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How Narratives Helped the Taliban's Surprise Takeover of Afghanistan in 2021

Abstract: World witnessed strange events in Afghanistan in August 2021 when over three hundred thousand "well-equipped" Afghan Security Forces, failed to offer any meaningful resistance to the Taliban attacks. The Taliban virtually took over entire Afghanistan including the Capital Kabul in a matter of days, surprisingly without any resistance from Afghan forces. Most US and western writers and military experts blamed Afghan Forces and their civilian leadership for the collapse of resistance and in a way took the blame away from the US-led coalition. This article suggests that the Taliban's surprise and almost bloodless victory has less to do with immediate factors around August 2021. The surprise was slowly manufactured by the Taliban through their strong effort caused by the narratives, spread over two decades of the war. Such consistent narratives created an environment which caused the immediate collapse of Afghan Forces even before the US could complete evacuation out of Afghanistan.

Key Words: War on Terrorism, Afghanistan, Taliban, Narratives, US-Led Coalition, Surprise

Introduction

The world was stunned by the events which unfolded in Afghanistan in the middle of August 2021. President Ashraf Ghani-led Afghan regime, which was all poised to independently run Afghanistan after the withdrawal of US-led western forces melted quicker than the ice, even before the US could complete its exit. All US intelligence estimates that projected Afghan forces and regime to withstand the Taliban offensive, proved erroneous to an astonishing extent as the Taliban took over Capital Kabul and almost the entire remaining Afghanistan even before the departure of US-led forces. Multiple logics have been presented for this 'surprise' takeover of Afghanistan by the

Taliban, mainly in media talks and articles. Most have tried to find the faults in Afghan security forces or either blamed the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA)'s civilian leaders. This study tends to suggest that the reasons for surprise were not immediate and this surprise was managed by the Taliban through their persistent narrative which established their discourse against the US-led coalition as well as the Afghan regimes and forces.

The US War on Terrorism (WoT) in Afghanistan has lasted close to two decades starting on 7 October 2001 and terminating on 31 August 2021 when Major General Chris Donahue boarded as the last soldier in

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the final US military flight out of Afghanistan (BBC News, August 31, [2021](#)). The war effort witnessed different phases including initial success in the overthrow of the Taliban regime, steady comeback and continuous increase in resistance level by the Taliban and finally, the defeat and withdrawal of the US-led coalition followed by the Doha peace accord. An important part of the US-led coalition's strategy has been the preparation, training and equipping of Afghan security forces on which the US spent over \$83 billion (Robert Burns, AP, August 17, [2021](#)). Similarly, based on the western democratic model, a government with all functioning departments was also managed in Kabul since 2001 under various regimes wherein Hamid Karzai, Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah remained in charge of things for different durations. However, nothing could withstand the onslaught of the Taliban. Doha Peace process from 2018 onwards gave a substantial advantage to the Taliban and the trickle started the formal end of GIRoA by undermining its legitimacy and representative status of Afghans.

Surprise Element in Taliban's Take Over

Before proceeding with the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan it is important to understand what constitutes a surprise. Gabriel (2013) suggests that Hotel Holiday Inn's logo 'no surprises' assures calm, expected, methodical, in a match with our known estimates and expectations services. He also suggests that by avoiding surprise, a sense of control is demonstrated. Surprise is something different from our routine knowledge, which shouldn't have happened, given our best understanding of how things work. It is in stark contrast with most educated expectations and with our assured beliefs using the environment's causality. It is deviance between our anticipations of a result and the actual

happenings. It is something different from continuity.

Silberzahn & Jones ([2012, 7](#)) define Strategic surprise as "the sudden realization that one has been operating on the basis of an erroneous assessment that results in a failure to anticipate a grave threat to 'vital' national interests". A study of the social construction of strategic surprises to the CIA from 1947-2001, points out two aspects, firstly to 'mystery' (Nye, [1994](#)) and secondly to 'secret' (Berkowitz, [2003, 4](#)). The mystery is impossible to be foreseen because it is contingent, non-existing and cannot be foreseen through any overt or covert means like the Iranian revolution and the fall of the USSR. Only uncertain estimates can be made through co-relationship with past events. The study of history, geography and culture of society is considered important in the context and can help get forewarning about a strategic surprise. While the secret aspect exists before it becomes a reality but has been hidden by adversaries like the Cuban Missile Crisis and 9/11 events.

Surprise results either from a failure of intelligence or from poor analysis wherein a side fail to conduct an unbiased assessment. Being the leading intelligence and military power, the US-led western coalition considers its intelligence collection, military knowledge, training system, weapons and equipment as the best. They could not undermine their own training standard which they provided to Afghan Forces, hence always claiming high these standards. It thus resulted in cognitive bias when the US estimated the strength of Afghan Forces in comparison to the Taliban.

A cursory look at the statements and estimates of the US officials reveals their erroneous assessment and intelligence failure. On June 23, 2021, The Wall Street Journal reported the US Intelligence assessment that the government of Afghanistan could collapse as soon as six months after the American military

withdrawal from the country is completed (Lubold, G., & Trofimov, Y. [2021](#)). On August 12, 2021, Reuters quoted a US intelligence official who estimated that the Taliban could take the Afghan capital within 90 Days (Reuters, August 12, [2021](#)). Bowman, T., & Evstatieva, M. ([2021](#)) point out that Pentagon's top military officer, Gen. Mark Milley told media on August 13, 2022, that the U.S. intelligence community estimated that if the US forces withdrew, the Afghan military could resist the Taliban for years, months and at least for weeks, but the surprise came within 11 days. A reporter was told by President Joe Biden in July 2021 that the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan was not a possibility in view of the presence of three hundred thousand "well-equipped" Afghan security personnel. On August 14, the White House released a statement from President Biden saying in part, "One more year, or five more years, of U.S. military presence, would not have made a difference if the Afghan military cannot or will not hold its own country. And an endless American presence in the middle of another country's civil conflict was not acceptable to me." He reiterated his position in an August 16, 2021, address, saying "I stand squarely behind my decision. After 20 years, I've learned the hard way that there was never a good time to withdraw U.S. forces." (Joe Biden on Afghanistan, August 14, 2021). Bill Roggio, a Senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, was reported by (Natasha et al. on CNBC on August 16, [2021](#)) declaring the fall of Kabul as an "Intelligence failure of the highest order".

Interpretation of Surprise Fall of Afghanistan

A literature review of the logic presented for the surprise fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban suggests a biased tilt mainly blaming Afghan forces. Multiple journalistic assessments and ideas have been presented on the surprise takeover of Afghanistan by

the Taliban. Assessments have also been presented mostly from the US led by western scholars, especially from the think tank and security-related institutions. Susanne George (August 15, 2021) declares that most US officials and foreign observers were 'stunned' by the pace of collapse of Afghan forces. Bowman, T., & Evstatieva (NPR) found a lack of leadership in ANSF as a reason for the rapid fall of Kabul, wondering why could not the US build on this crucial gap. They also relate the downfall to the lack of education of Afghan soldiers, cronyism, corruption in Afghan forces and high attrition rate which did not allow soldiers to mature their training. Writers forget to mention similar educational and training and high attrition difficulties were also faced by the Taliban. Reporters highlight the high training and motivation standard of Afghan Special Forces, but even these forces did not offer much resistance to the Taliban against their August 2021 onslaught.

Chas Danner ([2021](#)) considers the rapid pace of the Taliban's advance, demoralization, corruption and over-reliance of Afghan forces on the US forces as the reasons for the fall of Afghanistan. Retired U.S. Army colonel Mike Jason, relates the failure of Afghan forces to the failure of the US to impart objective training while Carter Malkasian ([2021](#)), an author and former civilian adviser to the US military relates the success of the Taliban to the religious factor and motivation opposite to Afghan forces which did not have any such motivation. Natasha et al. (CNBC, August 16, [2021](#)) note that Columbia University IR Professor Stephen Biddle connects the rapid fall of Afghanistan with the US decision to withdraw complete forces (resulting from the Doha accord) which created a snowball effect on Afghan forces for an immediate meltdown. Whereas, Jack Watling, a research fellow at the Royal United Services Institute, London attributes the failure as a reflection of a collapse in the

will to fight" (Chas Danner [2021](#)). However, he failed to mention what caused this collapse in the will to fight.

Max Boot (CFR August 16, [2021](#)) has explained that the Lack of the US military's knowledge of Afghan culture also hampered training efficiency. He also feels US training efforts focus only on lower-level tactics while paying less attention to important aspects like logistics, planning and command and control skills. Susanne George counts the money paid by the Taliban for surrendering their weapons and abandoning the fight as a factor for the quick success of the Taliban along with the above-cited factors. She further cites the non-availability of US air support to the Afghan forces, nonpayment of salaries to the police and the Doha pact caused uncertainty as the reasons. Bill Roggio, a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies declared the stunning fall as "An intelligence failure of the highest order" (Natasha et al. CNBC August 16, [2021](#)).

A cursory look at the arguments presented in the preceding paragraphs reveals that none has explored the background of what caused this surprise collapse. Furthermore, the causes have been related to the immediate time frame placing the onus totally on Afghan forces for failing to stand up to the Taliban, almost totally vindicating the role of the US-led western coalition. What has been discussed above may be a few of the causes which resulted in the surprise fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban. However, an important question is how these causes have induced demotivation and lack of morale in Afghan forces. The answer to this question can only be found in a detailed analysis of Afghan Taliban narratives through which they managed to cause the collapse of firstly, the US will to fight and then doubled this advantage by a surprise victory against Afghan forces.

This study suggests that the Taliban had constructed these causes through the strength of their narrative and discourse thereby creating their own Afghan truth which was undeniable for most Afghans including most Afghan forces. Only the closest circle of US influence stuck to the US cause, many of even those for their self-centred interest. The defeat and fall of Afghan forces was the final episode of the defeat of the US-led coalition, after the Doha Accord which has been termed a document of surrender (H.R.McMaster on Bari Weiss' podcast August 19, [2021](#)). Doha accord broke the will of Afghan soldiers to fight an invincible Taliban, which could not even be overcome by the collective efforts of the most advanced war machine ever witnessed.

The Narratives Did It

This study suggests that the cognitive domain of narratives transformed the practical domain of the battlefield. Narratives devised by the Taliban, based on their strong religious and ideological bondage, justification for righteous Jihad and Afghan national connectivity, cultural linkage, and resistance against infidels played an important role in winning favourable Afghan public opinion. Taliban's efforts to portray GIRoA as a corrupt, stooge, fighting against own countrymen, violators of Afghan hood and disloyal to Afghan land convinced most Afghan officials and soldiers not to fight the Taliban after the exit of US-led coalition forces. The collapse of the Afghan military to the Taliban reveals that the Taliban through the strength of their narrative had been extremely successful in dissuading Afghan security forces from the cause of their fight. This surprise collapse of Afghan forces also demonstrated that they were only fighting at the behest of the US-led forces and any feeling of enmity towards the Taliban was the only US fed and motivated.

An important aspect to note is that the narratives do not produce an impact overnight. Narratives are established through statements and once the idea settles down into the hearts and minds of the masses these become discourse which then shapes people's choices, opinions and actions. Afghan Taliban refused to accept the dominance of the US-led War on Terrorism discourse and decided to challenge it in the Afghan environment. They presented themselves as the sole legal force fighting for the righteous cause of liberating Afghanistan and restoring the Islamic system. They matched their actions with their projected narratives and despite best efforts from the US-led coalition and their Afghan supporters succeeded firstly, in forcing the withdrawal of foreigners from their land and secondly, recapturing Afghanistan almost without a fight.

Glorifying Leadership

Specifically prepared narratives presented and glorified the superiority of the Taliban's leadership in comparison to fellow Taliban, Afghan civil and military leaders and in fact superior to the leadership of the entire international coalition. Taliban narratives presented their leaders as practising Muslims and highly pious with great leadership traits (Shariat Magazine Volumes 1, 42, 52). Leaders were presented as selfless, leading a simple life, firm for the Islamic and Afghan cause and especially non-compromising on the occupation of Afghanistan (Shariat Magazine Volumes 6, 42, 46, 50, 52 & 100). Leaders fantasized to be concerned about fellow Taliban as well as about common Afghan people (Shariat Magazine Volumes 42, 52). Messages of felicitation on the occasion of Eids (two holy Muslim festivals) reinforced leadership glorification (Shariat Magazine Volumes 6, 15, 20, 28, 32). Ambience about the leadership was built to keep organizational discipline, earn willing obedience, reflect

moral superiority and increase their acceptability in the masses.

Religious and Ideological Connectivity

Since the arrival of Islam in Afghanistan in 708-09 A.D (Azad, [2017](#)), Afghanistan is considered a conservative Muslim society (Pandya & Laipson, [2009](#)) with a visible role of the clergy in state affairs. The US-sponsored Jihad against USSR brought people especially from the rural areas close to the religion mainly through Madrassa education and thus increased affiliation with the Mullahs. By projecting their distinctiveness as religion affectionate Muslims, Taliban aimed at getting the compassion and goodwill from the masses (Shariat Magazine Volumes 15,20,28,30,32,39,42,56,62,64,77,87,100).

Through such religion-based identity and legitimacy, they acquired the confidence of the people who (whether practising or non-practising Muslims) developed a better affiliation with the Taliban in comparison to the non-native forces or their native accomplices. They continuously propagated to establish Shariah Based Islamic rule if they come to power in Afghanistan (Shariat Magazine Volumes 10,18,19, 40,42,43 ,44,52,53,76,86 & Moscow Conference Speech-[2019](#)).

Authenticity of Jihad

Taliban based the authenticity of jihad on a *Fatwa* (scholarly religious verdict) given by the 1500 Afghan *Ulema* (September 21, 2001) just before the commencement of the US-led invasion of Afghanistan (also mentioned in a message to noble scholars of the Islamic world, March 10, 2018). They ensured that the *Ulema* refrained from issuing any *Fatwa* against the legitimacy of their Jihad from inside Afghanistan or from abroad. The projection of the narrative about fighting for the pleasure of God (Taliban *Layeha* (Code of conduct for Jihad) issued in Shariat Magazine Volumes 14-24), was aimed to

give a unique sense of moral strength to the believers. The such sense in side 'A', undermines side 'B' for standing opposite to the pleasure of God. The application and effects of this fact have been more severe and serious on the Afghan Soldier than on their 'foreigner', 'infidel', 'invader' trainers and leaders. Through such narratives, the sense of a 'holy fighter' about the Taliban was grounded.

Just War

Taliban leadership called upon their Jihadis to fight against 'foreign occupation and cleanse the Afghan Muslim homeland from invasion' (All volumes of Shariat Magazine Volumes from 1-112). Word 'invasion' is used to describe and undermine the attack by the US-led western coalition (Taliban inaugural statement of Al Khandaq Jihadi operations, April 25, [2018](#)). The construct 'invasion of Afghan Muslim homeland' establishes that the attack on their land is unjustified. Most of the Taliban messages aim at establishing justification for their cause, actions and policies while discrediting all such justifications to foreigners and their supporters (Shariat Magazine Volumes 2, 14, 28, 39, 51, 62, 74, 86). Thus the US-led just war slogan, established in the minds of the international audience after 9/11 is challenged and lost its value when it faced justification from the Afghan Taliban.

Coalitions' Failure to Understand Afghan Environment

Taliban have devised narratives which persistently exploited religious and cultural lack of understanding of the US-led coalition regarding Afghans (Shariat Magazine Volumes 1, 67). The Incident of the burning of copies of the Quran in 2012 resulted in an apology by US President Obama and NATO (Henderson, [2012](#), August 27). In another incident in 2017, Coalition Forces dropped a pamphlet which had the Muslim holy script

Kalama-e-Tayyba (holiest Islamic sentence) written on the Taliban flag, pasted on the dog. US soldiers were also found making Trophy pictures of the dead Taliban fighters and urinating on dead bodies in a video in early 2012 (Allen, Farmer & Waterfield, [2012, April 18](#)). These incidents mirrored the flawed understanding of US-led troops about Afghan religious and cultural values. This aspect was thoroughly exploited by the Taliban to instigate a deep negative feeling about coalition troops.

Viability Of Giroa Hinged on Coalition's Support

Taliban used their narrative to discursively establish that the survivability of the Afghan regimes hinged only on the wishes of US-led patronage and support and is actually not supported by the people (Shariat Magazine Volume 73), a fact also admitted by former Afghan President Ghani in one of his interviews (Iqbal, 2018). Taliban taunted elections for non-representative, fraudulent, low turnout and engineered (Shariat Magazine Volumes, 32, 92). Afghan national unity government was mocked as a two-headed government managed through US manoeuvring (Taliban Letter to American People, February 14, [2018](#), & Shariat Magazine Volume 32).

GIRoA's Corruption

Taliban labelled corruption on the successive Afghan regimes and their beneficiaries (Al Khandaq Operation statement, April 25, [2018](#), Al Fath Operation statement, April 12, 2019, Taliban Letter to American People, February 14, [2018](#)). They also blamed the foreign masters were either party in this corruption drive or failed to locate and control it (Letter to American people, February 14, 2018). Corruption backed by a strong support network in GIRoA has been a continuous theme and message of the Taliban from start to the end (Shariat Magazine Volumes 1-101). The facts

of GIRoA's corruption have been confessed in multiple reports prepared by various international sources (Torabi, [2012](#)) and the US (Sopko, [2016](#)).

Peace Possible only Under Taliban

Taliban propagated themselves to be the only force which could establish and ensure peace in the entire Afghanistan. On law and order situation. To augment their stance, they would routinely refer to their rule in the past reminding lowest crime rate, security to the people's lives, properties, lowest narcotics production and addiction, and punishments for the criminals. They would issue statements on 'peace for the oppressed people of Afghanistan', 'peace as the right of Afghans', and 'yearning for peace'. They claimed that peace for Afghans can only come after foreign forces leave Afghanistan. Taliban blame the US and its foreign and internal allies for refusing to enter into serious peace efforts with them till their engagement in the Doha process.

Humanitarian Assistance

Taliban would express their grief and sorrow over natural calamities, drought, floods, earthquakes, or human-caused crises (refer to civilian casualties). They would invite and assist International Organizations, United Nations, national businessmen and NGOs to deliver humanitarian support in the areas under their control. In turn, these aid workers would be assured of security and cooperation. This touch of sympathy would increase their bond with Afghan countrymen apart from conveying the Taliban's willingness and openness to work with the UN and INGOs.

Afghan National Connectivity

Taliban addressed Afghans as, "*Mujahid Nation*", "*Valiant Jihad-loving Muslims*", "*Our believing countrymen*", "*Mujahid Brothers*", "*Respected countrymen*", and

"*Honorable Muslim brothers*" (*Eid* and spring offensives Messages delivered through, Shabnamas, Shariat Magazine Volumes 6,8,18,20) and their website. Through such narratives, the Taliban tied the readers and listeners to their messages in a shared linkage and connectivity.

Afghan Identity Construction

An interesting social psychology phenomenon called 'home team discount' gives us an inside into the surprise element of the fall of Kabul in August 2021. Intergroup bias relates to the methodical inclination to judge one's own group ("in-group") more favourably than the other group ("out-group") (Tajfel [1970](#); Tajfel and Turner [1979](#), Hewstone, Rubin, and Willis [2002](#), 576 ;). A November 2013 survey in 21 Pashtun Districts of Afghanistan reveals that good work by the in-group (Taliban) is viewed as arising from the inherent character of the in-group while similar actions by the out-group (the US-led coalition & GIRoA) are understood as the out-group's situational compulsion to do a positive act. In contrast, harmful actions by an in-group (Taliban) are understood as situational compulsion (involuntary bad act), while negative actions by the out-group (the US-led coalition & GIRoA) confirm biases about the out-group and its members as bad actors. The harm inflicted by the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and its supported GIRoA resulted in its reduced support and increased support for the Taliban, but the harm inflicted by the Taliban does not translate into ISAF or GIRoA's support (Lyall, Blair, Imai, [2013](#)).

Pashtunwali, Honour and Civilian Casualties

Afghanistan is known to be the "land of the Afghans" and "land of the Pashtuns" (Barfield, [2010, 24](#)). Most Taliban belong to the Pashtun ethnic group (Sierakowska-

Dyndo, J. [2003](#)) and hence inherit traits of Pashtun culture. Sultan-I-Rome ([2006, 15](#)) suggests Pashtunwali (the literal meaning of "the way of the Pashtuns") is an unwritten but distinct blend of customs, norms, values, rules, regulations, codes, and commandments covering all aspects of the life of Pashtuns from cradle to grave. The Taliban did not loudly express themselves as Pashtuns, but their cultural practices expose their link. In their statements to the masses and their field fighters, the Taliban urge them to fight to get freedom for their honour, self-determination and respect (Shariat Magazine Volumes 10, 18, 19, 40, 42, 43, 44, 52, 53, 76, 86). They have criticized night raids and searches by the US-led and GIROA-included forces as a violation of the sanctity of Afghan homes. Similarly, they regularly criticized casualties caused by the coalition.

Bohannon ([2014, 724](#)) points to a causal link between civilian casualties and 'Green on Blue attacks' while Condra et al ([2010](#)) suggest these casualties encourage insurgent recruitment. Taliban have used these two aspects to expose Afghan cultural violations related to *Nang* (honour) and *Badal* (revenge) aspects of Pashtunwali. Night raids were declared as a violation of Afghan privacy wherein soldiers entered the houses of Afghans. Mostly, these raids were resisted by the victims often resulting in more civilian casualties.

Defenders of Afghan-hood and Resistance

Taliban justified themselves as the champions and defenders of the honour, homeland, religion, life and property of Afghans (Shariat Magazine Volumes 2, 14, 28, 39, 51, 62, 74, 86). Their yearly Jihadi campaign kicked off along with the start of the Afghan New Year thus giving an impression of bringing fresh energy to their struggle. These messages simultaneously addressed field fighters, Afghan masses as

well as other members of GIROA, aiming at winning positive public opinion. Taliban's narrative focused on the concept of 'illegal foreign military occupation' which must be resisted till its termination (Shariat Magazine Volumes 2, 14, 18, 28, 39, 51, 62, 74, 86). Repeated calls for resistance were given with extensive references to Afghan history of having never been enslaved.

Diversity in the Narratives

Taliban aired a variety of statements in their narrative which addressed multiple audiences with a singular purpose. Their messages to the Afghan masses declared the GIROA as corrupt and incapable (Taliban statement on inauguration of Al Khandaq Jihadi operations, April 25, [2018](#)), stooges in the hands of infidels and unable to survive without foreign support (Shariat Magazine Volumes, 32, 86 & Inaugural Message of Al-Fath Jihadi operation). They exploited Afghan cultural differences with the foreigners and incited Afghans including those in Government to work to undo the occupation (Message on desecration of holy sculpture September 7, 2017). Statements addressed to the US-led coalition aimed at highlighting the failure of US-led strategy and policy, exploiting trust shortfall between Afghan soldiers and their foreign trainers, projecting the Taliban's invincibility, feeding doubt and disbelief about their war objectives and accusing them of supporting a corrupt and incapable native government and system (Rowlatt. 2017, August 15 & Letter to the American people, February 14, 2018).

They addressed the concerns of the regional countries about not allowing the use of Afghan land against anyone, narcotics control, and continued cooperation in multinational projects (Shariat Magazine Volumes 10, 19, 40 & Moscow Conference [2019](#)). For the international audience, their narratives focused on the Taliban's invincibility, being

the only force capable of controlling, governing, and protecting Afghanistan and terrorism, reliability, and seriousness about Afghan peace and inflexibility to compromise Afghan freedom (Shariat Magazine Volumes 10,19,40, Moscow Conference Message 2005, letter to American People).

Propagation of Successes

Taliban have insistently been sounding their war-related victories through continuous claims of expansion in areas under their control (Shariat Magazine Volumes 28, 39, 62 & inaugural message on Al-Fath Jihadi Operations, April 12, 2019). In post-2014 time, they assured all that their outreach, control and influence are continuously expanding (Shariat Magazine Volume 35). They propagated that Government control is limited only to city centres consisting of headquarters of Police, district or provincial administration and security forces headquarters (Bezhan, 2020). Through these tactics, the Taliban would convince public opinion about their invincibility as well as on lack of official control. These messages are aimed at convincing Afghans that Afghan security forces are weak and incapable of securing the Afghan people. By projecting official control limited to city centres Taliban also demonstrated their control of rural areas which house about 75% of the total Afghan population (Asey, T. 2019).

Provoking Afghan Forces Against Fighting for Infidels

A special area of Taliban's narratives related to the message aimed at Afghan soldiers, servicemen and other officials working for the Afghan regime. Through the 'Preaching, Guidance and Recruitment Commission', the Taliban would invite Afghan service members to abandon government offices and forces and either join the Taliban or else quit fighting

(Statement from the Commission for Preaching, Guidance and Recruitment December 12, 2018). On January 6, 2021, Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi (Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) Minister of Foreign Affairs since August 2021 takeover) (IEA, MoFA web page, July 19, 2022) was appointed as the Chairman of the Da'wah, Guidance, and Recruitment Commission of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. This commission, held talks with many members of the former Kabul administration, performing a major role in the peaceful takeover of Kabul on August 15, 2021. The convincing through such repeated messages and impacts of the overall narrative in the Taliban discourse is viewed as the major reason for no resistance offered by the Afghan forces and the quick fall of Afghanistan and especially Kabul in August 2021.

Coalition's Dilemma Of Insider Attacks

A phenomenon which badly hurt the trust between Afghan soldiers and their trainers cum patrons of the US-led coalition was what is called insider attacks. Attacks by Afghan soldiers against coalition forces were called 'Green on Blue' while attacks by Afghan soldiers on fellow Afghan soldiers were called 'Green on Green'.

Taliban were well aware of the demotivation of Afghan forces hence they adopted the novel idea of recruiting their own fighters in the ranks of Afghan forces to conduct insider attacks on coalition forces at appropriate moments. In his Eid- Ul- Fitar message in 2012 Taliban leader Mullah Muhammad Omar first highlighted this aspect. On August 16, 2012, Mullah Omar affirmed, "Taliban have cleverly infiltrated in the ranks of the enemy according to the plan given to them in 2011". The message persuaded Taliban fighters and sympathizers to join the ranks of Afghan forces and conduct insider attacks. Taliban

kept repeating such statements in later time frames and also started accepting responsibility for such attacks.

Shortland et al, (2019) suggest that insider attacks have inflicted huge operational, tactical and psychological, impacts on the WoT in Afghanistan. Green-on-blue attacks appeared in May 2007 and went on till December 14, 2019 (Abed, 2019). Taliban claimed the success of this strategy to create mistrust in enemy ranks (AFP, 2012). Killings of US army Major General Harold J. Greene, killed on August 6, 2014 (BBC, 2014) and that of Kandahar Police Chief General Abdul Raziq Achakzai (ruthless anti-Taliban Police General) in October 2018 are considered the highest impact insider attack. Taliban claimed responsibility for both attacks (Mehdi, 2018).

These attacks signified a cause as well as a reflection of the trust deficit between coalition partners. Sageman (2013) found that collective grievances caused these attacks, where Afghan soldiers mostly targeted stranger foreign soldiers, without any personal enmity. Armstrong (2013) suggests the personal stress of Afghan soldiers and cross-cultural friction as major factors for such attacks. However, the Taliban's sponsorship of such actions, propagated and declared through the narrative, has made insider attacks into a major trust breakdown factor, which affected the morale of both coalitions as well as that of Afghan forces and also demonstrated their differences.

Impacts of the Doha Peace Process

Taliban got engaged with the US in Doha Peace Process from 2018 till finalization of Pact on February 29, 2020. Taliban achieved significant advantages from this process. In the battle of the hearts and minds, they exploited and used the process and its outcome to demonstrate and establish their legitimacy, invincibility, righteousness, and diplomatic maturity to the world in general

and to Afghan officials and masses in particular. In their dialogue with the US, they constantly insisted on complete US withdrawal from Afghanistan and assured nonuse of Afghan land against any other country, thus presenting their selves as focused and unambiguous. Through the Doha process, GIRoA was presented as non-representative of Afghans, unlawful and the dummy of the US-led coalition. GIRoA propagated to get directly engaged with the Taliban till February 27, 2020 (Tolo News, 2020) but the Taliban strongly refuted such news.

Taliban further used the Doha Process time to demonstrate their diplomatic skills by visiting and interacting with Moscow, Beijing, Islamabad, Tehran and Central Asian Republics (CARs). They had frequent interactions with the representatives from the US-led coalition as well as other important countries from NATO and elsewhere. The monetary support (Salaries and other benefits) and loosely knit discipline kept the skeleton of Afghan forces together for some time however, their combat efficiency and will to fight diminished. When faced with the final Taliban onslaught, they mostly preferred to peacefully lay down their weapons and accept Taliban offers of pardon. Resistance from Special Afghan forces went on a few more days than the normal foot soldiers, but they also faded away and slipped to neighbouring countries based on their origin and ethnic links.

Conclusion

The US embarked upon its War on Terror in Afghanistan is based on her capability to establish a dominant narrative by virtue of her lead in the fields of contemporary knowledge as well technology. After the initial overthrow of the Taliban regime in 2001, the US went sure of its success as it switched attention to Iraq in 2003. The Taliban took advantage of the situation and

orchestrated a slow but steady comeback. Taliban slowly gathered pace for the operations. However, they knitted their campaigns around intelligently crafted narratives.

They enmeshed their narratives in Afghan culture, religious background and history to win the hearts and minds of fellow countrymen. Their narratives presented the US-led coalition as infidel occupiers. GIRoA was presented as corrupt, disloyal to Afghans, and stooge in the hands of foreign masters as well as local warlords. Taliban glorified their leadership as pious, caring for Afghan sentiment, standing for freeing Afghanistan from foreign occupation and for leading from the front through great sacrifices. They presented their cause as just Jihad, based on religious and Afghan historical as well as cultural values. Their justification of Jihad could not be negated by the 'terrorist' mantra presented by the US-led coalition. The Taliban convinced the Afghan masses by exploiting their Afghan hood, cultural oneness, pains suffered from night raids, civilian casualties and displacements. Taliban narratives targeted Afghan soldiers and officials calling upon them to disassociate from enemies of Afghanistan to join either the Taliban ranks

else to stay away from the conflict. Their actions in the field were designed and timed to match and support their narratives. This article suggests that the Taliban won the war mainly through the strength of their narratives while the physical actions were aimed at strengthening the narratives. Doha Peace Process proved to be decisive in undermining the coalition's cause and strengthening the righteousness of the Taliban's narratives. Doha's process eroded the moral authority of GIRoA while the Taliban's status as the sole Afghan party opposing the US-led coalition was established.

Through their narratives, the Taliban not only won the minds and hearts of the Afghan masses but also undermined and demoralized opposing forces. Taliban narratives caused massive demoralization, particularly for Afghan soldiers which were further exploited through physical messaging by the Taliban's Commission for Preaching, Guidance and Recruitment. Hence, the Taliban soldiers opted not to offer resistance when the Taliban launched their final assault close to the US Withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021.

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