

Communication and Strategy of the Afghan Taliban, from the perspective of its leadership

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Executive Summary

On 28 December 2014, the ISAF (International Security and Assistance Force) in Afghanistan came to an official end. On that day the responsibility for security in the country was handed over to the Afghan government in Kabul. One of the biggest challenges facing Afghanistan is the continuing violent struggle with the Taliban. It is not clear if (and under what conditions) the Taliban might be willing to participate in the political process, or whether they want to continue the fight with the aim to overthrow the government by force. Insight into the future positioning of the Taliban is important, not only to Kabul, but also to NATO. The latter will continue to support the government with a limited military presence in the country, at least until 2017. The Netherlands will also remain involved in this effort to support the government in Kabul by their contribution to the NATO mission *Resolute Support*¹ and the involvement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Development Aid and Diplomacy.

As a result of a more limited military presence of the Netherlands in Afghanistan the Dutch information position regarding the Taliban has decreased as well. Realizing that insight in the developments in Afghanistan in general and the Taliban in particular will remain relevant to the Netherlands, the question rises to what extent the public communication by the Taliban could provide insight into the (future) positioning and conduct of this organization. This general question is divided into the following two research questions:

1. To what extent is Taliban communication about their ideology, goals and strategy in line with their actual conduct?
2. Can Taliban communication be used as a means to forecast the future positioning and conduct of this organization?

This research is based on a literature study for which academic works, reports by national and international organisations, government reports and journalist articles are consulted. This literature study is complemented with new empirical analysis. For practical reasons, this empirical research only covers the period between June 11, 2011 and December 28, 2014. President Obama's announcement in the summer of 2011 of the gradual withdrawal of US forces has been chosen as the starting point. The ISAF mission came to an end on 28 December, which is therefore taken as the end date of the empirical analysis. The comparison between what the Taliban leadership says and what the Taliban do in practice

¹ "Eerste militairen Afghanistanmissie onderweg," *De Volkskrant*, 21 november, 2014.

is limited to four themes that provide insight into the ideology, goals and strategy of the Taliban. These four themes are: the relationship between the Taliban and al-Qaida, the position of the Taliban vis-à-vis education, the willingness of the Taliban to negotiate with the government in Kabul, and the Taliban's attitude towards civilian casualties in the Afghan conflict.

The Taliban's ambiguous organizational structure, the equally opaque relationships with other extremist groups in the region, and the questions regarding the level of authority and power of the Taliban central leadership make it particularly difficult to speak of 'the' Taliban. Likewise it is also hard to speak of 'the' Taliban communications, considering the various differences in form, content and, to some extent, intended audiences. As a result a decision had to be made with regard to the emphasis of the research and the use of sources to map Taliban communication.

As this research is specifically focused on the question if and to what extent the communication by the Taliban can provide insight into the (future) positioning and conduct of this organization, it makes sense to concentrate on that part of the organization that has the most influence on this: its leadership. Out of pragmatic considerations, this study specifically focuses on communication in English. It uses sources that can be ascribed to the Taliban leadership. These sources are the statements and interviews posted on the Taliban website called '*Voice of Jihad*' (www.shahamat-english.com). The English language content on this site offers an opportunity to see what the Taliban leadership is communicating with regard to the four selected themes and allows us to gain more insight into their ideology, aims and strategy in general. This communication can then be compared to the actual conduct of the Taliban in these four domains. The mapping of the conduct of the Taliban has been based on academic and journalist works and reports by national and international organisations and governments.

Relationship with al-Qaida

Studying the public communication of the Taliban leadership pertaining to the Taliban and their relationship with al-Qaida shows that there is little communication that is publically released on this relationship. Different literature and the opinions of various experts on this specific topic also do not give a clear picture of the actual relationship between the two organizations. Nonetheless, it can be observed that the Taliban leadership does not explicitly disclose nor deny a relationship with al-Qaida, both in the past and in the present. It remains an open question why the leadership does not want to be clear about this relationship. Possibly, there is very little contact between both organizations, or the organization is split over the question how to deal with al-Qaida. Another possibility is that a disclosure of a relationship with al-Qaida could jeopardize the possibility to be regarded as a legitimate political actor. At the same time, a denial of any relationship could jeopardize the public support for the Taliban. Against this backdrop, to remain silent on this issue is probably the best option to the Taliban leadership.

Education

On the English version of their website, the leadership of the Taliban stresses the importance of education for both boys and girls and of modern education. A prerequisite is that education has to be organized according to Islamic rules. In its statements, the Taliban leadership also denies being involved in attacks against schools. Moreover, since 2009, its *Layeha* (code of conduct of the Taliban) does no longer call for violence against schools. Nonetheless, statistics of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) show that the number of attacks against schools has risen in recent years. There are several possible explanations for the difference between what the Taliban leadership says and what is happening on the ground. First, the Taliban are not the only actors that actually attack (secular) schools. Other militant groups also conduct these violent acts. Second, there might simply be limited or bad lines of communication between the Taliban leadership and local Taliban. There could also be different points of view between the Taliban military commission and the commission for education of the Taliban leadership. What to expect from the Taliban in the years to come with regard to education is difficult to say when studying the communication of the Taliban leadership. At the strategic level, education for boys and girls seems to be regarded to be an important issue, but the way this is interpreted and implemented at the local level seems to differ.

Negotiations with Kabul

With regard to the topic of negotiations between the Taliban and the government in Kabul there seems to be a discrepancy between the publications of the Taliban leadership on their website and what happens in reality. The general message is quite clear: no negotiations with the government in Kabul as long as there are Western military forces in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, the Taliban opened a political office in Doha (Qatar) and sent representatives to several international conferences on Afghanistan. It is not clear whether or not there were negotiations between the Taliban and other parties. This lack of openness is, however, not unusual during negotiations between parties that are at war. Because of this situation it is difficult to draw conclusions about the differences between what the Taliban says and what it does in practice regarding negotiations. Yet, there seem to be talks between the Taliban and other parties.

Casualties among civilians

In their public communication, the Taliban leadership stress the need to prevent civilian casualties and on the other hand, emphasize the number of casualties caused by the international and Afghan forces. On their website, the Taliban claim that they do everything in their power to prevent civilian casualties. Despite these statements, the violent actions of the Taliban have caused many casualties among ordinary Afghan citizens. In their statements, the leadership is very clear on who is to be considered a civilian (and therefore a civilian casualty), claiming that anyone who is associated with the Kabul government or the international forces should be considered an enemy and therefore a legitimate target. This is in strong contrast to the definition of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) that has monitored the number of civilian casualties in the Afghan conflict

since 2007. UNAMA claims that the number of civilian casualties has increased in the last years. The discrepancy between their numbers and the viewpoint of the Taliban can partly be explained due to this difference in definition. However, it seems highly plausible that the Taliban are partly responsible for the rising numbers of civilian casualties in the Afghan conflict as reported by UNAMA. Whether this is intentional or not is more difficult to determine. The message of the Taliban leadership regarding civilian casualties might not reach local Taliban, might get distorted or might simply be disobeyed.

Analysis

The first question of this research was: 'To what extent is Taliban communication about their ideology, goals and strategy in line with their actual conduct?'. Based on the above it can be concluded that the public communication of the Taliban leadership and what happens in practice correspond only to a limited extent. This does not necessarily mean that the leadership says one thing and does another. There are many different explanations possible for the discrepancies between words and actions that have more to do with internal miscommunications or a lack of control over the Taliban movement in total.

The answer to the second research question 'Can Taliban communication be used as a means to forecast the future positioning and conduct of this organization?' is that the English communications of the Taliban leadership on the *Shahamat*-website only provide limited insight in the future actions of the Taliban. This is not to say that their statements do not express the intentions of the Taliban leadership. The studying of the communications of the leadership provide some insight in the viewpoints of this leadership on strategically and ideologically important themes, or at least on how that leadership wants to be perceived by the rest of the world.

In their public communications, the leadership emphasizes regularly they consider themselves the legitimate representatives of Afghanistan. Also, the leadership seems to acknowledge their poor reputation in the international world and at least in their statements attempt to try and refute this image. They stress, for instance, that they are strong advocates for education for both boys and girls. Their communications on their relationship with al-Qaida underscore this idea. The opening of the political office in Doha could point to the idea that the Taliban leadership is aware of the need to open up to the international community if they wish to be taken seriously as an international actor. In their communications as protector of the Afghan people, they seem to try and present themselves as a legitimate political actor instead of only a group of insurgents.

In sum, the comparing of words and deed of the Taliban leadership provides a better understanding in images and realities of a closed and complex movement. At first sight, the expressions of the leadership seem straight forward, but after closer analysis, their viewpoints seem less binary. The communications of the leadership indicate a rigid ideological movement, yet their actions reveal a more pragmatic approach. All in all, studying the communication of the Taliban leadership and comparing it to the Taliban conduct in practice offers valuable insight into images and realities, though it remains difficult to be able to forecast the future positioning and conduct of the Taliban.