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Trump's Afghanistan Policy: How Afghan Mainstream Media
Borrowed Official US Narratives to Frame the Myth of Peace

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Abstract

This study draws from scholarship in framing theory and mediated collective memories for the analysis of the adoption of official narratives of US President Donald Trump's Afghanistan policy as ready-made news frames by Afghanistan's Tolo TV's popular current affairs program as *Tawde Khabare* (Hot Talks). Collected through purposive sampling technique, a comparative qualitative analysis of selected programs of Tawde Khabare and the text of President Trump's Afghanistan policy suggests that the post-Taliban US-established Afghan media system has largely adopted and borrowed ready-made news frames and official narratives disseminated by the US government to domestic and global media. The ffindings suggest further that official frames of Donald Trump's Afghanistan policy received greater acceptability in the Tolo TV coverage of the concerned issue. The study has raised several questions regarding the credibility of the post-Taliban Afghan media system and as do similar systems in other post-conflict societies established though the financial and technical help of the US and allied states after 9/11.

Keywords: US, Trump, Afghan Media, Frames, Taliban

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Introduction

After months of deliberations, on August 21st, 2017, US President
Donald Trump announced his controversial and globally-discussed
Afghanistan and South Asia policy. The Afghan government and
mainstream media unequivocally welcomed Trump's policy, while
avoiding highlighting its repercussions for the ongoing weak peace
process and regional stability. On the contrary, Trump's official
narratives were passed on to Afghan audiences as ready-made news
frames. In his policy speech, Trump not only outlined the future course
in Afghanistan, but also invoked the post-9/11 collective memory of
American nation and that of Afghans' as well.

The question is why would Afghanistan's mainstream media
adopted official US narratives to frame a war that has largely failed to
achieve its stated core objectives. The initial hypotheses, in this regard,
were based on the history of the US-funding and technical assistance
to the post-Taliban media system in Afghanistan. In the post-Taliban
Afghanistan the next big challenge for the US forces was to establish a
new media system to support the Western-styled democracy and long-
term US military presence in the country (Brown, 2013; Khan, 2015).

Historically, the capital Kabul has remained in the control of

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Afghanistan's mainly centralized media system: From King Amanullah (1919-1929) to King Nadir Shah (1929- 1933) and from King Zahir Shah (1933-1973) to the pro-USSR communist regime (1973- 1989), the powers that controlled Kabul had also controlled Afghan mediaa (Khan, 2015). The Mujahedeen and the Taliban that overthrew them followed the suit during 1989-2001. However, the US not only brought the media system under the Karzai government, but it also funded certain private media groups in order to establish a new news media-order in the country (Brown, 2013; Khan, 2015).

In the first couple of months of the invasion, the US forces took over Radio Shari'ah from the Taliban and changed its broadcast from Pashto, the Taliban's preferred language, to Dari, which was preferred by the Northern Alliance. Within months, the US also brought back Radio Television Afghanistan (RTA) and Bakhtar News Agency (BNA) under Afghanistan's Ministry of Information and Culture. In 2002, RTA resumed television broadcasting in major cities of Afghanistan. The US also revived 35 state-run publications, which had ceased to get published due to financial constraints (Brossel, 2002; Brown, 2013).

Afghanistan's first post-Taliban media law signed by President Karzai in February 2002 liberalised news media. The Ministry of Information and Culture granted one of its first media licenses to an Afghan-Australian citizen, Saad Mohseni, who launched his first radio station as Radio Arman in April 2003. Mohseni got US$ 280,000 from Andrew Natsios, then head of the US Agency for International Development (USAID). Radio Arman targeted youth with

infotainment and music. Within the span of just a few years, Mohseni worked together with the USAID and US embassy in Kabul to establish his own group the Moby Media, which is currently considered as the most powerful and influential in terms of rating in Afghanistan. He launched Tolo TV (in Dari) in 2004 and Lemar TV (in Pashto) in 2006.

Tolo TV took no time to become Afghanistan's most popular television channel, due to continuous US funding and facilitation (see Brown, 2011, pp. 170-157).

The US support had initially focused on radio broadcast news. But in 2004, the US funded the launch of Pajhwok (echo), Afghanistan's first independent newswire, in Pashto and Dari languages. The US embassy in Kabul, USAID and a media development NGO, the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, worked together to fund the launch of various media

outlets, kept sustaining them with funds, technical know-how and journalists' trainings. Therefore, Afghanistan's post-Taliban media system owes its existence and development to direct and indirect US funding and technical support.

This study analyzes the influence of the US over mainstream media in Afghanistan more than 17 years after the country's invasion. Trump's announcement of his Afghanistan and South Asia policy offers a chance to look at the transfer of official US frames to a media system that the US have raised and sustained. In addition, it investigates the role of official US frames, which were transferred to mainstream Afghan media, in shaping the collective mediated memory of the Afghan nation.

Theoretical Framework and Rationale

Media construct meaning through narratives and the audiovisual and textual framing of issues. Media's function to publish or broadcast certain frames for a (longer) period of time or commemorate events is vital to the formation of collective memory (and also collective amnesia) of nations as well as their identities (Morales, 2013). Media framing of events and facts thus often times plays a crucial role in the collective memory formation of nations. A media frame or a news frame is a "central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events...The frame suggests what the controversy is about, the essence of the issue," (Gamson & Modigiliani, 1987, p.134). Through framing, media portray an issue from a certain perspective while omitting or excluding certain other equally or perhaps even more important aspects of the same issue. According to McCombs, Shaw, and Weaver (1997), framing is the extension of agenda-setting or second level agenda-setting. By incorporating media framing with agenda setting, priming and bias, Entman believes, "agenda setting serves as the first function of framing as it defines the problems worthy of government attention." Priming is "the goal, the intended effect, of strategic actors'

framing activities" (Entman, 1993, p. 165). Bias is spread via "consistent patterns in the framing of mediated communication that promote the influence of one side of conflicts over the use of government power" (Entman, 1993, p. 166).

While framing involves the selection or omission of an issue or

event for media coverage and adoption of a certain reporting style and facts-digging or checking criteria, collective memory refers to the process through which a group remembers together events of the past (Halbwachs, 1992). It includes, among others, commemorations such as public celebrations and rituals framed by the media, which serve as a unifying force in societies. In other words, by their ability to shape mediated collective memories, the media serve to unify human societies and give them a certain mediated direction. In modern societies, mass- network media produce mediated realities for mass consumption and thus act as a "vehicle of collective memories" and collective or national identities, especially the role of memory in the context of national collective experiences and the memory of collective traumas, e.g., war, conflict, and genocide (Meyers et. al., 2011). According to Volkmer (2011), "previous conceptions of social or collective memory as a distinct form of national public life are transformed into discursive terrains of supra- and subnational public communication, sometimes resurfacing in national public debates and in a dialectical ''resonance' 'affecting notions of national legitimacy" (p. E4).

Existing literature on the US media framing of the post-9/11, US-led wars shows that repetition of identical media frames shape collective memory of the Americans at home and the US media's consumers abroad (Schwalbe, 2006, Khan, 2015). Media often report on rituals and funerals for the victims and heroes of wars which often invoke selective events from the past which are acceptable to governments and elite policymakers.

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Previous research on the US-led "war on terrorism" in Afghanistan and Iraq shows that the US mainstream media framed both conflicts in the context of the post-9/11 global war against militant Islam and a transfer of democracy to various Islamic countries and nation-building processes in the so-called 'failed states'. In contrast, the US was portrayed as a "victim" forced to launch an unavoidable "just war" against some evil forces (Khan, 2015). This mediated reality has not only contributed to collective local and global myths about peace and stability, but also more importantly to the myth of an attainable peace in Afghanistan (e.g., Fahmy, 2005a; 2005b; 2007; 2010; Fahmy & Johnson, 2007; 2012; Fahmy & Kim, 2008; Griffin, 2004; 2010; Khan, 2015).

The global hegemony of the ethnocentric and security-focused elite US media has long drawn criticism for framing the American nation in the imagined outside world and vice versa through news spins, agenda-setting, framing, priming and several other tools of news manipulation. The current global digital media landscape, Internet and the US media's connections with transnational corporate giants around the world have facilitated and sustained the US media's hegemony in the domain of shaping global collective memory about the post-9/11 "war on terrorism" (Brown, 2012). However, in post-conflict societies where the US have invested massively in the mainstream and local media and the training of journalists, including Afghanistan, official US frames are directly borrowed by the local media.

The transfer of official US news frames to the mainstream Afghan media was witnessed in the immediate coverage and analysis

of President Trump's Afghanistan and South Asia policy. The coverage in the local mainstream media also endorsed a number of myths about the "war on terrorism" in Afghanistan as well as the post-Taliban Afghan

nationalism which were in synch with official US narratives aimed at shaping the post- Taliban mediated collective memory and nationalism in Afghanistan.

Based on the qualitative content analysis, the study compares frames of the speech given by President Trump on August 21st, 2017, delivering his Afghanistan and South Asia policy with the Tolo News' a local contextual current affairs program *Tawde Khabare*.

Post-Taliban Afghan Media

A recent survey of the Asia Foundation (2017) identifies 100 television channels and 302 FM radio stations that operate in Afghanistan. 'Oqaab', a digital TV service launched in 2016, offers 65 national and international channels to viewers in Kabul and its surrounding areas. Internet penetration is still limited to major cities and was under 15% in 2018.

However, around 80% of the population owned a mobile phone. Being a conservative and semi-tribal society with a joint family system, 80% Afghans still get news and information from family members and friends as their opinion leaders. Due to its persistent high illiteracy, Afghanistan has primarily remained a radio society over the last several decades. But, the trend has changed since 2013, as the number of people relying on radio as a source of news and information dropped to 62% in 2017 from 78% in 2013. Contrarily, the number of television

viewers has increased from 55% to 65% in the corresponding period. Mosques (46%) and Shuras or local council (36%) still play an important role in the dissemination of news and information. However, the sharing of information via Internet is under 12%.

Method

Based on the Afghan mainstream media's reporting and an analysis of Trump's policy, this study's first research question (RQ1) focuses on the overall framing of Trump's Afghanistan policy in the mainstream Afghan media: *How did the Afghan mainstream media frame President Donald Trump's Afghanistan Policy?* The second research question (RQ2) asks: *What are the similarities and differences in the coverage of President Trump's Afghanistan policy in the Afghan mainstream media and the official US narratives?*

The study analyzed Afghanistan's first 24-hour news channel, Tolo News' *Tawde Khabare* program. The channel is owned by the Moby Media Group, which captured more than half of the Afghan audience and roughly 45% of the market share as of 2010, and it has witnessed constant growth since then. Financially, Tolo News is considered the most stable television channel in Afghanistan. It makes more advertising revenue than any of its local competitors. The group targets viewers in major cities such as Kabul, Herat, Mazar-e-Sharif, Kandahar and Jalalabad.

Data collection period and purposive sampling

President Trump announced his Afghanistan and South Asia policy on August 21, 2017, while the timeframe of the study was from August 20, 2017 to November 30, 2017. Through purposive sampling

techniques, Tolo TV's most important Pashto language news and current affairs program, *Tawde Khabare*, was selected for a qualitative content analysis based on its popularity and rating. The channel broadcast five shows of *Tawde Khabare* exclusively on Trump's Afghanistan and South Asia policy on August 21st and 22nd, September 18th, and November 14th and 26th, 2017. Each program had a length of 48 minutes which amounts to 240 minutes of television broadcasting. For comparison, the text of President Trump's speech of July 21st, 2017, on the occasion of the announcement of his Afghanistan and South Asia policy for official US frames, was also analyzed.

Findings

The analysis of President Trump's speech showed eleven major news frame categories: the "America first" frame; Blaming the former US administrations; Blaming Pakistan; Justifying US military's presence in Afghanistan; Taliban can still be defeated; No more unlimited US support to Afghanistan; Hope for peace in Afghanistan; Only "terrorists" are killing innocent people; Justifying troop surge in Afghanistan; India's role in Afghanistan, and the 'Just war' frame (see Table 1).

The analysis of the Tolo News' current affairs program, *Tawde Khabare*, also offered all the eleven major frames present in the text of Trump's speech. Additionally, there was another major frame, "Afghanistan first."

Linking the "America first" frame with the "Afghanistan first" frame:

Trump's speech had started with his appeal for loyalty to America, while indirectly referring to the clashes between white nationalists and Neo-Nazis in Charlottesville. On several occasions, he referred to putting America first and making it great again, with smart economic policymaking and winning wars abroad, while showing national unity. In order to clean up his response to the Charlottesville events, Trump insisted, "When one part of America hurts, we all hurt" (Para 5). In fact, his speech had started while paying homage to the men and women in uniform fighting wars in the name of America abroad.

The *Tawde Khabare* linked Trump's America's first slogan to its own calls for putting Afghanistan first. Both the slogans were presented as homogenous and interdependent, and vital to peace. Moreover, the current affairs program also supported joint US and Afghan military operations against the Taliban and linked the US success with Afghanistan's ability to defeat the Taliban.

Blaming former US administrations frame:

While sharing his frustration over no victory in- sight after the longest war in US history, Trump also criticized the faulty war policies of his predecessors for compelling him to take a U-turn on his election campaign promise to call back troops from Afghanistan. The Tolo News program shared the frustration of President

Trump and the American people and framed it in the context of the growing public resentment with the war in Afghanistan while still keeping the hope for peace alive, and insisting that only the US could be the guarantor of the peace process.

Table 1: Comparing major frames in President Trump's speech with frames in the Tolo News' current affairs program, *Tawde Khabare* (Hot Talks).

Frames in Trump's Speech	Frames in Tawde Khabare
1. America first	1. America first
2. Blaming former US administrations	2. Afghanistan first
3. Blaming Pakistan	3. Blaming former US administrations
4. Justifying US military's presence in Afghanistan	4. Blaming Pakistan
5. Taliban can still be defeated	5. Justifying US military's presence in Afghanistan
6. No more unlimited US support for Afghanistan	6. Taliban can still be defeated
7. Hope for peace in Afghanistan	7. No more unlimited US support for Afghanistan
8. Only "terrorists" are killing innocent people	8. Hope for peace in Afghanistan
9. Justifying troops surge in Afghanistan	9. Only "terrorists" are killing innocent people
10. Giving India a role in Afghanistan Just war	10. Justifying troops surge in Afghanistan
	11. Giving India a role in Afghanistan
	12. Just war

Table 1

Blaming Pakistan frame: Trump also put Pakistan "on notice." He warned of the consequences if Pakistan did not cooperate with the US

and still kept on providing "safe havens" to US-designated terrorist groups, which allegedly attacked US forces in Afghanistan. The *Tawde Khabare* put extra stress on this particular aspect of Trump's speech and, on several occasions, justified the pretext of further US military adventure inside Pakistan in future. The *Tawde Khabare* held Pakistan responsible for the sufferings of the Afghans as well as for the frustration of the US in the "war on terror."

Justifying US military's presence in Afghanistan: While Trump justified the US military presence in Afghanistan due to a precarious security situation on the ground despite sharing the frustration of the American people about no victory in the longest war in their history; the Tawde *Khabare* considered the US military presence in Afghanistan as a matter of life and death for the Afghans. The program exposed the professional weaknesses and vulnerabilities of the Afghan national security forces in their war against the Taliban, which it insisted

 needed a long-term US commitment on the ground based on not only funds, but joint anti- Taliban operations as well even beyond the Durand Line (inside Pakisan).

Taliban can still be defeated frame: Trump reinforced his confidence in the US military might, which according to him was still capable of defeating the enemies abroad. He referred to the enormous security challenges in for US troops in Afghanistan, but also stressed that the Taliban could still be defeated. He stated, "America's enemies must never know our plans or believe they can wait us out. I will not say when we are going to attack but attack we will" (Para 20). The *Tawde*

Khabare termed the defeat of anti-peace elements within the Afghan Taliban a must for an enduring peace solution in the country. The program also endorsed the US peace approach towards the Taliban and simultaneously justified the use of force against the same militants.

No more unlimited US support to Afghanistan frame: Trump also made it clear that Afghanistan must now take ownership of the post-Taliban political system and institutions built by the US. He warned: "However, our commitment is not unlimited, and our support is not a blank check," (Para 36). The *Tawde Khabare* also shared the same perspective on the question of Afghan ownership. On several occasions, the program referred to corruption and a lack of unity in the Kabul government as the main reasons for the inability of the post-Taliban democratic system to sustain, thus justifying Trump's concerns with regard to corruption and lack of good governance in Afghanistan.

Only "terrorists" are killing innocent people frame: Trump held only the Taliban responsible for the killings of innocent people/civilians in Afghanistan without referring to any independent statistics on the issue thus exonerating the US forces of the similar charges. The *Tawde Khabare* followed the same policy-line and blamed the Taliban for the deaths of Afghan civilians as well as security forces.

Justifying troops surge in Afghanistan frame: Trump underlined that the US had withdrawn hastily and mistakenly from Iraq in 2001. The situation led to cause an administrative vacuum and offering of safe havens to ISIS and al Qaeda forces in the country. He warned against repeating the same mistake in Afghanistan. A troop surge in

Afghanistan was also part of his policy. The *Tawde Khabare* discussed the issue within the paradigm of Trump's narrative by pointing to the deteriorated security situation in the country which needed US support before global "terrorists" could exploit it again.

Giving India a role in Afghanistan Frame: While on the one hand, Trump blamed Pakistan for playing a double-game with the US in the war against terror, on the on other hand, he offered an increased role to India, a strategic competitor of Pakistan, in Afghanistan. In an identical tone, the *Tawde Khabare* also discussed India's 'positive role' in Afghanistan at length and justified the India-Afghanistan strategic partnership. It also supported a greater future role for India in the country without highlighting any of the long-standing concerns of Pakistan in this regard.

Just war frame: The single point on which Trump agreed with his predecessors was the nature of the US wars abroad. Trump also believed that they were all 'just wars' fought against the "evil forces." Similarly, the 'just war' frame was endorsed by the *Tawde Khabare* as well, not in the context of Christianity, but of Islam. The program challenged the religious ideology of the Taliban insurgents and their suicide attacks in the light of Islam because of its devastating impacts on the daily lives of Afghans. The war against the Taliban was justified within the framework of Islam, which asks for state's monopoly over Jihad (holy war).

Invoking the past, refreshing collective memory of Americans and Afghans: A comparative qualitative content analysis of Trump's speech and the *Tawde Khabare* showed that both invoked the post-9/11

past of the two nations (see Table 2). Trump made references to 9/11, and America's ups and downs in the "war on terrorism", American nationalism,

patriotism, and the bravery of US soldiers (as heroes) during the past and current wars abroad. He also talked about the post-Taliban Afghan democracy and its challenges and the lessons learnt from the Iraq war. In the global context, Trump talked about the US-NATO alliance and war in Afghanistan and Iraq while touching upon the global threats of Al-Qaeda and ISIS. The *Tawde Khabare* used similar references to the post-9/11 developments in Afghanistan, Afghan patriotism and nationalism. Both sources discussed the negative effects of Obama's "Af-Pak" (Afghanistan-Pakistan) strategy. Additionally, the *Tawde Khabare* focused on the previous Afghan governments and how they had failed to fully benefit from the US military, financial, and political support by defeating the Taliban and establishing a political system acceptable to Afghans.

Table 2: Comparing Trump's speech with *Tawde Khabare* (Hot Talks) by invoking the past and mediated collective memories of both American and Afghan nations.

Trump's Speech (Framing the Past)	Tawde Khabare (Framing the Past)
1. Paying homage to war heroes 2. US military above racism 3. Patriotism (in the US context) 4. American nationalism 5. Post-Taliban Afghan nationalism 6. 9/11 7. Taliban's support for terrorism 8. Terrorist groups (ISIS, Al-Qaeda) 9. Comparing US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan 10. History of US troop surge in Afghanistan 11. Uncertain peace process with the Taliban 12. US-NATO alliance 13. History of Pakistan's support to anti-US Afghan Taliban 14. Obama administration	1. 9/11 2. Patriotism (in US and Afghan context) 3. Post-Taliban Afghan nationalism 4. Taliban's support for terrorism 5. The evils of the Taliban regime 6. Terrorist groups (ISIS, Al-Qaeda) 7. Comparing US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq 8. History of US troop surge in Afghanistan 9. Uncertain peace process with the Talibann 10. US-NATO alliance 11. History of Pakistan's support to anti-US Afghan Taliban 12. Comparing various post-Taliban Afghan governments 13. History and performance of Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) 14. Obama administration

Table 2

Discussion

As President Trump decided to continue the path of war to 'peace', the

Tawde Khabare acted as a copycat, and in the process brushed vital questions under the carpet. For instance, Trump took a U-turn on the earlier US commitment of raising and sustaining a democratic political system in Afghanistan. About the Afghans, he said: "We want them to succeed. But we will no longer use American military might to construct democracies in faraway lands or try to rebuild other countries in our own image. Those days are now over. Instead, we will work with allies and partners to protect our shared interests" (Para 35). By Afghans, Trump meant those Afghans who supported the US-installed government or are willing to be part of it in the future. The Afghans who did not accept the US presence were labeled as "terrorists."

By transferring Trump's ready-made narratives about peace, stability, and democracy in Afghanistan, but also about the causes of and responsibility for destruction caused by the war, the *Tawde Khabare* tried to shape the mediated collective memory of the Afghans in the light of the post-Taliban Afghan nationalism that needed US protection in order to survive against an enemy within, but which the new Afghanistan is not ready to accept as its internal problem.

Moreover, *Tawde Khabare* was almost silent about Pakhtun nationalism and security on both sides of the Durand Line. It did not question the possible repercussions of US military operations inside Pakistan for the Pakhtuns, mostly tribes, which are living on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

The *Tawde Khabare* also followed the path of war journalism by supporting the "us versus them" and "zero sum game" narratives while labeling the other party (i.e., Taliban) as the eternal enemy of Afghanistan and a constant threat to the global political and financial

order. Elite sources and official statistics and warnings were the bedrock of analyses presented in the *Tawde Khabare* show, which also excluded opinions of the ordinary Afghans about Trump's policy and its possible impacts on the country in the short, medium, and long terms.

Trump's speech was dissected with historical analogies, but the whole history of the Afghanistan conflict was reduced to the post-9/11 political order and its immediate predecessor, the notorious Taliban regime. The selective narration of various events of the recent past were aimed at spoon-feeding Afghans with news frames which were loaded with the so-called benefits of the US straitjacket approach to peace and stability in the country.

The real causes of the failures of the US's Afghanistan policy and the inability of the national unity government in Afghanistan to get countrywide public support were the "Key Invisibles" (Ludes, 2011) in the narratives of the Trump's speech and its subsequent coverage by the *Tawde Khabare*. It showed the 'strategic exploitation' of the mainstream Afghan media by the US administration through audiovisual and textual hegemonies (see Ludes, 2005) which are the hallmark of the US' media global outreach. The current study also supports the role of "key visuals" and "key invisibles" in shaping the mediated collective memory (and amnesia) of the nations in post-conflict societies, especially on occasions such as annual reviews, shift in policies, changes in governments, and commemorative event.

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