

# Pashtun Awakening

## Defeat the Taliban by Changing the Narrative

Policy Brief / Sept 2012



### Executive Summary

Pakistan has systemically weakened Afghanistan by undermining the sacred tribal structure of the Pashtuns, the country's largest ethnic group, by attempting to replace it with the extremist ideology and practices of the Taliban – a process we refer to as “de-Pashtunization”. The only way to stop this process is by changing the narrative via a grassroots public relations campaign and through psychological operations aimed at telling the truth about the Taliban's origins and objectives.

#### Purpose

The objective of this brief is to provide U.S. policymakers with a snapshot of the ground truth in Afghanistan so they can make informed decisions on how to best address the de-Pashtunization of Afghan society. There are a number of cultural, political, socioeconomic and security-related reasons why the Taliban movement continues to flourish in southern and eastern Afghanistan. This policy brief will focus on the cultural aspect because it's foundational, as we shall demonstrate.

#### Background

After 34 years of incessant war the Afghan people find themselves trapped in a violent nexus between the Taliban insurgency, NATO's occupying forces and the predatory and corrupt Karzai regime. A war-weary populace has been psychologically numbed – trapped in a Hobbesian world of kill or be killed and rendered powerless. Instead of being governed by legitimate moral authorities who derive their power from the will of the people, Afghans of all ethnicities are ruled by strongmen who derive their power from the barrel of a Kalashnikov. These conditions have acted as a cultural straight jacket that has enslaved the Afghan mind, while denying the population their own much deserved “Afghan Spring”.

The current crisis can be traced to the fall of Afghanistan's monarchy during the 1970s, which was a unifying force that helped bind the disparate ethnic and tribal groups together. Societal fragmentation has been working in the Taliban's favor. With the death of the dynastic principle and

the absence of a well-respected national leader as head of state, Afghan society now lacks a common lineal thread with the past that could unify the nation.

Polls have indicated that the Taliban are even more unpopular than the reprobate U.S.-backed Karzai government. However, Taliban popularity seems to be on the rise as more and more Afghans are alienated by corruption, civilian casualties, Koran burnings and mass murders. Thomas Rutting of the Afghanistan Analysts Network described the lack of options the Pashtuns have available: "In today's violent atmosphere, between the anvil of the Karzai government and the hammer of the Taliban, there are no viable political alternatives for Pashtuns."

#### De-Pashtunization

Since the 1990s via its Taliban proxy, the intelligence and military instruments of the Pakistani state have transformed Afghanistan into an epicenter of global terrorism. Through a gradual process of destroying Pashtun tribal culture the Pakistani state has attempted to de-Pashtunize and Arabicize the Pashtuns by subjugating them to the Taliban's ultraorthodox Islamic belief system, which is an affront to traditional Afghan sensibilities. Taliban assassination campaigns against tribal elders clearly betray the group's maniacal designs. Pakistan and the Taliban have conspired to keep the Pashtuns in the dark ages by blowing up schools in an effort to deprive future generations of a modicum of secular education.

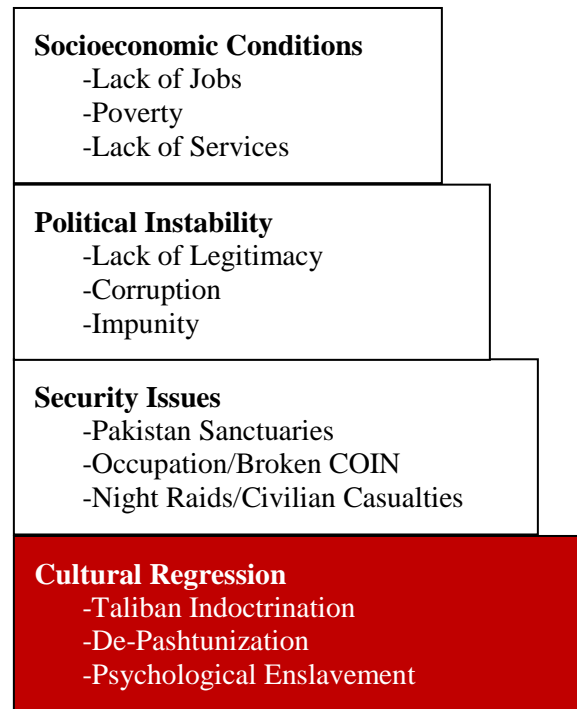
Afghanistan has always been a dedicated Muslim society but most Afghans never embraced the Wahhabist fanaticism of the House of Saud or the extremist doctrine peddled by the Deobandi school. Afghan spiritual beliefs were always a mixture of secular tribal values and Islam. Not to mention many Afghans adhered to the Sufi mystic tradition, which is denounced by modern hardliners. Extremists have pushed Afghan society into becoming more and more madrassa-centered as opposed to jirga or shura-centered. In short, the traditional secular power of the khan is now bowing to the authority of the mosque and the mullah, despite the fact that *Pashtunwali*, the Afghan ancient tribal code, predates Islam by 4,000 years.

Tribal experts have noticed a disturbing trend within the past few years. Although the Afghans have, for the most part, refused to accept the Taliban ideology at depth, the Taliban have been successful in gradually eroding traditional Afghan tribal values by eating away at the social fabric of Afghan society. Demographics point to a growing amnesia of the golden years of King Zahir Shah as upcoming generations are increasingly radicalized by the Taliban's perverted version of Islam. The confluence of corruption, radicalism and foreign occupation is exacerbating this trend, and until it is reversed, Afghanistan is at risk of remaining a radically violent failed state in perpetuity.

While the Western coalition has focused more time on winning militarily, we've lost or simply ignored the battle of the narrative, which is the jihadist's center of gravity. The U.S. military's entire COIN doctrine is premised on winning the hearts and minds of the local populace, yet American tactics such as errant drone strikes and humiliating night raids have continually alienated native Afghans, rendering a complete antipodal effect.

Taliban practices and teachings were intentionally designed by Pakistani leaders to undermine the Pashtun way of life. Because of the Taliban's draconian tactics, Afghanistan has suffered huge losses in nearly every measurable societal aspect. The Taliban have helped Afghanistan regress economically, socially, culturally, technologically, educationally and politically. Pakistan has established jihadist factories on Afghan soil so that Pashtuns are shunned by the world. Everyone knows the seeds of global terror are planted in Pashtun tribal areas. In other words, Pakistan's program of de-Pashtunization is working.

The Taliban movement has burgeoned over the past five years due to a number of factors summarized in the following figure as four layers:



Unless the cultural aspect is made the foundation of any proposed remedy, the next generation will be indoctrinated and there will never be a legitimate political solution. Hearts and minds are indeed the key to neutralizing an insurgency, but the U.S. has gone about winning them in a contraindicative and self-defeating manner.

Without a cultural awakening and some semblance of security, political stability is impossible. And without political stability there will never be economic improvements.

The problem with the political solution is that the Karzai family has a death grip on the legislative process and has "bought out" most of parliament. So it will be difficult to trigger the Loya Jirga option in the constitution to unseat the Karzais. Hence, the Afghans may have to "work within the system" and establish a pan-Afghan political party. But this isn't possible if the mindset of the Pashtuns is continually exploited and molded by Pakistan and the Taliban.

### Change the Narrative

There is still hope if the Pashtuns can restore their sacred tribal structure and identify the Taliban movement for what it really is – a religious mafia

concocted on white boards in Rawalpindi. It needs to be clearly communicated to the Pashtuns that Pakistan via its Taliban proxy is using Islam as a strategic weapon. The Pashtuns must be made aware that they are being de-Pashtunized. As the U.S. heads towards the exit doors and reduces its footprint in line with Biden's "counter-terror lite" option, it can at least modify its policies to deal with the Pakistani/Taliban threat. If the crux of the problem is a lost narrative the solution is taking it back from the jihadists that hijacked it. This calls for identifying, confronting and defeating propaganda through public diplomacy counterstrikes and preemptive psychological tactics.

Instead of brokering an unholy alliance, the U.S. State Department and ISAF public relations personnel should be working with educated Pashtun facilitators on a mass communications program to make the Pashtuns aware of what is

really happening. This would include facilitators working on the ground with the tribes, communicating orally, organizing shuras and disseminating information via local press. The U.S. should leverage media, press, radio, the internet, social media and other information technology tools to spread the word in both Pashto and English. It will also encompass monitoring Pakistani and Taliban websites and producing rebuttals to misinformation.

This path will be much more effective than the military option. Pashtun unification is the key to a truly independent Afghanistan.

Grassroots information campaigns, public diplomacy and psychology operations can go a long way in educating the tribes, changing the narrative and combating misperceptions, including the misperception that the Taliban are an indigenous movement.

#### **About the New World Strategies Coalition (NWSC)**

[www.NWSCinc.org](http://www.NWSCinc.org)

The NWSC is a think tank founded by native Afghans that creates nonmilitary solutions for Afghanistan. The NWSC has outlined a comprehensive reconciliation process in a white paper entitled *Restoring the Tribal Balance*.

Media inquiries: [khalil.nouri@nwscinc.org](mailto:khalil.nouri@nwscinc.org)

Afghanistan National Reconciliation: [www.facebook.com/krn9117](https://www.facebook.com/krn9117)