

NYTs/January 21, 2010

Taliban Overhaul Image to Win Allies

By ALISSA J. RUBIN

KABUL, Afghanistan — The Taliban have embarked on a sophisticated information war, using modern media tools as well as some old-fashioned ones, to soften their image and win favor with local Afghans as they try to counter the Americans' new campaign to win Afghan hearts and minds.

The Taliban's spiritual leader, Mullah Muhammad Omar, issued a lengthy directive late last spring outlining a new code of conduct for the Taliban. The dictates include bans on suicide bombings against civilians, burning down schools, or cutting off ears, lips and tongues.

The code, which has been spottily enforced, does not necessarily mean a gentler insurgency. Although the Taliban warned some civilians away before the assault on the heart of Kabul on Monday, they were still responsible for three-quarters of civilian casualties last year, according to the United Nations.

Now, as the Taliban deepen their presence in more of Afghanistan, they are in greater need of popular support and are recasting themselves increasingly as a local liberation movement, independent of Al Qaeda, capitalizing on the mounting frustration of Afghans with their own government and the presence of foreign troops. The effect has been to make them a more potent insurgency, some NATO officials said.

Afghan villagers and some NATO officials added that the code had begun to change the way some midlevel Taliban commanders and their followers behaved on the ground. A couple of the most brutal commanders have even been removed by Mullah Omar.

The Taliban's public relations operation is also increasingly efficient at putting out its message and often works faster than NATO's. "The Afghan adaptation to counterinsurgency makes them much more dangerous," said a senior NATO intelligence official here. "Their overarching goals probably haven't changed much since 2001, but when we arrived with a new counterinsurgency strategy, they responded with one of their own."

The American strategy includes limiting airstrikes that killed Afghan civilians and concentrating troops closer to population centers so that Afghans will feel protected from the Taliban.

American and Afghan analysts see the Taliban's effort as part of a broad initiative that employs every tool they can muster, including the Internet technology they once denounced as un-Islamic. Now they use word of mouth, messages to cellphones and Internet videos to get their message out.

"The Taliban are trying to win the favor of the people," said Wahid Mujda, a former Taliban official who now tracks the insurgency on the Internet and frequently comments on Afghan television. "The reason they changed their tactics is that they want to prepare for a long-term

fight, and for that they need support from the people; they need local sources of income,” he said. “So, they learned not to repeat their previous mistakes.”

The Taliban can shape the narrative about attacks sometimes before NATO public affairs even puts out a statement. Unlike the NATO press machine, the Taliban are willing to give details, and while some are patently exaggerated or wrong, others have just enough elements of truth that they cannot be entirely ignored.

Bruce Riedel, who led President Obama’s review of the administration’s Afghanistan and Pakistan strategy, described the information war as critical. “You have to respond in the propaganda war in a very quick time cycle; you can’t put out a statement saying, ‘We’re looking for all the facts before we comment,’ ”Mr. Riedel said.

The new public relations campaign combined with relatively less cruel behavior may have stemmed some of the anger at the insurgency, which tribal leaders in the south said had begun to rally people against the Taliban.

But the most important factor in their growing reach is the ineffectiveness of the central government and Afghans’ resentment of foreign troops. Military intelligence analysts now estimate that there are 25,000 to 30,000 committed Taliban fighters and perhaps as many as 500,000 others who would fight either for pay or if they felt attacked by the Western coalition.

The effort to change the Taliban’s image began in earnest last May when Mullah Omar disseminated his new code of conduct. The New York Times obtained a copy of the document through a Taliban spokesman. A version of the new code was authenticated last summer by NATO intelligence after a copy was seized during a raid and its contents corroborated using human intelligence, according to a senior NATO intelligence official.

The version sent to The Times is a 69-point document ranging from how to treat local people, how to treat prisoners, what to do with captured enemy equipment and when to execute captives. Much of the document deals with the Taliban chain of command and limits the decisions that field commanders can make on their own. The document exhorts insurgents to live and work in harmony with local people.

In an eerie echo of the Geneva Conventions, which prohibit the photographing of prisoners, one edict states: “If someone is sentenced to death, he must be killed with a gun, and photographing the execution is forbidden.”

Creating a code of behavior is one thing, enforcing it another. The Taliban have survived in part because they are an atomized movement and it is difficult to persuade local commanders, who operate in mountain or desert redoubts, to follow directives from leaders living hundreds of miles away in Pakistan.

There are doubts as well about the Taliban’s recent assertions that they are independent from Al Qaeda. Leaders of both groups live in the same areas of Pakistan, and Al Qaeda remains a source of financing and training for the Afghan movement.

“If you compare the document to actual behavior, Mullah Omar only has marginal control over his forces,” said Rear Adm. Gregory J. Smith, the director of communications for NATO.

“A portion of it may stick in some parts of the country, but not in other places,” he said. Despite an edict that says in suicide attacks “to try your best to avoid killing local people,” a suicide bombing in Oruzgan Province last Thursday killed 16 civilians. But in most places, the civilian casualties from suicide bombers have been in the single digits.

The Kabul attack on Monday killed five people, two of them civilians, and wounded 32. That contrasts sharply with Pakistan, where the insurgency routinely fields suicide bombers who kill scores of civilians.

Admiral Smith and others say that according to a recent Defense Intelligence Agency survey, the Taliban’s new strategy has failed to win over Afghans and that even though the insurgency may be carrying out fewer mutilations and beheadings, it still relies on intimidation through night letters, threatening conversations and even assassinations.

Interviews with tribal elders in areas where the Taliban are active suggest a complex picture. Several interviewed in rural Kandahar Province praised the Taliban’s new, less threatening approach, but said that did not translate into enthusiasm for the Taliban movement. At the same time, there is not much liking for either the Afghan government or NATO troops.

“There is a tremendous change in the Taliban’s behavior,” said Haji-Khan Muhammad Khan, a tribal elder from Shawalikot, a rural district of Kandahar Province. “They don’t behead people or detain those they suspect of spying without an investigation. But sometimes they still make mistakes, people still fear them, but now generally they behave well with people. They had to change because the leadership of the Taliban did not want to lose the support of the grass roots.”

The latest refrain of Taliban commanders, their Internet magazine and from surrogates is that the insurgency represents Afghanistan’s Pashtuns, who are portrayed as persecuted by the Afghan government. “Pashtuns are suffering everywhere; if you go and check the prisons, you won’t find any prisoners except Pashtuns; when you hear about bombings, it is Pashtuns’ homes that have been bombed,” said a Taliban commander from Kandahar Province who goes by the name Sangar Yar.

While Pashtuns have been disproportionately affected by the Western military offensive, the insurgency is active predominantly in Pashtun areas where it is difficult to separate civilians and fighters.

At the moment, the dueling propaganda wars seem to have reached a stalemate. “People have no choices; they are in a dilemma,” said Abdul Rahman, a tribal elder and businessman in Kandahar. “In places where the Taliban are active, the people are compelled to support them, they are afraid of the Taliban. And, in those places where government has a presence, the people are supporting the government,” he said. Taimoor Shah contributed reporting from Kandahar.