



*Voices of Moderate Islam attendees prepare to break their day-long fast in Medina, Saudi Arabia, Sept 7, 2010. The fast is part of observing Ramadan, the Muslim Holy month.*

# Voices of Moderate Islam

# “This is not a war for hearts and minds. This is a battle of words, deeds, and images: we and our Afghan allies must win all three.”

—MAJ Matthew J. Yandura, Brigade S-7, 173rd ABCT

It was as audacious an idea as it was controversial. If successfully implemented it could have game-changing implications for our area of operations in Afghanistan. The mission: send 35 Afghan key communicators to Amman, Jordan for a 10-day intensive religious study, debate, and tour seminar, then facilitate their pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia for the Umra, or lesser Hajj, during the last ten-days of Ramadan. At the conclusion of the experience the attendees would travel back to Afghanistan bearing the honorific title of *Haji*. Upon returning, each participant would share, unscripted, the story of their tremendous life-changing journey with family, friends, and fellow Afghans. The operation would have the effect of eroding the

credibility of a major theme of the insurgent narrative. The end state of this operation was three-fold: demonstrate respect for Islam and Afghan culture; expose Afghan key communicators to Islam in the context of a modern and religiously tolerant Jordanian society; and facilitate an Afghan-to-Afghan narrative. The following is the abbreviated version of how the 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team conducted an initiative we dubbed *Voices of Moderate Islam*.

## Know Thy Enemy

The Brigade began mission analysis for the upcoming deployment in May 2009 using a visualization tool we developed

called “The Cycle of Frustration” (See illustration 1). The cycle depicted how we saw the problem set in Afghanistan and included a fusion of enemy center of gravity (COG) analysis, Military Information Support Operations (MISO) target audience analysis, and critical thinking tools—all applied in a single, descriptive PowerPoint slide. Moreover, this visualization tool proved critical in how we mentally prepared and task organized ourselves for the fight ahead. The most important part of the cycle was what we saw as the heart of the problem: the enemy’s *radical suppressive ideology*. The cycle combined with other products we developed to form our campaign visualization (see illustration 2). Countering enemy ideology is the provenance of inform and influence operations. But how would the brigade manage

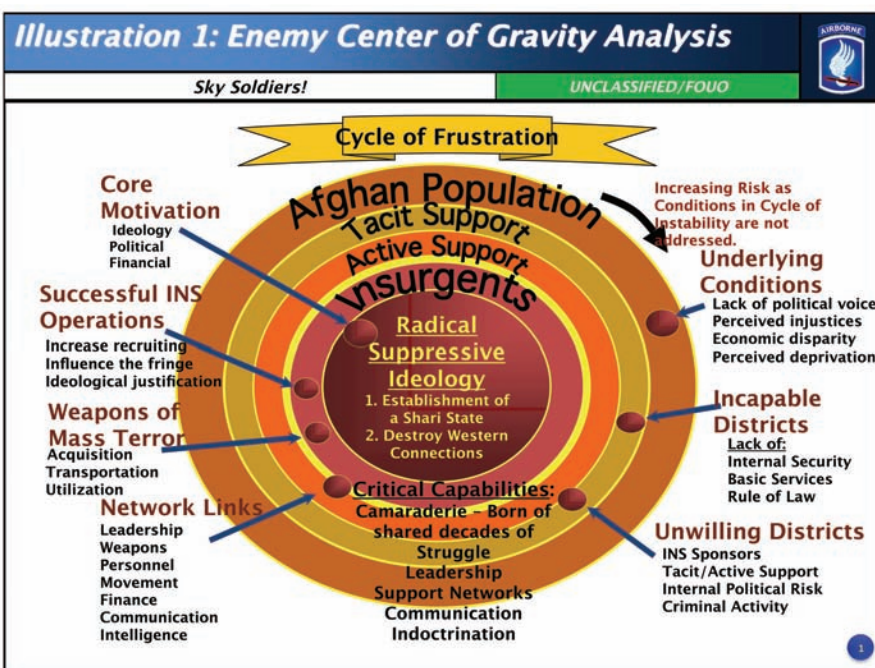
this? Going into Afghanistan it was not yet clear how we would achieve the commander’s intent of making the enemy and their radical suppressive ideology less relevant—but I knew that effective information operations were required toward achieving this endstate.

## Command Focus

IO officers do not arrive at maneuver brigades expecting to be a major focus of the Brigade’s efforts and we were only a few weeks away from going to our mission readiness exercise (MRX) in Germany. The staff was assembled in the Brigade Conference Room for our MRX concept-of-the-operation brief. The Battalion Commanders were also in attendance. During the brief, the Commander unexpectedly declared “Information Operations will be our decisive operation and most significant line of effort of the exercise and deployment.” My jaw hit the floor. In that one short sentence my commander had delivered an IO officer’s dream: a first-class ticket into the fight. The commander had a vision for this deployment, but now the pressure to perform was on. All the schoolhouse theory had to be put to practice.

## International Relations

During our tour of duty, the 173rd partnered with three allied nations: two provincial reconstruction teams from Turkey and the Czech Republic and one light



infantry battalion from Jordan. However, it was the Jordanian contingent under the dynamic leadership of US-trained Jordanian Special Forces Colonel Aref Alzaben who would prove decisive to the Brigade's IO efforts. Unbeknownst to the 173<sup>rd</sup>, Alzaben would arrive in theater with an entire information operations campaign that he developed while serving at the National Defense University. Alzaben based his campaign on the five pillars of Islam including the call for all able bodied Muslims to make the Hajj once in their lifetime. Alzaben's "IOC" as he would refer to it dovetailed perfectly with two upcoming Brigade operations named "Operation Noktai Tagheer I and II."

### Operation Tipping Point I

It was March 2010 and the Brigade had been in theater just over three months. We still didn't have as detailed a picture of local influencers necessary to conduct effective, locally-informed operations. We were responsible for partnered US-Afghan security, development, governance, and information initiatives in Logar and Wardak provinces, an area roughly the size of Rhode Island. Logar was home to the infamous "Kabul Attack Network," a loose affiliation of ruthless Taliban fighters and criminals with links that stretched into Pakistan. In Wardak, in addition to a Taliban presence, there was an assortment

of tribal, ethnic, and criminal networks that added a degree of difficulty to conducting operations there. Together the two provinces offered challenges along many fronts. It was during this period that the Commander determined it was time to "hyper-charge" our information operations. With the Commander's guidance in hand, we conducted a Brigade-level information operation called *Noktai Tagheer I*, Pashto for "Tipping Point," named after the Malcolm Gladwell book of the same title. The goal of Tipping Point I was to identify the key communicators in each Battalion Task Force's area of responsibility down to the village level. During the mission analysis for *Noktai Tagheer I*, I developed and discussed with leaders the idea of sending select Afghans to Jordan. However, the time was not right to act on this idea—we had a lot of homework and coordination to do first. For Tipping Point I, we employed a Key Communicator Assessment Team, or K-CAT as we called it, to assist the battalions in gathering the desired fidelity of information. K-CAT was composed of the Brigade Human Terrain Teams (HTT), Human Intelligence Collection Teams (HCTs), US Army Reserve MISO Detachment 307-40, Civil Affairs teams, Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), Combat Camera (COMCAM) teams, Agro-business Development Teams (ADT), and other key enablers. At the conclusion of

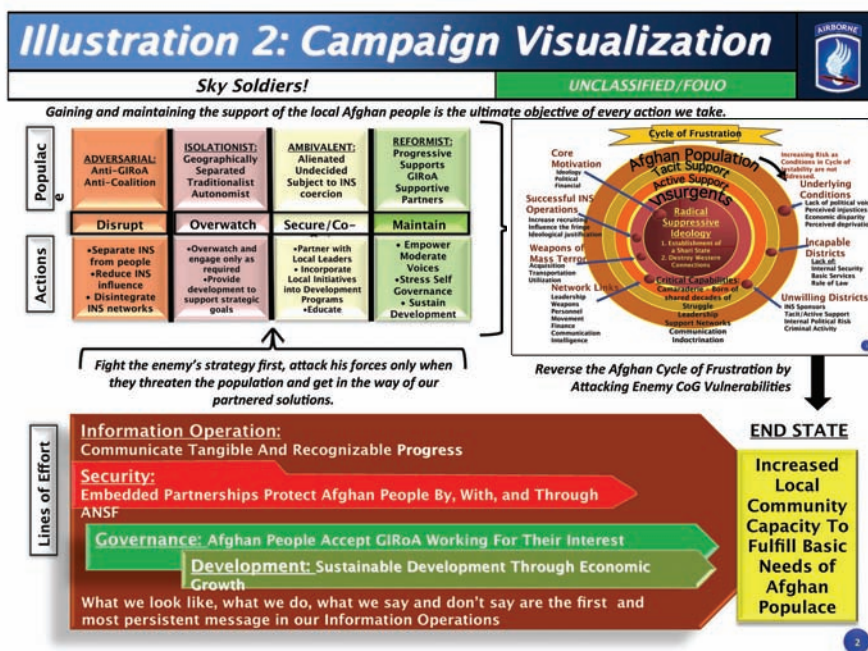
*Noktai Tagheer I*, the brigade had a better understanding who and where many of the previously unidentified formal and informal influencers were located across our operational area. Now that we had this data, how were we going to exploit it? What were we going to do? Cue *Noktai Tagheer II*.

### Operation Tipping Point II

If *Noktai Tagheer I* was the question, *Noktai Tagheer II* was the answer. In Tipping Point II, we used our deeper understanding of the human terrain within Logar and Wardak to conduct a series of deliberate Afghan key communicator outreach initiatives designed to empower Afghans to take on increasing levels of responsibility for community security, governance, and development. During this time, the Brigade began formalizing its program for reintegrating local Taliban fighters and leaders back into Afghan society using a community-based approach. More importantly, it was *Noktai Tagheer II* that provided the impetus for us to conduct the *Voices of Moderate Islam* or VoMI initiative.

### Ideology versus Ideology

The only way to defeat an ideology is with a countervailing ideology. But what ideology does an Army Brigade IO officer employ to counter a radical suppressive form of Islam? And moreover, how would we actually go about doing it? After consulting a respected Afghan provincial official, I initially drew toward employing patriotism or nationalism as a vehicle toward achieving our end state. However in Afghanistan's history, the people have never expressed a strong or enduring sense of nationalism. When nationalist sentiments were roused it was defined by xenophobia against foreign incursions into Afghan territory. We would need to dig deeper. In discussions with the Brigade MISO planner, a Pakistan-born naturalized US citizen, and the senior State Department officer assigned to our Brigade, we examined that most Muslims in the world practiced a moderate, tolerant version of their faith. My initial bias began to surface the longer we talked. "Correcting" a radical form of Islam with so-called "Afghan patriotism" or nationalism proved incorrect in this case. Instead,



we determined that the way to fight radical Islam within the context of an Afghan counter-insurgency was with the true, moderate message of Islam. In short, Islam will police itself.

### Planning Considerations for VoMI

1. In 2004, King Abdullah II of Jordan sought to answer once and for all the question of what and what does not comprise Islam? To that end, he wrote the Amman message. The message was supported by over 500 leading Muslim scholars from 50 countries and was supported by six other international Islamic scholarly assemblies, culminating with unanimous support by the International Islamic Fiqh Academy of Jeddah, in July 2006. The Amman message created a strategic breach in the enemy's ideology, and our intent was to exploit that breach with *Voices of Moderate Islam*.
2. One of the falsehoods propagated by the Taliban, because the Afghan culture is heavily informed by Islam and Islamic practices, was that the US and Coalition Forces were stationed in Afghanistan to destroy Islam. That notion has led many Afghans to become active or tacit supporters of the Taliban. In other cases, this belief has pushed Afghans to assume the position of either ambivalence or isolationism.
3. There remains a great deal of misunderstanding regarding the continued US and Coalition force presence in Afghanistan. Taliban and local criminal networks exploit local ignorance with relatively effective and highly decentralized information operations.
4. Local Afghan tradition (in keeping with Islamic teaching) looks at Hajj attendance as the ultimate journey a Muslim can make in their life. Hundreds from one's village and tribe may gather to see off a pilgrim. Thousands may greet them when they return. With VoMI we exploited this socio-religious phenomenon to tap into a network of networks that reached well beyond our two provinces.
5. Word-of-mouth, often facilitated by cell-phone and radio, were the most credible sources of information. We knew that news of our initiative would spread quickly and credibly,



A group of Afghan civilians chosen for the *Voices of Moderate Islam* program, wait to board a C-130 Hercules aircraft for a five day seminar in Amman, Jordan, then on to Mecca, Saudi Arabia, Aug. 25, 2010. US Army photo by Pfc. Michael Sword (Released)

particularly if the right participants were chosen.

6. We needed money, lodging, visas and transportation for 35 Afghans, two US, and two Jordanian escorts.
7. VoMI candidate selection was delegated to our Task Forces. They knew their areas of responsibility best and we trusted them to find suitable prospects. Selection guidance was simple: identify formal or informal Afghan leaders within your respective AO whom you believe, through their participation in this program, could bring about a significant positive change in the areas of security, governance, development, or information. There was no restriction on gender. Lastly, current and former Taliban members were also legitimate candidates for selection.

### Final Selection of Attendees

The battalions had a week to cull through the deck of key communicators identified within their respective areas during Noktai Tagheer I, determine candidate availability, develop a candidate order-of-precedence list based on the selection criteria provided, and then submit and brief to Brigade the final roster of desired candidates. Each of our six battalions could submit up to 10 names. Although several high-quality Afghan candidates were not eligible to participate due to their inability to get an Afghan passport in time, in the end, 35 Afghan governmental, social, religious, security, and tribal leaders were selected. Thirteen selectees were tribal leaders, nine were from the Afghan military and police, four were government officials, four served as

religious leaders, one Afghan worked as radio broadcaster, and two were former Taliban sub-commanders whom we had reintegrated earlier in the deployment. We hoped to use VoMI to tap into the street credibility and vast social networks of these individuals by demonstrating through our actions, the US's respect for Islam and Afghan culture.

### Department of State & Department of Defense Support

One of our early realizations was that we would not be able to do this operation without major assistance and support from the Department of State (DoS) and our three embassies in Afghanistan, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. It was our DoS representative who made us aware of the DoS Public Diplomacy grant program that could assist with some of the funding. It was possible, he said, to receive money for initiatives like the one we were proposing. If we kept our request under \$100K, if we were able to find a DoS approved non-governmental organization (NGO) sponsor through which to facilitate the initiative, and if we were able to draft and submit a strong proposal with our NGO sponsor that included all the financials, *then* we *might* be able get a major portion of the needed funding. It was a lot of "ifs," and time was against us. The word "impossible" was uttered by some who were either ideologically opposed to the operation or thought there simply was not enough time to pull it all off, but such commentary only strengthened our resolve. While there are many details to this part of the story, the short of it, was that we found a supportive NGO partner in the Hashemite Charity



His Majesty, King Abdullah II of Jordan (left), receives VoMI participants in Amman, giving them a warm welcome upon their arrival to the Hashemite Kingdom in August 2010. His Majesty held a special Ramadan Iftar meal later that evening in honor of the Afghan VoMI attendees.

Organization (HCO). We drafted, submitted, and received approval for a proposal of an approximate amount of \$65k, and worked out the extensive billeting, transportation, VISA, and oversight issues. We briefed our program concept and received a huge boost of support from none-other-than General Petraeus, his staff, Ambassador Eikenberry, King Abdullah II, and several other key DoS and DoD players. In the end, final approval for the request lift assets for VoMI would get routed from our Brigade, through in-country Command channels, to CENTOM, to DoS in Washington, DC, up to the White House for deliberation, and back down to the Pentagon, where the offices of the US Undersecretary of Defense for policy and Deputy Secretary of Defense ultimately gave their approval to proceed with the initiative and to provide the requested lift support.

This operation represented one of the biggest moments of our deployment. We needed help, and in the end, we got it. In short, we could not have pulled this operation off without the help of lot committed individuals.

### Naming the Program

It was late Sunday night, the clock in my office said 00:00—midnight. Our DoS officer and I had spent the last two days

trying to figure out what to name this program and we were feeling the pressure of a deadline to submit our NGO-supported proposal to DoS. Over fifty different concepts were put on the table. None of them seemed to work. Then, in a moment of over-caffeinated sleep deprivation, our DoS officer suggested using the phrase “Voices of Moderate Islam.” It had a ring to it. And yet, we assessed that the phrase had the potential to offend Muslims and others who might bristle at the notion of Islam being referred in such terms. As an inform and influence professional I was hyper-aware of the power of words, and all too cognizant of the implications of a poorly branded campaign. Interestingly, the term “*moderate Islam*” was an en vogue buzzword within certain DoS circles at the time and there was money out there to support programs that helped foster the notion along. But how would the name “Voices of Moderate Islam” play on the Afghan street? In the end it played out well. We consulted several Afghan religious leaders, to include the senior and most influential Mullah in Wardak province, along with both provincial governors. They liked the name, and more importantly, they saw no harm in it. Nevertheless, there was enough internal reservation expressed that we ended up using two names for the program

side-by-side when promoting the event in a mixed Afghan-US audience. The official name of the program was *Voices of Moderate Islam*. Our DoS officer was right—the US Embassy in Amman and Afghanistan liked the name and the concept. With some tweaking and advice from State, our proposal was approved as named. However, to ensure we reached the largest Afghan audience possible and to eliminate any barriers to accepting the initiative, we also referred to it as *Voice of Islam* when speaking to exclusively Afghan audiences. We experienced no loss in fidelity or understanding or buy-in from the target audience in what message we were trying to deliver. From a marketing standpoint, we were able to have our cake and eat it too.

### The Beginning of the Journey & the Importance of First Impressions

All 35 participants made the trek across our two provinces to come to Forward Operating Base Shank (FOB Shank) where we received them as honored guests. Some of the participants flew via helicopter with their Battalion Task Force sponsors, others arrived as passenger-guests in US military convoys, while another group arrived using local transportation. Every detail of the reception and onward movement was meticulously planned. Everything was rehearsed and executed precisely. From the moment the participants arrived, to the moment they boarded the US C-130 bound for Amman, Jordan, we communicated through word, deed, image, and our respect for Islam and Afghan culture. We knew that this would be a positive life-changing experience for the attendees and we wanted them to know our understanding as well. We also realized that this would be the first time most of the VoMI participants had ever traversed on the inside of a US forward operating base, the first time they had flown on a plane, and the first time they had traveled to a foreign country. Participants would stay the night at FOB Shank and then depart the following morning. Until then, we were intent on ensuring they had a terrific stay. Ramadan had begun several days earlier and many of the attendees were wondering if we were prepared to facilitate their unique requirements. Their concerns were alleviated when we shared them that we had two mosques on FOB Shank and that they would have

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escorts and transportation to ensure they could make daily prayers. Our Jordanian battalion had also arranged for a special meal for the attendees. We all broke Ramadan fast together that evening, then after breaking fast, the Jordanians hosted a pre-departure *Shura*, or meeting, with the participants and a small portion of the BDE IO team. After we made opening remarks, without prompting, the participants got up, one by one, and spoke: "I can speak for us all when I say, we never knew that American bases here had mosques on them, or that you had Muslim soldiers in your Army, or that you would allow them to pray, and observe Ramadan. I thought you were only about killing—but now I see so much more." Another participant declared: "This journey is our life. When we return, we will tell others what we saw here...we will tell others what you did for us. Everyone will know of the respect you've shown us." The last to speak was the oldest of the group. The frail tribal elder, with a wispy white beard stood up with assistance from those seated next to him. He said in a raspy, ethereal voice that still held power, "this is the first time that I do not feel like a prisoner in my own country. Thank you. I never thought I would see this day." The sentiments expressed by the participants that day boded well for the Journey ahead. *This* was the power of VoMI, and the program had only just begun.

## From Amman to Mecca and Back

The attendees departed on 25 August 2010 for Amman, Jordan. Our Deputy Commander would accompany the group to Amman to make a public statement announcing the program to local Jordanian media, then return to FOB Shank shortly after. The Jordanian Commander and his senior Imam, along with two senior Muslim US non-commissioned officers would accompany the 35 Afghans throughout the entire journey. The group

would return to Afghanistan on 15 September 2010—four days later than we had planned. Nevertheless, the experience in Amman, Jordan and Mecca was filled with experiences that the VoMI attendees would never forget. On the second day of the arrival in Amman, King Abdullah II personally invited the attendees to join him and members of the Royal court, along with the senior officers from the Jordanian Armed Forces to share in a Ramadan prayer and meal. King Abdullah spent an unprecedented 20 minutes with the attendees at the event. In the spirit of charity during the Ramadan season, the King gave the Afghan participants a gift of 1500 Jordanian Dinars each to cover any additional personal expenses while in Saudi Arabia. The Afghans were overwhelmed by the kindness and generosity the Jordanians had shown them. During the Amman phase, the attendees spent a day engaging in lectures and debate with respected religious figures from Jordan and Egypt. They discussed and debated such topics as: *What is the Amman*

*Message? What is moderate Islam? Why does it matter? What is a Muslim? What are the duties of Muslims? What is Jihad? Who is authorized to issue a Fatwa?* The Amman portion of the VoMI program called for a day of discussion and debate, followed by a day of travel to sites of religious significance to Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. It was in Amman, during the visit to the King Hussein I Mosque that the attendees experienced an important revelation. The Afghans were dumbfounded, not at the site of this massive and beautiful mosque, but at the site of the Christian Coptic Church located directly across the street. From where they were standing, they could see the mosque's minaret with its crescent moon on top and the crucifix from the dome of the church—side by side. "From this example, we learn that Islam and Christianity can co-exist in harmony and with respect for one another," said the Jordanian Senior Imam. One of the attendees commented, "I never thought such a thing was possible." After several more days in Amman, and numerous experiences, the attendees boarded a Jordanian Armed Forces C-130 Hercules and flew to Mecca with special permission from the Saudi Government. The next five days were a whirlwind of activity as the attendees, now Hajj pilgrims, went to Mecca and Medina to make the journey as the prophet Muhammad had once done. Thousands of

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Voices of Moderate Islam (VoMI)

Sky Soldiers!
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**VOMI FACTS:**

- 35 AFGHANS FROM WARDAK AND LOGAR PROVINCES ; HASHEMITE CHARITY ORGANIZATION (HCO) IS OUR NGO IMPLEMENTING PARTNER
- THREE-PHASE OPERATION: FOB SHANK TO AMMAN PHASE, UMRA PHASE, ENGAGEMENT PHASE
- INT'L INTERAGENCY TEAM EFFORT: THE WHITE HOUSE, COMISAF, 173<sup>RD</sup> ABCT, US EMBASSY-KABUL, US EMBASSY-AMMAN, HIS MAJESTY KING ABDULLAH II, JORDANIAN MINISTRY OF HEALTH, JORDANIAN ARMED FORCES, SAUDI ARABIAN MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS, US UNDER SECRETARY OF DEFENSE, US DEPUTY SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

**MEASURES OF EFFECT: COMMENTS FROM VOMI ATTENDEES**

"THIS PROGRAM IS OUR LIFE. WE NEVER WOULD HAVE THOUGHT THE AMERICANS WOULD DO SOMETHING LIKE THIS FOR US."

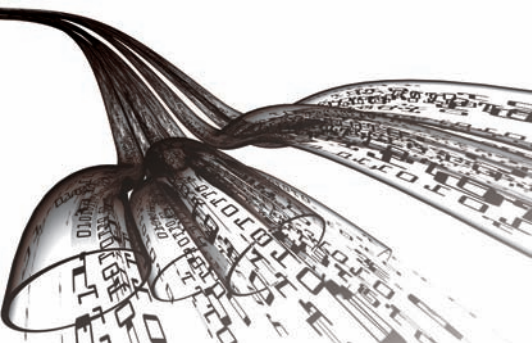
"WHEN WE RETURN, EVERYONE WILL KNOW WHAT HAPPENED HERE. THEY WILL KNOW WHAT YOU DID."

"THE RESPECT YOU ARE SHOWING TO ISLAM AND AFGHANS WILL NEVER BE FORGOTTEN."

"WHO KNEW YOU HAD MUSLIMS IN YOUR ARMY? I CANNOT BELIEVE THIS. I THOUGHT YOU WERE ONLY ABOUT WAR. I SEE SO MUCH MORE NOW."


**VOMI RETURNEE ENGAGEMENT PLAN:**

ATTENDEES WILL BE EMPLOYED IN KEY LEADER ENGAGEMENTS, SHURAS, REINTEGRATION EVENTS, OFFICIAL CEREMONIES, TACTICAL RADIO BROADCASTS, SCHOOL AND MADRASSA OUTREACH INITIATIVES, RELIGIOUS OBSERVATIONS, AND MORE



significant domains. We achieve our objective of dominance across the domains through the conduct of military operations that achieve superiority in each of the domains. Thus, our military objectives that focus our future operational and capability discussions result in superiority within each of the domains. See Figure 4.

This article describes a preliminary doctrinal framework, working from the macro level to a more detailed level to define the military operating environment. It also captures how warfare domains have evolved with the emergence of new technologies and capabilities. Furthermore, in clearly defining the relationships between the existing domains and the newer and emerging domains, we set the stage for focused discussions about how we organize to man, train, and equip the Army to achieve superiority within each of the militarily significant domains. This complete model defines the relationship from our high level vision through the principles that serve to guide us across a clearly defined operational environment that is further categorized into militarily relevant domains with distinct and achievable objectives. In short, it establishes that we are indeed making wine and not vinegar. See Figure 5.

This article attempts to streamline our current doctrine and attempts to clarify our understanding of our operational environment. While the article briefly outlines the construct and key concepts, more detailed explanations and examples should be included in the key doctrinal capstone documents to add further clarity and understanding of this concept. Operationalizing this construct will better prepare our military to man, train and equip our forces to achieve full spectrum dominance by achieving superiority across each of the domains. 

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pictures were taken. Hours of video were shot. These images from all the attendees would be collected and later produced into a video presentation of the entire trip and given back to the participants as a gift to commemorate their VoMI experience. As the attendees, wrapped up their time in Saudi Arabia and prepared to return to Afghanistan, the Brigade IO team was ramping up for the exploitation phase of VoMI. The real information operation was about to begin.

#### “IO HellFire Missiles”

As the Afghan attendees returned home, the Brigade Commander ensured his Task Force Commanders understood the opportunity before them. “The Brigade S-7 has provided each of you the equivalent of IO hell-fire missiles. Partner with your VoMI returnees ASAP. Help get them out into your local communities and to public events where they can share their story. *This is their biggest moment and ours.*” [See illustration 3 – page 15].

The effects of the program exceeded our expectations. Actionable calls into our Community Safety Phone Number (CSPN), a local 911 line, had spiked; local Afghans were self-organizing and meeting with the newly returned Hajjis in the hundreds to hear their story; one of our former Taliban VoMI attendees got one of Afghanistan’s most wanted criminals to turn himself in to Coalition Forces without a single bullet being fired. One month after returning from VoMI, we held a “Reunion Shura” to consolidate the effects of the program and its attendees, and discuss VoMI’s future. COL Johnson invited the 35 attendees to each bring “five of their friends or family” to share in the Shura as our guests. We expected no more than 185 Afghans would come to the reunion. Over 400 Afghan ended up showing for the event. The reason for the turn-out? They heard about VoMI from other Afghans. They believed in the program, and respected what the US and Jordanians were trying to do. God willing, they wanted a chance to make the VoMI journey themselves. Both of our Afghan provincial Governors attended and spoke at the event in support of VoMI. Senior leaders from the Afghan Uniformed Police (AUP) and Afghan National Army

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(ANA) were in attendance, along with hundreds of local Afghan tribal elders and religious leaders. All of the major media outlets from Kabul were there to cover the event. Several of the attendees, including a gifted Afghan radio broadcaster, gave impassioned addresses to the assembled audience. Many audience members showed their emotions openly as he spoke. VoMI had changed their lives forever. The veil had been lifted. The Taliban had lied. *The US does respect Islam and the Afghan people.* VoMI proved it. The implication was clear. *What other lies have the Taliban been spreading among us?* “May there always be a program like VoMI. May its blessings reach other Afghans like it has reached us. God will bless Coalition Forces a thousand times for a thousand lifetimes for what they’ve done here and what they’ve done for us” were the broadcasters parting words. Everyone in attendance nodded in agreement. 

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