

**Book review: Thomas H. Johnson: Taliban Narratives - The Use and Power of Stories in the Afghanistan Conflict, London: Hurst 2018, ISBN 978-1-8490-4843-9**

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## Book Reviews

THOMAS H. JOHNSON, *Taliban Narratives. The Use and Power of Stories in the Afghanistan Conflict*. London: Hurst, 2018. 336 pages, £30.00. ISBN 978-1 8490-4843-9

Since the mid-1980s Thomas H. Johnson (National Security Affairs Department at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California) has made numerous trips to Afghanistan and in 2001 he was involved in the information operations campaign in preparation for the US invasion of the country. Research for this book – which belongs to the great number of conflict studies on Afghanistan, here with a special focus on information operations – was mainly conducted over the years 2004–2011, including field research in Southern and Eastern Afghanistan with special attention to Taliban messaging. Johnson was a Senior Political and Counterinsurgency Advisor to the Commander of Canadian Forces in Afghanistan in 2009 and held other political and military positions as well during these years. His research for the book was thus directly embedded in the military actions of the US army and its allies. This makes clear that the author does not even attempt to take a neutral position as one might expect in a study carried out in the fields of narratology and cultural studies. For this reason narratives of the Taliban may be called “enemy narratives” (p. 3) in this book, and it comes as no surprise that military operations of the US army and its allies are straightforwardly referred to as “our operations in Afghanistan” (p. xxv). Already in the foreword the central finding of the book is formulated in terms of a military dichotomy (winner vs. loser) when the author says that “the Taliban has won the information war” (p. xxxv).

The book is aimed at assessing the information operations and associated narratives and stories of the Taliban and other Afghan insurgent groups, namely of the Hezb-e Islami. The author tries to suggest “why the Taliban have been so much more efficient and effective in presenting messages that resonate with the Afghan population than have the United States, the Afghan government, and the allies” (p. 2). It argues that the efficiency of Taliban information operations can be explained by the fact that they are indigenous and rely on traditional tools like night letters (leaflets, flyers), chants, poems and a variety of other culturally effective artefacts (p. 15). These tools are introduced and discussed in detail in separate chapters.

With regard to the theoretical background of his research, Thomas H. Johnson refers variously to works by successful authors of literature, commu-

nication studies, studies in the field of propaganda and persuasion strategies, Aristotle's Rhetoric and Patrick Hogan's book *The Mind and its Stories* (pp. 4–7). Johnson defines narratives as a “system of cognitive standards within which ‘messages’ are interpreted” whereas “stories are always interpreted within a persistent structure of norms and beliefs (narratives) that will affect the ways that stories and messages are interpreted” (p. 9). What is lacking is some background information about the role, function and mechanisms of story-telling in Afghan society. Johnson uses the term “story” in a rather loose sense. Mostly it is understood as an easier-to-understand interpretation of a translated text segment (see pp. 75–76, 113–131 et al.) or as an equivalent to “narration” (see pp. 217, 222). However, in the Afghan tradition of story-telling a “story” (Pashto and Dari: *riwāyat*, *hikāyat*, or *qessa / kisa*) is always a meaningful (and mostly entertaining) narration. In other words: Every narration of this kind transmits a particular message which can be seen as the quintessence of the narration and which usually has a broader meaning than the reported events. Such stories are allegories and metaphors.

According to Johnson, the Taliban always focus and act in a rural context. Tools of narration such as night letters, the Internet, DVDs, cellphone and other videos, radio broadcasts, official announcements or graffiti are discussed in detail, as well as traditional genres like poetry and chants. A separate chapter is dedicated to the “Code of Conduct” issued regularly by the Taliban leadership for their cadre. To sum up, Johnson comes to the conclusion that the Taliban maintain simple objectives in their strategic communication with a finite messaging spectrum and narrative universe and are quite successful in doing so. The US military and the Afghan government were unable to present a competitive narrative because their stories and overall narrative failed to resonate with a vast majority of the Afghan population (pp. 265 ff.).

When studying narrations it is always important to take into consideration the means of distribution and ask how the narrations were perceived by the target audience. Otherwise it can happen that we thoroughly discuss a text or some other narration that, in fact, remained meaningless for the society because it was not distributed as assumed or because it was not noticed at all. Only little is said in this respect in the book. The author mentions the low level of literacy among rural Afghans more than once. Maybe this can also explain why many rules of the Taliban's “Code of Conduct” were not followed in practice as mentioned on p. 177. Perhaps some Taliban fighters were simply unable to read this document.

The book is based on material that was translated from Pashto and Dari by native speakers who mostly live in the US. From a methodological point of view, such an approach faces substantial limitations. Every translation is an interpretation as a matter of course. Hence when working with translated texts, it is not the primary source being analysed but an interpretation of it.

This can explain why some analytical details remained superficial, not to mention the instances of incorrect translations and numerous mistakes in the transliteration of Pashto words and names. Notwithstanding such (mostly linguistic-hermeneutical) details, the book will undoubtedly find a grateful audience, especially among persons who are interested in political and military studies. For those unfamiliar with military issues, the large number of military-specific abbreviations may be confusing.

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SAMINA YASMEEN, *Jihad and Dawah. Evolving Narratives of Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jamat ud Dawah*. London: Hurst, 2017. 320 pages, £35.00. ISBN 978-1-8490-4710-4

With the jihad-focused spotlight of journalists, pundits and scholars shining brightly on the so-called “Islamic State”, interest in Pakistan has taken a back seat over the last few years. Samina Yasmeen’s new book, *Jihad and Dawah*, makes a compelling case for why it is fruitful to bring the country’s shifting jihadi landscape back into the realm of rigorous academic analysis. As Yasmeen rightly notes, existing studies have tended to exhaust themselves in mere descriptions of the terrorist activities and global linkages of Pakistan’s jihadi groups. Her goal, by contrast, is to dissect the ideological writings of one influential organisation, Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT, “Army of the Good”), and its political wing, Jamat ud Dawah (JuD, “Society for the Call to Islam”). In particular, the author wants to understand “how locally relevant narratives have been employed by jihadi groups in Pakistan to attract supporters” (p. 3).

To this end, Yasmeen has scrutinised a wide range of books, magazines and pamphlets that have been published in Urdu since the early 1990s. Her argument is straightforward: LeT initially considered the promotion of jihad as its main task. Proselytising (*da’wa*) was only a secondary consideration. Yet, this approach gradually – and mostly as a result of external shocks – gave way to a much more prominent role for religious preaching. As Yasmeen sees it, by carefully reshaping its message and postponing the call for armed struggle against the enemies of Islam, LeT managed to avoid government bans, broaden its societal base and secure additional sources of funding in the midst of a highly competitive “Islamic market”. Alongside this main argumentative arc runs the important notion that women’s agency within the organisation received a significant boost through this development, as well. Over the last three decades, female activists attached to LeT have made their voices increasingly heard. They hail “proper Muslim mothers” as crucial catalysts, both