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Assessing Military Information Operations in Afghanistan, 2001–2010

From the outset of military operations in Afghanistan, U.S. leaders have recognized the importance of winning the support of the Afghan population, and efforts to do so have been an important part of those operations. The U.S. Department of Defense requested an assessment of these efforts so that it could hone its messages to sway the population in supporting the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. Accordingly, RAND reviewed the effectiveness of U.S. military information operations (IO), focusing on psychological operations (PSYOP, now called military information support operations) from late 2001 through 2010. Since 2010, there have been changes in the definition, doctrine, organization, and practice of IO and PSYOP in the field, reflecting the findings of various assessments, including the one conducted by RAND.

In assessing the diverse PSYOP initiatives undertaken by the U.S. military, the study identified strengths and weaknesses and resulted in specific recommendations for improvement. A primary area of focus was how well PSYOP initiatives were tailored to target audiences, particularly Pashtuns, who are the dominant population in Afghanistan's conflict areas and the main source of support for the Taliban insurgency. The study also examined IO and PSYOP doctrine and organizational impact on the effectiveness of messaging.

The Performance of U.S.-Led Information Efforts

How has the United States performed in the information war in Afghanistan? The results have been mixed. There were some very successful operations, but others did not resonate with target audiences or even had counterproductive effects.

Overall, U.S. information efforts did not succeed in convincing most residents of contested areas to side decisively with the Afghan government and its allies against the Taliban. Even when PSYOP messages were delivered well,

Key findings:

- Efforts to win the support of the Afghan population for U.S. and allied military operations have had mixed success.
- The most successful initiatives were those involving face-to-face communication.
- The most notable shortcoming was the inability to effectively counter Taliban propaganda against U.S. and NATO forces regarding civilian casualties.
- Inadequate coordination, long response times for message approval, and an inability to exploit informal, oral communication were among the most significant problems with these initiatives.

their credibility was undercut by concern that the Afghan government would not be able to protect civilians from the Taliban after a U.S. and NATO force withdrawal. Although civic action and development projects were appreciated, some surveys suggested that Afghans viewed the Taliban and U.S. and NATO forces negatively.

The biggest PSYOP successes were in face-to-face communication, including meetings with *jirgas* (local councils of elders), key-leader engagements, and establishing individual relationships with members of the Afghan media. The practice of having every infantryman be a PSYOP officer was also effective.

The most notable shortcoming was the inability to effectively counter Taliban propaganda against U.S. and NATO forces regarding civilian casualties. Communications offering rewards for information on terrorist leaders also proved ineffective.

PSYOP communications were more effective when they reflected Afghans' yearning for peace and progress. At the same time, Afghan society is not

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homogenous but, rather, divided by ethnicity, tribe, and region. These characteristics affect target audience selection and analysis.

The key audience for counterinsurgency messages was Pashtuns, who account for 42 percent of the population and inhabit areas where the Taliban is strongest. Failure to adequately incorporate Pashtun perceptions and attitudes can diminish the effectiveness of communication.

There was variation in message themes and effectiveness over time (as shown in the table). Such themes as the promotion of democracy and participation in elections had better audience reception from 2001 to 2005 than in later years, including during the elections of 2009 and 2010.

Interviews with personnel who served in Afghanistan found that there was inadequate coordination of IO and PSYOP, long response times for message approval, a lack of integration in operational planning, a lack of measures of effectiveness, and an inability to exploit informal, oral communication. For example, under the PSYOP coordination system during the period examined in the study, leaflets that could have had a significant effect if produced within 24 hours and distributed immediately thereafter took as long as a month to produce. Informal, oral communication was also critical among a population with limited access to mass media besides radio.

Recommendations to Improve the Effectiveness of Information Campaigns

The study’s findings point to several ways to improve the effectiveness of IO and PSYOP:

- Identify and describe best practices based on the experiences of personnel who have served in Afghanistan.

- Use local focus groups to pretest messages. Failure to account for the cultural, social, political, and religious characteristics of target audiences is a major deficiency in PSYOP campaigns. Using focus groups to pretest messages can help hone messages, although care must be taken to ensure that focus group membership reflects the target audience.
- Conduct and use the results of public-opinion surveys for target-audience analysis and post-testing. Considerable polling and interviewing has been conducted in Afghanistan, some of it sponsored by the U.S. military, and there has been significant work on human terrain mapping and cultural intelligence. These data could be much better used to develop PSYOP themes and messages. Surveys should be keyed to specific PSYOP campaigns. Because target audiences may vary by region, surveys should also focus on district-level rather than national-level populations.
- Use key communicators to help develop and disseminate messages. Messages are more credible if they come from a figure who already enjoys prestige among the target audience and is already considered a trustworthy source of advice and information. Key communicators could include Islamic clerics, traditional chiefs, educated schoolteachers, wealthy merchants known for providing charity, or a government official.
- Harmonize IO doctrine and practice, and implement greater integration with PSYOP and public affairs. Closer coordination between PSYOP and public affairs could particularly enhance counterpropaganda effectiveness. ■

Assessment of Major Themes in Psychological Operations in Afghanistan

Theme	Assessment
The war on terror justifies U.S. intervention.	Ineffective
Coalition forces bring peace and progress.	Effective (2001–2005); Mixed (2006–2010)
Al-Qai'da and the Taliban are enemies of the Afghan people.	Mixed
Monetary rewards are offered for the capture of al-Qai'da and Taliban leaders.	Ineffective
Monetary rewards are offered for turning in weapons.	Mixed
Support of local Afghans is needed to eliminate improvised explosive devices.	Mixed
U.S. forces have overwhelming technological superiority over the Taliban.	Effective (2001–2005); Mixed (2006–2010)
The Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and Afghan National Security Forces bring peace and progress.	Mixed
Democracy benefits Afghanistan, and all Afghans need to participate in elections.	Effective (2001–2005); Mixed (2006–2010)

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