



Marine Corps Intelligence Activity

MCIA Note

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(U) Cultural Islam in Afghanistan

(U) Islam is practiced differently in Afghanistan than in any other part of the world. For operations in Afghanistan, it is significant to know the origins of existing cultural influences come from pre-Islamic Central Asian beliefs. This knowledge is necessary for two key reasons. First, understanding the specific cultural-religious mindset of local Afghans is essential to successful operations within the population. Secondly, Afghan cultural Islam conflicts with the fundamentalist Islamic movements that influence the current insurgency. Knowing and exploiting these differences can be beneficial to counteracting insurgent IO campaigns and to discourage local Afghans from identifying with insurgent groups vying for control of the population.

(U) Three main topics of discussions are key in understanding the cultural-religious mindset of the Afghans: (1) Demographics: When/how did Islam arrive in the geographic region of Afghanistan and what major sects of Islam can claim followers there? (2) Integrated Pre-Islamic Traditions: What are the origins and the lasting traditional influences of pre-Islamic Central Asian beliefs in Afghanistan? (3) Islam in the Insurgency: What Islamic movements influence the insurgent groups in Afghanistan and how do these movements specifically conflict with Afghan cultural Islam? Further, how have insurgency groups used Islam and Afghan cultural traditions for their gain? By answering these three questions, Coalition forces in Afghanistan can benefit from greater knowledge of the local religious sentiment. That knowledge can be used to a tactical and operational advantage in a variety of situations ranging from interaction with the locals to information operations.

(U) Islamic Demographics in Afghanistan

(U) Numerous invasions and civil wars have influenced Afghanistan for much of the territory's history.¹ Many civilizations have filtered through the territory. Among the most influential are:

- (U) Alexander the Great (329 B.C.E.²) and the Macedonians conquered the existing Afghan satrapies.³
- (U) The Kushans of Central Asia brought popular Buddhism into the region around 130 C.E., eventually building the 4th century Bamyán Buddha statues.
- (U) The Huns invaded Afghan territory in approximately 400 C.E. and ruled for 200 years until the Islamic Era of Afghanistan began.
- (U) Persian armies conquered the country and introduced Islam to the western regions as early as the mid-600s C.E.
- (U) British domination in the middle of the 19th century led to three Anglo-Afghan wars before Afghan Mullahs and others revolted against British control.

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- (U) In 1979, Soviets invaded Afghanistan to support the faltering Republic that overthrew the Afghan monarchy that Zahir Shah began in 1933.
- (U) Civil wars proceeded, with the Taliban taking power from 1994 to 1996.

(U) Arabic armies conquered the Persian Empire shortly after the death of Prophet Muhammad. The newly Islamic Persians proceeded east with their ideas and invaded the territory, now known as Afghanistan, around the mid-600s C.E.⁴ The religion enjoyed a strong hold on the western regions because local Afghan tribal princes allowed Arab Muslim governors sent by the Umayyad Dynasty to rule their provinces. People located in eastern cities rebelled against the rule of Arab Muslims, which made the religion weak in these areas. When the occupying armies left the eastern cities, the people quickly returned to their pre-Islamic beliefs. Eastern cities did not convert to Islam in a meaningful or permanent manner until around 870 C.E. with the conquests of Yaquib ibn Layth Saffari, a former Persian coppersmith, or *saffar*.⁵ He began the Saffaid Dynasty in Afghanistan and brought Islam to its present state. Today, Afghanistan's population is more than 99 percent Muslim.

(U) Eighty five percent of Afghans are Sunni Muslims and approximately 14 percent are Shi'a. Most Afghan Shi'a Muslims are found within the Hazara population. Sufi mystical orders are found as either independent Sunni or Shi'a sub-communities throughout Afghanistan. Sufism and its mystical components are part of the most significant discussions on religious tensions between Afghans, the Taliban, and other insurgency movements.

(U) Sunni Muslims stress the idea of equality throughout the community of believers. There is political or administrative leadership, but there is no clerical authority when it comes to the interpretation of the Qur'an and God's will. In this regard, all believers are equal before God. For instance, a man who knows the prayer forms may lead prayer; therefore, it is not reserved for religious leaders. Afghan Sunnis, like Muslims around the world, are divided into different schools of thought. Afghan Sunnis mostly belong to the Hanafi School. Abu Hanafi founded the Hanafi School in 767 B.C.E. Hanafi elevated the importance of belief over practice.⁶

(U) Hanafi may have been especially successful among Afghan Muslims because it allows for local custom as a secondary source of law. Most ethnic Pashtuns in Afghanistan are heavily influenced by the ideology of the tribal Pashtunwali code. Much of the rest of the Afghan population follows Pashunwali, or a variation of the code, as well. Further, Sunni Hanafis tend to have a better relationship with the Sufi mystics (which are significant to Afghan culture and history) because they value belief more than particular practices. Hanafi traditionally uses the following four basis for legal decisions:

- (U) The Qur'an (holy book containing the revelations made to Muhammad)
- (U) Qiyas (scholarly interpretation of the Qur'an)
- (U) Hadith (the traditions of the Prophet)
- (U) Ijma, or the 'will of God' (as evident in the consensus of scholars)

(U) Shi'a Muslims feel that the blood relatives of the Prophet continued to have special powers in relation to interpreting God's will. While Sunni believers refer to any religious leader as an imam, Shi'a Muslims refer to only blood relatives of the Prophet as Imams and consider these Imams the sole inheritors of the leadership of the Muslim Umma. To Shi'a, only Imams can interpret the Quran legitimately.⁷ Imami Shi'a (the predominant sect in Afghanistan, also called "twelvers") still wait for the 12th Imam (who hid from Sunni prosecution) to return and restore the Shi'a to prominence.

(U) Like most major faiths, Islam has a mystical component. Known as Sufis, these Islamic mystics felt disillusioned and isolated by the impersonal laws and the infighting of early Islam. Sufis seek a more personal relationship with God through singing, spinning, dancing, and breathing exercises. Sufis are famous

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for their poetic descriptions of ‘intimacy with God.’⁸ *Malang* (mystical religious leaders and healers in Afghanistan) are associated with some Sufi orders (*tariqat*).⁹

(U) Sunni, Shi’a, and Sufism are traditional Islamic sects found throughout the world. Islam influences almost all aspects of life in Afghanistan. However, aspects of Islam in Afghanistan differ greatly from traditional (Arabic) Islam and from Islam elsewhere. For instance, while traditional Islam follows Shari’a, many Afghans tend to follow the tribal ethical code of Pashtunwali—which emphasizes justice, hospitality, and honor. Islam is the faith, but Pashtunwali is the law.¹⁰ Afghans also differ from the Arab Muslim world in their culture’s religious practices. Knowledge about these practices and how they interact with the Islam of the Afghan insurgency are critical to operations.

(U) Pre-Islamic Central Asian Beliefs and their Integration into Muslim Life in Afghanistan

(U//FOUO) Afghans are a traditionally superstitious culture who place heavy emphasis on signs, dreams, and symbols as logical decision factors in daily life.¹¹ Further, several existing Afghan Islamic practices have their origin in pre-Islamic beliefs. These practices are based primarily in Central Asian belief systems that include lasting cult traditions, *ziarats* and shrine-worship, spirits (*jinnd*), witches, witchcraft, shamanism, and *malangs*. Most of these practices conflict with the strict interpretation of the Qur’an found in movements that influence the insurgency such as Wahhabism, Deobandism, and the teachings of Abdullah Azzam.

(U) Pre-Islamic belief systems in Afghanistan include ‘imported’ faiths like Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, and Hinduism.¹² Lasting effects of these traditions are evident in the giant Buddhas of Bamyan Province and in the Kalash religion of the Nuristanis (forcibly converted to Islam in the mid-19th century). Legacies of the Hindu caste system are evident in popular Afghan folklore that is more than 2,400 years old.¹³ The Mogul ruler Akbar, who exerted considerable influence over Central Asia in the early 1500s, dreamed of uniting his empire under one religion, Din Illahi, which would combine elements of Islam, Christianity, Jain, Hindu, and Judaism.¹⁴ He was not aggressive in terms of forcefully converting the inhabitants of Central Asia, but his ideas influenced the Afghan traditions combining elements of many religious influences into their Islamic practice.

(U) In addition to the effects of these imported religions, there were also indigenous movements that remain key influences.

(U) Cults and Lasting Cult Traditions

(U) The Cult of Zhun revolved around the worship of a golden idol with ruby eyes.¹⁵ The idol was placed in a large temple ‘guarded’ by the skeleton of a large reptile likely believed by the early Afghans to be the bones of a dragon (*Adzhar*). Scholars today know more about the Cult of Zhun from the writings of a Chinese pilgrim, Xuan Zang, who traveled in Afghanistan. The cult survived in the region for nearly two centuries after the arrival of Islam and appears to be related to the pre-Buddhist, dragon-god religion of Tibet. In Afghan Islamic tradition, Caliph Ali is often referred to as the dragon-slayer and is believed to have slain dragons throughout the region using his great faith in Allah.¹⁶ There is a geological formation in Bamyan Province referred to as the Dragon of Bamyan. According to local religious beliefs, this formation is the skeleton of a dragon slain by Caliph Ali. The formation includes a large fissure in which archaeologists discovered numerous skeletons of goats, assumed to be sacrifices, attesting to the importance of goats to Pre-Islamic Afghan tribes.

(U) In the previously Kalash-faith based cultures of Nuristan, goat horns are considered a symbol of prestige. The number of goat horns in front of a house or associated with an individual attests to his or her rank

(which, in turn, corresponds with the number of feasts given by that household).¹⁷ In the 11th century, Shah Nama Epic goat horns are linked with the uniforms of respected warriors. A common argumentative expression in Afghanistan today is “bring out your horned ones” or, in effect, “what is your strongest point.” Unearthed ritual goat burials in Afghanistan are further evidence of the influence of a goat cult dating back to the Bronze, perhaps even Neolithic, Ages. Goat horns are often found on poles surrounding *ziarats* or the shrines of saints visited by present day Afghan Muslim pilgrims.

(U) Ziarats and Shrine Worship

(U//FOUO) *Ziarats* are the shrines and graves of key saints or religious figures. These can be located anywhere from a mud hut to a temple-like building. They are usually surrounded by high walls and have a single-gated entrance. Active *ziarats* can be identified by the decorations surrounding them. Tall poles surrounding the compound or nearby trees may be used to fly colorful banners or clothes to remind the saint enshrined in the *ziarat* to intercede with Allah on the pilgrim’s behalf. Further, the tops of poles may be decorated with goat horns. These signs of an active *ziarat* should be readily recognized and the site respected by visitors.¹⁸ *Ziarats* are located in urban, rural, and mountainous areas. Some even exist in the middle of busy city streets or major highways.

(U) *Ziarat* worship and respect is a priority to the Afghan people and is often integrated into traditional Muslim worship. Here are some examples:

- (U) In the 1920s, construction began to relocate the Shrine of the Two Swords. According to Afghan legend, the shrine was a headless body of a decapitated soldier who continued to fight and kill ‘infidels’ for 8 kilometers before collapsing. The relocation of the shrine would allow a major highway to go through the area. However, the site but was abandoned when workers refused to continue after numerous worker accidents, strange discoveries of blood-covered tools on-site, and machine failures.¹⁹ King Ammanullah ordered that a mosque be built on the site to commemorate the miraculous happenings.
- (U) Another example of *ziarat*-centered worship and the belief in signs and dreams being infused into Muslim culture is the popular story of two brothers whose sister had been kidnapped. They reportedly prayed to Allah at a *ziarat* and then simultaneously dreamt that night of the location of her body. When informed of this, the police searched the area and found a cadaver.

(U) *Ziarats* and shrine worship are significant parts of Sufi Islam and of mainstream life in Afghanistan. Many fundamentalist movements consider *ziarat* visitation to be heretical.²⁰ The most religious tension is found between the Islamic movements followed by the insurgency and the cultural Islam of the Afghan people. The destruction of *ziarats* by Taliban leaders was deeply resented by people throughout Afghanistan, but especially by local Pashtun leaders in the southern and eastern regions, which are influenced by Qadiri Sufism. Many of these Pashtun leaders afford respect toward the offended Sufi religious leaders like Pir Gailani.²¹ Wahhabist revolutionaries and their supporters tend to be less welcome in these regions. However, *ziarat* and shrine worship is a strong Afghan religious practice all over the country.

(U) There are other traditions associated with *ziarat* and shrine-related worship.²² On Thursday nights in some provinces, families gather at shrines to offer food, prayer, burn incense, and hand out money to the poor. According to some local legends, mysterious floating candles are said to hover over the *ziarats* at night. Further, physical souvenirs from *ziarats* are sometimes used as charms to ward off evil, cure scorpion bites, prevent and cure illness, or for pure good luck. Mothers may take their child to *ziarat* and force them to swallow a pinch of dirt said to cure whooping cough. Other individuals may keep the dust as a charm. The leaves from nearby trees are sometimes made into potions to cure illnesses. The bricks from the shrine of Kwaja Musaferare are placed outside of local homes to ward off scorpions.

(U) Spirits, Witches, and Witchcraft

(U) The existence of spirits (*jinn*) is a widely accepted belief among the Afghan people.²³ These spirits can be malicious or benevolent and are said to haunt graveyards, buildings, and even roadways. The “good” *jinn* are referred to as white, while the “bad” are referred to as black. *Jinn* can take the form of scorpions, possessors, poltergeist activity, or be the cause of misfortune. Night paralysis, a disorder in which the individual afflicted wakes up unable to move temporarily, is also often attributed to *jinn*. In an example of integration into Islam, reciting the Shahadda (Muslim profession of faith) is said to be the only way to free oneself from this form of the *jinn*'s possession. Further, some locals will take mentally-ill relatives said to be possessed by *jinn* to the Ziarat-i-Meally Sahib in Jalalabad to be secluded, whipped, and have the Quran recited over them for up to a day at a time.²⁴ The belief in spirits in Afghanistan extends to an ancient Cult of Stones, which emphasized certain stones or rock formations as the dwellings places of *div*, a special class of *jinn*.

(U//FOUO) Charms, or *tawiz*, are said to counteract the effects of *jinn*. These charms can be in the form of Quran verses written on paper and sewn into the hems of clothing or into leather pouches worn around the neck.²⁵ Practices associated with other forms of ‘witchcraft’ or ‘black magic’ exist in Afghanistan today, such as the evil eye superstition. The evil eye stems from common Central Asian, Pre-Islamic superstitions about the power of jealousy and curses. A jealous neighbor can give an individual the evil eye to curse them; the evil eye can also be used as a manner of sorcery to transfix or place a spell on an individual. The idea, while contradictory to fundamentalist interpretations of Islam, is generally tolerated by Islam because of traditions stating that Muhammad became a victim by the spell of a Jewish woman. The evil eye and other curses are said to be counteracted by the “khamsa” or the “Hand of Fatima” (after Fatima, the daughter of Muhammad). This image is typically depicted as a hand with an eye drawn on the palm. This image can be seen on jingle trucks, posters, and even in the occasional tattoo throughout the Afghan region. Ideas about witchcraft in general, also contradictory to Islam, have been merged into the practice of the religion in Afghanistan. The final suras of the Quran are said to be “preservative” suras and useful in the protection against sorcery. Further, black magic and black magic witches are associated with Satan. The political Islamic Taliban movement banned sorcery and witchcraft, presumably targeting such practices as these associated with curses, charms, and spells.

(U//FOUO) Dreams and signs are a significant basis for Afghan thought and decision-making.²⁶ Dreams are commonly thought to be a source of divine wisdom or communication with God. This Afghan tradition could be considered incongruous with the Islamic ideal that the last revelations were given to Muhammad alone. Signs, often in the form of seemingly unrelated events outside of an individuals’ control, are also considered a logical basis for decision making. It is not confirmed whether these signs are suspected by Afghans to be from God, spirits, or from both/either depending on the situation.

(U) Mystic Figures

(U) *Malang* can refer to beggars, street performers, holy men, or some Sufi leaders.²⁷ However, it is also used to refer to a class of Shamanistic leaders who perform healing, exorcism, and communication with *jinn* in the name of God. *Malang* may belong to a Sufi order, but may be independent. These individuals claim to have inherited their powers or to have gained their abilities through completing an apprenticeship. *Malang* usually work performing mystical healings, curses or spells, communication with *jinn*, and fortune telling in return for an allotted fee. Some *malang* go through an initiation process sometimes involving hallucinogenic substances and spend days secluded in a cave (as Muhammad received his revelations in a cave) overcoming the temptations and psychological torment of appearing *jinn*. Afghans also may refer to the *malang*-like individuals as *baxsi*, *darvis*, or *qalandar*.²⁸ *Malang* whose focus is on fortune telling may be referred to as *tala'bin*, not to be confused with the Taliban. These shamans are universally associated

with the Muslim faith by local Afghans. However, fundamentalist Islamic leaders often condemn shaman practices. The techniques observed in rites performed by *malang* include ritualistic repetition of the Islamic creed or other Muslim phrases, prayer to Allah, and other ties to Islam.

(U) Islam in the Insurgency

(U) The religious beliefs and actions of the insurgents are largely incompatible with Afghan cultural life. The Taliban, in particular, advertises itself in propaganda as Afghanistan's legitimate government with Afghan local interests in mind. However, the Taliban's agenda and value systems are vastly different from those of traditional Afghanistan. The movement is "the product of the anti-Soviet jihad and the civil war that followed, but not representative of indigenous strands of religious thought or traditional pre-conflict power structures."²⁹ This fact—that the Taliban does not represent the indigenous Afghan way of life—can and must be exploited for Coalition gain in the significant IO efforts. Here are some examples:

- (U) Under Taliban rule, the destruction of *ziarats* and local shrines caused great resentment from the people of Afghanistan, especially in the southern regions. Southern Afghanistan is heavily influenced by Qadiri Sufism, and a substantial number of local Pashtun leaders follow the guidance of Sufi leaders.³⁵ The desecration to *ziarats* and local shrines is incompatible with Sufi belief and with significant Afghan traditions. Focusing on this incompatibility is key to information operations in the area of operations.
- (U) 'Witchcraft' and 'black magic' were banned from Kabul and other territories under Taliban control. Afghan traditions that could be referred to as 'magic' include ritual healings, exorcisms, common charms, and superstitious that exist throughout the country. By acknowledging the existence of such traditions and then banning them as heretical, the Taliban distances themselves from the Afghan population's cultural traditions.
- (U) The Taliban's ban on music suppressed not only Afghan cultural traditions (like the wedding party) but also mystic-influenced religious traditions. Sufis traditionally sing and dance to music as part of their methods toward divine connection. The poetry of Sufi mystics, a significant part of Afghan heritage, was also largely censored.

(U) Islamic movements that incorporate insurgent belief systems are very different from Afghan cultural Islam. Understanding the details of these movements emphasizes how incompatible they are with Afghan locals' beliefs. Two fundamentalist Islamic movements are especially influential to the insurgent groups in Afghanistan: extremist versions of Wahhabism and Deobandism. As much as these Islamic movements influence the insurgency, the insurgency uses Islamic ideas to influence the population and gain local support.

(U) It is beneficial to note the history that the Taliban (as a major source of insurgency in Afghanistan) attributes to itself. The word *talib* refers to a student.³⁰ Taliban oral tradition claims that the group began in the Kandahar region when a local Mullah was called on about the recent rape and murder of three women by a local guerilla leader. Mullah Maulvi Muhammad Omar recruited local religious students from a local madrasah to execute the offender and disperse his military. From then on, according to tradition, the Taliban was formed to defend Afghanistan from those citizens whom had betrayed her. In reality, most Taliban fighters originated in loosely related groups of former Mujahidin and Islamic militants. They organized and trained in various regions throughout Afghanistan and Pakistan with support from the Pakistani State.³¹

(U) Each of the following movements discussed—extremist Wahhabism, extremist Deobandism, and the teachings of Sayyid Qutb/Abdullah Azzam—is of exceptional danger to U.S. interests because these movements are not only religious. Each movement has historical political elements (Deobandism and Wahhabism) and some have historically been manifested in violent actions. The ambitions of the followers of these movements are easily justified to extend beyond personal or spiritual guidance and to political domination and rebellion.

(U) Wahhabism

(U) Wahhabism is an 18th century movement led by Abd al-Wahhab. Based on Saudi Arabian Sunni Hanafi, the primary doctrine of Wahhabism is *tahwib*, or the unique unity of God. This idea makes followers stress idolatry in any form as a grave sin. The movement claimed to be in response to the “moral downslide” of the Arabian Peninsula and followers prefer to be called Unitarians, or *Muwahiddin*. Based on a literal reading of the Qur’an, it is considered by most observers to be fundamentalist. Wahhab belief supports the idea that death in battle for Islam is martyrdom and results in the admittance into heaven.³² This idea is exploited by the Taliban to be beneficial to insurgent activity’s recruitment power in Afghanistan.

(U) The state of Saudi Arabia formed a pact with the supporters of Wahhabism soon after the theology emerged. Wahhabism benefitted from this pact in the 1970s when oil prices soared and Saudi influence increased across the globe. Wahhabism entered Afghanistan largely with Saudi support to the Afghan Mujahidin.³³ Wahhabists reject idolatry and consider shrine worship a heretical practice. According to one expert, “Local customs, laws, saints, or rituals—anything not found in a literal reading of the Qur’an—were to be abandoned as idolatry” under the command of religious authorities.³⁴ This aspect of the movement is not congruous with the way of life for most Afghan people whose religious-cultural traditions, including shrine worship, are well-imbedded into daily life.

(U) Deobandism

(U) While elements of Wahhabism were evident in the Taliban’s rule, Deobandism (also a radical offshoot of Hanafi Sunni thought) is influential in the insurgency. Deobandism began as an Indian school of thought that includes strict, literal interpretation of the Qur’an and anti-colonial, anti-modern components that developed in protest of the British rule of India.³⁶ Deobandism may have entered Afghanistan’s Taliban through certain neighboring Pakistan and/or religious madrasahs, which followed the school of thought. A large percentage of Taliban fighters were trained in or recruited from Pakistan. The Afghan Taliban often retreats to Pakistan through unsecured borders.

(U) The anti-modern trends in Deobani belief are evident in the Taliban’s dress requirements—for both men and women—and their denial of education to female citizens. Further, the Taliban has used strict, literal interpretation of the Qur’an to justify brutal punishments for offences against their law. These ranged from public executions to amputations. Deobandi beliefs state that a Muslim’s first loyalty is to his religion and only then to his state. This lack of respect for state authority is evident across the insurgency, not just within the Taliban group.

(U) Anti-colonial feelings may have been transferred to influence the anti-Western sentiment the Taliban and other insurgent groups have today.

(U) This form of Deobandi Islam is dangerous because it emphasizes the willingness to employ violence as an indicator of true belief. Further, like Wahhabism, it is closely linked to political movements. It “seeks to eradicate all forms of Islam other than its own interpretation of the Koran, and ... comes packaged with a set of now well-known political grievances, often directed at U.S. foreign policy.”³⁷ Deobandism began long ago, but has in recent decades developed to include even stronger political visions that are adverse to U.S. interests and to include more violent tendencies.

(U) Sayyid Qutb and Abdullah Azzam

(U) Al Qaeda’s terrorist organization plays a significant role in funding and stabilizing Afghanistan’s insurgency. Al-Qaeda’s extremist Islamic positions formed in part under the religious influences of the teachings of Abdullah Azzam.³⁸ Azzam’s teachings were, in turn, heavily influenced by Sayyid Qutb (Muslim Brotherhood). Both men saw Islam itself as a peaceful religion but taught that Islam needed a utopia to

fully thrive. This utopia must be reached by force. Azzam's Defense of Muslim Lands contains a call for the "salvation of humanity by the rule of fighting."³⁹ He describes two different types of jihad: offensive and defensive. Offensive jihad is attacking the enemy in enemy territory and is obligatory until only Muslims remain. From this tenet, insurgents can directly claim religious justification for terrorist tactics in the United States and abroad. These teachings also imply that Western ideals of commerce cannot peacefully co-exist with pure Islam. Azzam's jihad is global in scope.⁴⁰ This idea is part of what separates al Qaeda's cross-border terrorist goals from the Afghan Taliban's focus on political control of Afghanistan.

(U) Strategic Use of Islam in Afghanistan

(U) Insurgent propaganda is both effective and dangerous. The strategic use of religion, traditional cultural mediums like song and dance, and the timely distribution of propaganda to the media in local language gives the insurgency an advantage in IO efforts.⁴¹ To efficiently counter these efforts, which damage nation-building incentive and Coalition success, it is significant to understand how and by what means the insurgents are strategically using Islam and other cultural traditions for their gain.

(U//FOUO) There are a number of instances where insurgent groups have used Islam as a method of gaining/coercing support from the local population. For example, Taliban propaganda suggested that Mullah Omar received dreams of Muhammad instructing him to unite Afghanistan under Shari'a.⁴² This helped the movement to gain legitimacy among the Afghan nationals. Not only does this example display a manipulative use of Afghan Islamic belief, but also of Afghan mystical traditions that place heavy emphasis on the importance of dreams.

(U) Karzai's government has shown effective examples of recognizing the influence of religion among Afghans. The Religious Cultural Affairs division of the Afghan National Army is working to legitimize the new government and military through religious means. As one mullah, Moheburahman, points out: "The most effective thing that can persuade Muslims to do dangerous things and to fight is to give them the legitimacy of what they are fighting for. I describe the legitimacy of this government and point to verses [in the Qur'an]."⁴³

(U) The insurgency also uses media outlets to manipulate the Afghan public's religious and cultural traditions. There are recent reports of Taliban use of DVDs, song, and poems (most of which were once banned under Taliban rule) to spread propaganda.⁴⁴ Media outlets like newspapers and television reports also show evidence of this propaganda effort.

(U) On 26 March 2001, a Kandahar paper, Tolu-e Afghan, an article written in Pashtu, reported that the true aim of the United States in Afghanistan was to eliminate Islam. This insurgent propaganda cited the Secretary of Defense's anger at the Taliban's destruction of a historic statue of Buddha as evidence that the United States wanted to eliminate Islam from Afghanistan. The article continues to accuse the United States government of encouraging "nakedness" and "degradation" of Afghan women.⁴⁵ The article also identifies Coalition-supporting Afghans as "pro-infidel" Afghans and claims they are part of the problem. This kind of reporting is an effective method of intimidating Afghan locals and using their fear of God to not only turn locals against United States forces, but also to help eliminate local customs and traditions that separate Afghan Muslim practices from the Taliban's ideals.

(U) Taliban leaders also exploit Afghan cultural traditions based on justice and revenge through threats on Afghan locals (especially teachers, election workers, or anyone that cooperates with Coalition forces) made through "night letters." These are messages written by the Taliban and pinned to the doors of mosques and houses across the country during the night.⁴⁶ Election workers and American security guards, as well as local Afghans, have been murdered in connection with these threats. Threats to kill individuals or relatives of individuals who support Coalition forces are especially intimidating within Afghanistan.⁴⁷ In a

culture where trans-generational blood feuds are not uncommon with adherence to Pashtunwali, the fact that Taliban insurgents may exist in the country long after Coalition forces are gone is strong motivation to support the Taliban.

(U) The previous examples of the use of Islam and Afghan cultural religion are extremely beneficial to the insurgency. Without efforts to emphasize the differences between Afghan traditional Islam and the Islam practiced by the insurgency, extremely religious Afghans are vulnerable to insurgent propaganda that cites Islam. Insurgents coerce support from the local nationals and isolate them from identifying with Coalition forces by claiming that supporting the insurgency is synonymous with supporting Islam. This harms nation-building efforts, increases division among the locals, and causes overall detriment to U.S. interests in Afghanistan.

(U) Conclusions and the Relevance to Marine Corps Goals in Afghanistan

(U) The Taliban's ability to forcefully ensure stability after the Soviet occupation/Afghan civil wars helped the group to gain power and support across the country. Undermining Coalition efforts through display of force combined with forceful intimidation of the local population continues to be a key means of gaining support from Afghan nationals. The insurgency also employs the strategic use of religion to coerce support from the locals. However, locals were resentful over the suppression of many Afghan cultural and religious traditions under Taliban rule. This discrepancy is significant and should be emphasized in Coalition information operations.

(U) The opportunity to capitalize on resentment towards the Taliban remains a significant advantage for Coalition forces. The fundamental theological differences between the movements that influence the insurgency and indigenous religious traditions of the Afghan people are vast and include: conflict over ziarat visitation and shrine worship; the toleration of and/or participation in Sufism, mysticism; and the use of charms/magical beliefs or thinking. Coalition forces can and should emphasize the oppression of Afghan practices under Taliban rule and other insurgent groups that do not tolerate Afghan mysticism. This will be influential in building Afghan national identity as separate from the Taliban and other insurgent groups. It will also do well in counteracting enemy propaganda that portrays Coalition forces as oppressive foreign⁴⁸ invaders that do not respect Islamic life in Afghanistan.

(U) Knowing how Islamic movements manipulate the insurgency is essential to understanding the operating mindset of enemy forces. Understanding the violent and political tendencies of these movements reinforces the dangerous power of the dedication of the insurgents. Further, understanding how the insurgency uses Islam and Afghan mystical traditions to influence local nationals is essential to counteracting such manipulative attempts and curbing the influence of the insurgency on the Afghan population.

(U) Marines on the ground will benefit from in-depth knowledge of the Afghan cultural mindset. Afghan nationals practice Islam in a manner that is entirely separate from any region in the Middle East/Central Asia. Learning more about Afghan cultural Islam provides Marines with a better understanding of how Afghans make decisions, interact with one another, and interact with their environment—both human and geographic. This knowledge is essential to successful operation in the human terrain of Afghanistan.

(U) Endnotes

¹ (U) Ewans, Martin, *Afghanistan: a Short History of Its People and Politics*, HarperCollins Publishing, New York, New York, 2002, Overall Classification: U.

² (U) The term *B.C.E* means “Before Common Era” and refers to the time period formally referenced in academic literature as *B.C.*, the counterpart term is *C.E.* and refers to the time period formally referenced as *A.D.* in academic literature. I chose to use these terms because the paper discusses timelines that are not Christianity centered and therefore called for religiously neutral time references.

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³ (U) Arc of Crisis: Afghanistan Timeline. www.journalism.berkeley.edu/projects/arccrisis/afghan-aftimeline.html, DOR: 21 Jul 2008, Overall Classification: U. *Special Note: The word satrapies here is used to describe a provincial region similar to a city-state, but usually larger.*

⁴ (U) Dupree, Nancy Hatch, *An Historical Guide to Afghanistan*, "Chapter 3: Sites in Perspective," Afghan Air Authority Publishers, Kabul, 1971, Overall Classification: U.

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