The Taliban and Twitter: Tactical Reporting and Strategic Messaging

by Vincent Bernatis

Abstract

The US military's surge in Afghanistan from 2009 through 2012 was designed to blunt Taliban momentum and ultimately allow international forces to significantly reduce their presence and transition full responsibility for security to the Afghan government by 2015. In May of 2011, near the height of the surge, the Taliban leadership countered the international coalition by opening a distinct new front in their asymmetric battle; one waged not with bullets and bombs, but with regular English language posts on Twitter. This article utilizes public relations and communications theory to analyze a sample of these Tweets alongside Mullah Omar's yearly Eid messages. In doing so, the argument is made that Taliban information operations on both the tactical and strategic levels promoted a narrative of the conflict designed to weaken the international public's resolve to actively oppose the Taliban through a long-term deployment of primarily Western military forces to the country. For policymakers, the Taliban's own chronicling of the war on social media indicates that insurgent forces are not nearly as capable of waging a jihad across all regions of the country as they might wish to be, nor are they in command of a large network of infiltrators willing and able to attack their international trainers and Afghan military partners on command. Academically, the Taliban's use of Twitter reinforces other research showing that even in the more diffuse, less restrictive atmosphere of social media, the leadership of armed Islamist groups often attempt to exert control over internet-based information operations through the establishment of official social media accounts.

Keywords: *Afghanistan, Taliban, social media*

Introduction

The exigencies of war have a profound influence on organizations. The protracted insurgency in Afghanistan forced each belligerent party to develop innovative strategies in an effort to achieve victory. For forces of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), this largely comprised the adoption of full-scale counterinsurgency. The Taliban, a radical Islamist movement, also evolved in unexpected ways. For some, it may come as a bit of surprise that a group that once banned most forms of modern entertainment in a self-styled effort to "return to the early days of Islam" would nevertheless come to utilize the internet and social media as part of their campaign to return to power.[1] With a recent survey of the Afghan population reporting that only 3% of respondents utilized the internet to gather news, it seems highly unlikely that the Taliban's regular Twitter posts and online distribution of strategic messages are designed for consumption by a domestic constituency.[2]

This analysis addresses a key question about the Taliban's internet presence. How can we classify the Taliban's digital information operations in terms of public relations and communications theory? It can be argued that the Taliban social media presence and the online publication of Mullah Omar's yearly Eid messages represent a "press agentry" communications model (explained below) designed to draw attention to a Taliban narrative positioned to weaken the international public's resolve to actively oppose the Taliban through military means.[3] From a communications theory perspective, the Taliban believe they can accomplish their objectives by casting key stakeholders in the following roles: the members of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) are brutal "invaders", the Afghan government and security forces are feckless stooges of the international forces, while the Taliban are a moderate force seeking to deliver a sovereign and Islamic Afghanistan to its people. Finally, the Taliban—by their own accounting on Twitter—contradict their claims

of an expansive countrywide insurgency and are less responsible for infiltration type attacks then they might wish to be.

Sample Selection and Methodology

A comprehensive longitudinal examination of messages produced by the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (Taliban) is beyond the scope of this work.[4] While such an examination would undoubtedly add statistical validity to the model used herein, the communications selected for this study were chosen based on their qualitative significance: that is to say that the sum total of the social media posts and annual Eid messages offer the Taliban's narrative during a period encompassing the height of Obama's surge strategy through the ultimate withdrawal of those roughly 30,000 extra U.S. soldiers in 2012.[5] This research design juxtaposes the Taliban accounting of attack data against US Department of Defense reports to Congress. The latter reports detail, among other variables, "Enemy Initiated Attacks" per month as reported by each regional command, regardless of whether or not they caused fatalities.[6] While organizations such as the RAND Corporation have noted a number of problems with certain metrics utilized by ISAF and the Department of Defense in the Afghan war effort, the attack statistics used herein comprise the only available comprehensive data set that reports attacks against ISAF units throughout the country.[7] For an official measure of ISAF fatalities which detail the type, date, and location of an attack, this report also utilizes the data set compiled by iCasualties.org.[8] Finally, a precise and detailed account of Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) fatalities occurring since 2009 does not exist. However the Brookings Institution's *Afghanistan Index* provides a monthly estimate of ANSF fatalities based on quotes from Afghan officials and secondary source reporting. [9]

In sum, the data gathered from the Taliban Twitter feed can be compared to official reporting of anti-ISAF attacks and estimates of ANSF fatalities as a means to determine how the organization desires to portray its insurgency effort to a largely Western audience. This same analysis will also provide a comparative means by which to assess the Taliban's military performance. While it would be valuable to utilize a sample of Tweets that encompasses the period from the start of the English language postings in May of 2011 through at least the publication date of this article, doing so would require a major change in the design of this study. In particular, the limited availability of historical Twitter postings, coupled with the fact that ISAF and the US Department of Defense quit recording the number of "Enemy Initiated Attacks" in March of 2013, means the analysis herein represents more of a natural experiment. In essence, this research takes advantage of a limited window of time during a critical period–the denouement of the U.S. surge–of Afghanistan's recent history in which data from two competing sources of information could reliably be compared to one another. Thus, the remaining sections of this essay detail how the insights extracted from the dueling figures provided by the Taliban and international community relate to the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan's larger strategic messaging initiatives. First, this study analyzes non-administrative, English language Tweets of the Taliban Twitter handle "@alemarahweb" during the fighting season of 2012. This particular time period and the Taliban feed selected for study comprise a data set that meets the following conditions: international media recognizes the account producing the Tweets as Taliban affiliated, the relevant time period allows comparison with data gathered by alternative sources (ISAF and iCasualties.org), and Taliban messages on alternative online platforms help place the Tweets in a more holistic context.[10] The subsequent paragraphs offer both a detailed explanation of the data selection process and the methodology of analysis.

The Twitter feed "@alemarahweb" began to post in English in May of 2011.[11] However, the only Tweets freely accessible are those posted after November of 2011.[12] Existing freeware programs focused on metrics such as a Twitter account's relative influence in the "Twitterverse" or tracking the most commonly used

hashtags are largely useless in analyzing the content of a Taliban Twitter feed that is not wholly integrated into a likeminded network of insurgent members and rarely, if ever, uses English hashtags. Other studies of the social media engagement of Middle Eastern groups focused on waging a global jihad utilize these types of Twitter analytics with some success. In such cases, researchers measured the relative influence of jihadis operating among a digital community of believers in which the senders, receivers, and sharers of ideas all have access to computers.[13] If a significant number of Taliban fighters across Afghanistan were utilizing laptops to communicate with each other and their leaders in the social media environment, then standard Twitter analytic metrics would be useful. In this case, a study of the Taliban's social media efforts requires either tailor-made software or manual coding by a human; this article utilizes the latter method.

To whittle the volume of the data set down to a manageable yet topically relevant size, the decision was made to examine Tweets from the summer fighting season of 2012, a period encompassing May through September.[14] This study purposely excludes Tweets from "@alemarahweb" that reference administrative details, such as the posting of a new video to the Islamic Emirate's webpage, since these Tweets do not intrinsically contain information of relevance. Essentially, this research design only involved coding Tweets that reported on direct actions by insurgents or those which highlighted current events perceived by the Taliban to be beneficial to their cause (a protest against "American desecration of a Qur'an", for example). Each of the 349 Tweets from the resulting sample was then coded based on the manner in which they utilize terms like "invader", "puppet", or "minion" to categorize individuals opposed to the Taliban. From each Tweet, the study also tabulated the alleged number of fatalities inflicted on civilians or counterinsurgent forces, along with the manner of attack, and any aerial assets that may have been destroyed. The final element of coding for each Tweet included a location categorization by correlating the listed area of an event to a specific ISAF regional command (RC).[15]

Figure 1. Map of ISAF Regional Commands (Dated September 2011) [16]

Take the following Tweet as an example:

3 invaders killed as their tank blown up in IED blast: LOGAR, Sept. 24 – A roadside bomb blast planted by Muja... http://bit.ly/VwBe7p.[17]

In this case, the attack would be coded as an event in which ISAF is referenced using some derivation of the word "invader". The mode of attack is an improvised explosive device (IED) resulting in three ISAF fatalities, one tank destroyed, and the event occurred in the RC-East area of responsibility. Most of the Tweets from this Taliban account utilize some derivative of this particular format and usually detail the method of attack, number of fatalities inflicted, any equipment destroyed, the province in which the event occurred, and the date of the event. The end product thus includes a number of quantifiable metrics from the Taliban perspective, such as ISAF or ANSF fatalities by month by region, which can then be compared against similar data gathered by other organizations. In order to more thoroughly analyze such data, this essay will combine aspects of marketing and public relations theory previously applied to cases similar to the one presented in this work.

Applying Theory

According to Zelin, the major growth in jihadi social media can generally be attributed to the 2010 efforts of the now deceased Anwar al-Awlaki.[18] One of the main findings of Zelin's work, though it focuses almost exclusively on Arabic speaking jihadi groups, is that affiliated individuals tend to shun Twitter in favor of the exclusivity of online forums and do not regularly use English in their postings.[19] However, one recent work analyzing the social media usage of Western nationals fighting in Syria showed that "most groups' media outlets still

post their content to jihadi forums but will simultaneously create sponsored Twitter accounts where they release new statements or videos" and that much of the content, often in English, posted by these individual fighters remains more heavily influenced by a group's central leadership than a casual observer might otherwise expect.[20] The Taliban case, therefore, is more reflective of the latter trend where message content is controlled through the use of official or semi-official social media accounts. The notable exception however, is that there is no evidence to show that the Islamic Emirate's English language posts result from the presence of Western citizens who have joined the Taliban's cause. Nevertheless, to more effectively examine why and how an organization—corporate, militant, or otherwise—utilizes Twitter, it is useful to look at research from the field of public relations.

Waters and Williams provide an excellent summary of organizational practices on Twitter in stating that "research has shown that advocacy organizations rarely use social networking sites or blogs to create dialogue; instead, their primary focus is information sharing."[21] Though the Taliban are not an advocacy organization of the same type included in the Waters and Williams study, they view themselves as a legitimate governing entity (albeit in a militarily imposed exile) that is nevertheless communicating to an audience about a desire to return to power. The aforementioned study goes on to highlight four particular models of public relations. The first is known as "press agentry" and is classified as a "one way asymmetrical model" in which communications are designed to "catch attention and interest and to convince the audience of an idea, using any means necessary."[22] Additional characteristics of the press agentry manner of communication include "sensationalism" and "embellishment" that "stretch or abandon the truth" and contain few, if any, "backup or references" in support of the particular claim.

A detailed look at the Taliban Twitter feed shows that it is clearly engaged in this method of public relations. Taliban reporting of attacks through the summer of 2012 is rife with embellishment in terms of damage inflicted on ISAF forces, but appears to understate the effectiveness of their attacks against ANSF elements. Specifically, based on Twitter reporting, the Taliban claim to kill an average of 196 ANSF personnel per month during this period; resulting in a total of 980 fatalities. Estimates based on data compiled in the Brookings Institutions' *Afghanistan Index*, suggests an average monthly death toll of closer to 309 ANSF personnel, though a lack of regular, detailed reporting from the Afghan government negatively impacts the precision of such an aggregated estimate.[23] Nevertheless, the overall trends illustrate a messaging campaign primarily targeted to demoralize a Western audience. Table 1 shows a brief sample of the comparative difference in attack metrics between ISAF and the Taliban.

Table 1. ISAF Fatalities and Helicopter Crashes by Reporting Source for Summer 2012

	Taliban Reported	ISAF Reported *	Taliban Error
Type of Attack			
IED/Suicide IED	139	77	+62
Hostile Action (not «insider attack»)	460	76	+384
Hostile Action («insider attack»)	20	30	-10
Total ISAF Fatalities by Hostile Action	619	183	+436
Equipment Destroyed			
Helicopters Downed Due to Hostile Fire (resulting in fatalities)	6	3	+3
Helicopters Downed Due to Non-Hostile Causes (resulting in fatalities)	0	2	-2

*Data based on iCasualties.org independent analysis of official ISAF news releases and other media reporting [24]

What is also interesting is the extent to which the Taliban Twitter feed tends to understate casualties caused by attacks in which an ANSF member turns his weapon on an ISAF soldier. This will be discussed in more detail in the strategic messaging portion, but this is indicative of the Taliban's general lack of direct responsibility for insider attacks even though they recognize their tactical effectiveness and propaganda value.[25] As a final specific example of the Taliban's attempt to utilize Twitter to sensationalize the impact of an attack on Western personnel, one needs to look little further than the reporting surrounding a suicide attack in Kabul (RC-Capital) on May 2, 2012. Although the Taliban Twitter account claimed this resulted in the death of 43 "invaders"—the largest single day death toll for an attack in which the Taliban "confirm" killing foreigners—in fact the only non-Afghan citizen killed was a private security guard.[26] In any event, they also failed to mention the associated deaths of six civilians, which is not surprising given that the Taliban Twitter account does not contain a single post in which insurgents acknowledge that their actions may have caused civilian casualties. Overall, the general character of the Taliban's sensational and unsubstantiated claims exemplifies the press agentry model. Importantly though, these mostly tactical reports are less concerned about accurately conveying the numbers of ISAF personnel killed in Afghanistan so long as they serve to draw attention to the Taliban's larger strategic messaging themes. As we will see in the next section, the Islamic Emirate delivers its respective narrative via a bi-level communications scheme in which regular Twitter messaging attempts to reinforce the material in Mullah Omar's annual Eid ul-Adha and Eid ul-Fitr manifestos.

One particularly prescient study that provides an appropriate manner of assessing the content, delivery, and interpretation of jihadi media is that of Baines and O'Shaughnessy who describe terrorism as a "deviant sub-branch of political marketing".[27] These authors rely on concepts from marketing theory known as "intended positioning" and "cultural interpretation" to indirectly determine what particular message(s) the producer of a video glorifying jihad is attempting to convey. Most specifically, they utilize a deconstruction technique attributed to Jacques Derrida which attempts to identify "privileged themes" and "binary pairs or opposites" in an effort to reveal what message a work is designed to portray and the manner in which it

is conveyed.[28] Utilizing this same technique, it is argued here that the adoption of the internet in general and Twitter, in particular, is designed to deliver the Taliban's privileged themes (its intended position) in a manner that is readily used and understood by citizens of Western societies (cultural interpretation).

Regardless of whether or not Mullah Omar actually writes the Taliban's annual messages for Eid ul-Adha and Eid ul-Fitr, the Taliban leadership is increasingly aware of the importance of influencing Western public opinion.[29] The Taliban no longer appear hesitant to engage in the media war, which may be a direct influence of the senior leadership's interactions with Bin Laden in which the latter is reported to have advised his Afghan hosts that "it is obvious that the media war in this century is one of the strongest methods; in fact, its ratio may reach 90% of the total preparation for the battles."[30] In other words, media engagement is perhaps even more important to winning a campaign than the actual tactical or operational task itself. In embracing the media as an additional tool of asymmetric warfare, the Taliban's 2011 Eid ul-Adha message mentions the Islamic Emirate's "official Spokesmen, Websites and Press Releases" while encouraging "the men of letters" to "put to work their pens in the cause of defense of their religion."[31] The Taliban leadership seems to most poignantly address both the audience and purpose of their information operations in stating that "the American and Western people have no further taste for extending the Afghan war and seeing their soldiers return in coffins."[32] The Taliban thus have identified the Western citizenry as the center of gravity of the international war effort and target this audience through a number of privileged themes portrayed in different mediums.

As the aforementioned excerpts from Mullah Omar demonstrate, the Taliban look to the internet in general and social media in particular as an operational front complementary to actual violent action against ISAF and ANSF targets. Ultimately, both components are part of a strategy to force a complete and permanent withdrawal of an international security force presence in Afghanistan. Communications theory states that the presence of "opposites or binary pairs" in the text will ultimately reflect the intended message of the author. For the Taliban, Twitter is a means of pumping out a consistent stream of alternative identities: ISAF soldiers are "invaders" and "terrorists", not liberators; and Afghans serving in the security services or government are neither patriots nor true Muslims, but "puppets".[33] Chart 1 demonstrates a Taliban preference for portraying ANSF and ISAF personnel not as worthy military "enemies", but as a less legitimate type of opponent.
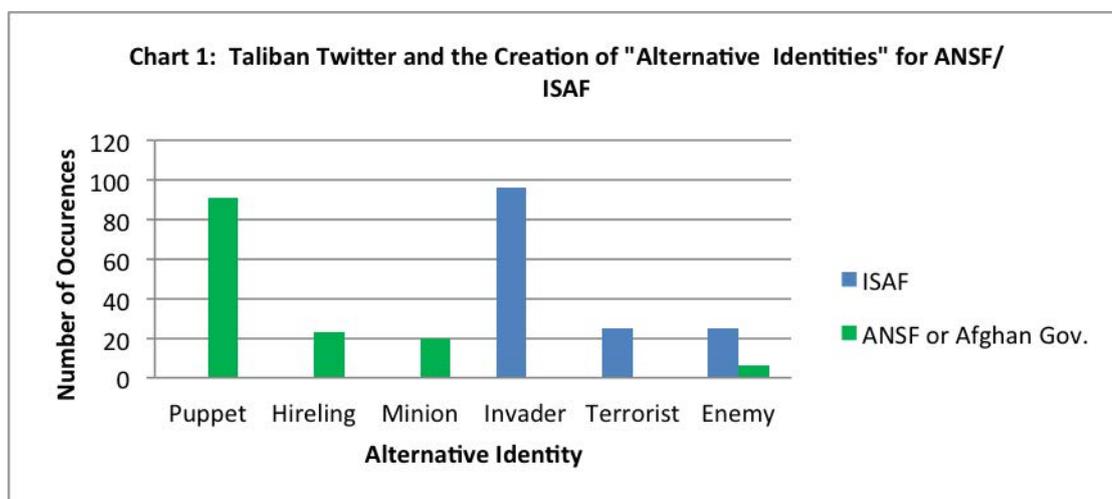

Chart 1: Taliban Twitter and the Creation of "Alternative Identities" ofr ANSF/ISAF

With the "binary pairs" of the Twitter feed identified, it is important to examine the extent to which these Tweets support the deliverance of the Taliban's privileged strategic messaging themes.

One major theme that the Taliban attempted to reinforce following the 2012 fighting season is that of a more effective jihad expanding to all parts of the country. In Mullah Omar's 2012 Eid ul-Adha message he states:

> *The ranks of Jihad do strengthen, experiencing expansion in every part of the country because of the close support of [our] brave people with the Mujahideen and their sacrifices. Massive aggressive and Jihadic [sic] tactical attacks are carried out against the grand bases of the invaders.[34]*

Given the limitations of available data, it is not possible to accurately assess the claim of an expansion of jihad to all regions of the country. However, Table 2 shows that much of the fighting occurs in the Pashtu dominated South and East of the country, as a relative proportion of overall attacks.

Table 2. Attacks by Region as Reported by the Taliban and ISAF for Summer 2012

	Taliban Reported Anti-ISAF Attacks	ISAF Reported Anti-ISAF Attacks*
RC-South	21%	21%
RC-Southwest	14%	30%
RC-East	58%	41%
RC-West	3%	5%
RC-North	2%	4%
RC-Capital	1%	**

*ISAF reported percentages equal 101% due to rounding (and raw figures are unavailable)

** ISAF reports this as statistically negligible in respect to the total number of attacks

Though the Department of Defense acknowledges that regional commands outside of these areas are clearly not immune to Taliban penetration, the Taliban's reach into places like Mazar-e-Sharif (RC-North) and Kabul (RC-Capital) is likely blunted by the enmity they created during their years in power.[35]

A second privileged theme the Taliban attempt to convey to the West in their effort to erode public morale is the insurgents' ability to deliberately plan and execute "insider attacks". In the Eid ul-Fitr address following the 2012 fighting season, the Taliban appeared ready to portray themselves as key facilitators, if not direct planners, of past attacks while also demonstrating a capability to conduct them in the future. In addition to allegedly creating a "Guidance, Luring and Integration" operational wing, the Taliban take responsibility for the season's attacks in stating that "Mujahideen have cleverly infiltrated the ranks of the enemy according to the plan given to them last year".[36] However, as mentioned earlier in this analysis, Taliban Tweets fail to account for the full range of fatalities resulting from the incidents and they do not provide Tweets claiming responsibility for a number of insider attacks reported by ISAF. Ultimately, because the Taliban are likely not the proximate cause of a number of insider attacks they are forced to retroactively claim responsibility in order to strengthen the narrative that they are able to penetrate ISAF's most secure locations.[37]

Conclusion

From the outset, this study sought to analyze the Taliban's social media and general internet presence in an effort to better classify the organization's information operations while also gaining a new perspective on insurgent operations. Assessments and statements from both sides of the military divide acknowledge that the Taliban's ability to use the media became an increasingly important front in the war for Afghanistan.[38] The analysis of Tweets from a Taliban social media account illustrates how the Taliban are primarily engaged in a model of public relations dominated by an effort to draw attention to a number of themes designed to

drain Western support for a prolonged military effort. While the Taliban have largely been successful in adopting and experimenting with a platform capable of delivering their competing narrative to Western audiences, their own tactical reporting on Twitter does not fully complement key strategic themes. The Taliban, as much as they might wish themselves to be, are not waging a jihad that is consistently effective in attacking their enemies across all regions of Afghanistan nor are they in command of a network of sleeper cells willing and able to conduct insider attacks on demand. Yet, unquestionable military effectiveness is not necessary to force the permanent withdrawal of international forces. For the Taliban, their goals cannot be achieved through social media outreach and internet proclamations alone, but their narratives can garner increased attention if they are built on a steady stream of newsworthy tactical victories.

Accordingly, Taliban social media activity presents a rich opportunity for continued study. Future research utilizing computer programming to analyze a greater sampling of Tweets from multiple Taliban accountscould improve on the sample utilized in this research, leading to more accurate predictions about how the insurgents will counter the body of international forces remaining in the country after 2014. With the government of Afghanistan, the US, and NATO recently signing new security mandates, other studies could continue to track the Taliban social media presence to see if it changes to address new audiences, convey different themes, or disappears altogether. Ultimately, this study provides a basic foundation from which to start.

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Notes

[1] For a more detailed discussion of the Taliban's rise and fall from power see: Barfield, Thomas. *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 256-264. For a discussion focused on Taliban ideology see: Esposito, John. *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 16; and Kepel, Giles. *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam* (London : I.B. Tauris, 2006), 231.

[2] Shawe, Keith. *Afghanistan in 2013: A Survey of the Afghan People (*The Asia Foundation, 2013), 99.

[3] Eid ul-Fitr celebrates the end of Ramadan and the breaking of the fast, while Eid ul-Adha is the second of these holidays to occur during the calendar year and commemorates Ibrahim's willingness to sacrifice his son as a mark of obedience to Allah.

[4] For a detailed report which demonstrates the strengths and weaknesses of utilizing Twitter analytical software to study jihadi social media see: Zelin, Aaron. *The State of Global Jihad Online* (Washington D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2013). For works that demonstrate in varying degrees the language skills or technical requirements for more extensive social media analysis see: Klausen, Jytte. "Tweeting the Jihad: Social Media Networks of Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq." *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* (17 October 2014) [accepted manuscript published online]; available from www.tandfonline.com (accessed December 2014); Torres-Soriano, Manuel. "Creation, Evolution, and Disappearance of Terrorist Internet Forums." *International Journal of Conflict and Violence*, Vol 7, no. 1 (2013): 164 – 178; and Zoto, Edval; "Failure and Success of Jihadi Information Operations on the Internet." (December 2013) [Naval Postgraduate School thesis online]; (Monterey: Calhoun Institutional Archive of the Naval Postgraduate School); available from www.nps.edu/library (accessed December 2014).

[5] Mount, Mike. "U.S. Official: Afghanistan Surge Over as Last of Extra Troops Leave Country." *CNN*. 21 September 2012 [news article online]; available from www.cnn.com (accessed December 2014); and Obama, Barack. «Remarks on Afghanistan, June 2011.» *The Council on Foreign Relations*. 22 June 2011 [Speech transcript online]; available from http://www.cfr.org/afghanistan/obamas-remarks-afghanistan-june-2011/p25333 (accessed December 2014).

[6] The US Congress mandates that the US Department of Defense submits these progress reports on Afghanistan every 180 days. Therefore, each report covers

both specific data from a roughly six month long reporting period as well as long term themes analyzed over the course of the conflict. For a detailed description of Department of Defense reporting requirements on the Afghan war see footnote 1 of: US Department of Defense. *Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan (December 2012)* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, December 2012), 1. ISAF and the Department of Defense quit recording the numbers of "enemy initiated attacks" in March of 2013.

[7] Connable, Ben. *Embracing the Fog of War: Assessment and Metrics in Counterinsurgency*. Report for the US Department of Defense (RAND Corporation, 2012).

[8] iCasualties.org. "Operation Enduring Freedom", 2014 [Datasheet online]; available from http://icasualties.org/oef/. iCasualties.org compiles casualty lists based on reporting by ISAF and respective countries' defense ministries and relevant news releases. The data also includes helpful additional details as to whether service members were killed in an "insider attack" or died in a helicopter crash attributed to hostile fire.

[9] Livingston, Ian and Michael O'Hanlon. *Afghanistan Index. Selected Data on Afghanistan and Pakistan* (Brookings Institution, 2014). For 2012 they estimate the total number of ANSF deaths to be 3,400 individuals for the period from January through November. This entails a monthly average of 309 deaths per month. Unfortunately, the lack of more detailed reporting means that this number fails to take into account the seasonal spike in attacks (and deaths) that occur during the summer months.

[10] Boone, Jon. "Taliban Join the Twitter Revolution." *The Guardian*. 12 May 2011. It is important to note that two other "official" Taliban Twitter feeds are now in existence, "@ABalkhi" and "@Zabihmujahid". The latter is the namesake of the Taliban spokesman often frequently contacted by media outlets for comments about particular attacks.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Software is available that is capable of archiving or storing Tweets for a set period of time, but such programs store all future posts based on user specifications. These programs are not capable of recovering or retroactively archiving Tweets which have already "expired".

[13] For a general discussion of the nature of the online jihadi community see: Brachman, Jarret. "Watching the Watchers." *Foreign Policy*, Issue 182 (November 2010): 60-69. Additionally, see the aforementioned *The State of Global Jihad Online by* Aaron Zelin.

[14] Many of the Tweets on the feed are exact duplicates of each other. The data set only utilizes one Tweet of the "duplicate pair" to avoid double counting. Additionally, any additional information in the Tweet beyond 140 characters is excluded because the information was either inaccessible or contained a non-functioning link to an external website.

[15] The ISAF regional commands during this period are RC-North, RC-East, RC-South, RC-Southwest, RC-West, and RC-Capital. For further information on the regional command structure, see: http://www.isaf.nato.int/.

[16] International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). "International Security Assistance Force – ISAF Order of Battle as of September 2011" [map online]; available from http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/oef_orbat_isaf.htm (accessed December 2014).

[17] Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. "*@alemarahweb*", [Twitter feed online]; available from https://twitter.com/alemarahweb.

[18] Zelin, 3. Zelin acknowledges Osama Bin Laden's recognition of the importance of media in 2002, years before the invention of today's most popular social media websites.

[19] Ibid, 2.

[20] Klausen, 2,5, 10-11; Torres-Soriano, 175-177; Zoto, 29-31.

[21] Waters, Richard and Jensen Williams. "Squawking, Tweeting, Cooing and Hooting: Analyzing the Communications Patterns of Government Agencies on Twitter." *Journal of Public Affairs* 11, no. 4 (March 2011): 354.

[22] Ibid, 356.

[23] Livingston and O'Hanlon, 13. The authors of this report cite a number of issues with obtaining an accurate breakdown of ANSF casualties, but provide a yearly estimate of ANSF fatalities by compiling reporting from the Afghan government and independent news organizations. For 2012, the report's 11 month estimate of ANSF fatalities of 3,400 personnel was taken and this number was divided by 11 to obtain a monthly average of 309. However, due to the lack of detailed reporting and data only covering a shortened year (11 months) the monthly average does not capture the fluctuations in fatalities that occur due to seasonal variations in the intensity of fighting. The lack of publically available reports also means that it is impossible to provide an official estimate of which regions of the country are deadliest for ANSF personnel. Nevertheless, it is the best metric available that allows for a comparison of Taliban reported anti-ANSF attacks.

[24] *iCasualties.org* reporting is considered a reputable source for a monthly breakdown of all ISAF casualty data. News organizations as varied as the BBC, NY Times, and Agence France-Presse have all utilized this database for their own reporting. For an examination of how *iCasualties* became a widely cited resource see: Cohen, Noam. "Close Watch on Casualties in Afghanistan and Iraq." *New York Times.* 21 November 2010. Think tanks also recognize this dataset as reputable source. For example see: Livingston, and O'Hanlon. *Afghanistan Index. Selected Data on Afghanistan and Pakistan* (Brookings Institution, 2014), 10.

[25] My analysis of the Taliban's statements on Twitter largely corroborate the ISAF assessment in December of 2012 which states that insider attacks are both an "enemy tactic" and "have a cultural component", yet "remain useful to the insurgency whether or not they are deliberately planned. See: US Department of Defense. *Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan (December 2012), 1, 6.*

[26] Georgy, Michael and Mirwais Harooni. "Suicide bombers kill 7 after Obama Leaves Afghan Capital." *Reuters.* 02 May 2012.

[27] Baines, Paul and Nicholas O'Shaughnessy. "Selling Terror: The Symbolization and Positioning of Jihad." *Marketing Theory* 9 (2009): 227-241.

[28] Ibid, 232-233.

[29] Obtaining these messages directly from the Taliban's website is difficult as the page is frequently removed from internet servers or blocked. Therefore, all versions of the Eid addresses are obtained from third party websites. Unfortunately, the author could not locate any vetted, officially translated catalogue of all of the Taliban's Eid addresses in open source material.

[30] Zehlin's study quotes this correspondence between Bin Laden and Mullah Omar on page 3.

[31] Omar, Muhammad. "Mullah Omar's Eid ul-Fitr Message (August 28, 2011)." *Information Clearing House*, 28 August 2011 [translated text of address on-line]; available from http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article28997.htm; and "Mullah Omar's Eid-ul-Adha Message 2011." *Uruknet*, 04 November 2011 [translated text of address on-line]; available from http://www.uruknet.de/. The latter message actually directs the Taliban's "countrymen" to seek out information from the Islamic Emirate's "Spokesmen, Websites, and Press Releases", though Taliban leadership may have later realized that the digital medium was more effective for reaching Americans than Afghans.

[32] Omar, Muhammad. "Mullah Omar's Eid-ul-Adha Message 2011."

[33] Term usage is not mutually exclusive and the chart accounts for all relevant derivatives of a particular alternative identity. For example "invader", "invading", and "invaders" are all counted under the identity of "invader". Multiple uses of the same derivative in a single Tweet are not double counted. Also, identities are not mutually exclusive as the Tweets occasionally use two distinct qualifiers. For example a dead ANSF soldier may be referred to as both a "hireling" and a "minion" in the same post. In this case, the count for each identity is increased by 1.

[34] Omar, Mohammed. "Mullah Omar's Eid-ul-Adha Message 2012" *Uruknet,* 24 October 2012 [translated text of address on-line]; available from http://www.uruknet.info (accessed March 2014).

[35] For an assessment of the insurgency during the relevant period, see: US Department of Defense. *Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan (December 2012),* 3-5. For an account of how the Taliban's pre-2001 military campaigns created regional enemies see: Barfield, 262.

[36] Omar, Mohammed. "Mullah Omar's Eid al-Fitr Message 2012." *Turn To Islam*, 16 August 2012 [translated text of address on-line]; available from http://turntoislam.com (accessed March 2014).

[37] US Department of Defense. *Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan (December 2012),* 1, 6, 35. Interestingly, this report states that the Taliban overstate both the number of casualties and the number of attacks. This is not borne out by Tweets on the examined account, but may refer to quotes given to media outlets after an insider attack occurs.

[38] Ibid, 21, 33, 35. Portions of these sections also use direct quotes from various Taliban messages—such as the yearly Eid messages quoted in this essay—to demonstrate that the Islamic Emirate's various media outreach and information operations are important elements of the conflict.