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Proposed Talking Points for the Soldier Accused of Proselytizing at Bagram Airfield

These narratives and talking points are recommended for discussion with GIRoA officials and non-media key communicators in the RC(E) AO. They are not intended for media engagements or discussions with U.S. audiences. Seek guidance from PAO personnel prior to any discussions with media representatives.

Context Assessment: Al Jazeera began running a media story on 4 May 2009 that alleges a US Army soldier was handing out Bibles and proselytizing to Afghans at Bagram Airfield. This story originated from an event that occurred in the spring of 2008. The Bibles were not paid for by the US Government. They were not handed out to any Afghans. The soldier was informed that this activity was punishable under General Order Number One. This incident will provide our adversaries a propaganda opportunity if the event is not effectively mitigated.

Talking Points:

The Event:

- In the spring of 2008, a junior and uninformed US Army soldier received a box of Bibles, translated into Dari and Pashto, in his personal mail, which had been sent to his personal mail address by his home church in the United States.
- The Bibles were not purchased or authorized by the US Government.
- The soldier brought them to a study group at Bagram Airfield.
- A military chaplain, knowing that proselytizing is a violation of military policy and punishable by the Uniform Code of Military Justice, immediately took the soldier aside and explained why he was not allowed to distribute these types of materials.
- The books were confiscated and were never distributed to any Afghans.
- Al Jazeera will likely continue to air this story. Again, the original footage is over a year old.

A Way Ahead:

- Our purpose here is to provide support to GIRoA and the Afghan people in their pursuit of a safer and more secure Afghanistan—and freedom of religion and tolerance of religious beliefs is core to what we stand for.
- Under General Order Number One, all US Forces, including religious advisers, are prohibited from proselytizing any religion, faith, or practice. Violation of this order is taken very seriously and may result in military disciplinary procedures.
- Religious advisers support service members of similar faith but are prohibited from any form of proselytizing activities.
- The U.S. military respect for Islam is demonstrated by the Muslim officers serving as official religious advisors [chaplains] in our armed services.
- Religious advisers in our armed services, regardless of religion or faith, all receive specific training on what is allowable, and this training specifically addresses the prohibition of proselytizing activities.

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- We respect the culture, practices, and religious beliefs of the people of Afghanistan.
- The US Military and ISAF do not support proselytizing. We train all service members on the culture and beliefs of the Afghan people and the importance of respecting those beliefs. Lack of respect is taken very seriously and will not be tolerated by our Command.

In response to possible Afghan reaction:

- Do not be tempted by insurgents who would like to use this misleading, old story to willfully incite violence amongst the Afghan people. It is imperative that insurgents do not use events such as this to drive a wedge between security forces and the Afghan people.
- We understand the anger the Afghan people may feel over this incident and their desire to voice their public outrage. However, violent protests are not the appropriate response.
- US Forces value the strong ties we have established with the Afghan people, and it is our sincerest hope that this unacceptable event will not damage the progress we have made together. Our intent remains to support GIRoA in creating a safe and promising future for the people of Afghanistan.
- We support the values and beliefs of the Afghan people. We have helped construct and repair hundreds of cultural centers [some subsequently used as mosques]. We are and will remain committed to the people of Afghanistan and their religious standards.
- There are over 40 Nations helping GIRoA and the Afghan people. Violence in response to this incident only brings further grief on the people of Afghanistan.
- International forces are here to support all Afghans. We are committed to working together with the people of Afghanistan to build a better future, a future chosen by the Afghan people.

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