Telling the Afghan Military Story . . . THEIR WAY!

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SEVERAL TIMES a week, a soldier from the Afghan National Army (ANA) hops on a bicycle in downtown Kabul and delivers press releases to news media bureaus within the city. When the weather is bad, he accomplishes this mission on foot. For Americans and other outsiders, this rather primitive distribution system reinforces a perception of backwardness, but it is a mistaken perception.

The Afghan Ministry of Defense (MOD) Office of Parliamentary, Social Relations, and Public Affairs employs limited technology mostly when it is necessary to alert reporters to breaking news, to invite them to an unscheduled news conference, or to respond to questions.[1] In Afghan culture, face-to-face contact and the personal delivery of information are more consistent with social expectations.

By contrast, the military public affairs staffs of Combined Forces Command-Afghanistan (CFC-A) rely on E-mails, cell phones, faxes, and other high-tech communications devices that provide immediacy but, ultimately, limit the direct human contact central to Afghan culture.

Other important differences exist in the assumptions that drive the emerging Afghan public affairs (PA) system. For instance, Afghan military leaders are often more open to the news media than outsiders expect them to be or are themselves. Afghan officers have been known to organize internal video and still-photograph crews to follow them and document what they are doing.[2] Operational commanders regularly interact comfortably with local news media to provide information.[3] Such openness is all the more unexpected knowing that in 2001 two Al Qaeda terrorists posing as reporters assassinated the prominent Afghan resistance leader Ahmad Shah Massoud.

American public affairs officers (PAOs) will also be surprised by the absence of any wall between MOD-generated news and the civilian media. In Afghanistan, the MOD controls news about the military; its stories move seamlessly between military-run media and Afghan national TV, radio, and newspapers. That does not happen in the United States.

The unaware PAO will be confounded, too, by some of the simple facts of life in Afghanistan: Only about 20 percent of the population is literate; TV penetration is limited to major cities; radio is the primary mass communications medium; and tribal, village, and religious leaders are the most respected sources of information for the average citizen. Radio and community relations are the primary techniques for reaching the Afghan people. No credible nationwide public opinion surveys exist.[4] Such an unfamiliar environment demands tailored information policies and procedures, but too often

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MG Mohammad Moenn, Commander of Central Corps, answers reporters' questions after a firepower demonstration near Kabul, 7 June 2005.

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Afghan and international reporters cover an ANA live-fire event east of Kabul, 7 June 2005.

we assume that modern PA techniques that work elsewhere will work with equal effectiveness in Afghanistan. They do not.

In Afghanistan, conducting stability operations is an adaptive experience. At least in public affairs, the complaint that Afghans "are not doing it right" usually means that they are not doing it our way. Our way is not necessarily or even usually the right way. Those who train Afghan PA personnel must understand this basic fact if they wish to lay the foundation for effective systems development and mentoring. Would-be mentors must resist the urge to interfere with the natural evolution of Afghan PA systems and avoid forcing Western information solutions into an unfamiliar Afghan environment. As we have begun to understand that, we have made substantial progress in helping to improve Afghan PA capabilities.

The Afghan PA System

In January 2004, the MOD PA office consisted of a single person: Major General Mohammed Zaher Azimi, the official MOD spokesman. As of fall 2005, Azimi's staff numbered 33 PAOs, with an additional 24 in the 5 regional corps and the Kabul Military Training Center.

As with any PA structure, developing institutional credibility is essential. Azimi and his growing staff come from a variety of operational and information positions within earlier MOD structures; some were Mujahadeen resistance fighters; all were well-known and respected within the defense establishment. In fact, Azimi is often called on by President Hamid Karzai to help with specific projects.

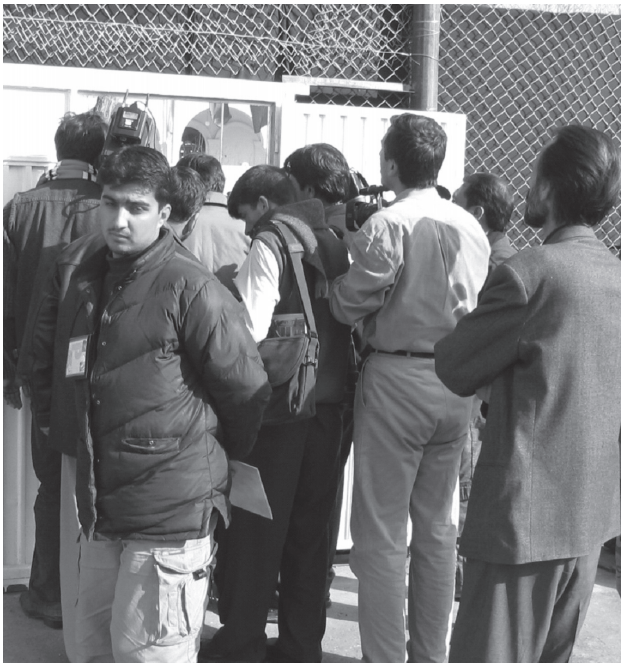
Information accuracy and message consistency are particularly essential in Afghanistan, where public trust was shattered in the past. Delivery is important too. To provide information to a population that lives primarily in rugged terrain and isolated villages, the MOD must use techniques that mix traditional social interaction with developing broadcast, print, and Internet technology. In such an environment, the bicycle messenger becomes understandable as a bridge between old and new.

Do Not Do It for Them

Afghan PA structures, policies, and procedures have evolved as a result of collaborative work-group meetings involving Afghan PA leaders and a PA mentor from the Office of Security Cooperation-Afghanistan; however, the Afghans make final decisions about the way ahead. Their investment in systems development and their ability to adapt quickly contributed directly to PA successes.[5]

CFC-A must stand back and allow the Afghans to operate. If it does not, it risks getting in the way. In August 2004, provincial unrest forced Karzai to deploy ANA soldiers to conduct stability operations. MOD PA put together a media coverage plan and invited reporters to go along. When this initiative conflicted with CFC-A PA and information operation plans, Afghan PAOs were replaced and different media transported.

Confronted with a similar situation in Herat a month later, the MOD acquired its own aircraft from the national airlines and transported Afghan PAOs



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Reporters strain for a glimpse through the gate of the "cage" erected for the presidential inauguration, 7 December 2004. Once the event began, the gate was closed to prevent any observation.

and news media to the scene. What had been negative reporting about the situation by reporters hundreds of miles away in Kabul changed dramatically for the better once the MOD gave them direct access. The MOD's effective independent initiative noticeably affected the Afghan people's perception of events.

Another example of misdirected help involves writing styles. Afghan culture relies heavily on an oral tradition. Even the simplest tales take the form of epics told over and over. Those who can write frequently adopt the complexity of oral communication, which is referred to as flowery or literary language.[6] Western advisers, however, often encourage the Afghans to abandon their writing style in favor of the compact techniques Americans favor. Such a change would have no value.[7]

During the presidential election process, PAOs from CFC-A and the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) translated English talking points into Dari words and handed them to Azimi to read to reporters. The problem is that English words translated directly into Dari do not automatically form Dari thoughts. Azimi, his interpreter, and the reporters were confused by what he was trying to read. Azimi abandoned the effort and returned to developing his own messages to support the operational information available to him from Afghan, CFC-A, and ISAF sources. From then on, his presentations were prepared in Dari from the beginning and were consistent with familiar Afghan language structures. As a result, they were credible.

As these anecdotes reveal, one of the strongest temptations advisers face is the urge to step in and accomplish PA tasks for the Afghans using Western techniques. Generally, if outsiders try to "help," the Afghans will step aside and allow others to do it, thus learning nothing. Such an outcome limits their ability to take over PA responsibilities, undermines the reform process, and requires continued outside intervention to sustain artificial performance levels. The question becomes: How long do you want to be here? The longer outsiders perform the tasks Afghans should be doing, the longer outsiders will have to remain to perform those tasks and the less skilled the Afghans become. It is at once logical, yet difficult to accept, that Afghans will conduct PA operations in ways unique to their culture. For instance, their news conferences are typically fluid events with reporters continuously moving about, shifting microphones, and ganging up on questioners for pictures. The apparent chaos is comfortable for them. We, on the other hand, try to organize and control the news media—a practice that runs counter to Afghan culture.

Except for special situations (most often involving security for the president), the MOD usually does not participate in media-control efforts, although it will allow outsiders to herd reporters around during an event. But control efforts can backfire. The most disturbing example involving outside media control took place at the presidential inauguration on 7 December 2004. Except for a few photographers organized into pools, reporters were locked inside a cage consisting of a large tent surrounded by a 10-foot-tall fence draped with flags and banners to prevent media observation. Armed guards at a narrow gate further prevented free media access and coverage of the event. These were not Afghan decisions. Imagine how the Afghans perceived this approach, which was completely inconsistent with even the strictest security precautions they employ.

Gauging Success

One of the toughest PA challenges is to measure the success of the operation. In an environment as

unfamiliar as Afghanistan's, this is even truer. An immediate goal of the Afghan PA effort has been to develop an information system that will cause the Afghan people to trust the ANA and its international allies more than they fear the Taliban. But how does one credibly measure progress in such an endeavor?[8]

Unconventional metrics. One of the first ways to measure progress is to develop a series of unconventional metrics based on an awareness of Afghan culture and recent history. For example, children flying kites, young girls going to school, music playing openly on the streets, and burkhas replaced by scarves reflect a strong confidence in the prevailing security environment. Under Taliban rule, all such activities were banned, and violators were severely punished. If the public lacked confidence in the ability of the Afghan Government and its allies to maintain security, such activities would not occur as often as they do.

Commercial districts in Kabul are going through a dramatic upgrade; modern storefronts are replacing openings in mud walls. Such investment is an encouraging sign. Sidewalk and street repairs, though still rare, also demonstrate a sense of optimism brought about by an evolving confidence in the security environment. Admittedly, these indicators are subtle and rather inconclusive and are nowhere near as dramatic as battlefield victories, but they can help decisionmakers and the public measure success.

Quantifiable metrics. To these subtler measurements, public affairs officers can add more quantifiable, somewhat less equivocal metrics to assess operational performance; for example, the number of references to MOD information cited in news stories. Information given to news media is meaningless if it is not published in a story. Today, even the most superficial reading of in-country news clippings and Internet search engines reveals an increasing number of direct references to the MOD, especially after the weekly news conference. Of course, the numbers are situation-dependent, but generally, if the MOD is involved in an event, its information and messages receive a strong hearing in national and international news media.[9]

The number and quality of MOD-managed special events and special-subject news briefings is another viable metric. The MOD has been quite active in this area, running numerous events and briefings in which senior MOD officials discussed their achievements, such as—

- The ANA's improved status, featuring Chief of the General Staff General Bismullah Khan.
- Legal reform, including implementation of a military nonjudicial punishment system.
- New personnel accession and promotion systems, including the conduct of a mock promotion board.
- MOD officer education.
- The establishment of the National Military Academy of Afghanistan.
- The completion of the militia disarmament program.

Verifiable operational successes. Of course, the results of individual events and programs go some way toward helping assess the overall effectiveness of a PA operation. Not only was the MOD's aforementioned initiative to give PAOs and reporters direct access to Herat in September 2004 a clear victory on the ground at the time, it also suggested that the Ministry had reached a particular level of competence and autonomy. In fact, Azimi's plane-lift of PAOs and reporters is only part of the Herat story. The MOD also implemented a community relations program to help calm unrest in the province. The program set up meetings to introduce the new provincial governor to community and religious leaders provincewide.

Gaining the support of local leaders to help restore order was one measure of success; another was the extensive coverage given the meetings by regional radio, TV, and newspapers—coverage that reflected a broad PA effort to inform the Afghan people about the state of security within the province. Azimi's personal management of this effort benefited from his Herat roots and his experience as a resistance fighter in the region.

The presidential election. The first-ever Afghan presidential election, in late 2004, offered a great opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of MOD's PA team. On 29 August 2004, then-Minister of Defense Fahim Khan issued a proclamation, through Azimi, at the weekly news conference affirming the ANA's neutrality in the upcoming election and pledging to secure all aspects of the election process, including polling sites. This democratic theme was pursued during subsequent news conferences and

public statements. The MOD also conducted a 6-week presidential election information program that focused on those weekly news conferences, and Azimi presented 16 security briefings to the national and international news media covering the election.

Ultimately, Azimi was able to assert the effectiveness of the MOD's election security efforts (shared with the Ministry of Interior, CFC-A, and ISAF) during his briefings to reporters at the U.N.'s Media Results Center, where he assumed the role as the only briefer for those organizations. Perhaps the best indicator of the MOD's information reach came from U.N. spokesman Manuel de Silva, who announced on 21 October 2004 that 1,245 members of the news media had registered to cover the election. Seven hundred of those were Afghan; the balance represented 11 other countries.

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MG Zahir Azimi briefs journalists covering the Afghan presidential election, October 2004.

Voter turnout. With the Taliban promising to kill voters at polling stations throughout the country, the MOD's PA office instituted an information program to emphasize the ANA's commitment and ability to secure the election. The message obviously got through, as some 70 percent of registered voters participated.[10] As an additional benefit, in the days before the election the Afghan people reported suspected terrorists to security officials, who made important arrests and averted major attacks.[11]

Unplugging the "Taliban Spokesman." Several individuals regularly contact the news media claiming to speak for the Taliban. They take credit for any mishap that occurs and often concoct tales of battles never fought and casualties never inflicted. Their comments used to go unchallenged and were printed verbatim. Not any longer. Now, Azimi regularly reminds the news media on the record to contact him before printing Taliban claims. He also collects examples of what he considers to be inaccurate or irresponsible reporting and periodically goes over those stories during weekly news conferences to set the record straight. Western public relations practices frown on Azimi's very public corrective measures, the conventional wisdom being that such corrections call attention to stories best ignored.[12] In most cases, however, that is nonsense. It has been a long process, but by the spring of 2005, Afghan news media had, for the first time, begun to include comments about the unreliability of reports from the Taliban spokesman. That is a clear success.[13]

After the February 2005 Kam Air crash, the worst aviation disaster in Afghan history in which 100 people died, a Taliban spokesman launched a series of false messages, including the odd claim that many, if not all, passengers had survived the crash on the mountain peak, but that the government

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Reporters crowd families, religious leaders, and MOD officials during the return of the bodies of victims lost in the Kam Air Crash, 3 February 2005.

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Afghan General Suhaila Siddiq, leader of the Tsunami Relief Team, speaks with reporters at Kabul International Airport before her departure, 18 January 2005.

was ignoring their cell phone calls for help. Sadly, many believed this. But, as weather allowed, Azimi transported reporters and photographers to the crash site to establish conclusively that no one could have survived the violent impact. He also reminded the public that the crash site was on an 11,000-foot-plus mountain, that snow depths reached 5 feet and more, that Soviet landmines littered the area, and that the snowstorm that led to the crash had continued for many days. Once the bodies were recovered, MOD-initiated coverage of their return to their families confirmed the care taken during the entire operation.

Tsunami relief. The tsunami that struck Southeast Asia in December 2004 gave the MOD an opportunity to help that further enhanced its standing. Karzai deployed a 20-person planning and medical response team with relief supplies. General Suhaila Siddiq, an ANA surgeon, led the team, which also included a MOD journalist. The team received a lot of positive publicity, including a ceremony at the main ANA hospital in Kabul that marked its departure and two well-attended news conferences. The team also received extensive news coverage that found its way back home. Although its return was overshadowed by the air-crash recovery efforts, a recognition luncheon hosted by Karzai once again brought the team's effort to the attention of the Afghan people. This operation boosted MOD and ANA credibility both nationally and regionally.

The *Newsweek* riots. In May 2005, rioting ignited by *Newsweek*'s allegations (later retracted) of U.S. military desecration of the *Koran* presented a major challenge for the Afghan Government.[14] Many people were killed or injured; *Korans* and other cultural treasures were desecrated; and mosques, libraries, and other public buildings were destroyed. Azimi responded decisively with three central messages:

- Blame those directly responsible for the mayhem: the rioters themselves and their organizers.
- Support the U.S. military by affirming that the behavior portrayed by *Newsweek* was inconsistent with Afghan experience of U.S. troops.
- Criticize *Newsweek* for irresponsible reporting.

The riots also marked the first time that Azimi allowed members of his staff to speak on the record for the MOD during a crisis. Azimi is gaining confidence, and the MOD PA effort is gaining depth.

Life is Not (Always) a Good News Story

In Afghanistan, ignoring bad news is not possible as it recovers from a quarter century of warfare and 2.5 million deaths. Afghanistan is a rugged place in which to survive.[15] Fortunately, Afghan PA systems have not succumbed to the "good news story" obsession. Instead, the fledgling MOD PA system has successfully managed many difficult issues and situations, including disarmament of the militias; public sparring with Pakistan and Russia; civil unrest in Herat, Jalalabad, and elsewhere; the air crash; daily combat operations; and the presidential and parliamentary elections.

As with any democracy, the effective, responsible practice of public affairs is essential to building public awareness, understanding, credibility, and support. Afghanistan is a young and vulnerable democracy whose leaders are attempting to apply useful communications models learned from others to their own situation. Do they sometimes adopt Western PA practices? Yes, but not so often as to make outsiders comfortable; thus, there is the temptation to interfere. The words of T.E. Lawrence about his experiences in Arabia, adapted to Afghanistan, provide a friendly reminder to outsiders seeking to help: "Do not try to do too much with your own hands. Better the [Afghans] do it tolerably than

that you do it perfectly. It is their war, and you are to help them, not to win it for them. Actually, also, under the very odd conditions of [Afghanistan], your practical work will not be as good as, perhaps, you think it is."[16]

The practice of using an ANA soldier to deliver news releases on a bicycle will surely not long survive the reliable performance of emerging technology, but that change, like introducing PA policies and procedures, should come at a pace comfortable to the Afghans themselves. And, although many difficulties remain, indications are that establishing a democratic Afghan defense establishment is on course. That story, with all of its components, must be told loudly and clearly—by Afghans. That will continue to be the most effective way for keeping the people informed about the progress of their military and government. ***MR***

NOTES

1. The current Ministry of Defense (MOD) public affairs (PA) staff of 33 is supported by two "hard" phone lines and fewer than 10 cell phones. The office maintains two computers with intermittent Internet access and a single commercial E-mail account. The MOD established a computer network on 20 December 2004.

2. MOD or personal video crews usually accompany Minister of Defense Abdul Rahim Wardak, Chief of Staff to the Commander in Chief GEN Abdul Rashid Dostum, and other senior leaders to document their daily activities, which are often broadcast on Afghan television.

3. The four regional corps (Kandahar, Gardez, Mazar-e-Sharif, and Herat) were established in September 2004 but had no PA staffs until June 2005. In the interim, field commanders worked willingly with local news media, many of whom they had known during the decades of conflict.

4. The cited literacy rate represents a midpoint of various estimates; its accuracy is compromised by the fact that girls and women did not attend school from 1996 to 2002. Commercial competition for government radio and television is beginning to appear, but its penetration is limited by the same factors limiting government broadcasts. Afghan National Army (ANA) and Combined Forces Command-Afghanistan (CFC-A) recruiting efforts have produced a few useful localized opinion surveys, but no credible nationwide database is available.

5. As of mid-July 2005, MG Mohammed Zaher Azimi and his staff were operating with final drafts of the MOD directive that established the Office of Parliamentary, Social Relations, and Public Affairs; the Afghan MOD "Public Affairs Systems Guide"; the "Guide to News Media Center Procedures," which included "News Media Facilitation and Ground Rules," the "Guide to Conducting News Briefings and Press Conferences," and the "Crisis Communications Guide"; a "Glossary of Public Affairs Terms" to establish a common language for operations and training; "MOD Public Affairs Directive 1," establishing the MOD public affairs system; "MOD Public Affairs Directive 2," outlining MOD PA planning; and PA doctrine discussing PA fundamentals, functions, and responsibilities. Also, seven final draft Parliamentary Affairs directives were in place to guide communications with the National Assembly. Azimi and his staff participated in the work-group process that developed each of these documents.

6. The opening lines of a news conference statement dated 12 December 2004 gives us an example of the literary language Afghans prefer: "The Beautiful State of Afghanistan, with a long history of evolving civilizations, is now entering a new stage of its history, one that it has never experienced before. After three decades of war, the Afghan Nation has now decided to head towards Peace and Freedom. Freedom, which is the right of human kind, is exercised by electing the new president by free and fair elections."

7. Western PA training took place in February 2004 and August 2005, the first provided by in-country PA assets and the second by a mobile training team (MTT). Both sessions provided high-quality instruction to Afghanistan's new PA officers. However, trainers in the first session spent considerable time focusing on the development and repetition of messages and slogans. As most of the Afghans are former political officers who worked under the Soviet model, they are skilled in messaging and sloganeering. The important new skills they need concern collecting, processing, and communicating information. The MTT also spent the better part of 2 days training the Afghans on Western writing styles, including the inverted pyramid structure, for communicating with Western reporters and audiences. As a rule, however, Western reporters do not attend MOD news conferences or events; moreover, it is reasonable to assume that today's limited Western media interest in Afghan affairs will only decrease as stability increases. Thus Afghan MOD PAOs must learn to communicate with Afghan and regional news media and audiences, not with those of Western countries.

8. Ironically, modern technology that brings events to us in real time does not automatically breed understanding of what success and victory look like. The public needs to be regularly reminded of the goals of any conflict and how each day's events contribute to achieving those goals.

9. CFC-A publishes an excellent daily summary of articles covering issues of interest within Afghanistan and around the region. Of particular interest is the section that tracks Afghan news reporting. The MOD also operates a media monitoring section that closely tracks coverage of issues within Afghanistan, especially those dealing with the defense establishment.

10. For more information, see U.N. General Assembly Security Council Report A/59/58 5/2004/925 of the 59th session dated 26 November 2004, on-line at <www.unama-afg.org/docs/_UN-Docs/_repots-SG/2004/2004/-925.pdf>, accessed 15 March 2006. On 4 November 2004, the Joint Election Management Board and the U.N. announced a final voter turnout of 70 percent. More than 8 million Afghans went to the polls, including refugee voters in Iran and Pakistan.

11. Perhaps the most dramatic prevention of an attack came when authorities, acting on a tip, were able to stop fuel trucks trying to enter Kandahar just before the presidential election. The trucks were to be detonated inside the city. Azimi reported this success during his briefings on Election Day, 9 October 2004.

12. The usual Western practice is to contact reporters privately and attempt to correct the record quietly. Azimi's approach proved successful within the Afghan environment.

13. Beginning in April 2005, daily CFC-A news summaries contained stories referring to the Taliban spokesman, usually Mullah Abdul Latifi Hakimi, as the "purported Taliban spokesman" and noted the "uncertain credibility" of his reports. On 5 October 2005, Pakistan reported that 2 days earlier it had captured Hakimi in the border region between Afghanistan's Zabul Province and Pakistan.

14. Azimi's primary forum for delivering his messages was his weekly news conference, *Newsweek,* 15 May 2005. He imparted the same messages to individual reporters when queried.

15. Ascertaining the accuracy of this figure is difficult in a country whose population size is open to conjecture. However, Azimi regularly uses 2.5 million in his public statements and President Hamid Karzai cited the same in public remarks at the National Day Parade, 28 April 2005.

16. T.E. Lawrence, "The 27 Articles of T.E. Lawrence," *The Arab Bulletin*, 20 August 1917, on-line at <www.lawrenceofarabia.info>, accessed 15 March 2006.

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