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## Why the Taliban is Winning the Propaganda War

By Jason Motlagh

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When Afghan President Hamid Karzai's office recently said it was holding peace talks with the Taliban, the Taliban countered with a press release. A spokesman for the militants dismissed Karzai's announcement as a propaganda ploy to suggest a schism within the Taliban's ranks. Not only was that not true, the press release that was subsequently sent to journalists announced the start of the Taliban's spring offensive, dubbed "Operation Victory." It was the latest exchange in a critical second front in the Afghan war — a war of words that U.S. and Kabul government officials privately concede they are losing.

The same Taliban that once banned television now boasts a sophisticated public relations machine that is shaping perceptions in Afghanistan and abroad. Although polls show the movement remains unpopular, the insurgents have readily exploited a sense of growing alienation fostered by years of broken government promises, official corruption, and the rising death toll among civilians from airstrikes and other military actions. "The result is weakening public support for nation-building, even though few actively support the Taliban," says a report from the International Crisis Group, a think tank that monitors conflicts. An American official in Afghanistan agrees: "We cannot afford to be passive [communicators] any longer if we're going to turn this around." (See Jason Motlagh's TIME.com video report from an Afghan village.)

The Taliban has a wide-range of propaganda weapons, spanning high and low technology. Since mid-2005, the militants have maintained a multilingual website that has repeatedly changed service providers to avoid being shut down. On April 9, The Washington Post reported that, for more than a year, a Houston-based firm had unwittingly hosted a site claiming to be the voice of the "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan" (the name of Mullah Omar's regime, deposed by the 2001 U.S. invasion) before it was identified as such. It was updated with official messages and battlefield reports that were clearly and incredulous pieces of propaganda. (See a multimedia look at the war in Afghanistan.)

Meanwhile, on the streets of the Afghan capital Kabul and the Pakistani frontier city of Peshawar, cheap, mass-produced DVDs feature footage of coalition atrocities: mud-brick Afghan villages leveled by allied attacks and ordinary citizens allegedly killed by coalition fire. Also popular: a montage from the anti-Soviet jihad of the 1980s, part of a running effort to portray the current foreign troops as "invaders." Other discs show Taliban executions of so-called traitors and spectacular attacks against coalition forces.

The Taliban also know how to take advantage of Western media outlets. For instance, on Aug. 18, the Taliban ambushed a French patrol about 30 miles from the Afghan capital, an attack that left 10 soldiers dead. Several weeks later, militants involved in the attack appeared in a glossy, eight-page magazine spread in Paris-Match, a leading French newsweekly, flaunting the weapons, uniforms and personal effects of the dead soldiers. Back in France, support for the war dropped to a new low. Defense Minister Herve Morin noted that the Taliban "understood that public opinion is probably the Achilles' heel" of the international community.

High rates of illiteracy in rural areas compel the Taliban to rely on more traditional means of communication. Threatening phone calls to influential tribal elders are supplemented with pamphlets and audio cassettes containing pro-Taliban songs and poems. Those who would dare cooperate with the authorities are reminded they are likely to be killed.

The propaganda machinery extends beyond the borders of Afghanistan. In Pakistan's Swat Valley, Mullah Qazi Fazlullah, a firebrand Taliban cleric known as "Mullah Radio," has used unlicensed FM stations to effectively paralyze the former resort area, now under militant control. Last week, an editorial from the The News International, a leading English daily, called the Pakistani government's failure to "evolve a counter-narrative to the Taliban propaganda" that fills airwaves and newspaper columns a "dereliction of the highest order."

The Afghan government has hurt its own cause in the past by making little to no effort to engage the media, leaving the Taliban to dominate the narrative. While NATO typically issues a brief statement within a day or so of an insurgent attack, Rahimullah Samandar, head of the Afghan Independent Journalists Association, points out that the Kabul government stays silent, even as Taliban spokesmen reach out to information-starved media outlets with detailed accounts in real-time. "The Taliban has been filling in the gaps," he says.

To counter the Taliban advances in the propaganda war, the Pentagon has reportedly launched a broad "psychological operations" campaign in Afghanistan and Pakistan to take down insurgent-run web sites and the jam radio stations. The Afghan government, for its part, has opened a new \$1.2 million media center with international support. Staffed by a team of Western-trained spin doctors, the facility includes a high-tech media monitoring wing and an outreach department tasked with building better working relations with journalists.

"There has been a misunderstanding," says director Waheed Omer. "We in the government thought the media was too negative, but we were not giving them enough positive information." Speed, he adds, is the second priority. "Yes, we have to check and coordinate information, but this does not mean we can justify not being on time." But with violence worse than ever and elections scheduled for late August, words are getting cheaper. "Ultimately," says Joanna Nathan, a Kabul-based analyst and author of the Crisis Group

report, "cleaning up the government and proving that life is better is more important than talking about it."