



RESOLVE
NETWORK

EXTRAC

A “New” Islamic Emirate?

The Taliban’s Outreach
Strategy in the Aftermath
of Kabul

Charlie Winter, Abdul Sayed,
and Abdullah Alrhoun

RESOLVE NETWORK | January 2022
RESOLVE Research Report
<https://10.37805/ogrr2022.1.afg>

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION3

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.....4

A TRANSFORMED STRATEGIC APPROACH.....5

A REFRAMED TACTICAL MESSAGE 15

CONCLUSION 23

SOURCES..... 25

The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the RESOLVE Network, the U.S. Institute of Peace, or any entity of the U.S. government.

INTRODUCTION

On August 15, 2021, the government of former Afghan President Ashraf Ghani collapsed, leaving Kabul, and the rest of Afghanistan, to the Taliban.¹ While it had for several months been thought of as something of an inevitability, the Taliban’s seizure of the capital happened faster than predicted. Even the Taliban—per its official account at least—was surprised.²

The rapid advances of the Taliban in the summer of 2021, which culminated in its takeover of Kabul, were not just down to military might. Rather, they were the result of a series of transformative developments in the Afghan security context—among other things the withdrawal of coalition troops, the subsequent collapse of morale in the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF), and the fragile instability of the Ghani administration—combined with the Taliban’s careful, goal-orientated military planning and strategic outreach efforts. The movement had been working towards this moment for years, synergizing an effective doctrine of insurgent warfighting with a comprehensive, multi-pronged communications effort that made use of a sprawling online network and an entrenched offline infrastructure.³ This meant that in the run-up to the fall of Kabul it could continually amplify the impact of the coalition’s withdrawal, work to catalyze the collapse of the ANDSF, and drive home the apparent inevitability of its victory.

As the Taliban’s forces swept across Afghanistan in July and August, their triumphalist—and fundamentally revolutionary—discourse became exponentially more pronounced. The moment it seized Kabul, however, the Taliban had to reorder its communications priorities. As Afghanistan’s new de facto government, it needed to expand on what its outreach strategists had been doing to date, i.e., setting out political aspirations, emphasizing military capabilities, and attacking the legitimacy of adversaries. Now, it had to take on a more complex strategic communications task: demonstrating that its new state would be able to follow through on what as a movement it had been promising for decades.

Drawing on tens of thousands of data points ingested from the Taliban’s online networks on Telegram and Twitter as well as an array of pro-Taliban static websites, this report examines how the fall of Kabul impacted the Taliban’s outreach strategy. In doing so, it provides a new, contemporary contribution to what is, somewhat counter-intuitively, given how topical the subject matter is, a fairly limited body of research. To date, there have been just a handful of in-depth studies of Taliban propaganda activities,

-
- 1 While the word “Taliban” is a plural, it is used in this report as an overarching singular term to refer to the Taliban as a political movement. The Taliban refers to itself as the “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.”
 - 2 Zabihullah Mujahid, press conference, August 17, 2021; Abdul Qahar Balki, interview, Al Jazeera English, August 21, 2021.
 - 3 Charlie Winter and Abdullah Alrhoun, *Mapping the Extremist Narrative Landscape in Afghanistan* (ExTrac, 2020), https://public-assets.extrac.io/reports/ExTrac_Afghanistan_201120.pdf.

prominent among them the work of Johnson (2018), Aggarwal (2016), and the International Crisis Group (2008).⁴

The report proceeds as follows. The first section provides a theoretical framework to understand the Taliban’s approach to outreach, both before and after August 15, citing in particular the work of French communications theorist Jacques Ellul. Then, drawing on data ingested by ExTrac’s automated crawlers over the course of 2020 and 2021, the next section uses mixed methods to demonstrate and visualize how this approach changed in the aftermath of the seizure of Kabul, tracking how it abandoned its old media infrastructure and realigned the strategic focus of its messaging. The third section takes a qualitative approach, considering four key discursive pillars that emerged in the Taliban’s official communications in the wake of its victory—security, mercy, inclusivity, and prosperity—which it deployed to stabilize the conflict and consolidate its gains. Taking a step back, the conclusion considers the near- and medium-term implications of this radical evolution in the Taliban’s strategic approach to outreach.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Taliban, like most political movements, uses strategic communications to compound, amplify, and crystallize its audiences’ beliefs, ultimately seeking to turn their thoughts, whether positive or negative, into actions. To understand what this means in practice, the work of communications theorist Jacques Ellul is a useful resource. Writing in 1962, Ellul identified two main forms of propagandistic outreach: strategic messaging and tactical messaging.⁵ Strategic messaging, he held, is inherently long-term in its approach. It sets out to establish the political identity of the movement by describing its ideological agenda, developing its organizational brand, and clarifying and subsequently reiterating its end goals.⁶ Tactical messaging, by contrast, seeks to obtain immediate results within that strategic framework.⁷ Tactical messaging campaigns are geared towards inciting or eliciting specific behaviors, anything from violent action to participation in elections. They only succeed if they are deployed in the context of ideas that have already been established by the strategic, brand-building outreach.⁸

Whatever context they are operating in, Ellul writes that political movements use strategic and tactical messaging to work towards one of two overarching goals: “agitation” and “integration.”⁹ Agitation, he holds, is “the most visible and widespread” form of political messaging; it is geared towards subversion and, as such, bringing down “the government or the established order” in order to make space for an

4 Thomas Johnson, *Taliban Narratives: The Use and Power of Stories in the Afghanistan Conflict* (London: Hurst, 2018); Neil Aggarwal, *The Taliban’s Virtual Emirate: The Culture and Psychology of an Online Militant Community* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.7312/agga17426>; International Crisis Group, “Taliban Propaganda: Winning the War of Words?,” July 24, 2008, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/taliban-propaganda-winning-war-words>.

5 Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men’s Attitudes* (London: Vintage Press, 1962), 62.

6 *Ibid.*, 62.

7 *Ibid.*, 62.

8 *Ibid.*, 62.

9 *Ibid.*, 71-76.

alternative.¹⁰ On this basis, it seeks to “arouse feelings of frustration, conflict, and aggression, [all of] which lead individuals to action.”¹¹ Integration messaging, on the other hand, seeks to do the opposite, encouraging stability, acceptance, and, ultimately, political inaction on the part of the community it is being deployed amidst. It is, he writes, “a propaganda of conformity” aimed at “making the individual participate in his [or her] society in every way.”¹²

Insurgent movements—like, until August, the Taliban—tend to focus overwhelmingly on the first part of this communications equation, agitation.¹³ This is because they are in a fundamental position of opposition, working to inflame tensions and turn their audiences against the state they are trying to bring down. When, however, an insurgent movement takes power, that changes. The new priority becomes, per Ellul, integration messaging, which works to “balance” and “stabilize the situation.”¹⁴ This shift from agitation to integration is, he notes, an “extremely delicate” process:

After one has, over the years, excited the masses, flung them into adventures, fed their hopes and their hatreds, opened the gates of action to them, and assured them that all their actions were justified, it is difficult to make them re-enter the ranks, to integrate them into the normal framework of politics and economics.¹⁵

Below, the analysis contends that it is this transitional process that drove the Taliban to transform its overarching approach to political outreach after the fall of Kabul. As demonstrated, first quantitatively and then qualitatively, within days of its becoming Afghanistan’s de facto government, it was already prioritizing integration-focused outreach over the agitation-focused activities that had long formed the basis of its communications offering.

A TRANSFORMED STRATEGIC APPROACH

This section analyzes the Taliban’s strategic messaging activities, quantitatively tracking how it altered course after it seized Kabul. First, it focuses on the changes the Taliban made to its media production apparatus before looking at how its proponents and officials modified the way they used (and use Twitter.

10 Ibid., 71.

11 Ibid., 188.

12 Ibid., 74.

13 Ibid., 71.

14 Ibid., 76.

15 Ibid., 76.

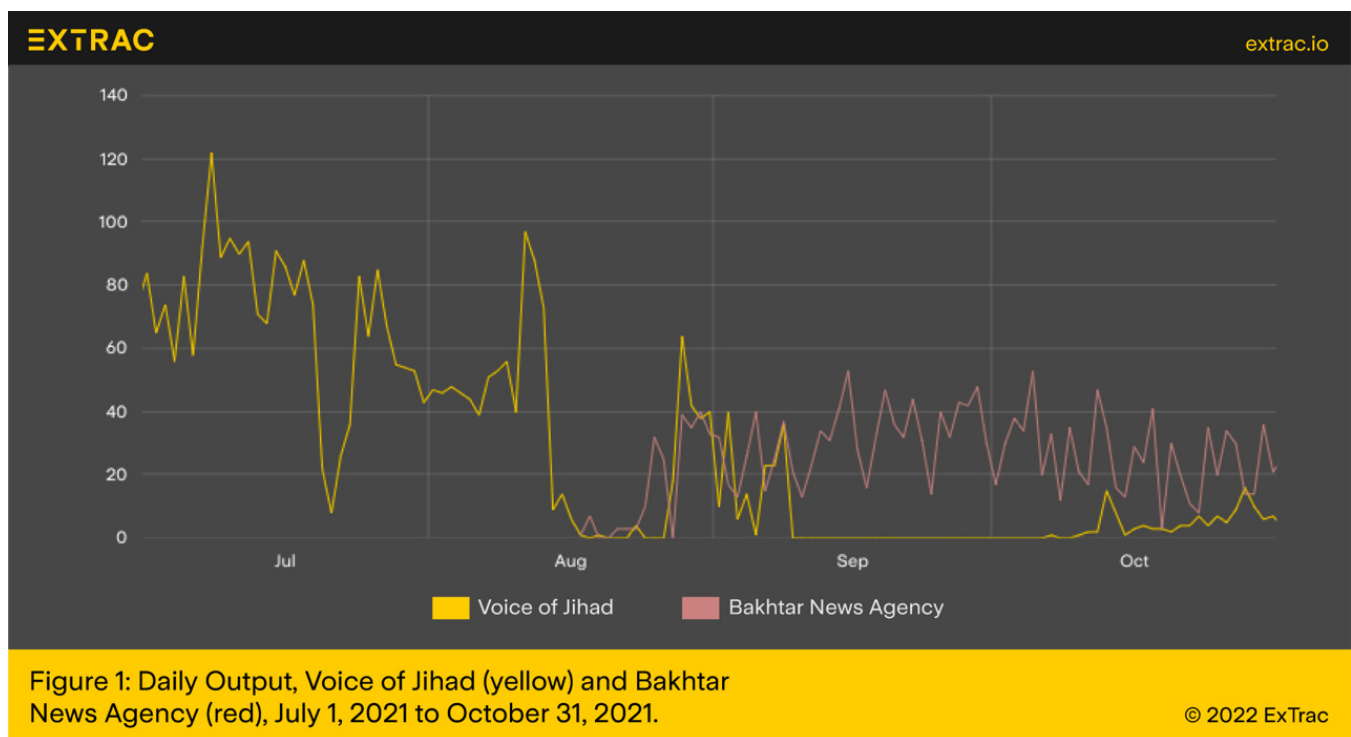
Lastly, it considers the broad thematic makeup of the Taliban brand, both in the run-up to and aftermath of August 15.

Media infrastructure

To track how the Taliban’s outreach efforts changed in the aftermath of the fall of Kabul, the research team deployed automated crawlers to ingest all content distributed via its official websites. Prior to August this year, these were all part of a single static network known as the Voice of Jihad, the entirety of which ExTrac had already been archiving over the course of 2021.

In August and September 2021, the activities of the Voice of Jihad network slowed—and for weeks were entirely suspended—as the Taliban shifted its communications effort over to Afghanistan’s state media infrastructure—including, among others, the Bakhtar News Agency and Radio Television Afghanistan. On that basis, from August 16 onwards, we also began archiving content from sites and agencies that had hitherto been regarded as the Afghan state’s official media apparatus. Having done this, we were left with 195,330 items in total. To make sense of these datasets, we used automated trend analysis to disaggregate them structurally and temporally. This meant we could track aggregate trends in official Taliban output over time.

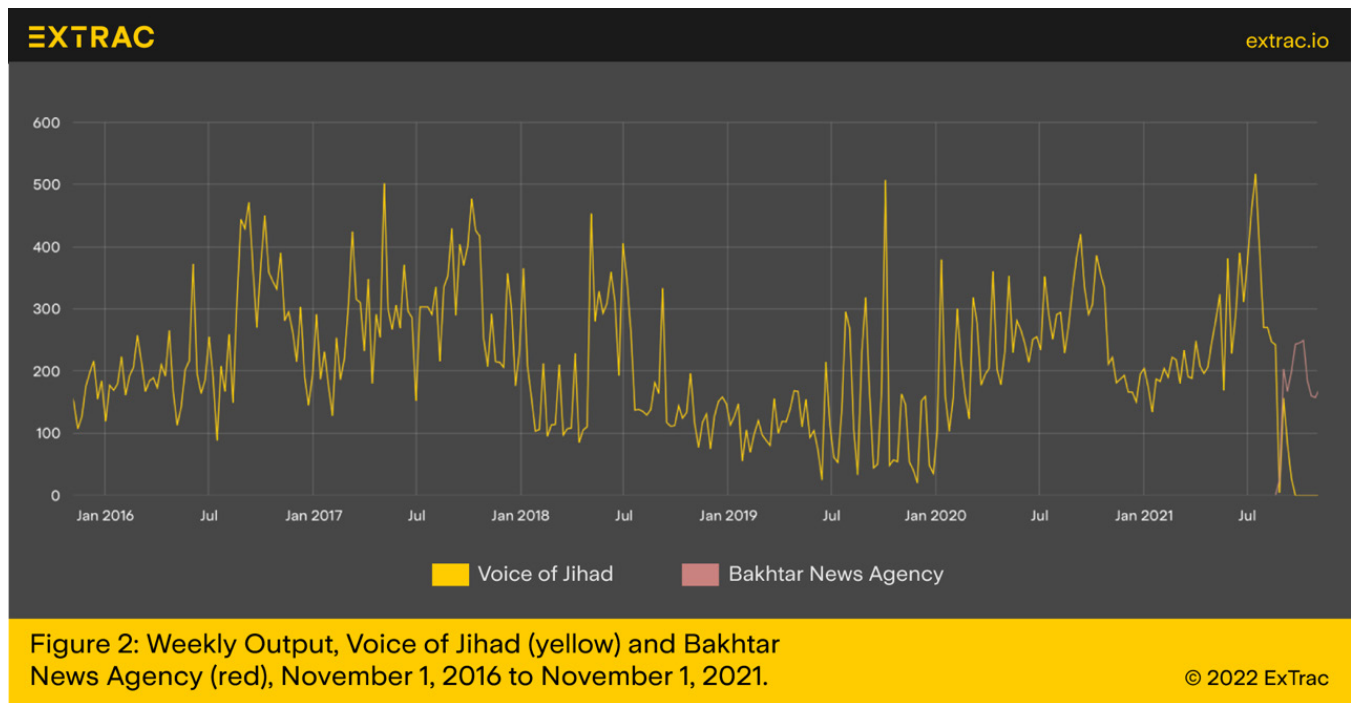
The data shows that within days of the collapse of the Ghani administration the Taliban successfully co-opted Afghanistan’s state media infrastructure. On August 16—the day after it took Kabul—it used the Radio Television Afghanistan network to broadcast a message of solidarity to the nation. By August 17, it was using the Bakhtar News Agency’s handle on Twitter to publish official news and policy



announcements. As it consolidated control of these new outlets, which just days earlier had been used to circulate anti-Taliban content, it was simultaneously winding back the Voice of Jihad’s operations,

redirecting the resources and expertise that had been supporting it to work in the now Taliban-controlled state media apparatus.

These dynamics are captured in Figure 1 below that shows the respective output of the Voice of Jihad and the Bakhtar News Agency—which prior to August 15 was staunchly anti-Taliban—capturing the decline of the former and the rise of the latter. It also shows the point at which, in October, the Voice of Jihad restarted its new, pared-back offering.



When the timeline is expanded to consider the last five years' worth of official Taliban communications, as is the case in Figure 2, the significance of the apparent dissolution of the Voice of Jihad is brought into sharper refrain. The network, which had for years been the Taliban's principal Pashto official media outlet was, by mid-September, inactive.¹⁶

In its place, the Bakhtar News Agency took over as the Taliban's central media outlet. As of early November 2021, its online presence comprised a regularly updated website and a highly active Twitter handle with, as of mid-November, 33,887 followers. Figure 3 shows its activity on Twitter, capturing posts both prior to and in the aftermath of the collapse of the Ghani administration. Note in particular the decline in activity between August 15 and 24; this was when the Taliban was consolidating control of it.

Figures 4 and 5 show a similar, albeit more marked, dynamic in the context of Radio Television Afghanistan's Pashto- and Dari-language outlets on Twitter, which as of mid-November have 219,671 and 114,813

¹⁶ While its website did relaunch in mid-October, its activities have been faltering in the time since, with just nineteen new posts each week on average in the ten weeks up to December 13, 2021, i.e., less than a tenth of what it had been publishing on average over the course of the last five years running.

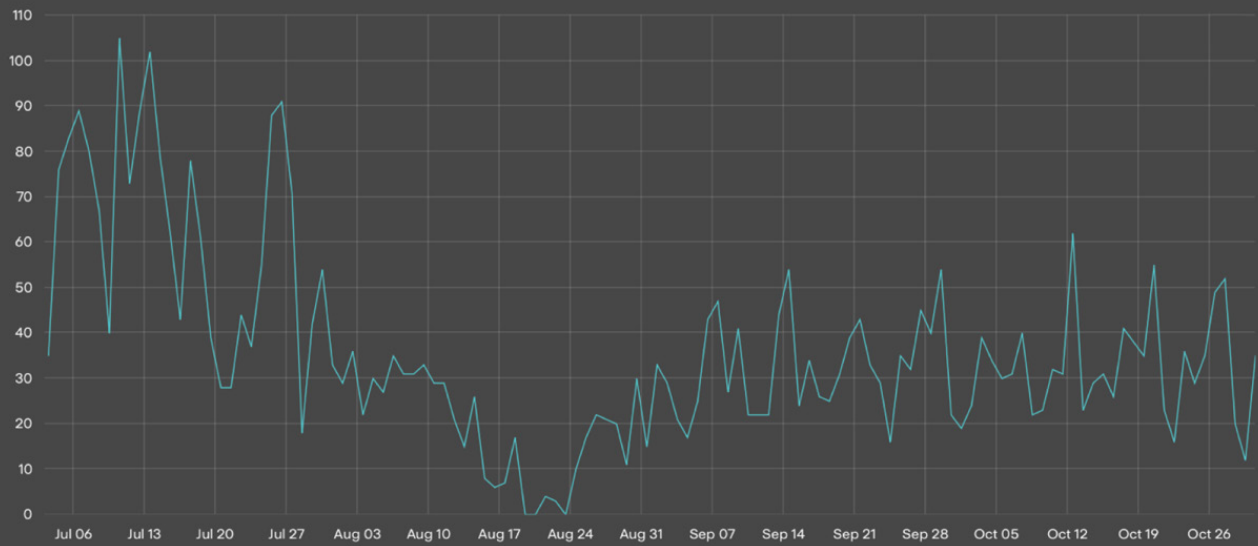


Figure 3: Daily Posting Activity, Bakhtar News Agency (@BakhtarNA), July 1, 2021 to October 31, 2021.

© 2022 ExTrac

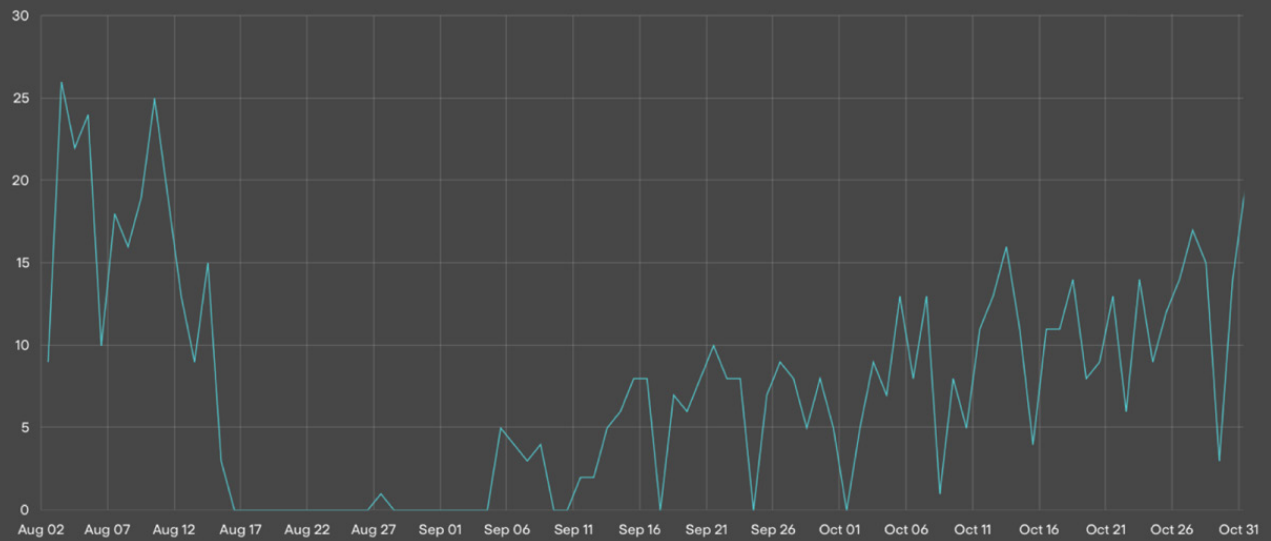


Figure 4: Daily Posting Activity, RTA Pashto (@rtapashto), July 1, 2021 to October 31, 2021.

© 2022 ExTrac

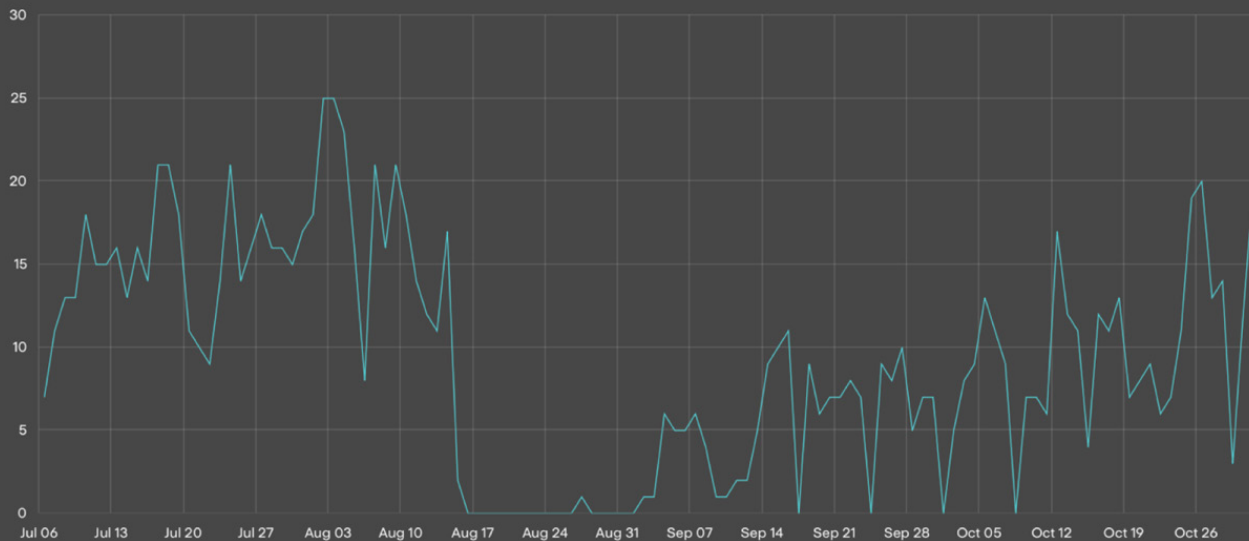


Figure 5: Daily Posting Activity, RTA Dari (@rtadari), July 1, 2021 to October 31, 2021.

© 2022 ExTrac

followers respectively. Like the Bakhtar News Agency, both became momentarily inactive as the Taliban was taking control of them, ceasing operations for a full two weeks from August 15.

The Taliban diverted resources away from its old Voice of Jihad network in favor of the more conventional and further-reaching Bakhtar News Agency and Radio Television Afghanistan because it was reordering its strategic outreach priorities. This reordering came about because it was shifting its focus away from agitation messaging and deploying more integration messaging. By co-opting these new (to it, at least) media outlets, it was able to expand the reach of its official communications and directly engage audiences that were hitherto disinclined to follow content shared via the Voice of Jihad.

Audience engagement

To assess whether any of the above-described changes were reflected in how, at an individual and community level, Taliban officials and media activists operated online after August 15, we compiled a list of 270 Twitter accounts tied to known officials and influencers. We processed all historic posts from these feeds—which we consider to be a diverse but representative sample of the Taliban’s overarching online presence—within ExTrac. Once disaggregated and analyzed, this enabled us to track online Taliban community and network dynamics over time as well as how they changed in response to offline developments.

As visualized in Figure 6, the data shows that after spiking in mid-August the posting activities of Taliban officials and influencers markedly intensified in the three weeks that followed before eventually stabilizing at almost double their average rate of activity in July. This meant that by early September this sample of accounts was reliably five times more active than it was at the beginning of 2021.

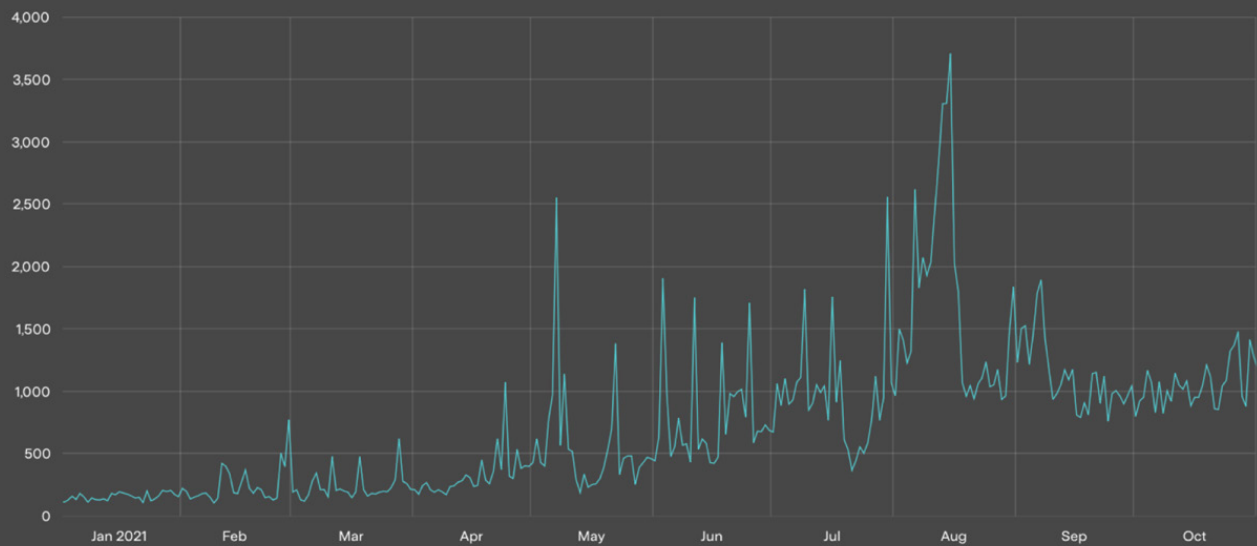


Figure 6: Daily Posting Activity, Taliban Twitter
Sample, January 1, 2021 to October 31, 2021.

© 2022 ExTrac

Given how low a profile these same users had kept on Twitter in the first half of 2021—except in May when the deadline passed for the withdrawal of U.S. forces—it would appear that in the weeks running up to August 15 the Taliban decided to adopt a more overt and accessible stance on Twitter, a move that would expand its reach, enable it to tap into new audiences and therefore better publicize its political agenda. From early September onwards, Taliban activities on Twitter levelled out, with its core cadre generally posting between 1,000 and 1,500 tweets a day, apart from on Fridays when their activities exhibit an across-the-board drop.

Throughout the time since, Twitter has remained a permissive environment for Taliban officials and supporters alike, provided they do not violate its Terms of Use by, for example, overtly inciting violence. This contrasts with the likes of Facebook, which as of early January 2022 still barred Taliban officials and media activists from using its services, a critical obstacle to Taliban outreach given Facebook’s popularity in Afghanistan far outweighing other social media platforms.¹⁷ As such, Twitter’s status as a core arena for pro-Taliban discussion and official content distribution has cemented with time, something that will likely continue for the foreseeable future provided Twitter does not change its content moderation policy.

Thematic focus

In addition to the Taliban transforming its approach to media distribution and engagement after August 15, it also altered the substance of its message. To track these changes, we deployed an automated

¹⁷ “Afghanistan: Facebook continues ban of Taliban-related content,” *BBC News*, August 17, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-58239786>.

discourse analysis model against the Taliban’s official output in the run-up to and aftermath of August 15. We had trained this model to identify with nuance the movement’s narrative priorities based on a year-long sample of Voice of Jihad content which was analyzed using a discourse analysis methodology called thematic networks analysis.

Based on grounded theory, thematic networks analysis offers researchers a way to iteratively identify themes and concepts within complex datasets by distancing themselves from the data itself, breaking corpuses down into their component parts and arranging them into codes.¹⁸ The approach used for this project was adapted from Jennifer Attride-Stirling’s methodology, which is geared towards “unearthing the themes salient in a text [or group of texts] at different levels [and] facilitating the structuring and depiction of these themes.”¹⁹ Specifying what is meant by “different levels,” Attride-Stirling notes that:

Thematic networks [analysis] systematize[s] the extraction of: (i) lowest-order premises evident in the text (basic themes); (ii) categories of basic themes grouped together to summarize more abstract principles (organizing themes); and (iii) super-ordinate themes encapsulating the principal metaphors in the text as a whole (global themes).²⁰

Clarifying the process by which one arrives at the highest thematic level—the global themes—Attride-Stirling continues:

A thematic network is developed starting from the basic themes and working inwards toward a global theme. Once a collection of basic themes has been derived, they are then classified according to the underlying story they are telling and these become the organizing themes. Organizing themes are then reinterpreted in light of their [constituent] basic themes, and are brought together to illustrate a single conclusion or super-ordinate theme that becomes the global theme.²¹

When applying the methodology in this context, individual pieces of Taliban-produced content were considered to be the smallest units of analysis. We used the content of each item to identify said item’s basic theme—i.e., “the most basic or lowest-order” description of it.²² This initial round of coding resulted in the identification of 102 basic themes. These were then grouped into organizing themes—i.e., “a middle-order theme that organizes the [basic themes] into clusters of similar issues.”²³ These exist on a higher level of abstraction than basic themes and thus allow for a more generalized categorization of

18 Kathy Charmaz, “The grounded theory method: an explication and interpretation,” in *Contemporary Field Research: A Collection of Readings*, ed. Robert M. Emerson (Long Grove: Waveland Press, 1983), 111.

19 Jennifer Attride-Stirling, “Thematic networks: An analytical tool for qualitative research,” *Qualitative Research* 1, no. 3 (2001): 385-405, <https://doi.org/10.1177/146879410100100307>.

20 Attride-Stirling refers to themes as “basic themes,” discourses as “organizing themes,” and narratives as “global themes.” For simplicity’s sake, this report refers only to themes, discourses, and narratives. See: Attride-Stirling, “Thematic networks,” 388.

21 *Ibid.*, 389.

22 *Ibid.*, 388.

23 *Ibid.*, 389.

data.²⁴ In total, the 102 basic themes were ordered into 17 clusters, each of which represented a single organizing theme. At this stage, it was possible to identify the overarching narratives, or global themes, that ran through the data. These are to the “main claim, proposition, argument, assertion or assumption that the [organizing themes] are about [...] the core, principal metaphor that encapsulates the main point in the text.”²⁵

When the organizing themes were considered as a whole, five repeating concepts—that is, five global themes—were clearly apparent: i) Security; ii) Victimhood; iii) Governance; iv) External Affairs; and v)

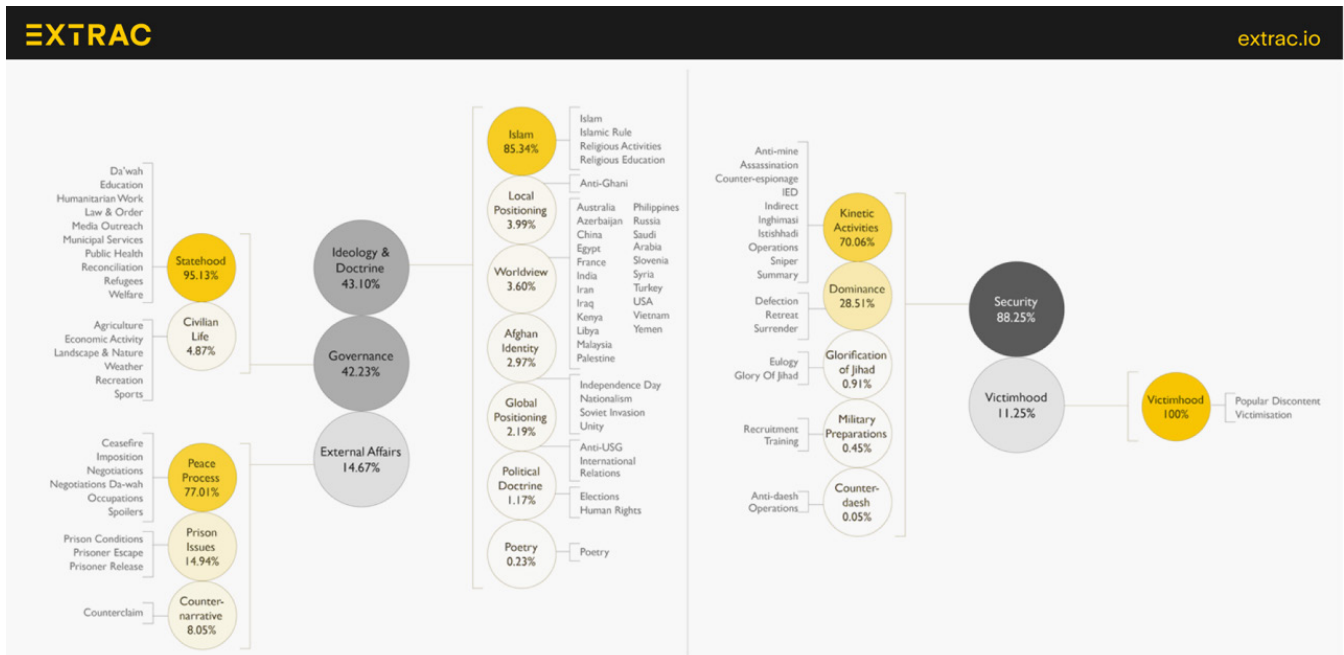


Figure 7: Thematic Networks in Official Taliban Media Output, October 1, 2019 to September 30, 2020.

© 2022 ExTrac

Doctrine and ideology.²⁶ The first two relate to military matters, while the latter three cover civilian affairs. These are captured, along with their proportionate weighting in the Taliban’s official output between October 2019 and September 2020, in Figure 7 below.

The **security** global theme revolves around the Taliban’s military capabilities and by extension its efforts to incite violence to further its political agenda. It comprises nineteen basic themes grouped into five organizing themes. In order of prevalence, they are: kinetic activities; surrenders and defections; military preparations; glorification of Jihad; and counter-Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP) operations.

24 Ibid., 398.

25 Ibid., 393.

26 For a detailed discussion of the results of this first manual round of analysis, see: ExTrac’s November 2020 report on Taliban outreach, Charlie Winter and Abdullah Alrhoun, ‘Mapping the extremist narrative landscape in Afghanistan,’ ExTrac, November 2020, https://public-assets.extrac.io/reports/ExTrac_Afghanistan_1120.pdf.

The other war-focused global theme is **victimhood**, which revolves around the notion of the civilian costs of conflict. It is geared towards casting a negative light on the enemies of the Taliban by drawing attention to the purportedly indiscriminate hardships they impose on the Afghan population. It is much less varied than the Security global theme, comprising just two organizing themes: victimization and popular discontent.

The **governance** global theme revolves around the idea that the Taliban is a credible and effective governing actor. It comprises seventeen basic themes falling into two organizing themes: statehood and civilian life. Statehood-focused materials cover anything from the Taliban’s outreach and education efforts to law enforcement activities, public health programs, and road-building works. Civilian Life-focused materials cover matters in which the “state” has less of a direct, tangible role—anything from sports to weather reports—but that are still relevant to the Taliban’s overarching statehood offering.

The **external affairs** global theme focuses on the Taliban’s engagement with adversaries and/or former adversaries, including the US and the rest of the international community (Western states and regional powers such as Iran, China, and Russia), both in relation to securing the withdrawal of coalition forces or calling for the provision of humanitarian assistance. Across 2019 and 2020, it was made up of twelve basic themes that fall into one of three organizing themes: peace process, prison issues, and counter-claims. After August 15, the Taliban started communicating extensively about its engagements with foreign diplomatic officials; to accommodate this shift, we adjusted the model so that it would detect an additional organizing theme on top of the original three: Diplomatic Relations.

The last global theme, **doctrine and ideology**, comprises materials that describe the Taliban’s ideological agenda, cultural values, and political beliefs. These materials are aimed at setting out the reasons for which Afghans should opt for or support Taliban rule. Often, they are published as post-facto attempts at making a case for certain policies or provisions. Perhaps unsurprisingly given the complexity of what it is setting out to do, this subset of content is the most varied, comprising 24 basic themes falling into six organizing themes: Islam; local positioning; Afghan identity; global positioning; political doctrine; and worldview.

Having finalized this initial manual stage of the analysis, we used weak supervision-based machine learning to train a discourse model that could instantaneously and automatically recognize the linguistic and visual markers that are tied to each of the above-described basic, organizing, and global themes.

Once we iterated it, we applied the model in real time to all official Taliban content (i.e., everything from the Voice of Jihad as well as the Bakhtar News Agency and Radio Television Afghanistan), so we could track changes over time in the composition of its thematic networks. Figure 8 does exactly that, showing how the Taliban’s discursive priorities changed in the run-up to and aftermath of its takeover of Kabul in August.

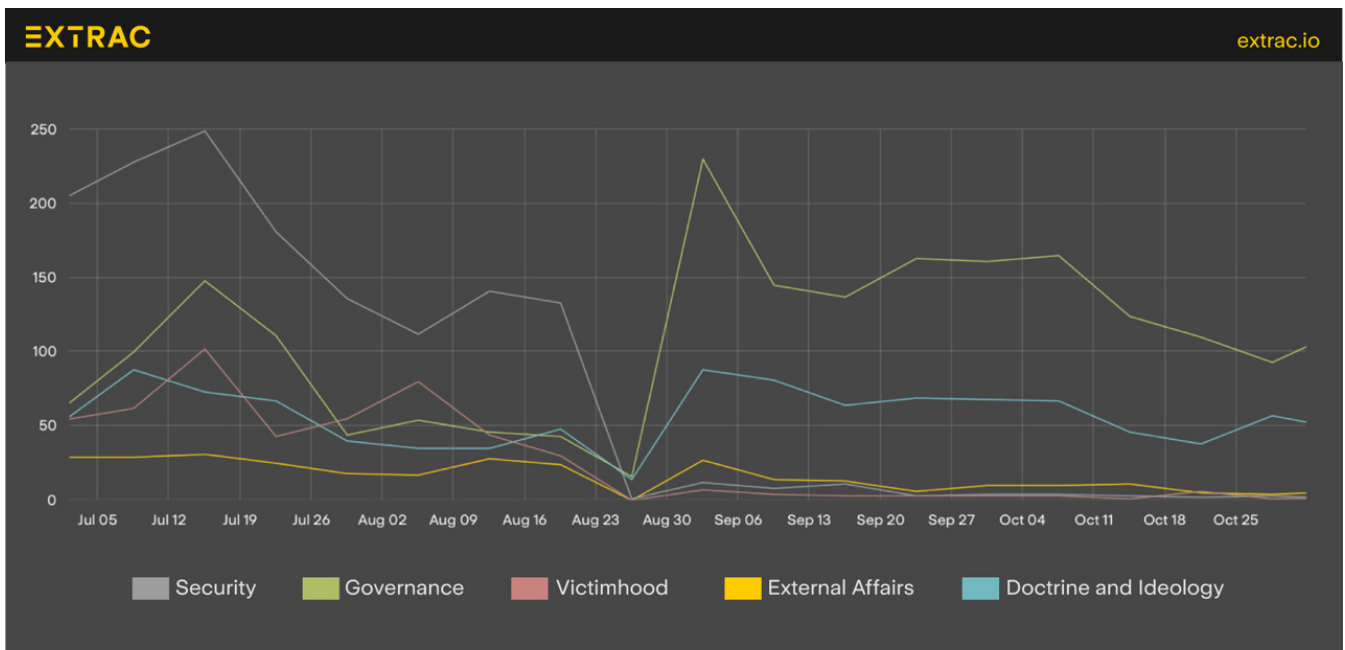


Figure 8: Thematic Priorities in Official Taliban Media Output, July 1, 2021 to October 31, 2021.

© 2022 ExTrac

Figures 9 and 10 demonstrate that in August the Taliban’s thematic focus transformed, civilian life-related messaging coming to priorities far more than war-related content. Figure 9 shows the thematic weighting of Taliban content between August 1 and 14—that is, when fighting was at its fiercest in the weeks running up to the fall of Kabul. It indicates that during this period 64 percent of the Taliban’s official output was focused on war (48 percent on security and 16 percent on victimhood), with just 15 percent revolving around governance. Figure 10, on the other hand, shows its thematic weighting between August 15 and 28, the Taliban’s first two weeks as de facto government of Afghanistan. It shows that just days later its overall communications offering changed significantly, with just 9 percent focusing on war (seven percent on security, including calls for violence, and 2 percent on victimhood) and some 54 percent revolving around governance.

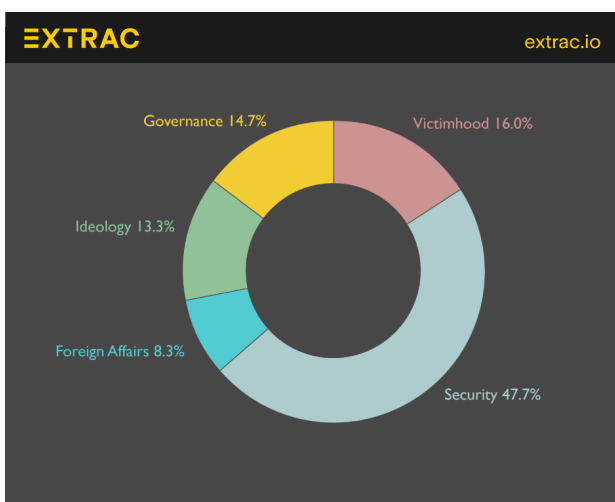


Figure 9: Thematic Priorities in Official Taliban Media Output, August 1, 2021 to August 14, 2021.

© 2022 ExTrac

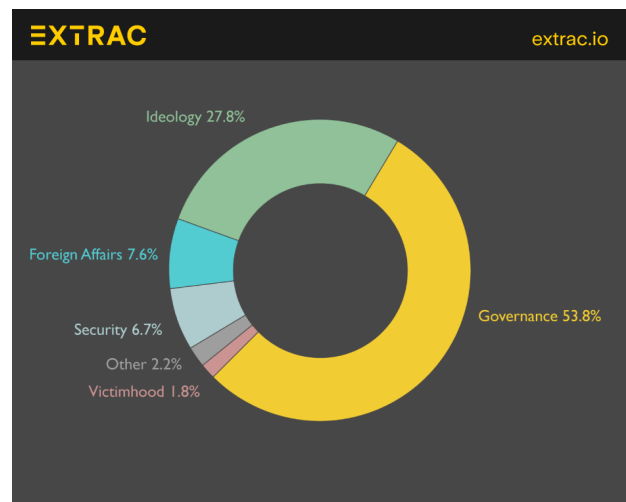


Figure 10: Thematic Priorities in Official Taliban Media Output, August 14, 2021 to August 28, 2021.

© 2022 ExTrac

The most pronounced shift in these charts is the steep decline of security-focused content and the steep incline of governance-focused content. It is not surprising that the Taliban should almost entirely cease reporting on military activities or inciting violence in the wake of its Kabul takeover—after all, the war with the ANDSF had come to an end. The spike in governance-focused content, too, is logical, given that after August 15 the bulk of the Taliban’s resources and manpower were redirected to civilian affairs. With the collapse of the Ghani administration, the Taliban’s core strategic communications priorities had had to transform. From that point onwards, instead of using propaganda and community engagement to improve the prospects of its insurgency, it had to refocus its outreach efforts on consolidating and entrenching its newly incumbent government, making Ellul’s transition from agitation to integration. In the next section, we explore how this transition manifested from a more qualitative perspective.

A REFRAMED TACTICAL MESSAGE

We argue above that after the Taliban took control of Kabul, it transformed the way it engaged in what Ellul would regard as strategic messaging. This saw it adopting a new media delivery infrastructure, changing the terms of its engagement on Twitter, and reorienting its overarching brand to adopt a new, governance-focused image. Below, we consider how similarly oriented changes were wrought in the context of its tactical messaging, the other side of Ellul’s political communication equation.

To do this, we draw on primary sources—almost all of them statements from or interviews with senior Taliban leaders—that were published in the course of the four weeks that followed August 15. These materials are prototypical examples of Ellul’s tactical messaging in that they all feature explicit calls for action (or, indeed, restraint) that are embedded in a broader set of aspirational and strategic, socio-political appeals and statements.

For the purposes of this part of the study, we considered how these calls for action were framed and justified, identifying four dominant themes that undergirded them: i) Security, ii) Mercy, iii) Inclusivity, and iv) Prosperity. These themes and the array of content they manifested in focused almost invariably around the Ellulian goal of integration; they revolved around the idea that the Taliban had won the war and was now ushering in a new era in Afghanistan’s history, something that meant that all Afghans should rally behind it and accept its new “framework of politics.”²⁷

Security

After its takeover of Kabul, the Taliban redoubled its efforts to establish an image of itself that revolved around an absolutist promise of domestic security. On the one hand, its leaders issued statements reiterating their promise of guaranteed safety for all Afghans. On the other hand, they called on

²⁷ Ellul, *Propaganda*, 76.

rank-and-file supporters to refrain from engaging in acts that could damage the perception that it was working to secure Afghanistan for everyone—even its former enemies.

One of the most prominent voices in this regard was that of Amir Khan Muttaqi, a senior Taliban official now acting as its Interim Foreign Minister. As early as August 15, Muttaqi claimed in an interview with BBC Pashto that the Taliban’s central priority was to keep all Afghans safe; in doing so, he laid the blame for any latent insecurity in Afghanistan on the former government.²⁸ Muttaqi also claimed that the Taliban had had no intention of capturing Kabul through military means. Contrary to reports that its forces had entered the city while President Ghani was still in situ, he contended that they had only deployed inside Kabul after it had become clear that the Ghani administration was on the cusp of abandoning it. At this point, and this point only, he said, its forces were sent in specifically responding to the invitation of “thousands of [Kabul’s] residents,” who were worried about it being left lawless in the absence of a government.²⁹ This claim was reiterated by multiple Taliban officials at around the same time, using almost exactly the same wording.³⁰

Muttaqi’s overarching promise of security and stability was repeated across the first few weeks of Taliban rule by leaders and supporters alike. It was predicated on the idea that the Taliban had prevailed militarily over its adversaries and that in the course of doing so it had been able to establish an effective monopoly on violence across Afghanistan (notwithstanding the remaining pockets of resistance in Panjshir).

On September 2, 2021, the Taliban underlined this idea through visual means, broadcasting via Radio Television Afghanistan the third instalment of its military propaganda series, Victorious Force.³¹ The 40-minute-long video—which featured, among other things, footage of a cavalcade of suicide operatives and captured U.S. weaponry, both of which were also put on display at an earlier victory procession in Kabul³²—implicitly propounded the idea that the Taliban was a disciplined and uncontested powerbroker in Afghanistan. Senior officials featured in it used it as an opportunity to encourage their former opponents to rally behind them. They stated explicitly that the Taliban’s security forces were now turning their attention away from war to focus instead on instituting and upholding domestic security for the benefit of everyone.

It was the head of the Taliban’s Military Commission and newly appointed Defense Minister, Muhammad Yaqub, that led this effort. Early on in the video he explained that the Taliban had already set about recalibrating its military infrastructure to improve the livelihood of all Afghans. As part of this, he said, the Taliban’s Defense Ministry planned to employ and redeploy former members of the ANDSF and police

28 Amir Khan Muttaqi, interview, *BBC Pashto*, August 15, 2021.

29 Ibid.

30 See, for example, statements from Zabihullah Mujahid (the Taliban’s spokesman), Muhammad Yaqub (the Taliban’s Defense Minister), Shir Muhammad Abas Stanikzai (the Taliban’s Deputy Foreign Minister), and Abdul Salam Zaif (the Taliban’s former ambassador to Pakistan).

31 “Victorious Force 3,” *Radio Television Afghanistan*, September 2, 2021.

32 “Triumphant Taliban parades at Kabul airport after US exit,” *Al Jazeera*, August 31, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2021/8/31/photos-triumphant-taliban-parades-at-kabul-airport-after-us-exit>.

and intelligence services. Notably, however, Yaqub added that only those considered to be “theologically eligible” would be re-integrated; he refrained from expanding on what exactly that meant.

Yaqub’s sentiment was echoed in a similar, albeit less militarized, vein in the first public address of the Taliban’s new Prime Minister, Hassan Akhund.³³ On September 9, he stated that now that “the war had ended,” his government would immediately set about working to usher in a new era of peace and security in Afghanistan, one that would be devoid of killings, night raids, humiliation, and corruption. Echoing his colleagues Muttaqi and Yaqub, as well as many others, Akhund held that the arrival of this new era was contingent on the political success of the Taliban and the acceptance of its government by all Afghans, even its former opponents.

This expansive and ambitious promise of security was a central part of the Taliban’s efforts to consolidate power in Afghanistan following the fall of Kabul. Historically an essential part of its overall appeal, it was especially prominent after August 15 as the Taliban’s leadership set out to frame the war—that is, in Ellul’s framing, its time in opposition³⁴—as having reached its conclusion. On that basis, this strand of its communications effort was one of the defining signifiers of its broader outreach transition between agitation and integration.

Mercy

A second key component of Taliban integration messaging after August 15 was its general amnesty campaign, which had been running continuously in the three months up to August.³⁵ As part of this, Taliban leaders and outreach officials continually set out to assure former and/or active opponents that they would be safe in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.³⁶

This idea was prominent in the aforementioned BBC Pashto interview with Amir Khan Muttaqi, who had been responsible for the campaign since the early summer.³⁷ In the course of the interview, Muttaqi asserted that the Afghan masses had nothing to fear from the Taliban, even if they disagreed with it ideologically. The reality of this was, he claimed, self-evident based on that the Taliban had, at the time of this interview at least, kept true to the promise of amnesty for even its highest profile political and

33 Muhammad Hassan Akhund, “New remarks by Mullah Muhammad Hassan Akhund, Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan Acting Prime Minister,” *Bakhtar News Agency*, September 9, 2021.

34 Ellul, *Propaganda*, 71.

35 The Taliban’s amnesty campaign had been running in a lower profile and less generalized manner for years under the Commission for Da’wa and Irshad, also headed by Muttaqi. After May 1, 2021, when the Taliban announced total war against the Afghan government, Muttaqi appeared in several videos which showed him setting free dozens of ANDSF soldiers in southern Afghanistan. On doing this, he reiterated time and again that all ANDSF defectors or surrenders would be treated the same. See, for example, “Maulawi Amir Khan Muttaqi asked the surrendered soldiers not to breach their promise once freed. If they fulfil their promise they could be part of the people serving their country in the future. However if they breach the promise, Taliban won’t be able to forgive them again,” @RahimLaghmani, Twitter, July 4, 2021, <https://twitter.com/RahimLaghmani/status/1411682872411496448?s=20>.

36 Its official messaging aside, some factions of the Taliban were more inclined to mercy than others, with many aspects of the movement behaving quite differently to what was being claimed—and purportedly directed—by the leadership.

37 Amir Khan Muttaqi, interview, *BBC Pashto*, August 15, 2021. See also: Abdul Hanan Himat (@Abdulhananhimat), “Amir Khan Muttaqi addressing surrendered soldiers,” Twitter video, July 4, 2021.

military adversaries. Among other examples, he cited the case of Ismail Khan—a prominent former Afghan politician and governor of Herat under Hamid Karzai—and the senior ANDSF and intelligence officials that had been arrested alongside him early in August. Muttaqi said that all these men, who had just days earlier been active opponents of the Taliban, had been set free “with dignity.”³⁸

Within days of that interview, Taliban officials had doubled down on this message repeatedly, airing several videos of former politicians being granted their freedom after handing themselves in. Among them was a widely shared clip of Gul Agha Shirzai, a former minister in the Ghani administration who had long been, prior to this video at least, one of the Taliban’s most prominent adversaries.³⁹ In footage published on Twitter on August 22, Khalil Haqqani, who is now serving as the Taliban’s Minister for Refugees, announced that Shirzai had pledged allegiance to the Taliban’s Supreme Leader. In another similarly orientated video, the brother of former President Ashraf Ghani was shown participating in a public amnesty proceeding, seemingly willingly aligning himself with the Taliban’s national agenda in a move that was again reportedly facilitated by Khalil Haqqani.⁴⁰

On social media, Twitter above all, Taliban outreach officials continuously circulated stories like these across August and September.⁴¹ Almost invariably, they revolved around the surrender of high profile adversaries rather than rank-and-file security personnel, an aspect of the amnesty process that was readily reported on by the Voice of Jihad but not often visualized.⁴² The Taliban is likely to have prioritized coverage of its more prominent opponents surrendering because this had the additional benefit of implying that it is uncontested in Afghanistan’s new political landscape.

In tandem with these online efforts, the Taliban intensively promoted its amnesty campaign through Afghanistan’s state media infrastructure. The day after it captured Kabul, for example, a Radio Television Afghanistan official who had worked with the previous administration’s Interior Ministry issued a message to the nation advising that:

No one should fear the Taliban because they are our brothers. They all are our Afghan brothers, not foreigners, and they have treated very well all Afghan National Television and Radio employees.⁴³

eparately, in a video message broadcast on national television the day after, Amir Khan Muttaqi called on the Taliban’s ranks to respect the amnesty process with absolute diligence.⁴⁴ He ordered them not to harass anyone, not to enter any houses without permission, and not to take anyone’s property—regardless

38 Bilal Karimi (@BilalKarimi14), “‘Message to the Afghan nation’ by Amir Khan Muttaqi,” Twitter video, August 16, 2021.

39 Abdul Sayed (@abdsayedd), “Gul Agha Sherzai also pledged allegiance to the Taliban. Sherzai is the early CIA ally in Afghanistan which forces fought on the ground against AQ-Taliban in Kandahar post-9/11. Even today, AQ calls him ‘Butcher,’ claiming he killed many of its members in Kandahar in 2001,” Twitter video, August 22, 2021, <https://twitter.com/abdsayedd/status/1429314500738658305?s=20>.

40 Henna Khan Afreede (@HAFreede), “Ashraf Ghani’s brother, Hashmat Ghani, announced his support for the islamic emirates of afghanistan through Khalil-ur-Rehman Haqqani,” Twitter video, August 21, 2021.

41 Particularly prominent among them are the likes of the English-speaking Foreign Ministry official, Abdul Qahar Balkhi.

42 See, for example: “27 ANA, ANP personnel surrender in Nawa HELMAND,” *Voice of Jihad*, August 1, 2021.

43 Ahmadullah Muttaqi (@Ahmadmuttaqi01), “Cultural Commission delegation at the office of Kabul National Radio and Television,” Twitter video, August 16, 2021.

44 Bilal Karimi (@BilalKarimi14), “‘Message to the Afghan nation’ by Amir Khan Muttaqi,” Twitter video, August 16, 2021.

of what role they had played in the former government. Anyone involved in “violations” would, he said, be harshly penalized. He also appealed to non-Taliban audiences, asking them to help identify culprits and alert its security forces to suspected infractions.⁴⁵

Later in the same statement, Muttaqi tried to build confidence in the Taliban’s promise of mercy, noting that several former senior government officials were still living in the capital, safe and secure. Though he did not mention any names, it is likely that he was referring to former Afghan President Hamid Karzai, former Foreign Minister Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, and a handful of other senior officials who stayed living in Kabul after the Taliban’s takeover.⁴⁶ On this basis, he urged those who had fled the city in the course of previous weeks to return, holding that the Taliban had no plans to arrest or kill anyone regardless of what they had done in the past.⁴⁷

A day later, this message was reiterated at the first official press conference of the Taliban’s spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahid.⁴⁸ Mujahid reiterated that, on direction from the Taliban’s Supreme Leader Hibatullah Akhundzada, all those who had previously served in the ranks of its enemies were to be forgiven. He also denied rumors that the Taliban had drawn up a kill list of adversaries, announcing that even those that had collaborated with the U.S. military—regardless of the level of their work—would not be held accountable for their past actions. When questioned about reported violations of this guarantee, Mujahid adopted a harder line than that of Muttaqi. He held that any infringements had so far been committed extrajudicially on the back of personal animosity and/or blood feuds. He said that while this was against the Taliban’s official policy, it was not its place to intervene in such matters. On this basis, he implicitly left open the possibility that future, scaled up violations could occur with the Taliban turning a blind eye because it was not its place to involve itself in personal disputes.⁴⁹

After August 15, the Taliban emphasized the supposed fruits of its amnesty campaign to ease its transition from belligerence to incumbency. This line of messaging—which revolved around widely publicized displays of prominent former officials making oaths of fealty—was a way to assure supporters that its victory was conclusive and unequivocal while simultaneously demonstrating to adversaries that it was following through on its promise of mercy, even in the context of its highest profile opponents. Notably, in the months following its takeover of Kabul, numerous reports emerged of Taliban violations of the amnesty, actions that did not remotely align with its leaders’ lofty rhetoric.

Inclusivity

The notion of inclusivity was similarly at the forefront of official Taliban communications during the first weeks of its rule. The principal focus was usually on women’s rights and minority rights—with the former revolving around issues like employment and education and the latter focusing on the prospects of Shi’ite

45 Ibid.

46 Asian News International (@ANI), “Anas Haqqani, a member of the Taliban’s political office, met with former #Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai and Abdullah Abdullah in Kabul today: TOLONews,” Twitter photo, August 18, 2021, <https://twitter.com/ANI/status/1427934014627737603?s=20>.

47 Bilal Karimi (@BilalKarimi14), “‘Message to the Afghan nation’ by Amir Khan Muttaqi,” Twitter video, August 16, 2021.

48 Zabihullah Mujahid, press conference, August 17, 2021.

49 Ibid.

Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs—all in an attempt to reframe the prospect of Taliban rule as something that opponents did not have to fear.

What is and is not “appropriate” for women in Afghanistan has long been a topic of focus for the Taliban, especially in the months since it signed the conditional peace accord in Doha.⁵⁰ Consistently since then, it has tried to differentiate its current gender policies from its gender policies in the 1990s, when it last controlled Afghanistan. Per this strand of communications, the Taliban has “modernized” in the time since, becoming more inclusive and progressive and an overt advocate of women’s rights.⁵¹ At least rhetorically speaking, there are several important points of divergence between the Taliban’s stated vision for women in Afghanistan today and in the past, the most important being its insistence that it has no intention to ban them from either education or work.⁵²

The day after it captured Kabul, the Taliban foregrounded this new set of gender policies when several of its official social media accounts posted an image of two young girls walking to school, announcing that girls’ schools would reopen immediately.⁵³ The implicit message was clear: this was a new era of Taliban rule, one in which there was a place for women and girls. Keeping in line with this idea, one of the first high profile Taliban interviews on Afghan national television after the capture of Kabul featured Abdul Haq Hammad, a senior Taliban representative, speaking with a female journalist, something that would not have happened in the 1990s.⁵⁴ The day before, Abdul Hamid Hamasi, another senior Taliban ideologue, was filmed visiting Kabul Central Hospital to assure female employees that they were fully permitted—expected, even—to work.⁵⁵ Separately, but soon after, the Taliban also held a public award ceremony for a female student that had achieved the highest grades (of either gender) in Afghanistan’s university entrance exams that year.⁵⁶

Aside from these direct public engagements, Taliban officials also orchestrated several women-dominated demonstrations in support of its rule, anywhere from Kabul to Kunduz and Mazari Sharif.⁵⁷ A number of these were widely criticized on the basis that many of the women in attendance were fully veiled, a

50 Winter and Alrhoun, *Mapping the Extremist Narrative Landscape in Afghanistan*.

51 Zabihullah Mujahid, interview, *Shamshad News*, September 22, 2021.

52 Ibid.

53 Civilian Casualty Prevention and Complaints Commission of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (@ccpcciea), “The first day of Taliban rule in #Kabul, brave girls on their way to school. We hope every child, girl & boy be in their classes today,” Twitter, August 16, 2021, <https://twitter.com/ghaznimediaOff/status/1427110818164977672?s=20>.

54 Saad Mohseni (@saadmohseni), “TOLOnews and the Taliban making history again: Abdul Haq Hammad, senior Taliban rep, speaking to our (female) presenter Beheshta earlier this morning. Unthinkable two decades ago when they were last in charge,” Twitter, August 17, 2021, <https://twitter.com/saadmohseni/status/1427531355538272269?lang=en>.

55 Sangar Paykhar (@paykhar), “Female health workers in #Kabul met with Taliban officials earlier today. Shaykh Abdulhameed Hamasi gave all female workers assurance that they can freely practice their profession and Taliban will provide security for a safe working,” Twitter video, August 16, 2021.

56 Modaser Islami (@mmodaser), “This is progressive. Taliban acknowledged the university entrance exam top scorer, Selgai Baran, at a ceremony in Kabul today,” Twitter, September 6, 2021, <https://twitter.com/mmodaser/status/1434834165556555780>.

57 Ahmadullah Muttaqi (@Ahmadmuttaqi01), “Kunduz: Students of girls’ schools and madrassas express support for Islamic system and happiness in wearing hijab,” Twitter video, September 8, 2021.

foreign and untraditional form of cover in Afghanistan that was particularly conspicuous in light of the Taliban’s earlier promises that there would be no full veiling requirement.⁵⁸

In the context of Afghanistan’s religious minority communities, many of whom had been targeted by the Taliban in the past, it adopted a similarly “inclusive” form of messaging. On several occasions in the months leading up to and weeks following its capture of Kabul, its leaders promised Shi’ite, Hindu and Sikh communities equal rights, freedom of worship, and security.⁵⁹ At the end of August, for example, this manifested prominently in the form of pro-Taliban media coverage of a delegation to Ashura—a Shi’ite religious holiday—in Kabul.⁶⁰ The officials present publicly vowed to uphold the safety and security of Afghanistan’s Shi’ite community—which has been targeted repeatedly by ISKP in the months since. Their pledges were shown being received with enthusiasm. In the following weeks several influential Shi’ite social media activists noted that they had never before enjoyed “security as exemplary” as provided by the Taliban this year, which Taliban supporters were quick to amplify.⁶¹

The Taliban’s spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid repeatedly cited its new, “inclusive” approach towards politics and society in the wake of August 15. At the end of the month, for example, he said that its government would do all it could to be acceptable to all Afghans—regardless of their gender, ethnicity, or religion. He also declared that there would be freedom of the press, provided journalists abided by three conditions: first that they uphold the national and religious interests of the Afghan nation, second that they are unbiased, and third that they do not act in the interests of political movements.⁶²

Throughout the weeks that followed the fall of the Ghani administration, these sentiments were reiterated frequently as Taliban officials attempted to frame their new government, formally announced on September 7 as an organic expression of national unity, something that everyone could get behind. One of the Taliban’s senior-most leaders, Khalil Haqqani, appeared in a video in late August and encouraged Afghans of all ethnicities and political beliefs to forget feuds of the past and come together, even going so far as to declare the Taliban’s former nemesis, Ahmad Shah Massoud, “a legendary Afghan commander and martyr.”⁶³ This glowing description of Massoud riled many of the Taliban’s more doctrinaire supporters, among them a prominent activist who goes by the name Jahid Jalal. (On August 21, he wrote that Haqqani was talking “rubbish” and that “Massoud was a corrupt, filthy traitor and a spy.”⁶⁴) However,

58 “Afghan women hit back at Taliban with #DoNotTouchMyClothes campaign,” BBC News, September 13, 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-58550335>.

59 Muhammad Jalal (@MJalal313), “The life of Sikh citizens of Kabul is normal and without any threat. Taliban have ensured the safety of all the citizens irrespective of their beliefs. This is the duty of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan to protect everyone as per the Islamic law,” Twitter video, August 18, 2021, <https://twitter.com/MJalal313/status/1427955906185154574>.

60 Ezzatullah Mehrdad (@EzzatMehrdad), “A number of Taliban officials visited Dasht-e-Barchi Hazara neighborhood of Kabul and attended a Shia mourning day for Muharram,” Twitter photo, August 17, 2021, <https://twitter.com/ezzatzmehrdad/status/1427596817949155329?lang=en>.

61 SAMRI (@SAMRIReports), “Pro-Taliban sources post interview of #Kabul’s #Shia residents saying that they are happy and secure under the Islamic rule of #Taliban,” Twitter video, August 17, 2021, <https://twitter.com/SAMRIReports/status/1427421382141415424>.

62 Zabihullah Mujahid, statement, *Radio Television Afghanistan*, August 31, 2021.

63 Hashim Wahdatyar (@HashimWahdatyar), “Khalil Haqqani, a Taliban leader called Ahmad Shah Masoud #martyr and #hero,” Twitter video, August 21, 2021, <https://mobile.twitter.com/hashimwahdatyar/status/1429072217741144064>.

64 Jahid Jalal (@A_Jahid_Jalal), “He [Khalil Haqqani] is talking rubbish. Ahmad Shah Masoud was a corrupt, filthy traitor and a spy,” Twitter, August 21, 2021.

seemingly in the name of securing support or acquiescence from its former opponents, the movement made no attempt to formally walk back Haqqani's words.

By attempting to reframe itself as more politically inclusive and socially progressive than it was in the past, the Taliban was transparently working to render itself more palatable to non-supportive audiences in Afghanistan—not to mention the global community—and expand the appeal of its political agenda. In doing so, it was again trying to navigate the transition from insurgent to incumbent, allaying the concerns of supporters of the former government with a view to, borrowing Ellul's words, "integrat[ing] them into the [new] normal framework of politics."⁶⁵

Prosperity

The last undergirding theme of the Taliban's integration-focused utterances after it seized Kabul revolved around economic matters. Since it signed the Doha Accord in 2020, one of the Taliban's core claims has consistently been that it would establish a government that would work to benefit all Afghans, not just those who are pro-Taliban.

After August 15, it doubled down on this sentiment, especially pronounced in an early speech from Muhammad Yaqub, the Taliban's Defense Minister. On August 24, he issued a lengthy statement regarding the formation of its government, which would, he said, be "representative of the whole nation of Afghanistan" and by dint of this uniquely able to restore Afghanistan to its "rightful state" of prosperity.⁶⁶ In the meantime, he urged his listeners, pro- and anti-Taliban alike, to rally behind it and keep calm in the face of the economic crisis they were navigating—a crisis that had already resulted in the Taliban's closure of Afghanistan's banks. This state of flux was, he held, only temporary.⁶⁷

These ideas surfaced frequently in the weeks that followed. In one of Zabihullah Mujahid's first addresses, for example, he similarly claimed that there was no need to worry about Afghanistan's economy, which was on track, he held, to reach historic levels of prosperity.⁶⁸ Mujahid also noted that "several states were already in contact with [the Taliban] for various economic projects" and that these "would bring economic wealth and investment to the country without ever compromising its independence or sovereignty."⁶⁹

Echoing this, several other officials used promises of Afghanistan's future economic clout to try to dissuade Afghans from leaving the country. With the Taliban's rise to power, they claimed, the entire nation was on the cusp of entering into a new era of economic stability and financial wealth. On that basis, instead of flocking to leave Afghanistan, its citizens were encouraged to stay put and look to the future, supporting the Taliban as it set out to define this new phase in Afghanistan's history.⁷⁰

65 Ellul, *Propaganda*, 76.

66 Muhammad Yaqub, interview, *Alemarah Radio*, August 24, 2021.

67 Ibid.

68 Zabihullah Mujahid, "Addressing religious scholars in Kabul," *Radio Television Afghanistan*, August 31, 2021.

69 Ibid.

70 Amir Khan Muttaqi, general statement, August 22, 2021.

Particularly emblematic of this line of reasoning was a speech from the Taliban’s newly appointed Deputy Foreign Minister, Shir Muhammad Abas Stanikzai, at the end of August. In it, he called on the Taliban’s former opponents to unify behind it and, in doing so, normalize its rule and secure the future prospects of Afghanistan.⁷¹ He also asserted that the Taliban intended to institute an inclusive system of governance that would foster economic diversity and secure the rights of all ethnicities and religions. This was repeated almost word for word from an interview between Aljazeera and the Foreign Ministry spokesman Abdul Qahar Balkhi a week earlier.⁷²

The integration logic of the Taliban’s messaging around prosperity was self-evident. By framing its victory as a victory for all Afghans, not just its supporters, it was again attempting to make assurances to its opponents and improve its standing among cynics and critics, selling and defending itself as a viable and credible alternative to the former government.

CONCLUSION

This report demonstrated that the Taliban transformed its approach to strategic communication in the wake of its capture of Kabul on August 15. This transformation was symptomatic of a broader shift in its outreach priorities, one that saw it reorienting its overall approach to focus less on “agitation” messaging—which is, to paraphrase Jacques Ellul, the propaganda of opposition—and more on “integration” messaging, the propaganda of incumbency.

The speed of this transformation suggests the Taliban understands the fundamentals of insurgent strategic communication, something that enabled it to respond to its rapidly changing circumstances nimbly, with coherence, and a high (though not total) degree of message control. It adopted a new media delivery infrastructure, changed how it used Twitter, and publicized a new, more palatable, state-like brand. On top of that, its senior officials systematically attempted to inculcate a more progressive and inclusive image in the weeks after August 15, an image that was apparently considered to be more palatable for the diverse population the Taliban now ruled.

As Ellul writes, the transition from being an opponent to being an incumbent is an “extremely delicate” process that requires careful, incremental deployment of political communications.⁷³ To date, the Taliban appears to have understood that; while it has made many audacious claims about its approach to ruling Afghanistan to date, first and foremost in relation to the economy, the immediacy of expanding the reach of its media output and adjusting its core messaging focus after seizing Kabul speaks to this intuition.

71 Shir Muhammad Abas Stanikzai, public address, Radio Television Afghanistan, August 28, 2021.

72 “Taliban leader Abdul Qahar Balkhi speaks about group’s future,” Al Jazeera, August 22, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/22/abdul-qahar-balkhi-taliban-leader-speaks-about-groups-future>.

73 Ellul, *Propaganda*, 76.

In the weeks and months to come, cracks may begin to appear in what has so far been a fairly unified and systematized approach to strategic outreach. With the worsening humanitarian crisis and crashing economy, not to mention the surge in terrorist violence at the hands of ISKP, the Islamic State's affiliate in Afghanistan, the Taliban's media strategists are increasingly finding themselves tested. Their message of integration—revolving around claims of good governance, effective security, and socio-political inclusivity—only stands to succeed if it, or at least parts of it, is believable.

Taking a step away from Afghanistan and the Taliban, the transformation we explore above is a rare case study in contemporary insurgency and strategic communication. A number of insurgent actors have succeeded in achieving their strategic aims in recent decades. However, setting aside the partial successes of groups such as the Islamic State and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham in parts of Syria and Iraq since 2014, no other insurgent movement to date has made a full transition to incumbency in the era of social media and digitized mass media. On that basis, research on the Taliban's communication strategy is more critical than ever, not only to learn about it and Afghanistan but also to better understand the critical role that strategic outreach plays in insurgency today.

SOURCES

- "27 ANA, ANP personnel surrender in Nawa HELMAND." *Voice of Jihad*, August 1, 2021.
- "Afghanistan: Facebook continues ban of Taliban-related content." *BBC News*, August 17, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-58239786>.
- "Taliban leader Abdul Qahar Balkhi speaks about group's future." *Al Jazeera*, August 22, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/22/abdul-qahar-balkhi-taliban-leader-speaks-about-groups-future>.
- "Triumphant Taliban parades at Kabul airport after US exit." *Al Jazeera*, August 31, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2021/8/31/photos-triumphant-taliban-parades-at-kabul-airport-after-us-exit>.
- "Victorious Force 3." *Radio Television Afghanistan*, September 2, 2021.
- Aggarwal, Neil. *The Taliban's Virtual Emirate: The Culture and Psychology of an Online Militant Community*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.7312/agga17426>.
- Akhund, Muhammad Hassan. "New remarks by Mullah Muhammad Hassan Akhund, Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan Acting Prime Minister." *Bakhtar News Agency*, September 9, 2021.
- Attride-Stirling, Jennifer. "Thematic networks: An analytical tool for qualitative research." *Qualitative Research* 1, no. 3 (2001): 385-405. <https://doi.org/10.1177/146879410100100307>.
- Balki, Abdul Qahar. Interview. *Al Jazeera English*, August 21, 2021.
- Charmaz, Kathy. "The grounded theory method: an explication and interpretation." In *Contemporary Field Research: A Collection of Readings*, edited by Robert M. Emerson. Long Grove: Waveland Press, 1983.
- International Crisis Group. "Taliban Propaganda: Winning the War of Words?" July 24, 2008. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/taliban-propaganda-winning-war-words>.
- Johnson, Thomas. *Taliban Narratives: The Use and Power of Stories in the Afghanistan Conflict*. London: Hurst, 2018.
- Mujahid, Zabihullah. Press conference. August 17, 2021.
- Mujahid, Zabihullah. Press conference. August 17, 2021.
- Mujahid, Zabihullah. Statement. *Radio Television Afghanistan*, August 31, 2021.
- Mujahid, Zabihullah. "Addressing religious scholars in Kabul." *Radio Television Afghanistan*, August 31, 2021.
- Mujahid, Zabihullah. Interview. *Shamshad News*, September 22, 2021.
- Muttaqi, Amir Khan. Interview. *BBC Pashto*, August 15, 2021.
- Muttaqi, Amir Khan. Interview. *BBC Pashto*, August 15, 2021.
- Muttaqi, Amir Khan. General statement. August 22, 2021.
- Stanikzai, Shir Muhammad Abas. Public address. *Radio Television Afghanistan*, August 28, 2021.
- Winter, Charlie, and Abdullah Alrhoun. *Mapping the Extremist Narrative Landscape in Afghanistan* (ExTrac, 2020), https://public-assets.extrac.io/reports/ExTrac_Afghanistan_201120.pdf.
- Yaqub, Muhammad. Interview. *Alemarah Radio*, August 24, 2021.

About the Authors

Dr. Charlie Winter is Director of Research at ExTrac. Over the course of the last decade, he has worked in a range of academic and policy-focused positions in the US and UK, researching how and why violent extremists use strategic communications. His research has been supported by the Global Internet Forum for Counter-Terrorism (GIFCT), Facebook, the UK Home Office and the US Department for Homeland Security, among others. Besides this, Charlie is an Associate Fellow at the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, and an Associate of the Imperial War Museum Institute in London. He is also member of the RESOLVE Network Research Advisory Council. *iplomacy, Communication, and Peace: Selected Essays (2021).*

Abdul Sayed is an analyst at ExTrac. He has a Master's degree in Political Science from Lund University, Sweden. From Afghanistan but with experience living in Pakistan, Mr. Sayed is a fluent Urdu, Dari, and Pashto speaker. To date, his work on the topics of transnational jihadism and anti-state extremism in AfPak has appeared in international outlets including the CTC Sentinel, Washington Post, News Week, Foreign Policy, and the Soufan Center, among others. He also writes frequently for the BBC Urdu and BBC Monitoring on Islamist militancy in Afghanistan and South Asia.

Abdullah Alrhoun is Chief Technology Officer at ExTrac. He is also a PhD candidate of network science in the Department of Network and Data Science at Central European University and holds a master's degree in engineering. His work revolves around the real-world use of data analytics, including understanding complex systems through big data, text mining of extremist content, and developing tools to detect fake imagery. His research also explores extremism, disinformation and misinformation diffusion and the viral communication of online hate. Currently, he is a visiting scholar at the Observatory on Social Media at Indiana University, researching the role of social bots in misinformation dissemination.

RESOLVE NETWORK

better research • informed practice • improved policy on violent extremism •

www.resolvevet.org



RESOLVE is housed at the U.S. Institute of Peace, building upon the Institute's decades-long legacy of deep engagement in conflict affected communities.



UNITED STATES
INSTITUTE OF PEACE
Making Peace Possible

ExTrac is a conflict analytics system that combines real-time violent extremist organisation (VEO) attack and communications data with artificial intelligence-driven analytics to provide actionable insights for counter-terrorism and counter-violent extremism policymakers and practitioners.

EXTRAC

RESOLVE

NETWORK



UNITED STATES
INSTITUTE OF PEACE
Making Peace Possible