
The Evolution in the Taliban's Media Strategy



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IN THE MID-1990s, the Taliban took control of Afghanistan for the first time. They [banned](#) photography, TV, music, and all forms of entertainment. Soon after, the Taliban [banned](#) the internet in early 2001, and then-Foreign Minister Mawlavi Wakil Ahmad Muttawakil famously [stated](#), “We want to establish a system in Afghanistan through which we can control all those things that are wrong, obscene, immoral, and against Islam.”

After being dislodged from Afghanistan following the 2001 U.S. intervention, however, the Taliban's [approach](#) to media changed dramatically. Over the course of the movement's two-decade insurgency, the Taliban developed a complex [media strategy](#) that contributed significantly to its rapid military



Image 1: A Taliban enforcement unit patrols the streets amidst a crowd of supporters and onlookers.

advance and takeover of Afghanistan by August 2021. Since then, their media strategy has shifted again as the movement attempts to transition from insurgency to a governing body. As such, the Taliban's current strategy builds on the ideological foundation from the 1990s combined with a continuation of certain tactics and approaches adopted during two decades of insurgency. This article divides the Taliban's media strategy into three phases accordingly: the movement's first period of rule from 1996 to 2001, the 2001-2021 insurgency, and their return to power following the fall of Kabul in August 2021. It discusses each phases' distinct characteristics, shared aspects with other phases, and what the

evolution in the Taliban's media strategy reveals about the future trajectory of the information environment in Afghanistan.

1996-2001: Maximum Control

Prior to 2001, the Taliban [banned](#) the use of the internet, dismantled state-run television stations, criminalized watching television altogether, banned music, and prosecuted people who violated these laws. Music was, in fact, one of the first casualties when a city fell to the Taliban. Upon [seizing control](#), Taliban soldiers would open audio and video cassettes, rip out the tapes, and hang them on fences. When they took over Kabul in 1996, Afghanistan's only radio station was [ransacked](#) and its library of music was destroyed.

The Taliban's ultra-conservative laws were [implemented](#) by the moral police, *amr bel ma'rof* (Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice—PVPV). PVPV police would stop vehicles on roads and search for hidden tapes and video cassettes. The luckier offenders might escape punishment with a warning to spend their time in the mosque and in service of religion. The more unfortunate 'offenders' would be thrown in jail, and some would experience [public punishment](#). In an interview with the author, a 45-year-old man from Herat recalls: "I have seen the Taliban punishing men who were caught with VHS cassettes. I remember clearly, on one occasion, a young man, 25-30, then around my age, was caught with VHS cassettes by the *amr-e bel ma'rof*. They had put the man in the back of a white Toyota pickup truck. The Taliban had wrapped the tape around his neck and body and had blacked his face. They were driving the car slowly in streets and announcing through a loudspeaker that that was the fate of people who violated the Taliban's decrees."¹

Under the Taliban's policy of maximum control, international and regional media had limited to no presence in the country, and the local media was under ubiquitous control of the Taliban's Islamic Emirate. The radio stations that remained on air were state-run and broadcasted a limited number of programs, which mainly consisted of propagandized accounts of international and national news and religion-focused content.² In these years prior to the widespread adoption of internet-capable smart phones, the Taliban could easily control the flow of information. As such, in the absence of an independent media and with draconian censorship placed on external media, the information flow to Afghan citizens was carefully controlled. But in the years that followed their ouster from Afghanistan, the Taliban's strict policies changed significantly.

2001-2021: An Insurgent Media

Following the toppling of the Taliban's regime in 2001, [reconstruction](#) and infrastructure modernization [efforts](#) across Afghanistan proved to be a great boon to civil society. By 2016, [estimates](#) showed that 89% of Afghans had internet access via their mobile telephone. The opportunities presented by a rapidly changing media landscape were not lost on the Taliban, who resolved to dramatically increase the reach of their online propaganda and recruitment materials. The advent of encrypted messaging applications such as WhatsApp, Viber, and Telegram, offered the movement expanded opportunities both to connect and communicate, and to increase operational security in the online sphere.

Similar to other violent jihadist groups like Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, the Taliban worked to establish significant public [presence](#) on social media platforms including Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Telegram, and TikTok in order to cultivate virtual online communities. These virtual communities offered the Taliban invaluable fundraising mechanisms and amplified the movement's recruitment and outreach capabilities. Furthermore, the distributed nature and lack of reliance on any fixed physical infrastructure made them difficult to shut down and control. As the Taliban's spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahid, [said](#): "We are trying to make the most of modern facilities to suit our needs". The Taliban's largely decentralized media strategy served to maximize outreach and information dissemination, foster grassroots support, and protect against decapitation strikes like the October 8, 2001 U.S. [air strike](#) that cobbled the Taliban's official Voice of Shariat radio in Kabul.

Although the media strategy of the Taliban as an insurgency shared a number of similarities to that of other violent jihadist groups, the content differed significantly. The Taliban strategically positioned itself as a nationalist group with the aim of establishing its Emirate in Afghanistan only, as opposed to groups whose aim it is to establish a Caliphate across international borders, most notably the Islamic State. The Taliban [framed](#) itself as a "national" Islamist group that fought against foreign invaders for the right to self-determination, bolstering its own legitimacy and delegitimizing the former Afghan government at the same time throughout audio, video and textual publications. Military competence and victories were strategically [featured](#) to further boost the Taliban's credibility as a significant and powerful actor. [Research on videos produced by the Taliban](#) during this period illustrates that depicting military conquest and flaunting victories was the most common theme expressed across a large sample of videos. This same study showed that public relations and engagement with the local population was a primary concern for the Taliban prior to the fall of Kabul in August 2021. Members of the local population were often [interviewed](#) by Taliban media teams to illustrate public support following successful military operations and to air public grievances (e.g. reporting on civilian casualties after bombardments or military operations by the former Afghan government).

During this period, the Taliban's media strategy was successful primarily because of its expeditious approach in outcompeting the international coalition forces and Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) in the propaganda domain. The Taliban consistently managed to produce content and [frame](#) the most recent operations and attacks much earlier than the coalition and former Afghan government could, allowing the insurgency to shape the information environment and force their adversaries to respond. For example, the Taliban would rapidly [produce](#) video clips of civilian casualties caused by night raids or bombardments by the coalition and ANDSF, and easily disseminate them to rural areas whereupon they quickly spread through social media platforms, Telegram, and WhatsApp. By the time the coalition and former government had written their briefs or organized a news conference to send out their version of the story, the reputational damage was already done.

Additionally, the Taliban had strategically formulated its messages to [leverage](#) local culture and resonate with local populations, a tactic the coalition forces and former Afghan government failed to successfully incorporate into their strategic communications. This



Image 2: A Taliban video released during the 2021 military offensive claims the capture of government weapons and fighters.

strategy of reshaping the movement's identity as rooted in Afghan culture and therefore legitimate won them critical support amongst local influential figures such as mullahs, religious scholars, and community elders. When the Taliban's military offensives swept across the country in the later years of their insurgency, these figures played a key role in [convincing](#) the ANDSF members and Afghan officials to surrender rather than fight. Reportedly, [Ismail Khan](#), a former warlord and leader of the anti-Taliban resistance movement in Herat city, stated that religious scholars from Herat met with him in an attempt to convince him not to oppose the Taliban during the latter's successful military offensives.

The Taliban's messaging strategy was also tailored toward an audience that shared similar religious views. In the period 2001-2015, Afghanistan witnessed an exponential increase in the number of mosques and madrassas, the majority of which were not formally registered. According to the former Ministry of Haj and Religious Affairs only [3,500 mosques out of 12,000](#) were registered in 2014. While thousands of youth gained religious training and education in these spaces, the government was less concerned with addressing the radicalizing influence of extremist content than it was with countering the Taliban's military offenses. As a result, the underlying extremist ideologies that eventually facilitated the Taliban's rise to power went largely [unaddressed](#). What's more, many madrassas had strong outreach channels and significant popularity that they used to openly challenge the policies of the

former government and civil society in Afghanistan. For example, a [popular Mullah in Herat city, Mujib-ul Rahman](#), managed to prevent a singer from giving a concert in the city, deeming the event un-Islamic. More recently, during a [gathering](#) organized by the Taliban, he made the controversial statement that “anyone opposing our Islamic government [the Taliban’s Emirate] should be decapitated.” Extremist religious views were often compounded by opposition to values such as democracy, women’s rights, and freedom of speech. Because they shared many similar views and values, the Taliban had no difficulty [reaching](#) multiple segments of the population. The cumulative effect over several years and countless Taliban media products was the shaping and then mobilization of public opinion in key provinces and districts all across the country.

Finally, it cannot be ignored that the Taliban’s media strategy proved particularly effective in shaping the narrative around the U.S. troop withdrawal agreement. That agreement, [signed](#) by the U.S. and the Taliban February 2020, completely sidelined the former Afghan government and was sold to the Afghan people as the Taliban’s victory and the beginning of the end of Ghani’s government. In fact, the ANDSF’s reluctance to fight the Taliban in many areas during the 2021 Taliban offensive has also been partially attributed to the impact of the latter’s effective [psychological warfare](#) that demoralized of the Afghan Security Forces in the wake of the February 2020 agreement. And to audiences abroad, senior Taliban officials—including wanted terrorists—were writing [opinion pieces](#) in outlets like the *New York Times* that whitewashed their crimes and presented the image of a changed organization, a “Taliban 2.0”. As a result, over the course of two decades the Taliban insurgency effectively segmented audiences at home and abroad, leveraged new mediums as well as ones they had previously shunned, and out-messaged their adversaries through a comprehensive and cohesive insurgent media strategy.

August 2021-Present: Media Blackout & Social Control

Following the capture of Kabul on August 15, 2021, the Taliban initially [launched](#) a public relations campaign to craft a different image of the group, distancing themselves from their legacy of brutal force and violent oppression of women. Under the gaze of the international media, the Taliban has tried to appear moderate and refrain from openly taking a harsh stance on multiple issues. However, in reality the Taliban has been covertly trying to control the flow of information into and out of the country. While the national media is facing heavy [restrictions](#) and the international media has limited presence in the country, obtaining valid and independent news from Afghanistan is becoming extremely difficult, in some cases impossible.

Under the Taliban's Emirate, the once free and dynamic media of Afghanistan has perished. Many TV and radio channels have [closed](#) and the few that are still operating have to adhere to strict [regulations and censorship](#). Female television presenters must [cover](#) their faces while on air, and entertainment programs—particularly those showing women—have been stopped. Many journalists operating in the



Image 3: Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid at a press conference in Kabul following the Taliban takeover. Photo: PTI/AP

country are self-censoring, and those who have criticized the Taliban's government or leadership have [faced](#) persecution, imprisonment, and torture. The Taliban have even gone to the extreme of threatening foreign journalists to recant their stories and [apologize publicly](#).

The Taliban has also been trying to control social media by flooding multiple platforms with an increasingly active online presence that has only ramped up since their takeover in 2021. [Dozens of pro-Taliban accounts sprang](#) up shortly after the fall of Kabul in 2021. Many more dormant accounts of Taliban supporters and associates on platforms such as Facebook and

Twitter have become [active](#) again. A large number of these accounts concertedly share videos and posts that present the Taliban in a favourable light, or function as dissemination channels for various top-down messages of the Taliban's Emirate. Most of these pro-Taliban accounts have carefully avoided posting content that openly espouses violence or hate speech that would violate social media companies' rules and result in account suspension.

Recently, Meta (formerly known as Facebook) [banned](#) Taliban-related pages, including a number of Facebook pages associated with various Taliban ministries and state-run news agencies. Following Meta's efforts to de-platform Taliban government-run pages, Afghan online advocates and supporters [launched](#) a hashtag #BanTaliban on Twitter that found significant traction. However, these efforts were quickly [countered](#) by Taliban supporters who launched the hashtag #AfghansSupportTaliban, which has since eclipsed the #BanTaliban push and now become the dominant trend in Afghanistan. It is common to see many Taliban supporters and sympathizers present on Twitter discussion spaces organized by human right activists and journalists. Furthermore, any general criticism of the Taliban and their policies by online activists is very likely to receive reactionary comments from pro-Taliban supporters.

This current phase of the Taliban's media strategy since their takeover last August combines the desire for authoritarian control over the flow of information from their first period in power with a fiercely competitive media strategy modelled on their decades of insurgency experience. The Taliban's rule

during the 1990s afforded the movement experience in exerting absolute control over traditional media, which was relatively easily managed given the fixed nature of radio and TV stations. The insurgency period taught the Taliban the power of a decentralized multi-media approach, one in which messages are developed rapidly in response to the latest events, spread widely across multiple mediums, and amplified by key supporting nodes. This proved to be a successful media strategy for the Taliban as an insurgency, and the movement shows every intention of leveraging those experiences today. However, while the Taliban can more easily exert control over traditional media sources in the country, it faces a number of challenges in controlling the narrative online regardless of its large number of active supporters and sympathizers across various social media platforms.

As a result, for many Afghans opposing the Taliban, the only venue of resistance is online. Those inside Afghanistan increasingly resort to platforms such as Twitter that allow for anonymous commentary. Still, some Afghans abroad have been vocal critics of the Taliban for mistreating women, activists, and religious and ethnic minorities, but others who have left families behind fear retribution by the Taliban and refrain from speaking out. Under these circumstances, [civil society organizations](#) need to proactively seek out these stifled, lost, and censored voices and amplify them. In the same vein, social media platforms bear responsibility for clearly articulating and strictly enforcing policies related to hate speech, extremism, and other policies involving Taliban media output and online supporters. These platforms cannot allow the Taliban to suffocate voices of dissent, and need to be watchful for changing dynamics in the user landscape inside the country, monitor warning signs of increased Taliban crackdowns, and respond accordingly. Establishing dedicated monitoring teams and a coordinated working group through the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT)—staffed and supported by Afghan activists and civil society organizations—would help to achieve these objectives. If narratives generated inside Afghanistan lose diversity and increasingly favour the Taliban, it is a good indication that the Taliban has started to exercise even greater control over internal dissent. In this crucial period of consolidation following their takeover, the Taliban cannot be allowed to achieve dominance in the information environment.

The Three Phases of the Taliban's Media Strategy

The Taliban's media strategy has evolved significantly since their early days in power during the 1990s, when the information flow was limited and the Taliban had complete control over traditional forms of media such as printed publications and radio. There was very limited presence of international media, and the local media was under strict control and censorship.

With the change in the Taliban's status from rulers to insurgency following the 2001 U.S. intervention in Afghanistan, the Taliban's media strategy evolved significantly. This phase (2001-2021) is characterized by expansive use of diverse media to promote the movement, and bears a number of

similarities to other violent jihadist movements such as Al Qaeda & the Islamic State. The Taliban utilized a decentralized structure, one tailored towards a diverse audience and aimed at attracting potential recruits and financial support. With a plethora of supporters and sympathizers to spread its message, the Taliban maintained an active presence on various social media platforms despite frequent account bans.

After the Taliban took control of Kabul in August 2021, the movement expanded its use of both traditional and new media. Taliban officials and supporters have reactivated their social media accounts and have appeared on local and international TV. Just as in the 1990s, however, the Taliban is again trying to control the flow of information. As the physical space for activism has shrunk or disappeared in Afghanistan, many activists view social media, particularly platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, as the only venue for debating and raising criticism about the Taliban. Pro-Taliban accounts and users have also increased to react to and counter these challenges to the movement's authoritarian need for control. To what extent the Taliban will succeed in controlling the flow of information and using media as a means of social control depends on how successful it is in solidifying power and establishing its theocracy through mediums new and old.

Endnotes

¹ Interview with author, conducted on July 28th on WhatsApp.

² Authors' observations while living in Afghanistan at the time.