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THE CULTURE AND CONFLICT REVIEW



The Status of US/ISAF Strategic Communications Efforts in Afghanistan

Michael Cohn, 11/1/2009

Conrad Jennings in his article on the growing crisis in Kandahar, published by CCS in 2008 writes, “The failures of the NATO information strategy – along with the overwhelming successes of that put out by the Taliban – is worth a whole separate examination on its own.”^[1]

The summary outlined below is an initial attempt at such an investigation. Following numerous interviews and discussions with Strategic Communication (SC) and IO officials, professionals and scholars, including senior leadership based in Afghanistan, a status report was compiled in order to better understand current US/ISAF SC challenges and provide recommendations for the future.

The US/ISAF’s entire presence in Afghanistan *is* an information operation. All issues and complications US/ISAF and the Afghan people face are intertwined and interconnected - issues of security, reconstruction, jobs, education, infrastructure, corruption, etc. influence and affect one another. None exists in a vacuum and little progress can be made in one area without making progress in others. Progress in any area depends on the support of the Afghan population.

The desired end state for US/ISAF forces in Afghanistan is for the Afghan people and people in Allied and partner countries to recognize and support the efforts of the Afghan government, the U.S., its Allies and partners in stabilizing and reconstructing Afghanistan. Ideally, the Afghan people should strongly support their government and reject insurgency, terrorism, and the narcotics trade. Achieving desired effects on audience perceptions is critical to achieving this end state.

To defeat the Taliban, coalition forces must persuade the Afghan population to reject extremism and deny safe haven to those fighting against the new Afghan political order. This will require dialogue, inducements, and the proportionate use of force to win the battle for “hearts and minds.”

False rumors, atrocity propaganda, and conspiracy theories are the inevitable side-effect of frustration, disappointment, and various levels of alienation. In this negative environment, the rising numbers of civilian casualties, along with foreign forces’ perceived lack of respect for Afghan traditions and norms, have fueled the spread of inaccurate stories that negatively affect Afghan attitudes towards the coalition. Moreover, a cumbersome approval process, exacerbated by a reluctance to adapt to culturally specific channels of communication, has prevented coalition forces from adequately responding to the negative propaganda and false rumors in a timely and effective manner.

For the past seven years SC has also suffered from a lack of sufficient coordination. Cultural assessments, SC thematic guidance and tactical execution of IO and PSYOPS have not always harmonized. Multiple contracting vehicles, though designed to assist and support these activities, have turned out to cause more redundancy and waste. In addition, the actions of foreign troops on the ground have not always mirrored the messages advertised. Our deeds did not consistently match our words and our messages were not always in sync with the Afghan people.

There has been an overemphasis on strategic advertising with undue focus on a generic audience, rather than executing people-centric grass roots campaigns targeting the specifics of different localities. Coalition SC failed to appreciate the significance of word-of-mouth channels of communication and the function of formal and informal social networks in Afghanistan. The limited formal and informal person-

to-person engagement inherent in the past strategy was not only caused by serious deficiencies in target audience analysis and message dissemination, it further contributed to them.

The coalition's lack of awareness and proper engagement of formal and informal communication and influence networks is a major contributing factor to the overall negative image of the US/ISAF amongst many Afghans. In addition, excessive willingness to deal with unsavory characters, engage in unduly aggressive tactics coupled with occasional but inevitably over-publicized strike mistakes on civilians has lessened our standing further. On a local level, these factors have also helped to undermine and marginalize the important role played by village elders in Afghan culture. This has decreased the possibility - certainly the effectiveness - of cooperating with them, which has been highly disadvantageous both operationally and with regard to information collection and dissemination.

US/ISAF forces currently find themselves in the precarious position of having to enhance the legitimacy of often corrupt and ineffective GIRoA institutions before the Afghan population, which unfortunately also contributes to the unintended perception of Western forces as collaborators and enablers of corruption and incompetence. US/ISAF faces an unsavory predicament: it needs to help establish Afghan governmental authority and legitimacy, yet the Afghan government has failed to gain the people's trust. Patronage, bribery and embezzlement plague the government and the Afghan Army and Police still lack proper manpower, resources, and training to fulfill their role effectively. Western forces are also held partly responsible for the lack of progress in reconstruction and economic development because of the perceived failures to establish sufficient security and properly guard against the squandering of aid funds. Moreover, extending central authority from Kabul has neither been sufficiently sold to the Afghan people nor has it ever accounted for the constant obstacles of geography, ethnic division, and cultural structures and sentiments.

The appeal, intimidation, and sympathy for the Taliban alternative benefits from this environment. US/ISAF SC must seek to rectify these shortcomings in order to improve its image in Afghanistan and gain more support from the Afghan people.

Current US/ISAF SC efforts, under the Directorship of RDML Gregory J. Smith, are undergoing a number of reorganizations to meet these challenges. First, there is a process of structural re-alignment across the board to improve coordination and information management. Efforts are being made to unify all operations and research efforts under a single taskforce. The purpose is to fuse the multitude of ongoing cultural assessment analyses into a centralizing hub. This information database would be accessible to all provincial IO teams as well as various USG/ISAF and GIRoA governmental entities, all contributing to its development at the same time.

In addition, there is an emerging shift in focus from the message towards the network of dissemination. Efforts are on-going to develop traditional communication pathways and provide more alternative media. This means telecommunications/radio towers and electricity on the one hand, and interpersonal and social network engagement on the other. The purpose is to use the information collectors as also information disseminators. RDML Smith believes there is a network to be built among the many Afghans working for the myriad of western-funded cultural assessment projects contracted throughout the country. These Afghans are uniquely positioned as practical interlocutors between US/ISAF forces and the Afghan population. Ideally, Smith hopes to utilize these Afghans to create new channels of communication by building and taping into existing and emerging social networks, and use them as message-multipliers for US/ISAF SC.

Going forward, we'll need to better understand the dynamics of communication and influence networks in Afghanistan in order to effectively use them to foster our own image and messages. We also need to significantly increase the role of personal interaction in engaging these networks to gain influence and support. Both Western and Afghan faces should be on the front lines helping to bridge the cultural divide, making our intentions and actions as clear as possible. The Westerners employed to do this should not always be military personnel, and even the military should not always wear uniforms. Building basic human *rapport* is as important as building new schools and roads.

Our efforts need to be focused at the grassroots level, where we can target our messages on the specific issues that matter to the population in each community; reinforcing and amplifying the far more important actions and words of the Brigades operating in these areas. At this level, we can also exploit local influencers with real credibility and visibility within the community. This grassroots approach to IO *complements* the main effort of COIN operations, which is at the Brigade and Battalion level, where the war is won individual-by-individual, street-by-street and community-by-community. The role of national

and regional advertising should be to support the grassroots effort by focusing on those few issues that are common across communities and by broadcasting successes achieved at the local level.

The country is marked by distinct regional differences in political dynamics of localism, or more generally, the dynamics of center-periphery differ amongst regions and provinces. Khandahar, for example, is dominated by several families. These elites utilize patron-client relationships in local administrative and security organs, as well as the backing of their own militias and profits from drug trafficking, to control the province and exercise considerable autonomy from Kabul. In places like Paktia, by contrast, tribes practice more egalitarian politics, based on consensus and tribal norms, but perhaps guard their independence from central government even more fiercely. We need to better identify these formal and informal structures of authority, how they operate, and how they vary throughout the country. In addition, we should enhance key leader engagement cells – up and down tactical and strategic environments – to include nontraditional forms of message-multipliers. We should also enhance our profiling of these individuals in order to more effectively utilize them in support of SC objectives.

It is clear we also need to increase our rapid-response capabilities and conduct better and more vigorous counter-propaganda at all levels. Taliban and Al-Qaeda elements are adept at releasing timely messages to undermine support for US/ISAF forces and the Afghan government. They are quick to exploit coalition failures and excesses; they respond rapidly to defend their own actions, often by shifting blame to the authorities; and they hijack coalition successes to argue that change only occurs as a result of their violence. The slow speed of the U.S. military's clearance process (typically it takes three to five days to approve even a simple information operations product such as a leaflet or billboard) creates an information vacuum that Afghans fill with conspiracy theories and gossip often reflecting the exaggerations or outright lies of insurgents and extremists.

Moreover, the coalition has yet to monitor enemy messages systematically at the grass roots level. Absent of such monitoring, any coalition attempt to seize information momentum is bound to fall short. Imagery of critical events filmed by the coalition's electronic news gathering agents and sent to coalition headquarters in close to real time could be used to highlight insurgent atrocities more effectively than a million dollar commercial before the window of opportunity is lost. It is also recommended we have pre-planned IO strategies for missions where we anticipate civilian casualties or the manipulation of them. Teams should be on hand, ready to go after these incidents. In this way, we will be able to seize the initiative.

The answer to many US/ISAF problems will also consist of asking better questions. We need to better understand the psychological and sociological effects of our presence. More research should be conducted regarding the imposition of our people, political ideas and artifacts and how they are absorbed and assimilated into Afghan culture. Further efforts need to be focused on becoming aware and alleviating cultural misunderstandings. Such questions will help us better tap into what Afghans think about the multitude of important challenges facing their country. These efforts will assist the overall effectiveness of refocusing the strategy to a more people-centric approach.

We also need to begin thinking about the legacy US/ISAF will leave in this country. In Afghanistan, many conquerors come and go. They rarely stay long and always leave a distinct imprint. We should start asking what our historical imprint will be. Will it be one of stark cement barricades and carelessness, little better than the Soviets? Or can it be more positive?

Finally, and most importantly, if all the efforts cited above are to succeed, we need to demonstrate results. The product advertised must deliver. Security must be established and maintained, reconstruction, economic, and infrastructure development must make progress, corruption up and down the Afghan government must be curbed, and ordinary Afghan people need to see tangible benefits in their daily lives if US/ISAF SC is to meet the many challenges cited above. US/ISAF forces must work to rectify and minimize past mistakes. Afghans need to see and believe things will change for the better, not remain stagnant or get worse. If progress does not take place, further instability in Afghanistan could be very possible.

In order to maintain a monopoly on power, one must maintain a monopoly on the vision of the future as well. The support of the Afghan people will be essential for US/ISAF success in Afghanistan. A number of strategic and operational issues were inimical to US/ISAF SC before the recent troop surge and strategy retooling under Gen. McChrystal. As forms of action, they far outweighed any propaganda of the word. More than anything we can say, it will be propaganda of the deed that will win or lose the day. With a reinvigorated commitment and improved strategy US/ISAF forces do have the potential to regain

the momentum in Afghanistan back from frustration and extremism. In order to be able to do this, however, real signs of progress must be demonstrated and a relationship of trust must be restored with the Afghan people.

About the Author

A graduate of Adelphi University in New York and Sussex University in England, Mr. Cohn also received his Master's degree from The Institute of World Politics, and is about to complete a post-graduate certificate from George Washington University in Washington, DC. He is currently working as a researcher and analyst for Glevum Associates, deployed in Afghanistan.

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1. Conrad Jennings, "[Update from Kandahar: A City in Crisis and Implications for NATO](#)," *Culture and Conflict Review* II, No. 4 (November 1, 2008).

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