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ISLAM, DIGITAL COMMUNICATION, AND THE TALIBAN: PATTERNS OF INTERNET USE AND ONLINE INFLUENCE AFTER COMING TO POWER

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Abstract: *This article examines the characteristics and patterns of social media use by the Taliban after coming to power. Based on a systematic analysis of works on the subject of the study, as well as individual empirical data, several stages were identified in the transition from the ‘traditional Taliban’, which sought to limit Afghans’ access to the outside world by shutting down the Internet and banning television and radio, to ‘Taliban 2.0’, which develops and implements comprehensive strategies for online presence, interaction and influence on various population groups based on a three-step ‘ladder’ model. The study concluded that after an initial attempt to completely isolate the population from the outside world in 2001, the Taliban’s attitude towards the Internet and social media has changed significantly. Members of the movement recognize the importance of these tools in disseminating information, forming a system of communication with the population, and highlighting priorities for territorial development and inter-state relations. The Taliban’s active use of social platforms continues to elicit mixed reactions.*

First and foremost, this is due to the fact that despite the reorientation of messages towards issues of territorial development and solving pressing economic problems, in-depth analysis reveals the ideology, culture and political dynamics of the ‘old Taliban’ presented in a ‘new guise’ using adapted strategies. However, the expansion of their cross-border online presence is most likely aimed at establishing the relatively positive image of ‘Taliban 2.0’ that has been created over the years, but now at the level of the global community.

Keywords: Taliban, social media, propaganda, Afghanistan, power, ideology.

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The phenomenon of the Taliban’s presence in the social sphere at the present time is of particular academic interest due to its polarizing nature. On the one hand, propaganda aims to transform the image of aggressors and usurpers of power that took shape a decade ago; on the other hand, the desire for total control over the use of social media within the country prevents reliable information from reaching beyond the established territory. In this context, questions arise regarding the study of transformation stages of the Taliban’s online presence, the identification of persistent trends and new patterns of behavior, and the classification of the strategies employed. The methodology of this study is based on general research methods such as analysis and synthesis, deduction and induction, and historical genetic method, aimed at identifying the characteristics of the ‘traditional’ Taliban’s digital communication, the factors behind the transition to ‘Taliban 2.0’ propaganda, and determining its structure and key features.

The first appearance of the Taliban during the civil war in Afghanistan in 1994 was accompanied by the local spread of ideology, which was a by-product of the military and political actions of the movement and focused on restoring security, reducing crime and introducing Sharia law, mainly through word of mouth. Instead of using information and communication technologies to spread propaganda, the Taliban, considering them a dangerous influence of the West, banned the use of the Internet in 2001 in order to minimize access to 'anti-Islamic' materials [Corsello, 2022, p. 30].

For two decades, the Taliban has used complex strategies, including the use of social media, to transform public opinion and strengthen the movement's power. Other strategies included addressing important issues in the development of agricultural areas, solving the problems of the rural population, continuously disseminating information about their determination to regain control of the country, and shaping the image of 'true warriors of Islam' [Misra, 2022]. It can therefore be said that the Taliban's propaganda relied heavily on image-building techniques, combining strategies of shaping public opinion regarding the movement with methods designed to portray its members as fighters for regional development.

Even before the emergence of 'Taliban 2.0' that replaced the 'traditional Taliban', members of the movement were present in the social sphere, as evidenced by the creation of the Alemarah website [Johnson et al., 2021]. Researchers also emphasize that Bin Laden recognized the importance of using media to spread anti-Western ideology not only among his supporters, but also among the younger generation in Muslim countries [Taylor, 2013].

An analysis of the Taliban's use of media, including social media, reveals that, in addition to promoting the movement's values and calling for resistance to the authorities, it also took on certain social roles. Thus, the Taliban presented itself to the people as a 'moderate force', despite the aggressiveness of its members' actual actions, whose sole purpose was to ensure sovereignty and create an 'Islamic Afghanistan' for the needs of the people. At the same time, Taliban propaganda defined the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) as 'invaders' and the Afghan government and security forces as 'puppets' in the hands of these invaders [Bernatis, 2014]. The Taliban's control of the public narrative, as a tool for spreading their ideas, is aimed not only at shaping a specific image in the eyes of the people, but also at fostering a particular political discourse that aligns the interests of the "ruling elites" into the communicative environment – both within the sphere of power (within the country and beyond its borders) and within the global community as a whole.

By presenting foreign organizations as invaders, the Taliban automatically questioned their legitimacy, laying the groundwork for strengthening its influence not only on Afghans but also on the international community, as evidenced by the fact that its propaganda messages were duplicated in different languages². If we try to systematize the key 'roles' of the Taliban, conveyed through social media and designed to reform public opinion about the movement's activities, we can identify three main categories: The Taliban as a 'government in waiting'³, as victors⁴, and as defenders of the population⁵. These roles were also actively reinforced by reports of desertions from the Afghan army and data on the Taliban's interaction with representatives of foreign forces [Courchesne et al., 2022].

At the same time, Taliban propaganda appears to be quite contradictory, requiring in-depth analysis to minimize the likelihood of the 'post hoc ergo propter hoc' error⁶ and simple

¹ Interchangeable names: 'Reformed Taliban,' 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA)'.

² In Arabic, English, Pashto, Persian, Turkish, Urdu, etc. [Bodetti, 2016].

³ Forming the conviction that, given sufficient conditions and civil support, the Taliban will inevitably come to power.

⁴ Publication of the Taliban's strategic victories for the purpose of political mobilization of the population.

⁵ Counter-propaganda messages primarily related to exaggerating the number of civilians killed by foreign forces and the Afghan government (delegitimization).

⁶ Lat. 'after that, therefore because of that': a logical error in which a simple sequence of events is taken to be a cause-and-effect relationship [Ivin, Nikiforov, 1997].

assumptions about the existence of causal relationships between phenomena. It can be assumed that the dissemination of information by the Taliban played a role in increasing the motivation of fighters during the re-seizure of power, but questions remain about the differentiation of motives for individual Taliban groups and the influence of propaganda on the Taliban's ultimate success [Wani, 2023].

The 'Taliban 2.0' completely changed the paradigm of managing the dissemination of information using social networks, forming a so-called "ladder" consisting of three 'steps' or stages. The first stage, which can be called 'electronic activation', involves providing key information to various recipients⁷. The second stage is 'electronic interaction', which involves the formation and development of communication channels through which members of the movement find 'points of contact' with the target audience (e.g., opinion exchange forums, online surveys, etc.). The final stage is 'electronic empowerment', which essentially means the possibility of direct cooperation between citizens and representatives of the movement [Wani, 2023, p. 2–3].

However, the very idea of such cooperation is thwarted by the reality that the Taliban lack coordination in their actions. Thus, following their re-seizure of power in 2021, two distinct factions emerged within the Taliban: the so-called 'Kandahar faction' and the 'Kabul faction', whose key differences lay in their attitudes toward Sharia law and Afghanistan's isolation from the outside world. In their quest to enforce prescribed norms and eradicate the 'source of unbelief', the Kandahar faction attempted to completely shut down the internet in Afghanistan in September 2025. However, representatives of the Kabul faction, who seek to transform Afghanistan into a theocratic, authoritarian state that interacts with the international community, insisted on the need to reverse this decision. [Peltier, 2025]. In this regard, a pressing question arises: how can communication be established between the Taliban leadership and society given such polarized attitudes toward social media platforms and the internet as a whole, and how can ideas be disseminated with the complete exclusion of any channels of digital interaction?

Evidence of the practical implementation of the 'ladder' concept is confirmed by the actual residence and employment of the Afghan masses⁸ in provincial capitals, as well as by the public celebration of the Taliban's re-seizure of power on 15 August 2021, – supporters of the movement took to the streets to demonstrate the effective completion of the third step of the ladder – the expansion of their rights and opportunities [Almoqbel, Xu, 2019].

These features highlight the scale of social media's influence on the general public. The use of online tools has enabled the Taliban to convey their beliefs to various target audiences, even though the dissemination of messages was completely unregulated and not based on funding [Nakov, Martino, 2021]. Particular attention should be paid to the ways in which extremist organizations present information, which are largely based on moral intuitions⁹ that can determine not only the attitude towards the information received, but also the behavior patterns of the recipients in the present and future. In particular, such tactics of influence are effective in relation to the younger generation who actively uses the Internet, due to its underdeveloped communication and self-regulation skills, socio-legal immaturity, and need for a sense of belonging and involvement [Anin et al., 2022, p. 292].

The Taliban's interaction with the public through social media before and after coming to power is also characterized by a high level of personalization. For example, with the active use of Facebook and X, informative posts were accompanied by direct communication between the target audience and press secretary Zabihullah Mujahid, who personally answered questions [Bahar,

⁷ The Taliban, civil society in areas of presence, Internet users in other countries.

⁸ Supporters of the Taliban.

⁹ Instantly (automatically) formed emotional judgements that are not supported by the results of conscious logical analysis.

2020]. Currently, the trend of direct interaction supports the shift in narrative from ‘warriors of Islam’ seeking to restore the rights and freedoms of the population¹⁰ to the general maintenance of a positive image of those already in power, including for the purpose of minimizing resistance to illegitimate authority without official diplomatic recognition. ‘Taliban 2.0’ seeks to use social media to ‘maintain visibility’ and communicate with supporters, as well as to develop an image of ‘good guys’ who won the war and now want to keep the peace in the conquered land [Yousaf, Jabarkhail, 2022].

Currently, the Taliban’s social media strategy has undergone a number of changes. For example, in view of the restrictions imposed in 2022–2023 on the use of platforms such as YouTube, Facebook¹¹, Instagram¹², and WhatsApp by representatives of the movement, accounts whose posts contain ‘traces’ of the Afghan Taliban (commissioned posts), as well as accounts of officials, police officers and Taliban soldiers, have been deleted. The Taliban’s development strategy itself is based on ‘three pillars’ – X (formerly Twitter), WhatsApp and Telegram, and the posts themselves, most of which are aimed at ensuring the legitimacy of the movement’s authority in the occupied territories, focus on socio-economic development. The Taliban clearly prefer X, as openly stated by Zabihullah Mujahid, the Taliban’s official spokesman since 2007, due to its mass popularity that forms the ability to expand the reach of information and communication messages, influence the self-identification and ideological affiliation of the population, and relatively liberal content publication policy without automatic blocking of posts containing violations such as propaganda of violence, military actions, etc. [Amiri, 2023].

The Taliban’s use of social media platforms is a matter of debate, particularly with regard to its transparency and legality. According to data from dataset X in May 2025, around 78 suspicious accounts were identified, actively posting ‘pro-Taliban’ content, containing the name of the Panjshiri region (opponents of the Taliban) and presenting themselves as ethnic Tajiks. This approach, on the one hand, aims to create the illusion of an inclusive government; on the other, shifts public opinion ‘in the moment’ using the mirroring technique (an attempt to counter negative events by posting positive content). Furthermore, the use of bots has touched upon such sensitive topics as women’s rights (the majority of accounts are registered under Tajik women’s names, despite the clear repression of women and restrictions on their rights to education and employment) [Alamdard, 2025]. Thus, the range of tasks for external users of information published by the Taliban on social media is expanding to include practices for identifying organized and structured networks for the dissemination of fake data using platform algorithms, alongside tasks for identifying the actual instances of disinformation.

It is worth noticing that at this stage in the evolution of the Taliban’s presence in social media, the trend of social media influencers (most often white) visiting Afghanistan to communicate directly with the Taliban appears to be highly controversial. Influencers seek not only to immerse themselves in Taliban culture and obtain answers to questions of public interest (political regime, women’s rights, education, etc.), but also to highlight these features in a predominantly positive light. For those representatives of the Taliban who are willing to engage in contact, a separate name, ‘Talibros’¹³, has even been created by social media users [Elnashar, 2025]. This trend has provoked an extremely ambiguous reaction from the public, since, on the one hand, studying Taliban culture from within is of research interest (especially given the high level of information secrecy of the Taliban before it came to power), but on the other hand, highlighting only positive

¹⁰ The four ‘pillars’: The Taliban’s national sovereignty over Afghan land, the Taliban’s military power, the sanctity of the Taliban’s jihad, and the authority of the Taliban’s Islamic Emirate [EFSAS, 2020].

¹¹ Forbidden in Russia.

¹² Forbidden in Russia.

¹³ Derived from the combination of the words ‘Taliban’ and the abbreviated form of the word ‘brother’ (‘bro’).

aspects can lead to a distortion of data and divert public attention from pressing issues. Moreover, the question arises about the authenticity of such content, – whether it is the expression of the influencers’ own will, or the result of a paid online campaign. Currently, there is no evidence that the Taliban pays online personalities, but members of the movement actively create videos to attract tourists [Rajvanshi, 2025].

In other words, influencers act as a kind of ‘lobbyists’ within a decentralized and semi-structured social ecosystem. The involvement of online personalities, combined with the interaction of the Talibs with each other, generates traffic and promotes content to friendly or neutral publications, thereby raising awareness among the general public without additional financial costs on the part of the movement’s participants. This approach allows the Taliban to control the narrative and maintain a certain image, while diverting public attention from the regime’s numerous shortcomings [Khorasani, 2025]. This feature once again highlights the evolution of the Taliban’s online presence strategies, as well as diversification of channels for influencing the target audience on a global level. The Taliban’s collaboration with influencers raises a whole range of questions regarding the commercial aspect of this partnership (paid promotion), the accuracy of the information provided to the general public, and the authenticity of the values and ideas being promoted. In our view, the ‘selective’ coverage of individual opinions, ideas, and behavioral patterns does not allow for the formation of a comprehensive understanding of the totality of the ideological values and socio-political aspirations of ‘Taliban 2.0’, and the involvement of people who are ‘unfamiliar’ with the details of Taliban rule in promotional efforts inevitably leads to information asymmetry, the distortion of significant facts, and the formation of false opinions based on the emotional component of content perception (i.e., audience’s blind trust in an influencer).

In summary, it is safe to say that the Taliban recognizes the importance of social media in disseminating information, establishing a system of communication with the population, and highlighting priorities for territorial development and inter-state relations. The Taliban’s active use of social platforms, in spite of imposition of a number of restrictive measures, evokes mixed feelings among academic and expert communities, as it is sometimes extremely difficult to separate truth from myth in the social sphere. Despite the apparent reorientation of the Taliban’s messages on social media towards issues of territorial development and resolution of pressing economic problems, an in-depth analysis reveals the ideology, culture and political dynamics of the ‘old Taliban’, partly because the people who have held these positions since the 1990s are still in power today. The old ideology is now being presented in a ‘new guise’, with the involvement of representatives of the younger generation (influencers), including those from other countries, with the aim of establishing the relatively positive image¹⁴ that has been created over the years, but now at the level of the global community.

The ambiguity of communication practices in the digital sphere —marked by the use of bots to disseminate information and influence public opinion, and the recruitment of foreign online influencers to promote carefully selected ideas and values – and the inability to reach a consensus regarding Afghanistan’s internet isolation from the outside world, allow us to characterize the Taliban’s internet strategy as a combined one, pursuing several objectives simultaneously – the formation and entrenchment of a positive image among external users of information whilst simultaneously restricting the use of social media within the country to avoid the risk of this image being debunked due to the dissemination of factual data.

In this regard, it is important to emphasize the exceptional significance of increasing the level of digital literacy, social and legal culture, and critical thinking in order to identify and

¹⁴ Based on the Taliban’s system of ‘roles’ and the creation of a unified “mythology” through narratives of strategic victories and the liberation of Afghanistan from ‘invaders’ in the form of foreign forces [Akram et al., 2023].

subsequently block propaganda messages and distorted data, methods of distracting attention from pressing issues, and reduce the likelihood of spreading extremist sentiments among young people, who are the most active Internet users.

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