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U.S. Military Information Operations in Afghanistan

Effectiveness of Psychological Operations 2001–2010

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Summary

Background

The United States has been engaged in conflict in Afghanistan for nearly a decade. From the outset, U.S. leaders recognized the importance of winning the support of the Afghan population, given the country's history of antipathy toward foreign armies. Initial efforts to influence the population met with some success, but ensuing years have seen rising disenchantment with the Hamid Karzai administration and coalition forces. The USMC is heavily engaged in Afghanistan, primarily in Helmand province, where the Taliban had controlled extensive areas prior to the U.S. offensive and remain a potent force. The honing of messages to sway the population is critical to the ongoing campaign to establish permanent Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIRoA) control over the province. Accordingly, in a lessons-learned context, the MCIA requested an assessment of the effectiveness of prior efforts so that it could improve its own operations in this area. It should be noted that the research focused exclusively on the U.S. military. Operations conducted by North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces in Afghanistan were not reviewed.

Purpose

This monograph reviews the effectiveness of USMIL IO and PSYOP in Afghanistan from late 2001 to 2010. The other four core capabilities employed by IO to achieve desired combatant commander effects—

electronic warfare (EW), military deception (MILDEC), computer network operations (CNO), and operations security (OPSEC)—are not covered. It should be noted that, in June 2010, the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) officially replaced the term *PSYOP* with *military information support operations* (*MISO*).[1] This monograph continues to use the term *PSYOP*, however, because that was the term in force during the research and it is unclear at the time of this writing what will change and what will remain the same under the new term. The basic goal of this monograph is to summarize the diverse PSYOP initiatives undertaken, evaluate their effectiveness, identify strengths and weaknesses, and describe the way forward, including making certain specific recommendations for improvements. Special attention was paid to how well PSYOP initiatives were tailored to target audiences, primarily the Pashtuns who are the dominant population in the conflictive areas and the main support of the Taliban insurgency.

Although this monograph focuses mainly on the effectiveness of themes and messages among Afghan target audiences, it also discusses IO and PSYOP doctrine and organization because of their impact on the effectiveness of messaging. Most operations conducted in Afghanistan under the rubric of IO pertain to the PSYOP core capability, but IO practitioners implementing these operations often view PSYOP as a separate activity. DoD was aware of the confusion over terminology and repeatedly issued guidance seeking to clarify differences between these "overlapping but distinct concepts."[2] Nonetheless, as has been noted in previous studies, *IO* has become a substitute term for *PSYOP*.[3] Few practitioners in the field seemed to follow the strict interpretation

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[1] Alfred Paddock, Jr., "PSYOP: On a Complete Change in Organization, Practice, and Doctrine," *Small Wars Journal*, June 26, 2010.

[2] U.S. Department of Defense, *Consolidated Report on Strategic Communication and Information Operations*, submitted to Congress, March 2010a, p. 5.

[3] See Todd C. Helmus, Christopher Paul, and Russell W. Glenn, *Enlisting Madison Avenue: The Marketing Approach to Earning Popular Support in Theaters of Operation*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-607-JFCOM, 2007.

of IO as solely a coordinating or integrating function.[4] This monograph contains various direct quotes from interviews, briefing slides, and other written material that refers to IO products, IO messages, and IO campaigns, but the official point of view insists that, doctrinally, IO are strictly a coordinating or integrating function that should not produce specific products.

For their part, PSYOP specialists tended to view the emphasis on IO as disproportionate and their own role as undervalued. They felt marginalized even before the term *PSYOP* was abolished officially in 2010 due to its perceived negative connotations. Whereas the Taliban implemented a unified anti-U.S. propaganda campaign, the United States subdivided its counterpropaganda capabilities, creating separate entities with overlapping missions and definitions. This could have negative ramifications for the overall effort to create a skilled cadre of specialists to deal with this nonkinetic aspect of asymmetrical warfare. Although the existing division of labor between IO, PSYOP, and strategic communication makes sense on a theoretical level, in practice, in the Afghan theater during the period in question, it did not seem to be the most-efficient way to marshal limited resources against the enemy's relentless propaganda offensive.

Findings

As a U.S. general asked in a 2010 Kabul meeting that I attended, the key question is, "Are we losing the information war?" The overall response is neither affirmative nor negative. This monograph contains reports of specific operations that were very successful in achieving IO objectives. However, there are also examples of operations that did not resonate with target audiences and even some that had counterproductive effects. If the overall IO mission in Afghanistan is defined as convincing most residents of contested areas to side decisively with the

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[4]   An example of the field perspective can be seen in the excellent article by Ensign Robert J. Bebber, "Developing an IO Environmental Assessment in Khost Province: Information Operations at PRT Khost in 2008," *Small Wars Journal*, February 28, 2009.

Afghan government and its foreign allies against the Taliban insurgency, this has not been achieved. Even when USMIL IO and PSYOP take all the right steps, message credibility can be undercut by concern among Afghans in contested areas that their own government, widely perceived as weak and corrupt, will not be able to protect them from vengeful Taliban once U.S. and NATO forces withdraw. Civic action and development projects are greatly appreciated, but some public-opinion surveys suggest that both the Taliban and U.S. and NATO forces are viewed negatively.

The biggest PSYOP successes have been in the area of face-to-face communication and the new emphasis on meetings with jirgas (local councils of elders), key-leader engagements, and establishing individual relationships with members of the Afghan media. Also, the concept of every infantryman being a PSYOP officer, as carried out by the 1st Battalion (Bn) 5th Marines and other units, is also very effective. In this respect, the success of civic action and development projects in promoting a positive image of the U.S. military and the Afghan government should be pointed out, although this varies greatly among localities.

On the negative side of the ledger, the most-notable shortcoming has been the inability to effectively counter the Taliban propaganda campaign against U.S. and NATO forces on the theme of civilian casualties, both domestically and internationally. Nonetheless, it should be stressed that this Taliban propaganda success does not translate into widespread popular support for the Taliban movement. On the contrary, most polls indicate that the great majority view the Taliban negatively, which suggests that their messaging has not achieved all of its objectives either. Although results of district-level polling vary greatly, the Taliban overall do not seem to enjoy great popularity. PSYOP products highlighting specific acts of Taliban terrorism, such as destruction of schools and the killing of schoolteachers, do discredit the insurgency. Nonetheless, throughout 2001–2010, audiences generally have not responded to offers of rewards for information on terrorist leaders.

PSYOP themes and messages tend to be more effective when they reflect Afghans' yearning for peace and progress. [5] It should be stressed at this point, moreover, that the Afghan audience is not homogenous. On the contrary, Afghan society is deeply divided by ethnic, tribal, and regional cleavages, and this affects PSYOP target audience selection and analysis. The key audience for counterinsurgency objectives is the Pashtuns, who make up about 42 percent of the national population and inhabit those areas where the Taliban insurgency is strongest. Failure to adequately incorporate Pashtun perceptions and attitudes can negate the potential effectiveness of many PSYOP products. In this respect, USMIL PSYOP have been criticized for not adequately countering the Taliban's manipulation of Pashtun religious and nationalistic sentiments. Also, there has been variation over time. Such themes as the promotion of democracy and participation in elections seemed to have better audience reception during 2001–2005 than they had in later years, including the most-recent elections, in 2009 and 2010. The reason for this decline in effectiveness has less to do with the content of the products than with the growing disillusionment over the regime's corruption and its inability to provide security and services. Moreover, credibility of USMIL IO and PSYOP messaging is undercut by contradictory public statements made by GIRoA and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) or U.S. government spokespeople regarding air strikes, collateral damage, night raids, and electoral fraud.

This underscores the notion that external factors over which PSYOP personnel have no control could ultimately determine the acceptance of their messages among target audiences.

Table S.1 contains the assessment of nine major themes of PSYOP efforts, rating them as effective, mixed, or ineffective.

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[5] The best evidence of this yearning is in the numerous public-opinion polls conducted in Afghanistan during the period. Also, interviews with IO and PSYOP officers returning from the field often indicate that the jirgas express very concrete ideas of desired peace and progress. This author has observed target audiences' positive reactions to the peace and progress theme, and this is well articulated in CDR Larry LeGree, U.S. Navy, "Thoughts on the Battle for the Minds: IO and COIN in the Pashtun Belt," *Military Review*, September–October 2010, pp. 21–32

Table S.1
Assessment of Major Themes in Psychological Operations

Theme	Assessment		
	Effective	**Mixed**	**Ineffective**
The war on terror justifies U.S. intervention.			Ineffective
Coalition forces bring peace and progress.	Effective 2001–2005	Mixed 2006–2010	
Al-Qai'da and the Taliban are enemies of the Afghan people.		Mixed	
Monetary rewards are offered for the capture of al-Qai'da and Taliban leaders.			Ineffective
Monetary rewards are offered for turning in weapons.		Mixed	
Support of local Afghans is needed to eliminate IEDs.		Mixed	
U.S. forces have overwhelming technological superiority over the Taliban.	Effective 2001–2005	Mixed 2006–2010	
GIRoA and ANSF bring peace and progress.		Mixed	
Democracy benefits Afghanistan, and all Afghans need to participate in elections.	Effective 2001–2005	Mixed 2006–2010	

NOTE: IED = improvised explosive device. ANSF = Afghan National Security Forces.

Interviews with IO and PSYOP personnel who have served in Afghanistan, which have been corroborated by various other studies, point to several organizational problems impeding effectiveness of their mission. These include inadequate coordination between IO and PSYOP, long response times in the approval process, lack of IO and PSYOP integration in operational planning, lack of measures of effectiveness (MOEs), and an inability to exploit the informal, oral Afghan communication tradition. However, these problems are not universal. Some commanders, for example, have become well known in theater for their insistence on integrating IO and PSYOP with their operational planning, and there are cases in which counterpropaganda

responses to Taliban charges against U.S. forces have been rapid and well conceived.

Recommendations

To improve the effectiveness of IO and PSYOP, this monograph makes the following recommendations.

Hold a conference of IO and PSYOP personnel who have served in Afghanistan to define best practices. The objective would be to define best practices based on their recent experiences in the field and make specific recommendations for operational, organizational, and doctrinal reforms.

Use local focus groups to pretest messages. Failure to take into account cultural, social, political, and religious factors is a major deficiency in PSYOP campaigns. Using focus groups to pretest messages can help correct this deficiency, but the focus groups' membership must closely parallel that of the target audience.

Conduct public-opinion surveys for target-audience analysis and posttesting. Considerable polling and interviewing are being conducted in Afghanistan, some of it USMIL sponsored. Significant work on human terrain mapping and cultural intelligence has also been accomplished. However, much-better use of these data could be made to develop PSYOP themes and messages. The surveys should be keyed to specific PSYOP campaigns. Moreover, the emphasis should be on district-level polling, as opposed to national-level polls, which might not be representative of target audiences in conflictive areas. Survey research can provide quantitative baselines and trend analyses of key attitudes held by the target audience. In addition, it can help predict attitude change based on knowledge of underlying attitude structures and, thereby, help develop appropriately targeted messages. Also, polling can be effective in posttesting specific PSYOP products, helping to determine whether the audience reacts as intended.

Use key communicators to help develop and disseminate messages. Messages are more credible if they come from a figure who already enjoys prestige within the target audience and is already considered a

credible source of advice and information. In Afghanistan, key communicators can vary greatly between communities. A key communicator could be an Islamic cleric, a traditional chief, an educated school-teacher, a wealthy merchant known for providing charity, a local leader who maintains a loyal following, or a government official, among others. Moreover, in the Pashtun tribal context, a key communicator might not necessarily be an individual but could be a collective group, such as the elders comprising a jirga. This monograph proposes that the traditional PSYOP role of the key communicator be expanded. Key communicators should be considered partners in developing messages, contributing not only to the wording but also to the content.

Harmonize IO doctrine and practice, and implement greater integration with PSYOP and public affairs (PA). The current disconnect between official IO doctrine and how it is practiced in the field is counterproductive. The situation has been further complicated by the recent elimination of the term PSYOP, entailing, in the words of U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) commander ADM Eric T. Olson, a "complete change in organization, practice, and doctrine."[6] That being the case, at the time of this writing, clarification of the revised PSYOP mission is needed. Also, the current division between PSYOP and PA works to the advantage of Taliban propagandists, who routinely accuse U.S. forces of needlessly causing civilian casualties. Closer coordination between PSYOP and PA would enhance counter-propaganda effectiveness.

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[6] See Paddock, 2010.