London: Greenwood Press, 2005), p.98.
14. Sandy Gall, *Afghanistan: Agony of a Nation* (London: The Bodley Head, 1988), p.99.
15. Nelofer Pazira, *A Bed of Red Flowers: In Search of My Afghanistan* (New York: Free Press, 2005), p.102.
16. For an example of a media account of night letters posted near the Spin Boldak border, see Ron Synovitz, 'Afghanistan: US Investigates Taliban "Night Letters" Threatening Villagers' *Radio Liberty*, 10 March 2004, <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2004/03/c47dc6f9-5e79-4213-8c0e-2430cf0557b5.html> [accessed 1 Sept. 2006].
17. Aryn Baker, 'Deadly Notes in the Night: How the Taliban is using a new kind of terrorist threat to intimidate Afghans', *Time*, 5 July 2006.
18. *Ibid.*
19. PYSOP officer interview by Capt. Keely M. Fahoum, 14 June 2006. US PSYOP personnel have expressed their frustration because of their inability to respond to Taliban night letters in a timely, effective manner. While the Taliban could hand-deliver their communiqués to strategic points of contact within rural villages, US PSYOP planners have limited physical access or intimate knowledge of village politics and social structure. During Operation Enduring Freedom, PSYOP personnel and analysts struggled with bureaucratic red tape which made it next to impossible to respond to Taliban propaganda efforts in a timely manner (personal communication with two PSYOP officers at the Naval Postgraduate School, May–July 2006).
20. I would like to thank former NPS student Capt. Keely M. Fahoum, USAF, for her outstanding support for some of the Taliban night letter analysis presented here. Capt. Fahoum's earlier conceptualisations on Taliban *shabnamah* have been critical to my thinking on the subject.
21. This particular night letter was distributed in May 2006 and was provided by a government analyst returning from a Afghanistan deployment.
22. Sir Percy Sykes, *A History of Afghanistan* (London: Macmillan, 1940), p.367.

23. Dupree, *Afghanistan*, p.314.
24. Ibid.
25. Olaf Caroe, *The Pathans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp.15–19.
26. Olaf Caroe states that Ghilzais are descendants of Khalaj Turks who came with Attila and the Huns. Caroe also states that after several centuries these tribes became Pashtunised and they formed a unique dialect of Pashto with a heavy Turkish vocabulary. He also states the word Ghilzai comes from Khalaj which evolved through time from Khalaj to Khalji to Ghalji to Ghalzai or Ghilzai (Caroe, *The Pathans*, pp.15–19).
27. See Johnson and Mason, 'Understanding the Taliban'.
28. James W. Spain, *The Pathan Borderland* (Karachi, Pakistan: Indus Publications, 1963), pp.41, 57; Caroe, *The Pathans*, pp.15–19.
29. Dupree, *Afghanistan*, pp.322-325.
30. The only period when the Pashtuns have not held power in Afghanistan was briefly in 1929 when Habibullah Ghazi, a Tajik, took power until he was overthrown and Durrani returned to power. Burhanuddin Rabbani Tajik, leader of the Jamiat-i-Islami, was an ineffectual Mujahedeen president of pre-Taliban Afghanistan from June 1992 until the Taliban took Kabul in September 1996.
31. The competition and distrust between the Ghilzai and the Durrani played a major role in the split of the PDPA, where the *Khalq* (the people or masses) led by Nur Mohammed Taraki represented Ghilzai Pashtun and the *Parcham* (Banner) led by Babrak Karmal represented the Durrani Pashtun. See: Anthony Arnold, *Afghanistan's Two-Party communism: Parcham and Khalq* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institute, 1983).
32. From the hundreds of resistance groups which emerged to challenge the Soviet invasion and occupation, the Pakistani Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) – who played a central role arming and training Afghan resistance groups – recognised seven Sunni parties and established offices for them through which to channel covert support. Although most of these resistance groups had a strong religious ethos, the groups were organised primarily along ethno-linguistic and tribal lines. Significantly, while three parties were explicitly led by a Ghilzai, all the 'leaders' of the Peshawar parties except for one had Ghilzai tribal connections. Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, Abdul Rasoul Sayyaf and Nabi Muhammadi are Ghilzais; Younis Khalis is from a neighbouring eastern Pashtun tribe (the Khugiani); Pir Gailani and Sibghatullah Mujaddidi are from immigrant Sufi families whose religious and political links are largely with Ghilzais. Only Borhanuddin Rabbani has no intimate connection with Ghilzais. None of the Peshawar parties were led by the Durrani, who were deliberately marginalised by the ISI.
33. See Anthony Arnold, *Afghanistan's Two-Party Communism*.
34. Gailani's NIFA party often stood in for the royal family, partially because of the anomalous position of King Zahir Shah.
35. Both Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a sworn enemy of the US and long rival to the Taliban until he signed an alliance of convenience with them after OEF's initial stage, and Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, fundamentalist leader of the Wahabbi Iittihad-i-Islami (Islamic Unity), are Ghilzai.
36. Dupree, *Afghanistan*, p.314.
37. Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York: Penguin Books: 2004), p.238.
38. Jeffery J. Roberts, *The Origins of Conflict in Afghanistan* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishing, 2003), p.xiii.
39. Fawaz A. Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad went Global* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p.83.
40. Night letter provided by a government analyst deployed in Afghanistan in 2003, translated by Amin Tarzi and Farid Mohammad, October 2006.
41. Johnson and Mason, 'Understanding the Taliban'.
42. Badkhen, 'Afghan Government Failure Reopens Door to the Taliban', p.A4.
43. See especially chapter eight of Mark Juergensmeyer's *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, 3rd edn (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003).
44. See Bruce Lawrence, ed., *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama Bin Laden* (London: Verso, 2005).
45. A term of Persian origin, meaning an army, a camp; or one belonging to an army, a soldier.
46. Dupree, *Afghanistan*, p.453.

47. Gerges, *The Far Enemy*, p.83.
48. He reportedly started the Taliban after a dream in which Allah came to him in the shape of a man, asking him to lead the faithful. In 1996 he made a risky but brilliant propaganda move, which again supports the notion of his being a charismatic leader, by taking the garment that Afghans believe to be the Prophet Mohammed's shroud or cloak out of Kandahar's royal mausoleum for first time in 60 years and wearing it in a public rally as a way of identifying himself with the Prophet – see Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), p.20. The cloak is believed by many of the 90 per cent of Pashtuns who are illiterate to contain supernatural and mystical powers. This action also represented Omar's absolute faith in his perceived divine right to rule and gave him legitimacy in his role as leader of the Afghan people ordained by Allah; soon after Omar was named *Amir-ul Momineen* or leader of the faithful – not just of the Afghans but of all Muslims. The cloak of the Prophet Mohammed, which had been folded and padlocked in a series of chests in a crypt in the royal mausoleum at Kandahar; 'myth had it that the padlocks to the crypt could be opened only when touched by a true *Amir-ul Momineen*, a king of the Muslims'. See: Joseph A. Raelin, 'The Myth of Charismatic Leaders' (March 2003), [http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m0MNT/is\\_3\\_57/ai\\_98901483](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0MNT/is_3_57/ai_98901483), [accessed 11 July 2006].
49. Richard F. Nyrop and Donald M. Seekins, eds., *Afghanistan Country Study* (Washington, DC: The American University, Foreign Area Studies, 1986), <http://www.gl.iit.edu/govdocs/afghanistan/Family.html> [accessed 6 Sept. 2006].
50. Miles Bredin, 'Class War: Battle to Educate Afghan Girls and Boys Hindered by Fear of Taliban Retribution', *The Independent*, 12 Sept. 2006.
51. Noor Khan, 'Militants Behead Afghan Principal for Educating Girls: Taliban Assaults Cited in Closing of Schools', *Boston Globe*, 5 Jan. 2006.
52. Human Rights Watch, at <http://hrw.org/campaigns/afghanistan/2006/education/letter3.htm> [accessed 25 Aug. 2006].
53. Esther Pan, 'Afghanistan's New Security Threat', *Backgrounder*, Council on Foreign Affairs, 14 Feb. 2006. Also see Griff Witte, 'Suicide Bombers Kill Dozens in Afghanistan, Violence in South Is Seen as Message to NATO', *Washington Post Foreign Service*, 17 Jan. 2006, p.A11.
54. For a chronology of suicide bombings in Afghanistan, compiled by Radio Liberty see <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2006/01/9ac36a59-d683-4189-a2b9-94fe5fbf32ad.html> [accessed 12 July 2006].
55. Griff Witte, 'Afghans Confront Surge In Violence: Foreign Support Seen Behind Attacks That Mimic Those in Iraq', *Christian Science Monitor*, 28 Nov. 2005, p.1.
56. Eric Schmitt, 'Springtime Killing in Afghanistan', *New York Times*, 28 May 2006.
57. Badkhen, 'Afghan Government Failure Reopens Door to the Taliban', p.A4.
58. Associated Press, 'Top Taliban Military Commander Dismisses NATO Casualty Reports, Warns Journalists', *International Harold Tribune* (Asian and Pacific edn), 4 Sept. 2006, online at [http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2006/09/04/asia/AS\\_GEN\\_Afghan\\_Taliban.php](http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2006/09/04/asia/AS_GEN_Afghan_Taliban.php) [accessed 10 Sept. 2006].
59. Syed Saleem Shahzad, 'In Search of the Taliban's Missing Link', *Asia Times Online*, 16 Sept. 2006, [http://atimes.com/atimes/South\\_Asia/HI16Df01.html](http://atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/HI16Df01.html) [accessed 17 Sept. 2006].
60. This very effective Taliban information operation has recently been complemented with a professional and sophisticated Pashto and Arabic website (English version is 'under construction'), Alemarah.org or 'Voice of Jihad' that lists occurrences of police corruption and reports of coalition attacks on innocent civilians. This website is clearly aimed at expanding Taliban influence in both Afghanistan and Pakistan and presents visitors with up-to-date news on Taliban activities and attacks in Afghanistan, editorials, official announcements, commentary, audio and video libraries, testimonials by suicide bombers, poetry, magazines, books and online contact information.
61. Charles Lindholm. 'The Segmentary Lineage System: Its Applicability to Pakistan's Political Structure', in *Pakistan's Western Borderlands: The Transformation of Political Order*, edited by Ainslie T. Embree (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House PVT, Ltd, 1977), pp.41–66.
62. While there are numerous Ghilzai Pashtuns living in urban areas of both Pakistan and Afghanistan, the vast majority live in rural areas.
63. Lindholm. 'The Segmentary Lineage System', p.60.