

In This Volume

Volume: 04

May 2020

Cyber Jihadists

The Confluence of Extremism and Digital Technology in Afghanistan

Elham Gharji

Ph.D. Candidate in International Politics
and Conflict Resolution



Contact Us

 @AISS_Afg

 /AISSAfghanistan

 contact@aiss.af

 www.aiss.af

Summary

- The digital space in Afghanistan is emerging as a new battlefield for ideological warfare where actors ranging from government, political groups, civil society, and women activists to ultra-conservative and violent religious extremist groups all compete for influence. Social media makes the heartland of this new battle.
- Violent Religious Extremist (VRE) groups in Afghanistan are actively using social media for information warfare and militant recruitment. While the Afghan digital space remains diverse and critical of extremist groups, it is also witnessing a resilient VRE information ecosystem exposure to which constitutes a major risk for online radicalization.
- Afghanistan has one of the world's youngest populations which are struggling with persistent violence, endemic poverty, corruption, and political crisis. These conditions create significant structural risk factors for radicalization and extremist mobilization. To mitigate risks, it is crucial to raise public awareness about the scope of the risk, improve digital safety practices, and empower civil society to build social resilience against violent extremism.

Key Points:

- The digital space in Afghanistan is emerging as a new battlefield for ideological warfare where actors ranging from government, political groups, civil society, and women activists to ultra-conservative and violent religious extremist groups all compete for influence. Social media makes the heartland of this new battle.
- Violent Religious Extremist (VRE) groups in Afghanistan are actively using social media for information warfare and militant recruitment. While the Afghan digital space remains diverse and critical of extremist groups, it is also witnessing a resilient VRE information ecosystem exposure to which constitutes a major risk for online radicalization.
- Afghanistan has one of the world's youngest populations which are struggling with persistent violence, endemic poverty, corruption, and political crisis. These conditions create significant structural risk factors for radicalization and extremist mobilization. To mitigate risks, it is crucial to raise public awareness about the scope of the risk, improve digital safety practices, and empower civil society to build social resilience against violent extremism.

Introduction

Despite having made progress in the areas of education, civil society, and democratic values over the last two decades, Afghanistan has been struggling with a growing problem of Violent Religious Extremism (VRE). Extremist religious ideologies have been infiltrating the Afghan social spaces through both traditional means such as mosques and madrassas, and modern infrastructures such as internet technology. Inspired by the experience of the global Jihadi groups in the Middle East, VRE groups in Afghanistan have turned to the internet and social media technology to disseminate war-related news, frame events, create or contest narratives, and expand their social bases.

This brief provides insights into the use of social media technology by VRE groups in Afghanistan. Findings point to the existence of a rather large VRE information ecosystem in the Afghan social media space, which involves both militant groups such as the Taliban and non-militant extremist networks that provide material support to VRE. Together, they constitute a VRE online community that is considerably large in terms of reach and digital subscription, and diverse in terms of actors.

The scope and scale of VRE contents in the Afghans digital space creates concerns for militant recruitment and online radicalization and undermines prospects of peace and stability in the country beyond the ongoing Taliban insurgency. Afghanistan has one of the youngest populations in the world which is struggling with endemic poverty and corruption, poor educational infrastructures, individual, and group grievances as well as the experience of violence and loss. All of these constitute significant structural risk factors for violent religious extremist mobilization.

With a growing number of Afghan youth turning into social media consumers each day, the VRE online ecosystem poses both immediate and long-term threats to Afghanistan's prospects of peace and stability. This brief maps the VRE social media in Afghanistan and highlights its potential impact on Afghan society as an emerging challenge. It also calls for a more comprehensive study of the scope and dynamics of the problem.

Notes on Methodology

This paper is compiled based on social media monitoring of VRE content on four major social media platforms in Afghanistan: Facebook, Twitter, Telegram, and YouTube. The study found that other platforms such as Instagram, Vkontakte, TamTam, Zello, etc are also used by some VRE groups, but monitoring has been limited to the above-mentioned platforms due to their relative popularity in Afghanistan. Based on judgmental sampling, the study has used a snowballing method (following links and shares) to locate VRE social media channels¹ in the Afghan social media space. Social media channels have been identified based on their:

- Relationship with VRE Groups: whether a channel is: 1) a VRE group's official channel; 2) has evidence of direct links to a VRE group;
- Content & type: whether a channel is: 1) posting violent extremist e.g. Jihadi materials; 2) acting as a news source for a VRE group; 3) sharing VRE lectures calling for violence e.g. Jihad; 4) distributing links to VRE channels; or 5) fundraising for VRE groups.
- Admin profile: whether a VRE channel is run by 1) an organization; 2) a key extremist figure; 3) a pro-VRE group media-agency; 4) Pro-VRE group journalist/media activist; 5) VRE group's support page; 6) or VRE members/supporters public chat groups.²

This study has analyzed only social media channels that have a considerable subscription base (1000-250,000+ followers), and evidences of an organized VRE social media campaign. The study has excluded personal channels –other than those handled by VRE groups' key persons e.g. spokespersons or media activists- that did not show evidence of a concerted effort to promote VRE content. They include particularly pro-Taliban individual Facebook channels that show sympathy to the group or publish random materials in support of the group. However, channels dedicated to promoting the Taliban such as the Jihadi Taraana (ode: Farsi for Jihadi Nasheed) channels on Telegram were included in the analysis.

¹ Social media has its own jargons such as twitter account, Facebook account, Facebook page, telegram channel, etc, all of which are referred to as channels in this study.

² Note on ethics: This study has been conducted in full compliance with the existing global norms about collecting open intelligence and social media data as well as Canada's Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act (PIPEDA), from where the research was conducted with support from the SecDevGroup. The researcher did not collect or retain information on individual users, user accounts, or identify individual users except where a self-identified user account e.g. a key influencer or spokesperson has been the source of public domain content posted to open channels and platforms.

In terms of language, Farsi and Pashto have been the main criteria for identifying Afghan VRE channels and contents. But VRE channels in Farsi and Pashto that aim at audiences in Iran and Pakistan were excluded from the analysis except for an international Farsi speaking Iranian Salafi channel and a few ISKP linked channels in the Tajik because they significantly focused on Afghanistan. Tajik ISKP and Jamaat-e Ansarullah linked social media channels are well integrated into the Afghan VRE ecosystem. Their contents -other than those in Cyrillic- are easily accessible to Afghans due to language similarities.

Demographics, Connectivity and Social Media Trends in Afghanistan

Afghanistan has one of the youngest populations in the world with about 64% under the age of 25.³ With a median age of 17, the youth of the country remains the primary consumers of internet technology. According to the latest report by the Afghan ministry of Communication and Information Technology, out of over 22 million active GSM subscribers in the country, more than 8 million use 3G & 4G internet services.⁴ The annual Internet growth rate for last year, (between January 2019 and January 2020) was +5.0% (+366 thousand).⁵

Connectivity has helped the spread of social media technology in Afghanistan. The number of active social media users in Afghanistan is about 3.6 million, 90% of which access social media platforms on their mobile devices.⁶ With over 3 million users⁷, Facebook is the most popular social media platform in the country, enjoying 67% of the social media market share, followed by Twitter (15%), Instagram (6.6%), Pinterest (6.3%), and YouTube (3.5%).⁸ Other platforms used in the country include Telegram, V Kontakte, and LinkedIn as well as private messenger applications like WhatsApp, Viber, Signal, and IMO.

Internet connectivity and social media technology have become instrumental in shaping political mobilization in Afghanistan. Social media played a key role in some mass mobilizations led by the Afghan youth in the last few years.⁹ Given its growing influence, social media is emerging as a new field of public engagement, political mobilization, and information warfare in Afghanistan. Besides government, political groups, and civil society activists, VRE groups in Afghanistan are actively using social media to influence public opinion as well as to radicalize and recruit the Afghan youth for militant purposes.

³ Young People, United Nations Population Fund <<https://afghanistan.unfpa.org/en/node/15227>> [accessed 15 April 2020]

⁴ Telecom Statistics Report (3rd quarter 2019) Ministry of Communication and Information Technology of Afghanistan <https://mci.gov.af/sites/default/files/2019-12/GSM%20Subscribers_1.pdf> [accessed 20 April 2020]

⁵ Digital Afghanistan 2020, Hootsuite, We Are Social <<https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2020-afghanistan>> [accessed 20 April 2020]

⁶ Digital Afghanistan 2020, Hootsuite, We Are Social <<https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2020-afghanistan>> [accessed 20 April 2020]

⁷ Internet Usage in Asia, Internet World Stats <<https://www.internetworldstats.com/stats3.htm>> [accessed 20 April 2020]

⁸ Social Media Stats Afghanistan (March 2019-March 2020) Statcounter Global Stats <<https://gs.statcounter.com/social-media-stats/all/afghanistan>> [accessed 20 April 2020]

⁹ For example, social media played a key role in mobilization in the Tabassum movement, which was one of the biggest protests in the country's recent history. See media coverage: Sheerina Qazi, Afghans Protest 'beheading of ethnic Hazara by ISIL' Aljazeera, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/11/afghans-protest-killings-hazara-isil-151110135854342.html> [accessed 21 April 2020]

Mapping VRE Social Media: Key Findings

A few researchers have studied the use of social media by violent extremist groups such as the Taliban in Afghanistan,¹⁰ but the scope and dynamics of VRE social media is yet to be mapped. Although a more extensive and in-depth study is required to capture the scope and dynamics of VRE social media in Afghanistan, a rapid assessment points to the existence of significant ecosystem of VRE contents and channels with rather large digital subscriptions. In some cases, the Afghan VRE ecosystem overlaps with other ones in the region forming an extended VRE online community that stretches from the Middle East to Central Asia.

Size and Platforms

This study assumes that the size of the VRE ecosystem in the Afghan digital space is much larger than it has been able to map here, and VRE content is available on more platforms than it has studied. In a rapid assessment, however, the study identified about 280 VRE channels across four major platforms: Facebook, Twitter, Telegram, and YouTube. The study found Twitter and Telegram to host most VRE channels (35 % and 34% respectively) followed by Facebook (18%), and YouTube (12%). While Facebook and YouTube are doing a relatively better job of preventing violent extremist contents too, Twitter and Telegram's high share of VRE content has to do with these platforms' technical features and functionality. The encryption technology in Telegram makes it a favorite platform for VRE groups because it provides a secure means of communication and content dissemination. Twitter on the other hand, is favored for its microblogging feature and its function for international outreach, and information warfare.

Over the last six months, the mass removal of violent extremist content by Telegram has affected the Afghan VRE ecosystem too. But the ecosystem has shown to be resilient; channels that get blocked by host platforms often get back online within days and revive their followers through a mix of offline and online mechanisms of link distribution. Pressures on VRE channels, particularly by Telegram, have sometimes forced some VRE groups to migrate to alternative but less popular platforms in Afghanistan, including TamTam, Instagram, and Blockchain messenger. However, the principal focus continues to remain on the most popular platforms.

Actors and Reach

The two chief violent actors shaping the VRE social media ecosystem in Afghanistan are the Taliban and the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). A third actor includes the Salafi extremist networks, which are not representing a specific militant group as such but are playing a significant role in the ecosystem by providing ideological support to violent

¹⁰ See David Drissell, 'Reframing the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan: new communication and mobilization strategies for the Twitter generation', *Behavioral Science of Terrorism and Political Aggression*, 7, no.2 (2015), pp. 97-128. And; Vincent Bernatis 'The Taliban and Twitter Tactical Reporting and Strategic Messaging', *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 8, No. 6 (2014), pp. 25-35

extremism in Afghanistan. Social media channels belonging to these three groups have a collective digital subscription of over 2.3 million (2,392,165) across the above-mentioned four platforms.

The Salafi extremist channels have the largest number of subscriptions, making up to 61% of the collective 2.3 million digital subscriptions to VRE channels. This corresponds to over 1.4 million subscriptions, 90% of which are on Facebook. Social media accounts linked to the Taliban make up 38.7% of the collective 2.4 million subscriptions corresponding to 925,942 subscriptions, 60% of which are on Twitter, 29% on Facebook, and the rest on Telegram and YouTube. Channels with links to ISKP have less than 5000 followers and make about 0.5% of the total subscriptions.

To clarify, the subscription does not imply the number of unique i.e. individual subscribers because an individual can subscribe to multiple VRE channels across various platforms at the same time. Nor does the subscription size mean the existence of support to VRE groups in Afghanistan because an individual may subscribe to VRE channels from anywhere in the world and for various reasons. Despite being extremely difficult to interpret, the size of subscription, however, reflects the VRE groups' digital reach and degree of exposure to VRE contents in Farsi and Pashto. Exposure to VRE content constitutes a significant risk for online radicalization and VRE mobilization. The latter is understood in this paper as the process of taking steps towards participation in religiously inspired violence. Exposure to VRE online propaganda was instrumental in VRE mobilization in the context of the war in Syria and the rise of ISIS.

Actors: Online Tradecraft, Narratives and Strategies

The Taliban

The Taliban is the largest VRE actor in the Afghan digital space. Besides maintaining a website in Dari, Pashto, Arabic, Urdu and English, the group and its media activists run many social media channels primarily in Pashto, but also Dari, English and even Russian and Uzbek (Central Asian).¹¹ The group uses almost all of the major social media platforms in Afghanistan. The availability of its propaganda contents in several languages and across all major social media platforms makes the Taliban the most digitally engaged VRE group in Afghanistan.

Though Taliban propaganda was available on the internet before 2011, the now-suspended @alemarahweb Twitter channel, which the group created in 2011, is regarded to be the first

¹¹ There are a few Telegram channels in Russian and Uzbek languages that are likely to be run by members of Central Asian groups in Afghanistan that are affiliated with the Taliban. Taliban affiliated Tajik VRE group, Jamaat Ansarullah, also maintains a few channels on telegram and Facebook that publish Taliban propaganda.

¹¹ Jon Boone, 'Taliban join the Twitter revolution', The Guardian, 12 May 2011 <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/may/12/taliban-join-twitter-revolution>> [accessed 25 April 2010]

official attempt by the group to use social media technology for VRE purposes.¹² Entry into the social media world was a significant shift for the ultraconservative group who opposed almost all features of modernity back in 1994-2001 when they ruled most of Afghanistan. Almost a decade later since the opening of Taliban's first Twitter channel, now the group's activists run many multimedia channels, online production studios, and social media channels on the internet. The group's use of social media is partially aimed at responding to the demographic changes in Afghanistan over the last 20 years i.e. the emergence of a new generation of Afghans many of whom live in the digital wonderland; a realm where the largely uneducated and conservative Taliban fighters were considered aliens by many.

Taliban use social media technology for both militant recruitment and information warfare purposes. A significant portion of the Taliban social media daily content is devoted to calls for Jihad and promoting of 'Istishhadi' (martyrdom-seeking) spirit and ideology among the youth of Afghanistan. There are over a dozen of what the Taliban call 'Jihadi Studios', particularly on the Telegram that disseminate materials ranging from war documentaries and motivational interviews with its fighters to songs (Taraana) and poetry aiming at militant recruitment. The group's Jihadi productions have over a hundred hours of war documentaries and video clips that glorify the so called 'Jihad' and 'resistance' to what the Taliban frame as 'foreign occupation' of Afghanistan. In terms of information warfare, the Taliban uses social media to spread the news of their battles and military gains, and most importantly, to create and contest narratives about the war. Taliban's principle narrative focuses on branding the group as 'a national liberation movement of the oppressed Muslims' against 'foreign occupation'. This constitutes the core of Taliban propaganda and mobilization strategy.

A key observation about the Taliban's social media strategy is the group's increasing focus on Twitter as a platform of choice for information warfare. This is interesting particularly given that Twitter is not the most popular social media platform in Afghanistan. Compared to Facebook where ordinary Afghans with a connection to the internet can join online conversations; Twitter has been a rather exclusive platform, where Afghans with the ability to tweet in English for an international audience have been most active. Afghan Twitter has been mostly a platform for conversation among expatriates such as Afghan Diasporas and international journalists, experts of Afghanistan, politicians, media and civil society activists. Activists in Afghanistan have been using Twitter mostly to draw international attention to local issues e.g. organizing Twitter Storms or Hashtags to raise awareness about a problem or incident in Afghanistan.

The Taliban's focus on Twitter also seems to aim at connecting with the international audience. The majority (53%) of over 180 Taliban channels studied here were on Twitter, of which, over 70 channels (41% of all Taliban social media channels) created between August 2018 and December 2019. This period closely corresponds to the start of direct U.S.-Taliban

¹² Jon Boone, 'Taliban join the Twitter revolution', The Guardian, 12 May 2011 < <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/may/12/taliban-join-twitter-revolution> > [accessed 25 April 2010]

negotiations. Many of these channels tweet in English besides Pashto, which demonstrates that the group's focus on Twitter may be a deliberate strategy involving information warfare aimed at an international audience. By tweeting in English, the Taliban social media activists partially aim at (re)building the group's image from a bunch of rural and illiterate religious fanatics to a group that is no longer a stranger to the modern world. This has been an important area of focus in the Taliban's information warfare. For example, several Taliban propaganda documentaries, including one featuring the group's attackers on CIA compound within the vicinity of Afghan presidential palace in 2013, feature Taliban fighters who speak English, stating: "You think of us as backward and illiterate Afghans, but we are not. We speak your language and know your technology".

The Islamic State- Khorasan Province (ISKP)

After the Taliban, ISKP is the second, but the most violent actor in the Afghan VRE ecosystem. Though the recent capture of the group's leadership by Afghan security forces¹³ has put the group's future in question, ISKP as an ideology remains alive, and more so in the online realm. The group's social media is mainly focused on Telegram, where it maintains a much smaller online community compared to the Taliban. ISKP linked channels are also found on Facebook and YouTube, where they seem to hide behind Salafi extremist channels. Central Asian members of the group maintain channels also on Zello, Instagram, TamTam, and blockchain messenger. Following the mass takedown of VRE channels by Telegram that has led to the removal of tens of thousands of IS and al-Qaeda channels worldwide in the last six months or so, ISKP channels have significantly decreased.

ISKP social media presents the most violent narrative in the Afghan VRE environment. It targets a wide range of enemy groups ranging from western democracies and foreign forces in Afghanistan to authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and Central Asia, the Afghan government, Shia-Muslims whom they consider heretic, and lately the Taliban. The majority of ISKP channels belong to Central Asian members of ISKP, mainly Tajiks. ISKP channels in Dari and Pashto are not as active, primarily publishing contents from the Voice of Khilafat digital radio, which despite facing difficulties, has been able to find hosts on the internet.

Tajik ISKP channels make part of the Afghan VRE social media ecosystem, first because they are, based on digital evidence, based in Afghanistan and integrated within the Afghan ecosystem; this study observed Afghans take an active part in some Tajik telegram group chats. Second, Tajik ISKP channels have a considerable focus on the war in Afghanistan. Although most of their written contents are in Tajik (Cyrillic scripts), these channels sometimes publish content in Dari (Arabic script) too. Their non-written contents such as lectures by key influencers and video materials are easily accessible by the Afghan audience.

¹³ Afghan forces announce arrest of local ISIL leader, Aljazeera, 24 April 2020, <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/afghan-forces-announce-arrest-local-isil-leader-200404171431866.html>> [accessed 24 April 2020].

Like the Taliban, ISKP uses social media for both militant recruitment and information warfare. In terms of recruitment, ISKP Tajik social media channels target audiences both in Central Asia, particularly Tajikistan, and in Afghanistan. In Tajikistan, ISKP channels target religious enthusiasts and labor migrants in Russia. Posts calling for ‘Hijra’ (religious migration for Jihad) to Afghanistan are frequent in ISKP social media. In Afghanistan, besides the general public, ISKP propaganda aim at recruiting other armed groups to their ranks, including the Taliban fighters. Amid the Taliban-U.S. peace agreement and international pressure on the group to cut ties with global jihadi groups, the ISKP propaganda increasingly focused on creating rifts within the Taliban ranks. The ISKP channels framed the agreement as Taliban leader’s collaboration with the West and a ‘betrayal’ of years of sacrifices of the Mujahideen.

ISKP propaganda created concerns among the Taliban leadership who, given past precedents of the shift of loyalty, feared a potential splinter. Although the current relation between the Taliban and ISKP is hostile, the two are not irreconcilable. Shift of loyalty has been common among fighters of both groups in the past. Taliban breakaway groups were the second main local forces after Salafists that joined the Pakistani Taliban to form the ISKP in 2015.¹⁴ On March 15 of this year, the Taliban responded to the threat by releasing a statement in which it declared to crush ISKP in Afghanistan, perhaps to prevent the group from gaining further ground in the country.¹⁵

Before the arrest of its leadership, ISKP was trying to reorganize to recover from its territorial defeat in Eastern Afghanistan in November of last year. It conducted three attacks in March of this year, targeting members of the Afghan Shia and Sikh communities in Kabul.¹⁶ While as an organization, ISKP is facing uncertainty, as an ideology it remains well alive, and is likely to strengthen due to the growth of Salafi social media in Afghanistan, which is discussed next.

Salafi Extremist Networks

Salafi extremist networks include self-designated Salafi and Wahhabi¹⁷ religious extremist channels that promote the ideology of Jihad. While not all Salafi channels are openly violent, some are actively calling for Jihad against the Afghan state and its western allies. Another key focus of Salafi online propaganda is promoting sectarian sentiments targeting Shia

¹⁴ Borhan Osman, ‘Descent into chaos: Why did Nangarhar turn into an IS hub?’, Afghanistan Analysts Network, September 2016, <<https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/descent-into-chaos-why-did-nangarhar-turn-into-an-is-hub/>> [accessed 25 April 2020]

¹⁵ Zabihullah Mujahid, 14 March 2020 <https://twitter.com/Zabehulah_M33/status/123878935230777536?s=20> [accessed 26 April 2020]

¹⁶ *ISIS Claims Responsibility for Deadly Temple Attack in Kabul*, The Media Line, 25 March 2020, <<https://themedialine.org/headlines/isis-claims-responsibility-for-deadly-temple-attack-in-kabul/>> [accessed 27 April 2020].

¹⁷ Salafi and Wahhabi religious extremist channels are labeled as Salafists here because of their shared ideological roots. While not all Salafists are Wahabist, all Wahabis are considered Salafists because both "advocate literal and to some degree binary interpretation of Islamic teachings as enjoined by Prophet Muhammad and subsequently practiced by the early pious predecessors known as the salaf al-salih" (Bin Ali & Bin Sudiman, 2016) See entry here: <<<https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/co16254-salafis-and-wahhabis-two-sides-of-the-same-coin/>>> [accessed 28 April 2020].

Muslims in Afghanistan and beyond as well as encouraging revolt against democratic order, civic freedoms, and women rights in particular. As an emerging trend, Salafism seems to be finding traction in Afghanistan, at least in the digital space despite facing opposition from segments of the society, including from Hanafi Sunni Imams.

Salafi social media concentrate primarily on Facebook, but they are active also on Telegram and YouTube. Despite their relatively small number compared to the Taliban's, Salafi channels, as highlighted earlier, make over 60% of the collective 2.3 million subscriptions to VRE channels. About 90% of Salafi channels are on Facebook, which is also the largest social media platform in Afghanistan. As such, Salafi extremist contents seem to have the greatest exposure in Afghan social media space.

Unlike the Taliban's, Salafi extremist channels do not represent an organized Jihadi militant group in most cases. However, some Salafi channels are suspected to have links with the so-called Islamic State as evidenced by posts promoting pro-IS Salafi preachers or occasional sharing of contents from IS social media. Salafism constitutes the core ideology of the Islamic State, and Salafi groups were the main local forces in Afghanistan to join the ISKP when it first announced its formation in 2015.¹⁸ In 2017, Afghan security forces arrested a few Salafi preachers including Abu Obaidullah Motawakil, Abul Zahir Daie, and Mubbashir Muslimyar on charges of running recruitment centers for ISKP.¹⁹ These individuals are a few of key Salafi influencers who have had an important role in promoting Salafism in the Afghanistan. Abu Obaidullah Motawakil is widely celebrated by Salafi and ISKP social media, including among Central Asian Salafi groups. Channels set up in his name in Tajik have thousands of subscriptions on Telegram and Youtube.

Another key, though not violent, force behind the growth of Salafism in Afghanistan is the Farsi speaking Iranian Wahhabi digital networks. These include, but are not limited to Nour Global Network and Wesal-e Haq Global Network, which maintain strong presence on social media. Nour, which is predominantly focused on Iran, has almost a million subscriptions on Facebook alone.²⁰ Wesal-e Haq (aka Neday-e Haq) has a considerable focus on Afghanistan besides addressing issues in Iran, and sometimes Tajikistan in its daily broadcasts. Like other Salafi channels the Wahhabi media actively promote anti-Shia sentiments in Afghanistan and in the region. They are equally hostile towards democratic values particularly women's rights and civic freedoms in the Afghan society.

VRE Social Media: What to Be on The Lookout For

The Afghan social media space, in general, is diverse, vibrant, and dynamic. Despite the scale of their online presence, VRE groups and their propaganda are facing significant resistance and counter-narrative by the better educated Afghan social media users. Some

¹⁸ Borhan Osman, 2016.

¹⁹ Emad Rostaye, ' *Bazdasht Masooli Jalb o Jazbe Jangjuyan Daesh dar Kabul (IS recruiter arrested in Kabul)* Voice of America Dari Service, 2017, <<https://www.darivova.com/a/nds-arrested-ISIS-member-mola-abu-obidulah-in-Kabul/4779741.html>> [accessed 28 April 2020]

²⁰ Data on VRE social media subscription in this paper does not include Nour because of its primary focus on Iran.

Afghan youth's civic activism to promote democratic and moderate religious values amid pressures from ultra-conservative groups is promising. However, such progressive forces remain vulnerable to violent push back by the VRE groups. Amidst efforts to bring the Taliban back to the political process, the democratic public space and civil society in Afghanistan are facing additional challenges.

Given the many vulnerabilities, the existence of an active VRE online ecosystem in the Afghan digital space is likely to affect the political and security dynamics in some important ways: First, the scale and scope of VRE social media and the degree to which Afghan youth are exposed to VE contents create concerns for online radicalization. Anecdotal evidences suggest that some Afghan youth have joined ISKP after viewing the group's propaganda.²¹ The Afghan youth remain vulnerable to radicalization because of massive structural risk factors such as widespread poverty and unemployment, corruption, socio-political crisis, and experience of loss and violence. Violent extremism often provides a venue for expressing anger, dissatisfaction, and grievances. Exposure to VE contents significantly increases this risk.

Second, VRE social media helps violent groups such as the Taliban to expand their outreach and influence. Previously, the Taliban's ideological reach was geographically limited as the group operated mostly in remote areas of the country using traditional means of radicalization such as preaching in the mosques and Madrassas. Presence on social media significantly expands the group's reach, enabling it to connect with a much larger audience including the global jihad enterprise. This expands the opportunity for militant recruitment. The deliberate use of social media by the Taliban to influence narratives about the war in Afghanistan is helping the group to move away from being an object of war to become an active participant in the online conversations, where it engages with (dis)information warfare and builds its own narratives and audiences.

Third, VRE social media is likely to negatively affect prospects for peace and stability beyond the Taliban insurgency. For example, the ISKP and Salafi channels' anti-Shia rhetoric initiates new Jihadi dynamics and discourse. Against the backdrop of the numerous attacks against the Shia Afghans over the last few years including the recent horrific attack on a hospital and maternity ward in a Shia neighborhood in Kabul²², the anti-Shia rhetoric adds to the existing anxieties and increases the risk of sectarian violence in the country. The anti-Shia rhetoric involves geopolitics as much as it concerns local dynamics. For instance, the Iranian regime's oppression of its Sunni citizens has often been used by Farsi speaking Salafi social media to demand similar limitations on the rights of the Shias in Afghanistan. For example, in a talk on Wesal-Haq TV in 2017 Afghan preacher, Mujib Rahman Ansari called for the

²¹ For example, see this story on ISKP fighters by Susannah George, Siobhán O'Grady, Sharif Hassan, 'Afghanistan claims the Islamic State was 'obliterated.' But fighters who got away could stage a resurgence', Washington Post, 9 Feb. 2020, <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/02/09/afghanistan-claims-islamic-state-was-obliterated-fighters-who-got-away-could-stage-resurgence/?arc404=true>> [accessed 29 April 2020]

²² 'Kabul Hospital Attack: "they came to kill mothers"', Doctors Without Borders, 14 May 2020 <<https://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/what-we-do/news-stories/news/kabul-hospital-attack-they-came-kill-mothers>> [accessed 15 May 2020]

removal of Shia Afghans from government positions as the ‘only solution’ to the conflict in Afghanistan.²³ Such sentiments may resonate with segments of the Afghan society amid growing political and societal divides, the rise of Salafism, and threats of the Taliban’s return to power.²⁴

Finally, VRE social media is likely to contribute to mainstreaming of extremist religious norms in the Afghan society in the long run, helping to shift the Overton window with regards to religious tolerance, civic and democratic values, women and minority rights, among others. Amid weakening traditional religious institutions and authorities, social media technology is helping the emerging Salafi influencers to move onto the front stage of religious space in Afghanistan. Salafi digital preachers use a variety of resources such as Facebook live lectures, watch parties, Q &As and debates, etc. to enhance their influence and expand their audience. The penetration of Salafism could change the religious landscape in Afghanistan in the long run in favor of more extremist religious groups, thinking, and practice.

Countering VRE Social Media

To counter VRE social media, it is not enough to remove them from the internet; identifying and blocking VRE contents on the internet can momentarily limit their reach, but the effort is unsustainable. Despite Telegram’s relative success in disrupting ISIS and al-Qaeda channels recently, the ecosystem remains resilient. Fighting VRE groups on the internet requires resources, international cooperation, and a common understanding of the nature of the threat. Currently, there is little agreement on what constitutes violent religious extremist content.

Given that there may not be an ultimate technological solution for the problem, the focus should shift to raising public awareness about the risk and promoting digital safety practices among internet users in Afghanistan. In the long run, building and strengthening social resilience through empowering civil society and moderate religious thoughts, as well as addressing the existing development challenges, are crucial for limiting the influence of VRE social media in Afghanistan.

²³ A strong advocate of pro-IS Salafi influencers such as Abu Obaidullah Motawakil, Ansari is a frequent speaker on the Farsi speaking international Wahabi ‘Wesal-e-Haq global Network’, which is actively promoting sectarianism in Afghanistan and Iran. See Ansari’s comments in Dari here: <<https://www.facebook.com/Afg.Revolution/videos/2293099254315780/>> [accessed 5 May 2020].

²⁴ A Taliban key figure and member of the group’s political office in Qatar was reported recently to have been calling the Shia-Hazaras in Afghanistan ‘infidels’. See Harun Najafizada & Sami Yosufzai, ‘Taliban cheayenda-e baraye Afghanistan darsardarad? (What are the Taliban planning for Afghanistan?)’ Iran International, 24 March 2020 <<https://iranintl.com/ای-برای-افغانستان-در-سر-دارد-۸۰٪-دیدگاه-طالبان-چه-آینده>> [accessed 5 May 2020].



About the Author

Elham Gharji is a Ph.D. Candidate in International Politics at the School of Economics, the University of Coimbra in Portugal. His research focuses on the foreign policy and security dynamics in the post-Soviet wider Caspian region. Mr. Gharji has also been a Senior Central Asia Analyst with SecDev Group, a research & consulting firm based in Ottawa, Canada, where he has contributed to a major study on the digital dynamics of violent extremism in Central Asia. The current study was conducted with support from the SecDev Group, but views and opinions expressed here are the author's own, and only.

مهرنامه


Mehr Brief

Mehr Brief series aims at bringing you scholarly articles and journals from prominent Afghan and International authors about the Afghan Peace process. Under Mehr Brief series, authors provide opinions, critiques, and expert views, from scholarly perspectives on the conflict in Afghanistan, and the conduct of the peace negotiations and peace settlement by the Government of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, the U.S. Government, and other stakeholders.

The roots of the term 'Mehr' is the Indu-Iranian. The term 'Mehr' was taken from the root of "Mithra", which is one of the oldest gods in the ancient Persia. Mehr or Mithra means "light, lightening, friendship, unity, connectivity and affection" in Persian language. Mehr is against falsehood, mendacity, perjury and unkindness. 'Mehr' is a word that links to God and is the best divine gift. 'Mehr', is the beacon for a brighter tomorrow and brighter horizon. In Persian cultures, 'Mehr' is translated as angels of kindness, friendship and wisdom that bring goodness, joy and peace.

Contact Us

 @AISS_Afg

 contact@aiss.af

 /AISSAfghanistan

 www.aiss.af