The Digital Battlefield:
The Taliban's Case of Co-opting Social Media for Warfare and Governance

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Abstract

This paper delves into the paramount significance of social media in contemporary warfare, shedding light on the critical need for effective measures to counter online radical narratives and prevent the spread of violent extremism. It explores how autocratic and repressive groups like the Taliban exploit social media platforms to their advantage and how these platforms have become a fertile ground for violent extremist groups to establish a novel front in warfare by allowing them to directly engage with civilians and the public, thus effectively closing civic space. This direct engagement enables violent extremist organisations to disseminate their ideologies and propaganda, radicalise, brainwash, manipulate, recruit, mobilise support, and communicate with the international community and the world. The research design incorporated a comprehensive analysis, combining first-hand experiences of locals, documentation, and reporting of content on Facebook, with an examination of the Taliban's social media posts, tweets, and engagement on platforms like Twitter and Facebook. The primary data was further complemented with relevant secondary data and reports. The findings highlight the Taliban's effective weaponisation of violent content on social media, strategically employed to shape public opinion and behaviours, demoralise the military, and discourage resistance against them. This played a

role in facilitating their military takeover of the country and later in establishing and advocating for the legitimacy of their autocratic rule. This paper argues for heightened vigilance and proactive measures to counter misinformation, glorification of violence, and radicalisation online, ultimately safeguarding the integrity of information dissemination and societal well-being.

Introduction

Three weeks before the collapse of the Republic in Afghanistan, I sat in a café frantically reporting violent content on the Taliban's Facebook accounts that incited fear. I was staff at an Afghan NGO that partnered with Facebook to identify content that glorified violence and violent extremism. The gravity of the situation in Afghanistan weighed heavily on my heart. The partnership with Facebook was a crucial step for us in our fight against the Taliban's use of social media to incite terror and spread violent content. But as I looked around, fear and uncertainty hung in the air like a thick fog. The café was filled with tense conversations. A group of men huddled together, discussing the recent assassination of Dawa Khan Menapal, a high-ranking government official who dared to speak out against the Taliban. They debated ways to leave Afghanistan before the Taliban took over. Meanwhile, within a close distance to me, there were three teenage boys seated, glued to their phones, watching videos of the Taliban's advances in Badakhshan and talking to each other about how unforgiving and brutal the Taliban are towards the military, police, and special forces of Afghanistan. Despite my efforts to put aside my own emotions, I felt overwhelmed by the fear and pain I saw in the faces of those around me.

As I logged into Facebook to begin my work to report disturbing content on Facebook, I couldn't help but feel that the Taliban had already taken over the platform. Their propaganda videos were spreading like wildfire, even on trusted news agencies' pages. The Taliban used strategic terror-inspiring communication tactics. They preached on religious purification narratives, evoking the sense that they alone represented Islam. I had never before seen a Taliban presence on Facebook, yet now they were omnipresent, directly engaging with and shaping public opinion, poisoning and overwhelming everyone with fear. It was like cancer that had spread to every corner of social media, leaving no one untouched – children, young and old, men and women were exposed to the disturbing reality of the Taliban's violence and war against the Afghan government.

Now, more than two years have passed since the collapse of the former Islamic Republic of Afghanistan government (hereafter referred to as the Republic government) and the return of the Taliban in the form of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (hereafter referred to as the Second Emirate of the Taliban). Yet the questions surrounding the fall of the Republic and the rapid capture of Afghanistan by the Taliban still remain unanswered and subject to ongoing debates. For example, the US government recently released to the public its *After Action Review on Afghanistan*, tabulating its failures and shortcomings.[1] Various factors contributed to the fall of Afghanistan. These include the political decisions by the Trump

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[1] US State Department. After Action Review on Afghanistan. March 2022.

and Biden Administrations, decisions by the US and Afghan military, as well as wider geopolitical issues. This policy brief explores the significant role social media played in aiding the Taliban's military takeover of Afghanistan.

This paper will delve into how social media was co-opted to create a new front in warfare by directly involving civilians and using manipulated narratives. The Taliban used violent content as a weapon. The Taliban used social media to pursue their strategies and defeat the morale of the Afghan Republic government, military, and the public. The paper will analyse the Taliban's public relations campaign strategy on social media over the last twenty years, with a particular focus on the period following the collapse of the Republic. The paper will explore the ways in which autocratic and repressive groups like the Taliban exploit social media platforms to disseminate their political ideologies, propaganda, and messages, aiming to manipulate and sway public opinion. Furthermore, the paper will examine how the Taliban utilise social media to communicate with a global audience and its implications for their legitimacy and recognition by the international community.

From Technophobia to Tech-Savvy: The Role of Social Media in Contemporary Warfare

The Taliban's initial regime from 1995 to 2001 was characterised by a technophobic approach and aversion to modern technology like social media as well as traditional media such as television and radio.[2] However, following their overthrow by the US and NATO allies, the Taliban underwent a transformation, becoming tech-savvy. Like other terror groups, the Taliban began to harness the power of social media to wage their war against the United States, NATO forces, and the Afghan Republic government.[3]

Recognising the significance of media, including social media, in contemporary warfare, the Taliban established their own websites and social media pages, acknowledging that wars today cannot be won without effectively utilising media.[4] Abdul Sattar Mawandi, a Taliban representative, once said: "Wars today cannot be won without the media. Media is directed to the heart rather than the body, while the weapon is directed to the body; if the heart is defeated, the battle is won, and the body is defeated."[5] This highlights the Taliban's understanding of the power of media in shaping public opinion and influencing conflicts, even for organisations that were previously resistant to embracing technology.

Eventually, along with the Taliban's military advances, starting in 2020, they started a social media propaganda campaign to aid the military operation. This campaign created a new front in warfare by directly involving civilians and using manipulated narratives and violent

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[2] Lamensch, Marie. "The Fall of Kabul: When Platforms Enable Propaganda." Centre for International Governance Innovation. August 27, 2021.

[3] ibid

[4] ibid

[5] Lamensch, Marie. "The Fall of Kabul: When Platforms Enable Propaganda." Centre for International Governance Innovation. August 27, 2021. https://www.cigionline.org/articles/the-fall-of-kabul-when-platforms-enable-propaganda/.

content as weapons to neutralise resistance and weaken the morale of the Afghan national force, local authorities, and the public.[6]

In August 2021, the Taliban's spokesperson took to Twitter to declare their complete control over Afghanistan, stating, "We are now in control of all parts of the country, with the help of God and the support of the nation. We would like to congratulate our nation on this big achievement."[7] The Taliban's choice to post this statement on Twitter goes beyond being a mere news update on a change of government. The Tweet signaled that the Taliban recognised Twitter as a primary way people access news and revealed their active presence on social media, demonstrating how they have coopted social media as a strategic tool to gain power and effectively manage their public relations.

After taking over the country, the Taliban is now using social media to affect their standing and recognition on the global stage and communicate their legitimacy to the nation.[8] Recently, at least six prominent Taliban officials and supporters have purchased blue ticks on Twitter to appear as "active, notable, and authentic accounts of public interest" verified by Twitter.[9] A report that studied the activity of the Taliban on Twitter noted that by May 8 2022, Taliban-related content had reached over 3.3 million accounts, and more than 126,000 Twitter accounts either shared Taliban content directly or posted the content that was later shared by the Taliban's main network.[10] This demonstrates how otherwise extremely conservative and fundamentalist organisations that are resistant to technology can appreciate and utilise the power of media to shape public opinion and influence the trajectory of peace and conflict.

Taliban's Public Relations Pre-2001 until 2021

Before 2001, The Taliban did not seem to have a public relations (PR) strategy, but they later developed a foundational mythology to shape their image.[11] They presented themselves as young religious students driven by a mission to restore morality in Afghan society in the face of the corruption and misconduct of the previous Mujahideen regime.[12] However, many Afghans believe that the Taliban's origin really began as a military force created by the Pakistani interior minister, Naseerullah Babar, who referred to them as "our

[6] Yousafzai, Zafar Iqbal. "The Taliban's Use of Twitter as a Tool to Spread their Voice." GNET Research, October 12, 2022. https://gnet-research.org/2022/10/12/the-talibans-use-of-twitter-as-a-tool-to-spread-their-voice/.

[7] Courchesne, Laura, Bahar Rasikh, Brian McQuinn, and Cody Buntain. "Powered by Twitter? The Taliban's Takeover of Afghanistan." ESOC Working Paper No. 30, June 2022. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1GUN8YZUKOi1Lb_hkcRi_OvWRi8DQdq1W/view.

[8] ibid

[9] BBC News. "Taliban Start Buying Blue Ticks on Twitter." BBC News, 16 January 2022, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-64294613.

[10] Courchesne, Laura, Bahar Rasikh, Brian McQuinn, and Cody Buntain. "Powered by Twitter? The Taliban's Takeover of Afghanistan." ESOC Working Paper No. 30, June 2022. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1GUN8YZUKOi1Lb_hkcRi_OvWRi8DQdq1W/view.

[11] Maley, William. "Public Relations of the Taliban: Then and Now." International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), September 17, 2021. https://www.icct.nl/publication/public-relations-taliban-then-and-now/.

[12] ibid

boys."[13] Pakistani officials and some Western observers further promoted their mythology, a misconception that, to this day, is the narrative defining the Taliban.[14] During their first regime, despite their lack of a coherent public relations strategy, the Taliban aimed to gain international recognition but only succeeded in securing recognition from the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan.[15]

After the Taliban regime was overthrown in 2001, they initially lacked organisation and focus. However, they regrouped and resumed their fight against the US, NATO forces, and the Afghan government. [16] During this time, the Taliban developed sophisticated propaganda techniques designed to appeal to different audiences in Afghanistan. They utilised various mediums such as magazines, "night letters" (often anonymous, secret messages with warnings or threats), and online platforms, including mobile radio stations, videos, websites, Facebook, and Twitter, to communicate their messages.[17] The messages conveyed through these channels consistently aligned with the myths of their creation, presenting themselves as jihadist fighters on a divine mission, doing Jihad in the name of Islam.[18] Simultaneously, the Taliban continued attacks on Western forces, the Republic government, and Afghan civilians.[19]

Key Taliban narratives

To influence both domestic and international audiences, the Taliban deployed the following key narratives as part of their influence strategies.

- Portraying themselves as holy warriors who aimed to restore the religion of Islam and the Islamic state in Afghanistan.
- Portraying the then-Afghan government as corrupt and "a puppet of the West" that promotes indecency and un-Islamic values.
- Promoting their vision of achieving independence of Afghanistan from the "infidels" (referring to the US, NATO, the Afghan government, and those Afghan civilians who supported and worked for them).
- Presenting the Taliban as a divinely ordained and legitimate ruling authority that has the support of the people.
- Emphasising the Taliban's military accomplishments and progress by recording and spreading their terror and violence and the gruesome battlefield details and sharing false information and untrue claims of triumph.
- Highlighting and exaggerating the failures of the Republic government and diminishing its credibility on both national and provincial levels.

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[13] Jamal, Ahmad Shuja, and William Maley. "The Decline and Fall of Republican Afghanistan." Oxford University Press, 2021.

[14] Maley, William. "Public Relations of the Taliban: Then and Now." International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), September 17, 2021. https://www.icct.nl/publication/public-relations-taliban-then-and-now/.

[15] ibid

[16] ibid

[17] ibid

[18] ibid

[19] ibid

- Amplifying the weakness of the Afghan military and the strength of their own.
- Promoting a purification agenda, justifying their killing and atrocities with religious narratives as if God authorised them to eliminate those they deemed as infidels, including the Afghan government and those who supported it in the name of jihad.
- Spreading the word of their version of a radical interpretation of Sharia Law and the need to establish an Islamic rule by defeating the enemy.

Manipulating data

The power of terrorism resides in its capacity to instill fear and terror among people.[20] Just as fire requires oxygen to exist, terror relies on media reports to thrive.[21] In the last twenty years, social media has become the oxygen that fuels the flames of terrorism, a fact well-recognised by the Taliban. During the war, they adeptly utilised digital and traditional media to amplify fears and propagate terror, making it an exceptionally potent tool for terrorist groups to reach a wide audience and pursue their objectives. They utilised social media platforms to disseminate propaganda, publicise their attacks, manipulate casualty figures, shape media narratives, and communicate with their supporters, the Afghan populace, and the international community. Through these manipulations, they projected an image of power, fear, and invincibility, consolidating their influence on public perception.

Taliban Social Media Strategy During the 2021 Takeover of Afghanistan

Following the US and NATO forces' gradual withdrawal from Afghanistan starting in May 2021, the Taliban took the opportunity to increase their military operations against the Afghan National Security Forces.[22] The Taliban did not limit their efforts to the battlefield. They also strategically co-opted social media platforms and the broader information ecosystem of television, radio, and newspapers to spread disinformation to serve their goal of taking control of the country. They launched an effective propaganda campaign to dominate the information environment in Afghanistan on social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Telegram.

The Taliban utilised Twitter and Facebook as weapons, utilising a supportive social media network they had cultivated. From April to mid-September 2021, the Taliban tweeted over 100,000 times.[23] A network of at least 126,000 Twitter accounts amplified Taliban-authored content and messages by retweeting their content nearly one million times.[24]

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[20] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. Education for Justice. University Module Series. Counter-Terrorism. Module 1: Introduction to International Terrorism. Accessed May 2, 2023. https://www.unodc.org/documents/e4j/18-04932_CT_Mod_01_ebook_FINALpdf.pdf.

[21] Schirch, Lisa. "Ecology of Violent Extremism." In Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics, edited by William R. Thompson. Chapter 26. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.

[22] Yousafzai, Zafar Iqbal. "The Taliban's Use of Twitter as a Tool to Spread their Voice." GNET Research, October 12, 2022. https://gnet-research.org/2022/10/12/the-talibans-use-of-twitter-as-a-tool-to-spread-their-voice/.

[23] ibid

[24]ibid

During our collaboration with Facebook, we discovered hundreds of fake accounts created daily to bolster the Taliban's social media network. These newly created accounts actively countered anti-Taliban narratives and instilled fear among the Afghan public to establish the Taliban's reputation as a powerful and brutal force that was soon to take over their country.[25] They actively and consistently reported and shared updates on the Taliban's successes and progress in eventually taking over one district after another and provinces. They highlighted the Afghan government's failures, praising their progress and portraying themselves as a credible political entity.

Narratives, accounts analysed

The content presented below has been sourced, translated, and organised from the report and my work for the local NGO in partnership with Facebook, where I worked with a team of other specialists to identify and report content that glorified violence and propagated terror, ensuring that such accounts were flagged and subsequently taken down by Facebook. It is important to note that most of those accounts we flagged are currently unavailable on Facebook as the platform has removed them.

The following four Taliban-associated accounts on Facebook and a report on the Taliban's use of Twitter were analysed to observe their strategies.

1. In one account, videos showing the Afghan government's defeat in Kunduz were frequently shared, asserting that only the Taliban and their version of Islam could protect the Afghan people. These videos asserted that the Afghan government officials were corrupt, infidels, and incompetent in governing and protecting them. This account also distributed posts detailing the Taliban's victories in other parts of the country, alongside a Taliban statement urging the Kabul Administration to surrender to "the Mujahidin of the Islamic Emirates." The propaganda aimed to inflict fear and convince the audience that the government was about to be overthrown and that the Taliban's victory was imminent.

2. Another account disseminated videos showcasing the surrender of the Afghan army to the Taliban during the fall of the province of Badakhshan, illustrating the military's submission to the Taliban's authority. Additionally, this account shared a video of a group of people, supposedly "civilians," warmly welcoming the Taliban after their takeover of Takhar. The intention behind these videos was twofold. First, these videos conveyed a message to the public and the international community that the Taliban enjoyed widespread support. Second, the videos encouraged others to rally behind the Taliban by leveraging the psychological phenomenon known as the cascade effect, where people tend to conform to the actions of others due to a perceived social consensus.

3. Yet another account, identified by a Taliban white flag on its profile picture, engaged in commenting under posts that both supported and opposed the Taliban. This

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[25] ibid

account employed a repetitive strategy, literally copying and pasting the same comment multiple times on at least six distinct news agency and government official accounts and pages on Facebook. It appeared as if the content was handed to him and others to spread. The content of these narratives stressed that the Taliban were purifying Afghanistan of infidels and restoring Islam. The post noted the Taliban's progress in taking over Afghan districts and the Afghan military's defecting or surrendering to the Taliban. The comments were targeted at posts critical of the Taliban or highlighted instances where the Afghan government had reclaimed control of districts previously held by the Taliban.

4. Another account posted a video in which a person is seen kissing the hand of a Taliban commander following the Taliban's successful takeover of Nimroz Province. The accompanying caption described it as the most remarkable moment of the day, mentioning that the Taliban had shed blood, given their lives, and worked hard to strive for the country's independence from the "West/infidels'' in the name of Islam. The caption further emphasised that their dedication to Jihad deserved recognition, appreciation, and respect.

All of these accounts were analysed and found to be engaging with Taliban or pro-Taliban posts by liking and commenting to amplify the message they wanted to convey.[26] They actively countered anti-Taliban narratives by using religious grounds to dismiss them, spreading fear and threatening that the "Islam's/Taliban's" enemies would soon be defeated.[27] The Taliban employed these strategies to control the narrative about themselves, promote their ideology, and reinforce their power dynamics within Afghanistan. Their social media presence was highly effective, generating four times more engagement than 18 mainstream Afghan news organisations combined.[28]

The Taliban's success in reaching millions of people was primarily due to the size of their network and the engagement rate of their followers, which played a crucial role in determining the reach and impact of their posts, especially on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. This implies that the Taliban's strategic utilisation of social media as part of their military operation enabled them to expand their reach and influence the narrative. It additionally provided them with a direct channel to engage with the public, portraying themselves as a credible political entity and potentially mobilising supporters, something they did not have before.[29]

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[26] ibid

[27] ibid

[28] Courchesne, Laura, Bahar Rasikh, Brian McQuinn, and Cody Buntain. "Powered by Twitter? The Taliban's Takeover of Afghanistan." ESOC Working Paper No. 30, June 2022. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1GUN8YZUKOi1Lb_hkcRi_OvWRi8DQdq1W/view.

[29] Lamensch, Marie. "The Fall of Kabul: When Platforms Enable Propaganda." Centre for International Governance Innovation. August 27, 2021. https://www.cigionline.org/articles/the-fall-of-kabul-when-platforms-enable-propaganda/.

The role of fearmongering and intimidation

The Taliban demonstrated that they could display violent power to intimidate the opposing side, making others feel small and fearful and ultimately leading others to submit to their authority.[30] Not content to merely update the public on their takeover, the Taliban also disseminated shocking, gruesome, violent images and videos of their violent executions and torture of the Afghan national army and military, highlighting their own power and the weakness of their opponents. Their propaganda portrayed themselves as an invincible and merciless force, justifying their brutality by claiming to serve a higher purpose – the installation of Islamic rule in Afghanistan. Using purification narratives[31], they condemned the previous government as 'puppets of the West' and infidels that needed to be toppled. The Taliban used fear as a powerful weapon to bring the public and the military under their submission. With their strategic use of social media, they spread images and videos that portrayed their fighters as heroic figures and glorified their actions, fueling their propaganda machine with disinformation and violent content. In their pursuit of power, the Taliban aimed to demonstrate their strength and a narrative of invincibility, unforgiving, and brutality that made them seem too strong to be defeated.

The government attempted to counter the Taliban's claim of taking control of districts and provinces, because it had weakened the morale of the military to fight them back, by posting the successful operations of taking back the districts and provinces from the Taliban and sometimes calling them out on their lies.[32] The Taliban accounts actively commented on these posts, using violent videos and content. One video repeatedly shared on Facebook exhibited the Taliban's takeover of a police station where four officers, still alive, were ordered to surrender. The officers emerged, hands raised, crying, and submitted to the Taliban. The Taliban approached and executed all four officers with shots to their foreheads. The captions used in the propaganda were meant to convey that the officers deserved to die because they worked for the government. Those comments got more engagement than the post itself.

Social media algorithm's role in amplifying extremist content

It is no accident that Facebook and Twitter's algorithms amplified the Taliban's posts. Social media algorithms are designed to prioritise content likely to trigger an emotional response, such as anger, fear, or excitement.[33] Social media algorithms are designed to show users

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[30] Kalyvas, Stathis N. The Logic of Violence in Civil War (Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics) Illustrated Edition. Chapter 5. Cambridge University Press, 2006.

[31] A strategy or ideology aimed to create a society that adheres strictly to one extremist group's radical beliefs and principles. This agenda often involves purging or eliminating individuals or groups deemed as impure, heretical, or undesirable.

[32] Courchesne, Laura, Bahar Rasikh, Brian McQuinn, and Cody Buntain. "Powered by Twitter? The Taliban's Takeover of Afghanistan." ESOC Working Paper No. 30, June 2022. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1GUN8YZUKOi1Lb_hkcRi_OvWRi8DQdq1W/view.

[33] Munn, Luke. "Angry by design: toxic communication and technical architectures." Nature Humanities and Social Sciences Communications 7, no. 1 (2020): 1-8. Published July 30, 2020. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41599-020-00550-7.

content they are most likely to engage with.[34] This can make people more likely to engage with the content and can lead to more extreme views.[35] In response to the spread of fear and misinformation about the Taliban's wins, news agencies, government officials, and the public reshared the violent videos of the Taliban's battle operations, torturing and violently executing the Afghan military to advocate against the Taliban. While attempting to highlight these injustices, the reposting of the Taliban content, unfortunately, spread the videos so that they reached more people, even if the intent of the reposted message was to denounce the violence. It is because social media's algorithms have made it easier to spread information to manipulate the public and gain control of information.[36]

The impact of the propaganda/fearmongering on the domestic public and military

The impact of propaganda on the domestic public was significant, as the phrase "The Taliban are coming" echoed everywhere – on the streets, in workplaces and schools, and in every social interaction.[37] Fear had taken hold of the population, as they had been convinced by Taliban propaganda and influenced by the glorification of violence and information manipulation. They were successfully manipulated by the Taliban, leading them to accept and internalise the notion that their government was weak and incapable of ensuring their protection from the Taliban.

The Taliban's use of gruesome images and videos to incite fear and terrorise the public successfully seemed to change the loyalty of some Afghans. For some, the propaganda they viewed on social media seemed to shift their support away from the government. The Taliban's exaggerated claims of progress in taking over districts and provinces further contributed to the sense of defeat among the people, who had lost faith in the government's ability to resist the Taliban's advance.[38] This perception of weakness was amplified by portraying the Afghan military's failure, weakness, and submission to the Taliban and the government's apparent inability to counter these narratives. This contributed to the sense of defeat among the people; they began preparing for survival or planning their escape before the Taliban took over rather than planning or preparing to resist.[39]

This response is not surprising, as studies have shown that fear and the use of violence can coerce people into maximising their survival and submitting to the side that appears more powerful. A study about the logic of violence by Stathis Kalyvas explains how when one side (the Taliban) credibly signals that they will win, the public shifts their support away from the opposition (the Afghan government) towards neutrality or the Taliban.[40] People make

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[34] Barnhart, Brent. "Everything you need to know about social media algorithms." Written by Brent Barnhart. Sprout Social. March 26, 2021. https://sproutsocial.com/insights/social-media-algorithms/.

[35] ibid

[36] Maria Rasa speech on the use of Facebook and disinformation in Notre Dame

[37] My experience as a local living and witnessing the context and my recent conversation with four locals to evaluate Taliban's use of social media before the Fall of Afghanistan's previous government

[38] ibid

[39] ibid

[40] Kalyvas, Stathis N. The Logic of Violence in Civil War (Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics) Illustrated Edition. Chapter 5. Cambridge University Press, 2006.

decisions based on false propaganda portraying the power of an armed group like the Taliban. Out of fear, some people may change loyalties to side with the presumed victor, even if the armed group is exaggerating its power. Public collaboration is tacit, and some are persuaded to join for survival and protection from the presumed victor.[41] People's change of loyalty to neutrality or the other side is not permanent, and their position may change once the powerful side no longer controls the region.[42]

Twitter and Taliban Governance Post 2021

Following their takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021, the Taliban have adopted a new approach, utilising social media platforms such as Twitter as a tool for governance. The narratives and content shared by the Taliban on social media since then present a stark contrast to their brutal, terrorising, and oppressive policies on the ground.[43] They have been actively reporting (only) on their progress in creating a fake sense of security, their attempt to work on economic development, and capture a few thieves while simultaneously showing themselves as the better alternative regime compared to the previous government.[44] The Taliban's content consistently presents reminders to the public of the success of their Emirates agenda, constantly praising themselves for winning the country's independence and protecting Islam.[45]

Several key Taliban supporters and officials obtained blue ticks on Twitter, signaling that they are "verified users" in an effort to present themselves as credible and relevant accounts of public interest.[46] Half a dozen Taliban officials hold almost 1 million followers.[47] A comprehensive report analysing the Taliban's presence on Twitter revealed that by May 8 2022, their content had reached an audience of over 3.3 million accounts. Furthermore, a network of over 126,000 Twitter accounts either directly shared Taliban content or posted content that was subsequently disseminated by the Taliban's primary network.[48] According to a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, the Taliban responds to events on social media platforms faster and more actively than the Afghan government

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[41] ibid

[42] ibid

[43] Ghaffary, Shirin. "How Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are handling the Taliban. The world might accept the Taliban as a legitimate government. Will social media companies?" Vox, August 18, 2021. https://www.vox.com/recode/22630869/facebook-youtube-twitter-taliban-ban-social-media-afghanistan.

[44] ibid

[45] ibid

[46] "Taliban Start Buying Blue Ticks on Twitter." BBC News, 16 January 2022, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-64294613.

[47] Thorbecke, Catherine. "How the Taliban uses social media to seek legitimacy in the West, sow chaos at home." ABC News, August 19, 2021. https://abcnews.go.com/Technology/taliban-social-media-seek-legitimacy-west-sow-chaos/story?id=79500632.

[48] Courchesne, Laura, Bahar Rasikh, Brian McQuinn, and Cody Buntain. "Powered by Twitter? The Taliban's Takeover of Afghanistan." ESOC Working Paper No. 30, June 2022. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1GUN8YZUKOi1Lb_hkcRi_OvWRi8DQdq1W/view.

did.[49] Platforms like WhatsApp have been employed to offer services to citizens.[50] At the same time, Twitter is utilised for communicating with the international community through issuing press statements in English, showcasing their consistent global engagement, at least with a few countries such as Pakistan, Qatar, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and China to push for recognition of their regime by the UN. This paradoxical approach is part of a sophisticated social media strategy aimed at deceiving the West and seeking international legitimacy while suppressing resistance and maintaining their grip on power.

Portraying the Taliban as the champion of Afghanistan's independence

The Taliban's messaging regarding the Doha agreement serves a dual purpose. Domestically, the Taliban are representing and promoting the agreement with the narrative that they took back Afghanistan and achieved independence from Western infidels and a so-called puppet Afghan government backed by the West. Simultaneously, they are conveying a message to regional powers and the international community, particularly the United States, that they are committed to fulfilling the promises outlined in the Doha agreement.

In a tweet, Suhail Shaheen, the Taliban spokesperson and head of the Political Office in Doha, said: "Today (the 10th of the month Hot) is a proud day in Afghanistan's history. On this day, the Doha agreement was signed after successful negotiations. I want to personally congratulate the leaders, mujahids (foot soldiers), members, and the Afghan public. On this day, the occupiers accepted the independence of Afghanistan and said they would leave the country in 14 months."[51]

Suhail Shaheen. محمد سهيل شاهين
@suhailshaheen1   ...

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نن د حوت لسمه د افغانستان په تاریخ کې ویاړمنه ورځ ده.پدې ورځ د کامیابو مذاکراتو وروسته ددوحي توافقنامه لاسلیک شوه.   زه له خپله طرفه، داسلامي امارت مشرتابه، مجاهدینو، اعضاوو او افغان ولس ته مبارکي وایم.پدې ورځ ټولو یرغلګرو د افغانستان استقلال ومانه او ویی ویل ۱۴ میاشتوکي وزو.

2:46 AM · Mar 1, 2023 · **25.3K** Views

This tweet portrays the Taliban as champions who fought for their country's independence. It aims to justify their acts of terror, torture, killings, bombings, and executions of Afghan civilians to demonstrate that the government was illegitimate and unable to protect its citizens. While this was the Taliban's strategy to establish their dominance and become the

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[49] Ghaffary, Shirin. "How Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are handling the Taliban. The world might accept the Taliban as a legitimate government. Will social media companies?" Vox, August 18, 2021. https://www.vox.com/recode/22630869/facebook-youtube-twitter-taliban-ban-social-media-afghanistan.

[50] ibid

[51] Suhail Shaheen's Twitter Account, tweet posted on March 1, 2023

ultimate ruling power, they now justify their violent acts, targeting civilians and the destruction of schools, mosques, hospitals, bridges, and other infrastructure, as necessary to achieve Afghanistan's independence. This messaging misleads readers about the true nature of the war and convinces them to appreciate, thank, and celebrate the Taliban for securing independence from the West, positioning the Taliban as victors who defeated Western forces.[52] It aims to create an image of the Taliban as powerful and great in the eyes of those who may not be politically well-informed.

In another tweet, Abdul Qahar Balkhi, the spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, retweeted by Suhail Shaheen, states: "The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan has proven to the world and regional actors that, due to having a competent and organised military force, we have not allowed anyone to use Afghanistan to pose security threats against the world. It is important to note that Afghanistan's security is better now than many countries in the world."[53]

Abdul Qahar Balkhi
@QaharBalkhi   ...

د افغانستان اسلامي امارت د سيمي او نړۍ هېوادونو ته په عمل کي ثابته کړي چي د منظمو او مجربو امنيتي ځواکونو پر مټ یي هیچاته اجازه نه ده ورکړي چي د افغانستان خاوره د چا پر ضد وکاروي. د يادولو ده چي د افغانستان امنيت اوس د نړۍ تر ډېرو هېوادو بنه دی.

Translate Tweet

5:52 AM · Feb 19, 2023 · **16.6K** Views

This tweet references the first part of the Doha Agreement that requires the Taliban to "guarantee to prevent the use of Afghan soil by any international terrorist groups or individuals against the security of the United States and its allies."[54] Through the message, the Taliban are communicating with the US and its allies by ensuring their commitment to fulfilling their side of the deal. However, it also showcases the Taliban regime's progress in enhancing security compared to the previous government.

Additionally, it aims to showcase their power by portraying their radical military force as competent and well-organised.

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[52] ibid

[53] Suhail Shaheen's Twitter Account, tweet posed on February 19, 2023

[54] "Joint Declaration between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States of America for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan." *U.S. Department of State*.Accessed May 14, 2023. https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/02.29.20-US-Afghanistan-Joint-Declaration.pdf.

Taliban Public Updates

The Taliban actively and consistently provides updates to the public and the international community about the supposed progress made by their regime despite the lack of verifiable evidence to support these claims.


Keeping the public informed about their perceived progress serves multiple purposes for the Taliban. Firstly, it helps shape a positive perception of their governance and portrays themselves as effective and capable. By highlighting areas where they claim to have made improvements, they seek to gain public support and build legitimacy for their rule. Secondly, by providing updates, the Taliban strategically suppresses resistance from the public and

attends to the grievances of individuals who have suffered losses, both in terms of the lives of their loved ones and the physical, material, and psychological harm inflicted during the war by the Taliban. This is a way to appease and pacify segments of the population that may harbor animosity toward the Taliban. It is a calculated effort to mitigate dissent and potential opposition.[55]

Suppressing Resistance

In a tweet, Suhail Shaheen quotes Mohammad Yaqobl Mujahid, who states: "Our enemies (anti-Taliban resistance groups and segments of the Afghan public) are engaged in a constant effort to create division between the public and the regime. These opponents are resorting to lies and propaganda to deceive the public. The public should try not to be deceived by this propaganda because the enemies of Afghanistan do not desire freedom, independence, unity, progress, or peace for the country."[56]
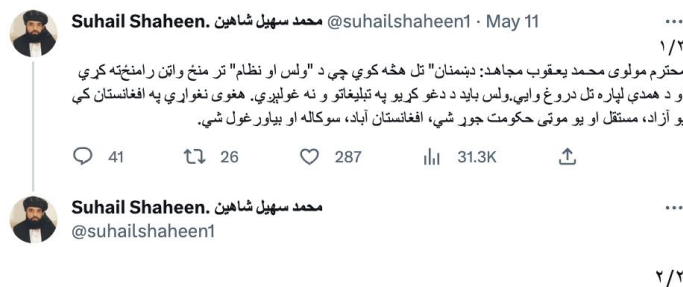
The second part of the tweet urges the public to progress and compete with the world, with a link to an interview with one of their members discussing their previous leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar. This message aims to discredit anti-Taliban content and resistance by labeling them as enemies of the country who are intentionally portraying the regime in a negative light. The tweet attempts to dismiss any criticism or wrongdoing associated with

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[55] ibid

[56] Suhail Shaheen's Twitter Account, tweet posted on May 12, 2023

the Taliban's government while simultaneously suppressing journalists and individuals who actively expose their human rights violations on the ground.

The Taliban's regional network and their efforts to get the UN's recognition

The Taliban are engaging and meeting with key countries, including Pakistan, Qatar, Norway, Uzbekistan, and China, to seek recognition of their regime by the United Nations. The Taliban's ability to travel to these countries and engage in meetings with a warm reception may suggest their dependence on these countries and these countries' support for the Taliban. Their messages on Twitter reveal their intention to consolidate power and establish themselves as legitimate authorities. Their messages aim to portray that the Taliban are no longer isolated and that they are trying to make the UN recognise their regime as a legitimate government. The messaging is intended to encourage countries sympathetic to their cause to support them and assist them in gaining resources, aid, and investment for the functioning of their regime. By demonstrating their willingness to engage with other nations, the Taliban aims to encourage opposition from countries that hesitate to recognise their regime.

Conclusion

Social media has become instrumental in shaping the course of peace and conflict dynamics. While the field of peacebuilding has long recognised the online threats posed to the prospects of peace, including the presence of violent extremist and terrorist-proscribed groups online, online radicalisation, online recruiting, and the spread of misinformation and disinformation through social media platforms, this research seeks to build on the existing knowledge and contribute to the field by identifying the implications of these challenges, particularly for Afghanistan. Specifically, the study aims to indicate the implications of violent extremist groups and terrorist-proscribed groups exploiting social media platforms

to expand the reach of terror, garner support, manipulate public opinion, shape perceptions, alter loyalties, and suppress resistance, and how social media platforms are a fertile grounds for these groups to bring the battlegrounds online and directly engage civilians.

Based on a comprehensive analysis, which incorporated first-hand experiences of locals, documentation, and the examination of content on Facebook, along with an in-depth study of the Taliban's social media posts, tweets, and engagement on platforms like Twitter and Facebook, it can be concluded that Taliban's strategic use of social media, their propaganda campaign on Twitter and Facebook has significantly helped the success of their military campaign and to take over the country, and establish and sustain their autocratic, repressive rule. The finding of this study indicate that the Taliban's weaponisation of violent content and propaganda, coupled with fearmongering tactics, resulted in weakening morale among the public and the military fighting the Taliban and suppressing resistance during the Taliban's military campaign to take over Afghanistan. Social media's algorithm designed to prioritise content likely to trigger an emotional response, such as anger, fear, or excitement, further amplified the reach of their terror, allowing them to present themselves as a preferable alternative despite their online terrorising and helped these groups achieve their agendas. The fear-mongering strategy has continued to be true now under their rule, as their repressive policies and the manipulative strategy of communicating the progress of their regime and them as the legitimate role have resulted in public allegiance shifts and discouraged and suppressed resistance. However, the Taliban have changed their PR strategy on social media after they took over, and the narratives and content shared by the Taliban on social media since then present a stark contrast to their brutal, terrorising, and oppressive policies on the ground, indicate how social media could help their rule to continue practicing their terror tactics in the form of a regime, and manipulate and divert the attention of the public and international community from their oppressive and brutal policies and torture of public on the ground.

This paper argues for heightened vigilance and proactive and more effective measures to counter misinformation, the glorification of violence, and online radicalisation to safeguard the integrity of information dissemination, prospects for societal well-being, and positive peace. It calls for effective awareness-raising programs to help social media users be vigilant against disinformation, radicalisation, and mobilisation by violent extremist groups using manipulated content. While users must remain mindful of the impact of their consumption of such content, the primary responsibility of monitoring and regulating such content should fall on social media platforms themselves. Social media companies that profit from the violent and engaging content often posted by extremist groups must be held accountable. Pressure should be applied to these companies to develop sophisticated systems that promptly remove misinformation, content glorifying violence, and content promoting radicalisation and intolerance. Access to social media spaces should be denied to groups promoting violence and intolerance altogether. This goal can be further achieved by incentivising users to report such content and holding companies accountable through better legislation. However, it is also important to consider precautions to ensure that policies intended for these purposes are not misused for surveillance, silencing civil society, closing civic spaces, or suppressing political opponents by states in other contexts.

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