

Panel Discussion on Twitter Space  
**Role of Western Media and Think Tanks  
in Taliban's Ascendancy**

12 August 2022

**Moderator**



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Researcher and  
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**Speakers**



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## **Event Report: They are and have been a terror a group: Experts criticised the hesitancy and confusion over defining the Taliban in the some section of Western media**

It's been a year since the Taliban took over Afghanistan. The fear and trauma many had predicted before 15<sup>th</sup> August 2021 have turned into reality. The Taliban continued persecuting religious minorities, particularly Shi'a Hazaras, banned girls from secondary education and established an apartheid regime where women's mobility is highly restricted. These traits of the Taliban are not new for the people of Afghanistan; this is the déjà vu moment for them, reminding of them the 80s and 90s Taliban. The only difference this time is that they are more vicious, better trained and enjoy much more impunity than ever. However, there seems a section, particularly within the West that is reluctant to see the Taliban the way Afghan scholars, academics and journalists want to define it. As a result, some has observed that this reluctance have resulted in ambiguity and complexities around the nature of the Taliban which persists within a section of Western media.

The Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies held a Twitter space titled '*Role of Western Media and Think Tanks in Taliban's Ascendancy*' on 12<sup>th</sup> August 2022 at 19:00 BST. The purpose of the space is to discuss and examine the reporting and prevailing narratives in the Western media, particularly since the takeover. Some of the key underlying questions were; What are the narratives of the Taliban's lobby in the West? How are those narratives disseminated and amplified under the disguise of research findings? How should independent media institutions avoid consuming and reproducing inauthentic policy analysis on Afghanistan?

The panellists included Dr Mohammad Nazif Shahrani, Prof of Political Anthropology, Indiana University Bloomington, Lynne O'Donnell, journalist, author and analyst, and Omar Sharif, Country Director American Institute of Afghanistan Studies. The discussion was moderated by Tabish Forugh, researcher and policy analyst.

### ***'Taliban 2.0': A deceptive term***

Not long ago, the former United States special envoy for Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, [claimed](#) that "the Taliban have changed in some ways and are the same in other ways...They did stick to the agreement not to allow plotting and planning by terrorist groups against the

United States”. This assessment that the Taliban have changed or learnt from their previous experiences has birthed the term such as Taliban 2.0, creating an impression that this time the group will respect fundamental human rights.

Sharifi explained that “perpetuating the confusion and ambiguity on Taliban is now the new phenomenon”, which he argues, helped the Taliban to benefit from the situation.

O’Donnell, who was recently detained by the Taliban for her critical reporting on the Taliban, pointed out that some media groups and journalists are to be blamed for nurturing this ambiguity. She asserted that editors are more keen to publish op-eds, giving little time to scrutinizing who is the writer and how the author’s writing will further one’s agenda. She was referring to Sirajuddin Haqqani, deputy leader of the Taliban, who wrote an [opinion piece](#) for *The New York Times*. She also highlighted how some journalists suspend their critical faculties just to maintain their contact with the Taliban. She reminded that whenever she writes a story, she sends questions and an overview of her story to the Taliban which includes critiquing the group. As a result, she is now ‘blacklisted’ by the Taliban and her access has been cut off.

All panellists agreed that there shouldn’t be any confusion and difficulty in defining the Taliban. “Explain the Taliban as they are; they are a militant group not a political movement”, Sharifi added. He also added that this needs “dismantling challenging dominant narrative based on ambiguity and uncertainty”.

### ***An indigenous Afghan narrative is missing***

One of the key reasons behind this ambiguity on the Taliban in western media is the missing voice of Afghan intelligentsia who have and are still living under the Taliban regime. Shahrani explained that native scholars are seen suspiciously as being ‘non-objective’. As a result, “young Afghan scholars were left out. A few of them got recruited, however, on the whole, they were ignored”. Most of the academics, hosted by the government, who later came to Afghanistan for research did not know the language and some of them did not even know the context.

Shahrani also provided a historical background on how the Afghan indigenous narrative was not able to get attention. He opined that the voice of Afghan intelligentsia was wiped out in the

80s and 90s. As a result, there were barely a few people left who could speak English and convey the message. This is where the Afghan diaspora started playing as an intermediary actor to inform the western media. However, Shahrani added that the diaspora is not an appropriate source to inform the ground situation because “most of them have little direct experience of facing the Taliban”.

Sharifi urged that in order to fill this gap, “we must produce more knowledge and explain it from our perspective”.

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### ***Local voices are emerging: A ray of hope***

Sharifi informs that new narratives are emerging. “There is a huge voice coming from inside. I have to say it’s unique in its scope”. Some of the recent examples such as a [protest](#) led by brave Afghan women in Kabul against the Taliban or a strong campaign against the group on social media and academic circles are those examples where the Afghans are challenging the illegal and apartheid regime.

Shahrani has a firm belief that the Taliban will not survive for long. “They wouldn’t last long. If renters are not willing to pay”, he hinted that if the US and other countries do not support the Taliban financially, the group’s fall is inevitable.

Therefore, the Afghans need to be prepared for the future. “There has to be an encouragement of political ideology from the grassroots level. It’s a great way to start”. He also emphasised the need for fresh and just political thought. “Let’s devise a political system that is appropriate, rescues us from poverty and oppression”.