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DEEP INTERNALIZATION- MEDIA AND PUBLIC SPHERES IN FRAGILE STATES: THE CASE OF AFGHANISTAN

**The Taliban's Propaganda: Narratives and
targeted audience**

Essay

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INTRODUCTION

This essay, written as a part of the seminar “deep Internationalization- Media and public spheres in fragile states: The case of Afghanistan”, explores the propaganda strategies employed by the Taliban. In August 2021, the US American military announced their withdrawal from Afghanistan which marked the end of the longest overseas conflict in American history (Shaik, 2024, p. 165). Consequently, the Taliban seized Kabul, the country’s capital, finalizing their takeover of Afghanistan (Yousaf & Jabarkhail, 2022, p. 117). Now, both, domestic and international observers, are questioning how Afghanistan will progress under the newly established care-taker government (Yousaf & Jabarkhail, 2022, p. 117). The so-called “Taliban 2.0” make an effort to distinguish themselves from the old Taliban governance, which lasted from 1996 to the end of 2001 (Foxley, 2007, p. 4). Even though, the Taliban show a “new” side to their political messaging and present themselves as more liberal, their very narrow interpretation of Islam leads to ultra-conservative laws and a governance which is in fact ideologically unchanged to the earlier Taliban regime (Wani, 2024, S. 2).

What has indeed changed, is their willingness to use the media to spread their ideas (Brooking, 2021). In promoting their message that they are in control of the country, the Taliban have been successful, both domestic and international (Johnson, 2013, p. 23). The strategic communication of the Taliban goes along with Lasswell’s (1927) definition of propaganda as being “the management of attitudes by the manipulation of significant symbols” (p. 627). In periods of war, propaganda is not an uncommon tool to misguide and influence the public (Bahar, 2022, p. 9). Before their takeover, the Afghan government and the Taliban stood in a constant battle against each other, a situation in which media can play a crucial role in gaining the peoples “hearts and minds” (Foxley, 2007, p. 2). Therefore, the information landscape in Afghanistan can be considered as even more contested than the battlefield itself, since the public discourse is characterized by opposing narratives (International Crisis Group, 2022, p. 4). Without fighting the U.S. military anymore, the Taliban built up an authoritarian regime in Afghanistan, a form of government, which is known for its heavy use of propaganda (Rosenfeld & Wallace, 2024, p. 15.3). Especially in a setting where the combatants are not accountable, the risk of spreading propaganda and disinformation is significant (Bahar, 2022, p. 10). Right now, the Taliban speak directly to the population and are not in need for an intermediary, who could censor or edit their messages (Johnson, DuPee & Shaaker, 2018b, p. 105). In addition, due to the predominance of illiteracy, Afghanistan has one of the lowest literacy rates worldwide, the population seem even more vulnerable to the effects of propaganda (Johnson et al., 2018b, p. 105; Bahar, 2022, p. 10).

The points mentioned above make it highly necessary to explore the Taliban's propaganda. The essay will focus the Taliban's propaganda shortly before the takeover in Kabul as well as on their communication strategies afterwards. The essay aims to analyze the different narratives and targeted audiences, since the Taliban are tailoring their messages individually to their recipients, using a wide range of dissemination techniques (Johnson, DuPee & Shaaker, 2018a, S.21). Not only the messages, but also the transmitting medium and the language are carefully selected and therefore will also be mentioned in this essay (Bockstette, 2009, p. 18).

MAIN PART

Given the fact, that the Taliban themselves do not have a strict agenda they are following, there is not only one propaganda strategy they stick to (Foxley, 2007, p. 3). Instead of claiming that there is one ultimate strategy this essay rather shows tendencies which narratives are communicated to whom, pursuing which communication goals. In general, the Taliban's range of narratives is limited whereas they utilize numerous information tools, effectively employing modern technologies but also traditional media to disseminate their objectives (Johnson et al., 2018b, p. 104).

The Taliban's Caretaker-Setup

The Taliban refer to themselves as the "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan", considering themselves as protectors of Islam and therefore the only legitimate authority capable of enforcing social justice through Sharia's law (Johnson et al., 2018a, p. 17). In the following part, the religious and cultural narratives as justification for their governance will be mentioned.

Religious justification

In this religion-based narrative the Taliban present themselves as "national heroes", who are willing to sacrifice everything for Allah and have the duty to protect the Islam and the religious community (Johnson et al., 2018a, p. 17). The overarching narrative "Islam will take care of everyone" is one of the main identities the Taliban target (Johnson et al., 2018a, p. 22). The Taliban use this utopian image of an Islamic state as legitimacy for their violent actioning (Bockstette, 2009, p. 8). When referring to a religious justification, the main targeted group is the local, regional, national and global community of Muslims, the *Ummah*, which is the Arabic word to describe the "Community of Believers" (Bockstette, 2009, p. 19). The narrative of martyrdom is a powerful mobilization tool, to recruit suicide bombers (Johnson et al., 2018a, p.26). Nevertheless, it would be a misleading perception, that the Taliban only refer to a small group of radicalized jihadists, they rather address the majority of the Muslim public to eventually become *Ummah* insiders (Bockstette, 2009, p. 19).

Cultural justification

Besides the Islamic theme, the Taliban also focus on cultural and nationalistic themes (Johnson et al., 2018a, p. 16). Afghanistan holds a long history of geopolitical struggles for power, including invasions, interventions and crises (Wani, 2024, p. 2). When resisting the Soviets in the mid-1980s, Afghan guerillas learned to promote themselves through media which the Taliban

adopted (Foxley, 2007, p. 8). Due to their history, it can be said that the motive of independence and resistance plays a crucial role in the Afghan society (Johnson et al., 2018a, S. 29). By focusing on the history and using the collective memory of Afghans, the Taliban succeed in promoting the narrative of victimization by foreign occupiers (Johnson et al., 2018a, p. 30). Before their takeover in 2021 the Taliban painted a picture of themselves as selfless fighters against the Afghan government, being only “a puppet of the U.S. forces” (Johnson, DuPee & Shaaker, 2018c, p. 271). Many operations of the Taliban were in ungoverned places, where independence from the USA was highly celebrated (Johnson et al., 2018a, p. 104). An example for the propaganda against the “foreign invaders” at time is a leaflet with a blurry picture that highly suggested that an American soldier is somehow touching an Afghan woman (Johnson et al., 2018a, p. 29). By provoking anger and fear and referring to cultural pride, this was a powerful recruiting tool (Johnson et al., 2018a, p. 29). When addressing their own fighters as recipients, the Taliban are able to radicalize them with extremist propaganda, instilling the belief that any relaxation of their stance would reduce them to a puppet state and strip away their independence (Watkins, 2023).

Targeted Audience: Locals and Pashtuns

With a strong nationalist identity, the Taliban presence rules especially in rural areas of Afghanistan (Johnson et al., 2018a, p. 17). The most targeted audience are the Pashtuns in Afghanistan and 40 million supportive Pashtuns in Pakistan (Buoncompagni, 2021, p. 75). The strategy of redefining the movement's identity as being rooted in Afghan culture and focusing on group identity earned them crucial support from influential local figures, including *Mullahs* and community elders (Mehran, 2022, p. 4). In rural settings and sometimes even in urban areas, *Mullahs* hold an almost exclusive authority, guiding people on moral or ethical issues and shaping the peoples every-day-life (Johnson et al., 2018a, p. 25). Given the circumstance of a low literacy rate, face-to-face-interactions are still some of the most important propaganda techniques, therefore the *Mullahs* play a prominent role (Johnson et al., 2018c, p. 269). By influencing them and paying money to previously unpaid *Mullahs*, the Taliban are using that hierarchy to spread their messages effectively (Shaik, 2024, p. 173). The fact that many fighters are locals themselves and can easily adapt to the local language and culture works in favor for the Taliban and makes them seem more reliable to the recipients (Foxley, 2007, p. 10). An example of their propaganda strategy being highly tailored to their audience is the use of a specific rhetoric: When addressing Pashtuns, the Taliban make use of the *Pashtunwali* code of honor, which includes five major facets: *Nang* (honor), *Badal* (revenge), *Melmastia*

(hospitality), *Nanawatay* (to seek forgiveness) and *Hamsaya* (“one who shares the same shadow) (Afsar, Samples & Wood, 2008, p. 61).

In order to spread their messages to the local audience effectively, the Taliban make use of a wide variety of channels, using the internet, newspapers, radio, magazines, TV, CDs and DVDs (Shaik, 2024, p. 175). The landscape of the common media like the internet, radio, TV and newspaper would be worth a whole essay by itself and there is a variety of papers exploring the landscape of mass media in Afghanistan (Khalvatgar, 2019; Sidiq, 2022). Instead, this essay focuses on more uncommon propaganda tools the Taliban are using to get in touch with the Afghans on a local level, since one of their communication strengths is to rely on more traditional tools like *taranas* (chants), *shabnamah* (night letters), poems and other culturally significant artifacts (Johnson et al., 2018a, p. 15). The poetic and narrative form of *taranas* is familiar to locals, the topics are often highly symbolic, addressing emotions such as sorrow, desperation, hope and pride and therefore resonate deeply with the Afghan community, especially the Pashtuns (Johnson et al., 2018a, p. 24). Night letters are an effective way of communication where access to other media is limited, the content of the leaflets or letters, which are often posted on walls or doors, are usually warnings or instruction (Foxley, 2007, p. 9). The themes are often formulated very directly, giving explicit exhortations to stop sending children to schools, to avoid Jewish or Christian coworkers and threatening with punishments to those who are not obedient to the Taliban (Foxley, 2007, p. 9). Another way to demonstrate power in rural areas in both, Afghanistan and Pakistan, are graffities featuring threatening messages and expressions of allegiance to Taliban leaders and commanders (Johnson et al., 2018b, p. 103). The high illiteracy rate in Afghanistan benefits the Taliban, as it allows them to effectively use other media such as the internet to communicate their message directly to the population without risk of alteration or censorship (Johnson et al., 2018b, p. 105). In Afghanistan the religiously justified totalitarianism of the Taliban endangers both individual and collective well-being combined with a restricted access to healthcare, food and income it leads to a severe humanitarian crisis (Wani, 2024, p. 13).

The Taliban’s Propaganda goes online

Whereas the “old Taliban” restricted the Internet, the Taliban now use it as a powerful tool to spread their propaganda (Buoncompagni, 2021, p. 71). The Social Media ecosystem has rapidly changed and extended during the last years (Basit, 2023, p. 9). All social media platforms are theoretically free accessible for Afghans and the number of social media users is increasing

(Bahar, 2022, p. 4-5). Especially Facebook and Twitter are extensively used and, in some cases, they completely replace mainstream media like print and radio (Khalvatgar, 2019, p. 7).

For terrorists, the internet is an extremely powerful tool to spread propaganda, since it ensures them a favorable communication asymmetry which can, for instance, compensate a lack of military power (Bockstette, 2009, p. 1). Furthermore, the costs for spreading information can be cheaper compared to mass media, a fact that works in favor for the Taliban in terms of their limited resources (Bahar, 2022, p. 3). Consequently, it is no surprise Jihadists have become very adept at exploiting and using these attributes of the internet (Bockstette, 2009, p. 18). The Taliban appear very flexible and interested in extending their social media presence (Johnson et al., 2018b, p. 89). With years of putting effort behind that, the Taliban now became very capable in using the internet to spread their narratives effectively through propaganda and manipulation (Winter, Alrhoun & Sayed, 2021; Yousaf & Jabarkhail, 2022, p. 119). Neither the internet nor its role as the “backbone of terrorist communities” (Bockstette, 2009, p. 22) has not been researched enough yet, nor have the dynamics of social media in Afghanistan been put in context sufficiently (Bahar, 2022, p. 2).

Whereas the Taliban’s main goal of shaping the public opinion by dominating the information landscape online and flooding the internet with their own propaganda did not change before and after 2021, the addressed topics did (Buoncompagni, p. 73; Khalvatgar, 2019, p. 7). Before their takeover the Taliban often used Twitter and Facebook actively to inform the public about their attacks and military successions (Bahar, 2022, p. 5). In order to amplify their narratives and create an image of inevitability they strategically used spam on Twitter (Brooking, 2021). Without having restrictions set on their shared information, the Taliban had the opportunity spreading misinformation which did not match with the content of mainstream media (Bahar, 2022, p. 8). On their official website called *Alemarah* there was an extra section about numbers of deaths in U.S. and NATO interventions promoting the image of victimization (Johnson et al., 2018a, p. 31). By the end of their insurgency, the Taliban’s propaganda strategies had become remarkably advanced (Shaik, 2024, p. 175). Since their takeover, the online presence of the Taliban increased due to many new accounts of Taliban-supporters popping up, knowing exactly which content they can post without getting blocked or censored (Mehran, 2022, p. 6). If accounts still get blocked, it does not take long that a new account shows up, especially on Twitter (Buoncompagni, 2021, p. 73). Since 2011 the Taliban also run an official account named after their spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid, posting frequently (Bahar, 2022, p. 5). In contrast

people who were sympathizers of the previous government or who were cooperating with the U.S. military deleted their profiles on social media (Buoncompagni, 2021, p. 72). Due to its anonymity for many Afghans the internet is the only way to criticize the Taliban (Mehran, 2022, p. 7). For national and international audience, the website *Alemarah* is still the main source of information operation and the Taliban want to get attention from a broad audience. In order to reach as many people as possible, the website is loaded with different themes, such as religious, historical, cultural and political content (Johnson et al., 2018b, p. 85). Furthermore, different sections are translated in a total of five languages: Pashto, Dari, Urdu, Arabic and English (Johnson et al., 2018b, p. 85). The targeted audience of the sections written in Arabic are neighboring countries such as Pakistan, Iran and Tajikistan (Johnson et al., 2018b, p. 86). To send their messages to the Western world, the English language is a universal and powerful communication tool (Johnson et al., 2018b, p. 88). Even though, the number of English interviews is not that significant, the Taliban leadership interviews with international media show their willingness to spread their messages widely (Yousaf & Jabarkhail, 2022, p. 119). Some interviews with the Taliban's spokesmen additionally were published in various Al-Qaeda media forums, again to reach out to the largest possible audience (Shaik, 2024, p. 176).

A new Image: Peaceful Taliban 2.0?

Not everybody in Afghanistan welcomed the Taliban's takeover in 2021, especially urban Afghans who had recently started to experience and enjoy their personal and professional freedoms (Yousaf & Jabarkhail, 2022, p. 118). The themes of their propaganda, when addressed to a more critical audience, are therefore most often based on forgiveness and inclusion (Yousaf & Jabarkhail, 2022, p. 118). Because of their desire for recognition, both national and international, the Taliban put a strong focus in their communication strategy on demonstrating credibility, capability, legitimacy and suitability (Winter et al., 2021). The Taliban are aware of their negative image in western media and therefore avoid showing aggression or violence to the international audience (Buoncompagni, 2021, p. 75). Since the Taliban highly depend on international funding, their main goal besides gaining legitimacy and respect is to earn financial support from the western world (Shaik, 2024, p. 175). Therefore, many promises made by the Taliban regarding human rights are less about being liberal but mainly seek for recognition and a relaxation in economic sanctions they face (Yousaf & Jabarkhail, 2022, p. 126). When communicating to an international audience, the Taliban focus on their perceived strengths and successions, for example presenting themselves as fighters for women rights, layering an overall-hero narrative around themselves (Gabel, 2024, p. 104). Instead of apologies or

explanations the Taliban's communication strategy, when being confronted with accusations of human rights violations, is offensive and contains most often simply denials, claiming the western media would spread disinformation to propagandize against them (Gabel, 2024, p. 104, 106).

A good example for the Taliban's international propaganda are interviews they published right after the takeover of Kabul with local and international journalists, in which they addressed topics such as human rights and the rights of women (Yousaf & Jabarkhail, 2022, p. 19). They also published videos of themselves, visiting women, students, hospitals and even religious minorities in order to support their peaceful and integrative image (Winter et al., 2021). One of their main tools are statements and interviews shared over radio, TV, newspaper and the Internet with Taliban spokesmen, such as Zabiullah Mujahid and Qari Mohammad Yousef Ahmadi (Johnson et al., 2018a, p. 97). It must be mentioned, that the spoken word of integration often does not match with the actual behavior of the Taliban, for example still using torture, extrajudicial killings, arrests of oppositions and severe restrictions on the rights of women and girls (UNAMA, 2022). Right now, women do not have access to education, very limited in taking part of the everyday-life and young girls are prohibited of going to secondary school (UNAMA, 2022).

Is the Taliban's propaganda waterproof?

Even though, the Taliban are advanced at their strategic communication, there are weaknesses which shortly should get pointed out. First of all, the Taliban's explanation is often vague, with the belief in "Allah will provide" their governance is highly Sharia-based (Foxley, 2007, p. 2). When it comes to Afghanistan's political future, they cannot serve with definitive policy guidelines and lack visions (Shaik, 2024, p. 176). An example is their communication when it comes to the rights of women, justifying the major inequality and their hyper-masculine understanding of a society after their takeover with the vague answer to support women's rights under the Sharia law (Yousaf & Jabarkhail, 2022, p. 125). Therefore, the Sharia serves as a generic excuse and a hollow promise when it comes to criticism and accuses against the Taliban. But even when taking the Sharia as justification the storyline is not stringent, since the Sharia actually even advocates for women's active participation in society and their contribution to the nation's progress (Halimi, Sudiman & Hassan, 2022, p. 122). While spreading their messages effective on a local level, the Taliban are significantly weaker when attempting to adapt to the international media system at a professional and strategic level (Johnson et al., 2018c, p. 283).

Additionally, lately internal disagreements within the leadership got public with key leaders openly criticizing the emir's policy directions, leading to speculation about power struggles and political instability (Watkins, 2023). Taliban spokesmen consistently put out contradictory messages and sometimes even completely differently core beliefs of the Taliban narrative on issues which might be attributed to their decentralized structure (Johnson et al., 2018c, p. 283). Besides that, there are many inconsistencies portrayed in the Taliban's words and action, for example giving the image of a liberal Afghanistan inclusive of all the different tribes and ethnicities but acting different in real life (Johnson, 2013, p. 19). An example is their takeover in 2021, where the Taliban showed a peaceful and stable image in the first day, contrasting immense with internationally published footages of protesters being beaten and killed (Buoncompagni, 2021, p. 71). Whereas violence indeed decreased right after the Taliban's takeover, it has started to rise again (International Crisis Group, 2022, p. 25).

Another strategic weakness the Taliban are facing is simply their history (Karzai, 2009, p. 83). The earlier leadership of the Taliban came with brutal measures on the Afghans, spreading a peaceful image is most likely more challenging facing the collective Afghan memory of a draconic Taliban regime (Karzai, 2009, p. 83). The Afghan society is fractured into different tribes and ethnicities; therefore, it is no surprise that the support for the Taliban varies within the country (Foxley, 2007, p. 11). In general, the Taliban lack genuine support in Afghanistan, the initial basis of support is mainly coming from rural Pashtuns in eastern and southern Afghanistan and also in tribal areas of Pakistan (Johnson et al., 2018c, p. 283). Especially in the northern half of Afghanistan opposition groups are most active and violent incidents involving anti-Taliban groups like the NRF or IS-KP have been increasing since the Kabul takeover in 2021 (International Crisis Group, 2022, p. 6). At this point another example for the Taliban's communicative contradictions can be mentioned, denying and downplaying of oppositional movements and security issues, for instance when talking about IS-KP and NRF in order to keep their role as security providers (International Crisis Group, 2022, p. 18).

Instead of cultivating a livable and stable environment for Afghans the Taliban continue to brutally suppress dissent, including detentions and torture (Richer & Ahmadi, 2024). The world view and governance of the Taliban is based on limiting factors such as education, access to media, limited tolerance towards the pluralism of religions and ethnicities and a limited access to other countries (Foxley, 2007, p. 4). Right now, the national media suffer heavy restrictions, either channels got closed or there are strict guidelines of self-censoring measurements

(Mehran, 2022, p. 5). Their regressive policies and efforts to erase the nation's diverse cultural heritage further highlight their commitment to extremism over national unity and progress, making long-term stability unlikely (Richer & Ahmadi, 2024). As an example of the repressive society the situation for women in Afghanistan is representative, facing harsh gender policies and brutal restrictions (Wani, 2024, p. 13). Right now, women are restricted from going to school and working in public spaces, required to wear the burka and in general getting equal treatment denied (Wani, 2024, p. 9). Since inclusion can be seen as a foundation for lasting peace in long-terms, it remains highly questionable that the Taliban founded a sustainable environment (Richer & Ahmadi, 2024).

CONCLUSION

The Taliban have developed a sophisticated propaganda strategy to consolidate their control over Afghanistan and influence both national and international audiences. They use a variety of media to disseminate their messages. They distribute traditional media like leaflets and night letters to target rural regions with limited access to modern media. This approach allows them to provide direct instructions and warnings, often addressing local grievances or cultural issues. Additionally, the Taliban use personal communication methods. In rural areas, where direct interactions remain important, they engage with local leaders, *mullahs*, and elders. In the digital era, the Taliban have significantly expanded their propaganda efforts. They utilize social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter to spread their messages globally, presenting them as a responsible new governance. Their official website, *Alemarah*, is central to this effort, offering content in multiple languages, the multilingual approach helps them reach various audiences, from local Afghan communities to the international public. This strategy leverages the authority of these influential figures to spread their messages, often incorporating culturally relevant symbols and narratives, such as principles from *Pashtunwali*, the traditional code of honor among Pashtuns.

The strengths of the Taliban's propaganda strategy lie in their adaptability and targeted messaging, tailoring messages to various audiences. Their ability to combine traditional methods with modern media allows for effective communication across different platforms. They also leverage deeply rooted cultural and religious themes to appeal to both local and global audiences. However, the Taliban face significant weaknesses. Their propaganda is often marked by contradictions and inconsistencies. Public proclamations of inclusivity and human rights contrast with their actions, such as restrictions on women's rights and suppression of dissent. This discrepancy undermines their credibility. The decentralized nature of their leadership often leads to mixed messages and internal power struggles, further affecting the effectiveness of their propaganda.

Despite their successful strategies in certain areas, they face considerable challenges due to internal contradictions and issues with their international reputation. The essay is facing several limitations due to its limited volume and the provided sources. While focusing on different target groups and the narratives, this essay is not providing a comprehensive overview of the media landscape in Afghanistan. Especially when it comes to mainstream media such as television, radio and newspaper other publications, such as Khalvatgar (2019) give more

comprehensive overviews. For further investigation it is highly recommended to get access to sources written in Pashtu, Dari or other languages in order to get a wider perspective of the propaganda towards national audiences. Another field which should be included when exploring the Taliban's propaganda is the framework and agenda-setting made by the Taliban, since the constructs of framing and propagating are closely connected. Hussaini's and Morris' publication (2020) could be a promising start in order to expand the field of investigation. The fact that the Taliban themselves neither make use of official classifications such as "propaganda" or "media campaign" nor follow strict guidelines regarding their communication strategies makes it more difficult to put their activities in more scientific terms (Foxley, 2007, p. 3). Additionally, writing about Afghanistan is challenging because sources need to be as recent as possible due to the Taliban's return to power in 2021, but finding such up-to-date information is difficult, the constantly evolving media landscape further complicates the search for current sources. Even though, the author put an effort on exploring the effects and impacts of the Taliban's propaganda, due to their restrictions on external access make it hard to obtain insider information about the true sentiments of the Afghan population towards the Taliban. When it comes to the gender policies in Afghanistan the Taliban do not transparently publish their underlying values which makes it hard to research on the narratives regarding women (Gabel, 2024, p. 106). Future research should focus on examining the long-term impacts of the Taliban's propaganda on Afghan society, focusing separately on different groups, and its international perceptions, as well as exploring how emerging technologies and media platforms will shape and influence the dynamics of propaganda in conflict zones. Additionally, further investigations should focus on the concrete impact of propaganda in Afghanistan to be able to derive instructions on how to deal with the Taliban.

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