

Changing the message: improving the prospects for conflict resolution in Afghanistan

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Cover photo: Five of former Taliban militants (in plain clothes) talk with Afghan Army official as they surrender their weapons during a reconciliation ceremony in Kandahar, Afghanistan, 05 January 2015. (EPA/Muhammad Sadiq)

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Executive Summary

A Taliban-led insurgency has grown in strength and confidence from faltering beginnings after the Taliban regime was ejected in late 2001. International efforts to achieve military victory have failed and opposition groups under the Taliban umbrella remain in the field. With the withdrawal of international military forces now well underway and the conflict largely unresolved, there is a high risk of the civil war intensifying in the years to come.

Peace talks have made little headway towards conflict resolution and the prospects for a political settlement continue to look distant – with neither side fully ready. The negative environment in media and other public information sources - communications, claims, announcements and propaganda – is significantly undermining the prospects for peace talks and reconciliation by creating distrust, disinformation and hostility. For talks to work, this messaging environment needs to be changed in order to transform the conflict.

Somewhere between the poisonous and damaging propaganda war and credible political dialogue there is an unexplored area of communication and information dissemination for the international community to investigate. It involves engaging with the opposition groups, including the Taliban, on political, social and economic themes that might guide, shape, coax and encourage them to engage more constructively.

Understanding what the various military and political groups want remains difficult and their communications hard to understand. But there are indicators of “reach out” on occasion and these should be engaged with intelligently and proactively by, for example, the United Nations, but also other neutral organisations.

A combination of non-confrontational messages and confidence building measures suggested in this report are intended to act, not as talks in their own right, but as a precursor to talks, to make talks more effective – and sustainable – when they do take place. Public, intelligent and sensitive discourse with the armed opposition groups should aim to guide them away from the language and deeds of violence and to engage more on political, social and economic issues.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Taliban, ISAF, messaging

Sammanfattning

Talibanregimen störtades från makten i Afghanistan år 2001 genom internationell intervention. Trots att talibanerna blev fråntagen makten växte det Taliban-ledda upproret snart i både styrka och självförtroende. De internationella insatserna i Afghanistan har inte lyckats säkra en militär seger och väpnade grupper som lyder under talibanerna är fortfarande aktiva. Fortsatt väpnad konflikt kopplat till tillbakadragandet av de utländska militära styrkorna innebär att inbördeskriget i landet riskerar att intensifieras under de kommande åren.

Fredssamtal har inte lett till några större framsteg. En politisk uppgörelse är fortfarande avlägsen – parterna är ännu inte redo. Det ofta negativa budskap som uttrycks i medier och andra öppna informationskällor – i form av påståenden, tillkännagivanden och propaganda – spär på misstro, desinformation och fientlighet och försvårar ytterligare möjligheterna för fredssamtal och försoning. Ett mer konstruktivt och försoningsinriktat samtalsklimat parterna emellan är en viktig förutsättning för att konflikterna i Afghanistan skall kunna lösas.

Det internationella samfundet kan göra mer för att hitta bättre sätt att kommunicera på. Budskap kan framföras på mindre konfrontativa sätt och därigenom tydligare stödja dialog och interaktion mellan parterna i konflikten – inklusive Talibanrörelsen – kring politiska, ekonomiska och sociala frågor, dialoger som i förlängningen skulle kunna leda till mer konstruktivt agerande.

Utmaningen är att det fortfarande är svårt att utläsa och förstå de olika militära och politiska gruppernas agendor och ambitioner. Det kan vara så att motståndets informationsspridning och signalering tolkas mer negativt än vad avsändaren avser. Samtidigt finns indikationer på att dessa grupper vid tillfällen försökt kommunicera och signalera en vilja till något annat än väpnat våld. Dessa försök bör bemötas på ett eftertänksamt och proaktivt sätt, av till exempel Förenta Nationerna och andra neutrala organisationer.

Denna rapport föreslår en kombination av icke-konfrontativ kommunikation och förtroendeskapande åtgärder som syftar till att främja mer effektiva och varaktiga samtal mellan de stridande parterna, när de väl äger rum. Öppen och eftertänksam diskurs bör syfta till att leda bort från ett våldsbejakande narrativ och agerande och istället betona nyttan av engagemang i frågor av politisk, ekonomisk och social karaktär.

Nyckelord: Afghanistan, taliban, ISAF, signalvärde, budskap

"A negotiated political settlement is a desirable outcome to the conflict in Afghanistan, but current talks with the Taliban are unlikely to result in a sustainable peace."

International Crisis Group, March 2012¹

"Let's open the minds of the Taliban."

Ahmed Rashid, Copenhagen, April 2013²

¹ International Crisis Group, 'Talking about Talks: towards a political settlement in Afghanistan', *ICG Asia Report No.221*, 26 Mar. 2012, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/221-talking-about-talks-toward-a-political-settlement-in-afghanistan.aspx>

² Rashid, A., 'Regional aspects of stability – what can we expect?', talk delivered at *DIIS Conference*, Copenhagen, 11 Apr. 2013, <http://www.diis.dk/sw128165.asp>

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1 Introduction

The international community has invested more than ten years and large resources in an attempt to help Afghanistan down the path to a sustainable democratic system and, as a result, develop resilience against the threats of re-emerging chaos. This community, with the growing assistance of the Afghan population, government and security forces, has confronted a Taliban-led insurgency that has also grown in confidence, capability and articulacy. The US-led military surge of forces over 2009 – 2011 was presented as the last chance to suppress the Taliban-led insurgency to an extent that would allow Afghan governance and security forces to secure the country. There were no guarantees for the success of the plan and it is increasingly being judged by a wide analytical constituency to have broadly failed to achieve its goals. However, even as ISAF withdraws, these ambitions and values remain and have been strongly espoused by the new Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani.

The Taliban, despite having suffered significant military pressure and casualties, still appear confident that they can outlast the international military presence and can regain control of Afghanistan once the internationals have left. The international community continues to press forward with their goal of reducing their military footprint and to fully transfer security responsibility to the Afghan government by the end of 2014.

The risk of the civil war re-intensifying in the period beyond 2015 looks increasingly plausible.³ It seems likely that external support for the Afghan government will be sufficient to prop up a central government regime but insufficient to enable anything resembling a conclusive military result against the Taliban. An inconclusive, multi-dimensional and protracted conflict would clearly be a highly undesirable outcome for Afghanistan, the region and the international community.

Although declarations of the importance of a political settlement with the Afghan insurgents are widespread, the international community and the Afghan government do not seem to be able to decide whether they should treat the Taliban as an enemy to defeat or to recognise them as a part of Afghanistan's political, economic and security landscape. This uncertainty is hindering the potential for talks. Even in 2012 and 2013, the US media was still full of articles discussing whether the US military is "winning" or "losing" and whether "victory" will ultimately ever be achieved.

³ 'Early withdrawal from Afghanistan would fuel civil war, warns Foreign Office', The Daily Telegraph, 20 Nov. 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/afghanistan/9691414/Early-withdrawal-from-Afghanistan-would-fuel-civil-war-warns-Foreign-Office.html>

Thus far, the prospect of a political settlement with the Taliban remains distant, confused and uncertain. And yet this is increasingly cited, by the Afghan government and the international community alike, as crucial to Afghanistan's future. But there is no evidence that Afghans are yet capable of leading the sought-after "Afghan-led" solution that the international community keeps claiming as the only way ahead for Afghanistan. There is lack of clarity regarding what the Taliban may or may not want.

Dialogue can at best be described as stalled, fragmented and incoherent, with many, including the US, appearing to insist upon terms that verge on "surrender" for the Taliban – that they should lay down their weapons, renounce Al Qaeda and agree to uphold the current constitution of Afghanistan, women's rights and human rights. The Afghan government and international community echo this. Other players, for example the United Nations – more neutral and with real experience of negotiating deals between warring Afghan factions – seem to be playing little significant part.

2 Defining the Messaging Problem

2.1 Research Question

Understanding the Taliban remains difficult because of their quite specific historic, cultural, social and religious origins, about which little is known. Communicating with them is therefore difficult, prone to misunderstandings and misperception and complicated by the ongoing conflict. As part of military and political activities designed to counter the Taliban, messages directed towards the Taliban from ISAF and the Afghan government are often designed to attack them; to ridicule, humiliate, contradict and damage in an informational, psychological and propaganda war. Planted messages (for example rumours of Mullah Omar's death, calls upon the Taliban to stop fighting) purporting to come from the Taliban leadership have caused short-term confusion within the Taliban leadership and between leadership and fighters but little long-term damage. This paper takes the position that such propaganda attacks have had little or no impact save to harden the Taliban's attitudes against the international community and against talks. The Taliban leadership see Western media as a part of this propaganda war.⁴

The paper intends to argue that, somewhere between the poisonous and damaging propaganda war and credible political dialogue, there is a whole unexplored area of communication that involves engaging with the Taliban on political, social and economic themes that might guide, shape, coax and encourage them to engage constructively. If they have better political, social and economic frames of reference before they go into talks, perhaps a settlement might be easier to achieve and be more sustainable?

Realistic expectations are crucial - much of this messaging environment cannot, or will not, be influenced in any way. But into this very negative reality new approaches are needed. My research question is thus:

Might there be better ways for the international community to use communication methods that can generate more political engagement and less armed confrontation from the Taliban?

There are several ways that the messaging and propaganda environment has influenced and continues to affect the overall situation in Afghanistan. To better understand what improvements are possible from the perspective of a responsible

⁴ Taliban statement, 'Remarks of the Spokesman of the Islamic Emirate Regarding the Fresh Rumors of the Western Media', *Jihadi website*, 18 May 2011, <http://theunjustmedia.com/Afghanistan/Statements/May11/Remarks%20of%20the%20Spokesman%20of%20the%20Islamic%20Emirate%20Regarding%20the%20Fresh%20Rumors%20of%20the%20Western%20Media.htm>

international community and where the unexplored and potentially fruitful areas of communication can be found, this paper is divided into four main analytical sections.

It will firstly look at a short *background to messaging* in the current conflict, in particular the role and effect of the propaganda war and the position and likely prospects for peace talks. It will then look at some of the key *dimensions to the messaging environment*. This will form the core of the report and will consider a selection of areas that might usefully contribute to a better framing of the conflict resolution environment. A *conclusions* section will pull together the main points from this analysis and will be followed by a *recommendations* section. This section will be aimed predominantly at key governments and non-government organisations and will advocate talking openly, impartially, calmly, accessibly and honestly to the Taliban. It will also suggest areas for further study.

2.2 Key Definitions

The report will be exploring some broad concepts and some complex clusters of actors and protagonists through the course of this report. It might be useful to set out a few general definitions. For the purposes of this report the term “messaging”, is defined thus:

“Communications, announcements, claims or statements emanating predominantly from directly involved protagonists: governments, insurgents and political groups, but also international agencies, NGOs, academic sources and even individuals. These are issued to, from or about the Taliban and contribute (intentionally or unintentionally) to influencing Taliban perceptions, capabilities or behaviour or influencing other parties in relation to Taliban capabilities or behaviour.”

This is a very wide study area within which propaganda activities are probably the largest single large subset, examples of which would include:

- a) Taliban propaganda websites
- b) Taliban night letters (handwritten and hand-delivered local communications from insurgent groups)
- c) Taliban interviews via media, TV, radio, internet
- d) United Nations (UN) statements regarding Taliban actions - reports on civilian casualties or other human rights violations
- e) US government statements about the Taliban
- f) Press articles on aspects of the conflict in Afghanistan
- g) Afghan government statements on progress of talks

- h) Human Rights Watch reports on human rights violations by the Taliban
- i) ISAF propaganda messaging, on, for example Twitter
- j) RUSI interviews with Taliban and former Taliban

There are several armed opposition groups engaged in armed operations against Afghan government and international forces: the Afghan Taliban, Hezb-e Islami Gulbuddin (HIG) and the Haqqani network. Others (including the Pakistani Taliban, Lashkar-e Taiba and Al Qaeda) have smaller roles and Afghanistan features as much less of a priority in their activities. When the report refers generally to insurgents that operate a military capability inside Afghanistan, it will employ the term “Armed Opposition Groups”, or AOG. The Afghan Taliban are the most powerful and prominent armed opposition group operating within Afghanistan. They are headed by Mullah Omar and a central leadership command believed to be based in Quetta, in Baluchistan, and known as the “Quetta Shura”.

Unless stated otherwise, the report is concerned with means of engaging with the Afghan Taliban only and will use the term “Taliban” to refer to them. Mullah Omar and the Quetta Shura remain the insurgency’s political and military “centre of gravity” in relation to Afghanistan: HIG are a small, almost peripheral group and the Haqqani network, based in south-eastern Afghanistan and western Pakistan, are understood to be loyal to Mullah Omar. The report makes the broad assumption, therefore, that, were the Afghan Taliban to make significant changes in their political, social or economic direction, be it policy changes, dialogue, peace deals, cease-fires, wider reconciliations or other forms of engagement, the other armed opposition groups will either fall in line with Mullah Omar and the Quetta Shura, or be significantly marginalised.

There are several groupings at the international level that have bearing on the current situation in Afghanistan, including: NGOs and aid agencies, the United Nations, neighbouring countries, NATO and ISAF. The report shall refer to these as such in the course of the report or will use the term “international community” as a generalisation where addressing a group including one or more of these bodies. The prime focus of the report’s attention from the perspective of analysis and recommendations will be towards these groups, with a very strong hint that the United Nations could look to take the lead.

2.3 Methodology and Sources

This will be a qualitative case study looking at one country only. Efforts towards the resolution of the conflict inside Afghanistan are of intrinsic interest to the international community in their own right. But the conclusions from this report may be of wider value. Many internal conflicts across the world might benefit

from a re-evaluation of how communications and directed political and military messaging impact upon the conflict.

This report will cut across several conflict themes – insurgency and counter-insurgency combat, the use and effectiveness of propaganda, conflict resolution and the role of the media. This makes navigation through these analytical waters somewhat complicated but this cannot be helped. It is the intention that the report represents no more than an initial exploratory case study to probe this gap between the messages of propaganda and the messages of peace talks and that the report's final recommendation will attempt to suggest areas for further analytical focus.

The report makes use of an extensive range of primary and secondary sources, with the latter forming the bulk of the material. Most of this resides inside the author's own personal computer database and has been collected and compiled over approximately a decade of study of Afghanistan. Most of the data has not, therefore, been compiled specifically for the purpose of this report, but it has been consistently directed towards the broader issue of the study of the current and possible future political and military condition of Afghanistan. As such, it is a highly relevant resource, containing interviews, photographs, video, media, internet, academic papers, conference reports and surrounding discussions, historic works, government, military and NGO reports and analysis. Most of the specific targeted research was conducted via this resource, books, journals and the internet.

The report also makes use of observations, interviews, discussions and field trips from the author's own time spent on the ground in Afghanistan. In 2006 and 2011 the author was able to observe and take part in some of the debates about the role and effectiveness of Taliban and ISAF propaganda activities. This has all informed the contextual understanding and analysis. Stake uses the term "triangulation" to describe the process of using diverse sources from different directions to permit a more coherent and plausible "location" of the analysis.⁵ The concept appeals as an explanation for the treatment of sources here.

Each particular source has strengths and weaknesses, particularly where reliability and accuracy are concerned and the report attempts to allow for this in the analysis. The Taliban present a vision of the conflict very different to ISAF or the Afghan government or different groups of the population. The conflict in Afghanistan – like many conflicts – is as much about perceptions as it is battle casualties and the taking and holding of ground. This report makes regular use of media reports, sources and outlets, even though reliability is more open to question. This is for several reasons. Accessing reliable information is difficult and, in the judgement of this report, many of the journalists quoted here routinely

⁵ Stake, R., *The Art of Case Study Research*, (Sage Publications: California, 2005), pp.107-116.

produce high quality, well researched analysis, having crucial access to events and personalities. They have a long-term engagement in, and in-depth understanding of, Afghanistan. Other times, the tone of media reporting gives a sense of the “multiple realities” being created (intentionally and unintentionally) in and around Afghanistan – for example the evolution of the messaging and propaganda environments. This is all integral to a qualitative case study of this sort, even if it means, as per Stake, “New puzzles are produced more frequently than solutions to old ones”.⁶

The risks of my own personal bias must be acknowledged. The author has periodically been involved in Afghanistan in various capacities. Although not intentionally supporting policy lines from any government or non-government organisation, bias might justifiably be pointed to in the specific reports, papers and quotes chosen to include in the report and those (by far the bulk of my data set) that are excluded. There is no guard against this other than to declare it at the start and point to Stake’s defence: “Subjectivity is not seen as a failing needing to be eliminated but as an essential of understanding”.⁷

2.4 Line of Argument and Reading the Report

This report postulates that the messaging environment – the tone, style and content – is working against the prospects for the sort of meaningful and sustainable dialogue with the Taliban that might achieve a sustainable peace settlement in the country. It is driven by agenda, propaganda, misinformation and mistrust. This is poisoning the well for understanding, trust and constructive dialogue.

The recommendations offered here will not, strictly speaking, be intended to get the Taliban “to the table”. They are more concerned with enabling more a creative dialogue once protagonists get to the table by reshaping the content and style of messaging to develop confidence, understanding and trust *before, during and after* dialogue.

The report will propose ideas for creating a more constructive communications environment for all sides before, during and after dialogue and helping the Taliban to lead themselves towards greater political discourse and engagement and away from the unproductive and damaging language of conflict. The goal should be, through dialogue and discourse, to give the Taliban opportunities to shape themselves into a non-insurgency group or at least to take steps towards this objective without anyone talking of winning or losing and without anyone feeling resentful and humiliated.

⁶ Stake, R., *The Art of Case Study Research*, (Sage Publications: California, 2005), p.45.

⁷ Stake, R., *The Art of Case Study Research*, (Sage Publications: California, 2005), p.45.

3 Background

3.1 The conflict and the messaging environment

Since their forcible removal from power by a combination of Afghan and international forces in late 2001, the Taliban have slowly evolved into a powerful and effective insurgency force. From fragmented beginnings, they developed various means of communicating and supporting a propaganda campaign intended to turn the Afghan population against foreign military forces and the “puppet” Afghan regime of President Karzai at home and rally support to their cause abroad. They now use a range of media, ranging from “night letters” and face to face dialogue at the local level, through to press, TV and radio interviews and the internet.

Of particular note (for an organisation known at one point for its rejection of modern technology) has been the embracing of the internet, mobile phones and social media. The international dimension of their media reach-out has slowly grown in importance for the Taliban, but has always been weak because of a poor understanding of the wider world, their uncompromising stance and the lack of clarity and contradiction in their messages.⁸ Too often, the medium used has drawn the analytical interest but less often the message content itself.

3.2 The Propaganda War

Despite many statements to the effect that a political solution is the only real way forward for the country, the international community has, through ISAF, put much of its effort and emphasis on military solutions supported by an aggressive messaging campaign with many faces: “propaganda”, “information operations (IO)”, “hearts and minds”, “psychological operations (PsyOps)” and, most recently, “Military Information Support Operations (MISO)”. Much effort has been put into attacking, ridiculing and otherwise undermining the Taliban. In terms of the outcome of this “war of messages”, the effectiveness of the results has been hard to judge. In previous analysis, together with time spent within the ISAF headquarters, this author reached the conclusion that ISAF was struggling to measure the impact of both ISAF and Taliban propaganda campaigns, leaving it difficult to get a sense of where best to apply resources.

⁸ Foxley, T., ‘The Taliban’s propaganda activities: how well is the Afghan insurgency communicating and what is it saying?’, *SIPRI Project Paper*, June 2007.

It is worth quoting a section of the findings of a recent RAND study commissioned by the US Marine Corps to investigate the effectiveness of psychological operations in Afghanistan from 2001 – 2010:

“If the overall IO mission in Afghanistan is defined as convincing most residents of contested areas to side decisively with the Afghan government and its foreign allies against the Taliban insurgency, this has not been achieved. Even when USMIL IO and PSYOP take all the right steps, message credibility can be undercut by concern among Afghans in contested areas that their own government, widely perceived as weak and corrupt, will not be able to protect them from vengeful Taliban...some public opinion surveys suggest that both the Taliban and U.S. and NATO forces are viewed negatively...the most-notable shortcoming has been the inability to effectively counter the Taliban propaganda campaign against U.S. and NATO forces on the theme of civilian casualties, both domestically and internationally. Nonetheless, it should be stressed that this Taliban propaganda success does not translate into widespread popular support for the Taliban movement. On the contrary, most polls indicate that the great majority view the Taliban negatively, which suggests that their messaging has not achieved all of its objectives either.”⁹

Perhaps a better way of framing the struggle with the insurgency in Afghanistan is to present the desired outcome as one of enabling the reshaping of the Taliban movement out of its current “insurgency” form and into something that is better able to constructively re-engage in Afghan society without any group being humiliated and opening up longer-term possibilities of a wider, genuine, reconciliation in the years to follow.

3.3 Peace talks – problems and prospects

But there is much uncertainty and even paralysis brought about by the two year transition period as ISAF scales down and prepares to leave. There is an atmosphere somewhere between “wait and see” and fear and uncertainty about the process for Afghans, insurgents and the international community alike. As a result of these issues, it seems that there is still no real agreement on what is to be discussed in what is still very much “talks about talks”. However, there is a real need for many groups, for different reasons, to be seen to be engaged in meaningful contact and to be making progress. We should be cautious, therefore,

⁹ Munoz, A., ‘U.S. Military Information Operations in Afghanistan: Effectiveness of Psychological Operations 2001 – 2010’, RAND National Defense Research Institute, 2012, <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG1060.html>

of reading too much progress into the US, Afghan and Pakistani statements and, at the very least, manage our expectations towards a timeframe of years.

Although it still remains difficult to give a confident assessment of progress and prospects for the future, it seems clear that prospects are currently assessed very negatively. At a conference in Copenhagen in April 2013, internationally-recognised Afghanistan experts, Ahmed Rashid and Thomas Ruttig were very downbeat, suggesting that “talks about talks” were still the best that had been achieved and that there was still no evidence that significant dialogue was going to be achieved any time soon.¹⁰

Judging the progress of such activity as we have seen poses many analytical challenges. It is highly likely that other contacts are necessarily taking place far from the public gaze. But, even with all this activity in mind – one to one contacts, use of intermediaries, bold statements from regional and international communities, offices supposedly being established and Taliban appearances at academic conferences – it is hard to escape the conclusion that little of tangible value has been achieved. In January 2013, the British newspaper, *The Guardian*, reported:

“There are no significant peace talks under way with the Taliban, the US ambassador to Afghanistan has said, despite years of western and Afghan government efforts to broker a political end to the decade-long war in the country, and some recent signs of progress. James Cunningham, the US ambassador in Kabul, described reconciliation as ‘a process that hasn't even really begun’, although he added that one of Washington's goals was ensuring ‘at least the beginning of a serious process’.”¹¹

Whatever is hoped for with talks and however desirable is the process, this blunt statement from Cunningham probably most accurately sums up the situation. Numerous problems are suggested when we consider the current “process”. There are many different actors representing many different groups and many different agendas – the US, the Afghan government, the High Peace Council, the Pakistani government, insurgent groups (including both Taliban and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar’s Hezb-e Islami), the United Nations and Afghan political and ethnic groups inside and outside of the Afghan government. Many strands of contact appear to be taking place simultaneously and without coordination. There is no clarity on what is to be discussed and no clarity on who is speaking for whom. Many of the terms employed in the discourse look as if they are being

¹⁰ Rashid, A. and Ruttig, T., talks delivered at *DIIS Conference*, Copenhagen, 11 Apr. 2013, <http://www.diis.dk/sw128165.asp>

¹¹ Graham-Harrison, E., ‘Taliban peace talks are not under way, says US ambassador to Afghanistan’, *The Guardian*, 17 Jan. 2013, http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/jan/17/taliban-afghanistan-us-peace-talks?CMP=twl_gu.

misunderstood and misused: e.g. talks, ceasefire, re-integration, reconciliation, power-sharing.

In conclusion, therefore, the main problems with dialogue at present can be summarised thus:

- a) Above all, neither side is fully ready. There is no stalemate situation that the Afghan government or the Taliban recognise on the battlefield sufficient to push them to the table
- b) Too many actors with too many agendas
- c) Unrealistic, artificial and high risk demands to achieve a “settlement” before 2014 – in particular, the US wanting a simplistic “mission accomplished” victory statement
- d) Uncoordinated communication
- e) No clarity regarding who is to talk and what is to be talked about
- f) No confidence or trust – media and propaganda strands are contributing to this
- g) Limited understanding of the position of the other

There are no obvious and immediate solutions here, but a critical appraisal of the messaging environment and a reworking of key message strands and style, together with some initiative and responsibility taken by the wider international community, might offer the possibility for understanding, discourse and dialogue to develop and even flourish.

4 Current Messaging Dimensions to the Afghan conflict

4.1 What do the Taliban want?

In spite of much analytical effort to study the Taliban's thinking, it is still probably fair to say that little is understood about the goals, agendas and plans of the Taliban. In April 2013, recognised Afghanistan and Taliban expert, Thomas Ruttig, noted some particular problems complicating dialogue prospects specifically and international understanding of the Taliban overall. There was no official Taliban political wing and their communications were often opaque, hard to source and difficult to understand. There is no official manifesto, making necessary a trawl through their many short messages and edicts. Even only the most generic of minor statements from the Taliban, such as "we want an inclusive Afghanistan" have to be taken as progress of sorts¹²

At a more recent conference of recognised international Taliban expertise, the conclusion was much the same. What remained as a theme throughout, was how little was still known and understood about the Taliban, even 20 years after the movement emerged. Rigorous academic research was difficult for a range of reasons - security problems, difficulty of accessing individuals, cultural and a lack of written information. But, perhaps of some value was the guidance offered on engaging with the Taliban - personal relations mattered, establishing a rapport, building working relations and trust. Framing the issue is important and deciding *how* to talk about something before deciding *what* to talk about. Raised expectations should be avoided and a major reversal of progress should not signify the end of talks.¹³

But maintaining the insurgency at or around current levels seems to be absorbing most of the armed opposition's concentration and resources, seemingly at the expense of consideration of about wider strategies for political, social and economic future of Afghanistan. Reports of internal divisions within the non-monolithic insurgent group points to some level of disagreement between "fighters" and "talkers", but, as with most Taliban issues, information is opaque at best.¹⁴ Judging the Taliban by their deeds and words, however, it still seems

¹² Ruttig, T., 'A political solution with the Taliban: is it possible?', comments made, *DIIS Conference, 'Afghanistan towards 2014'*, Danish Institute of International Studies, 11 Apr. 2013.

¹³ Author's notes, *DIIS Conference, 'The Taliban and Afghanistan – Beyond 2014'*, Danish Institute of International Studies, 27 Nov. 2013.

¹⁴ Chaudhuri, R., Farrell, T., Lieven, A. and Semple, M., 'Taliban perspectives on Reconciliation', *RUSI paper*, Sep. 2012.

quite clear that those favouring continued fighting have the upper hand within the movement.

When the Taliban do attempt to address political issues, their statements are limited and simplistic. But, crucially, there are periodic attempts to elaborate on issues beyond conflict that might offer opportunities for engagement with the Taliban. In July, 2011, a Taliban article entitled “Rethinking Afghanistan” was released.¹⁵ It carried seven short Taliban suggestions for solving “the Afghan imbroglio”:

- a) “...the main actors should stop the blame-game of calling the Mujahideen as terrorists...”
- b) “...Afghans should be given their right of independence as enshrined in the UN Charter.”
- c) “The Islamic Emirate should be recognized as a political and military power...”
- d) “The Afghans should be given their right of self-determination to form an Islamic government as per the aspirations of the people of Afghanistan”
- e) “The Americans and all foreign invading forces should seek a face-saving exit from Afghanistan in understanding with the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.”
- f) “The regional countries should create an environment of cooperation and trust with the Islamic Emirate based on common grounds of national interests of all neighbors.”
- g) “As a responsible party and as a proven military and political force, the Islamic Emirate will abide by its commitments to stability of the region following the withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan.”

A more recent Taliban statement, made in France in December 2012 at a rare appearance by Taliban representatives in Europe, stated support for a constitution and rights for all Afghan ethnic groups – and Afghan women – and the importance of an all-inclusive government.¹⁶ It talks about the need for a “clear framework for peace” and the problems caused by “poisonous propaganda”. They reject of the current insistence by the international community and the

¹⁵ Taliban statement, ‘Rethinking Afghanistan’, *Shahamat website*, 28 July 2011, <http://theunjustmedia.com/Afghanistan/Statements/July11/Rethinking%20Afghanistan.htm>

¹⁶ Taliban statement, ‘Text of speech enunciated by Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan at research conference in Paris’, *Shahamat website*, 24 Dec. 2012, <http://shahamat-english.com/index.php/paighamoona/28777-text-of-speech-enunciated-by-islamic-emirate-of-afghanistan-at-research-conference-in-france>

Afghan government that the Taliban surrender weapons, and accept the constitution. By Taliban standards, this is a long and detailed piece, but, time and again, key details are overlooked – the role of Sharia, who would actually *rule* the country and by what means, if any, might the Afghan population be able to represent their views.

The conclusions for this section are that the Taliban still struggle to articulate what they want. They probably do not fully understand what they want, beyond simplistic, one line, headlines. They are not clear on detail and are predominantly focused on jihad: it is possible, indeed common, to find extremely aggressive statements focused on violence mixed in and around these still rare political messages. To some extent, they probably believe their own propaganda. They have argued in the past that they are at war and that issues such as Al Qaeda, women's rights and drugs can only be addressed once the war is over. In a 45 minute pre-recorded radio phone-in interview with the BBC in November 2008, a prominent Afghan Taliban spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahid fielded a range of questions, mostly by avoidance or denial:¹⁷

Q: Would you allow al-Qaeda back in to Afghanistan if you were in power?

A: We cannot talk about that now, we are at war.

Q: What are your views on drugs?

A: We have never got money from drugs, we will never use drug money, we are against poppy.

Q: What about education for women?

A: Now we are not in power. When we are in power we will decide after looking at conditions at the time.

Q: Are there any scope for negotiations with the Taliban?

A: Foreign troops must leave first and then talks can take place.

Although specifics are evaded, this is still probably a good broad representation of the views of the Taliban leadership. Other considerations - the political, social and economic – therefore appear as a low priority for the Taliban. Their understanding of the wider world, the practicalities and necessary pragmatism of governance and the wishes of the Afghan population are limited. This certainly clouds and complicates options for dialogue, but, amidst the wealth of Taliban discourse on violence, there are at least enough indications to suggest that the Afghan government, the international community and the Taliban would benefit

¹⁷ Author's notes taken from a radio broadcast, BBC World Service, World Have Your Say interview with Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid, 13 Nov. 2008, <http://worldhaveyoursay.wordpress.com/2008/11/13/on-air-the-taliban-answer-your-questions/>.

from developing political, social and economic discourse. Non-confrontational messaging engagement and confidence building measures might help to pull the Taliban forward into a better position for constructive dialogue.

4.2 Propaganda War – poisoning the well...

The Taliban’s propaganda campaign has been met head-on by that of ISAF, with each trying to weaken and undermine the resolve of the other through claim and counter-claim. There are many aspects to the media war, but a vicious cycle of messages and actions are greatly damaging the prospects for dialogue in a number of ways:

- a) Western intelligence agency attempts to take the Taliban website offline.¹⁸
- b) Western intelligence agency attempts to plant rumours within the Taliban leadership and communications networks.¹⁹
- c) Afghan government spokesmen blaming Taliban for an explosion without waiting for evidence.
- d) Taliban making use of communications technology to allow speedy and ill-considered claims and denials.
- e) Taliban making grossly distorted claims about casualties and other events.
- f) Taliban denying incidents or stating that they do not kill civilians.
- g) ISAF and the Taliban communicating directly to each other via social media to contest battle statistics and trade insults.
- h) International, media or government statements, reports and speculation about talks, the progress of talks and revealing information about Taliban negotiating positions.

These have the effect of ensuring that genuine attempts for any side to “reach out” are treated suspiciously as propaganda and ignored. It becomes harder to establish good intentions, to get accurate information or to generate understanding.

Two examples might briefly suffice, one obvious and one perhaps less so, of intentional and unintentional damage to the messaging environment. Particularly

¹⁸ LWJ Staff, ‘Taliban website hacked for 3rd time in a year’, *The Long War Journal*, 26 Apr. 2012, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/04/taliban_website_hack.php#ixzz2RSjotU4d

¹⁹ ‘Taliban accuse US of hacking phone, website’, *CBS News*, 20 July 2011, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/taliban-accuses-us-of-hacking-phone-website/>

in 2011-12, the Taliban and ISAF engaged in a heated flurry of exchanges via the social media network, Twitter, which limits the length of permissible messages to 140 characters.²⁰ Taunts, jibes and other provocative comments were traded, often while a security incident was taking place. There is no evidence that this sort of activity achieves anything other than a waste of resources and a worsening environment for any real dialogue.

The second example is a report issued by the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) who conducted interviews with two former members of the Taliban and two Afghans with close relations with the Taliban.²¹ The intention was to try to establish whether the Taliban were genuinely interested in dialogue, what they might want from it and what their thoughts were on various issues, including relations with Al Qaeda and aspects of conflict resolution. The report claimed that the Taliban leadership were ready to renounce Al Qaeda, were open to a continuing US military presence in Afghanistan and detailed Taliban conditions for a ceasefire. This earned a very hostile rebuke from the Taliban:

“The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan strongly condemns this malicious and strictly propaganda based report of the said think-tank and declares it has no plans of prolonging the American invasion of Afghanistan even for a single day. Our religion, national interests, national pride and values forbid us from making such illegitimate deals or agreeing to the continuation of invasion or accepting their revolting presence due to fear and our own safety.

We believe that this report by the so called think-tank, based on the opinions of a few anonymous faces, is fabricated and consider it the direct work and move of the intelligence circles prepared for its people and for raising the moral of its defeated troops. In this regard, we ask all media outlets to contact the official spokesmen of Islamic Emirate for verification before publishing such fabrications for propaganda purposes so to affirm their impartiality and negate deceiving the masses.”²²

²⁰ Farmer, B., ‘Kabul attack: Isaf and Taliban press officers attack each other on Twitter’, The Daily Telegraph 14 Sep. 2011,

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/afghanistan/8763318/Kabul-attack-Isaf-and-Taliban-press-officers-attack-each-other-on-Twitter.html>

²¹ Chaudhuri, R., Farrell, T., Lieven, A. and Semple, M., ‘Taliban perspectives on Reconciliation’, RUSI paper, Sep. 2012,

http://www.rusi.org/downloads/assets/Taliban_Perspectives_on_Reconciliation.pdf

²² Taliban statement, ‘Remarks of spokesman of Islamic Emirate regarding report published by Royal United Services Institut’, *Shahamat website*, 11 Sep 2012, <http://shahamat-english.com/index.php/paighamooona/28800-remarks-of-spokesman-of-islamic-emirate-regarding-report-published-by-royal-united-services-institut>

The point here is that even well-intentioned and neutral sources that genuinely and carefully attempting to represent the views of the Taliban (or those close to the Taliban) in an academic format can possibly cause a brake on dialogue by forcing the Taliban into a corner and exposing them. The end result is that the Taliban is hostile, paranoid and suspicious about media, messaging and the international community's motives and use of "media trickeries" when it communicates.²³

4.3 Constructive messaging as a pre-cursor to talks

The current messaging environment – shaped by national and international political and military groups, the media, intelligence agencies, NGO reports, academic papers - is not conducive to laying a path for constructive dialogue and is indeed "poisoning the well" in many ways. But a constructive messaging environment can be a crucial pathway towards a future successful dialogue. Although many of the participants in this messaging environment will remain independent and unlikely to align their actions and messages there are key actors in the messaging domain (the UN in particular) that can make a real difference.

We have seen how the Taliban have become avid consumers of international media and often react in response to media messages. Their responses are usually negative or defensive in tone. Neutral elements of the international community, probably beginning with the United Nations, should now start talking to the Taliban in ways that can recognise, encourage and develop political aspects of Taliban engagement, while attempting to minimise their language of violence and extremism.

This would offer a best-case development for those broadly supportive of the current direction of the Afghan government, particularly in a media environment that "the West" struggles to control. This approach would not be political dialogue as such, but it would act as a pre-cursor to facilitating realistic and sustainable dialogue. It would continue over the long-term, irrespective of developments on the ground and supercede some of the aggressive language of ISAF. The more the Taliban can be encouraged to engage in any form of political discourse, the better chance they will move away from the language of conflict and the greater the chance that, when genuine dialogue takes place, the results might be more positive and sustainable. But new messaging will need to go further than addressing the Taliban alone; narrow and unconstructive views are also evident within the international community, the Afghan government and key political opposition figures of non-Pushtun ethnic groups. The emphasis should

²³ LWJ Staff, 'Taliban website hacked for 3rd time in a year', *The Long War Journal*, 26 Apr. 2012, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/04/taliban_website_hack.php#ixzz2RSjotU4d

be on the practical, pragmatic and achievable rather than the theoretical and ideal.

It will remain important to maintain (and ideally, expand) analysis of what the Taliban are saying and how. It is often difficult to “tease out” issues, themes and trends in Taliban thought from within the more aggressive Taliban rhetoric associated with jihad and conflict. The goal should always be to understand why they are saying what they say and to identify areas where they might be "reaching out" into dialogue or might benefit from assistance in reaching out. The Taliban should be helped to help themselves in terms of constructing and articulating their plans, goals and place in Afghan society. The Taliban are now extremely “media aware”: they direct messages to particular audiences, they look closely at – and respond to – all manner of commentary, reports and accusations directed against them. They are very quick to get messages out and employ a wide variety of media.

But their public responses still routinely betray a worryingly deep lack of understanding or ability to articulate on some fundamental issues:

- a) what they want,
- b) what the Afghan population might want and how the population might want to represent their views,
- c) how they might achieve goals in ways beyond military victory,
- d) what areas in which they might be willing to compromise,
- e) social, political and economic matters.

This suggests that the Taliban should be listened to when they communicate on these issues and supported to do so. Taliban messages, particularly official messages from website or spokesmen, need to be engaged with in a firm, calm and neutral fashion. Groundless accusation and propaganda need to be stopped. Clear Taliban violations of human rights must continue to be exposed and challenged.

The Taliban need to be guided away from the language of violence and into better defined social, political and economic discourse. Policy recommendations must be built around the development of intelligent and sensitive questioning by organisations that the Taliban have listened to in the past, have a good understanding of Afghanistan and are known for neutrality. Bringing in individuals and organisations that the Taliban know and trust could be crucial - the United Nations, the Red Cross, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation. In this respect, although policy recommendations aimed at the international community certainly fit with long-articulated Western goals, this is not a formal “policy initiative” for ISAF or NATO intended to defeat the Taliban. It is probably desirable to keep the "usual players" away from such messaging

activity, for example, ISAF and the US, as they may provoke more than they solve.

The Taliban, therefore, must be, not so much challenged and confronted, but encouraged to express their thoughts on issues of unemployment, of reconstruction, the economy, public health, education, political representation, governance, security and the future. What vision do they have for Afghanistan? Perhaps a core justification to the Taliban for these questions would be that these are key issues that the Afghan people are most concerned about. How would the Taliban plan for a future of supporting the people?

Although guiding the Taliban in their discourse is important, wherever possible the Taliban should be allowed to take the lead as they develop and express their thinking. But, whether they come up with the initiative or not, the international community should be ready to give them credit each time they are seen to engage in political - vice violent - dialogue.

Every step of the way, the goal must be to get the Taliban to talk more about politics and less about armed conflict. Even though it might be desirable to hear the Taliban formally announce their support for the current Afghan constitution, their rejection of Al Qaeda, their endorsement of Western interpretations of human rights and their plans for military disarmament, there is a good chance that this will never happen. From the Taliban's perspective, these are little more than humiliating terms of surrender dictated by international and Afghan actors that have no authority to do so. This doesn't necessarily mean that movement on some of these issues cannot be achieved, but that the process of dictating terms is unlikely to be helpful.

As part of a process of guiding the Taliban towards more constructive discussion of issues, the international community and the Afghan government should take a long look at the type of messages it is sending out and be prepared to make significant revisions to the content. Although this report is arguing that the Taliban generally should be encouraged rather than confronted, encouragement can and should take the form of "carrot and stick". Some new messages are urgently needed; some messages could be more effective if implied rather than stated and other messages currently being sent out should be stopped.

The intention is to reduce hostility, suspicion and reliance on highly provocative, sensitive and inflammatory language. This would not necessarily mean the issue has gone away or has been conceded in a settlement, but it is realistic to aim for the creation of a less hostile "breathing space" to allow confidence to build between protagonists. This would be more constructive than fighting every controversial issue at once.

4.4 Bringing political, social and economic themes to the fore

Messages aimed at the Taliban should concentrate on developing political, social and economic themes. Other messages could be implied, without the need for a serious commitment either way on the issue. Thus, demanding the Taliban renounce Al Qaeda, violence and weapons, would better be left unspoken for the time being. The Taliban probably do understand these issues and have probably concurred generally that Al Qaeda would not be welcomed again and even that they probably made a serious misjudgement by hosting them in the past. Forcing them to make a humiliating climb-down at this stage will probably not move things forward in a way that constructively addresses root causes of the conflict - similarly, with a demand that the Taliban support the constitution. After all, as regional expert Candace Rondeaux not unreasonably noted in April 2013, why should the Taliban be expected to follow the constitution, when even President Karzai cannot?²⁴

Perhaps, likewise, there is a possibility for an implied message on weapons and disarmament that does not require a humiliating surrendering of weapons (perhaps also subjecting Taliban fighters to the retina scanning procedures) and allows the retention of personal weapons for a period (1 – 5 years?) or until the issue is resolved, post-settlement.

Some messages should be stopped, if possible. A default tendency to blame the Taliban in a knee-jerk fashion for any loss of life in Afghanistan is unhelpful. It infuriates the Taliban and is likely causing their members to take a more hard-line stance. Afghan authorities are particularly to blame here. Many deaths are the result of tribal disputes, criminal activities or accidents. Left over unexploded ordnance from the previous century can just as easily destroy a civilian bus as an insurgent IED. And the international community should avoid falling into a trap of assuming that, simply because a local Afghan official declares the Taliban responsible for an incident then it must be true. It would be constructive to be able to give credit where it is due, exonerate the Taliban where possible and acknowledge insufficient evidence if this is the case. Messages that allocate blame without any investigation should be minimised.

4.5 “Carrot and Stick” messaging

The Taliban should be slowly encouraged to take part in political, social and economic processes inside Afghanistan and to move away from violence. The type of message to be delivered can be divided into two main types – positive

²⁴ Comments made at DIIS Conference, 'Afghanistan towards 2014', Danish Institute of International Studies, 11 Apr. 2013.

and negative inducements: “carrot”, whereby the Taliban are directed towards the positive reasons as to why they should be engaged and “stick”, where the Taliban have the negative consequences of not engaging clearly pointed out to them. Some of these messages could be openly stated, others might be better left unsaid, but with a clear implication.

“Carrot” messages might include the following:

- Come and take part in the rebuilding of Afghanistan: there are many problems and you have capabilities, skills and ideas that can be employed to help the country – corruption remains a problem, the justice system is still weak. We can fix these together.
- Come and discuss, monitor or help with politically neutral development projects that are in support of the people – you are working to help the people, right?
- If you show willingness to take part then international community recognition will be forthcoming and strengthened. Funding will certainly be made available to help you develop your political, social and economic capabilities.
- Acknowledgements from the international community that it has made many mistakes: it now wants to work with you to help understand how you can contribute to a prosperous Afghanistan.
- If you can show genuine and tangible signs of wishing to take part, we will not force you to make statements, commitments or denouncements or other pre-conditions beyond which you are willing to make yourself.
- The Constitution doesn't have to stay as it is forever – it can be revised. This would be an opportunity for you to contribute to the debate with fellow Afghans.
- We will not insist upon disarmament immediately – Taliban fighters could be allowed to keep their weapons for a period.
- No one is demanding that anyone “surrender”. This is not about winning or losing a war but about bringing stability, security and prosperity to the people of Afghanistan.
- If there is no fighting in Afghanistan, international military forces will leave sooner rather than later. International money to assist in economic development and reconstruction will take its place when the internationals can see that the peoples of Afghanistan can co-exist.

As positive inducements, “carrot” messages are perhaps easy to make. Perhaps there is less risk of misinterpretation and miscalculation than negative incentives,

which can be at risk of being misconstrued. With this in mind, consideration should be given to the following selection of suggested “stick” messages:

- You cannot keep blowing things up and killing people - you have to contribute to political, social, economic and development areas, otherwise you will not have any popular support.
- You know you have made a lot of mistakes as well. Whatever you think about ISAF, it does spend a lot of time admitting mistakes, such as causing civilian casualties, investigating them, apologising and compensating families. Can you say the same? Is it really possible for you to state that you cause no civilian casualties?
- This is not the 1990s. The population has changed and continues to change. They are younger, have access to much more information about the world and more communications technology to find out what they want to know and say what they want. They have stronger, better informed opinions about how they would like to live. You yourself have made great use of communication technology. You need to be able to listen and understand what they want. Are you going to close down mobile phones, internet, radios, TV, access to news?
- Society has changed and is continuing to change. You are in danger of being left behind by the population you claim to represent - children need balanced education and people need personal security and economic development.
- The long lists of violent acts on your website and in your statements are simply showing you have no real ideas for the future of Afghanistan.
- You have not achieved a popular Jihad like Afghanistan achieved against the Soviets – you will never be that popular. Take a good look at the Arab Spring. It wasn't about Islamic revolution, but about desire for economic prosperity, some control over their lives and their children to have opportunities. Can you offer this to the people of Afghanistan? If so, how? If you can give thoughtful and detailed answers to these, people will listen and you might then become more popular.
- If you come to power once again by force of arms, without the demonstrable agreement of the Afghan population, once you are in government you are very easy to track.
- Even if the US pulled out all its troops and closed its bases, you could still be living in fear of drone strikes for ever.
- You don't want to be controlled and dependent on Pakistan all your life, do you?

- This won't be like the Najibullah period where the army collapsed quickly – the Afghan army is better and the international military support can keep going indefinitely, particularly if the internationals don't have to do any fighting.
- Maybe you don't understand this yet, but you might be spending another 30 years killing fellow Afghans and Muslims. And a lot of civilians. You certainly won't kill many Western soldiers.

In addition to messages, actions can be messages in their own right. This next section comprises a bundle of proposed initiatives that might, individually or in combinations, contribute to developing confidence between protagonists before, during and after dialogue.

4.6 Developing trust and confidence

When delivering messages to the Taliban, the style should be low-key, not intended to provoke and able to overlook the ebb and flow of the conflict. Actors that have engaged in past propaganda confrontations should probably be excluded or discouraged from taking part in future communications, or at least have their contributions minimised or their resources applied in a supporting capacity only, rather than in the lead. This perhaps should particularly include ISAF/NATO and the US.²⁵ The language should encourage the positive and reject the negative. The goal should be to engage constructively with any statements the Taliban make on political, social and economic matters, by translating them into practical proposals on the ground.

In their own official statements, over a period of years, the Taliban have rejected information collected in Afghanistan and used against them, usually on the subject of human rights violations. But they have also made appeals for independent investigations – *even including teams that could comprise Taliban and ISAF personnel at the same time*. They have been particularly keen to refute claims regarding the number of civilian casualties they have caused. In May 2008, the Taliban issued this statement via their website:

“...once again the leadership council of Islamic Emirate makes a request to different organisations of common people, tribal elders and independent journalists to investigate the people who are involved in the butchering of thousands and thousands of innocent Afghans, and after carrying out a comprehensive non-bias investigation they should share their findings with the world...The leadership council of Islamic Emirate purposes that the

²⁵ Siddique, H., ‘Taliban and Nato-led forces engage in war of words on Twitter’, *The Guardian*, 14 Sep. 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/sep/14/taliban-nato-isaf-twitter>

investigation team should be divided into small groups and with each group one Taliban and one NATO soldier should be assigned at all times, the investigation should be conducted all over Afghanistan...”²⁶

In February, 2013, a similar claim was made by the Taliban:

“...the Islamic Emirate has asked them repeatedly to collect the facts and figures of the civilian casualties from eye witnesses in all parts of Afghanistan through a joint commission of ICRC, the United Nations and The Islamic Emirate. The report should them [*sic*] be published in the light of that collected information. But UNAMA has never accepted this proposal...”²⁷

As a means of developing confidence and the regular communications that can build up trust and other engagement opportunities, establishing joint teams to investigate issues together potentially has much to offer. Engaging with the Taliban on the more controversial issues, such as civilian casualties, might not be the best first step in such a process. But, on the ground, consideration should be given to inviting Taliban representatives and/or observers to engage with, observe, provide feedback and otherwise monitor more neutral issues: health, aid, humanitarian development, construction or reconstruction projects. It could be suggested to the Taliban that they select a project that they would consider monitoring. In June 2012, the Taliban issued a statement of condolence and sympathy for the victims of the earthquake that struck Baghlan province.²⁸ A genuinely humanitarian incident or situation might be a good starting point. The still largely incomplete and ineffective Kajaki Dam project, intended to provide

²⁶ Statement from Taliban leadership, ‘The declaration of leadership council of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan about setting up an independent investigation team on the killing of civilians’, *Taliban leadership*, 20 May 2008

<http://www.theunjustmedia.com/Afghanistan/Statements/may08/setting%20up%20an%20independent%20investigation%20team%20on%20the%20killing%20of%20civilians.htm>

²⁷ Statement from Taliban leadership, ‘The latest report of UNAMA is written in the spirit of giving acquittal to the foreigners, not for exposing realities’, *Taliban leadership*, 25 Feb. 2013, <http://shahamat-english.com/index.php/comments/29220-the-latest-report-of-unama-is-written-in-the-spirit-of-giving-acquittal-to-the-foreigners,-not-for-exposing-the-realities>

²⁸ ‘To the Mujahid Muslim people of Baghlan! We pray to Allah before everything else and ask him to recompense the families of the earthquake victims with an immense reward and may He bless them with patience and perseverance in the face of such calamity. May Allah also grant the martyrs of this heart-rending incident with the highest of Paradise (Al-Firdaws), the wounded with immediate recovery and all those left behind with that which is better...’, 12 June 2012, <http://www.tranungkite.net/v11/modules.php?name=Forums&file=viewtopic&p=1230188>

electricity to around 1.7 million people in southern Afghanistan, might also be tested in this way as a means of generating local Taliban engagement.²⁹

If an observer role is acceptable to the Taliban, efforts could also be made to develop joint monitoring teams that include more proactive and engaged Taliban representatives. This might be slowly guided into agreements regarding the declaration and enforcement of ceasefires. Such activities would slowly give the Taliban a stake in the local societies that they claim to represent and make it harder for them to regress into violent actions. Joint projects with a group or groups they trust should be a vital part of local confidence building between the Taliban, the population and the Afghan government.

There are many other areas in which trust can be developed. Time and again, the Taliban have expressed concern for the treatment of Taliban prisoners in Afghan prisons:

“The latest reports show that the oppressed prisoners are barbarically treated in the prisons related to the Kabul administration. They are deprived of the human dignity and even preliminary human rights. They are tortured in different ways. They are beaten, abused and even frightened by the threats of execution...The Islamic Emirate has repeatedly raised this issue and has complained about the awful condition of prisons. For example the declaration of March 14, 2012 and prior to that the declaration of October 11, 2011 plainly expresses the apprehension of the Islamic Emirate in very clear words. A part of the declaration says, ‘In those different security organs of the Kabul admin where political prisoners are either kept or investigated, they are conducted with callousness, inhumanly and in an annoying manner.

The Islamic Emirate expresses its deep concern to the United Nations Organization, human rights watch and surveillance organs and other international influential circles and demands their serious attention and care halt it.’ As now once again this issue has been raised by the United Nations and other Human Rights Organizations...”³⁰

This is a key issue for them. The Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) has spent much effort investigating the poor conditions in Afghan prisons, the Red Cross similarly. Making a more focused effort to examine the humanitarian treatment of Taliban prisoners and suspects held in

²⁹ See this report from the AAN from this year, http://www.aanafghanistan.org/uploads/20130125_Arjomand_Kajaki_Dam_final1.pdf.

³⁰ Taliban statement, ‘For how long untoward conduct with the prisoners?’, *Taliban website*, 28 Jan. 2013, <http://shahamat-english.com/index.php/comments/28767-for-how-long-untoward-conduct-with-the-prisoners>

Afghan jails, including the involvement of Taliban representatives and monitors would be an important gesture in its own right and might build bridges to consideration of other human rights issues. Perhaps if efforts are made to respect Taliban human rights concerns, they may end up reciprocating.

The report has attempted to demonstrate that the propaganda war between the Taliban on one side and the Afghan government and international community on the other is nothing but destructive and leads to the unhelpful hardening of positions. It is likely that attempts on the part of Western intelligence agencies have been made in order to fragment and disrupt the Taliban command structure and cause rifts with the false reporting and manipulation of the Taliban's own means of communication. The Taliban certainly believe this. The propaganda war should be closed down by both parties. Hostile propaganda operations – planting of rumours, deliberate miss-reporting and angry Twitter confrontations - make the protagonists more jumpy, more suspicious and less inclined to talks.³¹ This will not be in anyone's interests.

When considering the Taliban's deeds and words, they should be given credit where it is due (for example, in their political statements) and exonerated where possible (for example in the case of unexplained killings and deaths. These are not always the result of the Taliban – knee-jerk claims of Taliban culpability should be discouraged until evidence and assessment can be made. This will be extremely difficult, but even a public recognition that mines left over from the Soviet invasion might equally be a cause of some unexplained civilian deaths might be helpful in developing an atmosphere of trust between protagonists. There was much media comment about supposed poisonings of school children last year (and, indeed in previous years).³² The Taliban were automatically blamed, even though it arguably does not fit their patterns of activity, their capabilities and could form a massive “hearts and minds” disaster for them. An investigation by ISAF concluded the following:

“Tests by the International Security Assistance Force (Isaf) and government, however, have not found any toxic substances. One international expert has said the scares have all the hallmarks of mass hysteria.”³³

³¹ Liston, E., ‘Taliban and forces in Twitter war of words’, *The Independent*, 15 Nov. 2011, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/taliban-and-forces-in-twitter-war-of-words-6262376.html>

³² BBC, ‘Taliban deny poison attacks on girls' schools’, *BBC News*, 27 May 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-18227227>

³³ Gutcher, L., ‘Fear in the classrooms: is the Taliban poisoning Afghanistan's schoolgirls? Hundreds in hospital – but are terror attacks on schools to blame, or mass hysteria?’, *The Independent*, 1 June 2012, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/fear-in-the-classrooms-is-the-taliban-poisoning-afghanistans-schoolgirls-7808463.html>

4.7 The Taliban's website and strategic reach-out

The Taliban's website has developed into a major source of propaganda, communication, instruction and explanation of its own position.³⁴ In it, the Taliban contest adverse claims and comment about them and advance their own military and political claims. It is clear that the Taliban spend an increasing amount of time reading articles and reports from the world's media, the international community and significant non-government organisations. The bulk of the language is of conflict and violence - day to day battle reports detailing numbers of attacks and casualties inflicted feature strongly. But the Taliban also produce articles which attempt to explain their positions on political, social and even economic matters. A significant amount of this comes from within formal statements attributed to the Taliban's leader, Mullah Mohammed Omar, in particular his Eid statements.³⁵

The Taliban have clearly invested much time and effort in constructing this communications system. This is a huge demonstration of understanding of the need for strategic communication and one that the international community should look to engage with constructively, beyond ineffective cyber-attacks to take it off-line or the planting of false messages. Although the United Nations has been regularly attacked within the Taliban's website for bias, it is clear that the Taliban still recognise the body as an important player who should be engaged with. A neutral organisation such as the United Nations might look to engage with the Taliban website by establishing a "mirror" site that directly addresses issues that arise from the Taliban site in a clear and calm fashion, with it being clearly known that this represents a formal channel for the UN to engage in public communications with the Taliban. If the Taliban have particular grievances they could be raised here in a public manner – something that the Taliban already do. This would be an important "open channel" that the global community is able to observe.

Thus far, the quality of Taliban website is low, dominated by violence and containing only minor glimpses of political, social and economic themes. Language directed at the Taliban here would encourage any positive actions or statements from them, whilst firmly rejecting the negative, giving them regular feedback on all their actions. Such feedback and commentary would focus, in particular, on their political discourse, in a non-judgmental manner, in order to guide the discourse away from the language of violence. It would encourage

³⁴ See <http://shahamat-english.com/> for the Taliban's English language section of their website.

³⁵ Mullah Omar, 'Message of Felicitation of the Esteemed Amir-ul-Momineen on the Occasion of the Eid-ul-Odha', *Taliban website*, 24 Oct. 2012, <http://shahamat-english.com/index.php/paighamooona/28791-message-of-felicitation-of-the-esteemed-amir-ul-momineen-on-the-occasion-of-the-eid-ul-odha>

them to host more political discourse on the site. There would be no “point-scoring” and the language – regardless of the provocations of the security situation – would stay calm but firm.

The Taliban seem on occasion to be willing to travel to expound their views and even engage in discussion and exchange of ideas, if their appearance at conferences in Japan and France are anything to go by.³⁶ At both conferences it seemed clear from the Taliban perspective that these were not peace talks but opportunities to explain aspects of the Taliban position. The Taliban should be invited to a great many international, regional and perhaps even national conferences, big and small. Not just to ones where they are expected to expound upon (or even negotiate) conditions for peace under an intense media spotlight and high expectation. While this might be helpful, such a process could also risk a highly public dispute and collapse of any fledgling talks. Instead, it might be more constructive to throw off artificial timelines, such as 2014 and aim for longer-term, more measured progress, where the Taliban can be brought more organically into routines of engagement in discussions of other aspects of Afghanistan – the social, the political, the economic.

The Taliban need not always be required to make major statements or discuss the most controversial of issues. If done well, conferences are opportunities to absorb, explore and discuss ideas without immediate commitment but with the prospect of longer-term analytical, critical and intellectual growth and development of mutual understanding – for all parties to the conflict.

Intelligent and constructive appraisal and re-appraisal of how, why and what messages are reaching the Taliban should always be undertaken. We should also consider the impact upon the Taliban of such messages. An approach that attempts to defuse suspicion and build understanding is important and will have to be done regardless of, and in parallel to, the ebb and flow of the political and military situation. Encouraging the Taliban towards political understanding, engagement and discourse should be the number one priority for key actors – the United Nations above all.

³⁶ Hodge, N. and Totakhil, H, ‘Afghan Foes Sit Together in Kyoto’, *Wall Street Journal*, 28 June 2012, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702304830704577494680175851766.html> and Rosenberg, M, and Sayare, S., ‘New Scenery for Breaking the Ice With the Taliban’, *New York Times*, 20 Dec. 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/21/world/asia/afghan-factions-hold-informal-talks-near-paris.html?_r=0

5 Conclusions

This report has attempted to discuss how messages and information could possibly influence one of the major actors in the Afghan drama, the Taliban.

Altering and reshaping the behaviour of Afghanistan's armed opposition has been a critical task over the course of the ISAF mission in the country, operating alongside military counterinsurgency strategies and attempting to form a new and less detrimental political landscape. Information campaigns and messaging is a key part of any counterinsurgency and for that matter political strategy. This report has dealt with this particular part of Western help in Afghanistan.

What then can messages and information campaigns hope to achieve? The conflict is driven not only by the armed struggle, political contentions and religious-ideological fault-lines. It is also highly influenced by the perception of what is going on and what role the primary actors play. Such perceptions are formed within the differing parties as well as among the population of Afghanistan writ large.

A re-appraisal of messages approach should aim for goals that are low risk and "win, win" There is little to be lost in open, clear and calm efforts to engage with the Taliban and much to be lost from a hostile propaganda conflict. Ultimately, if the initiative fails, it will fail because the Taliban are exposed: exposed as having no depth to their thinking, no ability to contemplate solutions for Afghan society and a reluctance or inability to constructively consider and articulate a non-violent future for Afghanistan.

Many groups will continue to work actively against political dialogue or will take part in a counter-productive fashion (by accident or design). "Spoilers" will continue to spoil, be they intelligence agencies or from neighbouring countries, or both. The TV, radio and press aspect of the messaging environment is not controllable (and neither should it be) nor is it the role of these media to resolve a political and military dispute. It is by no means certain to what extent the Taliban are willing and able to engage in these forms of dialogue and confidence building measures other than to say that there are certainly signs from within Taliban communiques that some of these engagement processes will probably have some positive impact.

It is highly likely that a lot of fighting still has to take place. Although ISAF nations have wearied of the more direct aspects of fighting, neither of the Afghan protagonists appear to consider themselves defeated. Although both would surely be happy for a political settlement, neither party feels the need yet to concede too much. The Afghan Government has a huge army now and the Taliban remain very much in the field and ready to continue an armed struggle. Some reports say

that levels of military combat have increased quite significantly in 2013.³⁷ The point of “hurting stalemate”, in which both sides begin to understand that the military confrontation is leading nowhere, does not yet appear to have been reached.³⁸ This strongly implies that much of the effort to engage with the insurgency on political, social and economic matters will take place with an on-going – if not intensified – conflict as backdrop.

Although this report is focused primarily on the Taliban aspect of the conflict, many of the suggestions here could well be applied to other political, ethnic and religious factions inside Afghanistan. There are many stakeholders to be convinced of this approach. Messaging and confidence building should also be directed towards the components of the Afghan government, ethnic groups, political factions and other key stakeholders. There is much suspicion, particularly amongst the non-Pushtun ethnic groups, that the Taliban are to be appeased, the country abandoned by the international community and human rights, women’s rights and the Afghan constitution are all being given up. This report cannot address this – Afghans will need to resolve this themselves – hopefully after better levels of trust exist.

³⁷ Nordland, R., ‘Study Finds Sharp Rise in Attacks by Taliban’, *New York Times*, 19 Apr. 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/20/world/asia/study-finds-sharp-rise-in-attacks-by-afghan-taliban.html>

³⁸ “A situation in which neither party thinks it can win a given conflict without incurring excessive loss, and in which both are suffering from a continuation of fighting. The conflict is judged to have entered a period of ripeness, a propitious moment for third party mediation”, *United States Institute for Peace*, <http://glossary.usip.org/resource/mutually-hurting-stalemate>

6 Recommendations

My challenge to the international community is to do as Ahmed Rashid suggests: “Let’s open the minds of the Taliban”.³⁹ The international community needs to reshape its approach to dealing with the Taliban – combat operations have proved to be only of partial utility and a hostile propaganda environment needs to give way to calm and clear signalling. As the military role of those nations comprising the International Security Assistance Force comes to a close, each should reflect upon:

- a. the need for a credible messaging *environment* – trust, understanding and confidence - prior to talks, and not merely the importance of getting the Taliban “to the table”.
- b. what steps could be taken to facilitate it
- c. how the problem could be reframed in a way that emphasises the creation of a political Afghan Taliban and conflict *resolution*.

This report suggests that there are in actuality many options for achieving this that can be undertaken by ISAF nations and the United Nations, from local, battlefield, confidence building measures to engaging with Taliban representatives in academic settings across the world. If there are issues of prioritisation or coordination, this should fall to the United Nations, which should, in any case, be once again pushing itself forward as the “lead” point of international contact – alongside the Afghan government – for engagement with the Taliban, with those ISAF nations still willing and able to play relevant supporting roles.

International and Afghan demands and expectations for an instant political settlement before the end of 2014 – now not so far away - are unlikely to enhance the prospects for a credible and sustainable result. But the international community should start to frame any messaging related to the Taliban as if the Taliban are slowly on the road to forming a political grouping in anticipation of the talks to come and re-engagement with the Afghan population. The Taliban must be encouraged to expound on and engage in the political, social and economic discourses that might slowly move them away from violence of deed and word. This will involve all manner of expectation management. For the Taliban to move from their emphasis on violent resistance into some kind of “mainstream” political environment might take many years – even decades.

During this period, the United Nations, ISAF nations and the Afghan government will be required to make some painful and difficult decisions about what Taliban

³⁹ Rashid, A., ‘Regional aspects of stability – what can we expect?’, talk delivered at *DIIS Conference*, Copenhagen, 11 Apr. 2013, <http://www.diis.dk/sw128165.asp>

behaviours to overlook, what to comment on and what to condemn. For those seeking to engage with the Taliban at the political, social and economic levels, the Taliban need to be reminded of the obligations of governance and society (the people want to hear about reconstruction, jobs, investment, justice, representation, etc.). But at the same time provocative and unrealistic demands of them should be avoided – renounce violence, lay down your weapons, denounce Al Qaeda, accept the Afghan constitution. If the Taliban engage “organically”, through their own choice and broadly on their own terms in selected areas of the political, social and economic arenas, before any formal declarations or settlements, they should be encouraged and facilitated to do so. In this way, they are more likely to gain a sustainable stake in a society where they do have something to offer and where they accept the challenge of being accountable to a diverse range of fellow Afghans who now have stronger and better-informed opinions about what they want for the country and who should be allowed to lead it.

Final thoughts

A question that has recurred during the course of writing this report has been the role ISAF nations should play in this transformation of the messaging environment. Closely related is the relationship that the analysis and recommendations made here should have to Counter Insurgency techniques and the “hearts and minds” approach associated with COIN. It is difficult to give an answer with confidence although this paper would perhaps recommend a removal of ISAF military interventions of any sort in this field and an emphasis away from COIN terminology and technique.

The process being suggested in this report should be presented as (and actually be) a neutral *and wherever possible totally impartial* attempt to guide key groups – the insurgents above all, but not exclusively – into combinations of non-confrontational messages, discussion and confidence building measures. These should act as a precursor to talks, to make talks more effective – and sustainable – when they do take place.

Public, intelligent and sensitive discourse with the armed opposition groups should aim to build trust with the population, guide insurgents away from the language and actions of violence and to engage more on political, social and economic issues. Progress with the recommendations of the report should be underpinned by the understanding by all that the efforts are impartial. This does seem to suggest that, although changing the message is clearly compatible with the intended political and strategic ends of ISAF/NATO, the involvement of international military messaging techniques should be avoided, as it likely preserves in the minds of many protagonists, the perception that the future is a series of battles in which there are winners and losers.

Tim Foxley, December 2014

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