

The Taliban's Metamorphosis

By Fred Burton

A number of alleged "collaborators" have been executed in Pakistan's North West Frontier Province recently, and the string of killings continued this week as the bodies of two local tribesmen -- both of whom reportedly had been shot to death -- were found in different parts of North Waziristan agency. Notes pinned to the victims' bodies, warning that "American spies will face the same fate," left little doubt as to which side the killers support in the U.S.-jihadist war.

Executions of this sort have been occurring regularly since the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001, and there is little that is particularly noteworthy about the recent uptick in violence -- if considered in a vacuum, that is. Five years into the war, patterns of behavior by both sides have become largely predictable: The annual spring thaw marks the beginning of the traditional combat season in the Hindu Kush, and the combat season always is preceded by an "intelligence surge." In other words, in late winter, Western intelligence agents start stepping up their activities to determine what the jihadists' military plans will be, and the jihadists move to counter the intelligence efforts. Therefore, the violent deaths of alleged "spies" -- real or imagined -- also tend to tick upward at times, in keeping with the other seasonal cycles.

But if considered in tandem with other regional trends -- particularly a recent shift in the frequency and means of communication used by Taliban leaders -- these seasonal executions begin to tell a new story.

The last few months have brought a notable difference in the way the Taliban, the largest jihadist force in the Pakistan-Afghanistan border region, conduct the war. Not to put too fine a point on it, but the mullahs have "gone Hollywood." As before, suspected espionage agents are being killed; but in a new twist, the Taliban have begun recording videos of the executions and posting them on the Internet.

What's more, this tactic -- apparently borrowed directly from the al Qaeda playbook -- is merely the most striking of several other shifts in the way the Taliban communicate with friends and enemies alike. Since late December, some Taliban leaders seem to have embarked on a virtual media blitz, with one of them -- Mullah Dadullah -- even appearing recently in a TV interview with Britain's Channel Four. This behavior is significant, coming from the commander of a fundamentalist group that traditionally has avoided "image-making" technology as sinful.

To steal an old advertising phrase from General Motors: This is not your father's Taliban.

The Spring Offensive

To fully understand events in the region, one must consider both the traditional and emerging trends in the Afghanistan war.

First, this conflict is as much an intelligence war as a military effort. Since the attacks of 9/11, the United States and its allies (including Pakistan) have exerted constant efforts to gather intelligence about the jihadist forces arrayed along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, with particular emphasis on locating high-value targets (HVTs) such as Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri. The Americans and others quickly realized that signals intelligence (SIGINT) and other technical methods would never be sufficient. Given the way the jihadists operate, intelligence from

human sources (or HUMINT) would have to be emphasized if they were going to get in close enough to capture or kill al Qaeda leaders.

Viewed from the opposite angle, jihadists typically find sanctuary in a cocoon of social relations -- a system that relies on shared religious convictions; cultural, tribal and religious obligations; ties of friendship and intermarriage; and, not insignificantly, fear. Traitors and collaborators are killed.

The "badlands" on Pakistan's side of the border are now a key region for intelligence operations, since that is where the jihadists regrouped after their flight from Afghanistan. Recognizing that military operations against coalition forces were being planned and launched from new bases in Pakistan, the United States and its allies expanded their intelligence collection requirements there to include information about those military operations. These collection efforts, like those concerning HVTs, are HUMINT-intensive; but unlike the HVT collection effort, the military intelligence campaigns tend to be more seasonal than constant.

The jihadists are not unaware of Western intelligence strategies and -- judging from recent events -- are concerned by them.

The routine executions of "spies" like the Pakistani tribesmen, of course, serves two obvious purposes: By killing anyone who excites suspicion, the Taliban can protect against hostile intelligence agents who actually might have penetrated the organization, while also dissuading any would-be informants from going turncoat. These executions often are read as a sign that the jihadists are asserting their power in the border region, but they are, in fact, a marker of the jihadists' insecurity. There is always a possibility that someone in their social or operational network could sell them out or set them up as targets for an airstrike like that targeting al-Zawahiri at Damadola.

At that level, the paranoia is a constant. However, reports also emerged this week that the Taliban have seized an Italian journalist and a German citizen in the region, and a British reporter working for Al Jazeera was abducted in February. It is possible there are heightened feelings of insecurity in connection with this spring's intelligence offensive, particularly in the wake of the recent arrest of Mullah Obaidullah Akhund. Obaidullah served as the Taliban's defense minister prior to the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. The fear, of course, is that Obaidullah could provide a windfall of intelligence if he were interrogated by his Pakistani captors (provided that information is shared with the Americans).

The recent abductions could be one means by which the Taliban are seeking leverage in their battle against Western coalition forces.

Be that as it may, the routine execution of anyone who can be labeled a "spy" is highly useful -- whether for the Taliban or even as a tool in local tribal politics. Insofar as the Afghanistan conflict is concerned, these executions certainly have made it much more dangerous for anyone who might consider providing information to the United States and its allies -- and they have consequently upped the ante for U.S. case officers attempting to recruit new human sources.

The Video Offensive

The "fear factor" now is taking on new dimensions, however, with the Taliban expanding their communications to include video and the Internet -- something not widely seen in this particular war.

In this respect, the Taliban are beginning to look and act more like al Qaeda.

Though Osama bin Laden frequently gave interviews to journalists in the late 1990s, his direct communication with the outside world ceased after 9/11, when he became the target of a global manhunt. At that point, al Qaeda began to produce its own statements and disseminated them to media outlets like Al Jazeera. This communication model provided better security for the al Qaeda leadership, but it still left much to be desired: Outside media sources still were able to exercise considerable editorial control over the messages, and frequently did not air them in full. Moreover, there was still a possibility that the movements and contacts of couriers carrying the tapes to media networks could be traced.

In 2005, al Qaeda's media arm, As Sahab, began to post messages directly to the Internet instead. This greatly reduced the risks for physical security, and neatly solved the problem of editorial control as well. In other words, using the Internet allowed al Qaeda to say everything it wanted without censorship, cuts or commentary.

Al Qaeda's regional branches in Saudi Arabia and Iraq -- and, more recently, in the Maghreb -- also have embraced the Internet. In fact, the Saudi and Iraqi nodes led the way in this realm by regularly posting their own statements and videos to the Web, before As-Sahab was formed in Pakistan. Enterprising jihadists clearly understood the value of the medium. It was his use of the Internet and decapitation videos that made Abu Musab al-Zarqawi a household name and allowed him to all but eclipse bin Laden as the world's most notorious terrorist. As-Sahab and the al Qaeda-linked Labik Productions also have made use of videos showing rocket and vehicular-bombing attacks in Afghanistan, as well as video statements from al Qaeda leaders such as Abu Yahya al Libi.

The Taliban and its leadership, however, have maintained a much lower media profile. Of course, Mullah Omar always has been reclusive and camera-shy -- and, having gone into hiding, it is not surprising that he would decline opportunities to provide the United States or its allies with a confirmed and recent image.

The Taliban's absence from the airwaves and cyberspace also could be explained in part by the group's fundamentalist ideology -- or at least that appeared to be the case until recently.

From a religious standpoint, the Taliban authorities frowned on depictions of the human form as evil -- and while in control of Afghanistan, the regime outlawed movies, television, photographs and painted portraits of people on these grounds. Even so, some Taliban leaders on rare occasions allowed themselves to be shown on film during interviews with important secular media outlets.

But in recent months, the Taliban's prominence in the media has increased markedly. For example, a video called "Pyre for the Americans in the Land of Kharasan" was released by As-Sahab on Feb. 15, showing the Taliban planning and carrying out an operation to capture a purported American base in Zabul province. In other recent videos, Taliban members were shown executing dozens of alleged informants, some of whom were beheaded with swords.

The Taliban leader who has been most in the public eye for some time is Mullah Dadullah, who previously was granting about one interview a year to major media. Since December, however, Dadullah apparently has been on a media blitz: He has appeared in As-Sahab videos and granted high-profile interviews to Al Jazeera and

Britain's Channel 4. In fact, his name now appears almost daily in the international news. Dadullah could be emerging as Afghanistan's equivalent of Iraq's al-Zarqawi. And, with bravado similar to that of al-Zarqawi, he has been quite vocal in threatening the largest-ever Taliban offensive this spring: He claims to have hundreds of suicide bombers waiting to be used against NATO forces and the government in Kabul.

Dadullah is not the only Taliban figure being featured in this new media campaign: Others, including Ghul Agha Akhund and Mullah Hayatullah Khan, also have granted interviews to Western media.

Analytically speaking, it is reasonable to question whether the media blitz is being driven by a conscious, strategic decision or by some shift in the Taliban leadership's locale. After all, in the early years of the war, most Taliban members did not have regular access to electricity, let alone to the Internet. However, they were able to communicate with satellite phones, the occasional printed statement from Mullah Omar and some Web sites maintained by sympathizers. Moreover, leaders could videotape statements from the wilds of Afghanistan using battery-powered equipment.

Also, we note with interest that al Qaeda's As-Sahab media arm -- which, like Labik Productions, has been posting material to the Internet for years -- has been involved in releasing some of the new Taliban videos (which also are reportedly sold as DVDs in Pakistani market stalls). The association with al Qaeda is not new, nor is the technological capability; therefore, the media blitz seems to be part of a strategic decision by the Taliban.

Jihadist Cross-Currents

In this sense, and in working with As-Sahab, the Taliban clearly are taking a page from the al Qaeda manual. It is not the first time they have done so: During the course of the five-year conflict, the Taliban have adopted tactics such as using the same kinds of roadside IEDs and suicide bombers employed by al Qaeda nodes in other theaters.

Culturally, however, the trends are moving in the opposite direction. In the Pakistani border regions, the Taliban have banned the playing of music and even have banned shaving -- showing an allegiance to the group's traditional religious doctrine. This is a further indication that the media offensive, with its use of modern technology, is a tactical move being made for battlefield advantage.

Put another way, we are witnessing both the "Talibanization" of Pakistan's Pashtun-dominated regions and a concurrent "al Qaedaization" of the way the Taliban are fighting.

And that brings up new questions about whether to read the Taliban's statements as jihadist bombast or meaningful threats.

Among other things, Taliban leaders have claimed in the recent media offensive that they are preparing to stage attacks outside Afghanistan -- a threat that was given little credence at the time. However, it will be recalled that al-Zarqawi's jihadist node in Iraq was able to stage attacks in Jordan at one point.

Clearly, the Taliban have chosen to emulate al Qaeda's battle tactics, using roadside IEDs and suicide bombers in attempts to force a NATO withdrawal from

Afghanistan. The Taliban today have moved toward the fourth-generation asymmetrical model of warfare now being waged by al Qaeda in other theaters. Whether they will find it in their interests -- or their means -- to carry out attacks beyond the Pakistan-Afghanistan region remains to be seen, but the idea is not, on its face, implausible.