

Hearts and Minds: Islam and Afghanistan's Moral Center of Gravity

Eva Shinagel

Though shredded by 30 years of turmoil, a cultural and religious fabric of Islam and its defense remains central to rural Eastern Afghan's lives – its moral center of gravity. For the Afghan government to be seen as legitimate, it needs to reflect and embody the Islamic values of its population. Coalition Force efforts to shore up the legitimacy of the government, through its supply of essential services and local security, have neglected to fully understand the basis of the critical public perceptions that remain.

Amid counterinsurgency theory's focus on protecting the population and providing essential services to demonstrate the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan's (GIROA) legitimacy, the international community and GIROA have lost sight of a key element that drives and sustains Afghan's rural populations' hearts and minds. We—the Afghan elites of Kabul and the Coalition Forces—have *assumed*, through our Western, developed-nation lens, that if the government is functioning as *we* think a government should function (even in an Afghan-Good-Enough model), the population will perceive it as legitimate and support its activities and objectives to stabilize and secure Afghanistan. However, some of our assumptions are too secular or incorrect. Among them, we have not fully understood or addressed the core importance that religion plays in the lives of rural Afghans, especially in the Pashtun belt of Regional Command-East (RC-East) and Regional Command-South and Southwest (RC-S/RC-SW). As a result, we may have improved the quality of peoples' lives, but their hearts still view our objectives—and their government's actions—with suspicion and distrust.

This research began with the hypothesis that religious leaders in rural Eastern Afghanistan represent a moral center of gravity, which, if swayed to support the government (or at least discourage passive support of the insurgency) could help to decrease the insurgency's informal base of support and weaken their efforts. However the research indicated that it just wasn't that straight a line. The Afghan religious community and the society as a whole are still determining the roles and responsibilities for religious leaders in a post-Taliban Afghanistan. Instead, I suggest that Islam (and its defense) is the moral center of gravity which sustains resistance of the government by a portion of the population. For the Afghan government to be seen as legitimate, it must be seen as reflecting and embodying the Islamic values of its population. This is not to say that GIROA cannot also promote the values of modernity, but it must determine how to

include and value a range of Islamic voices. So far, in the Pashtun areas, its success rate is low.

Moral Center of Gravity

While one could say the Counterinsurgency Manual (FM 3-24, 2006) is all about identifying and targeting the adversary's and a population's "center of gravity," the original edition uses the term less than 10 times.¹ Instead, the term "moral center of gravity" provides a helpful simplicity for considering identity-focused, protracted popular wars such as Afghanistan.

Drawing on Clausewitz's descriptions of "moral elements" and "will," and clarifying that Clausewitz's definition of "center of gravity" depends on the type of war being fought, Dr. Joseph Strange equates the public's *moral resistance* with a moral center of gravity: "You can defeat an opponent's army, destroy his industry, and occupy his land. But if the spirit of resistance still burns in the hearts of his people, you cannot claim to have won."² Along these lines, Dr. Strange characterizes moral resistance as "the will to fight and the ability to command the resources to fight."³ I would amend this: the "will to fight" is not just action—through fighting per se. As the non-violent civil disobedience movements have demonstrated, the will to resist, the will to be neutral, and the will to be passive or noncompliant can be just as effective in demonstrating opposition. In the rural Afghan population, all forms of behavior are present.

When we examine Dr. Strange's three categories of people that sustain moral resistance—a strong-willed leader, a ruling elite, or a strong-willed population—the rural, tradition-valuing Afghan population of RC-East most resembles the third: "A large grouping of people who share a common *belief set* that sets them in opposition to another state or grouping, and hold this belief sufficiently strongly to engage in, and sustain, conflict with the adversary."⁴ In the case of rural Pashtun Afghanistan, the common 'belief set' is not the COIN-proposed Maslowian benchmarks of security or essential services. It is the influence of Islam as a faith in Afghanistan, and their adversary is anyone—institution or person, domestic or foreign—who threatens that belief set. Moral center of gravity thinking posits that while security, essential services, and responsive government may be valued or desired by a community, if those 'public goods' undermine or conflict with core values, the core values will win.

The Role of Islam in Afghan Rural Society

Islam shapes the warp and weft of Afghan lives. It is commonly estimated that 99 percent of the population is Muslim, roughly divided with 80 percent Sunni, 19 percent Shia, and 1 percent other.⁵ While its practice and level of piety vary throughout the country, the

presence of the five pillars of Islam⁶ shapes the patterns and texture of thinking and action. This is especially true in Pashtun-dominated rural areas of RC-East and RC-S where the five-times daily prayers are a time to trade gossip in these extremely illiterate, media-deficient communities and where Jummah prayers (Friday prayers) include a sermon by the local mullah (religious leader).⁷ Religion has previously served as a basis for reinforcing the Afghan government's efforts to rout foreign forces such as the British in the 19th century and to consolidate power as in the 1970s, and the ulema shura (religious community) played the role of the "balancer" providing religious legitimacy to the ruler.⁸

Afghanistan's religious civil society historically served a number of community-based functions that were central to the functioning of people's lives. Local mullahs were moral and spiritual guides conducting daily prayers, rites of passage, and their status and sustenance depended on their relationship to their local community. The mosque was the central institution of local life and served religious and social functions.⁹ Within this tradition and in Pashtun areas greatly influenced by Pashtunwali, collective decision-making by jirga formed the basis of a representative system. Presided by tribal elders and community members of significance (including mullahs), dissenting voices could be raised, and the community would agree to abide by the decision of the group. The initial welcome of the Taliban in 1994 reflected a popular desire for order and greater morality following the violent political infighting among the Mujahadeen and the departure of the Soviet Union. The jihad against the Soviet Union was perceived as an honorable and justifiable effort against the godless infidel whose efforts were perceived as an effort to wipe out Islam. Following the politicization of Islam and religious leaders under the Taliban, trust of mullahs fell and the role of the national ulema shura decreased.¹⁰

While polls have not specifically measured the role of Islam in people's lives, some results can be taken as indicators of attitudes that grow from core beliefs about Islam. Recent polls show that the Islamic values of the Taliban still resonate with regional portions of the population—specifically in the South and East. A 2010 Asia Foundation poll showed that in Afghanistan's rural east, a kind of passive support exists where 49 percent of Pashtun interviewed expressed "sympathy" for the armed opposition groups with 31 percent of those respondents saying it is because the insurgents are Afghans and 26 percent because the insurgents are Muslims.¹¹ These were the highest "sympathy" ratings among all the ethnic groups in the study. Yet, among those sympathetic Pashtun, only 5 percent supported the insurgents' opposition to the government indicating a sense of identity but not of goals.

Unfortunately, foreigners' behaviors are viewed more negatively in the East and South and reinforce fear and distrust about our intentions toward their faith and their nation. In a 2010 International Council on Security and Development study focusing on the

Pashtun south, 40 percent of the respondents believed that foreigners are in Afghanistan to destroy it, occupy it, or damage Islam; 72 percent viewed foreigners as disrespectful of Islamic religion and traditions; and 45 percent thought that young men join the insurgency because of the foreign presence in Afghanistan.¹² In a follow-up poll in May 2011, foreigners disrespect for Afghan traditions and culture increased to 91 percent.¹³ In addition, even among college-aged men enrolled at Kabul University, the new Afghan elite who support their government and understand the goals of the international community, only 35 percent felt the U.S. was justified in being in Afghanistan in the first place; a full 40 percent said no and 25 percent didn't or wouldn't answer.¹⁴ If the brightest of Afghans display widespread lack of knowledge about the reasons for our presence, it is not surprising that rural illiterate Afghans are making assumptions that our intentions, fed by Taliban propaganda, is to attack and destroy Islam like the Soviets.

Finally, the perception of widespread corruption by government officials from district to national levels undermines GIRoA's legitimacy: 55 percent said corruption was a problem in their daily lives, 50 percent in their neighborhood, 56 percent with local authorities, 65 percent with their provincial government, and 76 percent thought it was a major problem for Afghanistan overall. These numbers have held steady since 2008.¹⁵ As a collectivist culture, individual success, even if acquired through indirect or corrupt means, can be acceptable and honorable if it is shared with others. This was often the explanation given by educated Afghan men to justify their belief that Nangarhar Governor Shirzai was a good governor—he was successful and he took care of his province's people by giving away large sums of his "personal" wealth to the poor and self-funding programs.^{16 17} But corruption that serves the individual or a small group of people, or which interferes with daily life—these are greatly resented and through the lens of Islam, seen as dishonorable and un-Islamic behavior.

Today, though shredded by 30 years of turmoil, a cultural and religious fabric of Islam—and its defense—remains central to rural people's lives. Honesty, knowledge, and humility are the highest ranked qualities for a mullah.¹⁸ When considered uncorrupt and trustworthy, they carry a moral authority and are frequently arbiters of disputes and sources of advice and information.¹⁹ Periodically, Afghan President Hamid Karzai meets with them to urge their public support of government policy in the hopes that they can influence the population.²⁰ While many urban mullahs welcome this as their role, rural mullahs view it as an attempt at cooptation and complain that their opinions and views are never actually solicited; they are just told what to do. Rural mullahs in an Eastern area on the border of Pashtun influence (and with high Taliban presence) steer clear of politics and government altogether and focus on promoting Islamic principles, defending Islam, and encouraging Sharia law.²¹

Where Can We Go From Here

In Afghanistan, because we have been so focused on shoring up the legitimacy of the government through its supply of essential services and local security, we have neglected to fully understand the perceptions that were developing. As Americans, our core values—our “faith”—is secular and grounded in beliefs of freedom, equality, and liberty. “Give me Liberty or give me Death” still resonates. As a secular society, we accept that our religious identities live adjacent to our secular ones, but it may be our very secularness which makes it difficult to step into the shoes of a rural Afghan and to understand why they distrust us, and by extension, the efforts of the Afghan government.

Separation of Church and State is our understanding of the world. In Afghanistan, there is no such tradition, nor, in some areas, much of a desire to separate Church from State.²² The current Afghan constitution affirms it is an Islamic republic, the state religion is Islam, and states: “In Afghanistan, no law can be contrary to the beliefs and provisions of the sacred religion of Islam.”²³ In addition, the Hanafi School of Islamic jurisprudence (one of four schools of Sharia law interpretation) is identified as a basis for court decisions.²⁴ Thus when the predominantly Christian international community proposes its State’s structures (legal system reform, representative government, economic development, educational system, health care, et cetera), rural Afghans suspect that the imposition of our Church is not far behind and is, in fact, our hidden agenda. They do not have the education and exposure to understand that the U.S. and the international community operates in a completely different paradigm of separate institutions as well as one of (generally) respectful diversity. Thus for most of our time in Afghanistan, we have committed an ultimate cultural *faux pas* of assuming that Afghans, as a whole, understand the meaning and intention behind the words we use. We have assumed that what we think and what we say is what they hear and what they understand and believe. This slow recognition, often at the field level, has led to increased efforts to identify and use the right messengers for the message—messengers who would be trusted within the basis of Islamic values and can speak through the known and accepted means of communication.²⁵ Three groups have been working to have this effect: the Afghan National Army (ANA), provincial level Afghan officials in collaboration with Muslim International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) partners, and select national ministries. In 2010, 92 percent of respondents considered the ANA fair and honest with the Afghan people.²⁶ In Laskar Gah, Helmand province, ANA officials have been working to reclaim Islam from the insurgency and directly engage the population. To counter Taliban propaganda that the ANA are godless “fake” Muslims, at their new patrol base the ANA constructed a large mosque and sound the calls to prayer across the neighboring area. Their billboards highlight Koranic verses and public prayer groups, and the ANA

commander has engaged local religious leaders to discuss the ANA's adherence²⁷ to Islam and encourages his Company's mullah to offer Koranic instruction in person and via the base radio station. In addition, a corps of "chaplains" known as hafiz is being recruited by the ANA to ensure that Islamic law is observed within the ranks and as mobile messengers to the population of the military's Islamic faith.²⁸

In other areas where Muslim ISAF partners operate, their special authority of being an Arabic-reading Muslim brother (from a more developed country) assists outreach efforts. In Parwan province in partnership with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) unit, in Logar province in partnership with the Jordanian Defense Forces, and even in Bamyan province with the Malaysian Medical Team, shuras and discussions about the Koran have been held with these ISAF partner imams or officers. In Parwan and Logar, the provincial Directorates of Hajj and Religious Affairs (DoHRA), and often with financial contributions by the provincial governors who occasionally attend, organize the events. In both Parwan and Logar, the Muslim ISAF partners have organized at least one trip for local mullahs to travel to UAE and Jordan to see how these countries function as multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies. Coalition Force presence is kept to an absolute minimum except for offers of mosque refurbishments and repairs, which are coordinated through the DoHRA.²⁹

A third example of supporting Islam's central role in the lives of the population is a quiet ISAF effort to help the Ministry of Hajj and Religious Affairs (MoHRA) to conduct a series of religious seminars to standardize religious teaching curriculum and which will include UAE-based seminars, of which one is dedicated to women participants. The ISAF Traditional Communication program provides a small team of advisors, lead by an Army colonel, to embed with three potentially population-influencing ministries who for various reasons received no attention during the first eight years of the international presence in Afghanistan: MoHRA, Ministry of Border and Tribal Affairs, and Ministry of Information and Culture which manages youth programs and issues.³⁰

Given Western unfamiliarity with Islam as a faith and as a culture in Afghanistan—as well as the fact that al-Qaeda and the Taliban have used Islam to justify their actions—for seven years, we approached the war against al-Qaeda in Afghanistan as a military operation where partnership with the people and GIROA were positive outcomes, but not the main effort. For a relationship-based culture, our transactional "carrot and stick" approach created opportunism among many Afghans but has not built as much trust.³¹ In contrast, these varied approaches by Afghans to reclaim Islam reassure the population about their government's intentions.

Conclusion

In early 2009 Admiral Mullen asserted that “the population is the center of gravity” in Afghanistan.³² But learning to think like an insurgent, much less like a rural Pashtun farmer, is a challenge, especially when serving a U.S. leadership where results are measured in numbers and not in harder-to-measure and longer-to-assess changes in attitudes. While individual officers and noncommissioned officers from division to platoon levels understand local culture and issues, their core mission is as soldiers, their training for war making, and their institutional mindset is not suited to community organizing. Yes, we go to war with the Army we have, but we can and should do better. The U.S. military has led, planned, and implemented our national engagement in Afghanistan. Over the past two years, U.S. civilian agencies have stretched to join integrated civilian-military planning for stabilization operations. Overall, this effort has given military planners at all levels the non-military nuances they lack. This collaboration should continue off the battlefield through a permanent joint, interagency team composed of Department of Defense, Department of State, and U.S. Agency for International Development military and civilian personnel who specialize in understanding the priorities and cultures of possible world hotspots where we have national interests. We should learn, adapt, and work to be better prepared.

The challenges the international community faces regarding others’ perception of our intentions regarding Islam are not limited to Afghanistan. As we seek to support “Arab Spring” activities in other tribally-based countries with limited histories of responsive government and varied factions of Islam, we will encounter them again. If we wish to have the effects that we seek, we need to develop a better understanding of the role that Islam plays in the lives of these populations—and to act and plan from that understanding.

Ms. Eva Shinagel is a U.S. foreign affairs officer with the Department of State. This paper was submitted while Ms. Shinagel attended the National War College, Washington, D.C., following two years serving in Regional Command-East, Afghanistan at the Provincial Reconstruction Team and brigade levels. The views expressed in this publication are entirely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views, policy, or position of the United States Government, Department of State, Department of Defense, United States Special Operations Command, or Joint Special Operations University.

Endnotes

¹ David H. Petraeus, James F. Amos, and John A. Nagl. *The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual: U.S. Army Field Manual No. 3-24, Marine Corps Warfighting Publication No. 3-33.5* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

² Joseph L. Strange and Richard Iron, "Center of Gravity: What Clausewitz Really Meant," *JFQ: Joint Force Quarterly* 35 (2004), under "Moral Centers of Gravity," <http://ezproxy6.ndu.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/58882352?accountid=12686> [accessed September 28, 2011].

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ CIA, World Fact Book, South Asia: Afghanistan, Religions.

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/af.html> [accessed October 3, 2011].

⁶ The five pillars of Islam are (1) the creed (shahada), (2) daily prayers (salat), (3) fasting during Ramadan, (4) almsgiving (zakat), and (5) the pilgrimage to Mecca (hajj) at least once in a lifetime.

⁷ Marina Kielpinski, *Kunar Provincial Handbook: A Guide to the People and the Province*, 2nd ed., ed. Nick Dowling and Tom Praster (Arlington, VA: Afghanistan Provincial Handbook Series, IDS International Government Services LLC, June 2009): 57

⁸ Kaja Borchgrevink, "Religious Actors and Civil Society in Post-2001 Afghanistan" (Oslo: International Peace Research Institute, PRIO Paper, 2007), 21. <http://www.prio.no/Research-and-Publications/Project/?oid=98322> [accessed October 3, 2011].

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid, 23.

¹¹ The Asia Foundation, *Afghanistan in 2010: A Survey of the Afghan People* (Kabul: The Asia Foundation, 2010), 49-54. <http://asiafoundation.org/country/afghanistan/2010-poll.php> [accessed on October 3, 2011]

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¹⁵ The Asia Foundation, *Afghanistan in 2010*, 85.

¹⁶ Conversations with USAID Deputy Field Program Officers (Locally Employed Staff), Forward Operating Base Shank, Logar Province, March 1, 2011.

¹⁷ For discussion of Governor Shirzai's governance style see, Chris Corsten, *Nangarhar Provincial Handbook: A Guide to the People and the Province*, ed. Nick Dowling and Tom Praster (Arlington, VA: Afghanistan Provincial Handbook Series, IDS International Government Services LLC, June 2009): 27-29.

¹⁸ Kanishka Nawabi, Mirwais Wardak, and Idrees Zaman, “The Role and Functions of Religious Civil Society in Afghanistan: Case Studies from Sayedabad and Kunduz” (Kabul: Cooperation for Peace and Unity, www.cpau.org.af, July 2007): 21.

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¹⁹ Marina Kielpinski, *Kunar Provincial Handbook: A Guide to the People and the Province*, 18.

²⁰ “Afghanistan Courts Islamic Council,” *Washington Post*, September 13, 2010, A9.

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²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Astr Suhrke and Kaja Borchgrevink. “Negotiating Justice Sector Reform in Afghanistan,” *Crime, Law and Social Change* 51 (2009). doi:10.1007/s10611-008-9154-0, 227.

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²³ Afghanistan, Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Chapter 1: State, Articles 1, 2, and 3, ratified January 26, 2004.

²⁴ Afghan Constitution, Chapter 7: The Judiciary, Article 130.

²⁵ Marina Kielpinski, *Kunar Provincial Handbook: A Guide to the People and the Province*, 57.

²⁶ The Asia Foundation, Afghanistan in 2010, 42.

²⁷ Brian Mockenhaupt, “Enlisting Allah,” *Atlantic Monthly*, September 2011, 30.

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<http://ezproxy6.ndu.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/887736312?accountid=12686> [accessed on October 4, 2011].

²⁹ The author served in RC-East as the Brigade Senior Civilian Representative to Task Forces Wolverine (86th IBCT (MTN)) and Patriot (4th IBCT-10th MTN DIV) from July 2010-2011 and coordinated stability operations planning on governance and development with U.S. government civilian and military personnel, and with Coalition partners Republic of Korea, New Zealand, Czech Republic, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, and Jordan. In this capacity, she supervised provincial-level efforts in Parwan, Logar, Bamyan, and Wardak to engage Afghan religious leaders. From July 2009-2010, she met frequently with religious and civil society leaders and elders in Kunar province as the Department of State Lead to PRT Kunar.

³⁰ Robert M. Hill, “Building Credible Voices Traditional Communication in Afghanistan,” *JFQ: Joint Force Quarterly* 61 (2011, 2nd Quarter), 62. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost [accessed October 4, 2011].

³¹ *Ibid.*, 57.

³² “Mullen Tours Forward Outposts in Afghanistan,” *Targeted News Service*, April 22, 2009; “Afghans must be 'Center of Gravity' in U.S. Strategy for Afghanistan, Navy Adm. Mullen Says,” *US Fed News Service, Including US State News*, March 25, 2009.