

Case Study: SHADOW GOVERNMENT: THE TALIBAN TAKE A VILLAGE

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A common method used by Taliban tribal members in Eastern and Southern Afghanistan to gain control of an area deemed of strategic interest to the Taliban leadership operating from safe havens in Pakistan or within Afghanistan is to identify and target villages to subvert. The Taliban have recognized the necessity to operate with the compliance of the local population with the modus operandi being to gain their cooperation through indoctrination (preferred) or coercion (when necessary). The control of villages is tactically needed to allow the Taliban to stage fighters and equipment to be used in attacks against Afghan security forces and U.S. and coalition troops and strategically to operate an effective and parallel “shadow government” which supplants the Afghan central government. The Taliban utilize existing tribal networks and alliances to further their own organizational growth in areas whenever possible. This “piggybacking” on Pashtun tribal structure facilitates the ability of the Taliban to rapidly spread into areas and to withstand network targeting as U.S. and Coalition forces disrupt old and established Pashtun tribal agreements. They destabilize and alienate the population from Afghan government and U.S. policies and efforts in a targeted area. One must understand Pashtun tribal structure to and apply lethal and non-lethal operations appropriately to interdict the Taliban ability to exploit traditional Pashtun tribal networks.

VILLAGE NODES OF INFLUENCE

For a non-Afghan or foreigner to understand how the Taliban can subvert a village, we can use a simple social structure model to identify the key nodes of influence within a typical Afghan village. A village can be divided into three areas that most affect how daily life is lived. These areas generally fall under political and administrative, religious, and security. These three areas can be considered key nodes of influence in every Afghan village. Of the three nodes the one that is the most visible to outsiders is that of the Malik and village elders. The Malik and village elders represent the political aspects of the village. A second key node of influence is the Imam. The Imam represents the religious node of influence within a village. A third Local node of influence is the individuals and system of security found within a village. Security is traditionally conducted by the men of each individual village which is a village based militia (lashkar). When one or more of the parts or nodes of influence is controlled by either the Taliban or Afghan government in a village, then the side having taken or controlled the village nodes will have the most influence or control villages and the area and has “won” the population over to their side. This victory can be temporal in nature and shift.

TALIBAN CONTROL OF VILLAGE NODES

The Taliban look for villages and areas which they can operate within and use as a base against US and Afghan forces. Areas with little US presence or Afghan police or army are prime areas the Taliban will initially seek to subvert and hold. The Taliban build networks by getting a fighter, religious leader, or village elder to support them. Whichever one or more are initially

used will be exploited by tribal and familial ties. The village politics administered by the elders and represented by an appointed Malik are the most identifiable node of influence of any particular village. The Taliban will attempt to sway those village leaders (Maliks) who are not supportive by discussion and if necessary threats, violence, or death. In villages where the locals say there is no Malik it is usually described as a convenience to the village as “no one wants the position”, or sometimes “the elders cannot agree on a Malik so it is better there is none”. In these cases it is likely that the Taliban has killed that village representative. When locals are pressed for a representative they will give you a name of a person who has come to represent the village. This individual will most likely be in support of and supported by the Taliban. The Taliban will use coercion or force, if necessary, to install a Malik or “representative of the village”.

A “sub-commander” will be established in the village to keep those in line who would resist the Taliban or their Malik, and will be supported by limited funding. The sub-commander may have several fighters under his control with the ability to augment with other sub commanders and fighters as needed. The fighters will often be armed only with small arms and rocket propelled grenades. They may or may not have an IED capability, and if not will coordinate IED activities for defense and when possible offense against US and Afghan forces. These fighters may stay in the village but preferably are not from the village. Currently many fighters are recruited from the Punjab and in Pakistani religious schools (Madrassas). Locals can sometimes be pressed into service to fight when needed but the Taliban tend to use fighters from different villages so that when threats or physical violence is utilized it won't be kinsman against kinsman. Blood relative Males from Pashtun villages may fight and it may be revenge against Afghan and coalition forces due to what they feel are egregious acts committed against themselves and their village, which is exploited by the Taliban. The Imam and local mosques of villages are often visited by the Taliban. This is not generally opposed by villagers as it is expected that even the Taliban must be allowed to perform and express their Islamic duties. These mosque visits afford the Taliban opportunities to gauge village sentiment and to build and establish contacts within localities. Village religious leaders also serve to educate children in villages where the Taliban have either closed or destroyed the local school. The mosque and Imam serve as an education center for the Taliban while still presenting an opportunity for village children to be “educated.” This presents a solution to the unpopular notion of schools being closed. A constant and recognized complaint from the Afghan people is the lack of opportunity because of poor education. The Taliban will supplant the local Imam if needed by supplying their own to a village. A village with no Imam will receive one and the Taliban will establish a mosque. This mosque will serve as a meeting place for Taliban, storage facility, and indoctrination center.

Sympathetic locals are used as auxiliaries to provide food and shelter. One way to do this is for known supporters to place food and blankets outside their living quarters or in guest quarters to be used by Taliban in transit or operating within a village. This gives the resident supporter some cover of deniability. When U.S. or Afghan forces arrive all that is found are the blanket, possibly clothing, footprints and other signs of their visit. The Taliban have blended into the surrounding village.

TALIBAN CAN CONTROL WITH FEW FIGHTERS

The Taliban method requires relatively few of their own personnel. Its strength is in the local subversion of the most basic levels of village organization and life. It is also a decentralized approach. Guidance is given and then carried out with commanders applying their own interpretation of how to proceed. The goal is to control the village, and at the local level the only effective method, which must be used by all commanders, is to control what we have termed the nodes of influence. Form fits function, an Afghan village can only work one way to allow its members to survive a subsistence agrarian lifestyle, and the Taliban know it well.

To control an area the Taliban will identify villages that can be most easily subverted. They will then spread to other villages in the area one at a time, focusing their efforts on whichever node of influence seem most likely to support their effort first. Using this model the Taliban could influence and dominate or control a valley or area with relatively few active fighters and fighting leaders. The actual numbers may be more population and fewer fighters. Recently one figure reported in the news gave a Canadian General assessing that active Taliban members had gone from 15% to 1%-2% in villages in the districts of Zari and Panjway in southern Afghanistan. 1-2% of a population involved with an insurgency allows the Taliban to maintain resistance and control of a populated area. Most likely the remaining Taliban in these villages are cadre or leaders who can reconstitute fighters and staging areas as needed when government forces depart that area.

The Taliban will have an elaborate network to support their fighters in areas they control or dominate. They will have safe houses, medical clinics, supply sites, weapons caches, transportation agents, and early warning networks to observe and report. The US and Afghan forces, heavily laden with body armor and excessive equipment, are reluctant to leave their vehicles, sometimes by command design. They are blown up on the same predictable roads and paths that they entered the area on. The Taliban will use feints and lures to draw our forces away from caches and leaders in an attempt to buy them time to relocate, or draw them into a lethal ambush. After the attack the Taliban disperse and blend into the village. The village will usually sustain civilian casualties and propaganda will be spread of US and Afghan forces using excessive force. The US and Afghan forces will leave or set up an outpost nearby, but the Taliban attacks will continue because the forces are not in the village, do not truly know “who’s who in the zoo”, and aren’t able to effectively interface with the village nodes of influence to their benefit.

Locals are reluctant to help because to be seen talking with the Americans and Afghan security forces will result in a visit from a Taliban member to determine what they talked about and to whom. The local villagers know the government has no effective plan that can counter the Taliban in their village and will typically only give information on Taliban or criminal elements to settle a blood feud. The Pashtu people are patient to obtain justice and will use what they have to pay pack “blood for blood” even against the Taliban through a complex code known as Pashtunwali of which badal (revenge), nanwatai (asylum), and melmastia (hospitality) are examples that can help or hinder US and coalition efforts at pacifying a Pashtun tribe or area.

COUNTERING THE TALIBAN IN THE VILLAGE

Countering Taliban subversion of the populace is not done effectively with just more troops located at outposts. The troops must coordinate their activities with the local population and establish security through and within the village. When US and Afghan forces do this the fight will typically take on a particularly violent aspect, and involve the population as the Taliban attempt to maintain control.

The US and Afghan forces and Government will need to identify individuals to use lethal and non-lethal targeting. This requires in- depth knowledge of tribal structure, alliances and feuds. Viable alternatives or choices need to be available to village leaders and villagers. Just placing US and Afghan soldiers at an outpost and conducting token presence patrols and occasionally bantering with locals and organizing a meeting (shura) once a month have not worked.

Afghan identity is not primarily national, i.e. belonging within a geographic boundary with a centralized national government. Afghan identity is tribal in nature. Americans view identity as a national government; in the villages Afghans do not. The tribe is most important. The country "Afghanistan" running things from Kabul does not mean very much to the Afghan people in the villages under duress from the Taliban.

U.S. and Afghan forces must be able to infiltrate and shape the village nodes of influence and then target individuals. Right now our military embraces a centralized, top-down driven approach that prevents our military and US - trained Afghan counterparts from doing so. Current U.S. procedures and tactics attempt to identify the Taliban without regard to their influence or social role at a village level. Instead we attempt to link individuals to attacks and incomplete network structures through often questionable intelligence. The individuals in nodes of influence must be identified as neutral, pro, or anti Afghan government and then dealt with. To target any other way is haphazard at best and does not gain us the initiative.

US and Afghan forces must also devise and utilize tactics to fight outside and inside the village. Proactive tactical pursuit operations based on basic military doctrine should be emphasized. Combat and reconnaissance patrols must be practiced and mastered. Afghan troops must be incorporated in operations as they grew up in similar village settings and can instantly recognize normal and abnormal patterns and understand the nuances of village life and mores. Counterinsurgency and infantry tactics need to be tailored to the specific area and insurgents. Best are lightly equipped and fast- moving COIN forces conducting tactical pursuit operations that go into villages and know how to properly interact with locals and identify Taliban insurgents. They must have the ability to take their time and stay in areas they have identified at the local level as worth trying to take back. Being moved from place to place in armored vehicles while barely engaging local leadership does not work. A light infantry force conducting specialized reconnaissance in villages, utilizing observation posts and using proven tactics like trained visual trackers to follow insurgents into and out of villages while conducting ambushes, foot patrols outside the village, and knowing the local village situation are the key. Infantry tactics should use also vertical envelopment of Taliban fighters by helicopter and parachute to cut off avenues of escape and to insert troops to conduct sweeps and set blocking positions. Helicopters can be used to quickly reposition troops for greater effectiveness during operations and used for command and control. Gunships can be used to drive insurgents to ground (fix) while troops close upon and capture/kill those they encounter. Troops should foot patrol into

villages at night, talk with and document compounds and inhabitants for later analysis, and have a secure patrol base locally from which to operate. Mega bases or FOBS should only be used for support, and units and tactics must be decentralized.

EXTERNAL SUPPORT FOR TALIBAN AND END GAME

The Pakistani ISI has been implicated in supporting Taliban activities and movement within Pakistan and into Afghanistan. The Iranian government and Revolutionary Guards have also been implicated in helping the Taliban with the provision of arm, equipment and expertise. With external sanctuary and a long poorly controlled border and focus currently on al Qaeda only strikes in Pakistan, the Taliban has increased potential for survival. If the U.S. won't or can't go after the Taliban in their Pakistani sanctuary and stop the flow of arms and equipment from Iran, it is not surprising that the Taliban have been asked to come to the table and play a part in the governance of Afghanistan as they will not be eliminated by military and police operations as are being currently conducted.

In other words the United States and Afghan government cannot defeat the Taliban with operations as currently conducted. The future of Afghanistan is going to have Taliban as a political entity in the government if tactics are not appropriately evolved to the mission. The very same Taliban that force women to wear complete covering from head to toe in public, limit education of girls, impose radical interpretations of Islamic justice, have killed hundreds of Americans and harbored and covered for al Qaeda training camps and the perpetrators of 9/11 will be legitimized. Is this the success and win America wants? Should we build a failed state with U.S. tax dollars and blood and install elements of the Taliban back in power?

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