

In-person Roundtable Discussion Digital Mullahs: Understanding Taliban's Online Strategy & Policy Responses

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Event report
In-person Roundtable discussion “Digital Mullahs: Understanding Taliban’s Online Strategy & Policy Responses”
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LSE, London.

As of May 2022, the content produced by Taliban reached more than 3.3 million accounts. According to a report, there are more than [126,000](#) Twitter accounts that are owned or associated with Taliban. With this amount of outreach, Taliban are clearly exploiting social media to advance their narrative. Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies organised a roundtable discussion titled “Digital Mullahs: Understanding Taliban’s Online Strategy & Policy Responses” on 10th February 2022 at the Old Building, the London School of Economics (LSE), London.



The roundtable was divided into two sessions. The first panel titled “*Taliban’s Digital Warfare: Asymmetric Manipulation; Outsmarting by ‘illiterates’*” was moderated by Lynne O'Donnell, author, journalist and columnist at Foreign Policy. The speakers included Belal Sarwary, an independent journalist, Zia Shahreyar, a senior journalist, BBC Persian, and Shah, a researcher and former official of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. The second panel titled ‘*Digital Oppression: Community & Policy Response*’ was moderated by Katerina Tiliakou, a journalist

at Afghanistan International TV. The panellists for the second session included Anouk Theunissen, Senior Investigator and Reporting Officer at Afghan Witness, Centre for Information Resilience, Tajuddin Sorouch, Senior International Correspondent, Afghanistan International TV, Habib Khan, journalist and founder of Afghan Peace Watch, and Lisa McInerney, independent consultant and violent organisations specialist.

Marika Theros, Senior Fellow at LSE and non-residential senior fellow at South Asia Centre, Atlantic Council, welcomed the participants and shared the ongoing projects particularly the Afghan Research Network (ARN). The project aims to capture learning and strengthening Afghan expertise and building bridges to address fragmentation.



O'Donnell began the first session by sharing that Taliban are much faster than anybody and they often have more information while others are investigating. "Coalition efforts were way behind in information", she added. This reflects that Taliban's communication strategy is way ahead of others. O'Donnell put the question to panellists that since the takeover, is there any change in Taliban's strategy and how does it manifest?

Taliban Media Strategy

Shah added that Taliban were also influenced and impressed by other terrorist organisations. "Success of al-Qaeda in Iraq had also an impact on Taliban that's when they realized and started becoming more active on the digital front; they realized the traditional way won't work", he added. Shah explained and categorised Taliban's strategy in the fifth-generation warfare (5GW)

paradigm, a non-kinetic military action using misinformation, propaganda, and cyberwarfare. “I see Taliban’s strategy is influenced by hybrid/fifth-generation warfare”. However, Taliban’s media strategy looks more evolved and refined comparing them with other terrorist organisations. “Taliban are better than al-Qaeda and Daesh in terms of using social media”, McInerney added.

Shahreyar also echoed what O’Donnell asserted in the beginning that Taliban were much quicker than the Afghan government. “They were very responsive, their narrative directed to the international community, Afghan people and it had some attractiveness to regional countries including Pakistan, Gulf countries, Iran and Russia”. Theunissen also added Taliban targeted different audiences i.e. domestic audience and international community and were running parallel hashtags both in Pashtu and English.



Theunissen also asserted that Taliban have learnt the advantages of social media and used different platforms such as Twitter space and Clubhouse. Sorouch also agreed that Taliban strategy was targeting multiple audiences. “They updated the [Taliban] website in six or seven languages”, he added. Shahreyar also highlighted that “they were using all languages i.e. Urdu, Arabic, Russian etc. They were making different content for these languages; their messages were different depending on the language and their counterparts”. More importantly, as Shahreyar informed, that Taliban were very organised i.e. using correct Persian whereas many leaders have not spoken or communicated with such perfection in Persian.

Habib Khan also mentioned how Taliban attracted people on Twitter by using fake accounts. “Taliban have many fake accounts with Afghan girls’ names. There are not many Afghan women on social media. Once the followers grow, they change the name”.

Taliban’s narrative creation

The speakers analysed how Taliban continued to portray themselves as the ‘legitimate’ stakeholders of Afghanistan and ‘saviour’ of the Afghan people, culture and Islamic values. Sarwary informed that Taliban have invested and focused on its public image. Shahreyar also added that narrative creation has always been at the heart of their strategy. He provided the genealogy and evolution of Taliban’s narrative building. “In 1994, their narrative was that they emerged amidst the chaos of civil war. The narrative was to fight corruption and ‘evilness’, bring order, and security, most importantly, establish Sharia. In post-9/11, when they reemerged, their narrative changed”. They portrayed themselves, as Shahreyar explained, as ‘freedom fighters’ who launched the jihad against ‘Christian invaders’ and restored the Afghan ‘honour’.



One of the key messaging strategies Taliban have employed is to present themselves as ‘victorious’. As Sarwary, Soroush and Shahreyar explained that Taliban claimed in their narrative that they have defeated the US i.e. superpower. “We [Taliban] defeated NATO and the US, and the West. Islamic and Afghan which we didn’t have before have been restored”, Soroush informed.

Shahreyar also added how Taliban presented the Doha negotiation in their favour. "They depicted process as a victory and western countries were defeated".

The speakers also highlighted the current strategy as how Taliban are shaping and adjusting their narrative since the takeover. Theunissen analysed that there are core areas where they are focusing. First, they present themselves as being legitimate governance actors. They try to promote and use international visits to Afghanistan as a source of legitimacy. Second, they pretend as defenders of security, religion and cultural values. Third, they present counter-narratives based on anti-western rhetoric. Sarwary also added how they are also heavily focusing on hiding their internal infightings and portraying themselves as one united group.

Threat and censorship

Taliban's narrative creation is also based on the threat and censorship of media and journalists. They aim to monopolise information control and curb independent voices to present their own narrative. Shah informed that "they coerce local journalists and require favourable reporting". Shahreyar also added that "they used traditional media...asking to review editorial 'checks and balances". Sarwary also informed that "Taliban warned us: if you don't use proper titles and words, you will be in trouble". Sarwary also shared that "there are WhatsApp groups; their only job is to monitor tweets, if there is something that makes them bad, they simply call and warn or they try to reach out".

Habib Khan apprised that Twitter in particular was an important source. "Only information flow is Taliban Twitter accounts because they have banned media and they want to inform people from Taliban sources only.

Challenges to countering Taliban narrative

Soroush complained that when Taliban were promoting their narrative, unfortunately, there were not many efforts to control or counter them. "you cannot find any law on digital media. Taliban used social media across channels. but there were no regulations. Afghanistan needed a comprehensive digital media law to counter Taliban propaganda".

The panellists also raised how Twitter has failed to prevent Taliban from promoting their propaganda. Sarwary complained that "Twitter has failed to hold them accountable. They are publicly threatening people". Khan argued that Twitter did ban some accounts. However, at the same time, Twitter is adding blue badges. "Twitter is giving their platform to spread lies

and glorify suicide bombers such as they recently produced a hashtag to glorify suicide bombings”, Khan added. He also questioned that while Taliban are censoring all media in Afghanistan and not allowing reporters, then why is Twitter allowing Taliban to further promote their false narrative? Khan proposed that Taliban should be banned on Twitter. "Presence of Taliban on Twitter is far more important than other platforms. Their target audience on Twitter is researchers, journalists and diplomats. On other platforms such as signal or telegram, they don't get this audience", therefore, they should not be allowed.



Taliban are facing multiple crises

Taliban's repression of journalists and controlling information is also linked to the challenges they are facing. Shahreyar added that "they don't have enough content to draw attention; that's why they are trying to control the information, they were repressing journalists, blocking sites, repression is going on but clear confusion among Taliban when comes to narrative. What would be the new narrative" Shahreyar argued that "they have been different from the last time; they are not strict as they used to be". Taliban recently started introducing harsher punishments such as cutting hands. Shareyar claimed that it's because "they are worried about their unity. If they lose their Islamic grounds, there are many competing [such as ISIS and other Islamic militant groups]".

He also explained the internal challenges. "Some [within Taliban] say we should preserve our unity if we are losing hardcore values, then there will be a big crisis for us".

Pakistan's assistance to Taliban

The panellists also discussed the role of Pakistan and its assistance to Taliban in shaping the social media strategy. Shah added that particularly during the Cold War, Pakistan received a boost in Afghanistan's information environment. Shahreyar shared that Taliban narratives were built in Pakistan i.e. ISI and the country helped Taliban to shape narratives. Khan claimed that "the whole operation of Taliban is run by ISPR [Inter-Services Public Relations, media wing of the Pakistan army]. ISPR accounts are hugely involved in Taliban propaganda machine".



Way forward

Khan argued that one of the vital steps in countering Taliban is to stop giving them platforms. His campaign #BanTaliban emphasises denying Taliban to platforms for their propaganda. "They deny freedom of speech at the same time they demand freedom of speech from Twitter or tech giants". He asserted that Taliban have silenced 40 million people (Afghanistan population), then why should they be allowed?

McInerney emphasised the robust policy against Taliban. She argued that human rights should be the core of any policy. She suggested that tech giants should have an iterative approach, and their policies should be periodically reviewed to strengthen the policy. She urged that robustness and consistency should be maintained to gain public trust. "If you bend the criteria in one place, it will have effects on other places", she added. McInerney also proposed to have

what she called ‘horizon scanning’. “You are constantly trying to get ahead, constantly monitoring what’s happening and predicting involving stakeholders and researchers. You know what’s next. It’s so dynamic and you need to get ahead”.

Sorouch also highlighted the importance of Afghan-in-exile. “Only institution that can challenge Taliban now is media-in-exile. They [Taliban] say we have defeated Americans, but cultural war is still there. Their target is media outside the country. Media in exile have become the main enemy of Taliban”.

Theunissen also emphasised holding information integrity while countering Taliban. She shared that using fake news against Taliban can be challenging because Taliban also flag fake news. She argued that “it [disinformation] also undermines our own objective and credibility. If people know they rely on media outlets, you could build media resilience against Taliban. We don’t need to share disinformation because there is enough evidence that Taliban are committing human rights violations”.

The End