

Date: Wed, 21 Apr 2010 14:40:33 -0400

To: "Dr. Baruch Fischhoff - Chair, National Academy Committee on Improving Intelligence" <baruch@cmu.edu>

From: Lloyd Etheredge <lloyd.etheredge@policyscience.net>

Subject: Public Opinion Polls: An Urgent, Fast Audit for the Behavioral Science/ Human Terrain System in Afghanistan

Dear Dr. Fischhoff and colleagues:

As part of the National Academy of Sciences Report concerning data systems and analysis methods, I forward a recent news story concerning public opinion polls and the Human Terrain System in Afghanistan. I assume that this use of behavioral sciences falls within the purview of the DNI system.

There are an extraordinary number of tough, and even brutal, questions that need to be asked about what this company is doing, relevant estimates for different types of biases, and how the results are to be interpreted in their political, cultural, and sociological context or used for policy purposes. The use of behavioral science in Afghanistan - i.e., a wartime public opinion poll that claims a sampling error of plus or minus four percent - deserves the most rigorous, independent analysis. And the National Academy's best thinking about how to improve methods and interpret results.

- This use of behavioral science is a welcome addition to McNamara's use of body counts to be scientific - i.e., and to apply expected utility rational choice behavioral science - in Vietnam. But there are many lives, and potentially billions of US dollars involved in understanding - quickly and accurately - the societal and political dynamics in Kandahar. Even in the US, leading researchers at Harvard say it took them 10-15 years with extensive data systems and variations in question wording, etc. to understand American public opinion about health care and health care reform . . . Maybe Kandahar is simpler. However, I am haunted by the pictures of Afghan peasants who stare at Americans as if we are Martians. And comments by Dexter Filkins (NYTimes) that talking with illiterate Afghan peasants engages people who are trying to be polite but whose real message is "Please go away. You are endangering me and my family just by talking to me."

How does the National Academy of Sciences believe these Human Terrain survey results should be analyzed and interpreted? Is the contractor using the best available methods for selecting interviewers, designing questions, and analyzing results about sensitive and dangerous issues? Are the right political questions being asked to shape a negotiated settlement?

Paul Sniderman at Stanford has done some very interesting cross-cultural survey work on ethnic group relations and prejudice, including indirect (sophisticated) estimation techniques by including quasi-experiments in research designs and other methods. It might be worthwhile to ask him and other leaders in studying sensitive/dangerous topics to consult with you and the National Academy and take a look at the survey instruments being used by the DNI system for intelligence and US policy in Afghanistan.

- You also might find this news report of interest in the context of evaluating David Miliband and US/DNI forecasting and planning scenarios in Afghanistan.

Lloyd E.

April 20, 2010. The New York Times

A Killing Further Erodes Afghan Faith in Leaders

By RICHARD A. OPPEL Jr. and TAIMOOR SHAH

KABUL, Afghanistan — Late on Monday night, Azizullah Yarmal, Kandahar's deputy mayor, walked into a large mosque in his city and faced toward Mecca. He knelt down in unison with the others, leaning forward so his head touched the floor in ritual prayer.

That was when gunmen, unseen by the bent-over worshipers, shot him to death. Killings of local notables have become a routine occurrence in Kandahar, but the slaying of Mr. Yarmal, perhaps the most admired public official in the violent city, shook people to the core.

As American and NATO troops prepare for a summer offensive in Kandahar — what could be their most critical push in more than eight years of war — any sense of safety in the area is being worn away by assassinations, bombings and other attacks on American and Western contractors, political officials and religious leaders.

The violence has further eroded support for the government and foreign forces among a population in Kandahar that remains broadly sympathetic to the Taliban and that more than anything seems to fear continuing conflict.

In a recent survey, Kandaharis favored negotiations with the Taliban by a margin of 19 to 1 over continued fighting. Five of six Kandaharis viewed the Taliban as “our Afghan brothers,” while four of five also said most members of the Taliban would stop fighting if given jobs.

Those views seem certain to complicate the planned large-scale offensive in Kandahar, which aims to use a surge of new foreign troops — and the prospect of more fighting — to drive the Taliban to the negotiating table.

The survey was commissioned by the United States Army’s Human Terrain System, a program intended to help the military better understand the social and cultural underpinnings of regions where troops are deployed.

The study polled almost 2,000 residents in the city of Kandahar and the surrounding Kandahar Province, examining security in nine districts of Kandahar, excluding the most dangerous areas. Conducted by Glevum Associates, a Massachusetts research firm, the poll has a margin of sampling error of plus or minus four percentage points.

In five districts of Kandahar, the Taliban have more influence than the government, the study found. And by December — when the survey was conducted — residents were already saying that security was deteriorating.

“The situation in Kandahar is getting worse day by day,” Hajji Muhammad Ehsan, a tribal elder and a member of the Kandahar provincial council, said in an interview on Tuesday. “People are tense, and there is no safety.”

Echoing the opinion of many Kandahar elders, he added, “The only way out of this conflict is to talk with the opposition, to bring them into the system and give them an equal portion.”

Kandahar was the birthplace and power center of the Taliban before the United States-led invasion in 2001, and in the years of occupation it has gained strength by feeding off a feckless and corrupt government that has favored a handful of po-

litically connected and powerful tribes.

Recognizing how central that problem is to Kandahar's chaos, the military plans to hold forums to bring local elders and government officials together in hopes of re-connecting with disenfranchised residents and giving them an alternative to the Taliban.

But the Kandahar study, first reported on the Danger Room blog of Wired magazine, illustrates just how tall an order that will be for a generation of Afghans conditioned — with good reason, many NATO officials concede — to believe that a Taliban government is a better deal than the official Afghan administration.

While Kandaharis blame the Taliban and other militants for insecurity, slightly more than half say the Taliban are "incorruptible." That is a stark contrast to the local government, whose corruption, the study found, had forced two of three residents surveyed to seek help elsewhere, including from the Taliban.

There are exceptions, of course, and perhaps the most notable was Mr. Yarmal. For many Kandaharis it was clear why he was killed: he was one of the few honest, effective and esteemed public officials in the city.

"He was one of the officials who was dedicated to his job, and he was actually committed to his work," said Zalmy Ayoubi, a government spokesman.

The top NATO civilian official in Kabul, a former British ambassador, Mark Sedwill, denounced his killing as an "appalling act."

"This was a man who was simply seeking to serve his people," he said.

The Taliban offered a terse explanation. "We have killed him because he was working for this puppet government," a spokesman, Qari Yousuf Ahmadi, said in a telephone interview. "We will target all those who are working for the government." Taliban spokesmen deny any interest in talks with the government as long as foreign troops remain.

In the poll, the Afghan National Army and National Police were the forces most cited for bringing security. But the support was tempered by another finding: Afghan Army and police checkpoints and vehicles were also cited most frequently as

perceived dangers while traveling on roads in Kandahar Province — ahead of roadside bombs, Taliban checkpoints and criminals.

Military officials say the Kandahar findings suggest that security needs to be improved before serious negotiations with the Taliban can take place.

“The strong support for reconciliation reinforces our contention that stabilizing Kandahar is essentially a political process,” said Lt. Col. Tadd Sholtis, a spokesman for the commander of American and NATO forces in Afghanistan, Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal.

“However,” he added, “worsening opinion about insecurity caused by the Taliban and criminal elements suggests that the political process has to be supported by some means of improving security — which may be necessary before any meaningful reconciliation is possible.”

Indeed, the assassination of Mr. Yarmal was not even the only attack of note in Kandahar on Monday. Hours before, militants tied a bomb to a donkey cart and led the donkey to a checkpoint in front of the home of one of President Hamid Karzai’s most important political allies in Kandahar, the former governor of the Spinbaldak district.

The former governor, Hajji Fazluddin Agha, who had also served as Mr. Karzai’s top campaign official in the province, was not hurt when the bomb was detonated using a remote-controlled device. But the blast killed three of his nephews, who were 15, 13 and 12. Two bystanders and two policemen were wounded. The Taliban claimed responsibility for the attack.

In an interview after the attack, Hajji Fazluddin, shaken and panicked, said his nephews were killed because they were playing near the donkey. “When it reached the checkpoint, they pressed a button and it detonated,” he said, describing how the militants set off the bomb. “The children were blown to pieces. They had been playing with the donkey.”

Richard A. Oppel Jr. reported from Kabul, and Taimoor Shah from Kandahar. Sangar Rahimi contributed reporting from Kabul.

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