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Publisher Routledge

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Small Wars & Insurgencies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713636778>

Analyzing Taliban *taranas* (chants): an effective Afghan propaganda artifact

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Online publication date: 03 March 2011

To cite this Article Johnson, Thomas H. and Waheed, Ahmad(2011) 'Analyzing Taliban *taranas* (chants): an effective Afghan propaganda artifact', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 22: 1, 3 – 31

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/09592318.2011.546572

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2011.546572>

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Report Documentation Page

*Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188*

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1. REPORT DATE MAR 2011	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2011 to 00-00-2011			
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Analyzing Taliban taranas (chants): an effective Afghan propaganda artifact		5a. CONTRACT NUMBER			
		5b. GRANT NUMBER			
		5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER			
6. AUTHOR(S)		5d. PROJECT NUMBER			
		5e. TASK NUMBER			
		5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER			
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Naval Postgraduate School, Program for Culture and Conflict Studies, Department of National Security Affairs, Monterey, CA, 93943		8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER			
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)		10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)			
		11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)			
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified	Same as Report (SAR)	30	

Analyzing Taliban *taranas* (chants): an effective Afghan propaganda artifact

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This article describes and analyzes a little understood Afghan Taliban propaganda tool: **chants** or *taranas*. These melodic refrains effectively use historical narratives, symbology, and iconic portraits. The chants are engendered in emotions of sorrow, pride, desperation, hope, and complaints to mobilize and convince the Afghan population of the Taliban's worldview. The chants represent culturally relevant and simple messages that are communicated in a narrative and poetic form that is familiar to and resonates with the local people. They are virtually impossible for the United States and NATO to counter because of Western sensitivities concerning religious themes that dominate the Taliban narrative space, not to mention the lack of Western linguistic capabilities, including the understanding and mastering the poetic nature of local dialects.

Keywords: Afghanistan; Taliban chants or *taranas*; *jihad*; *pashtunwali*; Afghan cultural artifacts; information operations; Taliban narratives; Taliban propaganda; Loy Kandahar; Taliban poetry; Sufism

Introduction

In June of 2009, as the senior author sat in a hotel lobby in downtown Kandahar City, he witnessed individuals 'blue-tooth' what appeared to be music from one cell phone to another. Upon further inquiry, he discovered that the 'music' being transferred between cell phones was actually Taliban chants. While aware of the importance of folklore and music to Afghan culture and traditions, the author was unaware of how pervasive Taliban *jihadi* chants had become in southern Afghanistan. Upon further reflection, he suspected that these chants were just another piece of a very sophisticated (and often misunderstood) information campaign the Taliban had pursued for years at the expense of the United States and NATO.¹ Taliban information operations and narratives have long used cultural identifiers, historical memory, familiar icons, and schemata; it made perfect sense that the Taliban would also use a type of musical refrain in the form of chants to present their message to target audiences.

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This article represents a descriptive analysis of Taliban music and messaging in the form of chants that were circulating in the Kandahar region in the summer of 2009. Through a review and analysis of actual Taliban chants, this article argues that Taliban chants are another link in a long chain of sophisticated information operations used to reveal both the rationale and ‘road map’ of the political and social goals the Taliban wish to achieve. These chants follow a rational, discursive, and iconic form designed to mobilize and convince the Afghan population of the Taliban’s worldview.

Afghan music

Historically music has been an integral part of Afghan culture and traditions.² It is especially important to recognize that Afghan songs in the forms of chants are closely related to the extremely important Afghan artifact of poetry. Poetry, of course, is an intimate aspect of Afghans’ daily life. ‘Generally, [Afghan] music implies the use of instruments and song refers to poetry. Early music was basically in the form of hymns and sacred chants, the focus was on the underlying text, and so it was often classified as literature, not music.’³ Traditional songs and chants are part of the fabric of Afghan society with people often singing and chanting as a central part of ceremonies associated with weddings and other traditional celebrations.⁴ Many of these chants and songs are drawn from Sufi texts and poetry. Indeed, despite negative reactions of some parts of Afghan society to music and especially musicians, mystical Sufi Orders have always held music as critical to many of their religious rituals.⁵

All types of Afghan music were drastically affected when the Taliban came to power in 1996.⁶ The Taliban not only viewed music as a distraction from serious and important life matters, but they also viewed most music as *haram* based on their particular interpretation of Islam. This view of music has also been upheld and enforced throughout the Pashtun areas of western Pakistan, particularly in Swat and the Khyber-Pakhtoonkhwa (Former-NWFP) Province since the Taliban became prominent in the area.⁷ Many mullahs, who are conservative religious figures, also disapprove of music despite the fact that Pashtun culture has its own traditional music and musical instruments such as *rabab*, *dohol*, *shawm*, and double-headed frame drum.

The Taliban view(ed) musical instruments as tools of *Shaytan* (Satan). However, they apparently allow(ed) the use of the frame drum – the *duff* – because they believe other Islamic traditions allow the use of this instrument during certain religious and personal celebrations and ceremonies. Hence, as distinguished British ethnomusicologist John Baily suggests, ‘the Taliban were not against all forms of music, and they certainly permitted religious singing without musical instruments.’⁸ The musical expressions of Taliban chants and *taranas* were allowed. According to Baily, the Taliban *taranas* (chants) are constructed in ‘the melodic modes of Pashtun regional music, nicely in tune,

strongly rhythmic, and many items have the two-part song structure that is typical of the region. There is also heavy use of reverberation.⁹

In many areas of Afghanistan, especially those with a significant Taliban presence like Loy Kandahar, Taliban chanting has flourished.¹⁰ For example, many Kandahari music shops that used to sell various types of music audiocassettes and musical instruments since the 1990s have begun to supply Taliban chants to the market.¹¹ Undoubtedly such dynamics are partly pragmatic in light of the fact that Kandaharis (and other Afghan urbanites) have been tortured and imprisoned for listening to or participating in other forms of music. In some cases, a number of local singers/musicians have decided to sing Taliban chants, while others have migrated to other countries because of their well-founded fear of Taliban prosecution.¹² Essentially, the Taliban has been largely responsible for the spread of such chants, which have not only become a source of entertainment for many but also a key component of the Taliban information and propaganda war. These chants have also become a powerful Taliban tool for 'instructing' and intimidating the Afghan populous. The following sections of this article describe and analyze a series of these chants.

Analyses of Taliban *taranas* (chants)

As suggested above, chants play an important role in Taliban communication with local populations. The chants are communicated in the local language and traditional style and often represent a manipulation of Afghan traditions, narratives, collective memory of events, and culture to serve Taliban interests.

These chants are melodic with memorable tunes; often with repeating sections that have a tendency to stay in people's consciousness. The chants are easily memorized, due to their rhyme, rhythm, lyrics – much like the advertising jingles that permeate American radio and television. The chants are very similar to certain types of Afghan poetry that are regularly memorized and recited by Afghans. Afghan poems, much like the chants assessed here, are wrapped in deep emotions and thought; the language of poetry in Afghanistan is the language of *wazn* (balance or rhythm) and *qafia* (rhyme). Abiding by the many other rules of poetry, *badee* (rules of creating a poem), and *aroz* (the art of creating balance and flow in poem), each verse of a poem must maintain a specific *wazn* and continuity in *qafia*. The combination of the two adds a melodic effect to the lyrics.¹³ This obviously has important implications for their resonating narratives as well as their basic propaganda value.

As will be demonstrated below, these chants often portray the ongoing events of Afghan life. The Pashto and sometimes Dari languages are the ones mainly used in a simple and traditional form that resonates with Afghan locals. We find it particularly interesting that the chants are gaining the attention of an increasing number of Pashtun youth, especially in (rural and urban) areas where the Taliban have a substantial presence.¹⁴ Nonetheless, the Afghan government and security

forces do not seem to take the chants seriously, perhaps because the chants are not viewed as a direct threat to the country's stability. Instead, they probably consider chants part of the local entertainment.¹⁵ It should also be pointed out that none of the US military or government personnel that the senior author spoke to after his field research had ever heard of Taliban chants.¹⁶ This might explain why there is little, if any, news on the seizure of audiocassettes, or CDs, or of any effort to curb business related to the supply of recordings of chants. Within this permissive environment, the Taliban eagerly and regularly distribute chants to the population. The Taliban chants are widely available in books and Taliban magazines,¹⁷ or on audiocassettes, CDs, cell phone ringtones, various Internet web pages,¹⁸ and even YouTube.¹⁹

In an effort to assess the meaning and impact of Taliban chants, we sought and obtained a series of chants that were circulating around Kandahar in the summer of 2009.²⁰ After obtaining these Taliban chants, all of which were vocalized in Pashto, we had them translated into English.²¹ Below, we present the actual narrative of the chant, followed by a brief analysis of its meaning, and its potential impact on the Afghan population.

As suggested above, all of the chants assessed here were found in Loy Kandahar, and it is assumed that the primary target audience for the chants was the local Pashtun population. In assessing the meaning and impact of Taliban chants on Afghan target audiences, we have been forced to make certain generalizations concerning this population's own narratives, and their view of local political, religious, and social environments. We recognize that Afghan identity and belief systems are multifaceted and dynamic, and are layered by language, residence, tribe, clan, family, and *qawm* (among others), with each playing an important role in an individual Afghan's worldview.²² *Qawm* (solidarity or affinity group)²³ membership is particularly important to chants and narratives because *qawms* are based, in part, on patron-client relationships, which in turn are central to the nature of resonating subjects or narratives for a typical Afghan:

No single concept is more important to Afghanistan's internal conflicts than that of patron-client relationships and the patronage networks these create... The importance of patronage relations extends to the *battle of ideas* in Afghanistan. Afghans are exposed to many different and often competing sources of news, but there is a tendency to follow the views of the provider of patronage or other Afghans that they desire to emulate.²⁴

While we are not suggesting an 'ideal' or reductionist Afghan view of the world, we have been forced to generalize across the target population in assessing the meanings and impact of the chants on the Pashtun.²⁵ The Taliban, in their construction of these chants, have clearly calculated the intended informational impact of their chants based on their own assumptions about what resonates with their target audience, and we have attempted to do the same here, albeit tentatively, for our analysis.

Chant 1: Afghan Mulk Angrizan (Afghan Region Foreigners)

Oh Afghan, the British (Foreigners) are present in your country.
They are your yesterdays' (past) enemies whom your ancestors defeated, and then they ran away. Today, they are the rulers who dominate your soil (country.)
Today, they have come under the slogan of friendship and rehabilitation of your country.
Today, they have come under the slogan of friendship and rehabilitation of your country.
The spies are present in your country. Your yesterdays' (past) enemies are present in your country.
They are your yesterdays' (past) enemies whom your ancestors defeated, and then they ran away. Today, they are the rulers who dominate your soil.
Oh Afghan, the British (Foreigners) are present in your country.
They are your yesterdays' (past) enemies whom your ancestors defeated, and then they ran away. Today, they are the rulers who dominate your soil.
They have invaded your country again. They intend to kill you.
They have invaded your country again. They intend to kill you.
The murderers of your ancestors are present in your country. They are your yesterdays' (past) enemies whom your ancestors defeated, and then they ran away. Today, they are the rulers who dominate your soil.
Oh Afghan, the British (Foreigners) are present in your country.
They are your yesterdays' (past) enemies whom your ancestors defeated, and then they ran away. Today, they are the rulers who dominate your soil.
They hit you by huge bombs, cruise missile and napalm bombs.
They hit you by huge bombs, cruise missile and napalm bombs.
Those people are present who pretend themselves to be your friends but they are your previous enemies.
They are your yesterdays' (past) enemies whom your ancestors defeated, and then they ran away. Today, they are the rulers who dominate your soil.
Oh Afghan, the British (Foreigners) are present in your country.
They are your yesterdays' (past) enemies whom your ancestors defeated, and then they ran away. Today, they are the rulers who dominate your soil.
Be careful oh Afghan, do not be deceived and do not be segregated from your goal. Be careful oh Afghan, do not be deceived and do not be segregated from your goal. Otherwise, Christians will be present [in your country.]
They are your yesterdays' (past) enemies whom your ancestors defeated, and then they ran away. Today, they are the rulers who dominate your soil.
Oh Afghan, the British (Foreigners) are present in your country.
They are your yesterdays' (past) enemies whom your ancestors defeated, and then they ran away. Today, they are the rulers who dominate your soil.
The world's biggest thieves have come to our country, and look! They are all Westerners.

The world's biggest thieves have come to our country, and look! They are all Westerners.

Your history's purchasers have come to your country. Your yesterdays' (past) enemies are present in your country.

Oh Afghan, the British (Foreigners) are present in your country.

They are your yesterdays' (past) enemies whom your ancestors defeated, and then they ran away. Today, they are the rulers who dominate your soil.

They are your yesterdays' (past) enemies whom your ancestors defeated, and then they ran away. Today, they are the rulers who dominate your soil.

The prospects and desires of *Siddiqi* (Poet) will be accomplished. It will be accomplished at the right time and date when once again the Afghan conquerors are in power.

They are your yesterdays' (past) enemies whom your ancestors defeated, and then they ran away. Today, they are the rulers who dominate your soil.

Oh Afghan, the British (Foreigners) are present in your country.

They are your yesterdays' (past) enemies whom your ancestors defeated, and then they ran away. Today, they are the rulers who dominate your soil.

Oh Afghan, the British (Foreigners) are present in your country.

They are your yesterdays' (past) enemies whom your ancestors defeated, and then they ran away. Today, they are the rulers who dominate your soil.

Analysis

This chant clearly targets the segments of the general Afghan civilian population who make up the Taliban's main primary recruiting pool. It touches upon a variety of serious issues that are dear to Afghan history, culture, and lifestyle:

- Foreign invasion (In some parts of Afghanistan, all foreigners are referred to as 'British');
- Foreigners want to bring Christianity to Afghanistan;
- Cowardly nature of foreign invaders ('they were defeated and then they ran away');
- Defeat of the British Empire by Afghan fighters ('ancestors defeated'); and
- Fight against invaders ('do not be deceived and do not be segregated from your goal').

This chant also focuses on the mistakes and contemptible behavior of foreign forces ('they pretend to be your friends; they intend to kill you'), behavior that is in direct contrast with the Afghan value of being a straightforward 'friend' or 'enemy'. Foreign invasion has historically been a very sensitive topic among Afghans, and the above chant repeatedly plays on this foreign invasion message in an effort to draw the attention and support of the public. This chant's reference to past Afghan struggles against foreign invaders is a theme that we have regularly seen in other Taliban narratives.²⁶

The vast majority of Afghans recognize personal freedom and national independence as a core value, and the Taliban understand the significance of this. But, the chant does not merely play on these Afghan sensitivities. The chant also explicitly invites Afghans to join the Taliban's war against the current influx of foreign 'invaders' by encouraging nationalism and playing on nationalistic sentiments.

There is little argument that most Afghans are very proud of their nation's history. And some of this pride stems from the fact that Afghans in years past have defeated some of the world's dominant powers including the Soviet Union and Great Britain. In fact, this narrative of defeating 'superpowers' is arguably one of the most effective motivational tools used to provoke Afghans against foreign forces, and is regularly used by the Taliban today.²⁷ We suspect that the Taliban often mention British forces because the British were long viewed as interlopers, moreover they are part of the present NATO 'occupying' force; hence, the British can be used to represent both past colonial powers' attempts to exploit ('purchase') Afghanistan, and the present 'invading/occupying' ISAF foreign forces. This Taliban chant presents the foreign forces as the 'murderers' of Afghans' ancestors in an apparent attempt to revive a sense of revenge (*badal*) among their target audience against the foreign forces. Meanwhile, the Taliban chant reminds the Afghan public about their ancestors taking revenge and defeating the British.

In this *taranas*, the Taliban also emphasize a very common and consistent message found in other pieces of Taliban propaganda: Islam is at risk with the presence of international security forces in Afghanistan. The call to arms against a 'threat to Islam' has been an extremely powerful incentive for Afghan communal action, and has historically been used to motivate Afghans – including even non-Pashtun elements of society who can be mobilized under the banner of Islam – to take action against foreign invaders. The Taliban portray invaders as representing a 'cosmic' threat²⁸ to the survival of Afghan's religion and way of life. They want to project the argument that an Afghan is not a true follower of Islam if he does not rebel against foreign invaders. Taliban messages describe foreign forces as cruel and inhumane invaders who do not respect Afghan culture and religion, and who do not deserve the respect of Afghans. This chant plays up allegations of foreign forces' brutality by referring to foreigners' use of huge aerial bombs, cruise missiles, and napalm bombs to kill and maim Afghans. These examples are offered as evidence to prove that US and ISAF forces are neither friends nor protectors; that the foreign forces came to slay Afghans and to dominate the country²⁹ – not unlike the Soviet occupation forces, whose widely acknowledged atrocities against Afghans are still fresh in popular memory. These messages powerfully exploit Afghan emotions by touching on painful historical and more recent collective memories.

Ultimately the chant tells Afghans that the Taliban are strong enough to defeat the enemy and to regain power. But, the Taliban admit that they must have the support of the Afghan people to succeed.

Chant 2: Aghyar Ashna (Stranger Friend)

Should I complain about a stranger or should I complain about my friend? I don't understand, I don't understand, should I complain about the world or should I complain about myself?

Should I complain about a stranger or should I complain about my friend? I don't understand, I don't understand, should I complain about the world or should I complain about myself?

The councils are held under my enemy's command. Decisions are taken by disqualified people in the council. They accept plenty of dollars to kill me.

Should I complain about his children or should I complain about their father. Should I complain about a stranger or should I complain about my friend? I don't understand, should I complain about the world or should I complain about myself?

They conspire to murder me with the advice of strangers. Some cowards in our country were celebrating my murder the same like it was Eid's eve.

They conspire to murder me with the advice of strangers. Some cowards in our country were celebrating my murder the same like it was Eid's eve.

Should I trust their regrets or complain about his laughter. I don't understand, should I complain about the world or should I complain about myself?

Should I complain about a stranger or should I complain about my friend? I don't understand, should I complain about the world or should I complain about myself?

My meat was being cut and you [pro government Afghans] were pouring salt on them. My meat was being cooked in the skewers of brutality.

Should I complain about a butcher or should I complain about you? I don't understand, should I complain about the world or should I complain about myself?

I could hardly breathe because of my wounds and pain in this desert. I was treated like a stranger guest that suffered from pain and no one offered me treatment.

I could hardly breathe because of my wounds and pain in this desert. I was treated like a stranger guest that suffered from pain and no one offered me treatment.

Should I complain about a doctor or whom should I complain about? I don't understand, should I complain about the world or should I complain about myself?

Should I complain about a stranger or should I complain about my friend? I don't understand, should I complain about the world or should I complain about myself?

I have become crazy about true love and have become like burned rue. I am burnt on the beautiful candle of Islam.

I have become crazy about true love and have become like burned rue. I have become smoked on the beautiful candle of Islam.

Should I complain about our own traitors or complain about the world. I don't understand, should I complain about the world or should I complain about myself?

I am burnt on the beautiful candle of Islam. Should I complain about our own traitors or complain about the world. I don't understand, should I complain about the world or should I complain about myself?

I am screaming for the justice and recall past times. Where is the security that I was happy with?

Analysis

This chant has two central objectives:

- To recruit new fighters, and;
- To undermine the Afghan government.

It consists of a series of melodic refrains interestingly based on the *Pashtunwali*³⁰ concept of *gila*, which means to complain about something important. In this chant the Taliban use Pashtun tribal mores to not only 'connect' with their target audience – Pashtuns – but also to argue against the people supporting the Afghan puppet government ('councils are held under my enemy's command') and international forces. In this very emotional chant, the Taliban complain about the pro-government Afghans' cruelty while explaining how righteous and innocent the Taliban are. The chant suggests that the current conflict has been imposed on the Taliban, and that they are the victims of this war ('I am screaming for justice'). It is instructive to note that the Taliban have established a series of 'shadow' justice systems throughout the country, which are highly popular in adjudicating land (*mezaka*) and water disputes as well as criminal cases. Using shari'a law, a Taliban judge can settle a case in a few hours without bribes – unlike many of the formal Afghan government courts. While these Taliban courts may not administer the kind of justice preferred by Kabul or the West, it is swift and perceived as just by most that use them. This is especially the case when property disputes are involved. In southern Afghanistan, many villages as well as city dwellers go to the Taliban court to settle such land disputes, which are often quite contentious and a serious source of local instability.³¹ The shadow courts actually give a certain degree of legitimacy to the Taliban. The Taliban have also established an ombudsman system, which local populations can use to report an abusive local Taliban commander or make other complaints, which are then forwarded to an independent authority for resolution.

Most Afghans – particularly southern Afghans – will agree that the complaints (*gila*) voiced in this chant by the Taliban are legitimate.³² This chant not only challenges people to oppose a corrupt, incompetent ('disqualified people in the council'), and brutal government and the people who support it ('traitors'), but it also slams government corruption ('they accept plenty of dollars to kill

me'), the foreign dependency of the Kabul regime, and injustice. The Taliban call their battle a pure Islamic movement ('the beautiful candle of Islam') and call the Afghan government a puppet regime that only serves foreign countries that aim to dominate the entire country and kill Afghans.

This chant not only attempts to play upon Afghan's Islamic affinities, but also to discredit the Afghan government as being un-Islamic. The government is introduced as evil, corrupt, and unable to provide justice. By doing so, it is clear the Taliban recognize that ownership and independent decision-making are important parts of Afghan and community tradition. In addition, the Taliban accuse the current Afghan government of killing Taliban fighters in return for money from foreigners – actions that directly contradict Afghan ownership and independence. In other words, to local Afghans this chant suggests that Afghan government officials are killing their own citizenry to serve foreigners. Likewise, the chant argues that *Jirgas* (councils) called together by the government are held with the advice and support of foreigners who are ruling the country by proxy.

Lastly, the Taliban reminds the Afghan public about the former justice and security, which existed while they ruled over Afghanistan ('I am screaming for justice and recall past times. Where is the security that I was happy with it?'). The phrase is an attempt to garner public support by drawing the people's attention to the Taliban's past performance while implicitly comparing the Taliban's past with the instability and insecurity under the current Afghan government that is itself under the authority of the US and its allies.

Chant 3: Volleyball, football, and cricket

Oh youth, quit volleyball, football [soccer], and cricket. Take the Rocket-Propelled Grenade launcher [RPG] on your shoulders. Oh youth, quit volleyball, football [soccer], and cricket. Take the Rocket-Propelled Grenade launcher [RPG] on your shoulders. Play with human heads instead of playing with balls. Play with human heads instead of playing with balls.

Quit kids' games; take the RPG on your shoulders. Quit kids' games; take the rocket on your shoulders.

Oh youth, quit playing volleyball, football, and cricket. Take the RPG on your shoulders. Take the RPG on your shoulders.

You look good with the weapon and Moswak [herbal toothbrush] but not chewing gum and chocolate. Oh youth, Take the RPG on your shoulders.

Oh youth, quit volleyball, football, and cricket. Take the RPG on your shoulders.

Purchase every worthless human for free (Kill the enemies.) Purchase every worthless human for free (Kill the enemies.) Take the RPG for on your shoulders.

Oh youth, quit volleyball, football, and cricket. Take the RPG on your shoulders. You will soon defeat the enemies. You will soon defeat the

enemies. You only need to put some more efforts defeating them. Take the RPG on your shoulders.

Oh youth, quit volleyball, football, and cricket. Take the RPG on your shoulders.

Behad by using the sword those people who open the country gate to the strangers. Behad by using the sword, those people who open the gate to strangers.

Oh youth, quit volleyball, football, and cricket. Take the RPG on your shoulders. Walk beside Ayubi [poet]. Don't be even late for a minute! Take the RPG on your shoulders. Don't be even late for a minute! Take the RPG on your shoulders.

Oh youth, quit volleyball, football (soccer), and cricket. Oh youth, take the RPG on your shoulders. Oh youth, take the RPG on your shoulders.

Analysis

This *taranas* is specifically written and sung to recruit Afghan youth to join the fight against the foreign invaders. The chant implicitly encourages Afghan youth to regain their *nang* (honor) by focusing their attention on important matters (defeating and killing the foreign invaders) instead of wasting time ('don't be even late for a minute!') on 'kids' games' and trivial pursuits such as 'gum and chocolate'.

That the Taliban have chants that target a specific demographic says a lot about the sophistication of their overall information campaign. Chants such as this are aimed at influencing specific age groups of locals (under 25) – a major recruiting pool for the Taliban – as well as the jobless and uneducated. The Taliban understand that many Afghan youths spend their free time playing different sports ('volleyball, football (soccer), and cricket'). In general, the most popular Afghan sports are soccer, cricket, and volleyball. Due to a series of recent successes by Afghan sports teams in the international arena,³³ the numbers of Afghans who participate in these sports and sports fans have increased tremendously. This increased popularity has had a direct negative impact on Taliban recruitment, and the Taliban recognize this. In an effort to reach local youths and convince them to stay away from activities that do not correspond to the needs of the Taliban, the Taliban have included this topic in their chants.

As is apparent in this chant, the Taliban use various symbols and icons that fit Afghanistan's war-torn situation by talking about rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), fighting on the battlefield, and killing the enemy. Specifically, the RPG was one of the best-known weapons used during the war against the Soviet Union. The RPG was widely available during the war, and Afghan *mujahidin* became quite accomplished at using them to destroy Russian tanks, military vehicles, and pro-communist Afghan forces. In past centuries, the sword was the best-known weapon in Afghanistan, but it has more recently been replaced by the AK-47 (Kalashnikov) and the RPG. Therefore, the Taliban use these symbols of

'modern' Afghan warriors in an attempt to motivate Afghan youth to become 'real' champions by joining the Taliban in their fight against the foreign invaders.

Chant 4: Arman-Khodaya (Wish-Allah)

Oh *Allah*, it is very sad that our innocent youths are colored with blood [martyred]. It is very sad that our village is (full of sorrow) covered with dust. Oh *Allah*, it is very sad that our innocent youths are colored with blood [martyred]. It is very sad that our village is (full of sorrow) covered with dust. Oh *Allah*, it is very sad that this dust and ashes come from the (dead) flower plant. Oh *Allah*, it is very sad that this dust and ashes come from the [dead] flower plant. Oh *Allah*, it is very sad that the [innocent Taliban died] innocent lamps of love fell down. Oh *Allah*, it is very sad that the [innocent Taliban died] innocent lamps of love fell down. Oh *Allah*, it is very sad that the (innocent people died) innocent lamps of love fell down.

It is very sad that despite the resistance of young flowers, they are falling down [the Taliban dies]. Oh *Allah*, it is very sad that the blood flow shakes our young plants.

Oh *Allah*, it is very sad that our innocent youths are colored with blood.

It is very sad that our companions' gatherings (Majlas) are destroyed.

Life is full of tasty honey. Oh *Allah*, it is very sad that their red blood (loss of life) brought harsh life to the community. Oh *Allah*, it is very sad that their red blood (loss of life) brought harsh life to the community. It is very sad that the grey huts of love carry the coffin of desires.

Oh *Allah*, it is very sad that our innocent youths are colored with blood.

It is very sad that my prospects and desires are unachievable... Only Sakhi Bacha (poet) is crying. Oh *Allah*, it is very sad that sorrow shakes our country. *Allah*, it is very sad that sorrow shakes our country. Oh *Allah*, it is very sad that our innocent youths are colored with blood. Oh *Allah*, it is very sad that our innocent youths are colored with blood.

Analysis

This chant has two objectives:

- To create sympathy for the Taliban among the Afghan public, and:
- To fuel people's sentiments against foreign forces.

It focuses on the sadness of the dead youth ('innocent youth,' 'dead flower plant') and commemorates young slain Taliban fighters ('despite the resistance of young flowers, they are falling down'). The target audience of this chant appears to be both the Taliban and the Afghan public. The chant implicitly introduces the Taliban as 'freedom fighters' and attempts to create sympathy for the Taliban among the public. The chant also suggests how valuable the lives of the Taliban are for the country's prosperity. It aims to give emotional support

to the Taliban in an attempt to explain the importance of each Taliban fighter's life in the community and their struggle to free the Afghan nation ('it is very sad that their red blood (loss of life) brought harsh life to the community'). These chants are meant to create a high level of local public support, particularly for the relatives and villagers of the fallen Taliban fighters. Generally, the Afghan public tends to be very sympathetic to a dead or 'martyred' Afghan, even if he is viewed as an enemy.

This chant is also intended to prompt people to side with the Taliban against the foreign forces. One traditional Afghan way to attract popular support is to be humble in the invitation for assistance while at the same time keeping open the door for a participatory struggle. The Taliban encourage all Afghans to join their war against the enemy: 'It is very sad that our companions' gatherings (Majlas) are destroyed.' Also, they convey a message, through this chant, that this holy war is unwinnable without the participation and cooperation of the public: 'It is very sad that my prospects and desires are unachievable.'

Chant 5: Ay Ghrabi Shamara (Oh Western Dragon)

Oh Western dragon! Where will you go when we shut all the ways? Oh Western dragon! Where will you go when we shut all the ways? Oh Western dragon! You have an opportunity to run away now. Hurry and get out of Kabul so that you don't regret when you are captured. Hurry and get out of Kabul so that you don't regret when you are captured.

Oh Western dragon! Where will you go when we shut all the ways? You will leave like a handicapped Russia and you will never gain victory. You will leave like a handicapped Russia and you will never gain victory. Oh Western dragon! If you want to stay healthy, hurry up and apologize for your actions. Oh Western dragon! If you want to stay healthy, hurry up and apologize for your actions.

Oh Western dragon! Where will you go when we shut all the ways? The Afghans cannot be deceived; they are intelligent. Oh Western dragon! You will be ashamed and you won't be able to recover. Oh Western dragon! You will be ashamed and you won't be able to recover. Oh Western dragon! Where will you go when we shut all the ways? This country is a flower in the turban of Asia. This nation is a great champion. This nation is a great champion. This force will make you lose your direction.

Oh Western dragon! Where will you go when we shut all the ways? This country belongs to Ghazi Abdullah. This country belongs to Ghazi Abdullah. Oh Western dragon! This is the residency of Ahmad Shah Baba. Oh Western dragon! Learn from this poetry...

Oh Western dragon! Where will you go when we shut all the ways? Oh Western dragon! Where will you go when we shut all the ways?

Analysis

This *taranas* is an exercise of power by the Taliban and a warning to US and NATO military forces ('Western dragon') in Afghanistan to leave the country while they are still able ('You have an opportunity to run away now. Hurry and get out of Kabul so that you don't regret when you are captured.') The target audience is the Afghan public, although this chant is composed of a series of ultimatums to international forces. In fact, via this chant, the Taliban suggest Afghanistan's degree of power and influence in the region ('This country is a flower in the turban of Asia'). In addition, this chant claims that the Taliban will soon regain power and defeat the enemies by invoking past Afghan victories ('You will leave like a handicapped Russia, and you will never gain victory'). Similar to other chants, the Taliban want to empower their supporters' morale by reminding them of Russia's defeat in Afghanistan and the courage of Afghan national heroes (Ghazi Abdullah, Ahmad Shah Baba) fighting various invading armies throughout history.

While the Taliban were in power, they rarely honored past national heroes because this did not explicitly serve their interest and goals. During their rule, they considered themselves the real and superior Afghan heroes, in part, because they were ready to sacrifice everything for religion and country. However, more recently, they have increasingly used the names of past Afghan heroes in their chants, especially those who fought foreign invaders in past conflicts. Honoring national heroes' achievements and their struggles to defend the country against foreign invaders is a tactic the Taliban now uses to connect to the general public. This tactic also reflects a nationalistic pride:

- By suggesting that Afghanistan 'is a flower in the turban of Asia' and a 'great champion';
- By invoking the legend of Ahmad Shah Durrani ('Ahmad Shah Baba' – Ahmad Shah the 'father'), the founder of the Durrani Empire, and the founder of modern Afghanistan; as well as Abdullah Shah Ghazi, who tradition suggests was a famous commander and conqueror during the Afghan-Anglo Wars.

Afghans generally and fondly recall past historical 'victories', and the Taliban continually play on this by recalling past victories in an effort to engender pride and confidence in their target audience.

Chant 6: Ay Mujahid (Oh Mujahid)

Oh *Mujahid* fellow, you are a champion and courageous man. You are our beloved; you are our pride in the world. You are our beloved; you are our pride in the world. Oh *Mujahid* fellow, you are champion and courageous. You are our beloved man; you are our pride in the world. You are our beloved; you are our pride in the world.

The enemies hear the fearful sound of your sword which won't let them get sleep and relax. You are the thunder to every brutal enemy. You are our beloved; you are our pride in the world. You are our beloved; you are our pride in the world. Oh *Mujahid* fellow, you are champion and courageous man. You are our beloved; you are our pride in the world. You are our beloved; you are our pride in the world.

You devoted yourself and suffered difficulties for the sake of *Allah*. You have defended your bunker with the cost of blood. You have defended your bunker with the cost of your blood. You are a recorded champion in history. You are our beloved; you are our pride in the world. You are our beloved; you are our pride in the world.

Oh *Mujahid* fellow, you are a champion and a courageous man. You are our beloved man; you are our pride in the world. You are our beloved; you are our pride in the world. The country's deserts exist because of your braveness. The deserts are colored with your blood and look like red flowers. You are the beauty of the country and protector of the whole book of Quran. You are our beloved man; you are our pride in the world. You are our beloved; you are our pride in the world.

Oh *Mujahid* fellow, you are a champion and courageous man. You are our beloved; you are our pride in the world. You are our beloved; you are our pride in the world. You are very famous for your bravery and everybody knows about you. I am proud of your heroism; you are..... the solution to our problems. You are our beloved man; you are our pride in the world.

Oh *Mujahid* fellow, you are a champion and courageous man. You are our beloved man; you are our pride in the world.

Analysis

This chant focuses on praising and honoring *mujahidin* (a.k.a. Taliban fighters).³⁴ Interestingly, the Taliban's former ambassador to Pakistan now under house arrest in Kabul, Mullah Salaam Zaeef, stated the group does not refer to its own forces as Taliban, but as *mujahidin*, because only one in ten fighters is a true Taliban, while the rest are 'ordinary Afghans'.³⁵

This type of *taranas* appears to have two central objectives:

- To provide moral support and encouragement to the Taliban, and;
- To assist in the recruitment of new fighters.

To achieve these two objectives, this chant claims that there are four central benefits of being a *mujahid*:

- You become a hero to the people ('you are champion and courageous. You are our beloved man; you are our pride in the world');
- You make history and become a historical figure ('You have defended your bunker with the cost of your blood. You are a recorded champion in

history... You are very famous for your bravery and everybody knows about you.’);

- You become a servant and protector of Islam (‘You devoted yourself and suffered difficulties for the sake of *Allah*... The deserts are colored with your blood and look like red flowers. You are the beauty of the country and protector of the whole book of Quran), and
- You provide protection to the community (‘You have defended your bunker with the cost of your blood... you are champion and courageous’).

All of the aforementioned qualities have immense value in the Afghan culture and community. Moreover, all of these qualities offer moral-related benefits. The Taliban are attempting to suggest that new fighters are not being offered material benefits such as salary, pension, or promotion; rather, in the eyes of the Taliban, the benefits include the protection of their communities and religion.³⁶ The Taliban recognize that helping and defending community is very important to the Afghan public. They regularly play on the fact that the Afghan government has been unable, in most instances, to provide for the protection and defense of the Afghan people. The Taliban portray themselves as ready to provide that security and protection to the Afghan people and to Afghanistan without any foreign support and backing. Their objective is to impress the public by stressing their hope for a secure Afghanistan following decades of war. They know that a large percentage of the Afghan population is extremely war weary.

Interestingly, the chant suggests that a key advantage of joining the Taliban is that it allows one to become a ‘recorded champion in history’. This claim resonates with the Afghan population’s narrative of a proud history complemented by ancestors and historical figures that were great warriors and conquerors. Thus, this chant invites the Afghan people to follow and build upon their ancestors’ struggle to protect the country from foreign invaders. Afghans are generally emotional by nature, and pride themselves in being strong and brave. Chants such as this serve as a reminder of their proud, collective history and invoke memories of their elders and ancestors in defending their territory from invaders. This trope also reinforces the Taliban claim that NATO security forces are foreign occupiers of Afghanistan.

As we have seen in other chants, the Taliban use the appeal of Islam for recruitment and to legitimize their actions. Taliban narratives, in conjunction with the mullah status of many Taliban, allow the Taliban to leverage their religious authority and teachings in support of their cause. Mullahs are an important source for providing narratives, information, and guidance to village populations. Therefore, the public, and especially the rural Afghan, is increasingly under the mullah’s sphere of influence. A large majority of local Afghans are religious, but cannot read religious books and teachings; they rely on the mullah (who is often illiterate himself) to teach and interpret for them the Islamic narrative.³⁷ The religious status and influence of Taliban mullahs as a powerful authority to guide the local population should not be underestimated.

Chant 7: *Badan Zakhmi (Wounded Body)*

Taliban's (My) entire body is wounded. The wounds are colorful. Oh *Allah*, please assist Taliban's Madrassas (religious schools.) My entire body is wounded. The wounds are colorful... Oh *Allah*, please assist Taliban's Madrassas. We are holding martyr's shawl and pray for him. My entire body is wounded. Oh *Allah*, please assist Taliban's Madrassas. After his (Taliban) death, he left his family behind. My entire body is wounded. The wounds are colorful. Oh *Allah*, please assist Taliban's Madrassas.

There is no body to take care of him. My entire body is wounded. The wounds are colorful. Oh *Allah*, please assist Taliban's Madrassas. My entire body is wounded. The wounds are colorful. Oh *Allah*, please assist Taliban's Madrassas. My entire body is wounded. The wounds are colorful... The Islamic nation does not take the lessons [responsibility to assist us]. My entire body is wounded. The wounds are colorful. Oh *Allah*, please assist Taliban's Madrassas. My entire body is wounded. The wounds are colorful.

Oh *Allah*, we only need your treatment. Oh *Allah*, please assist Taliban's Madrassas. Our entire body is wounded. The wounds are colorful.

All the cruel infidel nations oppose him. My entire body is wounded. Oh *Allah*, please assist Taliban's Madrassas. My entire body is wounded. The wounds are colorful. Oh *Allah*, the Taliban defends your religion. My entire body is wounded. Oh *Allah*, please assist Taliban's Madrassas. My entire body is wounded. The wounds are colorful.

Oh courageous Afghan, please be brave [join us].

Oh *Allah*, please be kind to us now. My entire body is wounded. Oh *Allah*, please assist Taliban's Madrassas. My entire body is wounded. The wounds are colorful. My 'Ayobi' prayer is for one whose body is wounded. My entire body is wounded. Oh *Allah*, please assist Taliban's Madrassas. This is a shame for... descendants. My entire body is wounded. The wounds are colorful. The entire body is wounded. The wounds are colorful. Oh *Allah*, please assist Taliban's Madrassas. My entire body is wounded. Oh *Allah*, please assist Taliban's Madrassas. My entire body is wounded.

Analysis

This chant mourns the death of a member of the Taliban, and asks *Allah* to help and save their madrassas. Attracting support and creating sympathy for the Taliban fighters appears to be the specific objective of this chant. Like other chants, this *taranas* illustrates that the Taliban are the true followers of Islam because they sacrifice themselves for the sake of *Allah* and only seek assistance from *Allah*. The chant further implies that although war cost Taliban their lives, they are still determined to seek assistance only from *Allah* because they are true believers of *Allah* and Islam.

They also claim in the chant that they are the sole protectors of madrassas, referencing the religious schools that provide Islamic religious instruction, while also complaining about the Afghan people for their reluctance to join the Taliban. Furthermore, the Taliban do not only state that the motivations behind this war are divine, but also claim that Islam's fate is reliant upon their survival. The Taliban invite people to join and support their cause because Islam is at risk, a common narrative that we have seen in other chants.

Chant 8: Bagh-Baghwan (Garden-Gardener)

It was a blooming garden of flowers but the stranger gardener took over this garden. Every flower's leaves fell down because the autumn is a stranger.

It was a blooming garden of flowers but the stranger gardener took over this garden. Every flower's leaves fell down because the autumn is a stranger.

Every flower's leaves fell down because the autumn is a stranger.

All the deserts stones and plants look forward to see their lovers (Taliban.) We have not seen yet the red lips of those lovers.

All the deserts stones and plants look forward to see their lovers (Taliban.) We have not seen the red lips of those lovers yet.

Analysis

This chant represents an iconic metaphor about how Afghanistan – portrayed as a beautiful flower garden ('blooming garden of flowers') – is being destroyed by foreign forces, portrayed by a 'stranger gardener'. Afghans generally have an affinity for flowers and gardens, and this chant plays on this empathy.³⁸ The chant's narrative concentrates on how a foreign invasion is leading to the destruction of the once prosperous and peaceful Afghanistan, while at the same time they all wait for their 'real lovers' (Taliban). The chant holds foreign forces responsible for all the misery in the country. It argues that Afghanistan was at peace in the past, but the outsiders have devastated everything. It also conveys a message to the people that they are the true caretakers of the country, and that they will soon take control of Afghanistan.

Chant 9: Ghaleem pa Kaano (Enemy by Stones)

Oh Lord, people stone me because of my love for you. The sons of Nomudiaan stone Ezrayel [Angel]. Oh Lord, people stone me because of my love for you. The sons of Nomudiaan stone Ezrayel.

Oh Lord, people stone me because of my love for you. The sons of Nomudiaan stone Ezrayel [Angel]. Oh Lord, people stone me because of my love for you. The sons of Nomudiaan stone Ezrayel.

Analysis

This chant targets the Afghan public and justifies Taliban actions as those of 'holy warriors'. This short but effective chant portrays the Taliban as pure Muslims who suffer all kinds of problems for the love of *Allah* ('Oh Lord, people stone me because of my love for you'). Meanwhile, it claims that all those people who oppose the Taliban, including the Kabul government and the international forces supporting the government in Kabul, are evil. The Taliban often refer to the Karzai government and international forces as the enemies of *Allah* because of their opposition to the Taliban, who claim to fight in the name of *Allah*. The Taliban are ever aware of the notion that most Afghans are highly religious, and this chant plays on those emotions by highlighting Islam as a core of the Taliban lifestyle.

Chant 10: Gulan Paasha (Toss Flowers)

Please come dear friend and throw flowers on my grave. I lie on deserts so please come always.

Please come dear friend and throw flowers on my grave. I lie on deserts so please come always.

Analysis

Although this chant is not fully copied from its original version, the context of the song is obvious. The Taliban believe, as suggested by previous chants, that they are national heroes who are often 'martyred' as they attempt to protect their country and people. This chant encourages people to visit shrines dedicated to dead or martyred Taliban – typically a Sufi tradition, and outlawed under the previous Taliban regime because shrine visitations pre-date Islam. This chant suggests an interesting turn of events, possibly meaning that either the Taliban have become more politically adaptable in their perception of Islam and more flexible about their tolerance of traditional cultural norms, or possibly this *taranas* was created by a more localized, non-ideologically aligned segment of the insurgency who reflect more traditional Afghan values. In sum, this chant may represent the true face of local resistance in Afghanistan comprised of indigenous Afghans who are less influenced by the radical interpretation of Islam subscribed to by neighboring Pakistani Taliban fronts, than by ancient traditional customs and Sufi influences observed in rural Afghanistan.

Afghans generally have a high level of respect for the shrines of national heroes, influential figures, and religious leaders. Moreover, nearly every village, town, and city in southern Afghanistan has a shrine visited by local Afghans for a variety of reasons. They often visit shrines and pray beside the graves of deceased ancestors. Many local Afghans believe that some shrines hold the keys to solving problems faced by individuals and communities today. For example, Afghans often go to shrines to ask for help for their sick children or relatives, to pray for

betterment of their family relationships, or to ask for increased economic opportunities and wealth. It is also common for Sufi and Shi'a Afghans to visit similar shrines in the Pashtun areas of Pakistan. The observation of this tradition on the Pakistan side of the border has drawn heavy criticism and resentment from the Pakistani Taliban who habitually bomb and kill visitors to such shrines, as witnessed during an early July 2010 attack against a Sufi shrine in Lahore, Pakistan that killed 37 and wounded 180 others.³⁹ In summary, this chant plays on the people's affinity for shrines, and implicitly asks Afghans to consider the Taliban as national heroes whose only purpose is to save the Afghan people from outsiders and foreign invaders – a central justification for their war against the Afghan government and international forces.

Chant 11: Jama ki da dosthai (In the Clothes of Friendship)

The enemies have come in the shape of friends. They look like human beings but they are wild animals. The act of disuniting people stays in their blood and their messages are look like flowers but they are full of poison. They have come under the banner of the friends but they are murderers.

The enemies have come in the shape of friends. They look like human beings but they are wild animals. I have always made the destiny of this country. I have brought happiness and beauty to my country. They have come under the name of sympathy but they are muggers. They have come under the name of sympathy but they are muggers.

The enemies have come in a shape of friend. They look like human beings but they are wild animals. They are Jewish but half of them are idolaters. They are fire worshippers who came from East and West.

Analysis

This chant, like the others we have analyzed above, challenges the presence of international forces in Afghanistan. It focuses on the notion of false friends.

Generally, Afghans take the issue of friendship very seriously. They have a tendency to respect those who call themselves friends of Afghanistan. In this chant the Taliban claims that foreigners:

- Appear as 'friends' but are really 'wild animals,' 'murderers', and 'muggers';
- Present messages that 'look like flowers' but are really 'full of poison'.

This chant tells the people to beware the international forces because they are insidious, false friends. The Taliban often use terms such as 'disunity,' 'unreal or false friends', and 'deception and non-believers' in their propaganda narratives. If we carefully assess these terms, we will be reminded of Afghanistan's former invading powers (the British Empire and Soviet Union). Afghans recall that Soviet forces consistently referred to themselves as 'friends to the Afghan

people' while they bombed and raped Afghans. Indeed, there are many common local stories concerning this topic, which nearly all Afghans have heard numerous times. This chant reinforces these stories and may be aimed at creating suspicion of all foreigners who offer friendship but are perceived as not having fulfilled promises since 2001.

Chant 12: Pashtun Mayaan (Pashtun Lover)

Be brave and get the gun, those are not Pashtun who fight at the house like a fox. Get the sword of your ancestors because the infidels have come to our innocent Afghanistan. Please protect Haji Mullah Dadullah because the Taliban are proud of him.

Get your swords and let's be united. All the streets are full of non-believers. My country is my belief. Whoever further destroys our country, *Allah* may give them punishment in the hell. I am with the Taliban because it is the army of Islam and I want to impress *Allah*. The mother of martyr cries while his coffin is carried by the Angels of the sky. *Allah* says that our brothers are alive, the Taliban are colored with blood.

Analysis

We received this chant as part of a video, which showed the chant being sung by a local Afghan singer at a picnic. The video is significant in that it indicates that the Taliban have been able to spread some of their chants using local singers. Weekend picnics like the one displayed in the video are very popular in Afghanistan, especially for urban Afghans who leave the city – Kandahar in this instance – to picnic in rural village areas. We find it very interesting that local singers who are often hired to entertain at these picnics would sing a Taliban chant that implicitly indicates the presence and influence of the Taliban in the area.

Although this chant seems like a mix of various other chants, it still presents very powerful messages about the Taliban and their *jihad* against international security forces. For example, this chant encourages Pashtuns to use their courage and honor ('Get the sword of your ancestors') – central components of Pashtunwali – to protect Afghanistan from the non-believers' invasion. The chant also includes requests for Afghans to join the *jihad* and to protect Mullah Dadullah (a slain Taliban commander known for his brutal and inhumane battlefield behavior). Familiar refrains about the righteousness of the Taliban, the proud history of the Afghans in expelling infidel foreign invaders, and the power of Islam and the Taliban are also prominent in this chant.

Chant 13: Taliban Nasheed (Taliban Ode)

I will defeat Khalilzad's red brothers. I will defeat American and British forces. I will be neither tricked nor deceived.

I will defeat Khalilzad's red brothers. I will defeat American and British forces. I will be neither tricked nor deceived.

I will not be tricked and deceived. I will defeat American and British forces. I will defeat American and British forces.

I have power in my arms to defeat these forces. I have power in my arms to defeat these forces. I want to announce today that I will break the teeth of Westerners.

I will defeat American and British forces. I want to announce today that I will break the teeth of Westerners.

I will be neither tricked nor deceived. I will defeat Khalilzad's red brothers. I will defeat American and British forces. I will defeat American and British forces.

The outsiders live in Kabul and I publically say that I will defeat American and British forces.

I will defeat American and British forces. I publically say that I will defeat American and British forces. I will defeat American and British forces.

I will not be tricked and deceived.

I will defeat American and British forces. I will come down from bunkers with power and dignity. I will come down from bunkers with power and dignity. I will destroy pharaoh's residency in these valleys.

I will defeat American and British forces. I will break pharaoh's residency in these valleys.

I will defeat American and British forces. I will not be tricked and deceived.

I will defeat American and British forces. I will break crusade and crusaders. I will defeat American and British forces.

Analysis

This chant is recorded as background sound for a video of Mullah Dadullah Mansour and his fighters.⁴⁰ It is sung as a way of demonstrating Taliban power, and to let the public know that they will defeat their enemies. The video shows Mansour visiting a suicide bomber training camp and giving a speech to very young trainees at the camp. It is an emotional and motivating chant that focuses on giving moral support to fighters. The chant focuses primarily on the idea that Taliban victory over American and British forces is inevitable.

Interestingly, the chant also refers to former Presidential Special Envoy and US Ambassador to Afghanistan from 2003 to 2005, Zalmay Khalilzad, in the opening refrain. The chant insinuates that Ambassador Khalilzad was allied with the 'communists' in Afghanistan, invoking the Soviet experience in Afghanistan ('I will defeat Khalilzad's red brothers'). We suspect that this chant might be referring to a specific group of Taliban that operates in regions within the British and American forces' areas of responsibility (e.g. in Helmand Province). Alternatively, the American and British forces may have also been invoked in

this chant because they are well known today by most Afghans across southern Afghanistan.

Chant 14: Taliban reciting Nasheed (Ode)

Women fought on the battlefield because they wanted to act for the sake of Islam. The Muslim is reliant upon *Allah*. The war is for *Allah* (there is no other God but him).

The Muslim is reliant upon *Allah*. The war is for *Allah* (there is no other God but him).

In the war of Uhud, our beloved prophet got injured. The war is for *Allah* (there is no other God but him). The war is for *Allah* (there is no other God but him).

Analysis

Although we only have a portion of this chant (we obtained it as part of a video); the main theme of the chant is *jihad*. The video shows a group of Taliban singing this chant with Arab fighters watching them. This is the only chant we have heard that refers to the women's role in defending Islam. We suspect that term 'women' is used either to persuade males to join the *jihad*, or to seek the involvement of females in Taliban military operations.

The chant suggests that the fight against the Afghan government and international forces is a 'war for *Allah*.' Hence the message to the Afghan people is that there is only worthy motive behind this war, and that is to serve Islam. This chant implicitly dismisses a notion held by many that the Taliban fight for power and wealth – a charge often leveled against the Taliban.

Conclusion

Our analysis of Taliban chants suggests that the Taliban carefully pick the topics to be portrayed in their *taranas*. We believe that their chants are developed explicitly to reflect values held dear by most Afghans and by Pashtuns in particular. It is also interesting to note that many of the narratives and topics presented in the chants are also featured in other types of Taliban propaganda, such as night letters.⁴¹ Unlike Western information operations campaigns in Afghanistan that seem to try to cover a multitude of topics and issues, the Taliban have limited the topics their chants and other propaganda artifacts address.

Simple, culturally relevant messages communicated in local dialects project these messages into the popular Afghan consciousness through messages that resonate deeply with local Afghan communities. While the chants we analyzed have focused on a variety of key topics, including Afghan history, religion, and tradition, the specific themes the Taliban *taranas* address are limited in scope. The chants' overarching themes include:

- Taliban victory in the cosmic conflict is inevitable;
- Islam cannot be defeated;
- The Taliban are ‘national heroes’ and willing to sacrifice all for *Allah* and country;
- Afghans have a long and honorable history of defeating invading foreign infidels;
- Foreign invaders as well as their Afghan puppets are attempting to destroy Afghan religion and traditions; and
- All Afghans have an obligation to join the *jihad* against the foreigners and apostates.

The themes portrayed by Taliban chants are relatively unadorned and to the point. The themes are presented through the use of symbology and iconic portraits engendered in emotions of sorrow, pride, desperation, hope, and complaints. Each of these themes and topics are presented in a narrative and poetic form that is familiar to and resonates with the local people. When one listens to the chants, their rhythmic and melodic form is immediately apparent.

Islam, and a Muslim’s duty to protect it, is one of the central themes the Taliban use to influence people and gain recruits; it is a powerful motivator among rural Afghans. The Taliban have been able to use Islamic rhetoric effectively in their chants to help legitimize their actions, and to help fuel Afghan anger against the foreign forces. Most Afghans accept *Allah’s* divine will, and believe that *Allah* will punish the oppressor (foreign invader) because *Allah* is fair and just. In rural Afghanistan, and even in some urban areas, mullahs hold a near monopoly of power over religion, and they instruct people about what is right or wrong. This association between mullahs and Afghanistan’s rural population has developed into a powerful patron–client relationship. The Taliban have used the mullahs to present a coordinated narrative to the people. Undoubtedly, the Taliban have been able to manipulate religion, and have used this manipulation as a powerful weapon in their *jihad* against the Afghan government and its international allies.

Our analysis of these chants also suggests that cultural values and traditions are used by the Taliban to shift public loyalties away from the government. Our analysis clearly suggests that many of the Taliban chants attempt to connect emotionally with Afghans through the chants’ explicit use of examples from Afghan history, and through appeals to Afghan nationalism. The Afghan public is generally proud of their history and their ancestors’ performance in defending Afghanistan against foreign invaders over the centuries. Chants that focus on these sentiments remind Afghans of past foreign invasions (by Great Britain and the Soviet Union), and suggest the ignoble motivations of the foreign invaders: ‘they may appear as friends but they have more sinister motives.’

Our analysis clearly suggests that the Taliban attempts to use and manipulate Afghan culture and traditions through their chants. For example, the use of *gila* (complaints), a traditional tool that is tied to Pashtun lifestyle, was used in a

number of the chants. In addition, the Taliban have used chants to appeal to subtle Afghan emotions.

Some of the chants posit that the Taliban are actually the victims rather than the perpetrators of war. These chants portray the Taliban as an innocent and humble people, while simultaneously portraying US and ISAF forces as evil and reckless invaders. The Taliban also use metaphors in their chants to send indirect messages to the Afghan people aligning themselves with Afghan traditions. At the risk of over-generalization, Afghans frequently communicate indirectly, using idioms and poetic expressions when they want to complain about something without directly or explicitly stating their concerns. For example, in the chant 'Bagh-Baghwān', we saw how the Taliban compared a blooming garden of flowers with Afghanistan, and a strange gardener as the foreign forces.

All of this begs the question, is there a realistic way to counter Taliban chants and other Taliban narrative expressions? The simple answer is that countering Taliban narratives is an extremely difficult and often almost impossible task for the West because of sensitivities concerning religious themes that dominate the Taliban narrative space, not to mention the lack of Western linguistic capabilities, including the understanding and mastering the poetic nature of local dialects. Nevertheless, there are some general lessons based on our analysis that should be considered. The United States and ISAF would be well advised to study Taliban propaganda carefully, and to learn from the Taliban's information operations strategies. Quite simply, the Taliban clearly know what resonates with the Afghan population, and their narratives reflect this. They understand relevant cultural referents and themes, and of course, local traditions. We do not.

Songs and chants are important mechanisms for storing and sharing Afghan memories, and a thorough understanding of these cultural artifacts as well as Afghan history could play an important role in helping to win the trust and confidence of the Afghan people. A more nuanced understanding of these elements is essential to building our own influential communication bridges with the Afghan populous. Taliban chants and other narratives seem to work effectively because of their simplicity, cultural relevance, iconic symbology, and repetition.

In conclusion, the Taliban chants as well as the process by which they were being distributed, as witnessed by the senior author in Kandahar City in June 2009, represent almost a kind of metaphor for the problems that the United States and NATO/ISAF have faced in Afghanistan. That is, the West has attempted to apply methods and pursue policies in both military and civil-political domains without understanding what was transpiring between individual Afghans. The West has not clearly understood those influences that sway and inspire Afghan behavior. The US and its NATO allies developed objectives based on *their* view and desires for Afghanistan, not based on the views and requirements of the common Afghan who represents the 'center of gravity' for this conflict. The US and NATO then made promises that they did not deliver on, at least in the eyes of

Afghans (a disastrous and dangerous situation in Afghanistan). As a villager from Sperwan Ghar, Panjwayi District of Kandahar province recently suggested to the senior author, ‘they [the coalition forces] promised to build but they destroyed instead.’

The US and NATO would have been well advised during the initial stages of Operation Enduring Freedom to ask simple questions about what Afghans – not just the elite in Kabul, technocrats, and ex-pats – really wanted from the West’s engagement. What are the messages and the frames that motivate and influence Afghans? What is the best way to spread a message? Such questions were never systematically asked, resulting in many of our policies as well as strategies being misapplied in the eyes of the Afghan population. By contrast, the Taliban *taranas* appear to be deeply rooted in the Afghan psyche. They appeal to emotions the West do not and have not tried to understand. This lack of understanding, in part, has ultimately doomed Western engagement in Afghanistan.

Acknowledgements

The views expressed in this article should not be construed as an official position or policy of the US government, Department of Defense, or Naval Postgraduate School. The authors would like to thank David Betz, J. Martin Daughtry, Matthew Dupee, David Edwards, and Harold Ingram for comments on an earlier draft of this article.

Notes

1. For a previous analysis of Taliban propaganda and narratives in the form of ‘night letters’, see Johnson, ‘The Taliban Insurgency and an Analysis of Shabnamah (Night Letters)’.
2. Generally, see Sakata, *Music in the Mind*.
3. Emadi, *Culture and Customs of Afghanistan*, 103.
4. A particularly important type of Afghan folk song is known as *nakhta* and is usually sung by women to mourn death or in honor of heroic figures.
5. For overviews of Sufi history and philosophy, see Baldick, *Mystical Islam*; Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*; and Trimmingham, *The Sufi Orders of Islam*.
6. During the Afghan mujahidin regime of Burhanuddin Rabbani (1992–96) music was also heavily censored and discouraged. Musicians had to apply formally for special licenses, and only males could perform at private indoor ceremonies or gatherings. See Baily, ‘The Censorship of Music in Afghanistan’.
7. By 2009, analysts estimated nearly 500 shops that sold music CDs and cassettes had been burned and looted in the Swat region of Pakistan alone. Yousafzai, ‘Music Has Died in the Swat Valley’; Freemuse, ‘Taliban Group Issues New Ban on Sale of Music’.
8. Siddique, ‘Understanding the Taliban’s Campaign Against Music’. Also see ‘British Ethnomusicologist: “It Isn’t Actually Correct to Say Taliban Have Banned Music”’.
9. Baily, ‘Can You Stop the Birds Singing? The Censorship of Music in Afghanistan’.
10. Loy Kandahar is a common term used by Afghans to describe the contemporary provinces of Kandahar, Helmand, Uruzgan, and Zabul.
11. Interview with Kandahar City resident by Thomas H. Johnson, June 2009.

12. Ibid.
13. The Taliban usage of poetry follows the boundaries of Ghazal, which is arguably the most popular classical form of poetry. We suspect the Taliban use similar techniques to their creation of *taranas*.
14. Thomas H. Johnson interviews of Kandahari residents (urban and rural), June–July 2009.
15. Thomas H. Johnson interview with Kandahar City resident, August 2010.
16. Numerous conversations between Thomas H. Johnson and US military or government personnel.
17. For Taliban magazines, see ‘Morchal Monthly Magazine’, Alemarah, accessed 30 August 2010, <http://ia360709.us.archive.org/4/items/morchal-june-2011/morchal-june-2010.pdf>; ‘Shahamat’, Alemarah, accessed 30 August 2010, <http://www.alemarah-ia.com/website/>; ‘Sarak Monthly Magazine’, Alemarah, accessed 30 August 2010, <http://www.alemarah-ia.com/website/>; ‘Taliban Tarana’, Getalyric, accessed 30 August 2010, http://www.getalyric.com/listen/sOzf78NLS00/taliban_tarana
18. For Taliban websites, see ‘Alemarah Taliban Poetry Section’, Alemarah, accessed 30 August 2010, http://www.alemarah-ia.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&id=7&Itemid=15; ‘Alemarah Taliban Tarana Section’, Alemarah, accessed 30 August 2010, <http://www.alemarah-ia.com/>
19. For a couple of recent YouTube examples, (all accessed 18 January 2011): http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d0wp40GN12w&feature=mfu_in_order&list=UL; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=89-6sSugaTE&list=ULBJ-M4lnmWSg&playnext=1>; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TWsMGTP-83k&list=ULBJ-M4lnmWSg&playnext=2>; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3h4AwEkiZog>; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rJo6hBxCEiw>; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qC93txcHc44&NR=1>; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QbAZJoO16-0>; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=URiILqoEVC4>; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FrzGTLA4Rqo&playnext=1&list=PLC26CBBF8AE7B52BB&index=5>; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FrzGTLA4Rqo&playnext=1&list=PLC26CBBF8AE7B52BB&index=5>; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=shGTGqyxPmU>; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yxz1sQv1Cv4>
20. We are indebted to Alex Strick van Linschoten for graciously sharing with us CDs of Taliban chants, June 2009, Kandahar City.
21. The Naval Postgraduates Program for Culture and Conflict Studies staff translated all the Taliban chants.
22. See Dupree, *Afghanistan*; Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan*.
23. Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan*, 242 defines a *qawm* as a ‘communal group, whose sociological basis may vary. It may be a clan (in tribal zones) a village, an ethnic group, an extended family, or a professional group.’
24. Isby, *Afghanistan: A New History of the Borderland*, 47, emphasis added.
25. We are interested in how the chants relate to Pashtun values and we use Hofstede’s definition of value as ‘a broad tendency to prefer certain states of affairs over others’ (Hofstede, *Culture’s Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values*, 18).
26. Johnson, ‘The Taliban Insurgency and an Analysis of *Shabnamah* (Night Letters)’, 339.
27. Ibid.
28. For a discussion of ‘cosmic threats’, see Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*.
29. For statements concerning an analysis of anti-US sentiments among the Afghan public, see, for example, ‘NATO Forces in Afghanistan Can’t Deny They Killed Civilians in Sangin Anymore’, YouTube, accessed 30 August 2010, <http://www>.

- youtube.com/watch?v=E4m6tQudSpI&feature=player_embedded; 'TIME's Cover, the CIA and Afghan Women', Firedoglake, accessed 30 August 2010, <http://firedoglake.com/2010/08/06/times-cover-the-cia-and-afghan-women/>; Salahudin, 'Karzai Orders Probe into Afghan Civilian Deaths Reports'; Gall, 'Afghans Want a Deal on Foreign Troops'.
30. Pashtun tribal traditions or literally 'the way of the Pashtun'.
 31. Based on interviews by Thomas H. Johnson in Kandahar City and the Dand and Panjwayi Districts of Kandahar Province, August 2010.
 32. Based on a Thomas H. Johnson discussion with a resident of Kandahar City, June 2010, and others in August 2010.
 33. For example, Afghanistan qualified to play in the Cricket World Cup (ICC World Twenty20 Tournament) after achieving first position in a qualifying round in Dubai in February 2010. Afghanistan and Oman shared the Asian Cricket Council (ACC) Twenty20 Cup in November 2007; in winter 2007, Afghanistan participated in the Asian Winter Games, which was held in Changchun, China; in 2007, the Afghan cricket team were finalists in the Asian Cricket Council (ACC) U-19 Elite Cup; in 2008, Afghanistan competed at the Summer Olympics in Beijing, China. Rohullah Nikpai made history by winning Afghanistan's first Olympic medal. He defeated world champion Juan Antonio Ramos of Spain to take the bronze in the men's under 58-kilogram Taekwondo competition; in 2010, Afghanistan defeated Nepal to win for the first time, the Asian Cricket Council (ACC) Trophy Elite competition.
 34. This chant is very different from others in not referring to themselves as Taliban, but rather mujahidin. The Taliban initially did not use the term because of the perception it carried, it harkened back to the dark days of 1992–94 when the mujahidin destroyed Kabul and killed thousands of Afghans. Now the Taliban openly refer to their loyalists as mujahidin in an attempt to expand their base to include 'all Afghans resistant to the Afghan govt. and ISAF' and probably encompass independent factions as well, such as al Fath, Hezb-i-Islami, foreign fighters, Haqqani loyalists, Tora Bora Military Front, the Islamic Emirate of Nuristan fighters led by Sheikh Dost Mohammad, etc.
 35. Straziuso, 'The Kabul Quagmire'. Also see Zaeef, *My Life with the Taliban*.
 36. Based on interviews with numerous Kandaharis, June 2009, Kandahar City.
 37. Johnson, 'Religious Figures, Insurgency, and Jihad in Southern Afghanistan', 52.
 38. It is interesting to note that 'gul' meaning flower, is a common component of many Afghan names, especially those of Afghan men (e.g. Gul Agha Sherzai, Gul Mohmand).
 39. http://www.twincities.com/national/ci_15424622?source=rss&nlick_check=1 (accessed 18 January 2011). Also see Johnson, 'Religious Figures, Insurgency, and Jihad in Southern Afghanistan'.
 40. Mullah Dadullah Mansour, also known as Shah Mansour Dadullah and Mullah Bakht Mohammad, is the younger brother of slain Taliban strategist and 'southern zone' commander Mullah Dadullah. Shah Mansour replaced his brother as southern zone commander following the latter's death in May 2007 and was later expelled from the Taliban movement following a public disagreement with the Taliban's Supreme leader Mullah Omar in late 2007. Mullah Dadullah Mansour was subsequently shot and arrested by Pakistani authorities as he crossed into Baluchistan on 12 February 2008.
 41. See Johnson, 'The Taliban Insurgency and an Analysis of *Shabnamah* (Night Letters)'.

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