



ATLANTIC MEMO #11

Afghan Media War: A Failure to Communicate

During the last three months, Atlantic Community members have debated NATO's mission in Afghanistan, its successes and its shortcomings in the project "Focus Afghanistan." Among the abundant suggestions for strategic adjustments, one returning theme is communication. Atlantic community members agree that the media and propaganda battle, which the Taliban are perceived to be winning, has to be fought more effectively.

1. Target the Taliban's weaknesses.

In order to improve its credibility the international community needs to adhere to its high moral standards (Bernhard Lucke) while pointing out the Taliban's shortcomings. The Taliban's radicalism is prone to alienate their hosts in Afghanistan and in the tribal areas of Pakistan, as Adrian Edwards explains. For instance, four times more civilians are killed by insurgents than by international troops (Nick Grono). And as Tim Foxley highlights, the Taliban tend to violate their own laws to suit their goals. These double standards need to be made public to the Afghans.

2. Allow local media to develop freely.

Members of atlantic-community.org understand that the media in Afghanistan works between a rock and a hard place. As John Hadjiski shows, journalists feel the need to please the Afghan government, the international forces or the insurgent groups in order to secure access to information – and protect their lives. Nevertheless, the international community has to understand the important role of independent Afghan journalists, who might not have the same training as Western journalists and might not always report in a pro-Western way. However, only Afghan journalists can reach every part of the country and communicate on a par with the locals (Grono).

3. Make use of local frameworks.

Due to cultural and religious differences, the international community has a hard time selling their story to the Afghans. Nicholas Lunt therefore suggests that NATO has to work with local communicators, such as tribal and religious leaders, as they – in contrast to Westerners – use the same cultural and religious references to get the message through (Florian Broschk). Also, they are so far "untapped resources" (Jennifer Epley).

4. Speak the language of Islamic morality.

Broschk considers Islam to be at the core of Afghan society. Therefore, communication efforts should include references to Islam rather than focus exclusively on concepts of democracy, civil society and good governance. Reconstruction would be more appreciated by Afghans, if it included religious projects. This recognition of Afghan culture should, in the opinion of many Atlantic Community users, not lead to a neglect of universal rights, such as the equality of men and women. While Morgan Sheeran does not see the need to push for these values, arguing that Western values will seep into Afghan culture over the years, others like Benjamin Stappenbeck point out that the current Afghan constitution does contain these rights, thus, they should be supported.

5. Let actions speak.

Atlantic Community members agree that rhetoric should not undermine action (Rob Steer). The international community must make their actions valuable to the Afghans. As Ahmed Rashid points out, the Taliban do not present an answer to economic, educational or social questions. Here, international forces can win ground.

Atlantic Community members favor sending more policy trainers and mentors with language and cultural skills to Afghanistan, wish that the EU intensify its reconstruction efforts and that the international community concentrate on improving the education system. Ambassador Maliha Zulfacar calls for a Marshall Plan for Afghanistan, a comprehensive strategy including education, micro-credit programs, and agricultural support. More than 70% of Afghans live in rural parts of the country, thus, village stabilization programs are important in winning the fight in Afghanistan (Chris Mason).

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Atlantic Memos showcase the best ideas and arguments from debates in the Open Think Tank on atlantic-community.org. All policy recommendations in this document were made by authors and registered members of the Atlantic Community.