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Article:

Finishing the Fight for Freedom: The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan's Strategic Communication of the "Freedom Jihad" Narrative Frame on X

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Abstract

This article examines the strategic communication of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) on the social media platform X (formerly Twitter) between November 2022 and August 2023. Specifically, it focuses on the official spokesperson, Zabihullah Mujahid, whose account is the central node of the IEA's X network. Drawing on Nicole Ball's framework of post-conflict state reconstruction and utilizing the approach of Teun A. van Dijk's critical-political discourse analysis, the study analyzes how the IEA constituted its dominant narrative frame of the "Freedom Jihad" and communicated its finalization to various audiences, preparing simultaneously for its transition into a new narrative frame of the "Development Jihad." The research asks how the IEA used X to disseminate its narratives, what image it sought to construct, and how communication strategies evolved during this period, including the selective strategic use of different languages. Findings demonstrate that the "Freedom Jihad" narrative frame was articulated through three main components: the establishment of Islamic rule, the elimination of "corruptors," and the forging of national unity. This way, in achieving security and stability, the IEA prepared for the arrival of a new era, one in the name of the "Development Jihad."

Keywords

Taliban, Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, Twitter, X, Critical Discourse Analysis, Strategic Communication

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Introduction

In August 2025, the reinstated Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA)[1] entered its fifth year of existence. Irresistibly, comparisons have been made between its current state and its first rendition from 1996 to 2001. Out of such comparisons, the phenomenon of strategic communication presents one of the most apparent transformations. Contrary to stereotypical perceptions, the IEA has proven surprisingly effective in communicating through various platforms, including newspapers, websites, and social media. And for the past four years, this media machinery has been operating at full tilt. Although the Taliban's overthrow of the Islamic Republic in 2021 was closely followed, with particular attention given to the role of the movement's online operations (see Hassan 2021; Atiq 2021; Mozur and ur-Rehman 2021), the attention of the world media has since turned elsewhere.

Among all available platforms, Twitter, nowadays called X,[2] has stood significantly out, providing the IEA with unmatched reach. At the time of writing, the official spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid's[3] account on X has over 1.1 million followers, making it the most followed account in the IEA's X network. On the threshold of the second anniversary of the IEA's re-establishment, this account shared a remarkable quote by the minister of interior affairs, Sirajuddin Haqqani, delivered at a press conference: "We have finished the Freedom Jihad, now it is the time of the Development Jihad" (post no. 1947).[4] In this article, I analyze how the IEA conceptualized

[1] I adhere to the usage of the term *Taliban* for describing the movement in its pre-2021 era and *Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan* or its acronym *IEA* for the post-2021 period. However, I also use this term when referring to the era of 1996–2001, differentiating it as *the first* IEA.

[2] In the middle of my data set time frame, Twitter changed to X. In this article, I use the name Twitter when quoting others using this name and when I describe this social site in the time before the scope of the data set. For the reasons of simplification and clarity, I call the site during the whole analyzed period simply X.

[3] Generally, I transliterate Dari, Pashto, and Arabic according to standards set by American Library Association—Library of Congress (ALA-LC; Library of Congress 2012a; 2012b; 2013). Names of the Taliban or the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan's figures are preserved in the way they appear most often in the primary source. Terms well established in the English language are romanized in a simplified manner corresponding with the most frequent form used in both the analyzed primary and secondary sources.

[4] For easier orientation, in the text, the posts cited are assigned a number according to the order in which they appear in the full data set. For further information see section Theoretical Framework and Research Method.

the so-called "Freedom Jihad" frame and shaped its strategic communication on X to facilitate the transition towards the subsequent "Development Jihad."

I turn to Nicole Ball's (2001, 731) arguments on post-conflict state reconstruction, which she divides into two phases—transition and consolidation. Ball argues that the "transition phase lasts between eighteen and twenty-four months," during which the key reforms should be implemented (2001, 731, 722). Accordingly, and considering the overall development of the IEA, I delineate this article's timeframe from November 13, 2022, to August 15, 2023.

November 13, 2022, was chosen as the starting point, as it was the day Zabihullah Mujahid posted on his account about a meeting during which the supreme leader Akhunzada reportedly commanded the judges to follow the sharia and, in cases of "thieves, kidnappers, and corruptors," to pass the judgment accordingly (posts nos. 6 and 7). Although these posts were shared only in Dari and Pashto, they attracted substantial global media attention. After months of anxious anticipation about the emerging reality in Afghanistan, and debates about how the second Emirate would resemble the first one, fears of the return of the draconian rules were confirmed. Global readers were taken aghast by headlines such as "Taliban leader orders judges to enforce sharia law with public executions and amputations" (The Telegraph's Foreign Staff 2022) or "Afghan supreme leader orders full implementation of sharia law" (Agence France-Presse in Kabul 2022). The announcement of the implementation of harsh sharia laws by Akhunzada can be seen as a part of the implementation of key reforms before entering the consolidation period. At the same time, I argue that November 13, 2022, can be seen as a turning point in the strategic communication of the IEA and its inner dynamics.

August 15, 2023, presents the second anniversary of the previous Islamic Republic of Afghanistan's fall and the re-emergence of the IEA. While being a suitable date for internal and external evaluation of the first two years in power, it also poses as the threshold of a new era, one in the name of development, as proclaimed by Haqqani. Due to the time alignment of Haqqani's declaration and Nicole Ball's theory, I argue that Haqqani's words

can be understood in the context of Ball's definition of post-conflict state reconstruction—as a declaration of finalizing the transition phase and entering the consolidation one.

This article shows how, in the studied period from November 2022 until August 2023, the IEA strategically communicated the transition as a narrative frame shift from the "Freedom Jihad" to the "Development Jihad," providing answers to the following research questions:

(1) How did the IEA utilize the X platform to communicate the narrative frame of "Freedom Jihad"?

(2) What image were the IEA's representatives trying to create through their activities on the platform, and what strategies across various language mutations were they utilizing to achieve it?

(3) How was the strategic communication changing during the observed period, and what prompted such alterations?

Theoretical Framework and Research Method

I understand strategic communication in this article as a "purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission" (Hallahan et al. 2007, 3). I approach the IEA's strategic communication in the framework of critical discourse analysis. I turn to Teun A. van Dijk's (1997, 11) definition of the *political discourse analysis* or, more specifically, *critical-political discourse analysis*. Van Dijk defines political discourse as "a special case of political action, and as a functional or strategic part of the political process" (1997, 18), delineated by its author and recipient (1997, 12–13). I argue that since the re-establishment of the Emirate in 2021, its representatives, in this case the authors, should be understood as politicians, as they have represented a sovereign state, regardless of the status of its international recognition.[5]

[5] As so far in many studies they have been described by academics or policymakers as an insurgent body or terrorists (for example, Bockstette 2009).

The recipients include "the public, the people, citizens, the 'masses'" (van Dijk 1997, 13) in various relations towards the state being "voters, […] demonstrators and dissidents," et cetera (1997, 13). In the context of the IEA's strategic communication, the recipients can be identified as all the inhabitants of Afghanistan, supporters of the Emirate or its opponents, as well as citizens of surrounding countries, their politicians, whether engaged in relations with the Emirate or not. Simultaneously, they can be political, religious, or like-minded figures of the "Muslim world," or in the broadest spectrum, the representatives, policymakers, humanitarian workers, academics, and researchers of the whole world.

Critical-political discourse analysis is thus designed to identify discursive structures and strategies in the defined political discourse. Given the predominantly textual content of Mujahid's X account and the nature of the X platform, I mainly focus my analysis on written material. Therein, the structures or strategies are realized via topical selection, schematic structures, semantics, lexicon, syntax, rhetoric, et cetera (van Dijk 1997, 25–37). A usual element of the strategies is the polarization of evaluations, displayed through positive evaluation of the *ingroup* (i.e., "us," the authors) and negative evaluation of the *outgroup* (i.e., "them," the recipients) (1997, 28). Moreover, these evaluations are often emphasized when referring to the positive values of the *ingroup* or the negative values of the *outgroup*. Conversely, the positives and negatives are de-emphasized when relating to the respective groups. Van Dijk (2011, 396) described the schema as an "ideological square." Understanding these dynamics of ingroup and outgroup evaluations is fundamental for analyzing the heavily polarized society of contemporary Afghanistan.

The data set of 2,112 posts gathered through X's application programming interface (API) was originally collected as part of a larger research project (Nachtmann 2024). During a preliminary analysis, an excerpt was selected to be pre-analyzed by ChatGPT that was tasked to identify the main topics of the posts and representative keywords.[6] The excerpt was comprised of

[6] ChatGPT, responded to the prompt: "Find significant topics and keywords in the [following] tweets," OpenAI, July 31, 2023.

40 randomly selected posts, the then maximum possible number to fit in one prompt, in Pashto, Dari, and English. The results were subsequently compared with previously published analyses (Knopp et al. 2023; Saeed and Nour 2022) and examined against the acquired data set. Through this process, three overarching categories and a supplementary one were identified, as follows:

(1) Security and internal affairs;

(2) Diplomacy and foreign affairs;

(3) Economy and infrastructural development;

+ Cross-promotion of other means of strategic communication.

The subsequent manual coding of the data set relied solely on qualitative assessment. Representative keywords were examined together with the overall tone of each post, following van Dijk's framework of discursive strategies (van Dijk 1995; 1997; 2011).[7] The following article predominantly deals with posts originally assorted in the first category, for those relating to developments inside of Afghanistan and communicated to its citizens, mainly constitute the "Freedom Jihad" narrative frame.

Literature Review

Since the fall of the first IEA in 2001 and during the years of the subsequent Taliban insurgency, their activities and methods of operations were being studied. A noticeable shift occurred in how the Taliban were spreading their message and attracting new supporters—they embraced the world of the internet and social media. Early stages of the Taliban's transformation were captured in Antonio Giustozzi's (2007) *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan*.

Later, David Drissel (2014), in his article "Reframing the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan: new communication and mobilization strategies for the Twitter

[7] For more details on data collection and its processing see Nachtmann (2024, 16–19).

generation," argues that the Taliban managed to adapt themselves for the 21st century. He describes the genesis from the Taliban's first website to their first Twitter accounts. He states that the movement simultaneously managed to bear the legacy of the mujahideen and create a new collective identity. Similar findings were presented by Thomas Johnson, Matthew DuPee, and Wali Shaaker (2017) in *Taliban Narratives: The Use and Power of Stories in the Afghanistan Conflict*. This book presents many primary sources of the Taliban's origin in an analysis aiming to define narratives that the Taliban used in "information operations" (2017, 2). Analyzing magazines, newsletters, the internet in general, social media, radio stations, graffiti, or poetry from almost two decades, the book shows how effective the Taliban were in disseminating their messages among incoherent audiences and creating a master narrative that resonated with them.

Neil Krishan Aggarwal (2016) undertook a similar approach in *The Taliban's Virtual Emirate: The Culture and Psychology of an Online Militant Community*. Utilizing the critical discourse analysis framework, his analysis was primarily preoccupied with differences in communication over various platforms, including articles, songs, videos, statements, and interviews, in various languages. Aggarwal demonstrated how English and Arabic languages were used to communicate with audiences worldwide, Urdu with Muslim audiences in South Asia, and Dari for the internal audience of Afghanistan (Aggarwal 2016, xiv–xv, 27).

Since the fall of Kabul on August 15, 2021, and the resurrection of the IEA, its strategic communication has been primarily studied by journalists, think tank analysts, and policymakers. A report "Powered by Twitter? The Taliban's Takeover of Afghanistan" (Courchesne et al. 2022) studied the Taliban's Twitter activities in the months before and right after the takeover. Its quantitative analysis proved the undeniable strength of the network, identifying at least 126 thousand Twitter accounts of the so-called "media ecosystem" and a consistent strategy in their administration (2022, 6–7).

BBC Monitoring analysts conducted a similar quantitative analysis of the IEA's use of Twitter during the first year of power. A change towards

a more statesmanlike tone was visible in the language used by the state's representatives (Saeed and Nour 2022, 2). It also explains that apart from being suitable for this type of political-related messaging, the preference for this platform stems from the fact that the IEA's figures have been banned from competing platforms like Facebook and YouTube (2022, 2). Focusing on 216 prominent accounts of the government officials, state media, supporters, and pro-Taliban "influencers" who produced over 350 thousand posts in one year, the analysis's conclusions confirm that Twitter continued to be the leading platform of the reinstated IEA's strategic communication (2022).

A research report, "Comparing Taliban Social Media Usage by Language: Who's Speaking and What's Being Said," processed data from August 2021 to April 2022. Its analysis is mainly quantitative and written to inform US and generally Western policymakers on pre-defined desirable topics. As such, it disproportionately studies some aspects of the IEA's strategic communication and favors them over others (see Knopp et al. 2023, iii, 54).

Furthermore, Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn (2018) compiled and published an exceptional collection, *The Taliban Reader: War, Islam and Politics*, which presents primary sources of the Taliban. Starting in 1979 and stretching to 2017, it is a valuable resource for understanding the strategic communication of the contemporary IEA. Unlike the above-mentioned publications, it is more of a chrestomathy than an analysis. Lastly, one of the latest additions to the topic was Hassan Abbas's (2023) *The Return of the Taliban: Afghanistan After the Americans Left*, where the phenomenon of successful online operations is observed in the context of contemporary developments.

A Quantitative Point of View

To illustrate the dynamics of the IEA's embrace of social media, I offer a brief quantitative analysis of Zabihullah Mujahid's X account activity in the analyzed nine months. I argue that the account poses as the most representative one of the whole IEA network, being the most followed one, while belonging to *the* official spokesman of the Emirate as a whole. Its information value also

lies in its modus operandi, displaying the vastness of the IEA's X network. The account serves as a platform for Mujahid's own statements on various political subjects. Furthermore, it is used as one of the channels through which the stances, views, decisions, or orders of Hibatullah Akhunzada, the supreme leader of the IEA, are shared. Finally, it serves as a hub through which all the important posts of the IEA's network flow, owing to Mujahid's ample usage of X's system of reposts and quotes.

The account emerged very early in the movement's adoption of Twitter and eventually became one of the IEA's most prominent accounts.8 At the beginning of the analyzed period, the account had over 738 thousand followers (Zabihullah (..م ذبـــيح الله) 2022) and grew to more than 889 thousand by the period's end (Zabihullah (..م ذبـــيح الله) 2023) The audience continues to grow and, at the time of writing this article, the number counts over 1.1 million followers, securing its position as the biggest account of the IEA network.

In the set period, 2,112 posts were published on Zabihullah Mujahid's X page. These were written by 111 unique accounts, including accounts of official IEA institutions, their representatives, and spokespeople, as well as media platforms connected to the state. Mujahid's account appears as the most active one, having authored 882 original posts.

A majority of approximately 56 percent of the posts were written in Pashto, 24 percent in Dari, and 10 percent in English. The posts were frequently released simultaneously in more than one language mutation. This was most often the case of a Pashto and Dari combination. Twenty-one percent of all the posts were identified as sharing identical content in these languages. Additionally, three- (including English) and four- (adding Arabic) language combinations accounted for six percent in both cases. Comparing the various language mutations showed only negligible differences. This showcases that the strategy in language utilization lies less in producing different versions of the same message for distinct audiences, and rather in tailoring the topic and language for specific target recipients.

Context

The terms "Freedom Jihad" and "Development Jihad" have not gained widespread adoption. However, as the following section demonstrates, both terms are grounded in Afghanistan's historical developments. In this article, I approach the terms followingly:

(1) I conceptualize the term "Freedom Jihad" as a strategic narrative frame used by the IEA in the period under study, corresponding to the transition phase of the post-conflict state reconstruction. This frame integrates several narratives rooted in earlier chapters of the movement's history and draws on trends in its strategic communication, thus reflecting the IEA's ideological stances. I argue it stands as the crucial lens through which the IEA understands and presents its actions.

(2) In this sense, I propose to understand the term "Development Jihad" similarly—as a subsequent strategic narrative frame that builds on the interpretive logic of the "Freedom Jihad," while shifting the focus of the strive towards the themes of reconstruction and development. However, its proclamation by the IEA's representatives as the designation of a new era lies at the margins of this article's scope and therefore deserves further academic study.

A brief look into the history of Afghanistan suggests that the fight for freedom considerably exceeds the existence of the Taliban and the IEA. From a broad perspective, it can be traced back to the Anglo-Afghan Wars of the 19th and early 20th centuries, when the Afghans fought the British forces (Gopal and Strick van Linschoten 2017, 9). From a more imminent point of view, the term "Freedom Jihad" incorporates the more than forty-year-long struggle for freedom. In 1989, the jihad against the occupation of the Soviet Empire ended. In 1994, a change came when society was on the verge of collapse (2017, 32). A common struggle for bringing peace, security, and the rule of law under Islam emanated from southern Afghanistan's villages, which were dissatisfied with a general disregard for these virtues (2017, 23; see also Strick van Linschoten and Kuehn 2018, 24–25). There, students united with

former mujahideen fighters in what would come to be known as *the* Taliban (2018, 24, 59).

With the Taliban as the ruling power, jihad continued as their priority with two goals: to bring the whole country under the control of the movement and to make it function as a proper state (2018, 60). Not long after 2001 and the end of the first IEA, the Taliban began to mobilize again to launch a new jihad, this time against the American forces. Despite the significant development the Taliban and the IEA have undergone, the movement's identity still reflects its origins. This continuity can be documented by the *ingroup*'s, that is, the Taliban and the IEA's, insistence to present itself as *mujahideen*, those conducting jihad (see, for example, Caron 2012, 61). David Drissel (2014, 123) sees the revitalization of the term *mujahideen* as one of the key successful steps in the Taliban's post-2001 transformation.

In sum, the striving—jihad—for national sovereignty, peace, security, and Islamic rule drove the Taliban movement in the insurgent period until the re-emergence of the IEA in August 2021 and continued to dominate its political discourse even thereafter. August 2021 marked a turning point in politics and the movement's strategic communication. The leitmotif of fighting for freedom could have served as its dominant narrative frame for only a limited time. During the same time, the IEA had to prove it was more capable of running the state than it was twenty years ago. Therefore, I argue that what we witnessed from November 2022 to August 2023 was a culmination of the transitional period of post-conflict state reconstruction, which was mirrored in the strategic communication where the narrative frame of the "Freedom Jihad" was ending, being replaced by the "Development Jihad" frame.

The "Freedom Jihad" Strategic Narrative Frame: an Analysis

At first, let us introduce this analysis with a quote from 2014: "Peace is a guarantor of security and stability" (Strick van Linschoten and Kuehn 2018, 511). Years before the Taliban 2021 victory, this excerpt from their website Al-Emara suggested how the movement understood the meaning of its fight, which has echoed in the strategic communication until now. The apparent,

war-related understanding of "Freedom Jihad," encompassing the decades-long armed fight against internal and external enemies, culminated in 2021 with the ousting of the foreign forces and the conquering of the entire territory of Afghanistan. However, I argue that this further utilization of the narrative frame can be understood in the context of ensuring security and stability. Stability is then further constituted by two key factors:

(1) establishing the rule of law, derived from the IEA's specific interpretation of Islam and sharia;

(2) the unity of the people of Afghanistan, bridging their ethnical or religious differences.

The following section analyzes these intertwined pillars of the "Freedom Jihad" frame.

Establishing Islamic rule

On November 13, 2022, Zabihullah Mujahid informed about a meeting of the IEA's judges with *amīr almu'minīn*[9], as the IEA's supreme leader Akhunzada is addressed. Akhunzada was supposed to remind the judges to study cases of "thieves, kidnappers, and corruptors" closely. In cases where these crimes meet the criteria for punishment according to sharia,[10] the judges should pass the judgment accordingly. Akhunzada even stressed his own role by stating: "Because this rule of sharia and my order are obligatory" (posts nos. 6 and 7).

First, the position of Akhunzada deserves further explanation. As Michael Semple (2014), author of the article "Rhetoric, Ideology, and Organizational Structure of the Taliban Movement" and an expert on Afghanistan and the Taliban, suggests: "Taliban rhetoric asserts that decrees and orders issued by

[9] Amīr *al-mu'minīn* translates as commander of the faithful. Historically, it is an Islamic title of the sovereign, usually associated with temporal power (see Newby 2002, 28).

[10] Specifically, he talks about *ḥudūd* and *qiṣāṣ*. The first term refers to punishments for crimes like "robbery, theft, drinking intoxicants, false accusations of unchastity, and adultery or fornication." Said punishments range from whippings to death (Newby 2002, 69). The latter term is understood as a lawful retaliation, "within the bounds of justice for individuals who are wronged" (2002, 177).

the movement and its officials have the authority of Islam. Mullah Omar is still described as the [amīr al-mu'minīn], and officials of the Islamic emirate serve under his authority" (2014, 8). We can see that the strategic communication in the analyzed period continued in the same direction. However, since the re-establishment of the IEA, Akhunzada's decrees and orders have not had only the Islamic but the official statesmanlike authority as well. The officials of the IEA continue to serve under his authority, as evident from Akhunzada's words above—to issue the debated type of judgments is now an "obligatory order" of the *amīr*. This confirms the sovereign position of Akhunzada in the system of the IEA's governance (see Butt 2023, 29).

The supreme leader's message was shared in both Pashto and Dari versions, yet it managed to attract international attention (The Telegraph's Foreign Staff 2022; Agence France-Presse in Kabul 2022), which concentrated on a comparison of this statement to the practices of the first IEA. This came as no surprise, as certain aspects of the Taliban ideology and its communication have undergone important changes, while others have remained the same. The emphasis on restoring sharia has stood in the foreground of the Taliban's proclaimed goals since the beginning of the movement. During the insurgency, when many viewed the Kabul-based republican government as incompetent, corrupt, and its justice system as untrustworthy, the Taliban's strategic communication was offering an alternative in the form of sharia (Johnson, DuPee, and Shaaker 2017, 26). In addition, the call for greater adherence to sharia has been an integral part of the more general striving—jihad—for the establishment of a proper Islamic system (see Aziz 2018, 453).

The notion of establishing such a system was even stressed in "The Islamic Emirate and its Governance System,"[11] so far the only theoretical work attempting to define the Emirate written by a member of the governmental echelons. It clearly states that the jihad "must continue until a full Islamic

[11] "The Islamic Emirate and its System of Governance" is an extensive Arabic text, a comprehensive theory of the IEA's political system. It was published in 2022 by Abdul Hakim "Haqqani," a graduate of Haqqania madrasa of Hanafi Deobandi jurisprudence. The author has been a prominent scholar among the Taliban since the beginnings of the movement, currently serving as a Chief of Justice of the IEA (see Butt 2023, 2–11).

system has been established" (Butt 2023, 13). Therefore, it can be argued that by informing the citizens about the a*mīr*'s order to pass judgments qualifying for *ḥudūd* and *qiṣāṣ*, the IEA shows how it is approaching its ultimate goal.

In their study of Taliban ideology, Gopal and Strick van Linschoten provide important insight into the role of sharia in Afghanistan. They return to the beginnings of modern Afghanistan, to the era of Abd al-Raḥmān Khān[12]. He used sharia as a "uniform, formal legal code of the land" to deal with the plethora of local traditions, which to a varying degree stemmed from Sufism, Deobandism, indigenous folklore, and dissimilarly adhered either to tribal or religious law. I contend that in the eyes of the current IEA, the stress on strict adherence to sharia serves a similar purpose—to be an instrument used to achieve consolidation of the state and pave the way for "modernization," the "Development Jihad."

Fighting the "corruptors"

Having considered the role of adherence to sharia in the process of transition from the "Freedom Jihad" to the "Development Jihad," the matter of its enforcement and elimination of those who resist such efforts deserves further attention. Naturally, the IEA leaders are not the first ones in Afghan history to pursue their goals in the name of jihad. Historic rulers of Afghanistan, such as Dōst Muḥammad Khān used jihad to legitimize their military actions (Gopal and Strick van Linschoten 2017, 9). Abd al-Raḥmān Khān even "frequently pressed the [*ulamā'*] to sanction his military ambitions as 'jihad' and cast his enemies as infidels" (2017, 9). According to Hanafi jurisprudence,[13] there must be a justification for an armed jihad. Such a justification can be, for example, an elimination of *fitna* (Butt 2023, 14). *Fitna* can be translated in various ways, including "trial, temptation, discord, civil war, strife" (Newby

[12] Abd al-Raḥmān Khān, often called the Iron Amīr, reigned 1880–1901 and is regarded as a key figure in the modern Afghan history having consolidated and centralized power, giving way for modernization efforts of his successors (see, for example, Barfield 2010, 110–111).

[13] Hanafi jurisprudence stands as the only school Sunni Muslim legal thought on which the IEA's law is based (see Nelson 2021, 3).

2002, 63) as well as corruption or rebellion (Butt 2023, 14; see also Pashtoon 2009, 534). The word is used by Akhunzada in his above-mentioned speech, where he orders to apply relevant laws to the cases of "*fitna-garān*," that is, the "corruptors," those inciting rebellion or sowing discord. The term is used more often in the strategic communication of the IEA when referring to fighting those who rebel against the state. Thus, it can be argued that by using the term *fitna-garān*, the IEA rhetorically supports the legitimacy of its claim for jihad.

Moreover, the term *fitna* has been used historically for two civil wars that occurred in the Islamic society of the 7th century. The first one of these led to the formation of the so-called Kharijites. Interestingly, this term is also often present with *fitna-garān* in the analyzed posts. A post titled "Intelligence and Military Chief of Khawarij corruptors killed," by Mujahid on February 27, 2023, in three language mutations, Pashto, Persian, and English, presents an ample opportunity to analyze the utilization of both terms by the IEA (posts nos. 1022, 1024, and 1025). Similar brief messages informing about casualties among both the enemy and the IEA, accompanied by the numbers of confiscated arsenal, were shared on Mujahid's page periodically in the analyzed period. By their structure, they strongly resemble the so-called "Statistics of Jihad," which used to be published in Taliban magazines during the insurgency period (Aggarwal 2016, 93–94).

As is visible, Mujahid deemed this content noteworthy not only for the whole domestic audience, addressed in both main languages of Afghanistan, but also for international attention. In the English versions of the analyzed posts, the word "corruptors" is used as a translation of the discussed term *fitna-garān*, which appears both in Pashto and Persian posts. In the past decades, the term was used, for example, in relation to US presidents or other representatives (Aggarwal 2016, 109). In the analyzed data set, it is applied to members of militant groups opposing the IEA, predominantly the Islamic State–Khorasan Province (IS-KP), whose intelligence and military chief was announced dead in the quoted post.

IS-KP is a terrorist organization, comprised of various groups, that relates to ISIS and operates in the area of Greater Khorasan (Eggink 2024). As it poses a threat to international security, the IEA is regularly pressured to deal with this problem. After all, according to the "Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America," signed on February 29, 2020, the very first point the Taliban vouched for were "guarantees and enforcement mechanisms that [would] prevent the use of the soil of Afghanistan by any group or individual against the security of the United States and its allies" (United States of America and the Taliban 2020). It is essential for the IEA to show that it is fulfilling its part of the deal. Therefore, the posts concerning fighting the "Khawarij corruptors" are aimed at international, English-speaking audiences as well.

Furthermore, the choice of words and an emphasis on the topic by its regular *repetition* show a pattern in the strategic communication of the IEA. Let us now concentrate on the lexicon typically used in the discussed posts. Generally, it can be observed that the lexicon is comprised of negative opinion words that present the *outgroup* as subversive to the good deeds of the IEA. Apart from the "corruptors," the posts speak about "rebels" (posts nos. 142, 143, 149, and 150). The majority of the analyzed posts describe catching and sometimes killing enemies of the IEA in their "hideouts" (see, for example, posts nos. 1145 and 1146) where they were planning attacks or even "major destructive actions" (post no. 4).

Notions of what the IEA politicians, that is, the *ingroup*, want to express about themselves can be identified behind the fundamental informational value of the posts about security operations undertaken by the IEA. This presentation adheres to the basic principle of critical discourse analysis, the *polarization*, where the counterpart is presented as overly negative to stress the positives of the *ingroup*. In these cases, the texts usually announce that an "operation" was carried out by "special forces." Then, the emphasis is put on the "discovery" of the "hideout," "destruction" of the cell, and subsequent recovery of the

"rebels'" weapons (post no. 4). This way, the IEA attempts to position itself as a state authority that holds a monopoly on violence.[14] It presents itself as a capable, active, and effective actor in the application of its power. It tries to showcase its seriousness about providing security for the citizens. As such, the strategic communication of the IEA holds a similar course as during the insurgency period when "the Taliban project[ed] their fighters as belonging to a strong and organized military force. They proclaim[ed], and often exaggerate[d], military successes" (Semple 2014, 8).

The used lexicon offers other interesting insights into the IEA's strategy. As seen above, the "corruptors" are often further described as "Khawarij"—Kharijites (see post no. 1023 and for comparison also nos. 1025, 1145, and 1146). Again, this pertains to various armed enemy groups, even though mainly the IS-KP. The application of this word deserves a more thorough examination. We can compare the utilization of the Kharijite term with an example of Groupe Islamique Armé (GIA)[15] as suggested by Mohammad M. Hafez. He argues that the GIA proclaimed that "the groups that purportedly violate[d] the Book or the Sunna […would] be fought based on what category they [fell] under […including] those who secede[d] from the community (*Kharijites*)" (Hafez 2019, 198). Similarly, Jaysh al-Islam[16] labeled "ISIS fighters as Kharijites to justify their execution" (2019, 204). Hafez connects these examples to Yusuf al-Qaradawi's analysis of divisions within Islam, which identifies two types of such division. The first presents disagreements over creed, and the other over jurisprudence. And whereas the latter is "acceptable and beneficial," the former is quite the opposite (2019, 194–195). Therefore, those who "kill fellow Muslims based on legitimate disagreements over debatable issues […] are engaging in religious extremism […] associated with the detested Kharijites" (2019, 195).

[14] This claim is supported by Morisco (2023, 12) who states: "In an attempt to transform from a non-state to state actor, Taliban leaders seem to organize their governance based on the Weberian model where state is defined as a human community that claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory."

[15] Groupe Islamique Armé, the Armed Islamic Group, was an Algerian Islamist body Active from 1992 until 2004, fighting the Algerian government and advocating for an Islamic state under the rule of sharia (*Mapping Militants Project* 2018).

[16] Jaysh al-Islam is union of groups from Damascus fighting the Syrian government, as well as the ISIS (*Mapping Militants Project* 2019).

These historical Kharijites seceded from the Muslim community in the 7th century during the first Muslim civil war, *fitna*. When Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib decided to fight them, it was on the basis of their deeds, deemed as fanatic and unjust, not for being infidels, as Hafez (2019, 204) remarks. This is an important notion of the contemporary application of the term. "[By] refusing to call extremists infidels [… one] avoids the trap of [*takfir*][17] that Salafists, especially the most radical among them, deem to be a legitimate practice" (2019, 204).

I argue that the IEA applies the term similarly to justify the killing of other Muslims, however, "rebelling" or "corrupting" they might act. This legitimization is directed both at the domestic and international Muslim community. Simultaneously, it is meant to show that the practices of ISKP and other groups operating in Afghanistan are considered extremist by the IEA. The choice of words of the IEA authorities, on the other hand, does not go far enough as to denote the rebels as infidels, which would lead to the IEA being perceived similarly to the Salafists. Nonetheless, it is worth adding that Muslim communities from Arabic-speaking countries were an intended audience of only a limited number of Arabic versions of the posts. Posts concerning the anti-IEA "rebels" were primarily published in Pashto. These were often supplemented by a Dari mutation, which could be aimed at Iranian audiences apart from being relevant to the Dari-speaking inhabitants of Afghanistan. All other possible audiences were targeted by rather sporadic English posts.

A context for the question of *takfīr* in relation to the IEA should be provided. In his analysis of Taliban periodicals during the insurgency period, Aggarwal (2016, 67) describes how various Taliban authors differentiated between the *ingroup* and *outgroup*. Those who were building this polarization on religion were usually calling the *outgroup* explicitly "infidels" (2016, 67–68). Such apprehension is demonstrated in many historical or contemporary primary sources of the Taliban (see Strick van Linschoten and Kuehn 2018; Drissel 2014). This starkly contrasts with the strategic communication presented by

[17] *Takfīr*, "to declare someone an unbeliever," a technique, specific interpretation of Islamic law, adopted by modern militant Islamic groups to allow for killing those in question (see Newby 2002, 201).

Zabihullah Mujahid's account, where this term is absent. Given the many ideological streams in the IEA and the variety of channels of their strategic communication, we can hardly assume that such words were removed from the rhetoric altogether. However, it suggests that the post-2021 official statesmanlike rhetoric of the IEA speaking through the account of Zabihullah Mujahid tends to be constrained.

Halfway through the analyzed period, the communication strategy on this topic changed its course. The "Statistics of Jihad" type of posts was abolished, and reactionary posts appeared instead. In other words, the topic was only tackled in reactions to claims about inadequate security measures on the part of the IEA, which had allowed for the emergence of terrorist groups. Such claims were occasionally brought up at international forums or mentioned by Western politicians (see, for example, *Afghanistan International* 2023). These foreign claims were often met with strongly rejective responses aimed at all possible audiences. For example, on March 24, 2023, such a response in Pashto, Dari, English, and Arabic was released after US officials commented on the rising threat of IS-KP combatants in Afghanistan (posts nos. 1165–1169). The topic was dismissed with a statement that "Daesh militants [had] already been reduced in ranks and suppressed" (posts nos. 1165–1169). The alteration in the strategy shows that, as far as communication with the public is concerned, the "corruptors" were dealt with, and sufficient security was ensured. Still, the IEA deemed its reactions a necessary tool to counteract the false foreign "propaganda" on this topic (see, for example, posts nos. 1716–1719). Within this context, Mujahid even suggested that the matter goes beyond the propaganda itself and hinted that the US was "aiding [and] abetting the ISIS insurgents" (posts nos. 1165–1169).

At the end of April 2023, the topic was tackled again with a series of quadrilingual posts. The reaction came after, in the words of Mujahid himself, "some Western media published reports that a certified document of the US Ministry of Defense [showed] that Afghanistan [had] become a so-called center of terrorism" (posts nos. 1319, 1324, 1330, and 1337). A more substantive rejection of this claim was shared in the English version, which spread over seven subsequent posts, making it two posts longer than the other versions. The seeming urgency of the

IEA's strategic communication should be understood from the point of view of the legitimacy of rule and maneuvering in international politics in accordance with the aforementioned agreement signed in 2020. The following texts show again the typical polarization where the *positive* deeds of the IEA are strongly emphasized and possible deficiencies are denied, and simultaneously, the *negative* approach of the *outgroup* is emphasized.

> Afghanistan has become a peaceful country at the regional level, this year's Eid is a good example. Fortunately, no security incidents have occurred in the entire country […]. At such a time, publishing such baseless claims and self-made documents is the work of intelligence agents who do not want Afghans to live peacefully.
>
> The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan has full control over the country and does not allow anyone to use Afghanistan against the security of any other country, in particular, terrorist groups like ISIS have been severely affected and are in the process of being destroyed.
>
> Despite the commitments and practical measures of the Islamic Emirate in the areas of existing peace and stability, Afghanistan is still being introduced this way, it is obvious that the spread of such biased reports shows that some people in America have not forgotten their hatred and enmity with the people of Afghanistan. (posts nos. 1319–1335, 1337–1341)

In line with the previous examples of understanding the *outgroup*, this excerpt demonstrates that the subject the IEA felt the need to oppose was "America," or rather, the United States. The US representatives were described with *negative opinion words* as authors of "biased reports," feeling "hatred" toward the people of Afghanistan. The final words, however, show an utterly important understanding of the *ingroup* by the IEA. The "enmity" is not aimed at the IEA itself, nor its representatives, but rather at the people of Afghanistan as a whole. Thus, Mujahid positions himself as the speaker of all citizens of the country.

Forging unity

Nicole Ball's description of post-conflict reconstruction is primarily focused on what is elsewhere called state-building and focuses rather on material aspects of the process. However, in a successful transformation, the state-building should be accompanied by the formation of a collective identity (Talentino 2004, 558–559). The main task of this "identity-building" is to forge "a common commitment to a single state" (2004, 559). Given Afghanistan's multiethnical and multilingual realities, such commitment has been a challenging task for all the rulers and ruling parties since the formation of modern Afghanistan. The IEA representatives are evidently aware of the problem, and therefore, the emphasis on collective identity is a strong part of their communicational strategy in efforts to achieve stability.

First of all, it should be remarked that "brotherhood and unity among the [mujahideen]" is one of the key values stressed in the so-called "Instructions to the [mujahideen] from the commander of the faithful," a document published by Supreme Leader Akhunzada in 2017 (Strick van Linschoten and Kuehn 2018, 556).[18] This notion is also mirrored in the IEA's strategic communication. I have already mentioned several examples of supporting the "identity-building": the collective noun "mujahideen" used generally for all Afghans (and once again in the just quoted "Instructions"), or the positioning of Zabihullah Mujahid as the speaker of the whole country. Aggarwal (2016, 94) even connects these two, stating: "The Taliban classifies Afghan civilians among the mujahideen, allowing the Taliban to speak for all Afghan Muslims."

Mujahid's posts offer a plethora of other attempts to support unity through the IEA's communication, strategically directed at domestic audiences. One of those of interest concerns the Hazara community, which was subjected to many forms of persecution during the first IEA (see, for example, *Human Rights Watch* 2001). Nowadays, the IEA's strategic communication attempts to paint a wholly different picture of its relations to this community. An

[18] The "Instructions" can be understood as a new form of similar documents called "Layeha" issued by previous supreme leaders. According to the text, it was once again compiled by Mullah Abdul Hakeem, the author of "The Islamic Emirate and its System of Governance" (see Strick van Linschoten and Kuehn 2018, 554, 556). Historically, the "Layeha" was understood as the "code of conduct" (Johnson and DuPee 2012).

interesting case can be observed in a series of posts shared on January 2, 2023, originally written by @ARG_1880, an official government account. Four consecutive posts informed about a meeting of the IEA's officials with representatives of the Shia community in Afghanistan. The community mainly comprises Hazaras who differ ethnically, religiously, and even linguistically.[19] The efforts to include the community into the Emirate are even visible in the choice of language, also confirming the apt utilization of language strategies in the communication—this meeting was informed about through the official government channel only in Dari, the language of the Hazara community.[20]

During the meeting, a representative of the Shia community was quoted as saying that the Shiites held a "positive" and "good" stance towards the IEA. The chair of the meeting was satisfied with the meeting and claimed that "service to the people and dealing with their problems [was] an honor [of the IEA's officials]." Then, the posts stressed the importance of "creating a strong and stable relationship between the nation and the system" and mentioned a promise of the IEA officials to launch "developmental" programs in the regions inhabited by Shiites, like Bamyan. We see that the overall *positive tone* of the message tends to be underlined by the choice of words. A rather expectable sectarian Sunni-Shia division is omitted. Instead, the Shiites are considered a part of the "nation" and what remains to be solved is the relationship of the whole to the "system" (posts nos. 475–478), linking the element of unity to the establishment of the Islamic governance in the joint effort of achieving stability. Finally, the reference to development appears as a solidifying tool in the relations, foreshadowing the "Development Jihad" narrative frame.

The subject of collective unity deserves further examination. The case of "peaceful coexistence" (post no. 884) between Sunni and Shia communities of Afghanistan is stressed in the data set. However, it is not presented as

[19] Hazaras are one of the main ethnic groups of Afghanistan. They are of Mongolian or Turko-Mongolian descent and unlike the majority of Afghanistan's population, they adhere to the Shia branch of Islam (Khazeni, Monsutti, and Kieffer 2012; Monsutti 2012).

[20] To be more specific, Hazaras speak their own dialects of Persian which are very close to Dari (see Kieffer 2012).

a part of eliminating sectarian divisions, but rather as part of nationalist rhetoric aiming to promote national unity. For illustration, a Dari text was reposted by Mujahid on February 7, 2023: "Shia community of Afghanistan is a template of peaceful coexistence and a pioneer of national unity. We must not give space to corruptors" (post no. 884). It is important to note that the post was originally published by @Drnazari18, an account belonging to Abdul Latif Nazari, currently serving as the deputy minister of economy, and one of two high-ranking political figures of the IEA of a non-Pashtun ethnicity—a Hazara (*Afghan Biographies* 2024; Shaista 2021). Furthermore, we see the term *corruptors* used again, in this context to denote those who oppose the national unity.

Remarkably, Aggarwal (2016, 68) suggests that basing *ingroup* identity on national themes was more typical for Taliban authors writing in Dari during the insurgency. The case of strategic communication on Mujahid's account does not show such a tendency. This can be seen in the following example, where the emphasis on unity is further stressed by using the word "brothers." On February 16, 2023, Mujahid quoted a post with a video of a speech by Mullah Yaqoob, the minister of defense. Mujahid's quote contains a bilingual commentary, in which the Pashto version is longer and offers slightly more details. The Dari version only states: "We are all each other's brothers, we unite with the right and defend the right." The Pashto version expands this by adding: "Afghans no longer accept division based on ethnicity and language" (post no. 927).

Furthermore, the notion of the "Freedom Jihad" also serves as a unification tool. In this sense, those who lost their lives in its course were uniformly addressed as "martyrs." This was not only a case of fighters who were killed by enemies in the "special operations" aimed at "corruptors." Aggarwal (2016, 95) points to the linguistic connection between martyrdom in Islam and declaration of faith (both being *shahāda* in Arabic) and suggests it implies "that those killed by enemies are martyrs by virtue of being confessional Muslims, fusing individual with group identity." However, the term stretched further than to those who fell in the fight. It rather became a general designation for all deceased Afghans. This can be illustrated on an occasion when "almost 80

Afghan citizens, including women and children, were martyred as a result of the sinking of the boat" (post nos. 1032–1034), that is, not armed fighters but rather refugees traveling on a boat from Turkey to Italy.

Conclusions

This article has traced how the IEA constituted its strategic narrative frame of "Freedom Jihad" from November 2022 to August 2023 enclosing the first two years in power. Finalization of the post-war state's transition period was mirrored in the strategic communication as a shift between the narrative frames, from the "Freedom Jihad" to the "Development Jihad." Let us demonstrate it with the words of the supreme leader Akhunzada stated on the occasion of Muḥarram festivities: "With prolonging the current security and stability, Afghans will have the opportunity to build their own country and under the Islamic system take rapid steps in the direction of development" (posts nos. 1950–1951).

In conclusion, rephrasing Haqqani's announcement of the completion of the "Freedom Jihad" and inauguration of the "Development Jihad," Akhunzada's words also present the main narrative components of the "Freedom Jihad" frame. In the period under study, the IEA's communication on X revolved around three interlinked pillars of this post-war strive for freedom: the establishment of Islamic governance, the elimination of opposers, and the forging of national unity. Utilizing multifarious languages, including Dari, Pashto, English, and Arabic, the IEA proved effective in being able to target specific audiences with a specifically tailored message. Therein, the IEA sought to construct an image of itself as the guarantor of security, a caring and providing representative of all citizens of Afghanistan, grounded in the Islamic governance system. To present itself as such, it frequently utilized *repetitively positive-opinion words* while describing its opponents *negatively*, a classic example of the critical discourse analysis principle of *ideological square*. The most important change occurred in the communication of security-related messages, where the fight with the "corruptors" went from being reported on as ongoing to being described as dealt with. This shift, also influenced by pressures from global political representation, occurred in

line with the preparation for the finalization of the "Freedom Jihad" and the transition to "Development Jihad." Despite the many challenges Afghanistan continues to face, this new narrative frame has defined the means through which the IEA justifies its rule and projects its future.

Declaration on the Use of AI

AI tools (ChatGPT) were consulted during the early stages of the research for a topical pre-analysis on a small, randomly selected data sample. Provided results were then compared with published academic studies and subsequently adapted and used in manual coding of the data set, as in detail described in the section Theoretical Framework and Research Method. However, no AI outputs were used to develop any portion of the manuscript.

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