The Taliban’s Online Emirate

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Neil Aggarwal, a Harvard- and Yale-trained psychiatrist, has turned his many talents to an analysis of *The Taliban's Virtual Emirate* emergent over the last decade. While a number of studies have been published on al-Qaeda’s virtual world and some on the Islamic State (ISIS), rather little is available on the Taliban’s cyber presence. Dr. Aggarwal utilizes his training in cultural psychiatry and medical anthropology to address this gap and does so with a depth of perspective uncommon in many analytical works.

Aggarwal formulates a comparative analysis of Taliban texts and content in English, Arabic, Dari, Pashto, and Urdu to address how the Taliban configures its virtual messaging to enhance the sociopolitical awareness of its distinct target audiences thereby increasing support for the neo-Taliban insurgency.

During the 1980s, foreshadowing modern Taliban efforts in the cyber domain, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar’s Hizb-e Islami began publishing hard copy Islamist periodicals in Arabic, Pashto, Dari, Urdu, and English during the Jihad against the Soviets. According to Aggarwal, this enhanced the organization’s recruitment efforts by motivating Afghan students from those years to see politics through the lens of religion rather than merely considering Islam in terms of Qur’anic recitation and Hadith examinations. Hekmatyar’s foresight portended the Taliban’s Virtual Emirate.
THE PAKISTANI INFLUENCE

Aggarwal notes that the particular Pakistani madrasa network that shaped the worldview of students who would later lead the Taliban prepared them for both a strict interpretation of Islam and political activism. The madrasas that trained the Taliban leadership, many of whom were war orphans from the Soviet occupation, were said to have originated at the inspiration of the Dār al-ʿUlām Islamic School, founded in Deoband, India in 1867 by scholar-jurists Muhammad Qasim Nanotvi, Rasheed Ahmed Gangohi, and ‘Abid Husaiyn. Since the early twentieth century, Deobandi scholars trained in these networks have fostered political mobilization across the Pashtun territories, from modern Pakistan’s Indus River to Afghanistan’s Amu River. Although Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar was from the Ghilzai tribe, the bulk of the original Taliban leadership learning in the Deobandi tradition came from Afghanistan’s Durrani tribe and were largely trained in the Darul Uloom Haqqani and Jamiatul Uloomil Islamiyyah madrasas in Pakistan.

The first incarnation of the Taliban emerged in the chaotic aftermath of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989 which left an amalgam of warring sovereignties. Gulbuddin Hekmatyar’s Pashtuns dominated the south in competition with Ismail Khan’s Afghan Shia, Abdul Rashid Dostum’s Uzbeks ruled in the north, and Ahmed Shah Massoud’s Tajiks controlled the northeast. Traders whose smuggling business between Central Asia and South Asia had been disrupted by the civil war provided much of the initial funding which allowed the Taliban to coalesce in 1994 and establish a new and somewhat stable Islamic order.

THE RISE OF OMAR

The Taliban ruled Afghanistan only briefly, between 1997 and 2001, and during that time they were known abroad and particularly in the West for an insularity defined by an ideology that fused Deobandi interpretations of Islam with Pashtun tribal honor codes. Aggarwal necessarily portrays Mullah Omar through a limited set of sources encompassing a few interviews, recollections from Omar’s associates, statements by Mullah Omar at religious festivals, and by a total of thirty-four orders issued by Omar and included in every issue of the Urdu language periodical Sharīʿat. Omar himself is portrayed in contrary vignettes as living opulently in Kabul while ruling Afghanistan, although simultaneously humble in dress and personal habits. Likewise, sophisticated prose has been attributed to Omar while by all accounts his formal education was virtually non-existent. Aggarwal describes a crucial event shaping Mullah Omar’s worldview that occurred in 1996 when he put on a cloak that was allegedly worn by Mohammed and, according to one story, given to Mohammed by
Enoch at the gate of the fourth heaven. In 1996, the cloak (Kerqa) was located adjacent to the main mosque in Kandahar under the control of the Akhundzada family who acted as the cloak’s traditional guardians. It was provided to Omar and he donned it atop a platform in front of a crowd including scholar-jurists from Afghanistan and Pakistan. The crowd then began to proclaim Omar *Amir al-Mu’minin* or Commander of the Faithful. This was the title favored by Caliph ʿUmar Ibn Al-Khattab (579–644 CE). The intentions of the Afghan and Pakistani scholar-jurists were presumably limited to solidifying Mullah Omar’s leadership between rival factions of Ghilzai scholar-jurists from Kabul and Durrani scholar-jurists from Kandahar rather than any intention to declare Omar the new Caliph. But he instead took the title seriously and apparently attempted to pattern himself after ʿUmar, or at least his rural Afghan folk view of Caliph ʿUmar, which likely had little in common with scholarly assessments of Caliph ʿUmar or his Caliphate.

**AFTER 9/11, THE NEO-TALIBAN**

Aggarwal describes how, following the American-led invasion of Afghanistan in late 2001 in the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 (9/11) Islamist attacks on New York City and Washington, DC, the Taliban quickly scattered to the winds. Hamid Karzai, backed by the Northern Alliance, was initially installed to the leadership under United Nations authority, though he was later “elected” in 2004 as the country’s President. Over time, the Taliban’s supporters slowly began to reconstitute themselves and establish an insurgency against the new Western-backed government. The Taliban, like most social and political organizations, initially reflected their origins but evolved to see that reflection fade as time and events shape the larger movement. The first Taliban were then superseded by what Aggarwal calls a “neo-Taliban” whose fighters now use Pakistani cities for sanctuary, and whose emergent Afghan rural networks are anchored in the application of Islamic law, militancy, and funded by the opium trade.

This “neo-Taliban” is also characterized by an increased cyber presence. The Taliban, of course, are only one of many cyber actors representing disparate Islamist sub-state radicals who utilize virtual space in multiple ways congruent with their political objectives. For example the Salafist Islamic State’s *Al Itisam* media establishment utilizes its multiple organizations and platforms to deliver propaganda and, more importantly, to engage both the curious and sympathizers in conversation aimed at recruitment. This “conversation,” a very critical part of the Islamic State social media effort, is aimed at convincing potential warriors to make the *Hijrah* (religious migration) to Islamic State territories. Conversely, al-Qaeda’s cyber and social media electronic jihad messaging is spread more
diffusely among the objectives of recruitment, planning, and facilitating donations than are Islamic State information operations. But the Virtual Emirate of the Taliban appears to have a focus on using virtual space to support the real world kinetic insurgency in Afghanistan. In engaging the multilingual discourse of the Virtual Emirate, Aggarwal analyzes how Talibanic social media is configured to link their messaging to culturally relevant symbols in a way designed to appeal to distinct English, Arabic, Dari, Urdu, and Pashto audiences. He observes that in the hybrid imagined community such disparate audiences can see the Taliban through their own cultural lens.

THE IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE

Aggarwal suggests that the audience for the Taliban’s Virtual Emirate is less the rural Afghan populations, most of whom are blissfully unaware of cyber existence, but rather Taliban military commanders, expatriate Afghans abroad, donors, journalists, and other opinion leaders. By utilizing his training in psychiatry, psychology, and South Asian studies Aggarwal, a self-described Indian American Hindu, examines the multiple messaging in Taliban discourse across audiences and seeks to understand the Taliban’s master narrative. He refers to the theory of imagined communities to explain group identity formation through communication in the context of this Virtual Emirate, intending to endow cultural communities with a sociopolitical awareness favorable to the Taliban. Consequently, the Taliban master narrative can be parsed in different languages to persuade individuals far from Taliban territories to support the movement by creating a hybridized identity driven by Taliban propaganda promoted in virtual space. Aggarwal explains that the Taliban’s English and Arabic materials are particularly important because the two are considered the transnational cosmopolitan languages most useful for shaping opinion and promoting fundraising. In the Dari and Pashto languages Taliban propaganda reflects the vernacular of Afghanistan, while Urdu is considered a regional parochial language symbolic of religious identity across South Asia, as well as for nationalist Pakistanis. By linking the Taliban Virtual Emirate to both political realities and the madrasas of memory, Taliban propaganda portrays Pakistan as having been founded on Islam and its scholar-jurists as allies, although the government of Pakistan is seen as corrupt. This is stylistically similar to the common “we are enemies of the government but not the people” meme exploited by militants everywhere. Russia is described by the Taliban through the lens of imperialism and, in that sense, Taliban propaganda echoes the 19th century arguments of activist Sayyid Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (1838–1997) who, while a modernist in some senses, was nonetheless a vocal opponent of that era’s British imperialism. In general, the leadership of many
radical movements (with a few exceptions like Caliph Ibrahim of the Islamic State) utilizing Islam for political objectives has little to no element of advanced religious education. They therefore must use social media to bypass the traditional scholar-jurists whose opinions would otherwise be understood as authoritative in politically mobilizing target populations. Aggarwal demonstrates that the “neo-Taliban” have been somewhat sophisticated in their efforts to achieve this effect.

Aggarwal’s work might challenge other scholars to ask if counter-narratives by non-governmental organizations like Aaron Lobel’s America Abroad Media could open the target audiences of the Taliban’s Virtual Emirate to additional points of view. Scholars might also seek to identify the messengers of the Taliban’s Virtual Emirate to discover who decides the content of their messaging. The Taliban is after all a learning and teaching organization and is nearly a generation removed from Mullah Omar’s brief rule. The generation that waged a jihad against the Soviets is now comprised of mainly old men while the bulk of today’s Taliban fighters were infants or small children when the Taliban were driven from power.

In summary, Neil Krishan Aggarwal has made a significant contribution to understanding an important ethnic and religious movement through this comparative analysis of the Taliban’s English, Arabic, Pashto, Urdu, and Dari messaging across their worldwide Virtual Emirate.