The Use of English-Language Internet Propaganda by the Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan, 2007-2010

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THE USE OF ENGLISH-LANGUAGE INTERNET PROPAGANDA BY THE TALIBAN INSURGENCY IN AFGHANISTAN, 2007 – 2010

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A Thesis

Presented to

the Dean and Faculty of the Josef Korbel School of International Studies

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In Partial Fulfillment

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Master of Arts

International Security

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by

Matthew T. Calvin

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Abstract

After nearly a decade of war in Afghanistan, military and government officials have described the propaganda efforts of the Taliban insurgency as increasingly sophisticated and effective. These statements fail to distinguish between insurgent propaganda efforts at the local level and those carried out online and targeted at Western populations. This research investigates the effectiveness of the Taliban’s use of English-language media to reach Western populations and shape their own image in a way that furthers their strategic objectives. An analytical approach that combines quantitative analysis performed on a set of Taliban messages from 2007 to 2010 and a deeper, qualitative assessment of a subset of those messages provides insight into the trends and themes within Taliban messaging. This approach shows an unsophisticated Taliban English-language propaganda effort that, despite showing recent signs of potential improvement, has failed to shape its image in support of its strategic objectives, focusing its efforts instead on violent and reactionary messages and following a narrative driven by the Western and international media.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The current war in Afghanistan that began in November 2001 has entered its tenth year. It is now the longest war in American history, and it has ushered in a fourth decade of nearly constant conflict in Afghanistan. The current insurgency is being waged under the banner of the Taliban, the largely Pashtun, Islamic fundamentalist movement that dominated most of Afghanistan in the late 1990s as the apparent victor of the country’s brutal civil war. Generally described in simplistic, uniform terms, the ‘Taliban’, both in its inception and today, is a complex mosaic of actors and groups, often as much of an abstract rallying cry, ideology or scapegoat as a true organization. The insurgency is dynamic and pragmatic, shifting its messaging and tactics to adapt to the changing strategies and often failed attempts by the Afghan government and its Western backers to stabilize and govern the country. Having once banned Internet, television and music, the leadership of the Taliban faction that governed in the 1990s now enthusiastically leverages the speed and reach of modern communications technologies in its efforts to spread its own narrative and influence the outcome of this highly asymmetric conflict.

Perception is paramount in an insurgency. In a counterinsurgency environment that has been as under resourced and strategically uncertain as the one being waged by NATO forces over the past ten years, perception is easily manipulated by insurgents who come from the very communities whose loyalty the government is trying to secure. In a security vacuum unfilled by foreign militaries or ineffective Afghan security forces and a governance vacuum created by a highly corrupt government, story and rumor can stoke
fear, frustration and anger among the population. The Taliban insurgency has shown an adept ability to channel the resentment and fear of local populations in Afghanistan and turn it against a government that came to power in 2001 as a generally popular alternative to the brutal Taliban government and the anarchy that preceded it. Even those Afghans who may not want to support the return of the Taliban have been forced to side with the insurgency, for fear of retribution or need for security and stability in the face of corruption and lawlessness.

Understanding the way that the Taliban communicate their narrative is critical to understanding the evolution of the insurgency itself. The ability of a networked, highly fractured, militarily unsophisticated insurgent movement to gain moral and physical ground against a national government backed by the world’s most powerful military shows the power of modern asymmetric warfare. Within the borders of Afghanistan, the campaign of intimidation and messaging that shapes the environment is highly localized and culturally and socially specific to the villages and towns, families and tribes within which the struggle is taking place. Studying this aspect of the conflict from afar, especially as it is ongoing, is ineffective at best and risks dangerously simplistic conclusions at worse. As an insurgency backed by international and transnational forces on both sides though, elements of the conflict extend far beyond the borders of Afghanistan. Over the past ten years, the insurgency has increased its efforts to spread its messaging beyond the Afghan population to reach distant populations around the world on whose opinion and support the war in Afghanistan also depends. It is elements of this cross-border propaganda effort that this research seeks to better understand.
Afghanistan, especially in its many rural communities, is both highly illiterate and extremely disconnected from any modern telecommunications infrastructure. The language of the Pashtun communities, from which many of the Taliban come and within which much of the insurgency rages today, is Pashto. The rest of the country speaks Dari, Uzbek, and a handful of other languages. Arabic and English are spoken by only a relative few, and access to the Internet is rare as well. Despite this reality on the ground, the Taliban have, since the beginning of the insurgency, published statements, stories, news and articles in Arabic and English, as well as Urdu, and distributed them largely through the Internet. These efforts have grown more professional and more frequent as the war has progressed.

There are arguably two primary reasons for the insurgency to support the time and resources required to publish communications intended for English and Arabic speaking audiences. The focus on Arabic is to engage much of the Muslim world, including the residents of oil-rich countries of the Middle East whose financial support has served as a source of insurgent funding dating back even to the Soviet occupation in the 1980s. The focus on English is intended to address the populations of many of the countries whose militaries now support the Afghan government of Hamid Karzai, including the United States and Britain. For an insurgent force engaged in a complex, global-local insurgency against a foreign-backed national government, both of these objectives, while very different, are critical to the long-term strategic outlook of the conflict.

While both of these distinct target audiences and messaging mediums are important to understanding the media operations of the Afghan insurgency, this research will focus primarily on the English language media. Since the objective of the
insurgency’s English language media is to reach the English speaking world, the messages are openly available online. Since they are written in English, they can be analyzed in their native format without the need for translation. While some translations of Arabic and Pashto materials are necessary in understanding the comparative nature of the English language propaganda, the focus of this research is on better classifying and understanding the use of English language media by the Afghan insurgency and its apparent success or failure.

Over the past ten years, claims have been made by journalists, policy makers, military leaders and academics alike as to the alarming sophistication and effectiveness of the Taliban’s propaganda campaign. In May 2009, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said that the United States is losing the “media war” in Afghanistan to the more affective strategic communications of the Taliban insurgency.¹ These statements though are largely based on anecdotal evidence and a general understanding of the important role that information plays in an insurgency. While more substantial evidence points to the success of Taliban propaganda on the ground in Afghanistan, the research on the effectiveness of its foreign language propaganda has been less substantial. Questions remain as to whether the Internet posts of the Taliban insurgency are even important to the overall conflict or whether they are simply the weak attempts of a distant, nationalist insurgent group to mimic the efforts of its more successful transnational allies. Tim Foxley, a researcher from the SIPRI organization, has made the claim that “in short, the Taliban propaganda is

underachieving”. To assess this in more depth though, research needs to move beyond anecdotal assessments and look at the higher level trends relevant to the goals and effects of Taliban English language propaganda.

The objective of this research is to analyze the effectiveness of the English language propaganda efforts of the Afghan insurgency. The insurgency has stated that one of its primary missions is to bring about the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Afghanistan. From the perspective of the insurgency, the way to achieve this is the erosion of public support for the war among the democratic countries involved. In a democracy, when public support declines far enough, withdrawal of military forces and government support will historically follow. Part of the insurgent strategy is carried out on the ground, by raising the costs in blood and treasure through violent attacks on Western military and civilian targets. Propaganda plays a role in publicizing these attacks and driving Western opinion towards accepting a withdrawal. The question being investigated is: are Taliban English language propaganda efforts having any influence on Western public opinion, or are they simply riding on the coat tails of a Western and international media whose coverage of the war is actually leading the influence of Western perceptions of the war? The hypothesis is that, as Tim Foxley pointed out, the English language efforts of the Taliban insurgency are actually limited in reach and ineffective, more repeating hyperbolic statements about the media topics driven by Western and international media than actually driving the narrative themselves.

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From a historical perspective, the modern wars in both Afghanistan and Iraq have served as the first and most prominent examples of complex global-local insurgencies in the post-9/11 al-Qaeda era, with al-Qaeda as the transnational element involved in both. As al-Qaeda has heavily influenced the evolution of Taliban propaganda, the knowledge transfer between the media-savvy al-Qaeda membership and its nationalist, Taliban allies is a potential sign of things to come in future insurgencies of this nature. While this research does not have the value of hindsight since it is looking at an ongoing conflict, it is still valuable to look at the ongoing evolution of the information campaign of the Afghan insurgency, as it has direct consequences on the conflict today and, unfortunately, likely conflicts in the future as well.
CHAPTER TWO: BACKGROUND

Brief History of the Conflict in Afghanistan

Understanding the role of media and propaganda within the Afghan insurgency requires some background on the history and makeup of the insurgency itself. This section will provide background on how the current insurgency in Afghanistan came to be, how this has affected the structure, nature and identity of the insurgency today, and how the use of media and propaganda by insurgent forces has evolved during the conflict.


While the history of Afghanistan as a modern state began in the early 18th century, the situation faced by the country today essentially began its modern evolution in 1978 with a coup that brought a radical Afghan communist government to power in Kabul.\(^3\) The leaders of this new government failed to understand the danger of forced rapid modernization within a highly traditional and conservative Afghan society, and upon taking power, enacted a series of laws designed to modernize rural Afghanistan.\(^4\) Resistance was immediate and intense, particularly from conservative, rural communities, and the Afghan communists soon realized the severe limitations of central government control in Afghanistan. As the revolt gained in strength, Afghan government military

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commanders and soldiers began abandoning the Communists in force and joining the
Mujahideen resistance. In December 1979, fearing the collapse of a sympathetic
Communist government on its southern border, the Soviet Union invaded to support the
weakening Afghan Communist regime.

The Soviet occupation of Afghanistan lasted a decade, until a loose alliance of
Mujahideen fighters, based in Pakistan and funded and armed by the United States and a
number of Sunni Arab governments, forced the eventual withdrawal of Soviet forces in
1989. The structure of the Mujahideen groups would come to have a dramatic impact on
the country after the Soviet withdrawal, as these heavily armed factions began competing
for influence in a post-Soviet Afghanistan once the withdrawal became apparent. The
Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), which was responsible for arming and
coordinating the Mujahideen, favored the more violent, fundamentalist Mujahideen
commanders, like Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, hoping to increase Pakistani influence in
Afghanistan following the removal of the Communist government. After the Soviets
withdrew in 1989, the Afghan Communist government was able to maintain control of
Kabul against repeated Mujahideen offensives until 1992, when it was finally defeated.
The Afghan civil war then entered a new stage of destructiveness with a violent battle for
Kabul between the majority Pashtun forces of Hekmatyar and the largely Tajik forces of
Ahmed Shah Massoud.

Hekmatyar, Massoud, and a cast of other former Mujahideen commanders battled
for control of territory across Afghanistan for the next four years, massacring populations

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who supported rival commanders and further destroying an Afghan civil society and infrastructure already ravaged by more than a decade of war. Lawlessness and banditry thrived in the Afghan provinces where warring Mujahideen armies were absent, and insecurity continued to spread. In 1996, a group of Islamic students, many former Mujahideen, from the predominantly Pashtun southern region of the country, calling themselves the Taliban, rose up within this vacuum of lawlessness, drawing strong support from a public weary of war by executing a band of criminals in retaliation for a series of violent crimes.\textsuperscript{6}

The Taliban, under the guidance of Mullah Mohammed Omar and with the financial and military support of the Pakistani ISI, chained together a series of rapid victories against Mujahideen commanders and warlords, first in the Southern part of the country and then continuing North. By 1996, the Taliban had captured Kabul and taken control of most of the country.\textsuperscript{7} The last resistance to the Taliban was a group known as the Northern Alliance, a primarily Tajik force under the leadership of Tajik-commander Ahmed Shah Massoud. During this time, the Taliban also formed a loose alliance with Osama bin Laden and his Al-Qaeda terrorist network, allowing them to train and operate from territory inside Afghanistan. It was from these camps that parts of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks were planned and supported.\textsuperscript{8} Following the September 11 attacks, the United States demanded that the Taliban government extradite Osama bin Laden to stand trial. The Taliban refused this request.

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{8} Coll, \textit{Ghost wars : the secret history of the CIA, Afghanistan, and bin Laden, from the Soviet invasion to September 10, 2001}.
In December 2001, a campaign of surgical air strikes and special forces support to Northern Alliance militias overwhelmed Taliban forces, which collapsed and dispersed throughout the country and across the Pakistani border. While Northern Alliance commander Massoud had been assassinated by al-Qaeda agents two days before September 11, 2001, with the help of American technology, his forces were able to dislodge the Taliban and force their retreat. The victory was quick and decisive and American and allied forces were able to quickly secure and occupy major cities across the country. As American and coalition forces worked with Afghan allies from the Northern Alliance to hunt al-Qaeda members fleeing to Pakistan, a new power vacuum emerged in Afghanistan and various players, new and old, began to jockey for position in the post-Taliban Afghanistan.

Afghanistan: 2001 – Present

Following the invasion and expulsion of the Taliban and al-Qaeda, the United States and the international community sought to fill the power vacuum as quickly as possible with a central government in Kabul that would be friendly to the West. As Thomas Barfield points out, this decision essentially sought to return Afghanistan to the system of strong central control that first emerged only after the second Anglo-Afghan war of the late 19th Century. Central authority did not have a long history in Afghanistan, and the thirty years of nearly continuous conflict prior to the removal of the Taliban had further fractured the distribution of political power and organization within the country. As mentioned above, many Mujahideen commanders who gained power and authority

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during the anti-Soviet jihad carried that authority into the power vacuum of post-Soviet
civil war, carving out regions of relative autonomy as more powerful power brokers
struggled for control of Kabul. While the rise of the Taliban may have co-opted or
subdued many of these militia commanders, a number of them were able to quickly
return to authority when international forces routed the Taliban from power.

In November 2001, just one month after the ouster of the Taliban, the United
Nations convened a conference in Bonn, Germany to develop a transitional government
for Afghanistan and assign leadership positions. Most major Afghan power brokers were
included in the discussions, with the obvious exclusion of the Taliban. Hamid Karzai, a
Pashtun from the Popalzai tribe who played little part in the anti-Soviet insurgency or
Civil War, was selected to be the president of the provisional government. Leaders from
different factions of the largely non-Pashtun Northern Alliance were given control of
most of the ministries.\textsuperscript{10} The Bonn Process ended with the intent to conduct a vote of
approval on the provisional government in a national loya jirga within one year.

Following the establishment of the provisional government at Bonn, a series of
loya jirgas and elections followed in the subsequent years, as Afghanistan progressed
through a process intended to bring about a stable and legitimate central government. In
June 2002, an emergency loya Jirga was held to grant the provisional government another
two years by which to develop a new constitution for Afghanistan and hold national
elections. The major political and ethnic factions from across Afghanistan were
represented, but in the end, strong pressure from the United States was required to
solidify Karzai’s continuation as President, which foreshadowed his declining legitimacy

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 284.
among Afghans.\textsuperscript{11} In December 2003 a new Afghan constitution was adopted by another loya jirga. The first national election was then held in October 2004, when Hamid Karzai was elected president of Afghanistan in what was generally considered a relatively fair election.

Given the exceptional levels of violence and conflict that had consumed the country for decades, Afghanistan proved to be relatively stable and secure during the first few years following the ouster of the Taliban and emplacement of the post-Bonn Karzai government. Despite a perceived historic aversion to foreign forces, the Afghan population proved at first to be generally accepting of foreign forces in the country. For many Afghans, stability and protection from the numerous internal factions that had devastated the country for a decade took precedence, and the population grudgingly accepted the hope that American and international forces could provide that stability.\textsuperscript{12}

The relative security and support for the new Afghan government would be short lived though. While the new government of Afghanistan continued to move through the steps established by the international community and the Afghan elite in order to build its legitimacy, its ability to govern and function on the ground proved increasingly inadequate. Corruption, a scourge of the civil war period, returned from the top down, as the Karzai government sought to garner support through patronage and co-option of powerful militia leaders.

As widespread government abuse and mismanagement steadily increased and economic and basic living conditions failed to improve, the patience of the Afghan

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 297.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 277.
population began to waiver. Particularly in the rural parts of Southern and Eastern Afghanistan, where strong ties in some cases various Taliban factions had kept leaders from that area out of the post-Bonn power structure, the lack of resources, investment and security laid the groundwork for the growing resentment and instability. Even though Karzai’s Durrani Pashtun roots emerged from Eastern Afghanistan, his government was unable to funnel enough development or aid money to the area to noticeably improve economic conditions or counter the toxic effects of a stream of corrupt and ineffective government leaders.\(^{13}\)

Some reports point to the organized resurgence of the Taliban beginning as early as late 2002 in the eastern provinces of Kunar, Paktia, Paktika and Khost. As Antonio Giustozzi notes, those provinces served as an easy entry point, given the mountainous and porous borders between those provinces and the ungoverned spaces in western Pakistan.\(^{14}\) Initial attacks targeted primarily Afghan police and military forces, given the minimal presence of U.S. forces in the region and the decreased risk of attacking less capable Afghan targets.

Even in late 2002, the first IED attacks began to appear in Afghanistan. The Dai Chopan district of Zabul province, in the east, is the first recorded stronghold for the resurgent Taliban in the post-2001 era, and by 2003, insurgent elements are reported to have had near full control of Zabul and Eastern Paktika.\(^{15}\) By early 2003, media attention on the Afghan conflict had dropped severely from the intense focus that it had following

\(^{13}\) Ibid., 322-324.
\(^{15}\) Ibid., 2-5.
the September 2001 attacks on the United States and subsequent invasion of Afghanistan. The Spring 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq further hid Afghanistan from the foreign news scene in the United States and the West. The insurgency itself continued to gain strength throughout this period though, as an under-resourced and under-committed coalition force and corrupt and ineffective Afghan government failed to establish security or meet the expectations of an increasingly skeptical population.

By 2007, the Afghan insurgency had established a presence in major swaths of Southern and Eastern Afghanistan. Helmand and Kandahar provinces in the South were largely under the control of Taliban insurgents, and NATO sources reported insurgent activity even in some formerly stable Western and Northern provinces.\textsuperscript{16} The insurgent force that began to reassert itself in Afghanistan was not a monolithic organization either. Various groups that had fled across the border to Pakistan in 2001 began to return to their former areas of control. Those insurgents returning to the Southern provinces were more closely aligned with the former Taliban government of Mullah Omar. Insurgents returning to the East often had ties to anti-Soviet Mujahideen commander Jalaluddin Haqqani or to Gulbuddin Hekmatyar’s Hizb-e-Islami. Regardless of leadership or organization, they challenged and increasingly displaced the corrupt Afghan government for authority and control across the South and East.

In the Fall of 2009, Hamid Karzai was re-elected President of Afghanistan in a highly fraudulent election, fraught with lack of security at the polls and low voter

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 5-6.
This second presidential election proved substantially less legitimate and secure than the first five years earlier, making clear the massive failures of governance and development that had characterized the intervening years. Under strong pressure from the United States, a run-off election between Karzai and his closest rival, Abdullah Abdullah, was scheduled, but ultimately Abdullah withdrew, granting Karzai his second term in what was seen as a major hit to his legitimacy at home and abroad.

By this time, violence had reached alarming new levels. IED incidents by Fall 2009 had risen to more than triple the 2007 level, the size of IEDs being deployed by insurgents had increased substantially, and NATO assessments showed insurgents acting with strong or demonstrated capability in nearly 200 districts across the country. Afghan security forces were unable or unwilling to slow the progress of the insurgency, and international forces, due to lack of mandate or manpower, were largely ineffective as well.

With the American military focused primarily on the war in Iraq from 2003-2009, troop commitments to the Afghan theatre were limited during that period, with only 33,000 deployed in October 2008, the highest up to that point of the war. While lethal and effective in clearing part of the country of Taliban militants, U.S. forces were unable to establish lasting improvements. Towns and villages cleared of insurgents would be infiltrated again as soon as U.S. forces withdrew. Upon taking office in January 2009,

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President Obama ordered an increase in troop levels almost immediately, and by November 2009, there were 68,000 U.S. troops in the country.\textsuperscript{20}

At the end of 2009, Obama and his national security team conducted a review of the US and coalition strategy in Afghanistan, and in December 2009 the President announced a new path forward. The President committed an additional 30,000 troops to Afghanistan to increase total troop levels to their highest since the start of the war. These new troops were to carry out a refocused counterinsurgency strategy designed to suppress the insurgency long enough to improve the legitimacy of the Afghan government and hand over security to Afghan security and military forces. Obama also set a timeline of July 2011 to start the withdrawal of combat troops from the country. In a move to appease those on the left opposed to the war and those on the right concerned with the risks abandoning the Afghan mission, the President sought to walk a middle line through a surge of pressure on the Taliban to gain the upper hand followed by a slow withdrawal and handover to Afghan forces.

The July 2011 deadline has since been criticized as playing into the hands of the insurgents who are able to prey upon the fears of local Afghans who worry that the US and its allies will abandon Afghanistan. The US has since repeatedly tried to reassure Afghan allies and the citizens of Afghanistan that the withdrawal date will not bring about an immediate exit and loss of support. Despite this seeming propaganda victory for the insurgents, the influx of new combat forces has allowed the US, Afghan and NATO forces to increase the kinetic pressure on Taliban forces. In the second half of 2010,

NATO ISAF reported carrying out over 7,000 special operations raids on Taliban targets, killing or capturing more than 600 Taliban leaders.\(^\text{21}\)

Most of the insurgent violence in Afghanistan has taken place in the Southern and Eastern regions. In a 2010 review of the Afghan war, the CSIS’s Anthony Cordesman cited that during March 2010 in particular, 80% of the IED activity in Afghanistan took place in 5 provinces in the south and east, Helmand, Kandahar, Uruzgan, Ghazni and Khost.\(^\text{22}\) The increase in NATO troops in the southern regions of Kandahar and Helmand and an elevated operational tempo targeting Taliban commanders and soldiers has seen some success in demoralizing members of the insurgency and driving them into Pakistan.\(^\text{23}\) At the same time though, reports from the Northern provinces in Afghanistan show deteriorating security and an increased Taliban presence.\(^\text{24}\)

A November 2010 NATO conference in Lisbon, Portugal gave some breathing room to the counterinsurgency efforts, as the U.S. and its allies framed the strategy to look towards 2014 as the year of full transition of security to Afghan leadership.\(^\text{25}\) President Hamid Karzai has also spoken of 2014 as the year in which Afghan forces will assume responsibility for security in the country. Despite security gains and a proposed transition plan, the opinions and patience of the Afghan people are a major concern.


Many Afghan citizens have little faith in their government to provide for them or protect them from Taliban retribution, so those that may have opposed the Taliban in the past are abandoning the corrupt Afghan system out of fear and necessity. There is little faith among the population that the United States will not grow weary of the effort and abandon the country, as it did following the Soviet withdrawal in the early 1990s.

As the US, Afghan and coalition forces seek to drive the insurgency to the negotiating table and insurgents try to withstand the increased pressure and maintain momentum through rising violence, the Taliban have continued to wage a media war on the ground and over the Internet.

**Global-Local Insurgency in Afghanistan**

The current insurgency against the Afghan government and its Western coalition partners is unique from a traditional localized nationalist struggle. The American-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 that brought the Afghan government to power was carried out because of the presence of al-Qaeda members living, training and operating in Afghanistan. From its inception, the ongoing insurgency has been intertwined with the presence of al-Qaeda and its global *takfiri* agenda. While the Taliban insurgency is primarily made up of Afghan militants and is fighting for limited nationalist objectives, the links between these groups and al-Qaeda’s global network add a level of complexity to both understanding and confronting the insurgency.

Modern insurgencies of this nature, those with both local and global elements, can be described as *global-local* insurgencies. The RAND Corporation has defined global-local insurgencies as local insurgencies receiving outside support, making them part of a
wider regional or global struggle. This report notes that these insurgencies pose the “greatest challenges of 21st century insurgency” due to the effects of globalization.

While the non-Afghan, foreign presence among insurgent forces may not be numerically significant, the ramifications of the global element within the insurgency extend far beyond participants on the battlefield. The foreign intervention which forced the Taliban out of power and against which insurgents today claim to fight, the training and funding from overseas Islamist sympathizers, and the recruitment and radicalization of young Afghan and foreign jihadists are all intertwined with the global agenda of foreign elements within the insurgency.

In Afghanistan, al-Qaeda is the primary global component in the global-local insurgency. While al-Qaeda, as a worldwide network and ideology, is global in its geographic dispersion and ambitions, a large portion of its operations and activities are tied up in individual nationalist insurgent struggles worldwide. In Afghanistan, al-Qaeda fighters are allied with the primarily Pashtun Taliban, most of whom have no ambition beyond control of Afghanistan. In Iraq, local Sunni tribes who had allied with al-Qaeda for protection against Shiite sectarian violence actually turned against al-Qaeda fighters - who had become exceptionally brutal - in order to achieve local political and security objectives. The struggles in Somalia, Algeria and on the Arabian Peninsula are similarly local in nature. Al-Qaeda itself has become in large part a global sponsor of insurgencies.

It is important to note the history and limitations of al-Qaeda’s involvement in the Afghan insurgency though. While ties between many of the Afghan insurgents and al-

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26 David Gompert and John Gordon IV, *War by other means: building complete and balanced capabilities for counterinsurgency* (Santa Monica, CA :: Rand Corp., 2008), xxx.
27 Ibid., 48.
-Qaeda trace back to the anti-Soviet jihad, the links between the Afghans and the Arab Islamists during that time were not significantly strong. During the fight against the Soviets and the Communist Afghan government, estimates place the number of Arab volunteers in the anti-Soviet struggle at only 3,000 – 4,000.\textsuperscript{28} In addition to the small numbers relative to the size of the conflict, many Afghan Mujahideen viewed the Arab jihadists as unprofessional, ineffective and bizarrely focused more on martyrdom than defeating the Communists.\textsuperscript{29} Most spent their time in Pakistan providing services to returning insurgents, and the rest were largely dispersed in small numbers among Afghan insurgent groups.\textsuperscript{30} The ties binding the largely Arab al-Qaeda and the many Afghan militant groups were not extremely strong as the Afghan Civil War emerged in the 1990s.

In 1996, as the Taliban were still trying to wrest control of Kabul from Massoud’s forces, Osama bin Laden returned to Afghanistan from Sudan, where he had lived for a number of years until U.S. pressure forced the Sudanese government to expel him.\textsuperscript{31} With Bin Laden now leading his global al-Qaeda network from within Afghanistan, his relationship with Mullah Omar and the Taliban leadership was uncertain. While bin Laden had initially promised Mullah Omar that he would keep out of the media spotlight while under the protection of the Taliban, he defied those orders through multiple engagements with Western media and by antagonizing the West through a series of \textit{fatwas} urging Muslims to attack American and Western targets around the world.\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{30} Hafez, “Jihad after Iraq: Lessons from the Arab Afghans,” 76.
\textsuperscript{31} Wright, \textit{The looming tower: Al-Qaeda and the road to 9/11}, 255.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 299-300, 326.
Despite this transgression, Mullah Omar refused demands from the United States to extradite bin Laden.

While ultimately refusing American demands that the Taliban extradite bin Laden, there are reports that Mullah Omar and other Taliban leaders did not come to this decision easily.\textsuperscript{33} As a primarily Pashtun movement, separate from al-Qaeda’s global ambitions and Arab origins, it was not in the interests of the Taliban to harbor their Arab \textit{jihadi-takfiri} guests and suffer the retaliation of the West. Mullah Omar chose to protect bin Laden in the face of Western pressure though, and the Taliban was quickly routed from power.

While many among the Taliban have blamed the American invasion on al-Qaeda, the relationships between the various Taliban elements and the remnants of the al-Qaeda network have been uncertain and dynamic over the past decade of conflict. While the actual presence of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and the links between the transnational extremists and the Afghan Taliban are uncertain, it is important to understand the role that al-Qaeda has played in this conflict from the outset. Additionally, US commitment to the war hinges in large part on the fear of a renewed al-Qaeda presence in the country following any withdrawal of Western forces. From a propaganda standpoint, nearly ten years of conflict have given the once media averse Taliban the opportunity to learn from the more technologically savvy global al-Qaeda organization.

\textsuperscript{33} Barfield, \textit{Afghan Customary Law and its Relationship to Formal Judicial Institutions}, 36.
The Elements of the Afghan Insurgency

The Afghan players in the insurgency are far from unified. While Western and international media may often convey the insurgency as being fought by a monolithic “Taliban” enemy, the identities of those groups and individuals which oppose coalition forces and the Afghan government in Kabul are diverse and fractured, often shifting between cooperation and confrontation based on the interests of the day. The loyalties and goals of the different elements of the insurgency are often highly localized, varying from one district or village to the next. Nine years of war have fractured the insurgency across generations as well, as young men who were children when the Taliban were in power have now grown up and joined the fight, developing their own conceptions of Afghanistan and views towards the Afghan government and its Western allies. The disparate groups and individuals lumped under the banner of “Taliban” often have no more in common than a common enemy. Amin Tarzi has coined the term “neo-Taliban” in order to “recognize that this new phenomenon encompasses both the past and new agendas, players, and engagement strategies”.

The name “Taliban” is most closely associated with the group that emerged under the leadership of Mullah Mohammed Omar in the 1990s. While the Taliban movement may have emerged as a group of religious students seeking to combat the criminality that had taken hold of post-Najibullah Afghanistan, by 2001 it had become a much less unified movement. From their birth in Kandahar, the Taliban had largely bought and

negotiated their way to control of most of the country through bribes and deals, co-opting former warlords and Mujahideen within their strict Islamist regime. Allegiance was maintained as much through terror and fear as loyalty to Mullah Omar or the movement, and Omar’s decision to declare himself *Amir ul-Momineen* (Commander of the Faithful) and separate himself from common Taliban members behind a wall of secrecy may have already begun eroding his image even before the American invasion.\(^{37}\)

During its last few years in power, the Taliban government began referring to itself as the “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan”, or IEA. Following the American invasion in 2001, many members of the defeated IEA military and government either returned to their homes in rural Afghanistan or fled across the border to Pakistan. As the Afghan insurgency grew in strength in the years following the invasion, many of these former Taliban returned to fight the Afghan government and its Western allies. In 2003, Mullah Omar released an audiotape statement declaring the establishment of a ten member Leadership Council to “organize resistance to US-led foreign troops in Afghanistan”.\(^{38}\) Eight members of Omar’s leadership council were from Kandahar, while the other two were from the Eastern provinces of Khost and Paktia. This council claimed leadership of the “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan”, returning again to the name often used by Taliban leadership prior to their ouster.

This branch of the insurgency, presumed to be under the command of Mullah Omar and his Leadership Council, is often referred to as the Quetta Shura Taliban (QST),

\(^{37}\) Ibid., 291-292.  
deriving the name from the Pakistani city of Quetta, where Omar and other Taliban leaders are said to have taken refuge after fleeing Afghanistan. Based on the roots of a majority of the Leadership Council in the largely Pashtun provinces of Southern Afghanistan, Taliban militants loyal to the Quetta Shura operate primarily within the Southern region. The QST leadership council has suffered substantial losses during the course of the war, with members being killed or captured over time. The most significant of these events was the February 2010 capture of Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, Mullah Omar’s top deputy and the man believed to be in command of military activities in Afghanistan.39 Two replacements were named for Baradar in January 2011, continuing the turnover on the leadership council.40

While Mullah Omar has been in hiding since his ouster from Afghanistan in 2001, he still seems to maintain strong authority, at least symbolically, over the diverse elements of the insurgency.41 Some observers have pointed to the generational changes within the Taliban’s ranks, caused in part by attrition of older, more senior fighters, as a sign of power shifting away from the former regime leaders based across the border in Pakistan.42 The unusually public disagreement between the IEA and Mansur Dadullah in 2007, which resulted in Dadullah’s expulsion from his leadership position, was a rare

42 Yousafzai and Moreau, “Not Your Father’s Taliban.”
instance of internal disputes within top levels of the group. The public face put forth by
the secretive organization shows little disagreement among the insurgency’s leadership.

The Khost member of the original Leadership Council was Jalaluddin Haqqani, a
former Mujahideen commander who grew to prominence in the anti-Soviet war. Haqqani
and his followers actually have a history that pre-dates the Soviet invasion, having
traveled to Pakistan in the early 1970s to receive training to combat the regime of
Mohammad Daud Khan, who had deposed the Afghan King Mohammad Zahir Shaw in a
1973 coup that was a harbinger of the coming three decades of nearly constant conflict.

While sitting on the QST leadership council, Jalaluddin Haqqani and his son
Sirajuddin operate their own network of insurgents, referred to as the Haqqani Network,
in Eastern Afghanistan, with links back into Pakistan. In an interview with the jihadist Al-
Balagh media outlet in April 2010, Siraj Haqqani admitted to being on the Mullah
Omar’s QST leadership council, and he also admitted to cooperating openly with Al-
Qaeda, a connection often denied by the other Quetta Shura leadership. The Haqqani
Network has frequently been described by Western security experts as the most
dangerous and professional element of the Afghan insurgency.

The third major group within the insurgency is known as Hizb-e-Islami
Gulbuddin (HiG), under the leadership of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the former Prime

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for the Study of War, October 2010), 6, http://www.understandingwar.org/report/haqqani-network,
(accessed December 20, 2010).
45 Sirajuddin Haqqani, “Al-Balagh Media Interview with Sirajuddin Haqqani,” Al-Balagh, provided by
17, 2010), http://whyy.org/cms/radiotimes/2010/12/17/the-afghanistan-war-assessment/, (accessed April
10, 2011).
Minister of Afghanistan during a brief period in the 1990s and another former
Mujahideen commander who fought against the Soviet Union in the 1980s. Hekmatyar
was a favorite of the Pakistani ISI during the anti-Soviet jihad, and as such, he at one
time received funding and equipment from the United States. Following the Taliban’s
rise to power in the 1990s, Hekmatyar fled to Iran, where he remained until he was
expelled by Tehran in 2002 and returned to join the insurgent struggle against the Afghan
government of Hamid Karzai and the Western coalition.47 Hekmatyar’s relationship with
the Quetta Shura Taliban is both uncertain and largely opportunistic. While Hekmatyar
has denied any link to the Quetta Shura Taliban,48 he reportedly declared his support to
Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda in a video released in 2006.49

Beyond these three primary factions, there are a number of other smaller groups
that have been identified within the insurgency, including Hizb-e-Islami Khalis and the
Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, an al-Qaeda allied extremist group of primarily Uzbek
militants.50 In addition to the Afghan Taliban, there are Taliban and other extremist
factions operating just across the border in Pakistan, including the Tehrik-e-Taliban
Pakistan (TTP) and Laskhar-e-Tayyiba (LeT). The diversification of the insurgency
between different factions has many historical, social and political reasons. It has also
been attributed in part to the needs of the original Taliban, under Mullah Omar, to gain

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47 “Profile: Gulbuddin Hekmatyar,” BBC News, March 23, 2010,
49 “Afghan rebel’s pledge to al-Qaeda,” BBC News, May 4, 2006,
footholds in the North and East, where they traditionally had little or no influence, through alliances with other disaffected militia groups.51

Pakistan plays a critical role within the Afghan insurgency as well. Pakistan has existed as a safe haven across the Afghan-Pakistan border for insurgents and foreign extremists alike. During the anti-Soviet insurgency, many of the mujahedeen developed strong ties to Pakistan. The Pakistani ISI provided direct operational support to the mujahedeen during that conflict, with funding and equipment coming from the United States and Saudi Arabia. While this research does not focus specifically on Pakistan’s role in the Afghan conflict, much of the Taliban’s propaganda throughout the war has originated in Pakistan, especially in the years immediately following the ouster of the Taliban from power.

Referring to the entire Afghan insurgency as “the Taliban” ignores the many differences in identity, organization and interest between the many actors and groups involved in the conflict. From a terminology standpoint, the author will utilize the specific group names where applicable throughout this thesis, making a distinction when necessary between the various insurgent groups. The term “Taliban” will be used to refer primarily to the Quetta Shura Taliban, under the leadership of Mullah Omar. When the specific attribution of a statement or action is unknown, “Taliban” will be used as well, since this is the largest element within the insurgency and leads, at least symbolically, the confrontation against the Afghan government and Western forces.

It is extremely difficult to estimate the actual numbers of the Taliban operating in Afghanistan. An August 2010 assessment estimated their numbers to be between 20,000 and 30,000 fighters.\(^5\) As a reference point, the population of Afghanistan is over 29 million.\(^5\) In 2008, Antonio Giustozzi, a researcher with substantial field experience in Afghanistan, made an estimate of 17,000 total with 6,000-10,000 active at any one time.\(^4\) As Gilles Dorronsoro has pointed out though, the numbers vary substantially depending on whether one is assessing full-time or part-time fighters, and seasonal variations impact estimates a well, as many Taliban only fight during the summer months, returning home during the remainder of the year. Additionally, the porous border between Afghanistan and Pakistan means that the numbers can fluctuate as reinforcements are sent from Pakistan based on the needs of the insurgency.\(^5\)

Not all of the insurgents fighting the Afghan government and NATO forces are ideologically motivated and dedicated to the same goals as the Taliban leadership. Many are driven to fight by circumstance alone, whether our of fear of retribution, to earn money for their families, to defend their homes or livelihood against a corrupt Afghan government, or to get revenge for family members killed by coalition forces. David Kilcullen has referred to this phenomenon as the “Accidental Guerrilla syndrome,” in which members of the population are driven into the insurgency through the heavy


handed actions of an intervention force, which in this case invaded in the first place to target a small group of ideologically driven extremists.\textsuperscript{56} After nearly a decade of NATO intervention and corrupt and ineffective governance by the Karzai administration, many Afghans who may not have originally supported the Taliban have been driven to join the insurgency.

Afghan society is ethnically diverse and primarily rural. It has been fractured by more than three decades of war. The majority ethnic group in Afghanistan are the Pashtuns, who comprise 42\% of the population and largely inhabit the southern and eastern regions. The second largest ethnic group are the Tajiks, making up 27\% of the population and living primarily in the northeast and northwest regions. The Hazaras and the Uzbeks each comprise 9\% of the population and live in the central and northern regions, respectively.\textsuperscript{57} A number of other smaller ethnic groups live within the country as well, primarily in the northern regions.

Within each of these ethnic groups, there are many tribal and clan divisions that play an important part in the identity individual of Afghans. Beyond these divisions of identity, history too has served to deepen these fractures through bloodshed. The Soviet occupation has created divisions between those who sided with the Communist government and those who fought with the Mujahideen.\textsuperscript{58} The civil war, fought largely between Mujahideen factions formed along ethnic divisions, has left fear and mistrust between Afghans of all ethnic groups. The rise of the Taliban also left “social scars”

\textsuperscript{56} David Kilcullen, \textit{The accidental guerrilla : fighting small wars in the midst of a big one} (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 38.
\textsuperscript{57} CIA World Factbook, “Afghanistan.”
between those who joined them and those who opposed them. Even the historically strong tribal systems among Afghan ethnic groups have been destabilized by the years of shifting conflict.

From its origins, the Taliban movement has consisted mostly of ethnic Pashtuns. Mullah Omar and many from his original inner circle are from the Ghilzai Pashtun tribal confederation specifically, which has historically competed for power with elements of the Durrani confederation from which Hamid Karzai’s Popalzai tribal lineage emerges. In post-2001 Afghanistan, the alienation of the Pashtun ethnic group as a whole has had a significant impact on the spread of the insurgency, despite President Hamid Karzai being a Pashtun himself. The role of non-Pashtuns, specifically Tajiks from the former Northern Alliance, in positions of power in the post-Bonn government left many Pashtuns feeling excluded from having a say in the governing of the country that they had controlled for nearly all of its modern history. According to Amin Tarzi, this created an environment “ripe for the resurgence of the former regime or factions within it”.

Afghanistan’s rural makeup and high rate of illiteracy has a strong impact on the nature of the insurgency. In 2010, it was estimated that only 23% of the population lived in cities, with the remainder living in villages and rural areas. Additionally, in 2007, less than a quarter of the adult population was estimated to be literate, with only 2 percent claiming to read newspapers regularly. Access to the Internet is even less, with

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59 Ibid.
60 Barfield, Afghanistan: a cultural and political history, 284.
62 CIA World Factbook, “Afghanistan.”
estimates between 1.6%\textsuperscript{64} and 3.6%\textsuperscript{65} of the population having access to the Internet. While mobile phone usage has increased dramatically since the fall of the Taliban, it is still distributed primarily in urban areas, and the Taliban have repeatedly destroyed communications infrastructure and threatened phone companies in an effort to deny civilians the ability to report on insurgent activity.\textsuperscript{66} The high rate of illiteracy, lack of access to the Internet, and language distribution all define the type and medium of messaging that the Taliban target towards the Afghan population. When it comes to digital media, English-language messaging distributed through the Internet is unlikely to reach many in Afghanistan.

The Importance of Information and Media in Insurgency

This research is focused on the targeted use of information by elements within the Afghan insurgency. Whether using the term propaganda, media operations, information operations, or others, what is being described is the deliberate spreading of information, factual or falsified, to a wide, target audience for the purposes of furthering the goals or objectives of the originating group through influencing the beliefs or actions of the target group. While the delivery mechanisms vary greatly, from hand-written letters in Pashto left on the doors of Afghan school teachers to English-language websites instantly accessible around the world, the goal is still the use of information – ideas, facts, stories,

decrees, commands, images, or others—to influence behavior and ultimately the course of the conflict.

Understanding the role that the spread of information and disinformation has in insurgencies, and this insurgency in particular, sets the stage for the discussion of how the Taliban’s use of English-language media fits into the larger conflict. The environment within Afghanistan is ripe for disinformation, as the population is largely illiterate and disconnected, receiving their news and information through interpersonal networks. Three decades of shifting conflict and violence have made fear an even more powerful tool. Combined with cultural and historical misunderstandings on the part of the West that can lead to negative perceptions, information has become the most powerful weapon of the insurgency. While this research focuses on the Internet and English-language messaging, understanding the role of information on the ground is important as well.

An insurgency emerges, survives and thrives upon information. More than any other form of warfare, an insurgency relies upon the effective use of messaging to generate and sustain support for its much weaker forces in the face of greater conventional capabilities of its adversary. The ultimate objective for an insurgent force is to gain support and legitimacy in the eyes of the population at the expense of the recognized government, and the effective use of propaganda is a force multiplier for an insurgency, expanding the actions of a small group in one location to touch the minds, through fear, outrage, or inspiration, of a much larger population group. Information is the ultimate asymmetric tool, wielding great power over real events, yet free to generate and constrained only by the imaginations of its creators. Modern information technology has made the wide distribution of information cheaper and easier than ever before, with
tools like YouTube, Internet forums, websites, Skype, and countless others enabling global instantaneous communication and information sharing at negligible cost.

Faced with an asymmetric distribution of military power, insurgents engage in deteriorating the legitimacy of the government and foreign forces through the targeted application of violence and information. Perception is ultimately more important than reality, whether perception of personal safety, government excesses and corruption or Western abuses and attacks against civilians. While insurgents aren’t held to the truth in their use of information, real incidences of government abuses or civilian deaths serve as a base upon which to build an information campaign to push the population away from the government.

David Galula, a French military officer who fought as a counterinsurgent for the French colonial government in Algeria in the mid 19th century, wrote of the use of propaganda by an insurgent force: “The insurgent, having no responsibility, is free to use every trick; if necessary, he can lie, cheat, exaggerate. He is not obliged to prove; he is judged by what he promises, not by what he does. Consequently, propaganda is a powerful weapon for him. With no positive policy but with good propaganda, the insurgent may still win.”67 The government, on the other hand, is expected to tell the truth and will be held accountable at home and abroad when caught doing otherwise. Perception is far more important than truth to an insurgent, and rumors and fabrications spread effectively can drive a wedge of fear and anger between the population and the government.

In Afghanistan, Taliban commanders who report attacks on coalition forces or civilian casualties caused by coalition airstrikes are beholden to no one for verification of their claims. What is critical to their progress is the perception of the population that is the intended audience of their claims, whether distant Western publics or nearby Afghan civilians. Many Afghans are far more likely to believe Taliban rumors spread by word of mouth than official statements released by the government or NATO forces. In the West, populations may be disinclined to believe anything that the Taliban says, but the messaging may have influence on the public discourse regardless.

The insurgency in Afghanistan is a complex hybrid between a localized, nationalist insurgency among a traditional, rural Pashtun population and a global, technologically advanced Islamist enterprise. Thomas Rid and Marc Hecker describe modern warfare as “War 2.0”, in which information technology, particularly its social aspect, has given shape and enhanced capability to modern insurgent and terrorist groups.68 For actual or hopeful jihadists around the world who become connected to the Afghan insurgency through videos, pictures or statements posted by the insurgents online, the conflict is transnational and they have joined the “War 2.0” component of the insurgency. For the Afghan farmer in rural Afghanistan, deciding between growing poppy or wheat or whether to allow his daughters to attend school and risk Taliban retribution, the conflict is entirely local and entirely Afghan.

According to T.X. Hammes, modern warfare over the past fifty years has evolved into a fourth generation, in which political will and effective utilization of networks and

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information can empower militarily weaker opponents to defeat their much more powerful adversaries. According to Hammes, the modern fourth generation of warfare began with Mao’s guerrilla war against and ultimate defeat of the Chinese nationalist forces 70 years ago. Mao’s utilization of social networks within rural Chinese society and his potent combination of guerrilla warfare and political legitimacy among the rural population were a harbinger of a change in modern warfare.

In fourth generation wars, the primary target of an insurgent force is not their adversaries’ military but the political leadership that must support the war for it to progress. According to Hammes, these fourth generation adversaries leverage “all available networks – political, economic, social and military – to convince the enemy’s political decision makers that their strategic goals are either unachievable or too costly for the perceived benefit”. Fourth generation wars are long, often approaching decades. They are fought across the political, social, economic and military realms. Although kinetic power and attrition are important elements in the conflict, information and narrative are the ultimate deciding factors.

In Afghanistan today, the political will in question is that of the American public, which has been supporting a nearly decade long war in the face of uncertain progress or objectives. Modern information technology now ensures that the American public is made instantly connected to the war from afar, through an ongoing stream of news coverage, pictures and videos. This is the network through which a fourth generation adversary can seek to erode the political will of a much more powerful nation-state.

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Hammes points out that modern fourth-generation adversaries, while able to effectively destroy the political will of much larger opponents, are incapable of posing an existential challenge to Western nation-states, in the form of a conventional military confrontation.\textsuperscript{70} Rid and Hecker make a similar point, citing the vast asymmetry in military capability and geographic dispersion of transnational jihadist networks as fatal weaknesses.\textsuperscript{71} While this is certainly positive for the United States from an existential standpoint, it does not bode well within the scope of defeating a growing Afghan insurgency. The American public is deciding upon support for a war that is, from a nation-state survival standpoint, a war of choice. When the survival of the state is not at stake, it is unlikely the support for the continued loss of life and use of resources will be maintained.

For the various elements of the Afghan insurgency, the only true path to victory is the withdrawal of the Western forces that are supporting the current Afghan government. The case was the same when fighting the Soviet Union in the 1980s, when conventional parity with the Najibullah government only came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from the country, and even then it took three more years for the Mujahideen forces to conquer Kabul and remove Najibullah from power. Without the withdrawal of military and technologically superior Western forces, the Taliban can continue to operate as guerrilla forces, even providing government-like services to certain areas of the country, but they cannot gain total control, operate freely, or seek legitimacy internationally. This is the cornerstone upon which the insurgency must be understood.

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., 211.
\textsuperscript{71} Rid and Hecker, \textit{War 2.0: irregular warfare in the information age}, 220.
Given the above point, the Taliban have essentially two very different targets for their information operations. The first is the local Afghan population, which they target so that they are able to gain their support against the government, whether passively through shelter or protection, or actively, through membership, funding or intelligence. The second target is the populations of Western democracies whose troops are supporting the Afghan government. Targeting the first enables tactical and operational successes against far superior military forces and the weak government they support. Targeting the second can yield the strategic victory of the withdrawal of foreign forces. Efforts aimed at the first target are largely invisible to the second, and vice-versa. Illiteracy and lack of access to the Internet means that digital media posted on the Internet is intended for Western/external audiences. Lack of access to rural Afghanistan and lack of connectivity means that much of what goes on there is invisible to the West as well.

At the local level, perceptions of security and governance determine how the population will decide who to support. David Kilcullen’s theory of competitive control holds that “in irregular conflicts, the local armed actor that a given population perceives as most able to establish 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”.

In Afghanistan, the lack of effective governance at the local level, combined with insecurity in areas in which there is not a high concentration of Western forces, means that the Afghan government is generally hard pressed to provide “resilient, full-spectrum” control. When the Taliban can provide a sense of security, as well as a functioning and relatively reliable, albeit draconian, court system, it

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then becomes a difficult choice for the population to support the Afghan government, even if they may not be active ideological supporters of the Taliban.

Use of English language media, particularly that on the Internet, is clearly not aimed at the local level in Afghanistan. Given the strategic necessity of being perceived as the most legitimate local force for security and justice, the goal of English language media efforts is to eliminate international support for the coalition mission and the Afghan government itself. The potential recruitment of foreign fighters and raising of funding through English language materials provides valuable external support at the operational and tactical levels, but deteriorating Western public opinion towards the war itself contributes towards the ultimate strategic objective of forcing Western abandonment of the Karzai government.

The concept of narrative refers to the story or account of events surrounding an event or issue, regardless of the level of truth behind it. In an asymmetric war, shaping the dominant narrative about the progress of the war means taking advantage of the uncertainties inherent in war and controlling information to shape how it is perceived by the many audiences who have an interest in its outcome. All insurgent activity should then be considered in light of influencing the narrative surrounding the war. Attacks carried out against Western forces or Afghan police are designed to create a media effect and decrease support for the war and the Afghan government. Messages published in the name of Mullah Omar and The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan are meant to convey a desired image of the insurgency and narrative of events on the ground. The English language website is a direct connection to Western audiences and a means of influencing how those audiences perceive their country’s role in the war. All of these elements shape
how the progress of the war is perceived and, ultimately, the decisions that are made on all sides.

This research will focus on the English-language propaganda published by the Afghan insurgency, and of this subset, the focus will be primarily on their use of the Internet. As stated above, the localized propaganda efforts on the ground in Afghanistan, including hand-written letters known as shabnamah and threats spread by word of mouth, are extremely influential and effective for the insurgents. Effectively researching these efforts though requires an understanding of the languages of Afghanistan, Pashto and Dari, and understanding of Afghan culture and history, and access to the places and people affected by this propaganda, none of which are available to this researcher.

Alternatively, the statements and reports released in English on the Internet are openly accessible, since they only have value if their target audience – English speakers with access to the Internet – is able to reach them. Additionally, as will be described in more detail later, the real impact and influence of the Taliban’s English-language propaganda is largely unknown. If the ultimate strategic objective of the Afghan insurgency is to force the withdrawal of Western forces from the country, and eroding Western public opinion of the war is a means of doing so, it is critical to understand whether the information operations aimed at Western public opinion are achieving their objectives.

**The Evolution of Taliban Propaganda and Media Operations**

When discussing the evolution of Taliban propaganda, a distinction needs to be made between the different actors, channels and audiences that fall within this broad
topic. While modern communications technology makes it easy to blur the lines between local and global, Western populations are a much different audience than Afghan villagers. The efforts of the insurgency to target messages to these very different audiences are understandably different as well. In some cases, the line between local and global propaganda is clear, as in the case of letters written in Pashto and distributed at night in Afghan villages or Taliban statements posted online in English directed to the American people. In other cases, the line is less clear, as in Taliban commanders calling Western journalists from the field to make a report on a recent battle. Here, the propagandist may be a local commander speaking about local events, but the target is global, since the Western media is contacted as a publication outlet. The international media falls between the two, since it becomes a filter between statements made by local representatives and the global audiences that may read them.

Existing literature on the topic of Taliban media has come from a small handful of scholars and researchers focusing on the conflict in Afghanistan. The most comprehensive pieces did not start emerging until late in the conflict. In June 2007, Tim Foxley of the SIPRI research group published his report *The Taliban’s propaganda activities: how well is the Afghan insurgency communicating and what is it saying?*. This was one of the first comprehensive reports focusing on the Taliban’s organized and outward-facing communications campaign. In 2008, Crisis Group Asia, a research group focused on conflict and stabilization issues, published a report titled *Taliban Propaganda: Wining the War of Words?*, building upon Foxley’s work with additional

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73 Foxley, *The Taliban’s propaganda activities: how well is the Afghan insurgency communicating and what is it saying?*. 40
sourcing and more detailed assessment of the topics emphasized in insurgent messaging.⁷⁴

In 2009, Joanna Nathan, who was involved in the 2008 Crisis Group Asia report, published a chapter in Antonio Giustozzi’s compilation *Decoding the New Taliban* titled *Reading the Taliban*, in which she further broke down and clarified the often confusing and misrepresented mix of actors and timelines making up the Taliban’s media efforts of the past ten years.⁷⁵ Anne Stenersen of the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment, published the most recent comprehensive review in February 2010. Stenersen’s study of the Taliban movement and its ideology focused on a qualitative analysis of official statements and publications, in Arabic and English, of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.⁷⁶ Other researchers have discussed and contributed to the topic, including Amin Tarzi, Thomas Johnson, Antonio Giustozzi and an array of soldiers, bloggers and scholars, but these works above are the most comprehensive efforts on the topic today.

As is the nature of trying to understand and capture in writing the evolution of an ongoing conflict, the existing literature has continually built upon earlier works as new developments take place in the Afghan conflict. As the Afghan insurgency is becoming more active in its international communications every year, their propaganda campaigns are a moving target for researchers. 2010 has been the most active year yet for Internet releases of statements made in the name of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, with over 100 statements published online. The first few months of 2011 have kept pace as well,

⁷⁴ *Taliban Propaganda: Winning the War of Words?*
with at least 38 statements already released by the middle of April 2011. This section will look at the existing literature on the topic, providing a background on the evolution of Taliban media efforts, and then build upon that research with additional sources that have become available in the recent past.

The Beginning of Taliban Media Operations

When the Taliban emerged in 1994 during the Afghan Civil War, their only propaganda efforts were local and largely a secondary result of their military and political actions, with stories of their conquests and plans of restoring security, stopping rampant criminality, and imposing Sharia law spread mostly through word of mouth. The Taliban once shunned modern technology as a dangerous Western influence. The Internet was even banned in July 2001 in order to restrict access to allegedly “anti-Islamic” material.77 TV and movies were banned under Taliban leadership as well, and radio and state-controlled print media were used by the Taliban government to spread its strict ideology.78 The more sophisticated use of information technology as a means of spreading their narrative only emerged in earnest in the post-2001 period.

The use of English and Arabic language Internet media and outreach to Western journalists is clearly an attempt by members of the insurgency to reach audiences beyond the borders of Afghanistan. A conscious choice was made over the past decade to shift from a religious and ideological stance against information technology to a pragmatic and strategic embrace of that technology to further their interests. As new languages were

78 Taliban Propaganda: Winning the War of Words?, 4-5.
added to the publication mediums, this too reflects a strategic choice to reach a broader audience. The hypothesized reasons for this decision are numerous. Gina Cairns-McFeeters sees the expansion to Western audiences as an attempt to “increase the probability of provoking a disproportionate response from Western governments and media.” Rid and Hecker see the goal of expanded media operations focused primarily on a larger Muslim community. In reality, it is likely a combination of all of these goals, with execution dependent on resources and needs.

It is important to note that this section describes the evolution of the Taliban’s use of media and technology for propaganda efforts. From their emergence, the Taliban have been very adept at more traditional and local methods of spreading propaganda through personal networks and word of mouth. This sophistication has not necessarily transferred over to their use of the Internet and other information technologies. As Anne Stenersen has pointed out, “it should be stressed that the IEA’s interaction with local populations in Afghanistan is a complex process which cannot be understood by considering Internet-based propaganda only.” The specific scope of this research, and its limited applicability to the situation on the ground, must be considered throughout.

The first recorded use of electronic media by the Taliban insurgency to communicate through the traditional media came in November 2002, when a letter, also distributed as a “night letter” within Afghanistan, was faxed to Pakistani journalists. This letter stated that Mullah Omar had declared jihad against the foreign forces in

80 Rid and Hecker, War 2.0 : irregular warfare in the information age, 177.
Afghanistan, as well as the “proxy government” of then Interim President Hamid Karzai. This fax also stated that Mullah Omar had appointed two deputies, Mullah Brader and Mullah Obaidullah Akhund, both former officials from the deposed Taliban regime.\textsuperscript{82} This was the first signs of organization within the growing insurgency.

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.\textsuperscript{83} This history comes from an article in the December 2008 issue of \textit{al-Somood}, an Arabic monthly publication which the Taliban first released in 2006.\textsuperscript{84} The article describes the media unit and the various activities in which it had allegedly been engaged since its inception in 2002. Among the activities was the establishment of a website to speak for the Islamic Emirate and the publication of a number of magazines and newspapers.

The Taliban’s increasing use of information technology to spread their message was a clear divergence from many of their anti-technology policies established during their time in power. As Tim Foxley pointed out, "[t]heir embracing of technology is probably a result of observing other current insurgencies (in particular in Iraq), but also because of the growing accessibility of such technologies and their increasing ease of

\textsuperscript{82} Taliban Propaganda: Winning the War of Words?, 7.
\textsuperscript{84} Stenersen, \textit{The Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan - Organization, Leadership and Worldview}, 34.
use. Historical and operational ties with members of al-Qaeda enabled the transfer of knowledge from lessons learned in the Iraq war, and the low cost and high accessibility of technology made it easy to rapidly adopt technologies that had been shunned a decade before.

In a 2007 interview with a Swiss journalist, Taliban official Mansoor Dadullah was asked about the use of information technology by the insurgency, contrasted with the aversion to technology during the Taliban’s time in power. Dadullah responded that “Television and the media of mass communication have become indispensable aids in our effort to get our message across to a broad public. We use them with care and with the exclusive aim of reaching the hearts of Muslims.” The adoption was more pragmatic and utilitarian than any true change in belief or ideology.

Local Propaganda and Night Letters

Before discussing the Taliban’s online propaganda efforts, an understanding of the local propaganda activities is useful for comparison. In sharp contrast to the relatively unsophisticated media operations of the Taliban insurgency, an activity in which the group only began to engage in earnest within the last decade, the group is highly effective and sophisticated in its local propaganda efforts. While Internet-based propaganda relies upon both literacy and Internet access – neither of which are prevalent within most of Afghanistan – local propaganda relies primarily upon word of mouth, a deep

85 Foxley, The Taliban’s propaganda activities: how well is the Afghan insurgency communicating and what is it saying?, 6.
understanding of culture and social structures, fear and intimidation. The target of these campaigns is the Afghan people, localized to very specific areas.

David Kilcullen has described these efforts as “armed propaganda”, in which insurgents use a combination of “word of mouth and rumor” and in influencing local officials using a “combination of coercion and persuasion”. Kilcullen cites examples of sophisticated campaigns of assassination against provincial-level officials in several provinces in order to convince other officials not to cooperate with the government or coalition forces. The Taliban are clearly skilled at manipulating local perceptions and carrying out attacks against individuals to maximize fear among specific sectors of the population. Their English-language Internet messaging does not reflect the same level of sophistication and deep understanding of the target population, in this case Western or other English-speaking populations.

Key to the Taliban’s local propaganda efforts are night letters, or *shabnamah*, which are posted during the night in public locations, like mosques or schools, as a means of distributing messages to rural communities. Thomas Johnson conducted a 2007 review of *shabnamah* in Afghanistan, looking at their role in Afghan history and society, as well as their evolution and influence within the modern conflict. While a large segment of Afghan society is illiterate, especially in rural areas, night letters still reach a wide

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88 Ibid.
audience, since they are typically posted in public locations and conveyed by a literate villager to the rest of the community.\textsuperscript{90}

While the night letters are a written medium, they draw upon a rich Afghan oral history, spread through stories, poems and music. Johnson points to a letter written and distributed in Kandahar in 2004, early in the insurgency, which calls upon the memories of great and powerful Afghan rulers of ages past. Calling him “ancestor and hero”, the letter invokes the memory of Ahmad Shah Durrani, the founder of the 18\textsuperscript{th} century Sadozai dynasty that would become the Durrani Afghan empire centered in Kandahar.\textsuperscript{91} Looking back even further, the same letter recalls 11\textsuperscript{th} and 12\textsuperscript{th} century Afghan dynasties whose legends are alive and well within the modern folklore of Afghanistan. Some \textit{shabnamah}, like this one from Kandahar, even include popular Afghan poems as yet another strong connection to Afghan tradition and culture.

Taliban \textit{shabnamah} frequently evoke the anti-Soviet jihad as another source of Afghan solidarity and common emotion.\textsuperscript{92} Even though the Taliban insurgency draws primarily from the Pashtun ethnic group, 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 cross ethnic and political lines in crafting a strong narrative of resistance.

Some night letters call on Afghanistan’s history of empire and resistance to build solidarity and turn the population against Western forces and the Karzai government. Others leverage fear and coercion to influence the population. Delivered at night to public

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{90} Ibid., 319.
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., 323.
\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., 324-325.
\end{flushright}
places like schools or mosques, many *shabnamah* lay out death threats for those Afghans who cooperate with Western forces or the central government of Hamid Karzai. The translation below, provided by Johnson, is from a 2003 night letter to the people of Ma’ruf and Arghistan, both towns in Kandahar province.

> 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 dishonor 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).\(^\text{93}\)

Clearly an attempt to stop the population from informing American or Afghan security forces about the locations or actions of Taliban insurgents, this night letter builds upon likely existing fears among neutral or undecided Afghans civilians that the insurgency will know if and when they try to support the government or its Western backers. Again evoking the memory of the anti-Soviet jihad and Islam itself, the letter pits the memory of the Mujahedeen against those who would “dishonor sincere Muslims” with the threat of death.

While many *shabnamah* are distributed to communities, individuals are often targeted with letters as well. In the wake of the 2010 Wikileaks release of classified military documents from the Afghan theatre, the Taliban claimed that they were going to target those identified in the leaked documents as collaborating with Western forces. The targeting began as night letters, sent out to 70 elders in the Panjwaii district alone.\(^\text{94}\)

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\(^{93}\) Ibid., 327.

Written on letterhead of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, the short notes declared that a death sentence had been made to the recipient, giving them five days to leave the country.

The influence of the Taliban through this “armed propaganda” has been particularly prevalent in targeting education, especially co-ed or girls’ schools. From January 2005 to June 2006, Human Rights Watch documented 204 attacks against teachers, students and schools, many of which were preceded by night letters posted on the schools. Often times, the night letters and threats therein were more than enough to keep students from attending school or teachers from teaching, without any attacks even taking place.95 This has continued to recent times and spread to other parts of the country. In the village of Chawni in Eastern Afghanistan in December 2010, the Taliban posted a letter on the wall of a school describing the curriculum to be taught, despite the fact that the school was funded by the central government.96

While the methods and targets are highly localized, there is evidence of common themes spread among Taliban members across Southern Afghanistan. In a series of interviews conducted across five districts in Kandahar by The Globe and Mail in 2008, the similarities in responses by the different low-ranking Taliban members shows relatively consistent messaging themes.97 David Kilcullen has pointed to a simple “five-line information strategy” used by the Taliban insurgency in early 2006 as another example of consistent and successful propaganda. This strategy was based around five

97 Taliban Propaganda: Winning the War of Words?, 1.
slogans, “Our party, the Taliban”; "Our people and nation, the Pashtun"; "Our economy, the poppy"; "Our constitution, the Shari'a"; and "Our form of government, the emirate". As Kilcullen notes, these slogans were simple and unifying, clearly targeted against the government and Western intervention forces but vague enough to not alienate any particular faction of the insurgency, with the focus on Pashtun nationalism being the potential exception.

In recent years, the Taliban insurgency has begun using videos and messages spread on cell phones to target the local population in Afghanistan. The administrator of the Taliban’s al-Emarah website stated in an interview that news and messages are sent to people in Afghanistan via SMS messages, and reports from Afghanistan indicate 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. The US government has recognized the power of this growing messaging medium, and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has noted that the administration is considering cell phone space in their efforts to counter insurgent propaganda and reach people where they are already being targeted by the insurgency.

This research does not focus on the role of cell phones in the effectiveness of the Taliban’s propaganda since this medium is primarily, at least for now, aimed at influencing the local information space. While the focus of this thesis is the use of English-language Internet media by the Taliban, their use of night letters, SMS messages

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98 Kilcullen, The accidental guerrilla : fighting small wars in the midst of a big one, 58-59.
100 “Clinton Says US Losing Media War in Afghanistan, Pakistan.”
and other local coercion tactics is important to understanding their goals, methods and sophistication within the local context of the insurgency. In Afghanistan, the core of the struggle is local, within the communities that must decide between supporting the Afghan government or the resurgent Taliban. The use of the Internet, while potentially influential from a strategic standpoint, is distant and distinct from the world of shabnamah and Afghan poems and songs used to spread fear or build resistance among the Afghan population.

The Taliban Online

The first website to appear in the name of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan was at the address www.alemarh.com, which was available at least by July 2001, even before the American-led invasion.¹⁰¹ The site name, “alemarh”, is likely a misspelled transliteration of the Al Emarah, or “The Emirate”. While that site has long been shut down, an image of it is available via www.archive.org as far back as September 23, 2001. The site, which still represented a Taliban force in control of most of Afghanistan, was actually written in Arabic, rather than Pashto, and was very simplistic and amateur, featuring little more than a banner and a few graphics with links to a handful of articles, photos and interviews.¹⁰²

One “interview” posted on this site may have been aimed at establishing international legitimacy for the Taliban government, as it denied corruption in the government, claimed support for women’s rights and drug eradication, and claimed

¹⁰¹ According to www.dnscoop.com, the domain name was first registered on August 31, 2000, but no images of the site are available on archive.org until the July 2001 date.
¹⁰² The site was accessed by www.archive.org on 13 January 2011. The site image was captured by www.archive.org on September 23, 2001. Google Translate was used to translate the text elements of the page from the original Arabic into English for interpretation.
Taliban control of 95% of the country.\textsuperscript{103} It is not clear from the translation who is being interviewed. Since the site was published in Arabic, it was likely either intended for potentially friendly Arab Muslim audiences or written and posted by someone for whom Arabic was a native language.

By September 2002, nearly a year after the ouster of the Taliban by coalition forces, the website at www.alemarh.com had been redesigned, with much more content than its September 2001 incarnation. While still written in Arabic, a cursory look at the main page showed a range of content, from 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 the history of Afghanistan, a country “not amenable to foreign invader[s]”.\textsuperscript{104} No further archives of the site are available after September 2002, presumably because the site had been removed.

After the site at alemarh.com was shut down at the end of 2002, there are no known records of websites operated in the name of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan until April 2005, when a new site was set up at www.alemarah.com. This new site, given the name “Voice of Jihad”, was written in Pashto, rather than Arabic, and contained news


\textsuperscript{104} The site was accessed by www.archive.org on 13 January 2011. The site image was captured by www.archive.org on September 25, 2002. Google Translate was used to translate the text elements of the page from the original Arabic into English for interpretation. The machine translated version of much of the text on the site was difficult to understand, so it was used only to look for basic concepts and phrases on the site.
and statements about the ongoing insurgency. The “Voice of Jihad” website has been largely persistent ever since, moving from domain to domain as different sites have been periodically taken down or disabled for short periods, presumably by foreign governments, by independent “hacktivists”, or by web providers made aware of the identities of their clients.

Accounts of the websites by researchers largely depend on when the researcher tried to access the most recently active website link, or Uniform Resource Locator (URL), of that time period. Amin Tarzi notes that the first website to represent the “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan” was established in both Pashto and Arabic in June 2005, even though only the Pashto was updated regularly. He cites Persian, Urdu and English materials added in 2006, with only the Pashto and Persian being updated regularly. In mid-2006, he notes that all materials were updated regularly, followed by the blocking of the site in late 2006. Other researchers, including Stenersen, Foxley, and the Crisis Group Asia, have written about different timelines, and sites operating in the name of the IEA have clearly risen anew since the 2006 shutdown mentioned by Tarzi. There is currently no clear picture of the evolution of the IEA websites within the existing literature.

In December 2010, the Taliban published an interview in *al-Somood*, their Arabic-language monthly periodical, with the supposed administrator of the al-Emarah website, Abdul Sattar Maiwandi. An English translation of the interview was not posted

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105 The site was accessed by www.archive.org on 15 January 2011. Images of the site were captured by www.archive.org from April 2005 to June 2008.


to the Taliban’s English-language website until February 17, 2011 and was then re-posted to a number of Taliban sympathizer and Western national security websites. This interview has provided the most in-depth look at the Taliban’s own intent for their web presence. In Maiwandi’s own words, the Al-Emarah website:

specializes in conveying field reports from the combat zones and publishing the statements of the Ameer ul-Momineen and the statements of the Command Shura Council about different issues pertaining to Jihad, in addition to articles and official analysis. They have many sections: for example there’s an Islam page, a magazines page, and a page for films produced by official studios. We also print magazines and statements and distribute them in popular circles at home and abroad...

Maiwandi later states that the Taliban’s media committee receives reports from correspondents “in all of the provinces of Afghanistan” and reposts them on the website. Additionally, he states that media are first published in Pashto and then translated and distributed in Farsi, Urdu, Arabic and English, although this statement appears to be false, since many of the Arabic-language materials, like al-Somood, have more substantial content and depth than what eventually gets translated into English.

As of April 2011, the Pashto language site was hosted at http://alemarah-iea.net, while the English, Farsi, and Urdu variations are hosted at the separate domain http://shahamat.info, for reasons unknown. Unfortunately, the transient nature of the IEA websites makes it difficult to build an extensive archive of website content all of the way back to the 2006 emergence of the first English-language material. Each time a version of the site goes down and re-emerges at a new URL, a majority of the archived

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109 Shahamat means “bravery” in Pashto.
content from the previous version is lost. As an example, the current version as of April 2011 only has archive data going back to late May 2010, while the former version, available in early 2010, had archive data stretching back to July 2009.

While the original “Voice of Jihad” website was published in Pashto, new versions have since been established in Arabic, Urdu, Farsi and English, which Abdul Maiwandi verified in his December 2010 al-Somood interview. Given the lack of Internet connectivity and level of illiteracy in Afghanistan, the viewership of the Pashto website is questionable. The contents of the Pashto site have been more extensive since its creation, but the quantity and language quality of the English-language site content has been steadily increasing since its inception.\textsuperscript{110} The early uses of the website were primarily to share infrequent statements supposedly issued by IEA leadership and to post updates on tactical events in the country, mostly exaggerated accounts of attacks on coalition forces.\textsuperscript{111}

While the Pashto content has been the most extensive and regularly updated since the 2005 emergence of the website, the Arabic-language content, clearly directed at a different audience from the Pashto material, has been a close second. In addition to the Arabic version of the “Voice of Jihad”, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan has published \textit{al-Somood}, Arabic for “Standing Firm/Perseverance”, since at least 2006.\textsuperscript{112} Given the importance of outside support to the insurgency, whether human or financial, the focus on Arabic, which can reach much wider and wealthier swaths of the Islamic world than Pashto, Farsi or Urdu, makes strategic sense.

\textsuperscript{110} Stenersen, \textit{The Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan - Organization, Leadership and Worldview}, 11-12.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{112} Nathan, “Reading the Taliban,” 30.
The emphasis on Arabic-language content may be as much a result of alliances and circumstance as any serious strategic thinking on the part of the Taliban. Some researchers point to al-Qaeda as the original source of expertise and training for the Taliban’s media operations. Al-Qaeda, a transnational network with few members that has no home and lives and operates in the shadows, survives and thrives on its use of media and information technology to spread its ideology. During the 1990s, al-Qaeda reportedly assisted in Kandahar with the production of an Arabic monthly, *Al-Imarat-ul Islamic* and an English monthly, *The Islamic Emirate*, but both were allegedly produced with little or no guidance from the Taliban leadership in Kabul. As an insurgent movement, it is plausible that a similar situation has emerged, in which al-Qaeda directed supporters of the insurgency are publishing content in Arabic as a means of spreading propaganda among the Arabic-speaking Muslim world.

The English-language content has been much less professional in nature than the Arabic material. In his 2007 assessment of the Taliban’s propaganda activities, Tim Foxley points to the lack of professionalism and language skills on the English-language version of the website as a lack of care for the English-speaking world and the group’s messaging towards them. The English language used on the site, while mildly improved at least in vocabulary and grammatical errors since 2007, is elementary and either translated using machine-translation software tools or written by someone with basic language skills.

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113 Rid and Hecker, *War 2.0: irregular warfare in the information age*, 169.
114 *Taliban Propaganda: Winning the War of Words?*, 6.
115 Foxley, *The Taliban’s propaganda activities: how well is the Afghan insurgency communicating and what is it saying?*, 6.
In a 2007 assessment of the Taliban’s media operations, Hanna Rogan describes the rudimentary nature of the themes mentioned in Taliban productions, which were notably devoid of more sophisticated ideas or rhetoric. The primary focus seemed to be publicizing the deeds of the Mujahideen and insulting the Afghan government and coalition forces. While the research and discussion below analyzes this topic in more detail, by most accounts the sophistication of the Taliban’s online messaging has not increased much since this 2007 assessment.

Whether from lack of resources or lack of interest, the reach and sophistication of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan’s official website, while growing, is extremely limited, especially when compared to media operations of groups like al-Qaeda. Except for the interview with the al-Emarah website administrator Abdul Sattar Maiwandi, the identities of the individuals actually writing the content of the IEA statements is unknown. Statements are released either in the name of the IEA or Mullah Omar himself, posted to the “Voice of Jihad” website and emailed to journalists and sympathizers. While the original messaging and statements from Mullah Omar and other members of the IEA leadership are originally posted on the official IEA sites, much of the redistribution of the messaging online is done by supporters on independent websites or discussion forums. One such site, www.theunjustmedia.com, reposts all statements made in the name of the IEA leadership and has been doing so since 2007. Daily attack data is also posted on this site.

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The identity of the owner of theunjustmedia.com is uncertain, but the person or persons are clearly sympathizers of the Taliban and other Islamist movements. While re-posting the same material, this site has not experienced the same fate as the Taliban’s own “Voice of Jihad” and has remained online since its creation in October 2001. The website at theunjustmedia.com is the most consistent and stable of the online sympathizer websites that redistribute IEA material, but there are numerous others who occasionally post IEA messages along with additional discussion.

It is difficult to gain an accurate assessment of the reach of the IEA messaging on the Internet without more sophisticated collection and analytical capabilities. The use of the free Yahoo! Site Explorer, does provide a level of insight into how many webpages have included direct links back to the IEA official and sympathizer websites. According to Yahoo! Site Explorer, the English language sub-site of the Taliban’s current Voice of Jihad website, at shahamat.info/english, had only 407 “in-links” from external websites as of April 2011. An “in-link” is a hyperlink embedded on an external website that directs users to the original page, in this case the al-Emarah website. The entire shahamat.info website, which includes the Arabic, Farsi, and Urdu pages as well as the English, had over 5,000 in-links. For comparison, the website at unjustmedia.com had more than 16,000 in-links, although this included links to other sections of the website that are not focused on Afghanistan.

The types of websites that link to the stories on the al-Emarah website or theunjustmedia.com are primarily blogs and sympathizer websites, rather than any that might have wide viewership within the general Western public. Some of these include the websites at Islamic-intelligence.blogspot.com and revolutionmuslim.com. None of these
sites have been as consistent over time at re-posting IEA statements and messages as the website at theunjustmedia.com.

Within the last few years, the Taliban’s online messaging has gained a greater presence within modern social media sites. In the 2011 al-Somood interview with Abdul Sattar Maiwandi, the administrator of the IEA website, Maiwandi specifically mentions Western sites Facebook and Twitter, where the Taliban supposedly “publish the news every day and reach thousands of people”.117 Sites like these provide the capability to connect the insurgent group much more directly with sympathetic audiences and potentially distribute the messages much more broadly. The Taliban’s presence on Twitter appears to be currently limited to the user account “alemarahweb”, which re-posts news headlines from the Pashto version of the al-Emarah website.118 Their presence on Facebook is much greater though.

As of April 5, 2011, there were actually six different Facebook pages titled “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan”. Despite Maiwandi’s statements, none of these appeared to be an “official” page operated by the same organization that administers the al-Emarah website. These pages appear to be created by insurgent sympathizers to share links, images and videos and praise and discuss the efforts of the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Of the six pages on Facebook as of April 2011, the most popular had only 313 users who had “liked” it, which is one indication of the size of its audience. It is possible that a much larger group of members are passive viewers, unwilling to directly and

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overtly connect their Facebook accounts to the page by “liking” it. The information section of this page contained links to all of the IEA Voice of Jihad websites, including the English language version at shahamat.info.

In the comment section of the page called the “wall” on Facebook, there was a steady stream of videos and user-submitted comments, with around two to three posts per day for the month of April 2011. In some cases, statements from Taliban Spokesmen Zabihullah Mujahid and Qari Yousuf Ahmadi were reposted by users in their entirety. At least one link to an article on theunjustmedia.com was posted on the group wall as well. While most of the conversation was in English, there were images of articles written in Pashto that had been posted to the wall as well.

The other IEA-related Facebook groups had similar content, albeit with only 91 fans. Another group, also titled “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan”, had only links to videos posted on its wall, about half of which were titled in English. Most of the videos showed attacks on Western or Afghan forces. The “info” section of the page focused primarily on a Pakistani militant group called Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), and the connection between this group and the IEA was unclear.

The Taliban presence on Western social media sites like Facebook appears to be even more unstable than operating their own website, as the owners and administrators of these services apparently delete content and remove user accounts due to violations in their terms of service. On the “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan” Facebook page mentioned above, there were a number of comments about the page administrators being “deleted”, presumably being removed by Facebook due to their online behavior.
In a March 2011 article on RFE/RL, Bashir Ahmad Gwakh did a similar review of Taliban-related Facebook groups and found a much different picture than this research found even one month later. Reportedly Gwakh discovered an “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan” Facebook page, with more than 1,000 fans. This page, no longer available in April 2011, was listed with the location of “International Falls, Minnesota” and administered by Muhammad Zaib Khan Mujahid.\(^{119}\) According to the SITE Intelligence Group, this site, along with a number of others that were quickly created in its place, were closed down by Facebook.\(^{120}\)

The use of video by the insurgency has been a topic of much concern among the military and policy community, with examples given of Taliban fighters staging attacks on coalition forces to capture video and distribute it throughout Afghanistan and on the Internet.\(^{121}\) According to Anne Stenersen, the Taliban’s video releases were initially published by Arab media groups with more experience and capability, rather than by the Taliban themselves. Al-Qaeda’s as-Sahab production company released at least fifty operational films highlighting the conflict Afghanistan during 2006 and 2007, as well as a number of videotaped interviews with Taliban leaders and spokesmen.\(^{122}\)

As of April 2011, the Taliban’s Voice of Jihad website contained a separate video section with embedded videos showing insurgent operations in Afghanistan, interviews with militants, footage of captured American soldiers, and martyrdom messages from

\(^{119}\) Gwakh, “Taliban Employs Modern Weapons In ‘War of Words’.”


\(^{121}\) Rid and Hecker, \textit{War 2.0: irregular warfare in the information age}, 182.

\(^{122}\) Stenersen, \textit{The Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan - Organization, Leadership and Worldview}, 34.
presumed suicide bombers. The webpage headings and video titles appeared to be mostly in Pashto. Many of the videos linked to the site were no longer accessible, and for those that were available, it was unclear whether they had been produced by the IEA themselves or with the help of Arab or other foreign militant groups.

While this is not the focus of this research, it is important to note that these videos have gained a strong presence online, within social media sites like Facebook and also on video sharing sites like YouTube. In many cases, the YouTube videos seem to have much wider reach than Facebook groups like those mentioned above. A YouTube channel operated under the “News4U100” and claiming association with theunjustmedia.com has uploaded a number of videos of militant attacks in Afghanistan and videos conveying the same messaging as is posted on the main theunjustmedia.com website. In October 2009, a video titled “Mujahideen of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan operations stat's for Aug-Sep” was posted that includes, along with audio and animations, statistics on insurgent attacks against Afghan government and NATO forces in Afghanistan. This video has been viewed 6,500 times as of April 2011.

In December 2009 a video was uploaded to YouTube by user “Alemarah11” showing insurgent attacks in Nuristan province of Afghanistan. This video had over 11,000 views as of April 2011. Interestingly, the description of the video was posted in Arabic though, with links back to the various IEA websites and phone numbers for Taliban spokesmen Qari Yousuf Ahmadi and Zabihullah Mujahid.

123 http://shahamat.info/movie/
Who Speaks for the Taliban?

The distinction was made earlier in this thesis between the numerous elements within the Afghan insurgency, all of which are often lumped under the heading of “Taliban” by Western journalists, policy makers and analysts alike. This past section then reverted to the general category of Taliban to discuss the use of propaganda by the insurgency. Here again, the critical distinction between elements within the insurgency are highlighted, as the question of who actually speaks for the “Taliban” insurgency is addressed.

While certain members of the Quetta Shura Taliban and its leadership may claim to have a media council that directs the media activities of the resistance, there is in reality no single group that speaks for insurgency. Additionally, given that the insurgency has no recognized body which could be held accountable for false or exaggerated statements, messages and claims often have little or no connection to the realities on the ground. When the communications medium is English or Arabic language media, there is little chance that individuals on the ground, in a place to actually challenge the veracity of the messaging, will have the access, language and literacy skills to do so.

Those statements released in the name of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and published to the al-Emarah website are believed to be representative of the views of Mullah Omar and the Quetta Shura Taliban. While some statements are actually published in the name of Mullah Omar, most are attributed to various Taliban spokesmen.
According to one report, the first of these spokesmen to emerge was Abdul Latif Hakimi, appointed shortly after the collapse of the Taliban regime.\textsuperscript{126} Other reports list Muhammad Mokhtar Mujahed as the first. Mujahed first emerged in June 2003, when he delivered a message from Mullah Omar declaring the establishment of a new leadership council for the IEA.\textsuperscript{127} In the years since, the list of alleged spokesmen is long. Hamid Agha, Mullah Abdul Samad, Muhammad Amin, Saif al-Adl, Ustad Muhammad Yaser, and Muhammad Hanif have all spoken to the media in the name of the IEA during the conflict.\textsuperscript{128} Currently there are two official spokesmen named on the IEA website, Qari Mohammed Yousuf and Zabihullah Mujahid.

The danger of surfacing as a spokesmen of the insurgent movement is clear, as many of these representatives have been arrested or killed. Hakimi was arrested in Quetta in October 2005, around the same time Dr. Mohammed Hanif appeared. Hanif himself was arrested in 2007.\textsuperscript{129} Perhaps because of the arrests of anyone claiming to be the voice of the Taliban, the current “spokesmen”, Qari Mohammed Yousuf and Zabihullah Mujahid, are likely aliases used by multiple individuals, either simultaneously or as their predecessors are killed or captured.\textsuperscript{130} Online and in contacts with Western and international journalists, Qari Mohammad Yousuf and Zabihullah Mujahid provide an overwhelming majority of the statements.

\textsuperscript{126} Foxley, \textit{The Taliban’s propaganda activities: how well is the Afghan insurgency communicating and what is it saying?}, 5.
\textsuperscript{128} Tarzi, “The Neo-Taliban,” 295-296.
\textsuperscript{129} Stenersen, \textit{The Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan - Organization, Leadership and Worldview}, 33.
\textsuperscript{130} Taliban Propaganda: Winning the War of Words?, 11.
Other insurgents claiming to be Taliban officials have been conducting interviews with journalists as far back as 2003. An example of this is a November 2003 story in The Observer in which a Mullah Abdul Rauf, whose name does not appear in any other known Taliban statements, provides commentary on the changing state of the insurgency. Given the fractured nature of the insurgency, the expanding presence of communications technology in Afghanistan, and the increasing propaganda sophistication of the movement as a whole, it is to be expected that low and middle level commanders would reach out to media representatives on their own to provide statements.

It is clearly important to Mullah Omar, or those speaking in his name, to maintain control of the Taliban’s message. Omar has at numerous times in the past issued statements discrediting those who would speak in the name of the insurgency and the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan without permission from leadership. In February 2004, a fax was sent in the name of Mullah Omar to several news agencies refuting statements made in the media by Saif al-Adl. This same fax named Hamid Agha as the only authorized spokesman. Later, in a 2007 statement released on behalf of the IEA, Mullah Omar made a statement approving only of those comments released by the “official spokesmen and [the] Al Emarah web page”. Former high-ranking Taliban member Mansoor Dadullah was even reportedly removed from his position by Mullah

133 Taliban Propaganda: Winning the War of Words?, 11.
Omar for making statements to the media that were not in line with the views of Mullah Omar and the other Taliban leadership.\textsuperscript{134}

In his assessment of the Neo-Taliban, Amin Tarzi notes internal contradictions among insurgents speaking to the media dating back to 2004.\textsuperscript{135} Continuing up to 2006, Tarzi wrote of more examples of serious contradictions in messaging, this time between statements made by supposed Taliban representatives and the IEA website. In one particular case, a suicide attack on the funeral of an Afghan government figure was simultaneously condemned by an insurgent speaking with the media and claimed – and praised - by the Voice of Jihad website.\textsuperscript{136}

Tarzi also notes perceived differences in the underlying goals of those speaking in the name of the Taliban. In April 2004, Hamid Agha, a representative of the Taliban, announced in a fax to a Pakistani daily newspaper that Karzai should ask the US to withdraw troops, stop bombing Afghan villages, and end victimizing Afghans who support the Taliban.\textsuperscript{137} As Tarzi notes, these are very nationalistic goals, limited in scope to the Afghan theatre. This is contrasted with a March 2004 recording posted on the Center for Islamic Studies and Research website, an al-Qaeda linked site, that also claimed to speak on behalf of the Taliban yet focused its statements much more upon the global Islamist agenda and the larger struggle against the United States and the West.

It is important to note that statements made in the name of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan are made, whether factually true or not, in the name of Mullah Omar and the

\textsuperscript{134} Stenersen, \textit{The Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan - Organization, Leadership and Worldview}, 46.
\textsuperscript{135} Tarzi, “The Neo-Taliban,” 294.
\textsuperscript{136} Ibid., 295.
\textsuperscript{137} Ibid., 292-293.
Quetta Shura Taliban leadership. That leadership is largely resident within Pakistan, at a
distance from the actual fighting in Afghanistan. Separated from the battlefield, the
leadership is supposedly kept informed by representatives spread across Afghanistan. The
statements and news reports distributed on the al-Emarah website most likely reflect the
second-hand reports coming in from the field. The level of contact with militants on the
ground is unknown though. It is highly likely that the Taliban leadership develops its
English language messaging based as much on the international political climate and
press coverage than the events of the conflict itself.

While the messaging released by the IEA spokesmen claims to speak for the
entire insurgency, in reality it only represents one element of a much larger, fractured
insurgency. Other groups, including the Haqqani Network and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar’s
Hizb-e-Islami, do not issue statements and communicate with the media to the same
extent. Haqqani Network leadership, including Jalaluddin and his son Sirajuddin, who
now reportedly leads the operations of the Network, have at times given interviews to al-
Qaeda affiliated media production companies, but their messages are attributable to them
as individuals and not made in the name of the shadow IEA government. HiG insurgents
or leadership may occasionally speak to the media, but statements made in the name of
Hekmatyar or his Hizb-e-Islami are rare and they certainly do not operate a website like
that of the Quetta Shura Taliban.

In the English-language online propaganda space, the Quetta Shura Taliban has
been dominant. Whether out of a belief that overt divisions within the insurgency might
hurt the overall campaign against the Karzai government and Western forces or the view
that Internet media provides little value while carrying operational risk, other insurgent
groups in Afghanistan have let the Quetta Shura Taliban take the lead. As such, the messaging analyzed in this research will be that generated by Taliban spokespersons and propagandists in the name of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and Mullah Omar.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Source Selection

The approach taken in this research was to focus collection and analysis primarily on the English language media and communications released by insurgent groups operating in Afghanistan, particularly material released directly on the Internet. This approach allowed for research on primary sources without relying upon data collected by a third party in country or on obtaining translations of foreign language material. This resulted in a more comprehensive set of primary source material. Collecting Internet content from an ongoing conflict comes with its own challenges, which will be addressed later, but over all this approach was used successfully in enabling the researcher to collect a large body of content with which to assess the efforts and effects of insurgent use of Internet media.

Research began with an assessment of existing literature on the topic of Taliban propaganda and media usage, the summary of which was provided in the background section above. Aside from a few critical pieces focusing specifically on this topic, much of the analysis of Taliban media was part of broader assessments of the Taliban movement, with Internet propaganda being one element of its organization and messaging. This research provided an initial history and background on the timeline of Taliban media efforts, which served as a starting point upon which to begin collection of a broader and more recent set of primary source insurgent media materials.

As the Taliban is an active insurgent group operating against Western forces in an ongoing military conflict, the stability of their Internet presence is fragile at best.
Whether from the actions of the US government or independent, technology-savvy citizens, the website being operated in the name of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan has been taken offline and forced to move to a new web host many times over the past decade of conflict. Unfortunately, from a research standpoint, when the site has returned to an active state it has not always maintained the same duration of archived data, leaving much of the data from initial versions of the website currently unavailable. A comprehensive effort was undertaken to find as much of this data as possible via third-party websites or from the Internet archive project at www.archive.org, but this approach still left substantial gaps in the early years of the conflict.

When used to refer to Taliban media, the acronym IEA refers to the statements made in the name of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and either released on the al-Emarah website or provided by “official” Taliban spokesmen. During the course of research, it was discovered that many of the statements and messages released by the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan are re-posted to third-party sites that are sympathetic to the insurgent movement. These sites often claim that the messages are e-mailed to them by the IEA spokesmen, although this claim could not be verified. One particular site, www.theunjustmedia.com, hosts a substantial archive of statements and incident reports released by the IEA dating back to late 2007. An assessment was performed to identify any differences between the content posted on this site and that posted directly on the IEA “official” website, and with little substantial difference aside from an occasional post that was hosted on only one or the other, this supporter-site was identified as another valuable comprehensive primary source and archived for later analysis.
The decision to use the data discovered at www.theunjustmedia.com was made for another, less immediate reason as well. The focus of this research is to assess the effectiveness of English-language media efforts of insurgent groups in Afghanistan. In an ideal world, it would be evidently clear exactly what is released by whom. In reality, researchers are essentially forced to operate under the assumption that a message posted on a website claiming to be operated by representatives of the Taliban movement is indeed a message from that group, unless obvious evidence points to the contrary. It is possible to look for changes in message style or format or content as a sign of a fraudulent or misattributed post, but at some point, barring much more sophisticated and intrusive information operations capabilities, there is no way to be absolutely certain as to the real identity of the message creator.

While this reality is faced by researchers hoping to learn more about the insurgency in Afghanistan, it is also faced by Western media reporting on the conflict and by sympathetic individuals who are looking to follow the statements and ideas of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and its leadership. The actions that are taken by these groups, whether citing a Taliban Internet post in a news story or becoming increasingly radicalized from an argument or event posted to the IEA website, become just as important as the true identity of the source itself. If it is a Taliban sympathizer who generates content for an Internet post, either completely fabricated or based in part on actual messages from the Taliban leadership, and releases it in the name of the IEA, the outward face still looks the same as if the message source was the insurgent movement itself.
In the arena of modern asymmetric conflict and information operations, sympathizers who operate in this capacity, even if doing so from a great physical distance from the conflict, essentially become a party to the conflict. They may not be operating in theatre conducting attacks or directly providing material support, but their messaging can have psychological or influential effects regardless. It is still critical for researchers to perform due diligence as to the identities of the message creators and to try to assess or recognize the potential for false assumptions of attribution, but it is also important to recognize the role that even messages generated by imposters or sympathizers can have. Even beyond those related to the Afghan conflict, sympathizer websites make up a large majority of the online extremist community, where much of the volume of posts and multimedia is spread through thousands of militant websites that only replicate the original content produced and originated on a small number of key websites.138

Since a component of the research was to assess the influence that Taliban messaging has on Western audiences, primarily via Western and international English-language reporting on the Afghan conflict, a representative collection of traditional media reporting on the conflict in Afghanistan was collected. Since 2003, the website at www.afghanistannewscenter.com, run by Fawad Ahmad Muslim, an Afghan citizen who worked at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Afghanistan from 2002 to 2006, has been collecting and archiving news stories related to the conflict. This data, which will be referred to as ANC, is already organized by date, has already been filtered for relevance to the conflict, and is derived from a wide range of English language media sources.

While there is potential for bias inherent in using only this source for the sample of news media upon which to perform analysis, the sources are varied enough and the substantial amount of raw text data available is large enough, with an average of over 280,000 total words per month, that this research was deemed to be a legitimate representative sample. A more robust approach would have been to compile a new, independent database of media reporting by programmatically pulling archive data from a pre-selected list of media outlets and news aggregators, but this would have required time and financial resources beyond the scope of this particular thesis.

**Assessing News Coverage of the Afghan War**

Before analyzing the influence of Taliban media operations on traditional media and its coverage of the war in Afghanistan, it is important to look at the overall media coverage of the war itself, particularly in the United States, which has been the focus of this research. Assessing the media exposure of Americans based on Internet news stories, as is the approach take here, is an imperfect approximation that only addresses a portion of the news on Afghanistan that reaches citizens. The Pew Research Center tracks where Americans get their national and international news, and television has long dominated as the primary source. Only in the last few years though has the Internet made substantial gains, surpassing newspapers and radio to become the second most popular source behind television, as shown in Figure 1 below.
Assessing where American’s get their news is made increasingly complex by the fact that most news consumers do not choose one source or another but “graze across platforms” instead, with 46% of Americans claiming to use 4 to 6 different platforms on a typical day. In an increasingly information-rich, on-demand news environment, it is virtually impossible to gauge the “typical” media sources where Americans and citizens in the Western world get their news on the war in Afghanistan.

Within the scope of this research, Internet-based text media provided an available source of data that could be analyzed using a computer-assisted quantitative methods. At the present time, performing a similar collection and analysis effort on television media is a much more difficult and complex task. The choice was made in this research to focus

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only on online media with the recognition that it is only a piece of the news on Afghanistan reaching Americans. Given that past studies have shown little difference between traditional print media and online media in distribution of international coverage though, the online coverage, which often includes stories from newspaper outlets who produce print media as well, comes close to the level of television in its grip on providing Americans with their news.141

The war in Afghanistan itself though has a relatively and unexpectedly small share of the media coverage in the United States. As measured by the Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism, Afghanistan only accounted for 4% of the total news in 2010, down from 5% the previous year despite still increasing casualties and insurgent attacks.142

While many Americans may respond in surveys that they are very interested in the progress of the war, press coverage in many cases exceeds the interest of the public.143 According to a 2011 Pew Research Center report, the resignation of Gen. Stanley McChrystal in June 2010 was a prime example of this phenomenon. According to the report, the press coverage of the McChrystal incident far exceeded the public interest, with only the WikiLeaks release of State Department documents and the Midterm

elections having a greater recorded gap between interest and coverage. The American public at large is not clamoring for more coverage of the Afghan war. In a survey of public interest in media subjects taken over 18 weeks, the Pew Research Center for People & the Press found that hardly more than 10% of the public surveyed identified Afghanistan as the story they were following most closely.

Much of the coverage of the war in Afghanistan is centered around a small number of specific events, particularly those with a strong element of Washington-based political and policy impact. In 2009, according to the Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ), 46% of Afghanistan coverage in the United States focused on the Obama administration’s end-of-year policy and strategy debate. Combat, violence and casualties on the ground was second in 2009, at 14%. In 2010, the strategy and policy element decreased from the year before but still had the highest share of news coverage, down to 25%. Violence on the ground was again second, with 20%. After that, Gen. McChrystal’s resignation and replacement with Gen. Petraeus’s and Afghan internal affairs had 16% and 8%, respectively, followed by only 3% for al-Qaeda and the Taliban re-emergence. According to the Pew PEJ analysts, “the war is not a big newsmaker without a major Washington component to the story”.

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146 Ibid.
147 Ibid.
148 Ibid.
With the Internet as an increasingly important source of news for people around the world, news consumption is no longer a passive activity. The Internet provides readers the ability to search and filter the news based on their interests. Readers are not constrained to a small number of media platforms. Search engines enable users to find new sources of news based on specific interests, and e-mail alerts and RSS feeds let users subscribe to the topics and stories in which they are most interested. According to Google, searches in the United States containing the word “Afghanistan” from 2004 to the present reached their peak in December 2009 during the Obama strategy and policy review, with nearly a 174% increase in searches above the average for that year. News consumers are no longer constrained by local news or a small number of mainstream outlets to get their news. While readers may choose to frequent a limited number of sources, the Internet in theory offers them a dramatically wider array of options.

Despite the availability and easy access via the Internet though, few Americans or Westerners are likely to visit the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan’s Voice of Jihad website or any Islamist sympathizer websites, much less give much credence to the postings of an insurgent movement perceived in the Western world as a violent group of religious fundamentalists and terrorists. This creates a fundamental disconnect between the intent and actual influence of the Taliban messaging. For Taliban propaganda to reach and influence Western audiences and have the powerful asymmetric effect that has been

attributed to it over the past years, there must be a third-party mechanism to spread the
message.

This third-party filter role is filled now by the Western and International media. Even though coverage of the war in Afghanistan has largely been eclipsed over the past few years by the global financial crisis and a series of other major events, it still captures at least 4% of all Western media coverage.¹⁵¹ The stories and interviews of Western journalists provide the opportunity for the Taliban to attempt to spread their messages to a much wider audience than their website can reach on its own. This background will frame the analytical approach taken to investigating the relationship between Taliban messaging and media coverage of the Afghan conflict.

Analytical Approach

The approach taken to analyzing the data was a combination of a large-N quantitative assessment of specific trends within the entire corpora of collected insurgent messages and mainstream media stories and a more targeted, small-N quantitative look at specific messages against which to assess the findings of the large-N analysis. The goal of this approach was to identify and assess longer term trends in insurgent messaging and Western and international mainstream media that would not be readily apparent in a smaller sample of collected material. By looking at trends on a large set of text data from 2007 to 2010, the relationship of individual messages or posts to the larger propaganda efforts of the insurgency can be better understood. It is important to note that the research

recognizes the limitations of a strictly quantitative high-level analysis of the data. In this combined approach, the large-N assessment enables a better informed in-depth analysis of insurgent messaging.

When building a single database of insurgent messages for analysis, the Taliban sympathizer site, www.theunjustmedia.com, was used as the primary data source, since it still has records of IEA messages dating back to late 2007. The most recently active instance of the IEA’s official website, www.shahamat.info/english, unfortunately only has archive data going back to May 2010, so it did not cover a long enough time period for useful analysis. The data from theunjustmedia.com also provide a more accessible and organized format than that on shahamat.info. The official al-Emarah website at shahamat.info was used manually to perform verification that the messages on theunjustmedia.com matched those on the official website during the short period where overlapping data are available.

Additionally, the Internet-based news and information aggregation website, Afghanwire.com, contains archives of statements and reports from the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan’s al-Emarah website during 2007 and 2008, which enabled filling in gaps from the other sources, particularly the pre-November 2007 period on theunjustmedia.com. Unfortunately, the archive of Afghanwire.com “news reports” in 2007 only had substantial sets of data during the months of January and July, which could have been in part due to the al-Emarah “Voice of Jihad” website being down during the other months. A small number of statements from early 2007 were also available on Afghanwire.com, but without access to archived copies of the IEA website or other archived records from that time period, this research has been unable to determine
whether this is a complete set of statements released in the name of the IEA during this time. The set of statements and news reports for 2007 is unfortunately less complete and of a lesser fidelity than in 2008-2010, but because it provides a greater historical record it was still maintained within the research data set. The limitations of the data for early 2007 are taken into account during later analysis.

For the period of 2007-2010, the websites at unjustmedia.com and Afghanwire.com both posted extremist media material related to the war in Afghanistan that was excluded from the data set for numerous reasons. In particular, translations of the Taliban’s *al-Somood* Arabic-language were excluded, since their original language is non-English and the target audience is thus different from the English-language audience that is the focus of this research. While not included in the data set for quantitative analysis, certain *al-Somood* translations were used to provide context during analysis. Other media, including poems, interviews of Taliban members by the unjustmedia.com editor, and reports submitted by unidentified “mujahids” were excluded as well in order to isolate the data set only to statements attributed to the Taliban and generated in English.

Within the last few years, interest in Taliban propaganda has grown and a number of Western defense and intelligence blogs and websites, including jihadology.net, jihadica.com, the NEFA foundation, the SITE Intelligence group, Views from the Occident, and others began re-posting Taliban statements for the defense and security community to use for research and analysis purposes. While these served as valuable sources for notification when new insurgent messages were released and verification of the completeness of the data set used for research, in all identified cases the data provided
on these sites were also available on theunjustmedia.com. For this reason, none of these sites were used as primary sources of insurgent messaging material.

IEA messaging was broken into two categories, statements and news reports, during analysis. Statements include longer communications issued in the name of the IEA. The official al-Emarah website at shahamat.info actually posts messages as “statements”, “articles” and “weekly analysis”, but the message format is similar for each. The website at theunjustmedia.com re-posts all three of these media types under the heading “statement,” and they are all referred to as statements in this research.

These statements primarily consist of criticisms of the United States, NATO and the Karzai government, as well as praise for the “mujahideen” resisting the foreign occupation. News reports are much shorter and include Taliban claims of specific, tactical events that occur within Afghanistan. These are primarily exaggerated claims of insurgent attacks against Western or Afghan government forces, but they at times contain claims of civilian casualties caused by Western forces. Due to their different focus and frequency, the two types of messages were separated for some parts of the analysis. The statements include more topical material on which to assess trends in messaging content, while the news reports provide insight into the tactical elements that the insurgents view as important. When analyzing the volume of output or high-level trends that cross message type, the two sets of data were combined.

As stated earlier, the site afghanistannewscenter.com was used as a single source for a representative sample of Western and international English language media reporting on the Afghan war. This site maintains an archive of daily news stories dating
back to 2003. Coinciding with available insurgent messaging, most of the analysis was performed only on data going back to the beginning of 2007.

For each of the data sources listed above, local copies of the relevant website pages were downloaded for use in conducting the research. The data were binned according to the month in which the texts were posted online. The unit of a month was chosen because it generally allowed for at least one insurgent statement per period. Since the original collected post data were in HTML format from the Internet, scripts were written to extract the raw text from the HTML files for further analysis. Perl scripts were used to perform this “cleaning” function on the data, which included removing HTML markup, removing extraneous header or footer information, converting all text to lowercase to eliminate duplicates during processing, and then writing the messaging content to a single text file for each month period.152

Once the data were cleaned and organized by month, another Perl script was utilized to extract n-grams from each month of data. An n-gram is a sequence of characters or words of length n found within the target text. This research used words as the n-gram units, so the values for “n” correspond to individual words. For example, “Taliban spokesman” would be a n-gram of length 2, also known as a bigram. Trending of n-grams within a text provides the frequency of specific word or phrases. N-grams of length 1 to 5 were extracted from the available data for each month. N-gram processing

152 The Perl module HTML::Strip by Alex Bowley was used to strip the raw text from the HTML. http://search.cpan.org/~kilinrax/HTML-Strip-1.06/Strip.pm
was done using the Perl module `Text::Ngram`, developed by Vlado Keselj and distributed via the Comprehensive Perl Archive Network (CPAN).  

Analyzing n-gram frequencies of certain words or phrases is a simple yet effective way of looking at trends in messaging over time. The n-gram module used in this analysis provides both an absolute frequency and a normalized frequency, with the latter enabling a comparison of n-gram frequencies across sample sets of differing sizes. This was necessary when comparing the insurgent messages against the much larger data set of mainstream media news reporting.

The generated n-grams for each month of data were initially written to individual text files. Once all of the n-gram output files were generated, the data were written to a MySQL database. This was done to move away from performing analysis on the text files and to enable easier search and trending across the entire set of data. When the final database was populated, it contained tables with the absolute and normalized frequencies for n-grams of n = 1 to n = 5 for each month from January 2007 to December 2010 for four different text data sets: the afghanistannewscenter.com articles, the combined IEA news and statements set, and the individual IEA news and statement sets.

Once the n-gram database was populated, a set of software tools was developed to enable the flexible extraction of trends in time for individual n-grams within the four available database sets. This was used to look at trends of specific topics or terms both within and between the IEA messaging and ANC media coverage of the Afghan war.

When comparing multiple time-series data sets for the same time periods, the statistical

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correlation coefficient was used where applicable to provide a quantitative measure of the linear similarities between two sets of data.

When analyzing specific topics, such as civilian casualties, a set, or “basket”, of associated n-grams was created to approximate the discussion of the item of interest within the data set. As an example, the civilian casualty basket included the n-grams “civilian casualties”, “killing of civilians”, “civilians killed”, “murder of civilians”, and a series of twelve other n-grams. This and the other n-gram baskets used in this research are included in Appendix A.

The approach taken to the data analysis was to look first at the dominant themes in IEA messaging, starting from the existing literature on the subject and augmenting this data with new primary source material and the insight provided by n-gram frequencies extracted from the aggregated set of messages. From here, the question of civilian casualties was investigated in more detail. Using an n-gram basket to approximate mentions of the topic of civilian casualties, the discussions of this critical issue within both IEA messaging and Western and international media were compared. The data were analyzed by looking for sharp or anomalous increases or decreases in focus on these topics or events over time.

In particular, the relative changes between the two sources was important to assess whether discussion in one preceded discussion in another. This is certainly not be an indicator of direct causality, as many other complex factors are involved in driving messaging and reporting on both sides, but it does reveal a potential for influence between insurgent propaganda and media reporting. Time periods of interest were
identified through analyzing the trends of these n-gram baskets, and from here the actual reports and news stories were further analyzed qualitatively for additional insight.

This same n-gram basket trending approach was then used to analyze the extent to which spokesmen representing the Taliban insurgency have been able to spread their messages to Western audiences through inclusion in Western and international media reporting on the Afghan conflict. The quantitative n-gram analysis provided a backdrop against which to look in detail at the IEA messages and themes that are conveyed in specific news articles in traditional media outlets. Particular focus was paid to the image that the IEA has been able to convey through its contact with the media. In the final section, IEA English and Arabic language media were analyzed in detail to assess the effectiveness of the Taliban insurgency in controlling its image and the overall narrative of the conflict in a manner consistent with its strategic objectives.
CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS

What are the Taliban Saying?

The hypothesis put forth in this research is that the English language propaganda efforts of the Taliban insurgency are limited in reach and ineffective when measured against their goals, as they consist primarily of reactionary and hyperbolic statements and have little ability to drive the media narrative themselves. Testing this hypothesis requires a survey of the themes and ideas that are conveyed in the Taliban’s English language messaging.

Anne Stenersen has broken down the Taliban’s online messaging into four primary themes: battle reports, articles defaming the enemy, justifications for the IEA’s struggle, and denials of alleged atrocities committed by IEA.\(^ {154}\) What Stenersen refers to as “battle reports” have been included in this analysis as the news reports issued on the al-Emarah website. These reports are usually 2-4 sentences long, providing date, location and casualty counts from Taliban attacks on NATO or Afghan government forces. An example report from June 24, 2010 is shown below:

7 American invaders killed as enemy tank destroyed in Logar At least 3 American cowards were killed with three badly hurt on Wednesday afternoon (June 23) as their tank was exploded by and IED blast in Charkh district of Logar. Reported by Zabihullah Mujahid.\(^ {155}\)

By measure of output, these news reports dominate the propaganda material released by the IEA. While the number of statements released is generally less than ten each month, news reports are generated in the hundreds each month. Figure 2 below


\(^{155}\) Zabihullah Mujahid, “Mujahideen of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan military operations against the kafirs, munafiqs and the worshippers of Idols,” [www.theunjustmedia.com](http://www.theunjustmedia.com), June 24, 2010.
shows the monthly volume, measured by word count, for IEA news and statements respectively from 2007 through 2010.

As mentioned in the methodology section, a comprehensive database of IEA news data for early January through July 2007 was unavailable for analysis, which accounts for the lack of data during that time period in the figure above. Aside from this period in 2007, the figure shows that the output volume of news reports is substantially greater than the more lengthy statements.

In addition to serving as an indicator of overall propaganda output, these reports give insight into the view that the Taliban want to project for the progress of the conflict on the ground. Returning to the term “battle reports” used by Anne Stenersen, these reports are indeed focused almost exclusively on the battlefield exploits of the insurgency. A look at the words used by the IEA in these reports is indicative of this focus. Figure 3 below shows the twenty most frequent words used in the entire data set of IEA news reports from 2007 to 2010, after removing filler words like “the”, “and” and
“were” and other words repeated as part of each report, including “Islamic”, “emirate”, and the names of the IEA spokesmen that are generally included with each report.

Figure 3: 20 Most Frequent non-Filler Words in IEA News Reports, 2007-2010

Terms like “terrorists” and “invader” are used to refer to NATO forces, while “puppet” is used to refer to Afghan government forces. The fact that “tank” and “vehicle” have such high frequencies is a result of many news reports claiming the destruction of Western equipment as well as the deaths of enemy soldiers. Within these reports, the IEA shows a near-complete focus on portraying the success of the insurgent forces on the battlefield.

The decision was made not to analyze the specific casualty counts within the news reports, since they are elevated beyond what is realistically feasible, given the numbers of US and NATO forces in the country. Interestingly though, the geographic breakdown of the provinces mentioned in the news reports is largely consistent with events on the ground. The frequencies of Afghanistan’s province names were extracted from within the news report data set, accounting for different spellings and misspellings.
used by the IEA. These frequencies were then grouped by region using the classifications provided in Appendix C. For the period from 2007 to 2010, the provinces in the South-East and South-West regions, which include the Taliban’s original home in Kandahar, made up 63% of all province mentions in IEA news reports.

When comparing the occurrence of province names to a record of attacks on the ground, the IEA focus is actually more weighted towards these particular regions. According to the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), during the same time period, 52% of attacks in Afghanistan occurred in the South-East and South-West regions. In terms of geographic distribution, Taliban propaganda is not claiming reach beyond where it is actually operating, despite the fact that the casualty numbers that it publishes are highly exaggerated. When it comes to the locations for the published attacks, they appear to stay relatively close to their actual reach.

The other three themes that Stenersen highlighted in the IEA messaging - articles defaming the enemy, justifications for the IEA’s struggle, and denials of alleged atrocities committed by IEA – are present primarily in the more lengthy propaganda statements issued on the al-Emarah website. As indicated earlier, the insurgent messaging being analyzed here has been collected primarily from the Taliban sympathizer website theunjustmedia.com, with data from Afghanwire.com augmenting this primary set for part of 2007.

156 U.S. National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) Worldwide Incidents Tracking System (WITS) database record of attacks in Afghanistan perpetrated by Islamic Extremist (Sunni) groups, 2007-2010, broken down by province. The Islamic Extremist (Sunni) designation includes the Taliban and associated insurgent groups. Data for regions was compiled from the individual province values. Only 1 incident was listed with “unknown” for the province.
For the period of 2007 – 2010, the IEA released an average of 4.5 statements per month. The monthly number of posts has trended upwards over the past four years though, as the IEA has increased its online propaganda activity. Figure 4 below shows the frequency of posts each month from January 2007 until December 2010, with the word count for each month overlaid to show the corresponding output volume.

Figure 4: Timeline and Frequency of IEA Statements

Figure 4 shows that the increasing number of statements released by the IEA in late 2009 and 2010 has maintained a consistent message length over time, rather than proliferating into a greater number of shorter messages.

IEA statements target a range of enemies, including the US and its NATO allies, the Karzai government, the United Nations, and the Western “mainstream” media. Criticism of US and NATO forces and the Karzai government are the most frequent and expected.

Focus on the corruption and illegitimacy of the Karzai government is particularly heavy during the months surrounding Presidential and Parliamentary elections. The August 2009 Presidential election was the focus of three different statements for the
election itself, while the October 2009 run-off election, which was called because of international condemnation of irregularities in the main election and subsequently cancelled, was the focus of four more statements from the IEA. In one particular message, titled “Statement of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan Regarding the Runoff Elections,” released on October 25, 2009, IEA propagandists show an informed understanding of the international backlash against the initial fraudulent presidential elections and the heavy Western influence that pushed for the runoff elections. Karzai is labeled as a “besieged miserable president” whose “suffocated voice” and “pale countenance” are signs of his weakness in the face of international pressure.

The September 2010 Parliamentary elections drew even more attention and were the subject of four of the eleven statements issued that month alone, with two others discussing the corruption and weakness of the Karzai government and Afghan police and army. The emphasis of these statements was on the illegitimacy of the elections and the efforts of the insurgency to disrupt them, including a report of attacks carried out against polling stations, broken down by province. The report claimed a total of 739 attacks across 31 provinces, which is substantially higher than the 303 violent incidents reported by NATO.157

The United Nations has drawn particular focus from the IEA over the past four years and is regularly criticized for its lack of neutrality and support for the NATO military intervention in the country. In the entire set of statements, the United Nations is

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mentioned more than 100 times. In particular, UN reports criticizing civilian casualties
cased by the Taliban insurgency elicit strong responses from the IEA.

The Western media has over the last few years become a particularly prominent
target of attacks in IEA statements as well. Criticisms of bias and propaganda from the
“mainstream media” and “Western media outlets” show that the IEA recognizes the
important role played by the Western and international media in shaping perceptions on
the conflict in Afghanistan. Their rebukes of mainstream media coverage of Taliban
atrocities are inflammatory and critical, yet they show that the Taliban are consistently
monitoring the major English-language media outlets covering the war. In particular, The
New York Times, the BBC, CNN, Time magazine, and The Washington Post have all been
mentioned by name in IEA statements.

The Taliban faced a heavy propaganda defeat from the media in July 2010 when
an issue of Time magazine printed a graphic photograph on its cover showing the
mutilated face of a young Afghan woman who was allegedly punished under the orders
of a Taliban commander. The Taliban reacted to this with an immediate response in early
August, distancing themselves from the story and decrying the photograph as “desperate
propaganda”.158 This was followed by a lengthier critique of Western media in a
December statement titled “Poor Aisha or a patsy in US political ploys and propaganda
machine,” in which the supposed lack of evidence in Aisha’s case shows that the
incident was faked by the Western media.159

158 Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, “Response of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan regarding a picture
159 Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, “Poor Aisha or a patsy in US political ploys and propaganda machine,”
Another consistent theme in IEA statements is the evocation of the defeat of the Soviet Union by Afghan Mujahideen in the 1980s. The United States is frequently compared with the Soviet Union, as the IEA claims a similarly unified opposition against the current occupation as that faced by the Soviets over two decades ago. The phrase “Soviet Union” is used 59 times in the available data set of IEA statements, which is significantly high given that these are all historical references to a political entity that no longer exists.

The IEA also devotes a considerably high level of its messaging output to denying claims made in the media of negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government of Hamid Karzai. There have been numerous occasions over the past four years of allegations that “secret talks” between Afghan government and Taliban officials were showing progress towards a political settlement. The IEA has consistently responded to these by flatly denying negotiations. A September 2008 statement titled “Statement of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan regarding the untrue news about peace talk,”160 was followed in March 2009 by a statement titled “No negotiations with invaders and their puppets”.161 In 2010, similar statements were released in April, May, October and December, with the last referring to a revelation in the media that a Taliban “official” with whom US and Afghan government official had been meeting was actually an imposter.162

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The strong focus on denying any political settlements or negotiations with the Karzai regime is consistent with what Anne Stenersen has described as the Taliban’s “worldview”. According to Stenersen, the IEA’s narrative conveys the consistent theme that “the only solution to Afghanistan’s problems is armed struggle against the occupiers and their local lackeys, until an Islamic regime is re-installed in Kabul”.163 Despite the reality that the Taliban’s real competitor for political control of Afghanistan is the Karzai government, the presence of foreign military forces is one of the most consistent and frequent themes in IEA messaging. The insurgency recognizes that foreign military and political support is potentially the only thing keeping the corrupt Afghan government in place, so rallying against foreign intervention provides a strong platform from which to unite Afghan opposition against the IEA’s adversaries.

In a November 2010 statement titled “Open Letter of Qari Mohammad Yousuf Ahmadi, to Members of the American Congress,” the Taliban spokesman directly addresses the theme of Afghan unity in his message:

You had better know the ground reality that the war of Afghanistan is a losing war, being fought by the indigenous people, not just by a given faction, a tribe but by an entire nation which has over 5,000 years old history; a nation that considers both victory and martyrdom in the war against your forces as a cherished wish of success not only in this world but in the world to come as well.164

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Drawing on the “5,000 years old history” of the Afghan nation, Ahmadi brushes aside even the recent history of civil war and internal divisions between those groups struggling for control of Afghanistan.

According to Ahmadi, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan had no role in the events of September 11 that led to the invasion of Afghanistan, even claiming that “participation in operations on foreign soil” is not part of IEA policy. Regardless, the Western intervention forced the Afghan people to “put up resistance... out of sheer feeling of patriotism to defend the country and the religious sanctity”. The role of al-Qaeda, the Northern Alliance, and the widespread condemnation of the Taliban in public opinion polls understandably does not weigh into this narrative.

Along with the theme of confronting foreign intervention is the strong focus in IEA messaging on the US policy debate surrounding troop withdrawal deadlines. A November 2010 statement titled “Response of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan as regards Lisbon Meeting” described the decision to extend the troop withdrawal deadline to 2014 as an “irrational decision” since it would only delay the inevitable while ensuring continued violence in the meantime.165 A July 2010 statement titled “US has to get out, why not now,” even evoked the history of the Vietnam war and a supposed recent survey in which “85 percent of the Afghan masses support their Mujahideen brothers” in its arguments against prolonging the war.166

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The most comprehensive and lengthy of the IEA statements each year are those published in the name of Mullah Omar on the occasion of Eid ul-Fitr, the three-day Muslim holiday that marks the end of Ramadan. Since it is based on the Islamic calendar, Eid ul-Fitr occurs on a different date for the Gregorian calendar each year. It has taken place in October and September over the past four years. The IEA has released statements from Mullah Omar surrounding this occasion in at least 2007, 2009 and 2010.

Mullah Omar’s messages have been addressed to multiple audiences, including the people of Afghanistan, the Islamic Ummah, and even the American people. Many of the same themes as those listed above, including criticism of the US, NATO, UN and Karzai government, are repeated at length. Going back to 2007 though, these messages have carried a more policy-centric focus as well, declaring nationalist themes and mention of “neighboring countries” that refutes any transnational elements in Taliban objectives or ideology. These more strategic concepts are largely absent from other Taliban statements, leaving those messages from Mullah Omar to create the outward-facing picture of the IEA’s policies.

Most of the themes and specific statements mentioned above are highly reactionary in nature, written in response to criticisms of the insurgency in the Western media or denying rumors of political compromise and negotiation with the Afghan government. The narrative of a common Afghan revolt against illegitimate foreign military intervention is consistent and may prove powerful among local audiences, although its impact on foreign audiences is arguably less influential. The next 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.
Narrative on Civilian Casualties

One of the main IEA messaging themes identified by Anne Stenersen and mentioned above is the denials of alleged atrocities committed by insurgency. The killing of civilians is the paramount atrocity in irregular conflict like that in Afghanistan, and civilian casualties caused by either side play a central role in the media operations of both insurgent and counterinsurgents. Rid and Hecker describe the number of civilian casualties caused by NATO as “by far the most important focus of Taliban media operations”. The insurgency highlights civilian deaths caused by coalition forces as a sign of foreign imperialism and the inability of the government and its supporters to protect the population. The Afghan government and NATO forces point to civilian casualties caused by the insurgency as a sign of its brutality and lack of concern for the wellbeing of the Afghan people. For the government and NATO forces, the killing of civilians is one of the quickest ways to turn public opinion against the government and its allies. Claims of civilian casualties from NATO airstrikes within insurgent messaging are given credibility by all too frequent real occurrences.

This analysis focuses on the trending in media discussion of civilian casualties within Afghanistan, looking for signs of an insurgent focus on the topic as a potential leading indicator for the mainstream media emphasis. Here, a “basket” of n-gram terms was created that indicated discussion around the topic of civilian casualties and the frequency of these n-grams was extracted from the media data sets and aggregated. Looking first at the trending of this topic within the mainstream media, Figure 5 below shows the absolute and normalized counts of civilian casualty related n-grams over time.

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167 Rid and Hecker, War 2.0: irregular warfare in the information age, 179.
While the n-gram basket approximation of civilian casualty mentions for this sample set changes substantially from month to month, the yearly average of mentions has actually decreased for 2010, down by 25% from its four-year high in 2009. The basket of terms used for this analysis is included in Appendix A.

This same basket of terms was extracted from the combined set of IEA statements and news reports to compare against the trends in media reporting. Unfortunately, the number of mentions within the IEA media content was too insignificant to identify any strong trends. Discussion of civilian casualties within insurgent messaging was infrequent and insignificant compared to the much more substantial focus on alleged battlefield victories of the insurgency. The average total number of mentions within both IEA statements and news reports for 2007-2010 was slightly above only 3 mentions per month. With this minimal level of focus in IEA messaging, only a small number of months had any substantial messaging to assess. January 2010 saw the greatest focus on
civilian casualties within IEA messaging according to this analysis, with nearly 13% of the total extracted mentions within the data set for the entire four year period.

To understand whether these results were truly indicative of the content of IEA messaging, a sample of posts were analyzed by hand to determine the type of phrasing and word choice used by insurgents to discuss the killing of civilians by coalition and Afghan government forces. It was discovered that the same terms used by the traditional media were not as applicable to insurgent messaging, where the term “civilian casualties” and other similar terms and phrases which appear more regularly in traditional English-language reporting are not as prominent. Instead, phrases like “martyred 12 civilians”, “ambushed civilians” or “bombed homes of civilians’ are used by the insurgents. 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, making the assumption that the focus of these the insurgent messaging is specifically targeted against coalition and Afghan governments, thus yielding a high likelihood that any mention of civilians would be attributed to negative actions taken on behalf of those groups. Figure 6 below shows the trending of these terms within the combined IEA statement and news report sets.
The analysis of the terms “civilian” and “civilians” again shows January 2010 as one of the most dominant months for civilian related messaging. While January 2010 was the highest for the basket-driven analysis that was also performed on the mainstream media data set, October 2010 has the highest absolute count in this case, with January 2010 a close second.

In looking specifically at the message content during the January 2010 period, the increase occurred primarily within two statements written in response to a United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) report on civilian casualties published that same month. The UNAMA 2009 report blamed the insurgency for causing an estimated 67% of all civilian casualties in the country, which does not include the 8% of deaths where the responsible party was undetermined.\textsuperscript{168} The release of the report on January 13 was preceded by a January 7 speech by UN Secretary General Ban ki-Moon at the United Nations 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.
Nations on the findings of the report.\textsuperscript{169} Based on the date listed on the website posting, the initial response by the IEA followed Ban ki-Moon’s statements by two days. Their subsequent statement was then posted two days after the UNAMA report itself was released.

In the IEA response to Ban ki-Moon’s UN remarks, the insurgents attack his neutrality, stating that he “brazenly tramples down on UNO principles of neutrality through his remarks in order to please the White House rulers”.\textsuperscript{170} The message then goes on to name specific events where American attacks allegedly caused civilian casualties, including the deaths of school students in Narang district of Kunar province a week prior. This accusation was referring to recent reports of 8 Afghan children being killed by US-led forces in a night-raid at the end of December. A NATO official claimed that the raid was carried out against an IED manufacturing cell, but the “facts about what actually went down” were not made clear by the official.\textsuperscript{171} The statement then goes on to claim that the reports of Taliban attacks against civilians are part of a Pentagon-led propaganda effort, out of the “Psychological Warfare and Lies Fabrication Department” that has affected the UN assessment and biased it against the insurgency.

The response to the UN report itself, which was released a week later, contained much more specific rebuttals of the UN claims. According to the IEA, the Western media are falsely reporting on the deaths of Afghan civilians.

Last year, we saw that the Western media were frequently publishing partial and farce reports about civilian casualties perpetrated by the invading Americans. For example, the Western media, quoting American spokesmen, reported that 35 militants from the armed opposition were killed by American troops in Dai Ch[o]pan last year. Later, it was proved that all were civilians killed as a result of American bombardment. Up to this very day, no reporter or an official of the United Nations visited the area to find out about the incident.172

Dai Chopan is a district in Zabul province in Southeastern Afghanistan. The only press release for Zabul from that period on the NATO ISAF website described an incident in which six wounded civilians reported to an ISAF forward operating base following an engagement between ISAF forces and armed insurgents. No further specifics were given on the incident. No independent accounts of the incident were available.

The statement does challenge the ability of the UN to collect accurate data from the rural or “war-stricken” areas of the country. It points out that large portions of rural Afghanistan have been effectively under the control of the Taliban for some time and thus unreachable by UN officials. They charge that the UN has “patched up the report in the Guest House of UNAMA in Kabul, stuffing the desired data into it which are palatable on political grounds”. The IEA then mentions “overlooked” house raids, highway killings, “blind bombardments,” and Predator strikes in the rural areas of Kunar,

172 Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, “Response of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan to UN Report on Civilian Casualties,” www.theunjustmedia.com, January 15, 2010. The misspellings here are from the original IEA source, which has been quoted exactly as it appears in the original message.
Nooristan, Laghman, Kunduz, Logar, Paktika, Helmand, Farah and Uruzgan provinces. No specific dates or evidence are provided for these events though.

While the challenge of UN access to data from the rural and largely inaccessible regions of the country is valid, the statement itself is an unspecific and highly reactive response to the work of the UN that discredits the insurgency. Beyond these direct responses, the release of the UN report caused a seemingly reactive increase in focus on civilian casualties within other statements and news reports during this period. Both January and February 2010 saw an elevated increase in mention of civilians in IEA news reports that primarily focus on insurgent attacks against NATO forces. By March, the numbers began to drop off again.

The normalized frequency count shows the relative number of occurrences of the selected terms with respect to the total number of words within that specific month. This data provides insight into whether trends seen over time are simply the byproduct of an overall increase in message volume. January and October 2010, both of which had the highest total counts, are much nearer the rest of the data set when taking into consideration the normalized frequencies of those terms. This shows a largely constant focus by the IEA media organization on the topic of civilian casualties over the past four years, with occasional increases due to more to external factors, like the UN report, than to events on the ground.

The actual UNAMA data on civilian casualties provides a backdrop against which to analyze the trends in media reporting and IEA messaging. Figure 7 below shows the UN civilian casualty data from 2007 to 2010, split out by the alleged perpetrator of the killings. AGE stands for “Anti-government elements” and includes the different Taliban
factions, while PGF stands for “pro-government forces” and includes both the Afghan government forces and NATO ISAF military partners.

![Image of Civilian Casualties in Afghanistan, by Responsible Party, 2007-2010](image)

**Figure 7: UNAMA Reported Civilian Casualty Data in Afghanistan, 2007 - 2010**

While the true accuracy of the UN civilian casualty data is uncertain, the assumption is made in this analysis that it is the most accurate and neutral assessment available. The data show seasonal increases in civilian deaths occurring in the summer months of each year, when fighting between insurgents and pro-government forces intensifies. As the UN report on 2010 indicates, the number of civilian casualties attributed to Afghan government and ISAF forces decreased in 2010 from previous years, leaving a large majority of the civilian deaths attributable to the insurgent forces.

In comparison to the trend in PGF-caused casualties, Figure 5 above (Civilian Casualty Mentions in ANC Data) shows a similar decrease in civilian casualty mentions within the mainstream media for 2010. Using a standard statistical correlation coefficient calculation, the estimation of media reporting on civilian casualties was compared to the
civilian casualty data for the three different actor groups specific by the UNAMA report, AGE, PGF and Other. This was done to see which casualty set most closely aligned with the reporting on the topic. The result of the correlation calculation is a value between -1 and 1 and is a measure of the linear dependence of two variables, in this case the media reporting on civilian casualties and civilian casualties caused by different parties in the Afghan conflict according to UNAMA data.

This analysis yielded correlation coefficients of 0.14 and 0.20 for AGE and Other casualty data, respectively. For PGF caused casualties though, the correlation coefficient is 0.51, showing a much greater statistical relationship between media reporting and civilian casualties caused by pro-government forces. The correlation coefficient between the media reporting and the total record of UN reported casualties in only 0.38, so the media focus is much more closely aligned with incidents of Afghan government and NATO forces killing civilians than those caused by any other actors. The correlation coefficient equation used and a table with the calculated coefficients are included in Appendix B.

The higher correlation between media reporting on the killing of civilians and the data attributing civilian deaths to pro-government forces is an indicator of potential bias on the side of Western and international media in focusing reporting on those deaths caused by Western and Afghan government forces. While this is a very basic calculation of correlation with a number of assumptions involved, it does indicate that reporting on civilian casualties in Afghanistan most closely aligns with those civilian casualties caused by pro-government forces. This assessment only shows linear similarity between the data sets over time and is not an assessment of causality in any way.
One potential cause is the lack of access by journalists to many rural or insurgent-controlled areas of the country where the Taliban are more likely to commit attacks against civilians. The quick and concerted propaganda response to the UN report that placed heavy blame on insurgent forces for civilian deaths shows that the insurgency understands the danger of being associated with civilian casualties, so insurgents are unlikely to allow journalists, foreign or Afghan, into areas under their control to report on atrocities committed against the population. Amnesty International has reported that the Taliban have increased attacks against Afghan journalists in 2010 and blocked reporting in areas under control of the insurgency. Additionally, Taliban representatives frequently deny attacks that kill civilians when contacted by journalists.

A second potential factor influencing this trend in reporting is the concerted efforts by the insurgency to alert international journalists when NATO or Afghan government forces do kill civilians. The analysis above showed that the English-language media content generated by the Taliban, in the form of statements and news reports, did not place a substantial focus on this topic. Other researchers and journalists have pointed to evidence of Taliban representatives in the field being much more active and successful in directly contacting journalists, by phone or SMS, following events in which coalition raids or airstrikes have caused real or falsified civilian casualties.

In their assessment of the Taliban’s media operations, Rid and Hecker focus on the Taliban’s ability to quickly contact journalists after an event of interest, usually

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before coalition forces are able to release their version of events. According to Rid and Hecker, there is generally a ninety minute window after the start of a major military operation before Taliban spokespersons contact the international press. The regular inaccuracy of these statements is recognized by many journalists, but the insurgency is still able to exploit this capability to consistently alert the press when NATO missions do result in civilian casualties.

Through a combination of denied access to Taliban controlled areas and a concerted effort to alert the media when coalition forces cause civilian casualties, the insurgency has been able to drive the media focus on civilian casualties towards the effort of international forces. This appears to be done solely from the ground with no assistance from the organization’s online effort, which was reactive in nature instead, responding to international accusations against the insurgency rather than driving the narrative on that important topic. The online messaging was instead dominated by a focus on battlefield exploits. In many cases, charges of civilian casualties committed by NATO forces were hidden within the flood of exaggerated news reports of insurgent attacks, a position that is ultimately ineffective at reaching broader audiences and having any impact on the narrative surrounding civilian casualties.

The Voice of the Taliban in the Traditional Media

The Taliban’s English language messaging analyzed here is generated in English and intended for an English-speaking audience. While in some cases the English-language content is simply a translation of material originally generated in Pashto or

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175 Rid and Hecker, War 2.0: irregular warfare in the information age, 179.
Arabic, the content of many of the messages indicates that they are targeted distinct specifically at foreign audiences. In addition to an expected focus on events within Afghanistan, insurgent propagandists comment regularly on current events that are dominating the Western media scene. The relative sophistication of argument and commentary put forth, regardless of its militant tone and recognizable failings with the English language, show a concerted effort to engage with the international English speaking world on topics that they feel will elicit some form of response. The medium, language and content show that the messages are not intended to resonate with the domestic Afghan audience, and as mentioned earlier, the night letters that the Taliban have been using for years are far more culturally and operationally sophisticated than their Internet messaging. Instead, these English language messages are, at least in part, a strategic attempt to influence the English speaking world.

The link between the online Taliban and the local Taliban is the traditional media, which serves as a filter between the events and messaging on the ground and audiences around the world. It is more than a simple relay or redistribution. It is its own entity with a wholly different identity and set of agendas from other parties involved in the conflict. For most Americans and citizens of other Western countries, the Western media is the sole lens through which they learn about and understand the conflict. It is also generally the only way in which messages released by the insurgents reach the English-speaking world, since few Western citizens actually visit the official Taliban websites.

While the current war in Afghanistan is now the longest war in U.S. history and has at times taken the spotlight in the national debate, the war on average makes up only a very small fraction of national news coverage. As mentioned above, the Afghan war
accounted for only 4% of the nation’s news coverage in major outlets through early December 2010. This is a slight decrease from 2009, when it grabbed 5% of the nation’s news coverage. When the study began in 2007, the war was only 1% of the national coverage.

Since the Afghan war began in late 2001, following the terrorist attacks of September 2001, the war slowly faded into the background of American public attention. Eclipsed at different times by the Iraq War, Hurricane Katrina, the most severe economic crisis since the Great Depression, the BP oil spill, and other events, the slow and steady increase in casualties has become a sadly familiar trickle of news for most Americans. Certain events throw the war into the national spotlight, such as President Obama’s 2009 strategy decision shortly after taking office, the 2010 Wikileaks release of classified field data from the conflict, or the 2010 replacement of Gen. Stanley McChrystal as Commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan by Gen. David Petraeus, but the attention is rarely sustained beyond the levels mentioned above.

The purpose of this analysis into the media coverage on the Afghan conflict is to gain insight into how often traditional media stories make reference to statements made by representatives of the Taliban. While the website posts highlighted earlier are the primary focus of this analysis, another avenue by which the insurgency in Afghanistan has sought to promote its messaging is through direct contact with representatives of the media.

There are a number of ways in which Taliban statements or messages become part of the stories distributed by mainstream Western or international media outlets. Within

176 Stelter, “Afghan War Just a Slice of U.S. Coverage.”
Afghanistan, journalists on the ground have reported that the Taliban are exceptionally easy to reach for comment, whether by phone, SMS, e-mail or even instant message. Taliban spokespersons frequently initiate contact with journalists in an effort to tell their account of events on the ground before the Afghan government or coalition forces are able to do so.

Journalists looking for Taliban statements or further insight into their strategic messaging can also visit the same insurgent and sympathizer websites analyzed in this research. The Voice of Jihad website, while frequently out of service, has been endorsed by the Taliban leadership as the only authorized source for distribution of its statements and news reports. Additionally, websites run by Western researchers, defense analysts and bloggers, including jihadology.net, the NEFA Foundation and the SITE Intelligence Group, frequently repost insurgent messages, often along with commentary and analysis.

In many cases though, it is unclear where or how journalists obtain the statements from Taliban representatives that they include in their stories. In the case where a message is obtained from a reputable Western security or defense analysis website, such as the NEFA Foundation, attribution is more common. In a 2009 article highlighting a message from Mullah Omar on the occasion of Eid ul-Fitr, Kim Dozier of the Associated Press gave credit to the SITE Intelligence Group for obtaining and distributing the copy of the insurgent message.178

177 Gwakh, “Taliban Employs Modern Weapons In ‘War of Words’.”
In most cases though, an anonymous “Taliban spokesman” is cited as the source of the included message. Occasionally the two most recent Taliban spokespersons, Zabihullah Mujahid and Qari Yousuf Ahmadi are given credit, but even these names are reported to be pseudonyms used by potentially numerous different individuals. It is unclear also how many of these contacts are made via phone, SMS, e-mail, or other communications mediums. In the absence of being able to assess the frequency of Taliban contact with the media at the source, an alternate approach is to look at the message content itself for indications of Taliban messages.

The purpose of this assessment is not to try and uncover subtle biases or messaging changes in the language used by journalists as a result of contact with the Taliban. This deep level of content analysis is beyond the scope of this research and would require access to journalists and a much richer set of data than is openly available. Instead, the approach taken here is to perform a surface-level analysis of the news story content for overt examples of Taliban statements or quotations.

The most accurate way to perform this assessment would be to hand code the sample corpus of media news stories on Afghanistan to look for direct quotations. Given the difficulty of performing such an analysis on thousands of stories over a four year period, a computer was used to perform a similar assessment. While not as accurate as hand-coding, trending occurrences of n-grams frequently associated with a story that includes a statement from a member of the insurgency, such as “Taliban spokesman” or “Mullah Omar said”, provides a consistent and high-level indicator of the presence of Taliban propaganda in mainstream media news stories over time. The n-gram “basket” used to approximate this topic is included in Appendix A.
While this approach is imperfect, since it will miss relevant stories in which one of these phrases do not appear, the data in the aggregate do provide insight into reporting on the Afghan conflict within the Western and international media. This analysis was performed on the ANC data from January 2007 to December 2010, and the normalized and absolute frequencies of the n-gram counts, by month, are shown in Figure 8 below.

Figure 8: Taliban Spokesman Citations in English Language Media Reporting

In order to check for potential irregularities in the data due to the source set from afghanistannewscenter.com, a similar analysis was performed on the news archive data available from the LexisNexis Academic database, specifically for the “All News, English” source set. Performing this search on LexisNexis data for individual month periods from 2007 - 2010 yields another look of the presence of this “basket” of terms within media coverage of the war. This assessment was done in part because of the unexpected spike in Taliban spokesmen mentions in the summer of 2007. Figure 9 below shows the LexisNexis and ANC data normalized to the highest month count for each data
set. The normalization was done to make the two data sets comparable, since LexisNexis is a much larger set of documents than the ANC data set.

![Normalized Taliban Spokesman Mentions in English Language Media Reporting, Multiple Data Sources](image)

**Figure 9: Taliban Spokesmen Mentions in English Language Reporting, By Source**

The data in Figure 9 show that the trends present in the LexisNexis dataset are also present in the ANC corpus used as the primary source for this analysis. Interestingly enough, the summer of 2007 dominated the trend, with the average of the months of July, August and September of 2007 seeing more than double the average number of mentions over the entire dataset. Since both the normalized and absolute frequencies show the same spike during that time period, the increase is not the result of an overall increase in reporting on the conflict during that period. Here, the correlation coefficient between the ANC and LexisNexis results was calculated to be 0.67, showing a high degree of linear dependence between the two series of data.

While claims have been made about the increasing sophistication and success of Taliban propaganda, Figure 8 above shows no significant increase in citations from Taliban representatives within the media over the past three years. In fact, looking into
the data shows that the highest two month period of Taliban spokesmen mentions occurred in the summer of 2007. This reporting was primarily focused on a single hostage situation in which Taliban insurgents abducted 23 South Korean church volunteers on a road south of Kabul in July of that year.

Within a week of taking the hostages, insurgents had already killed one male South Korean as a message to the Kabul government.179 During the course of the crisis, the Taliban killed one more male South Korea hostage, released two female hostages and continued to hold the other hostages until August 30, when the remainder were released. Insurgents demanded the release of Taliban prisoners in exchange for the release of the hostages, along with the standard demand that foreign forces leave the country. Early in the process, Taliban spokesman Qari Yousuf Ahmadi released a specific demand for the withdrawal of South Korean troops from Afghanistan, despite the fact that the South Koreans had already set a time table to have their forces out by the end of 2007. In an acknowledgement of this demand though, the South Korean government did confirm their intention to withdraw their troops by the end of 2007 shortly after the 23 South Korean hostages were abducted.

The negotiations dragged on for over a month, as the Afghan and South Korean governments refused to meet insurgent prisoner exchange demands and the insurgents then continued to create new deadlines as each previous one passed. Qari Yousuf Ahmadi was reportedly the regular contact between the media and the insurgents during the crisis, providing updates via satellite phone from an undisclosed location.

This South Korean hostage crisis became a major focus of international news, and many journalists carried quotes from Taliban representatives in their stories during the ordeal. From a simple word frequency perspective, the use of the words “hostage” and “hostages” increased in the ANC sample set of media stories on Afghanistan by 850% during the months of July, August and September of 2007 above the average for the first half of that year. The South Korean hostage situation came right on the heels of another incident in which Taliban forces kidnapped two German citizens and killed one of them, releasing his body and claiming the refusal of the German government to withdraw its troops as a reason for the killing.

While the late summer and early fall of 2007 were the peak in both Taliban spokesperson mentions and hostage mentions in the media, this does not match with the actual trending of kidnapping events on the ground. Figure 10 below shows the number of kidnapping incidents in Afghanistan from 2007 to 2010, according to the US National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC). The data show a steadily increasing rate of kidnappings, peaking in the summer of 2010 with 45 kidnapping events that month alone.
While kidnappings have slowly increased over the past four years, with the 2010 summer average (June – September) of 34 kidnapping events more than three times the average for the summer months of 2007 when the South Korean incident occurred, the media reporting of hostage incidents has not kept pace. The South Korean incident, with 23 initial hostages, is the biggest single incident of the war, which arguably led to its generous press coverage. Arguably, the fact that it was a bus of Christian missionaries from a country on the edge of withdrawing its troops anyway likely led to the media appeal as well. The Taliban clearly struck a nerve with the international community in this case and were rewarded with an increase in international coverage.

In terms of messaging, this increased coverage and the individual stories that were part of it provided a narrow opportunity for the Taliban to express grievances or convey their chosen messages through their interactions with journalists. In execution though, the

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180 U.S. National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) Worldwide Incidents Tracking System (WITS) database record of kidnapping incidents in Afghanistan perpetrated by Islamic Extremist (Sunni) groups, 2007-2010. The Islamic Extremist (Sunni) designation includes the Taliban and associated insurgent groups.
only themes present were the demand for coalition countries, particularly Germany and South Korea, to withdraw their troops from the country and for the release of Taliban prisoners from Afghan prisons. This is an interesting mix of tactical and strategic themes. While targeted violence against a specific coalition country in an attempt to force their withdrawal from the NATO mission is in line with the asymmetric objectives of the insurgency. In this case though, South Korea was a minimal contributor and already planning to withdraw. Additionally, this message was drowned out by inconsistent and frequently shifting demands for release of Taliban prisoners.

The tactical value of hostage taking is clear in this case. The kidnapping of the German and South Korean hostages followed an incident earlier in 2007 when a kidnapped Italian journalist named Daniele Mastrogioacomo was successfully exchanged for several high-taking Taliban hostages. The Italian government’s actions in this case set the precedent, which some of the coverage focuses on as a potential reason for the wave of kidnappings that followed. The Taliban even directly acknowledged the value of hostage taking to the organization, as one commander was quoted as saying “It’s a very successful policy”.

In the case of the South Korean hostage incident, there is a strong disconnect between the Taliban messaging as it comes through quotations and statements in the media and the messaging as it appears in full statements from the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, released on their Voice of Jihad website. In contact with journalists, the

impression is given that the Taliban spokespersons are constantly changing demands and adjusting their deadlines in the face the South Korean and Afghan governments failing to cooperate. The number of Taliban prisoners that they demanded be freed in exchange for the hostages jumped from 5 to 10 to 8 to 23 in the subset of news stories sampled in this research. The comments of the Taliban spokespersons seemed almost as if they were made up on the fly during conversations with journalists, and there was little consistency or apparent strategic intent to their actions or messaging.

In contrast, a statement released by the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan’s leadership on August 31, the day after the hostages were released, titled “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan statement concerning the Mainstream Media propaganda asserting that ransom money was paid for the South Korean”, lays out five alleged demands upon which the two parties agreed. These include agreements that all South Koreans would leave the country by the end of the year, that all South Korean NGOs would leave by the end of that month, that no more South Korean Christian missionaries would enter Afghanistan, that the Taliban would not attack South Koreans during their departure, and that the IEA would forego the demand for the release of Taliban prisoners. In the statement, the IEA and the South Korean government are treated as equal negotiating partners, and the release of the South Korean hostages without the reciprocal exchange of Taliban prisoners is stated to be a “goodwill gesture”. Framing the story in this way is a clear attempt by the insurgency to be seen as a legitimate party to the conflict.

In addition to its attempt at increasing legitimacy, the IEA statement directly targets the perceptions being made in the “mainstream media”. According to the statement, the Taliban are denying a payment of $20 million that some news stories claim was paid for the release of the prisoners. Calling these allegation “devilish propaganda”, the IEA claimed that “since the day when it first captured the 23 South Koreans have never demanded any money, only the releasing of their Mujahideen who are illegally lock up in America and Karzai’s administration prisons where they are being tortured”. The authors of this post, allegedly Taliban leadership, decry what they perceive as unfair representation of their role in negotiations within the international press.

In the same message, a reporter from Al Jazeera is targeted specifically for his reporting on the alleged ransom paid in the prisoner exchange and for quoting a Taliban statement that kidnappings would continue against other coalition partners. Taliban propagandists are clearly paying attention to the international media coverage of their activities, in this case Al Jazeera’s English outlet. The statement denies that the “puppet” source quoted in the Al Jazeera story represents the IEA and charges the media with falsely reporting on the outcome of the crisis. The authors behind this message understand the strategic importance of the insurgency’s representation in the media and the poor representation they were given in the international press. Their complaints and targeted messaging never made it into larger circulation though.

Additionally, in another statement released shortly before the release of the hostages on August 30, the Taliban released additional details surrounding the South Korean hostage situation and the objectives of the insurgency in carrying out the kidnapping. While the delivery in this message was blunt and riddled with grammatical
errors, these themes touched upon show an understanding of strategic concerns that never come across in the media coverage. They seek to drive a wedge between the South Korean government, with whom they are “starving to maintain good ties” and the United States, blaming American imperialism for putting them in a situation where they had to attack South Korean citizens. They defend their actions as self-defense and as demanded by Islam and end the statement with “best wishes” towards the people of South Korea.

Elements within the insurgency understand the image being painted of them as “the most tyrannical people in the world” and “Afghanistan as a uncivilized country” and make attempts, however weak, to confront and change that image.

From a single event perspective, the Taliban have been unable to replicate the direct exposure that they received in the media from the South Korean hostage crisis. By nearly all other measures, the intensity of the conflict and the Taliban’s media campaign have substantially increased over the past three years. Kidnappings, attacks, coalition deaths, Afghan civilian casualties, IEA statements and overall IEA output have all increased. Despite this, the direct presence of Taliban spokesmen in the international media, approximated by the phrase-based ngram analysis highlighted above, has decreased since hitting its highest levels in the summer and fall of 2007.

While never reaching the levels driven by the South Korean hostage crisis though, insurgent representatives still have managed to maintain a presence in the international media in the years since. The frequency is highly variable from month to month though, as shown in Figure 8. The sharp rise in the summer of 2007 is not the only significant increase in this approximation of Taliban presence in the media. The summer and fall seasons of 2008 and 2009 and the early spring of 2010 all saw months of relatively
significant increases as well, all driven in large part by events on the ground in Afghanistan.

The increase during and shortly after the summers of 2008 and 2009 may be attributed in part to the general increase in overall level of violence on the ground during the summer fighting “season”. Insurgent attacks during the summer months, from May to September, increased from 344 in 2007 to 666 in 2008, nearly doubling.\textsuperscript{184} NATO ISAF casualties during the same period increased from 119 in 2007 to 159 in 2008, a 37% increase.\textsuperscript{185} The increase in 2009 was nearly as drastic, with attacks increasing to 1109 and ISAF casualties increasing to 252, increases of 67% and 58% respectively.

The summer 2008 media coverage of the conflict focused on the rise in violence and increasing boldness of Taliban forces. Article titles like “Ragtag Taliban Show Tenacity in Afghanistan” and countless reports of increasing casualty numbers on both sides drove the narrative of a determined yet unprofessional insurgent force intensifying the conflict through its sheer reckless boldness and willingness to sacrifice its fighters.\textsuperscript{186}

Taliban spokesman quotes in news stories during this time certainly contributed to this sense of wonton violence. Many of the citations serve only to confirm responsibility for suicide bombings, convoy attacks, hijackings, kidnappings, assassinations or armed attacks on NATO or Afghan government forces, with Taliban spokesmen Zabihullah Mujahid or Qari Yousuf Ahmadi doing so from undisclosed locations using satellite

\textsuperscript{184} Data downloaded from the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) Worldwide Incidents Tracking System (WITS) database. Attacks filtered for those located in Afghanistan and perpetrated by Islamic Extremist (Sunni) groups, which is the closest approximation available for the Taliban and associated insurgent groups operating in the country. \url{https://wits.nctc.gov/}

\textsuperscript{185} Casualty data from iCasualties.org. This data includes all known casualties in Afghanistan for all ISAF partner nations during this period.

phones. Exaggerated claims are made as to the number of ISAF forces killed or vehicles and aircraft destroyed. In certain cases, justification for the attacks is given, with the victims nationality or association with the Afghan government being the only specifics provided.

In certain cases, the lack of coordination within the movement comes through in the media coverage. In a September 2008 AFP article, an insurgent who identified himself as Safiullah Bilal tells journalists he is a Taliban spokesman from Farah province and comments on the abduction of 118 hostages in Eastern Afghanistan. In the same story, Yousuf Ahmadi, one of the regular Taliban Spokesman, counters these claims and reports that the group does not have a spokesman in Farah nor does he know Safiullah Bilal. Since Farah province is in the Western portion of the country and closest to the Southern region most commonly associated with the Quetta Shura Taliban, whom Ahmadi represents, it is less likely that Bilal belongs to the Haqqani Network or HiG. Whether he was acting independently or whether Ahmadi denied association to avoid connection to the hostage incident is unclear. What it reveals is a lack of central control of insurgent contact with the media.

In a rare instance of the Taliban messaging moving beyond acceptance of responsibility for attacks and criticism of foreign forces, an August 2008 article in The New York Times cited Zabihullah Mujahid in a description of Mullah Omar’s control of the Taliban. According to Mujahid, Mullah Omar “runs a shadow government, complete with military, religious and cultural councils, and has officials and commanders

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appointed to virtually every Afghan province and district, just as he had when he ruled Afghanistan”.188 This brief mention of the governance abilities of the insurgency is rare, despite its strategic importance to the Taliban’s ability to erode the legitimacy of the Afghan government and grudgingly win the acceptance of the Afghan population.

Taliban presence in the international and Western media in the summer of 2009 saw a similar focus on violence and insurgent attacks. Additionally, Taliban spokesmen were quoted in coverage of the Afghan election held on August 20, 2009. Their messages connected attacks to an overall strategy to disrupt the elections when talking with journalists. Leading up to the election, Taliban representatives confirmed their intent to attack polling stations to deter participation in the voting. Qari Yousuf Ahmadi told a reporter from The Australian that “We are using new tactics targeting election centres. If anyone is harmed in and around election centres, they will be responsible because we have informed them in advance”.189 In a near-contradiction though, an unidentified Taliban spokesman denied specific intimidation rumors that insurgents intended to cut off the purple, ink-stained fingers that would identify those Afghans who had voted in the election.190 Showing again a lack of cohesion or central control within the movement, at

least one report of voters getting their fingers cut off by militants in Kandahar emerged following the election.191

Most citations referred to violence surrounding the voting, while only occasionally discussing the strategic implications of the election and its role in the future of the country. At least one reference was made by Qari Yousuf Ahmadi to the elections being unfair and not transparent, but he then brought the discussion back to the theme of violence, vowing to increase efforts to sabotage the election because its lack of legitimacy.192 After accusations of fraud and the resulting international backlash forced a run-off between Karzai and his nearest opponent, Abdullah Abdullah, Qari Yousuf Ahmadi assessed the situation as “very good” for the insurgency, since the Taliban “want both of them eliminated”.193

February 2010 saw a particularly sharp increase in the number of mentions for Taliban spokesmen in the mainstream media, especially given that it was outside the normal seasonal period of increased fighting on the ground. At this time, the US Forces were focused on Southern Afghanistan, executing Operation Moshtarak, whose name means “together” in Dari. The operation was targeted at the village of Marjah in Helmand province, a Taliban stronghold prior to the operation. The capture, pacification and reconstruction of Marjah was promoted as an initial test of the new counterinsurgency strategy chosen by President Obama and executed by Gen. Stanley McChrystal.

The bulk of the Taliban citations in Western and international news stories were focused on getting the perspective of Taliban fighters and commanders on the ground prior to and during the execution of the operation. When reporting on this event, which had strategic and political importance to the war effort in Afghanistan and back in the US, journalists understandably turned to Taliban spokesmen for additional comment, as indicated by the increase in both absolute and normalized frequencies of citations of Taliban representatives. Here again, the emphasis was on ground combat and violence, with Taliban spokesmen denying gains made by NATO forces and providing their casualty counts and comments on the ongoing operation.

In contrast to the increase in Taliban representation in the media during Operation Moshtarak, the period of October to December of 2009, when President Obama was conducting his Afghan War strategy and policy review, saw a sharp decrease in the citations of Taliban spokesmen in the Western and international media. Additionally, this occurred during a particularly active month for IEA statements released on their website. With Obama’s strategy review nearing its conclusion, journalists stopped turning to insurgent representatives for their reporting, despite a continued increase in messaging output on the side of the insurgency. With the international community largely focused on the strategic decisions being made in Washington during this period, the focus shifted from the tactical realities on the ground to the story in the White House.

The Taliban’s own news and field reporting distributed on the Internet maintains the same focus on violence and armed resistance as their presence in the mainstream media, although it is does not fluctuate with season like the actual events on the ground or the traditional media that reports it. Figure 2, included earlier in this section, shows the
word counts of insurgent news messages and statements, respectively, from 2007-2010. The “news reports”, which are primarily newswire-type reports of insurgent attacks against NATO and Afghan government forces, dwarf the more strategic statements by sheer volume. While the word count data for IEA “news” does not provide anything more than output volume of attack claims by the insurgency, it does reveal a strong and steady increase form early 2009 to late 2010. The IEA “statements” on the other hand, which include messages from Mullah Omar and other Taliban leadership and discuss topics in much more depth with less focus on violence on the ground, are much less prolific with less overall increase in output over time.

A deeper look at the language used in IEA reporting on violent events shows a gradual change in terminology over time to correspond to that used in Western media outlets. Figure 11 below shows the change in terminology over time used to refer to IED attacks against NATO and Afghan government forces. While early in the period “landmine” – or more specifically “remote controlled landmine” – was the term of choice for the Taliban, they have shifted over time to terms more commonly used by the U.S. military and Western journalists, including “roadside bomb” and “IED”. The frequency of these terms is striking, as they and the reports that include them dominate the news reports being released by the insurgency.
Certainly, there are strategic advantages to highlighting attacks against NATO forces and the Afghan government and increasing instability in the country, as it builds on the war fatigue already plaguing Western populations who are tired of the loss of blood and treasure to a nearly decade long conflict in Afghanistan. The other side of this though is improving the viability of the Taliban assuming a long-term role in the governance of the country, making a negotiated withdrawal more realistic and palatable. This latter theme is absent from Taliban messaging. Only part of this is due to the ranks of the insurgency lacking the skills and knowledge to address this theme. The judicial and mediation role performed in many rural areas by Taliban forces is effective and often lacks the mass corruption carried out by the Afghan government, even if it is often brutal and driven by intolerant fundamentalism.

In addition to the Taliban media ranks placing such a strong emphasis on attack reporting, the Taliban’s presence in the media being so closely aligned with the theme of violence can be attributed in part to journalists seeking out a quick quote from insurgents to confirm responsibility and add an element of authenticity. While this is the most
significant presence of the insurgency in the international English language media, there are some cases of more strategic messages from Taliban leadership making their way into the traditional media.

In September 2009, the IEA released a message in the name of Mullah Omar with the lengthy title “Message of Felicitation of the Esteemed Amir-ul-Momineen (Leader of the Believers) Mullah Mohammad Omar Mujahid (May Allah preserve him) on the Occasion of Eid-ul-Fitré”. In his message, Mullah Omar addresses “all heroic Mujahideen, the pious people, the families of martyrs of the sacred frontlines of Islam and to all Islamic Ummah” on the state of the war in Afghanistan and the objectives of the IEA. On the same day, Reuters journalist Peter Graff published an article from Kabul titled “Taliban leader Mullah Omar takes aim at Obama”, summarizing the IEA statement and sharing its key points with a much wider distribution than the Voice of Jihad website could on its own.194

In his article, Graff focuses on Mullah Omar’s address to Western civilians, in which his statement tells them “not to be deceived by the assertions of Obama, who says the war in Afghanistan, is a war of necessity. The West does not have to wage this war”.195 The article then focuses on Mullah Omar’s calling into question the progress of the Western effort in the country over the previous eight years. Other than a few quotes though, the article spends as much focus on the unknown whereabouts of Mullah Omar and President Obama’s upcoming strategy decision and potential request for more troops.

195 Ibid.
There are a number of themes from the IEA statement that do not make it into the short piece from Reuters.

The full statement from Mullah Omar emphasizes the “rampant corruption in the surrogate Kabul administration” and “corrupt and stooge administration” put in place through illegitimate elections. He recognizes that “internal issues” exist among Afghans but that they can only be solved after the withdrawal of foreign forces from the country. Additionally, he makes the statement that:

Our goal is to gain independence of the country and establish a just Islamic system there on the basis of the aspirations of the Muslim nation. We can consider any option that could lead to the achievement of this goal. We have left open all options and ways towards this end. However, this will only be feasible when the country is free from the trampling steps of the invading forces and has gained independence.196

The wording of this statement subtly leaves open the option of negotiation and power sharing with the Kabul government, while still placing the withdrawal of foreign forces as a prerequisite. After again reiterating the demand for withdrawal of foreign forces and opening the idea of negotiation with Kabul, the statement moves on to address the post-NATO rebuilding and governance of the country. Again, from the statement:

The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan has distinctive and useful plans for the future of Afghanistan under the shade of the just social system of Islam after the withdrawal of the foreign forces. They include rehabilitation of social and economic infrastructure, advancement and development of the educational sector, industrializations of the country and development of agriculture.

While making claims in simplistic and awkward English about “distinctive and useful plans” for rebuilding and governing the country is a long way from actually having

the intent, plans or capacity to do so, this shows that the insurgency is aware of the strategic need to appear as a legitimate option for ruling the country. Even this short and simple narrative within the IEA statement is completely absent from the messaging that the IEA is able to convey through the mainstream media.

Mullah Omar’s statement on the eve of Eid ul-Fitr continues on to address the topic of corrupt elements within its members, highlighting self-accountability and purging of the ranks as an “everlasting and necessary obligation,” again showing a recognition of the international criticisms of the movement. Finally, the message directly addresses the relationship of the Taliban movement with the international community, stating that “the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan wants to maintain good and positive relations with all neighbors based on mutual respect and open a new chapter of good neighborliness of mutual cooperation and economic development.”. Indirectly distancing itself from al-Qaeda and its vision of a global caliphate, Mullah Omar here is effectively latching onto a nationalist theme and seeking legitimacy as a responsible nation-state government.

In another direct confrontation of the international criticisms of the movement, the statement decries the “black propaganda of the enemy media” that has “wrongly depicted [the Taliban] as a force being against education and women’s rights”. The Taliban’s treatment of women while in power in the 1990s was one of their behaviors that drew the most international criticism, and education, particularly among girls, has been one of the post-Taliban success stories often mentioned by those supporting the American intervention there. Here again, words and actual beliefs and behaviors can be dramatically different and there is no reason to believe a post-Karzai Taliban government
would behave any differently than a decade ago, but the realization exists and it has become an element of the organization’s strategic messaging and media operations.

In addition to the 2009 message mentioned above, Mullah Omar’s statements released on the Voice of Jihad website have been the focus of more mainstream media articles over the course of the conflict. In December 2007, the BBC picked up another statement released around the Muslim holiday of Eid ul-Fitr in which Mullah Omar vowed to continue fighting and challenged the futility of recent NATO efforts to capture a town in Southern Afghanistan. 197 Another statement addressing President-elect Obama was picked up by the New York Daily News in November 2008. 198 In December 2008, again on the eve of Eid ul-Fitr, another of Mullah Omar’s statements, this one urging Afghans to boycott the 2009 Presidential election, was mentioned on a number of relatively obscure Internet news sites. 199

Within the past year though, there have been instances of the tone taken towards IEA messaging in Western news stories changing. In an October 2010 Washington Post story titled “Taliban steps up propaganda war,” Ernesto Londono include a number of direct quotes from a September 2010 statement from the IEA titled “Message Of Felicitiation Of The Esteemed Amir-Ul-Momineen Mullah Mohammad Omar Mujahid,

On The Eve Of Eid-Ul-Fitr". What is new in this instance is the relative depth to which the statement from the Taliban is covered. Another story from the UPI around the same time picked up on the topic from the Post article and provided additional commentary.

The narrative in The Washington Post article is different and more nuanced in its approach towards the Taliban and its messaging than many articles from earlier in the war. An Afghan political analyst named Jelani Zwak is quoted saying that the Taliban’s propaganda has changed in recent years and that “they are not only talking about the occupation and civilian casualties. They are acting like an alternative to this government”. In the IEA statement, Mullah Omar spends two paragraphs on a section titled “regarding the upcoming system of the country,” in which he vaguely describes the role of Sharia, a non-discriminatory governing body for the country, the respect of women’s rights, the eradication of morality and injustice, and other similarly lofty goals that would seemingly make a Taliban government a legitimate and responsible party.

What is interesting in this Washington Post article is that it treats these themes within Omar’s statement as new, despite the fact that similar topics were included in Mullah Omar’s 2009 Eid ul-Fitr message described above. Additionally, while only two paragraphs of non-descriptive goals and statements are attributed to the Taliban’s future governance of an entire country, the Post article paints the statement as “a specific plan

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202 Londono, “Taliban steps up propaganda war.”
for leading the country”. This signals a potential shift in mainstream reporting on the Taliban’s messaging, with the focus away from violence and on the question of governance, regardless of how shallow it is, making it through to Western and international audiences through respected sources.

While the lengthier statements from the IEA, particularly those released in the name of Mullah Omar, are more successful at being picked up by Western journalists and written into stories, much of the content from the original messages is often filtered out in the process. While the November 2010 Washington Post article shows that some of the narrative in the Western media is shifting in recent years, the relatively infrequent presence of Taliban messaging in the traditional media is still dominated by violence and its image as an ideologically driven extremist group.

The above analysis makes the case that journalists from mainstream media, including Western and international outlets, are still firmly in control as the gatekeepers to the Western public. The relative presence of Taliban spokesmen in news stories aligns much more closely with the perceived news interests of Western public than with increasing insurgent media sophistication, casualty counts, Afghan political cycles, or anything else driven by the tactical reality of the conflict. As expected, traditional media news content, when it comes to quoting Taliban spokesmen, is shown largely through the lens of the foreign country driving the war, the United States.

While it does not have the granularity to address the impact of Taliban propaganda on the American public, the best available data on the general attitude of the public towards the war in Afghanistan is poll data. Gallup has been taking survey data on

203 Ibid.
popular opinion towards the war since shortly after it began in 2001. In 2006, they started asking the question “In general, how would you say things are going for the U.S. in Afghanistan?” In November 2010, Gallup conducted the tenth survey for this question, and the results show the overall trend in public opinion towards the war over the past five years. July 2009 was the last time that public opinion viewed the progress in Afghanistan as more positive than negative, but by November of 2009, this trend had reversed and responses were at their most negative. Interestingly, by November 2010, the last available survey period, positive responses had increased again, with only 45% saying things are going “moderately well” or “very well”, as opposed to 54% responding with “moderately badly” or “very badly”.

Again, the data from the Gallup poll are too general to make any assessments of the role of Taliban propaganda in the results. From a timing standpoint though, it is interesting to note that while still primarily negative, opinions towards the war have been relatively constant over the past five years and have actually improved in the most recent poll, despite the increasing levels of violence and insurgent attacks and Taliban online propaganda activity.

Regardless of quantitative presence in the international and Western English-language media, the Taliban have been unable to qualitatively take advantage of the access that they do have. As negotiations with the Taliban have been raised within the Western media and policy circles numerous times over the past four years, the Taliban could have arguably furthered its interests by making efforts to alter its image to one of

an actual and responsible partner that could successfully govern a post-NATO Afghanistan. Instead, the rhetoric has barely softened beyond the religious fervor and demand for the withdrawal of foreign troops. Additionally, the fact that a singular event like the South Korean hostage crisis can drastically impact the presence of the insurgency in the mainstream media shows the limits of its propaganda and voice on the international stage.

There are hints at a recognition among Taliban propagandists of the need for international legitimacy, in the form of outreach to neighboring countries and nationalist statements. As others have pointed out though, discussions of governance are largely missing from their messaging, despite the fact that in many ways to they have more successful governance capacity, at the local level, than the actual Afghan government. As noted above, vague notions of governance have begun entering some statements released by the IEA leadership over the past few years. Starting in late 2010, a number of Western journalists picked up on this trend and portrayed a stronger and potentially more legitimate insurgency in their discussion of the Taliban’s improving propaganda efforts. While these few articles are indeed anecdotal and cannot be claimed as representative of a greater trend, the placement in such a widely distributed outlet as *The Washington Post* is significant in recognizing potential early signs of a narrative shift resulting from Taliban propaganda efforts where most other efforts had failed in earlier years.

**Taliban Image Management**

Looking at the few examples of subtle change in the media coverage of the Taliban’s messaging shows that certain more sophisticated themes have made their way
into IEA propaganda in recent years. In particular, Mullah Omar’s messages on the Muslim holiday of Eid ul-Fitr appear to be the primary vehicle for discussion of the organization’s vision of a post-NATO governance concept, even though this vision is generally vague and focused primarily on the role of Sharia in that government. Despite these new themes gaining the attention of the Western press and potentially softening the prevalent brutal and unsophisticated image of the Taliban organization itself, there are few indications that the IEA has internalized this lesson and is making substantial changes in messaging.

Even though their messaging has included few statements that could improve its image as an organization working to improve its legitimacy and perception among the population, the Taliban have taken actions that, were they to be communicated effectively, could contribute towards this end. In July of 2009, The Quetta Shura Taliban leadership issued a code of conduct book to its forces operating in Afghanistan. A copy obtained by Al-Jazeera shows the code of conduct book to be 13 chapters in length with 67 articles of specific instructions defining the actions that Taliban insurgents can and cannot take.205 Titled "The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan Rules for Mujahideen", this code of conduct places a high importance on limiting civilian casualties, decrees that any “unofficial groups or irregular battalions” that refuse to join the Taliban’s formal leadership structure should be disbanded, and encourages the selective use of suicide bombing for important targets only.206

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206 Ibid.
A translation of the document provided by the NEFA Foundation shows that much of the guidance it provides could, if followed, consolidate a more unified and organized insurgency under the command of Mullah Omar.\textsuperscript{207} In a highly complex conflict environment where criminals can easily operate under the Taliban banner to seek protection from other insurgents, maintaining and controlling the movement’s image is extremely difficult, especially when attempting to do so from across the border in Pakistan.

In a June 2007 assessment of Taliban propaganda, Tim Foxley identified a previous Taliban effort to release a similar code of conduct.\textsuperscript{208} This earlier code of conduct, which had 30 points instead of 67, had a similar focus on controlling the behavior of the Taliban’s soldiers in the field, but it clearly did not have the impact that the organizations leadership hoped it would. Foxley pointed out a similar propaganda failure as that discussed here even back to 2007, noting that despite the release of the code of conduct, the insurgents “[had] not promoted or even referred to it before or since”.\textsuperscript{209}

While the creation and distribution of this code of conduct was clearly a major strategic undertaking, the issue of the 2009 version seems to have been treated in a similar manner to the 2006 instance, with no mention made in the IEA’s English-language statements as to the new rules governing the insurgent group. This is not unexpected, given that the Taliban has always been a secretive organization and

\textsuperscript{207} Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, \textit{A Book of Rules (Translation)}, Translation (NEFA Foundation).

\textsuperscript{208} Foxley, \textit{The Taliban’s propaganda activities: how well is the Afghan insurgency communicating and what is it saying?}, 14.

\textsuperscript{209} Ibid.
admission of the code of conduct could be conceived as recognition of the weakness that prompted its creation. Ironically though, this action taken by the insurgency’s leadership shows a level of organization and sophistication that could serve to bolster its image. The Western press and national security communities picked up on the code of conduct release despite the silence in the IEA propaganda and gave it a substantial amount of coverage. Rather than a sign of weakness, the Taliban missed what could have been an opportunity to build organizational legitimacy.

The IEA’s Arabic-language propaganda, which has historically had more depth of argument and discussion, has highlighted issues of governance beyond what appears in the English-language material. While the al-Somood magazine articles have the same focus on battlefield successes and insurgent control of territory, they also publish interviews with Taliban leaders and commanders that discuss more than attacks against NATO forces or criticism of the US and its allies.

In an October 2010 al-Somood interview with Maulavi Abdul Kabir, a member of the Leadership Council of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, the interviewer poses this question: “Your reaction to every initiative of peace is usually negative and, instead you emphasize on the use of force. Do you not think that this posturing portrays your weakness in the diplomatic [field]?" Kabir answers the question indirectly while returning to the persistent theme of demanding the withdrawal of foreign forces. Peace and reconciliation efforts, according to Kabir, are useful in leading the way towards an

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Islamic system of governance but are only possible after foreign forces have been withdrawn.

A later question in the interview focused specifically on questions of Taliban governance and administration in Afghanistan. Kabir answers the question with more depth and specificity than most other IEA releases, making reference to the structure of the former Taliban regime and stating that during that time “professional people were not disregarded but had participation in the government. Only Taliban and religious scholars were appointed to some higher slots. The rest were professional officials who were serving the country.” He then adds that, should the Taliban regain power, they would take the same approach again, with the prerequisite for governance being “piety and capacity”.

A November 2010 statement released by the IEA, this time in English, includes more focus on pragmatic and constructive political themes. In this statement, IEA spokesmen claim that 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 protection of the county against any harm of others and convince the world that the future Afghanistan will not harm them.” The context of the statement is in response to the NATO meeting in Lisbon, Portugal which discussed the extension of the mission there and the withdrawal deadlines for troops. In this context, making statements aimed at representing the Taliban as a legitimate organization capable of governing shows a recognition of the

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211 Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, “Response of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan as regards Lisbon Meeting.”
connection between NATO countries withdrawing from Afghanistan and the image of the Taliban as a legitimate negotiating partner.

Taking the concept of governance even further, a January 2011 article titled “The Islamic Emirate Of Afghanistan And Its Successful Administrative Policy,” again in the Arabic-language al-Somood magazine, dedicates a full-length article to discussion of the administrative structure used by the Taliban in the areas under its control.212 Written by Ikram Miyundi, an unknown member of the al-Somood production company, the article describes the religious legitimacy and credentials of the Taliban’s system for governing Afghanistan. It moves beyond the simple declaration that Sharia will be used to govern and discusses the administrative breakdown of the country, the methods by which disputes are resolved, the different leadership committees involved in governing, and the importance of selecting competent and specialized individuals to lead.

While originally published in Arabic in al-Somood, a translation was posted on the al-Emarah website’s English-language “weekly analysis” section and on theunjustmedia.com in late January 2011. On the al-Emarah website, the embedded social media element on the page showed that it had been “shared” 26 times by Facebook users. It is important to note though that here again the original publication was in Arabic, rather than English, with the English translation and publication occurring as a secondary action. While not all al-Somood articles are translated and published in English, the IEA did make the decision to do so for this one. Here again is another small sign of the

organization’s recognition of the strategic importance of these themes in their messaging to an English-speaking audience.

Despite this uncharacteristic focus on issues of governance and nation-state relations at the end of 2010 and start of 2011, the IEA statements released for February, March and April of 2011 show no similar statements or interviews. Instead, the messages have returned to the consistent themes of blaming NATO forces for causing civilian casualties, comparing the United States to the former Soviet Union, and repeating arguments expressed in the Western press criticizing American policy towards the war.

From a strategic perspective, there are potential reasons why the IEA has chosen not to further project a vision for governing Afghanistan, assuming it has the ability to do so. Stenersen makes the point that when the Taliban came to power in the 1990s, their ambition was not for governing the country but rather for ridding it of the corrupt warlords who were running it at the time. This theme of rooting out corruption has continued through to today and seems to be partly responsible for their lack of specificity on how the group would govern upon taking power. Stenersen argues that this may purposeful, in order to avoid specifying plans for post-NATO governance, since it could “sow splits in the movement”. This lack of governance discussion, according to Stenersen, “indicates that the ‘occupation discourse’ has far greater mobilizing power among potential followers, than the idea of resurrecting the Taliban state or bringing Mullah Omar back to power”.213

While the potential for divisions within the larger insurgency should it ever succeed in taking control of the country are certainly real and highly likely, the Taliban’s

The greatest obstacle to achieving its objective is the presence of foreign forces. A philosophical disagreement on government or administrative policy between power brokers in the insurgency is an issue with which they should be less concerned. The IEA’s constant focus on the withdrawal of foreign military support for the Karzai government shows their recognition of the strategic importance of this support. The escalating violence, increasing instability and failure of the Afghan government to deliver effective governance are all working to deteriorate Western public support for the war. Much of what stands in the way of public acceptance of accepting a renewed Taliban role in governing Afghanistan is the still strong image of a radical, fundamentalist movement that brutalizes women and once gave sanctuary to al-Qaeda.

The Taliban have shown an inability to craft messages that are more palatable to Western populations. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, while a very different organization from the Taliban in many ways, is an example of an Islamist group that has a much stronger understanding of the importance of controlling and shaping its image as it is conveyed to the Western world.

During the popular revolts that led to Hosni Mubarak’s overthrow in the Spring of 2011 following three decades years as the President of Egypt, concerns were raised in Western policy circles and in the media over the potential role of the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood in a post-Mubarak Egypt. Critics of the Brotherhood pointed to the fact that Ayman al-Zawahiri, Osama bin Laden’s deputy, was a former member of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. While the group had played a non-violent political role in Egypt for many years, the specter of an anti-American Islamist government in a critical Middle Eastern country drew a great deal of attention in Washington and other Western capitals.
Recognizing this, members of the Muslim Brotherhood were extremely careful not to give the impression that the popular revolution in Egypt was in any way an Islamist revolution. The Brotherhood withheld support for the uprisings until they had gained sufficient momentum, and even then the group deferred to the secular figure of Mohammed ElBaradei as the face of the movement.\textsuperscript{214} Essam El-Errian, a member of the guidance council for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, even wrote an op-ed piece for The New York Times titled “What the Muslim Brothers Want” in which he clearly stated the Brotherhood’s aim “to achieve reform and rights for all: not just for the Muslim Brotherhood, not just for Muslims, but for all Egyptians”.\textsuperscript{215}

Again, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the Taliban in Afghanistan are very different organizations with completely unique histories, ideologies and objectives. Most notably, the Muslim Brotherhood has by many accounts moved away from its violent Islamist past and embraced a new role as a peaceful political movement. From a Western perspective though, they both fall within the camp of Islamist movements and thus draw much of the same skepticism, despite their differences. While the Taliban defiantly throw their violent Islamist revolutionary rhetoric in the face of Western criticism, the Muslim Brotherhood recognizes the dangers of being labeled an Islamist movement and has sought to craft its image accordingly.

Ironically, one of the most thorough and accessible counter-narratives to the common image of the Taliban as a backward and uncompromising movement of religious

Fanatics has been the translated autobiography of a former Taliban official, Mullah Zaeef. His book, “My Life with the Taliban” was translated with the help of two Western journalists and published in 2010 by Columbia University Press. The book tells the story of the emergence of the Taliban and its rise and ultimate loss of control of Afghanistan through his own involvement with the movement from its birth.

Zaeef, who claims to be a neutral party at the time of its release, provides a humanized look at a secretive religious organization that seems to show no humanity in all of its other interactions with the world. Since the book itself follows Zaeef’s own life, including his imprisonment in Guantanamo Bay following the start of the current conflict, it does not provide much insight into the emergence of the current Taliban insurgency. In his story of the movement’s rise to power in the 1990s though, he paints a picture of a movement that tried to grapple with the challenges of governing a country that had seen nearly two decades of conflict. As an official in the Taliban government, Zaeef claims to have been responsible for successful improvements in Afghanistan’s industrial sectors, despite efforts by Iran and Pakistan to undercut it. He talks at length about the value of human life and gives a unique look into the cultural and historical richness of Afghan people, and he connect the Taliban to that history in direct opposition to the confrontational division between the two that often emerges in Western descriptions of the insurgency.

While Zaeef’s story is unverified and questionable in many cases, it shows the value of telling one’s story and developing a strong, human narrative. The Taliban’s standard information operations towards the English-speaking world, in the form of its statements and reports released on its website, completely miss this element of
communicating with the rest of the world. Zaeef’s biography does not excuse the brutality, past or present, of the Taliban in any way, but it will cause many who read it to consider the Taliban in a much more complex and nuanced light.

Once a member of the Taliban’s inner-circle, Zaeef shows that members of the Taliban do have the ability to tell a more compelling story than the insurgency has been able to so far. While he had the help of two Western journalists and glosses over many of the most controversial topics surrounding the Taliban’s history, shaping a narrative can have as much to do with fiction and perception as reality. While the IEA has shown signs of sharpening its message with more sophisticated themes that move away from its usual drumbeat of hyperbolic claims and sharp rebukes, the signs are fleeting.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Operating on the ground, the Taliban are able to navigate the complex Afghan social landscape 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.

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.

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 serious change through their own hyper-radicalization.²¹⁶

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

²¹⁶ Rid and Hecker, *War 2.0: irregular warfare in the information age*, 217.
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 an 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 a short 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.
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APPENDIX A

Basket of terms used to approximate discussion of civilian casualties:

civilian casualties
civilian casualty
civilians were wounded
civilians were killed
civilians killed
innocent civilian
innocent civilians
civilian lives
civilians died
civilian deaths
killing of civilians
loss of civilian lives
afghan civilian
afghan civilians
of civilian
on civilians

Basket for assessing the presence and activity of the Taliban as reflected in stories published by the Western and international the media:

taliban spokesman
taliban spokesmen
taleban spokesmen
taleban spokesmen
spokesman for the taliban
spokesmen for the taliban
spokesman for the taleban
spokesmen for the taleban
spokesman of the taliban
spokesmen of the taliban
spokesman of the taleban
spokesmen of the taleban
Mullah Omar said
taliban representative said
taleban representative said
the taliban said
the taleban said
taliban sources said
taleban sources said
APPENDIX B

The correlation coefficient was calculated using the Microsoft Excel function:

\text{CORREL}(\text{array1}, \text{array2})

where \text{array1} and \text{array2} are the two ranges of cells on which to calculate the correlation coefficient. The equation used by Microsoft Excel is as follows:

\[ \text{Correl}(X, Y) = \frac{\sum (x - \bar{x})(y - \bar{y})}{\sqrt{\sum (x - \bar{x})^2 \sum (y - \bar{y})^2}} \]

where \(X\) and \(Y\) are the data in \text{array1} and \text{array2}, respectively, and \(\bar{x}\) and \(\bar{y}\) are the sample means for \(X\) and \(Y\), respectively.
APPENDIX C

Below is the breakdown of specific provinces within each region in Afghanistan as used in this research. Within each region, multiple spellings are provided for many of the provinces. This was done because the IEA news reports often used several different spellings for each province or misspelled them altogether. The different spellings were determined manually by searching the news report corpus for ngrams of format “<name> province” or “province of <name>” and then inspecting the results alongside commonly accepted spellings of each of the provinces.

**East Region:**
Kunar
Kuar
Laghman
Nangarhar
Ningahar
Ningarhar
Nuristan
Nooristan
Noristan

**Southeast Region:**
Ghazni
Gahzni
Ghazi
Ghazin
Ghaznie
Ghaznio
Khost
Khos
Khust
Paktika
Paktya
Pakatia
Paktia
Paktika
Paktiya
Paktya
Zabul
Zabul

**Southwest Region:**
Daykundi
Daikondi
Hilmand
Helmand
Kandahar
Kandahr
Nimroz
Nemro
Nemrose
Nimroz
Uruzgan

West Region:
Badghis
Badgis
Baghis
Bamyan
Bamean
Bamian
Farah
Faraha
Ghor
Ghowr
Ghur
Gore
Hirat
Heart
Herat

Central Region:
Kabul
Kapisa
Kapissa
Logar
Lugar
Panjsher
Parwan
Parwaon
Wardak
Wardag

Northwest Region:
Balkh
Balk
Faryab
Fareab
Fariab
Jawzjan
Samangan
Sari Pul
Saripol
Sari Pol