

How the Taliban Take a Village

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A current method used by the Taliban in Afghanistan to gain control of an area deemed of strategic interest to the Taliban leadership, which operates from safe havens in Pakistan or within Afghanistan, is to identify and target villages to subvert. The Taliban have recognized the necessity to operate with the cooperation of the local population, with their *modus operandi* being to gain villagers' cooperation through indoctrination (preferred) or coercion (when necessary).

VILLAGE NODES OF INFLUENCE

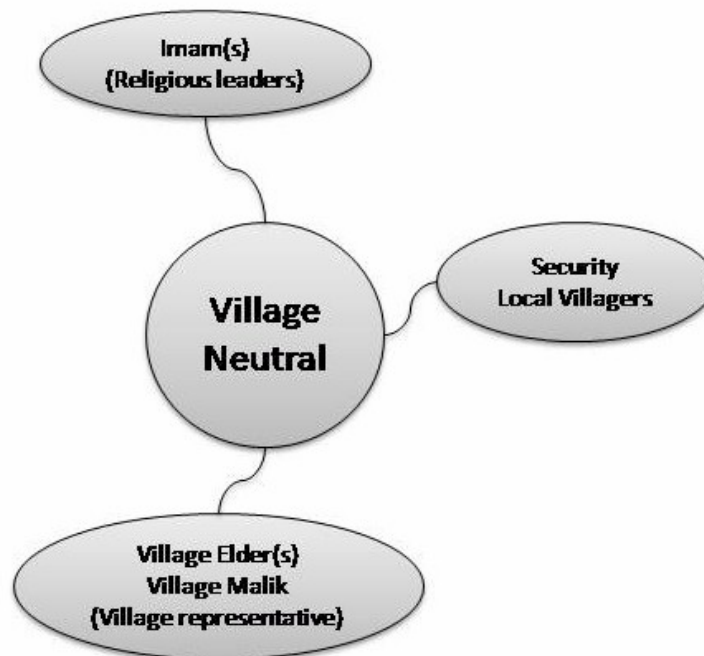
For a non-Afghan or foreigner to understand how the Taliban can subvert a village, we can use a simple social structure model to identify the key nodes of influence within a typical Afghan village. A village can be divided into three areas that most affect how daily life is lived. These key nodes are political and administrative, religious, and security aspects of village life. Of the three nodes, the one that is the most visible to outsiders is that of the *malik* (tribal leader or chieftain) and village elders. The *malik* and village elders represent the political aspects of the village. A second key node of influence is the *imam* (religious leader). The *imam* represents the religious node of influence within a village. A third local node of influence is the individuals and system of security found within a village. Security is traditionally conducted by the men of each individual village. If either the Taliban or the Afghan government controls one of the parts or nodes of influence in a village, then that entity also heavily influences or controls the village and perhaps other villages in the area.



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TALIBAN CONTROL OF VILLAGE NODES

The Taliban look for villages and areas within which they can operate and use as a base against US and Afghan forces. Areas with little US or Afghan police or army presence are prime areas the Taliban will initially seek to subvert and hold. The Taliban build networks by getting a fighter, religious leader, or village elder to support them. Whichever one or more are initially used will be exploited for tribal and familial ties. The village politics administered by the elders and represented by an appointed *malik* are the most identifiable node of influence of any particular village. The Taliban will attempt to sway those *maliks* who are not supportive by discussion and, if necessary, threats, violence, or death. In villages where the locals say there is no *malik*, it is usually described as a convenience to the village as “no one wants the position,” or sometimes “the elders cannot agree on a *malik* so it is better there is none.” In these cases it is most likely the Taliban have neutralized the desired representative of that village. When locals are pressed for a representative they will give you a name of a person who has come to represent the village. This individual will also most likely be in support of and supported by the Taliban. The Taliban will try to install a *malik* or “representative of the village” by coercion or force.



KEY NODES OF INFLUENCE WITHIN AFGHAN VILLAGE

A sub-commander will be established in the village to keep those in line who would resist the Taliban or their *malik*, who will be supported by limited funding. The sub-commander will generally have 2–5 fighters under his control. The fighters will often be armed only with small arms and shoulder-fired antitank rocket launchers (RPGs). They may or may not have an improvised explosive device (IED) capability, and if not will coordinate IED activities for the defense and when possible offense against US and Afghan forces. These fighters may stay in the village, but preferably are not from the village. Locals can sometimes be pressed into service to

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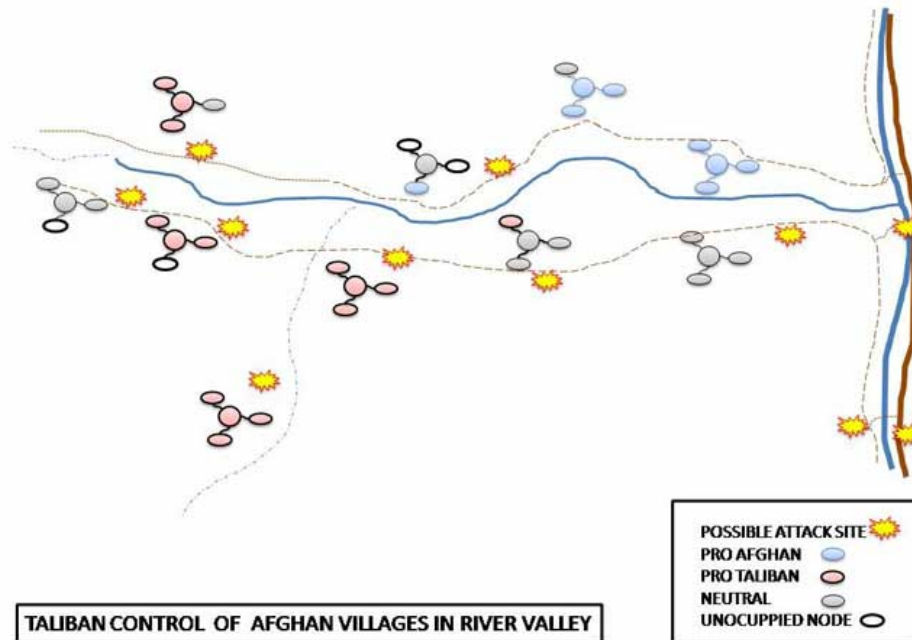
fight when needed, but the Taliban tend to use fighters from different villages so that when threats or physical violence is utilized, it won't be kinsman against kinsman. The Taliban often visit the village *imam* and local mosques. Villagers do not generally oppose this, as it is expected that even the Taliban must be allowed to perform and express their Islamic duties. These mosque visits afford the Taliban opportunities to gauge village sentiment and to build and establish contacts within localities. Village religious leaders also serve to educate children in villages where the Taliban have either closed or destroyed the local school. The mosque and *imam* serve as an education center for the Taliban while still presenting an opportunity for village children to be "educated." This presents a solution to the unpopular notion of schools being closed. A constant and recognized complaint from the Afghan people is the lack of opportunity because of poor education. The Taliban will supplant the local *imam* if needed by supplying their own to a village. A village with no *imam* will receive one and the Taliban will establish a mosque. This mosque will serve as a Taliban meeting place, storage facility, and indoctrination center.

Sympathetic locals are used as auxiliaries to provide food and shelter. One way to do this is for known supporters to place food and blankets outside their living quarters or in guest quarters to be used by Taliban in transit or operating within a village. This gives the resident supporter some plausible deniability. When US or Afghan forces arrive, all that is found are the blanket, possibly clothing, footprints and other signs of visitors. The Taliban have blended into the surrounding village.

TALIBAN CAN CONTROL WITH FEW FIGHTERS

The Taliban method requires relatively few of their own personnel. Its strength is in the local subversion of the most basic levels of village organization and life. It is also a decentralized approach. Guidance is given and then carried out, with commanders applying their own interpretation of how to proceed. The goal is to control the village, and at the local level the only effective method, which must be used by all commanders, is to control what we have termed the nodes of influence. Form fits function; an Afghan village can only work one way to allow its members to survive a subsistence agrarian lifestyle, and the Taliban know it well.

To control an area the Taliban will identify villages that can be most easily subverted. They will then spread to other villages in the area one at a time, focusing their efforts on whichever node of influence seems most likely to support their effort first. Using this model the Taliban could influence and dominate or control a valley or area with a population of 1000–2500—ten villages with 100–250 people (100–250 compounds)—with only between 20–50 active fighters and ten fighting leaders. The actual numbers may encompass greater population and fewer fighters.



The Taliban will have an elaborate network to support their fighters in areas they control or dominate. They will have safe houses, medical clinics, supply sites, weapons caches, transportation agents, and early warning networks (the British Army calls them “dickers”) to observe and report. The US and Afghan forces, heavily laden with excessive body armor and equipment, are reluctant to leave their vehicles. They are blown up on the same roads and paths they entered the area on. The Taliban will use feints and lures to draw our forces away from caches and leaders in an attempt to buy them time to relocate, or into a lethal ambush. After the attack the Taliban will disperse and blend into the village. The village will frequently sustain civilian casualties and the information or propaganda will be spread of US and Afghan soldiers using excessive force. The US and Afghan forces will leave or set up an outpost nearby, but the attacks will continue because the forces are not in the village, do not truly know “who’s who in the zoo,” and aren’t able to effectively engage Taliban personnel or effectively interface with the village nodes of influence to their benefit.

We say one thing but our actions are different. Locals are reluctant to help because to be seen talking with the Americans and Afghan security forces will result in a visit from a Taliban member to determine what they talked about and to whom. The local villagers know the government has no effective plan that can counter the Taliban in their village, and will typically only give information on Taliban or criminal elements to settle a blood feud. The Pashtu people are patient to obtain justice and will use what they have to pay pack “blood for blood,” even against the Taliban.

COUNTERING THE TALIBAN IN THE VILLAGE

Countering Taliban subversion of the populace is not done effectively with just more troops located at outposts. The troops must coordinate their activities with the local population and establish security through and within the village. When US and Afghan forces do this, the fight

will typically take on a particularly violent aspect, and involve the population as the Taliban attempt to maintain or reassert control.

The US and Afghan forces and government will need to identify individuals in order to employ lethal and non-lethal targeting. This requires in- depth knowledge of tribal structure, alliances, and feuds. Viable alternatives or choices need to be available to village leaders and villagers. Just placing US and Afghan soldiers at an outpost, conducting token presence patrols, occasionally bantering with locals, and organizing a shura once a month are not going to work.

Afghan identity is not primarily national, i.e., belonging within a geographic boundary with a centralized national government. Afghan identity is tribal in nature. Americans view identity as a national government; Afghans in the villages do not. The tribe is most important. The country "Afghanistan" running things from Kabul does not mean very much to the Afghan people in the villages under duress from the Taliban.

US and Afghan forces must be able to infiltrate and shape the village nodes of influence and then target individuals. Right now our military embraces a centralized, top-driven approach that prevents our military and US-trained Afghan counterparts from doing so. Current US procedures and tactics attempt to identify the Taliban without regard to their influence or social role at the village level. Instead we attempt to link individuals to attacks and incomplete network structures through often questionable intelligence. The individuals in nodes of influence must be identified as neutral, pro, or anti-Afghan government and then dealt with. To target any other way is haphazard at best and does not gain us the initiative.

US and Afghan forces must also devise and utilize tactics to fight outside and inside the village. This requires true light infantry and real counterinsurgency tactics employed by troops on the ground, not read from a "new" COIN manual by leadership in a support base. The tactics must entail lightly equipped and fast-moving COIN forces that go into villages and know how to properly interact with locals and identify Taliban insurgents. They must have the ability to take their time and stay in areas they have identified at the local level as worth trying to take back. Being moved from place to place and using armored vehicles while scarcely engaging local leadership will not work. Targeting identified high value targets will only result in the "whack-a-mole" syndrome. It's demoralizing for US and Afghan troops, the American public, and the Afghans who just want to live in peace. A light infantry force conducting specialized reconnaissance in villages, and using proven tactics like trained visual trackers to follow insurgents into and out of villages, proper ambush techniques on foot outside the village, and knowledge of the local village situation is the key. Infantry tactics should also include vertical envelopment of Taliban fighters by helicopter and parachute to cut off avenues of escape. Troop units should have a secure local patrol base from which to operate, send foot patrol into villages at night, and talk with and document compounds and inhabitants for later analysis. Mega bases or forward operating bases (FOBS) are only for support; units and tactics should be decentralized.

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