

By George Friedman

On Sunday, The New York Times and two other newspapers published summaries and excerpts of tens of thousands of documents leaked to a website known as WikiLeaks. The documents comprise a vast array of material concerning the war in Afghanistan. They range from tactical reports from small unit operations to broader strategic analyses of politico-military relations between the United States and Pakistan. It appears to be an extraordinary collection.

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Tactical intelligence on firefights is intermingled with reports on confrontations between senior U.S. and Pakistani officials in which lists of Pakistani operatives in Afghanistan are handed over to the Pakistanis. Reports on the use of surface-to-air missiles by militants in Afghanistan are intermingled with reports on the activities of former Pakistani intelligence chief Lt. Gen. Hamid Gul, who reportedly continues to liaise with the Afghan Taliban in an informal capacity.

The WikiLeaks

At first glance, it is difficult to imagine a single database in which such a diverse range of intelligence was stored, or the existence of a single individual cleared to see such diverse intelligence stored across multiple databases and able to collect, collate and transmit the intelligence without detection. Intriguingly, all of what has been released so far has been not-so-sensitive material rated secret or below. The Times reports that Gul's name appears all over the documents, yet very few documents have been released in the current batch, and it is very hard to imagine intelligence on Gul and his organization, the [Inter-Services Intelligence \(ISI\) directorate](#), being classified as only secret. So, this was either low-grade material hyped by the media, or there is material reviewed by the selected newspapers but not yet made public. Still, what was released and what the Times discussed is consistent with what most thought was happening in Afghanistan.

The obvious comparison is to the Pentagon Papers, commissioned by the Defense Department to gather lessons from the Vietnam War and leaked by Daniel Ellsberg to the Times during the Nixon administration. Many people worked on the Pentagon Papers, each of whom was focused on part of it and few of whom would have had access to all of it.

Ellsberg did not give the Times the supporting documentation; he gave it the finished product. By contrast, in the WikiLeaks case, someone managed to access a lot of information that would seem to have been contained in many different places. If this was an unauthorized leak, then it had to have involved a massive failure in security. Certainly, the culprit should be known by now

and his arrest should have been announced. And certainly, the gathering of such diverse material in one place accessible to one or even a few people who could move it without detection is odd.

Like the Pentagon Papers, the WikiLeaks (as I will call them) elicited a great deal of feigned surprise, not real surprise. Apart from the charge that the Johnson administration contrived the Gulf of Tonkin incident, much of what the Pentagon Papers contained was generally known. Most striking about the Pentagon Papers was not how much surprising material they contained, but how little. Certainly, they contradicted the official line on the war, but there were few, including supporters of the war, who were buying the official line anyway.

In the case of the WikiLeaks, what is revealed also is not far from what most people believed, although they provide enormous detail. Nor is it that far from what government and military officials are saying about the war. No one is saying the war is going well, though some say that given time it might go better.

The view of the Taliban as a capable fighting force is, of course, widespread. If they weren't a capable fighting force, then the United States would not be having so much trouble defeating them. The WikiLeaks seem to contain two strategically significant claims, however. The first is that [the Taliban](#) are a more sophisticated fighting force than has been generally believed. An example is the claim that Taliban fighters have used man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS) against U.S. aircraft. This claim matters in a number of ways. First, it indicates that the Taliban are using technologies similar to those used against the Soviets. Second, it raises the question of where the Taliban are getting them — they certainly don't manufacture MANPADS themselves.

If they have obtained advanced technologies, this would have significance on the battlefield. For example, if reasonably modern MANPADS were to be deployed in numbers, the use of American airpower would either need to be further constrained or higher attrition rates accepted. Thus far, only first- and second-generation MANPADS without Infrared Counter-Countermeasures (which are more dangerous) appear to have been encountered, and not with decisive or prohibitive effectiveness. But in any event, this doesn't change the fundamental character of the war.

Supply Lines and Sanctuaries

What it does raise is the question of supply lines and sanctuaries. The most important charge contained in the leaks is about Pakistan. The WikiLeaks contain documents that charge that the Pakistanis are providing both supplies and sanctuary to Taliban fighters while objecting to American forces entering Pakistan to clean out the sanctuaries and are unwilling or unable to carry out that operation by themselves (as they have continued to do in North Waziristan).

Just as important, the documents charge that the ISI has continued to maintain liaison and support for the Taliban in spite of claims by the Pakistani government that pro-Taliban officers

had been cleaned out of the ISI years ago. The document charges that Gul, the director-general of the ISI from 1987 to 1989, still operates in Pakistan, informally serving the ISI and helping give the ISI plausible deniability.

Though startling, the charge that Islamabad is protecting and sustaining forces fighting and killing Americans is not a new one. When the United States halted operations in Afghanistan after the defeat of the Soviets in 1989, U.S. policy was to turn over operations in Afghanistan to Pakistan. U.S. strategy was to [use Islamist militants to fight the Soviets](#) and to use Pakistani liaisons through the ISI to supply and coordinate with them. When the Soviets and Americans left Afghanistan, the ISI struggled to install a government composed of its allies until the Taliban took over Kabul in 1996. The ISI's relationship with the Taliban — which in many ways are the heirs to the anti-Soviet mujahideen — is widely known. In my book, "America's Secret War," I discussed both this issue and the role of Gul. These documents claim that this relationship remains intact. Apart from Pakistani denials, U.S. officials and military officers frequently [made this charge off the record](#), and on the record occasionally. The leaks on this score are interesting, but they will shock only those who didn't pay attention or who want to be shocked.

Let's step back and consider the conflict dispassionately. The United States forced the Taliban from power. It never defeated the Taliban nor did it make a serious effort to do so, as that would require massive resources the United States doesn't have. Afghanistan is a secondary issue for the United States, especially since al Qaeda has established bases in a number of other countries, particularly Pakistan, making the occupation of Afghanistan irrelevant to fighting al Qaeda.

For Pakistan, however, Afghanistan is an area of fundamental strategic interest. The region's main ethnic group, the Pashtun, stretch across the Afghan-Pakistani border. Moreover, were a hostile force present in Afghanistan, as one was during the Soviet occupation, Pakistan would face threats in the west as well as the challenge posed by India in the east. For Pakistan, an Afghanistan under Pakistani influence or at least a benign Afghanistan is a matter of overriding strategic importance.

ETHNIC DISTRIBUTION IN PAKISTAN AND AFGHANISTAN

