

# THE TALIBAN'S MEDIA BLITZ

By ISW Research Analyst, Jeffrey Dressler

As the world awaits the highly anticipated announcement of the President's Afghan War strategy, the Taliban is actively trying to influence the debate in Washington through a sophisticated information campaign. Emphasizing the intractability of the conflict, the Taliban seek to dissuade the White House from investing more blood and treasure in a war that they contend will be a bloody, drawn-out struggle. However, there is little truth in the Taliban's media blitz. It is a strategic mistake for decision makers in Washington to buy-in to the Taliban's propaganda efforts.

The Taliban is aggressively attempting to rebrand their image and feed talking points to those in favor of de-escalation. Last month, the Taliban's senior leadership released a statement claiming that, "[they] did not have any agenda to harm other countries including Europe, nor do we have such agenda today." This release coincided with a New York Times story claiming that the Obama administration has begun to define the Taliban as a group that "does not express ambitions of attacking the United States." Of course, nothing could be farther from the truth. Earlier this year, a spokesman for the Taliban's media wing said, "After removing America from our homeland and defeating them, we would then have achieved half of the work to free our occupied Muslim countries because with the collapse America... NATO will collapse. And all the towers of tyranny will collapse in the region, including Israel and Zionism, which receives its military, economic and political power from America." When asked if Afghanistan will become a center to attack targets outside of Afghanistan, he replied, "... After liberating Afghanistan we will do what concerns us of principle Islamic missions."

The Taliban clearly see the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan as an attack not only on their organization, but on Islam writ-large. They will not be satisfied with vanquishing America from their historical homeland, as they see their struggle as fundamental to Islamic missions across the globe. This is precisely the reason why Al Qaeda was allowed to train, plan, and launch attacks from Afghanistan.

The Taliban are closely watching the debate unfolding in Washington and offering their insight on pending legislation. Recently, the Taliban's day-to-day operational leader, Mullah Barader, released a statement directly addressed to President Obama, Carl Levin, and the Senate Armed Services Committee's proposal to include "re-integration funding" in the Senate's annual defense appropriations bill. As in Iraq, Senator Levin envisions doling out financial incentives for Taliban fighters who would be willing to switch sides. Barader urges the President that this strategy is bound to fail, as his fighters are not simply hired-hands, but deeply ideological and committed jihadists dedicated to the independence of the Afghan state and the widespread establishment of Sharia law.

In reality, the overwhelming majority of the Afghan Taliban's fighting forces are not deeply committed ideologues from Pakistani religious schools, but disenfranchised locals, increasingly desperate to make a living. They accept measly rations to plant IEDs and conduct ambushes on US, NATO and Afghan patrols. Large-scale Taliban offensives were forcibly delayed over the past year because the majority of

fighters were harvesting their crops. Only after harvest season were these fighters available to participate in the leadership's planned offensives. If offered a viable alternative, there is no reason to believe that these individuals wouldn't be willing switch sides. Nothing terrifies the Taliban's senior leadership more than the prospect of losing sway over these desperate individuals.

The Taliban understands that an influx of coalition troops operating at the local level to protect and ultimately improve the lives of ordinary Afghans poses a serious threat to their widespread recruitment and domination over local populations. This is precisely why they are weighing in on the Beltway debate, and their timing is not a coincidence. The Taliban are often, incorrectly, thought of as a loosely organized band of rag-tag fighters. Nothing could be further from the truth. They are well-organized, sophisticated and thoroughly entrenched throughout Afghanistan.

This is not to suggest that the Taliban are insurmountable. They typically exaggerate the extent of their operations and influence over local Pashtuns. This recent propaganda campaign directed at U.S. and international audiences seeks to exploit sagging public support for the war effort and convince international leadership that no possible combination of strategy and resources is capable of reversing the momentum of the war, seizing the initiative from the insurgents. The Taliban's media strategy demonstrates an appreciation that popular opinion is crucial to the staying power of a multinational alliance.

President Obama and other international leaders must explain the urgency and imperative of the mission in Afghanistan. General McChrystal, in his expert military opinion, believes that this is a winnable war, given the necessary resources and commitment from the international community and the Afghan government. It's important that the Taliban's talking points don't trump the General's.

*Jeffrey Dressler is a Research Analyst at The Institute for the Study of War (ISW) in Washington D.C. and author of the recent report, "Securing Helmand: Understanding and Responding to the Enemy."*