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Inciting the Believers to Fight

A closer look at the rhetoric of the Afghan jihad

INTRODUCTION

Although it is often stated that the Afghan insurgency is not primarily ideologically motivated, there can be little doubt that the insurgents are generally able to instil a deep sense of meaning in their supporters, aspirants and fighters. The steady growth in insurgent numbers as well as the undeniable dedication of a sizeable proportion of them to fight a vastly superior foe cannot adequately be explained by singular or combined factors of poverty, illiteracy, ethnicity, monetary incentives, revenge, or frustration with a corrupt government.

The case for jihad, a justification of why it is a religious duty to resort to arms in the face of a Muslim government in Kabul as well as the high-tech weapons of its foreign supporters, is made daily in countless mosques, teahouses and backyards. However, these arguments are rarely recorded and made available to the wider public. Meanwhile, disseminated insurgent propaganda consists mainly of combat footage (showing their own strength and the vulnerability of the enemy) or the alleged outrages perpetrated by NATO forces,¹ avoiding discussion of the elaborate rules

pertaining to jihad in Islamic law (*fiqh*). One of the rare cases, in which a complete sermon with a theological justification for jihad was videotaped, edited and distributed, emerged on Arabic language jihadi forums² in late 2009. Significantly, however, the sermon was given not in Arabic, but in Dari – one of the main languages of Afghanistan – with no Arabic translation or subtitles. The message was thus directed at an Afghan (but interestingly enough, not primarily Pashtun) audience and as such, it offers a useful insight into some of the ideological facets of the Afghan jihad. This and other videos of the producer – a media centre calling itself *Neda ul-Jihad* ('call of jihad' in Arabic) – are circulated by al-Fajr Publication Centre,³ the distribution network for al-Qaida and its affiliates and not by the 'mainstream' (Quetta Shura) Taleban propaganda department, which channels its products via the website al-Emara. Nevertheless, in this as in all its videos, *Neda ul-Jihad* explicitly expresses allegiance to the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and to Mullah Omar as the commander of believers, thereby situating itself

¹ For a discussion of Taleban propaganda see International Crisis Group, *Taleban Propaganda: Winning the War of Words*, July 2008, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/158-taliban-propaganda-winning-the-war-of-words.aspx>.

² Such as Faloja, Ansar, Ana al-Muslim, al-Boraq.

³ It is usual for jihadi production studios to channel their material to al-Fajr, which in turn passes it on to different forums. This process not only provides additional security to the producers, but also establishes the authenticity of the material for the readers: the sentence 'distributed by al-Fajr Publication Centre' can be found under any announcement of *Neda ul-Jihad*'s material on the various jihadi forums and serves as a quasi-official seal of quality.

firmly within the framework of the Taleban. This interesting constellation of variables calls for thoughts about the degree to which al-Qaida-inspired, jihadi-salafi⁴ thought has found its way into the wider Afghan jihad.

THE PUBLISHER

Neda ul-Jihad made its way into publicity in May 2008 with a 52 minute video entitled '*shekast-e salib*' ('Defeat of the cross'), showing combat footage from Nuristan: the different stages (training, reconnaissance, planning, execution, and aftermath) of a complex attack on an American combat outpost, an ambush on American and Afghan soldiers and finally, the remnants of a downed US helicopter. A year later, in May 2009, Neda ul-Jihad released footage of the battle of Want⁵ in Nuristan in a lengthy video under the title '*āqebat-e motajāwezīn*' ('The end of the invaders'). Another video, called '*nasr min allāh*' ('Victory is from god') shows the destruction of a US Humvee in the Korengal valley, Kunar Province, which had been covered, that is, filmed from the American perspective, in a 2008 PBS documentary.⁶ These sophisticated videos are partly underlaid by *anashid* (Islamic songs featuring unaccompanied male voices) and have elaborate animations. The languages used by Neda ul-Jihad are both Dari and Pashto – the latter being the language spoken in the area of Nuristan and Kunar from where all

⁴ Salafism denotes a broad current which renounces most forms of Islam practised in today's world as distorted, and which tries to revert to the earliest, purest forms of Islam. Jihadi-salafism is a term often used for an undercurrent of Salafism, which sees worldwide, violent struggle as the core of its faith. See Quintan Wiktorowicz, 'Anatomy of the Salafi Movement' *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2006) 29:3, 207. Salafis have often criticised the Taleban for being insufficiently Islamic, see Anne Stenersen, 'Blood brothers or a marriage of convenience? The ideological relationship between al-Qaida and the Taliban', Paper presented at ISA's 50th Annual Convention "Exploring the Past, Anticipating the Future" in New York, 15-18 February 2009, available online at: http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/3/1/2/5/2/pages312525/p312525-1.php.

⁵ In the battle of Want (or Wanat), nine US soldiers were killed when their patrol base was almost overrun in July 2008. Due to these heavy casualties, the incident received wide media coverage. The US Army Combat Studies Institute released a detailed review of the battle in 2008, which can be found at <http://www.cgsc.edu/carl/download/csipubs/Wanat.pdf>

⁶ PBS Frontline 'The War Briefing', 21 October 2008, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/warbriefing/>.

footage seen so far has originated. The area has historically been among the most welcoming for radical Islamist and salafi thought⁷ in all of Afghanistan. Currently, several distinctive (and sometimes rivalling) insurgent groups are active in the area, among them 'mainstream' Taleban, fighters of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-e Eslami, foreign fighters, and smaller and sometimes independent salafi groups.⁸ While Neda ul-Jihad's connections to the Arab-speaking 'Jihadosphere' may be interpreted as a hint that they belong to the last category, the appearance of senior Taleban figures (such as Ustad Mohammad Yasir and Mullah Munibullah⁹) in their videos suggest that they are at least closely connected to the Taleban.

WHAT THE VIDEO SAYS

Neda ul-Jihad's sermon-video, which is under discussion here, is called '*mā dar barābar-e yak shamshir qarār dārem*' ('We are faced by one sword'). It features a masked Maulawi, an Islamic scholar whose name is given as Abdul Basit, sitting between heavily armed fighters. Maulawi Abdul Basit – who is neither further introduced nor known from earlier or later publications, although in January 2011, his death was announced on a Persian-language jihadi forum¹⁰ – delivers his sermon in Dari with frequent and well-pronounced Arabic passages.

His starting point is two verses from the Quran (4:75 and 76) in which the believers are asked why they do not fight for the cause of the weak who suffer under oppression: 'What is with you, that you don't fight in the path of God and the

⁷ See David B. Edwards' discussion of the underlying reasons for this in his seminal book, *Before Taliban. Genealogies of the Afghan Jihad* (Berkeley 2002), pp 148–149, as well as his following (pp 150–166) description of how the Islamists took over Nuristan from 1979 onwards.

⁸ See Thomas Ruttig's 'On Kunar's Salafi Insurgents', *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 14 February 2010, <http://aan-afghanistan.com/index.asp?id=570>.

⁹ The former was a member of Sayyaf's Ettehad-e Eslami who joined the Taleban after 2001 and served in several positions, among others as a spokesman for the movement. He was arrested in Pakistan in 2005, freed in exchange for Italian Journalist Daniel Mastrogiacomo in 2007 and arrested again in Peshawar in early 2009. The latter, who originates from Nurestan's Waigal valley, is a high-ranking military commander of the Taleban in his province. Both, it should be noted, have known good ties to foreign fighters.

¹⁰ <http://www.rahejehad.com/showthread.php?t=141>.

oppressed men, women and children, who cry out “Lord, rescue us from this city of oppression!” The killing of civilians (pictures of civilian casualties are superimposed on the video at this point), the destruction of their homes and the imprisonment of pious Muslims are cited by Abdul Basit as proof that the ‘bloodthirsty Americans’ equate to the Meccan pagans who persecuted the companions of the Prophet. The Western military presence in Afghanistan is portrayed in terms of historical continuity: the Meccans, medieval crusaders and Mongols as well as the British and Soviet Invaders of Afghanistan in the last 200 years are all different faces of the same enemy, who also attacks Muslims in Palestine, Iraq and elsewhere in the world (hence the title of the video). These attacks allegedly follow a sinister logic: ‘Under no circumstances’, declares Abdul Basit, ‘can the West accept that in some corner of the world a truly Islamic system is installed ... where there is an Islamic system, there is no place for unbelief, but where unbelief rules, Islam cannot thrive.’ According to the Maulawi, in this never-ending battle against the forces of unbelief, God has already ordered his followers to take up arms against the invaders. In fact, therefore, whoever confesses the Muslim faith must fight, just as the Prophet’s companions fought the pagans, and the entire Afghan nation fought the Soviet invaders and their communist clients in the 1980s: ‘So, oh Muslim nation of Afghanistan, let us [fight] once again – this is an honor to us that we once again reach with our hands for the weapon and fight along with the Islamic Emirate – against whom? Against the bloodthirsty enemy of Islam.’

THE NARRATIVE OF ‘OPPRESSION’ AND ‘CORRUPTION’

While the topic of a divine command to fight is neither new nor surprising, a number of subtleties emerge when closer attention is paid to the details of the sermon, including its opening lines. The oppression (*zolm*) which constitutes Maulawi Abdul Basit’s very starting point is not fully equivalent to the Western concept of oppression as the opposite of democracy and ‘good governance’. Although both perspectives have a relatively similar idea of what constitutes oppression, they differ markedly concerning the deeper reasons for oppression as well as its remedy. In Western political thought, the concept of oppression is characterised by the distrust of any power which is not kept in check by other institutions (in this world). The Islamic concept of *zolm*, on the other hand, pertains more to the misuse of power due to the transgression of

boundaries laid out by God for mankind. As a result, the natural antidote to *zolm* is not found in better democratic oversight and certainly much less in ‘more freedom’, but rather in strict adherence to the comprehensive system of divine rules. *Zolm*, which figures as one of the most commonly used terms in the Quran (where, together with its derivations, it appears more than 280 times¹¹), pervades Abdul Basit’s sermon as arguably the main line of reasoning. While the Maulawi counts the harming of innocents, to which he refers again and again, as oppression, he gives the term *zolm* and especially its root causes a slightly different twist: the main line of transgression, from which everything else follows, is living under foreign occupation (*eshghāl*) and moral corruption (*fassād*). Since the occupation and especially corruption have abolished adherence to divine law, they – not a weak government or the lack of democratic oversight – are the source of Afghanistan’s maladies. ‘Moral corruption’, claims Abdul Basit, ‘has spread so that it now covers all Afghan cities. Will the Muslim nation of Afghanistan, which gave three million martyrs in the path of God, accept this spread of moral corruption?...Isn’t it an embarrassment and a humiliation for us that we are still waiting?’

Indeed, the concepts of corruption, occupation and oppression and their interconnections are so important to the meaning of the sermon, that they deserve a closer look. One point worth noting is that since in classical Islamic law, oppression (*zolm*) is still preferable to chaos (*fitna*), rebellion against even an oppressive (Muslim) ruler (*zālem*) is in fact deemed unlawful. However, spreading *fassād* is such a fundamental sin that it actually excludes its perpetrator from the general prohibition on killing (Quran 5:32). A ruler who spreads corruption (*fāsed*) is thus someone to be rebelled against.

This leads us to a second noteworthy point: *Fassād* as a technical term covers two different aspects of corruption. On the one hand, it is used for the systematic paying and taking of bribes as well as nepotism (not exactly unheard of in Afghanistan), which more precisely is sometimes called *fassād-e edāri* (administrative corruption). On the other hand, its Quranic meaning is better translated as moral corruption (also called *fassād-e akhlāqī*), that is, the spreading of vice which threatens the bonds and common ground of society: the use of alcohol and drugs, the free mingling and promiscuity of the sexes, prostitution,

¹¹ Bernard Lewis, ‘Zulm’ in Bosworth E. Clifford (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Islam. New Edition, Vol. XI (W – Z)* (Leiden 2002), pp 567–569.

homosexuality, usury. Implicit in this concept is the element of seduction: to be drawn towards vice and licentiousness is seen to be so infectious a disease that it is not enough to stay away from it. Corruption and its wellsprings must be contained and fought against so that society as a whole shall not be in danger.

Significantly, the fight against *fassād* is something akin to the founding myth of the original Taleban movement. Former Taleban Minister and Ambassador Mullah Abdul Zaeef describes, in his account of the movement's 'founding meeting', that apart from an oath of allegiance to Mullah Omar, every participant 'swore on the Qur'an...to fight against corruption and the criminals'.¹²

For Maulawi Abdul Basit it is only natural to link rampant administrative corruption with moral corruption – especially easy, given that the same word is commonly used for both. Moreover, in his view, moral corruption is a foreign plot with a dual purpose. It entices the youth from the right path and at the same time, weakens Afghan society so that resistance against the invaders becomes impossible. Whoever, the assumption goes, spends all day watching Indian music videos with (according to traditional Afghan standards) half-naked girls, will not fight in jihad. Whoever is busy making money by selling stolen properties will welcome instead of fight the foreign invaders and the chaos they bring with them. Thus, the spreading of *fassād* is both a means and an end for the invaders. It is also therefore somewhat obvious that *zolm* will be rampant in a society whose central tenets have already been eroded by *fassād*: for Abdul Basit, as for many conservative Afghans, there is a clear connection between watching 'half-naked' girls on television, disrespecting elders, not giving alms, abstaining from prayer, abusing power and influence, stealing, raping and killing. In this view, he who is fearful of God and abides by his commandments, will not commit any of these acts, while he who has lost the fear of God and defies his commands, will probably not abstain from a single one.

'BELIEVERS', 'UNBELIEVERS' AND THE OTHERS

Hence, according to this position, merely verbally confessing faith in the one God and in the Prophethood of Muhammad (that is, ostensibly

being a believer or *mu'men*) does not make one a true Muslim. In the Maulawi's sermon, mankind can be divided into four groups:

- the unbelievers (*kāferān*) – those who not only reject, but always have and always will fight Islam and the Muslims;
- the believers (*mu'menān*) – those who confess the Islamic creed but who are mostly weak and passive and are unable to rescue themselves from oppression. Among them, there are two other sub-groups:
- the sincere ones (*sādeqān*) – these are the true Muslims, a group of believers who obey God's command to fight and thus strive for the liberation of their fellow Muslims;
- the apostates (*murtaddān*) – those who are seen as only nominal Muslims who are loyal to the unbelievers and thus have cut their bonds with Islam.

Given that the 'unbelievers' and 'apostates' are simply the enemy and the 'sincere fighters' are a symbol to be emulated, Abdul Basit addresses the 'believers' in his sermon: some have not yet recognised the nature of the enemy, some have given in to their worldly desires and have placed them over the commandments of faith, some are simply too weak to take up arms. In the end, however, the Western forces and their Afghan collaborators must be fought, if not for their crimes against the Muslim people of Afghanistan, then because it is God's command to the faithful. Intentionally rejecting God's command, the Maulawi warns, ultimately removes one from the community of believers. To underline this last, most crucial and undoubtedly most controversial point, he cites a hadith¹³ describing the inhabitants of Basra who – faced with foreign occupation – fall into three groups: one group of people runs away into the desert, hides – and perishes; another group overcomes their worldly desires, fights and becomes martyrs; a third one lives safely under occupation – but by doing so, its members become unbelievers. Although this hadith ostensibly deals only with the people of Basra, Abdul Basit claims that it has a general (*'ām*) meaning and that all occupied Muslim communities will fall into the three camps outlined. But since the hadith predicts that fleeing from the battlefield will not ultimately lead to safety, believers are in fact left with only two options: to fight or to become unbelievers.

¹² See Abdul Salam Zaeef's autobiography, edited by Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, *My Life with the Taleban* (London 2010), pp 40-41.

¹³ This hadith, 'bāb fi dhikri-l-basra', is taken from Abu Daud's canonical collection *sunan abi daud*, the chapter on Battles ('kitāb al-malāhim').

The corollary of Abdul Basit's line of thought is that it is impossible to be a *mu'men*, a believer, without eventually supporting the fight (and thus becoming a *sādeq*): There is no neutrality – at least in the long run.

The Maulawi does not elaborate on this idea any further and indeed, his overall remarks leave one to conclude that, for him, a 'believer' is not automatically turned into an 'apostate' by initial failure to take part in the jihad (as some more radical jihadists do claim). However, Abdul Basit's arguments open something akin to an Islamist version of Pandora's box: the notion of *takfir* (declaring someone to be an unbeliever) is one of the most controversial and most problematic issues of radical Islamist thought.¹⁴ Mullah Munibullah, the Taleban-commander from Nuristan who Neda ul-Jihad quoted at length in an earlier video, publicly avoided 'doing' *takfir* even on President Karzai; as the latter claimed to be a Muslim, Munibullah stated that he could not judge this claim and declare Karzai an unbeliever.¹⁵ Abdul Basit, on the contrary, advocates a line of thought which has the logical conclusion of allowing for *takfir* to be declared against even ordinary people who are not linked to the government or to foreigners, simply on the basis of their failure to participate in jihad.

SALAFI INFLUENCES

Abdul Basit's deliberations bear a striking resemblance to a concept that has become a trademark for today's jihadists: the concept of *al-walā' wa-l-barā'* ('loyalty and disavowance') or rather a highly politicised interpretation of it. To adhere to this concept means to consider it to be a basic command of faith to actively reject unbelievers and unbelievers (instead of merely abstaining from everything related to unbelief, as in more traditional thought) while firmly standing together with all true believers. This idea is evident in Abdul Basit's praise for the Iraqi *mujahedin* and his reference to the foreign fighters in Afghanistan before the overthrow of the Taleban as 'the best of the community of believers' as well as in his

¹⁴ See, for example, Mohammed M. Hafez, 'Tactics, Takfir, and anti-Muslim Violence' in Assaf Moghaddam and Brian Fishman (eds), *Self-Inflicted Wounds: Debates and Divisions within al-Qa'ida and its Periphery* (Westpoint 2010), pp 19 – 44.

¹⁵ Video interview with Mullah Munibullah by AfPax Insider (2008), <http://www.viddler.com/explore/AfPax/videos/2/>.

emphatic support for the overthrow of 'un-Islamic regimes'.

Just as the jihadi-salafi version of *al-walā' wa-l-barā'*, which Abdul Basit's sermon seizes without explicitly mentioning it, was made famous by Jordanian cleric Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi,¹⁶ so too, the Maulawi's extensive invocation of the prophet Abraham as an inspiring model for today's jihad is a topic closely associated with al-Maqdisi. Abraham, so Abdul Basit lectures us, expressed his detest for his idolatrous people and left them, placing obedience to God higher than all family and tribal loyalties – and taking action accordingly. Simply detesting idols and their worship without openly expressing it, or expressing detest but failing to act on it amounts to idolatry, in Abdul Basit's view. Idolatry – belief in a false god (*taghut*) – is an arch-sin in Islamic thought which removes its perpetrator from the community of believers. Yet for Abdul Basit, what constitutes idolatry is not limited to the religious worship of idols. For him, a *taghut* is also someone who is wrongly obeyed;¹⁷ whoever wields authority without completely implementing God's law becomes a *taghut*. This is another major departure from traditional Islamic thinking, more closely following the jihadi-salafi creed and – if applied unreservedly – with major implications: if every source of power (perhaps with the exception of the Taleban's Islamic Emirate which attempted to implement only God's law) is an idol, then nearly all living Afghans, as well as their ancestors, are worshipers of idols. Again, Abdul Basit does not take his argument to this logical conclusion – or at least he does not do so explicitly – but his line of thought is unambiguous.

While none of the topics Abdul Basit touches upon are unheard of in the usual Arabic-language material on jihadi websites, what is particularly noteworthy is that in his sermon they are

¹⁶ Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, born 1959, is a prominent Palestinian-Jordanian jihadi-salafi scholar, who gained fame among radical Islamists in 1984 with his book 'millat ibrahim', the nation of Abraham. See for example Jarret Brachmann, *Global jihadism. Theory and Practice* (New York 2009) p 22. Ayman az-Zawahiri, al-Qaida's number two, who took up the issue of *al-walā' wa-l-barā'* in 2002 assured its prominence in jihadi-salafi circles. See on the latter Stéphane Lacroix, 'Ayman al-Zawahiri' in Gilles Kepel and Jean-Pierre Milelli (eds) *al-Qaida in its own Words* (Cambridge 2008), pp 206 – 234.

¹⁷ This thought, though not in line with traditional thought, is also not unheard of among classical scholars: for example Ibn Qayim al-Jawziya (1292-1350), a student of Ibn Taimiya, described a *taghut* as everything worshipped (*ma'bud*), abided (*matbu'*) or obeyed (*matā'*) except god.

presented in an Afghan language and therefore exclusively to Afghans. In contrast, they are notably absent from the Pashtu and Dari sections of the Quetta Shura Taleban propaganda-site al-Emara.

THE JIHADISTS' DILEMMA, THEIR STRONG POINT – AND THEIR OPPONENTS' WEAKNESS

All in all, the sermon's subtleties offer some insights into the delicate core dilemma of inciting jihad against the government of President Hamed Karzai and its foreign backers. Given that a huge part of the Afghan population, most veteran mujahedin commanders from the 1980s' jihad and arguably also the majority of well-known Islamic scholars refuse this ideological position, it is far from an easy sell. Does God really command the believers to fight, when an ostensibly Muslim regime with many Muslim backers, many of them fighters highly decorated for their faith, is in place? The more radical a version of the Islamic faith the insurgents follow, the easier it may seem to logically demonstrate the necessity to fight – as with the hadith on Basra which leaves no room for neutrality in a struggle of cosmic dimensions – but at the same time, it is a line of thought much harder to sell and which will appall more people (ordinary Afghans as well as scholars).

Yet, with the intertwined concepts of oppression (*zolm*) and (moral) corruption (*fassād*) resulting from foreign occupation (*eshghāl*), insurgents generally rely on a popular, time-proven path. No wonder that Abdul Basit makes a special effort to denounce the now settled-down, former mujahedin from the 1980s for wrongly differentiating between the Soviet and the American occupation (this of course is a topic he shares with mainstream Taleban propaganda on al-Emara; 'anecdotal evidence from the field' also show plenty of appeals to the common 'jihadi' past and calls to join the jihad again). It should be remembered that the notion of the duty to defend homeland and religion against oppressive foreign invaders who seek to destroy society by spreading corruption, is the founding myth of a huge part of the current political class in Afghanistan. It is also well rooted among the wider population – even though in the 1980s many Afghans were actively supporting the communist government and many more simply refused to take sides. Hence, in the cases where the insurgents succeed in subsuming today's situation under the concepts of occupation, corruption and oppression, a huge

reservoir of manpower will be at least potentially available to them.

In addition, apart from the wide acceptance of the principle of jihad (as opposed to the question about whether it applies to the current situation), the insurgents gain from the somewhat inconsistent and incoherent narrative offered by the Western backers of the Kabul government concerning their own role. The standard answer given in this regard can be summarised as that the Western troops, advisors and development workers are in Afghanistan for completely selfless reasons. But more than nine years after the beginning of the intervention, the tactical realities on the ground have collided too often with this claim for too many Afghans. Of course, the idea of heavily armed soldiers coming from far-away countries purely for altruistic reasons is neither easy to believe, nor in line with Afghanistan's historical experience. Maulawi Abdul Basit consequently uses every opportunity in his sermon to ridicule the Western narrative: the fairytale of a benevolent invasion, he asserts, is only presented by their Afghan hirelings, while the Westerners openly admit the crusade against Islam and insult the Prophet.

'The Americans proclaimed when they attacked that they wanted to destroy the Islamic Emirate. Bush, in a conference of Christians and Jews, announced ... that in Afghanistan the heads of men must be without beards and the heads of women without veils. Democracy must rule there, this is a crusade ... One congressman even openly announced that "we are going to turn Afghanistan into a second Israel." And wouldn't the Americans – if they were really interested in helping the people – first rebuild their own homeland and help their own poor as well as their co-religionists south of the border?'

Even Superman does not escape the Maulawi's wrath; he rages that through such stories, American children are instilled with a sense of superiority and the perception that it is only natural for America to rule the world. By comparison, he argues, Afghan children are being fed stories about the virtues of peace, compliance and submission. 'How is it possible', asks the Maulawi, 'that the Americans teach their children that the world has to be under their command and the Americans must rule over all the world and all the civilizations, while they try to turn us and our children into a flock of sheep?'

CONCLUSION

The Afghan insurgency, it should be stressed again, does not thrive on the narratives of the Marxist liberation movements so often studied as role models in counterinsurgency warfare. Promising neither economic well-being nor political emancipation, the Afghan insurgents rely mainly on religious rhetoric with a heavy dose of appeals to honor and shame – and, of late, nationalism. While this is demonstrably not enough to mobilise a huge part of the Afghan population, the numbers of Afghan insurgents have been constantly on the rise in recent years, even considering the heavy casualties they have sustained. As a 2009 study¹⁸ suggests, ideology may often not be the one and only determining factor for men to join the insurgents' ranks, but it does ease this step and further radicalisation is likely to take place after they have joined.

In short: the interaction of the insurgents with their environment is facilitated or hindered by the degree of congruity in how they see, perceive and judge the world around them. Intimidation and pressure alone will not suffice to run an insurgency in the face of such a deadly enemy as the current, US-led military presence in Afghanistan. The subtleties of the insurgents' narratives, their weaknesses and inconsistencies deserve to be studied well and in detail. It must not be forgotten that the West's difficulties in matching their own stories to the thinking and perceptions of the Afghan population (and then to ensure that their actions match their stories) apply also – with certain variations – to the various groups of insurgents.

¹⁸ Sarah Ladbury in collaboration with Cooperation for Peace and Unity: Testing Hypotheses on Radicalisation in Afghanistan: Why do men join the Taleban and Hizb-i Islami? How much do local communities support them? Kabul 2009, <http://d.yimg.com/kq/groups/23852819/1968355965/name/Drivers%20of%20Radicalisation%20in%20Afghanista n%20Sep%2009.pdf>.

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