



Kardan Research Journal (KRJ)

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Journal homepage: krj.kardan.edu.af

Importance of Public Opinion in Shaping Foreign Policy: A Case Study of the Public Diplomacy of Afghanistan since 2021

Dr. Peerzada Tufail Ahmad
Mustafa Fazil

To cite this article: Tufail Ahamd, Peerzada, and Mustafa Fazil. "Importance of Public Opinion in Shaping Foreign Policy: A Case Study of the Public Diplomacy of Afghanistan since 2021." *Kardan Research Journal* 1, no. 1 (2024): 126–141.



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Published online: 30 December 2024



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Kardan Research Journal
1 (1) 127–141
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Kardan Publications
Kabul, Afghanistan

Received: 28 Sep 24
Revised: 25 Oct 24
Accepted: 28 Nov 24
Published: 30 Dec 24

Dr. Peerzada Tufail Ahmad
Mustafa Fazil

Abstract

The importance of Public Diplomacy as a foreign policy strategy is profound and has increased over the past couple of decades, especially after the 9/11 attacks. The growing significance of public diplomacy in countering misinformation, disinformation, and negative perceptions about a country, conveying positive aspects, and attracting and directly engaging with the foreign public has become the bedrock of the foreign policy strategy in inter-state relations. However, the public diplomacy of Afghanistan since 2021 as a foreign policy strategy of Afghanistan is less focused, understudied, under-researched, and ignored by the de facto authorities of Afghanistan. The paper aims to evaluate the Public Diplomacy of Afghanistan as a foreign policy strategy and provide policy recommendations for the authorities. The study is based on a case study approach and a thematic analysis. The results revealed that the de-facto authorities are not utilizing and focusing on public diplomacy in countering misinformation and disinformation, not engaging with the foreign public and putting out the other side (positive) and narrative of Afghanistan at the international level.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Foreign Policy, Public Diplomacy, Public Opinion, Public Engagement, 2021

1. Introduction

Public diplomacy is a government-sponsored activity that establishes and maintains a mutually beneficial relationship with foreign publics to obtain foreign policy objectives. It is a new term coined by Edmund Gullion, dean of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy and foreign services officer, in the 1960s.¹ Edmund A. Gullion defined public diplomacy as the method used by different international actors such as states, non-states (groups), and individuals trying to influence the perceptions of targeted governments and the public to change their foreign policy to benefit them.²

Public diplomacy, like other social science concepts, is a normative concept. It has been subjected to changes throughout history, and different scholars and practitioners provide different definitions of the term. Public diplomacy in practice can be defined through its motive of realization, which is to gain specific foreign policy objectives. The target

¹ Sonia Hukil, "Is Public Diplomacy Inherently a Manifestation of 'Soft Power'?" *Glendon Journal of International Studies* 8, no. 1-2 (2015): 4.

² Nancy Snow, "Public Diplomacy," ResearchGate, 2020, accessed December 19, 2024.

audience in public diplomacy is the foreign public, who are subjected to different communication tools.³

In the new global era, states can use traditional diplomacy, a classic communication method, through formal diplomats. Also, it can use direct communication tools such as TV, radio, social media, and other communication tools to influence the foreign public, which comes under public diplomacy.⁴ Public diplomacy ranges, including cultural and informational activity, are wider than traditional diplomacy.⁵ Public diplomacy can contain different educational, cultural, and communicational programs led by states to influence foreign audiences so that the public of that country pressures that state to make decisions based on the benefit of conducting states. Public diplomacy establishes relationships, fosters mutual understanding, and finds common ground for cooperation.⁶

The significance of public diplomacy as a foreign policy strategy has grown profoundly over the past few decades, particularly in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. Its crucial role in countering misinformation, disinformation, and negative perceptions of a country while effectively conveying positive narratives and engaging with foreign audiences has become a foundational element of foreign policy in international relations. However, in Afghanistan since 2021, Afghanistan's public diplomacy efforts as a foreign policy strategy have largely been overlooked and underestimated by the de facto authorities. For instance, Rasooli and Yawar, employing a descriptive-analytical approach, demonstrate that Afghanistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has not given sufficient attention to cultural and diplomatic tools. They have also underutilized media, civil society, and scholarship opportunities.

Furthermore, the country's tourism potential has been largely neglected.⁷ Farhana and Hashmi analyze Jirga, a crucial informal institution in Pashtun society, showcasing its role as a track-two diplomatic tool that fosters communication and builds trust between Pakistan and Afghanistan. The study reveals Jirga's ability to complement formal diplomacy by providing a platform for constructive discussions on key issues like Afghan refugee repatriation, the Durand Line, and cross-border terrorism.⁸ Similarly, Arif et al.'s study on wartime-mediated public diplomacy highlights the need to emphasize understanding news environments and routines as a key requirement for successful foreign media relations. They argue that government officials operating in foreign countries must establish mutually beneficial media relations based on openness and trust. They further argue that mediated public diplomacy efforts should focus not only on the message delivered but also on those media professionals who will ultimately shape and deliver the message.⁹

³ Erik Pajtinka, "Public Diplomacy As a Theoretical Problem: Searching For A Definition," *European Journal of Transformation Studies* 7:2 (2019): 26.

⁴ Ryan Michael Crow, *Strategies of Public Diplomacy: An Assessment of the Current U.S. Public Diplomacy Strategy in the Light of a Directional, Elite-Oriented Model and Two Historical Cases* (master's thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2003), 10.

⁵ Ibid., 11.

⁶ Nasser Hadian and Ahadi Afsaneh, "Conceptual statues of Public diplomacy," *Foreign relation quarterly* 1:3 (2008): 88-89.

⁷ Muaiyid Rasooli and Mohammad Ekram Yawar, "The Position of Cultural Diplomacy in Afghanistan's Foreign Policy (2001-2021)," *Akademik Tarih ve Düşünce Dergisi* 10, no. 6 (2023): 2680-96, published January 23, 2024.

⁸ Muhammad Farhan and Rehana Saeed Hashmi, "Track-Two Diplomacy: A Case of Jirga in Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations," *Annals of Human and Social Sciences* 4, no. 1 (2023): 382-92, [https://doi.org/10.35484/ahss.2023\(4-1\)35](https://doi.org/10.35484/ahss.2023(4-1)35).

⁹ Rauf Arif, Guy J. Golan, and Brian Moritz, "Mediated Public Diplomacy: US and Taliban Relations with Pakistani Media," *Media, War & Conflict* 7, no. 2 (2014): 201-17.

In addition, Momeni and Tonzai argue that implementing programs designed to attract foreign investment, enhance relationships with neighbouring countries, and promote constructive engagement has positively impacted development in Afghanistan.¹⁰ As Aaron argues, unlike in the previous two decades when the Taliban's power stemmed from its insurgency and armed forces, the group have facilitated a degree of normalization within the international system. He further argues that diplomacy has enabled it to be accepted as an international actor despite its lack of official recognition.¹¹ Furthermore, Tabish and Asghar highlighted the Taliban's communication strategies during the first public appearance of their spokesperson, Zabiullah Mujahid, at a press conference held on August 17, 2021, which outlined the roadmap the Taliban intends to follow in their pursuit of global recognition.¹² Likewise, Farooq and Moheb argue that the Taliban of 2021 differ significantly from the Taliban of 1996, particularly concerning their media messaging, propaganda strategies, and political manoeuvring.¹³ The literature review reveals that, since 2021, Afghanistan's public diplomacy efforts as a foreign policy strategy have been markedly underdeveloped, understudied, and largely overlooked by the de facto authorities. This situation highlights the urgent need for increased research and attention, where the potential contributions could be immensely valuable. The paper aims to evaluate the Public Diplomacy of Afghanistan as a foreign policy strategy and provide policy recommendations for the authorities. The study is based on a case study approach and a thematic analysis.

2. Components of Public Diplomacy

Nicholas J. Cull, a British Historian and the most renowned scholar in the field, provides five components to public diplomacy listed below:

2.1 Listening

The process of collecting data and information from the targeted audience and using this information to adjust foreign policy is the act of listening. In this component, the actors are more engaging in listening than speaking. Collecting information from targeted audiences and the international arena is important for having a successful public diplomacy campaign.¹⁴

2.2. Advocacy

The process of promoting a set of Values, ideas, and policies in an international environment by using communications tools such as international broadcasting entities and social media to influence targeted audiences is called advocacy. The foreign

¹⁰ Majidreza Momeni and Mohammad Taher Tonzai, "Economic Diplomacy in Afghanistan: A Post-Taliban Analysis," *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs* 11, no. 32 (2020): 541–565.

¹¹ Aaron Y Zelin, "Looking for Legitimacy: The Taliban's Diplomacy Campaign." *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Aug 6, 2024,

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/sites/default/files/pdf/AaronZelinchapter2.pdf>

¹² Muhammad Tabish, Kishwar Munir, and Muhammad Faizan Asghar, "Taliban 2.0: An Analysis of Taliban's Use of Political Communication During the Kabul 'Triumph' and Ensuing Quest for Global Recognition," *Global Foreign Policies Review* V, no. II (Spring 2022): 29–38, [https://doi.org/10.31703/gfpr.2022\(V-II\).04](https://doi.org/10.31703/gfpr.2022(V-II).04).

¹³ Farooq Yousaf and Moheb Jabarkhail, "Afghanistan's Future under the Taliban Regime: Engagement or Isolation?" *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism* 17, no. 1 (2021): 117–34, <https://doi.org/10.1080/18335330.2021.1982139>.

¹⁴ Nicholas J. Cull, *Public Diplomacy: Lessons from the Past* (Los Angeles: Figueroa Press, 2009), 18.

ministries in most countries are responsible for engaging in advocacy. Throw advocacy countries telling their stories and narratives to others in the world.¹⁵

2.3 Cultural Diplomacy

Attempts by actors to manage the international environment by making its cultural resources known globally and fostering cultural transmission abroad is called cultural diplomacy. Cultural diplomacy facilitates the exchange of ideas, information, arts, and other parts of culture to fortify mutual understanding. When a country's culture is known globally, it has the upper hand in managing the international arena and promoting its policies.¹⁶

2.4 Exchange Diplomacy

Exchange diplomacy accepts students, professors, and scholars from different countries while sending your students, professors, and Scholars to other countries for some time to manage the international setting.¹⁷

2.5 International Broadcasting

By using international broadcasting, actors try to manage the international environment by using Radio, Television, social media, and the internet to work and influence the targeted public. Usually, international broadcasting is done by broadcasting the message in foreign languages with the help of international media organizations.¹⁸

3. Importance of Public Diplomacy in Shaping Foreign Policy

Public diplomacy is one of the important elements of foreign policy. It consists of a dialogue between the government and foreign audiences to inform and influence. In the 21st century, countries are more engaging in public diplomacy to fulfil their foreign policy objectives than before.¹⁹ Public diplomacy can help countries build a positive image abroad, and it can be done through cultural diplomacy, broadcasting entities, and social media activities. Public diplomacy can foster mutual understanding and respect between two sides by influencing and informing foreign publics. This will help foreign policy practitioners achieve goals such as security, human rights, etc.²⁰ Public diplomacy can be beneficial during a crisis in a country. It can help manage the crisis, access credible information, counter misinformation, national branding, and tell your narrative to the world. Public diplomacy became one of the important tools in soft power and traditional diplomacy that helps countries establish a positive country image according to their national interest and helps them achieve foreign policy objectives more peacefully.²¹

¹⁵ Ibid., 19.

¹⁶ Nargess Rostami, "Public Diplomacy: Tools of Power in Foreign Policy; (Case Study: Application of Public Diplomacy in Foreign Policy of the United States of America)," *Kuwait Chapter of Arabian Journal of Business and Management Review* 3, no. 10 (2014): 194.

¹⁷ Gull, *Public Diplomacy*, 20.

¹⁸ Rostami, "Public Diplomacy, 193.

¹⁹ "The Importance of Public Diplomacy as an Instrument of Foreign Policy and What Makes a Good Diplomatic Agent," *BIDD*, last accessed December 20, 2024, <https://www.bidd.org.rs/the-importance-of-diplomacy-as-an-instrument-of-foreign-policy-and-what-makes-a-good-diplomatic-agent/>.

²⁰ Atsushi Tago, "Public diplomacy and Foreign Policy", *Oxford University Press* (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.471>.

²¹ Ayse Aslihan Celenk, "Public Diplomacy and Foreign Policy Making: The Turkish Case", *International Journal of Turcologia* 10:20 (2015), 25-27.

4. Status of Public Diplomacy Campaign of Afghanistan Post-2021

This section aims to focus on, address and highlight the following aspects related to the Public Diplomacy of Afghanistan post-2021:

4.1 Department Responsible for Public Diplomacy Programs in Afghanistan's Foreign Affairs Ministry

The ministry has 42 divisions, for instance, the Political Affairs Department, the Economic Affairs Department, the Consular Affairs Department, the Legal Affairs Department, the Cultural Affairs Department, the Administrative Affairs Department, the Spokesman and Public Affairs Department, etc. The official website is available in three languages: two of them are national languages (Dari and Pashto), and one of them is English. However, most sections on the website are not functioning properly. The website shares press releases, speeches and statements, and important announcements in the three above-mentioned languages.²²

In addition, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is also active on X (former Twitter). The official accounts have 71.1 thousand followers, sharing news, meetings, announcements, statements, condolence letters, consular news in Afghanistan, foreign embassies, condemning statements, and other related topics in three languages, sometimes Arabic.²³ Similarly, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has a YouTube channel with 9.11 thousand subscribers, sharing official interviews and events.²⁴ However, these posts' views are not over 100 thousand per post, while the likes and reposts are below one thousand on average on X. In addition, the account following the spokesperson and deputy spokesman reposts their post on official accounts.²⁵ The ministry does not have a Facebook or Instagram account.

4.2 Publication of the Amir-ul-Momineen Decrees: Reactions from the Public

Amir-ul-Momineen has issued 65 decrees, orders, and instructions published in the official Gazette on May 22 2023, from different years (2016, 2017, 2017, 2020, 2021, 2022, and 2023). The official Gazette published the decrees in two national languages²⁶, while these decrees were translated into English by unofficial translation networks.²⁷ These decrees are also published separately by the Ministry of Information and Culture, which issues them to Official news agencies, radio, broadcasting groups, and international media centres.

The reactions to these decrees are different. While some Decrees like administrative corruption, land-grabbing, treatment of prisoners, Taliban fighters' behaviour and avoiding cronyism and ethnocentrism, banes on recruiting minors on bases and ranks, banes on cultivating poppy, and special decrees about women marriages have a positive reaction from within and outside. These decrees are most favourable to foreigners, and

²² Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Main Page," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, last accessed December 14, 2024, <https://mfa.gov.af/en/main-page>.

²³ X.com, "@mofa_afg," last accessed December 14, 2024, https://x.com/mofa_afg.

²⁴ "YouTube Video," last accessed December 14, 2024, <https://youtu.be/c4VMeTuRYVU>.

²⁵ "X.com/mofa_afg," last accessed December 14, 2024, https://x.com/mofa_afg.

²⁶ *Ministry of Justice*, "Main Page," *Ministry of Justice*, last accessed December 15, 2024, <https://moj.gov.af/dr/>.

²⁷ Afghanistan Analysts Network, "Decrees, Orders and Instructions of His Excellency Amir-ul-Muminin," *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, last accessed December 15, 2024, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2023/07/Decrees-order-of-Taleban-amir-English.pdf>.

they do not create controversy.²⁸ However, the decrees banning women's work and education have negative reactions from the world and inside the country.²⁹ In addition, the restrictions on the media landscape also create controversy.

4.3 Cultural Events Held in/by Afghanistan Embassies Post 2021

Since the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in 2021, the number of cultural events in Afghanistan embassies abroad has decreased and even reached zero. The political changes in Afghanistan have challenged most embassies and reduced their activities. Reports indicate that Afghanistan has around 49 embassies and 20³⁰ Consulates worldwide. Since 2021, diplomats of the previous government have run diplomatic missions abroad, while only 14 diplomatic missions were handed over to the Taliban, with only China and the United Arab Emirates accredited a Taliban-appointed ambassador. Other countries have allowed the appointment of charge affairs, and some have allowed the appointment of new diplomats.

The acting Minister of Foreign Affairs claimed that 39 embassies follow and are under the control of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He also added that they cut ties with 14 Afghan diplomatic missions and would not recognize passports and visas issued by these embassies.³¹

The Charge's affairs in Islamabad only attended a few graduation ceremonies for Afghan students in Pakistan, and there is no information or details on any other cultural events. Similarly, in other embassies of Afghanistan worldwide, there is no information on engagement with the foreign public, including any cultural events.

4.4 IEA Delegation Travelling to other Countries and Meeting with the Officials

Despite the lack of recognition from other countries, the Taliban are attending various international meetings and forums. For instance, the Taliban delegation attended the recent COP29 climate summit.³² Likewise, the Taliban have attended meetings with other officials from different countries in Doha and participated in UN-held talks and forums in Moscow. Also, the Taliban are active in participating in forums in regional countries, lately in central Asia. However, the participation is limited as an observer statute till they get international recognition. In addition, bilateral meetings with various countries are held every day, and while accepting delegations from other countries, they also visit some countries to discuss areas of concern. Furthermore, international news and national media broadcast the travels and meetings.

²⁸ Afghanistan Analysts Network, "From Land Grabbing to Haircuts: The Decrees and Edicts of the Taliban Supreme Leader," *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, last accessed December 15, 2024, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/rights-freedom/from-land-grabbing-to-haircuts-the-decrees-and-edicts-of-the-taliban-supreme-leader/>.

²⁹ Human Rights Watch, "Afghanistan's Taliban Ban Medical Training for Women," *Human Rights Watch*, last accessed December 15, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/12/03/afghanistans-taliban-ban-medical-training-women>.

³⁰ "Afghanistan Embassies and Consulate," *Embassy Worldwide*, last accessed December 15, 2024, <https://www.embassy-worldwide.com/country/afghanistan/>.

³¹ Reuters, "Taliban in Control of 39 Afghan Embassies Globally," *Reuters*, last accessed December 15, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/taliban-control-39-afghan-embassies-globally-2024-09-19/>.

³² DW, "Afghanistan's Taliban Send Delegation to COP Climate Summit," *DW*, last accessed December 15, 2024, <https://www.dw.com/en/afghanistans-taliban-send-delegation-to-cop-climate-summit/a-70746139>.

4.5 Countering Misinformation and Narrative Building

Taliban uses a variety of tools to counter misinformation and false information and control the narrative by limiting people's access. Restrictions on media outlets in Afghanistan have helped the Taliban only to allow messages that they approved. In addition, they are active on social media, allowing them to recognize and ban messages against their narrative. This consists of removing posts, blocking accounts, and sharing their messages and narratives with the platform.

Furthermore, the Taliban also uses speeches, press releases, and social media to tell their narrative. The government media and information centre arranges press releases to ensure messages are broadcast and counter misinformation. For instance, the *Alemarah* state-sponsored news agency is one of the most active agencies publishing state-related news in 5 languages: Dari, Pashto, Arabic, Urdu, and English. In addition, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan-sponsored media outlets, including Radio, TV, newspapers, and Internet-based media, are also active in telling the Taliban narrative.³³ The Taliban uses religious massaging for effective sharing of their narrative as most of the messages are framed in the context of Islam, which makes it easy for Muslims to believe. In addition, the Taliban uses Afghan cultural traditions and values, such as *pasthunwali*, which is common and followed by most Afghans, as a tool to communicate their narrative. Similarly, Newsletters, Taranas, and Taliban social media accounts are active in this campaign.³⁴ Likewise, to counter international misinformation and present their narrative, the Taliban uses effective Diplomatic engagement. IEA is actively conducting interviews and making statements to international media outlets. Social media is used frequently to counter international misinformation and their narrative and developments in different areas. They use denial and rebuttal as tools to counter claims made by international entities and tag them as misinformation and propaganda.³⁵

5. Public Opinion Polls about Afghanistan Post 2021

Public opinion plays a vital role in shaping and directing foreign policy agendas. When a foreign policy practitioner considers and values public opinion, the foreign policy decision gets legitimacy and decreases negative opinions and opposition.³⁶ Media outlets inside and outside the country are important in shaping public opinion. During a crisis, public opinion changes quickly, thus putting the government in a delicate position regarding foreign policy decisions.³⁷ Public opinion cannot specifically determine foreign policy decisions but can play an important role in shaping them.

³³ United States Institute of Peace, "What the Taliban's Defensive Public Messaging Reveals," *United States Institute of Peace*, last accessed December 16, 2024, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/07/what-talibans-defensive-public-messaging-reveals>.

³⁴ Thomas Johnson, *Taliban Narrative: The Use and Power of Stories in the Afghanistan Conflict* (London: Oxford University Press, 2017).

³⁵ IISS, "Towards the Reintegration of Afghanistan into the International Community," *IISS*, last accessed December 16, 2024, <https://www.iiss.org/publications/armed-conflict-survey/2024/towards-the-reintegration-of-afghanistan-into-the-international-community/>.

³⁶ Cesran International Center for Strategic Research and Analysis, "The Role of Public Opinion in Foreign Policy," *Cesran International Center for Strategic Research and Analysis*, last accessed January 12, 2025, <https://cesran.org/the-role-of-public-opinion-in-foreign-policy.html>.

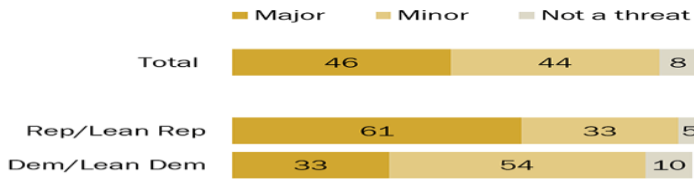
³⁷ Joshua D. Kertzer, "Public Opinion about Foreign Policy," in *Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*, 3rd ed., ed. Leonie Huddy, David Sears, Jack Levy, and Jennifer Jerit (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 395-414.

5.1 Public Opinion Polls about Taliban Post 2021

Following the withdrawal of US-led coalition forces, a majority of Americans view the situation in Afghanistan as a security threat to the United States. Specifically, 46% of respondents believe that Taliban control represents a major threat, while another 44% consider it a minor threat. Notably, Republicans (61%) are significantly more likely than Democrats (33%) to perceive a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan as a major security threat.³⁸

Democrats less likely than Republicans to view Taliban control of Afghanistan as major security threat to U.S.

% who say Taliban control of Afghanistan is a ___ threat to the security of the United States



Note: No answer responses not shown.

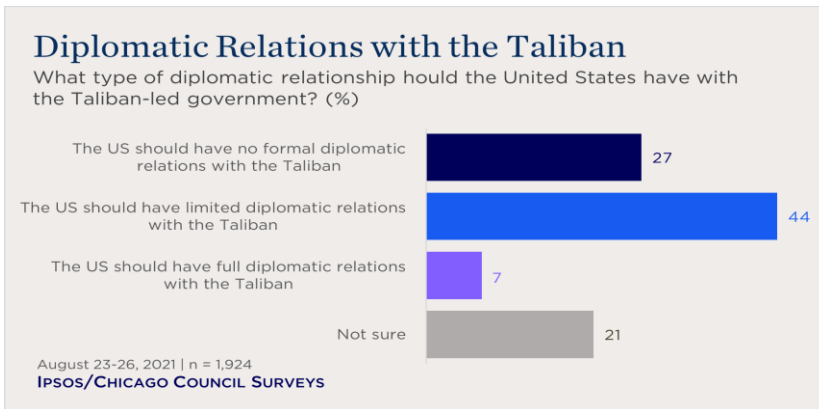
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Aug. 23-29, 2021.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Source: PEW Research Center³⁹

5.2 Recognition of Taliban and Frozen Assets:⁴⁰

A survey indicates that following the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, more Americans believed the United States should maintain limited diplomatic relations with the Taliban rather than pursuing full diplomatic relations or none at all.



Source: *The Chicago Council on Global Affairs*⁴¹

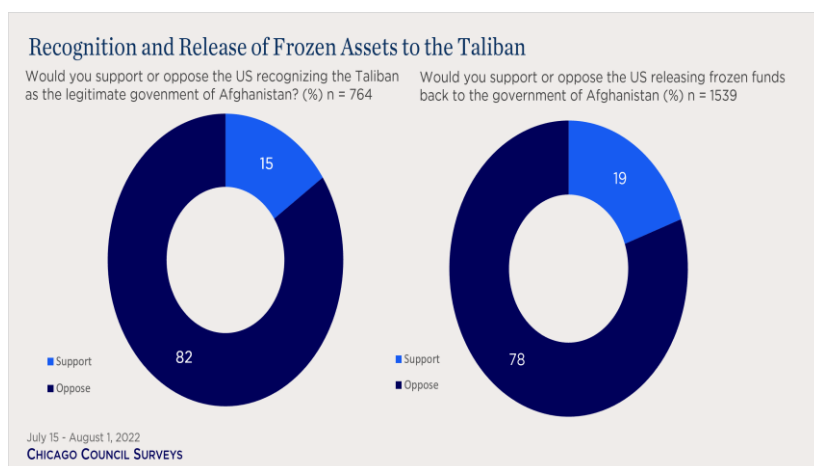
³⁸ Ted Van Green and Carroll Doherty, "Majority of U.S. Public Favors Afghanistan Troop Withdrawal; Biden Criticized for His Handling of Situation," *PEW Research Center*, August 31, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/08/31/majority-of-u-s-public-favors-afghanistan-troop-withdrawal-biden-criticized-for-his-handling-of-situation/>.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Lama El Baz, "Reflecting on Two Years of Taliban Rule," *The Chicago Council on Global Affairs*, September 11, 2023, <https://globalaffairs.org/commentary-and-analysis/blogs/reflecting-two-years-taliban-rule>.

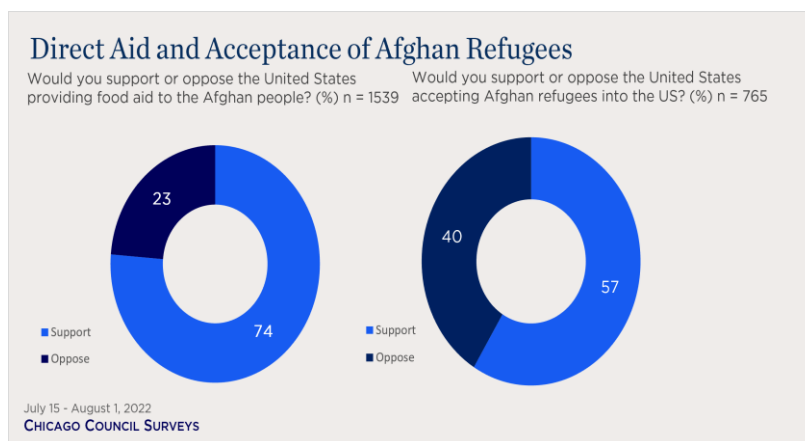
⁴¹ Ibid.

Nearly a year later, when asked whether they would support or oppose the United States recognizing the Taliban as Afghanistan's legitimate government, a clear majority (82%) of Americans expressed opposition. Similarly, regarding the release of frozen Afghan assets, a survey shows that 78 per cent of the public opposes it, even though it would greatly enhance economic and humanitarian conditions in Afghanistan.⁴²



Source: The Chicago Council on Global Affairs ⁴³

However, instead of releasing frozen Afghan assets, many Americans prefer that the United States adopt policies aimed at improving conditions for the Afghan people without necessarily empowering the Taliban. For instance, 74 per cent of Americans support providing food aid to the Afghan population. Additionally, 57 per cent of Americans favour accepting Afghan refugees into the U.S., although this support is less strong than for food aid.⁴⁴



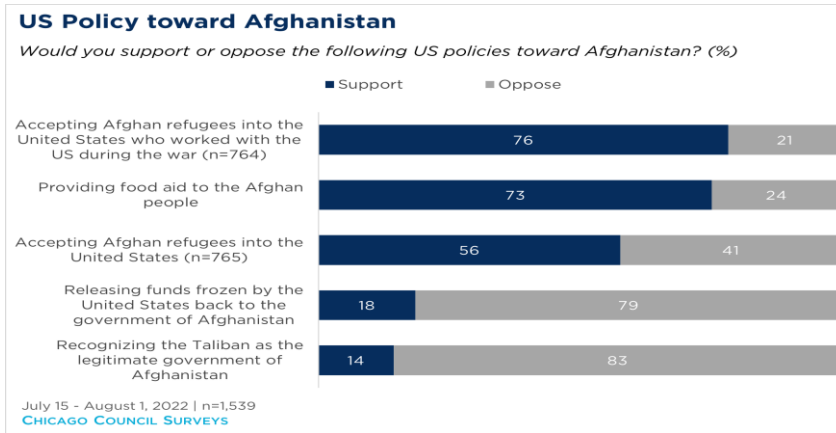
Source: The Chicago Council on Global Affairs ⁴⁵

⁴² Lama El Baz, Reflecting on Two Years of Taliban Rule, The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, September 11, 2023, <https://globalaffairs.org/commentary-and-analysis/blogs/reflecting-two-years-taliban-rule>

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

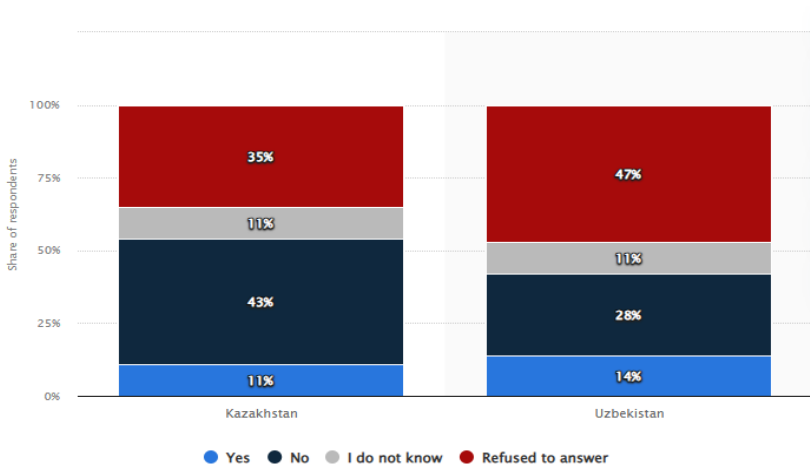
⁴⁵ Ibid.



Source: The Chicago Council on Global Affairs ⁴⁶

5.3 Opinion on Taliban Recognition as Afghan Government in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan 2021

A survey conducted in August and September of 2021 revealed that over 40% of respondents in Kazakhstan and nearly 30% in Uzbekistan opposed recognizing the group as the legitimate government of Afghanistan. While many respondents were uncertain about their stance, the percentage of those who believed their countries should recognize the Taliban government was only 11% in Kazakhstan and 14% in Uzbekistan.⁴⁷



Source: Statista ⁴⁸

Conclusion

The study reveals the importance of public diplomacy in shaping a country's foreign policy. In the age of globalization and digitalization, most countries, especially

⁴⁶ Craig Kafura, "Americans Support Afghans – but Not the Taliban Government," *The Chicago Council on Global Affairs*, August 18, 2022, <https://globalaffairs.org/research/public-opinion-survey/americans-support-afghans-not-taliban-government>.

⁴⁷ Statista Research Department, "Opinion on Taliban Recognition as Afghan Government in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan 2021," *Statista*, January 26, 2022, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1286538/poll-on-taliban-recognition-as-government-central-asia/>.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

democratic countries, use traditional and public diplomacy tools to achieve foreign policy objectives. The role of public opinion is profound, as visible in cases like the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, where public opinion in the Western countries against the military presence of Western forces played an important role in forcing the Western countries to come to the negotiating table with the Taliban. Likewise, in the Russia-Ukraine war, NATO's support of military assistance to Ukraine would not have been easier without the popular support of the public in favour of Ukraine. Similarly, in Syria, public opinion played an important role in forcing the Assad regime to collapse. It compelled Iran and Russia to modify their foreign policy tactics vis-à-vis Syria. Also, the Palestinian case highlights the importance of public opinion in shaping and forcing governments to alter foreign policy strategies.

However, the findings revealed that although public opinion vis-à-vis Afghanistan was more positive, after 2021, there has been a shift after the collapse of the Republic and the re-emergence of the Taliban in Afghanistan. After 2021, Afghanistan's de-facto authorities have been unable to use public diplomacy effectively, either ignoring the importance of public opinion in foreign policy or due to the limitations and constraints posed by the international community's lack of legitimization at the international level and restriction. The study revealed that no separate department or section in the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan is responsible for public diplomacy and interactions with the foreign public. Although some efforts are made through indirect channels such as formal diplomatic engagement, broadcasting, and international engagement, the study argues that the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan should work on its public diplomacy to reach the desired outcome. The authorities must focus on and give importance to interacting with and listening to foreign public opinion. This could be useful in easing and normalizing the relationship with the regional and other countries. Any negative public opinion, even though propaganda based on lies and misinformation, puts constraints and complicates the leaders of the countries to take any bold foreign decisions like normalizing relations with the Taliban. Therefore, countering any negative image or misinformation is pertinent to achieving foreign policy objectives.

Furthermore, the paper argues that for the Taliban to put across their side of the story and narrative, it is important to use public diplomacy more effectively and efficiently. The Taliban do not have to focus only on the anti-Taliban/anti-Afghanistan narratives but has to focus more on the foreign public who are neutral and open to listening to the Afghan/Taliban narrative. For this, the paper argues that the credibility and legitimacy of the messages shared by the IEA are paramount and must be considered. This will also help and benefit the authorities in controlling and shaping public opinion domestically. The public will trust IEA if the messages are based on facts and actual situations in Afghanistan. For international engagement and to gain recognition and support from the outside, the IEA should be committed to human rights, counter-terrorism agenda, and international norms and provide facts-based information to the international community. Without credibility and legitimacy, the message will not affect the audience's perception. The paper argues that the U.S.'s public diplomacy campaign in Afghanistan post-2001 failed because of the lack of credibility, double standard of the message and inconsistency in principles of public diplomacy. Therefore, the authorities must understand, recognize the importance and adhere to the principles of public diplomacy.

Furthermore, in Afghanistan and worldwide, most people use other social media apps like Facebook and Instagram, but the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is unavailable on these

social media platforms. However, because of the restrictions, they cannot use these platforms, thus highlighting and stressing the importance of them for public outreach and international broadcasting. The paper argues that those decrees of IEA, which are regarded by the international community as inappropriate and against international law and norms, receive negative responses from the international community. Therefore, to counter any negative responses, miscommunication, or misunderstanding, the authorities must properly convey and explain the logic and reason for such decrees. This will help the authorities put their narrative at the international level. Furthermore, the authorities must focus on and recognize the importance of international broadcasting, thus helping to understand the Taliban's perspective. Also, using media is a less costly way of putting across one's narrative, and as the Taliban are now in control, these tools can be more effective than before.

6. Recommendations

The paper has the following recommendations for the authorities:

- Create a department responsible for public diplomacy in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and provide sufficient funds for this department to initiate public diplomacy programs.
- Use of digital tools to share the Afghan narrative with the world.
- Provide Training to diplomats about public diplomacy or train public diplomacy officers and send a group of public diplomacy officers outside to enhance their skills and knowledge about public diplomacy.
- The Ministry of Foreign Affairs must welcome and support research about public diplomacy in Afghanistan.
- Restart cultural events in Afghanistan Embassies abroad.
- Publication of decrees in different languages.
- Start a campaign about visiting Afghanistan, sharing Afghanistan's cultural and tourist attractions on social media, and making documentaries about Afghanistan to attract tourists and showcase Afghanistan's other side.
- Officials and spokespersons must conduct interviews with international media houses and share narratives.
- Highlighting and publishing data/information about humanitarian assistance given by the authorities to needy people.
- Publishing data/information about the public welfare schemes and initiatives like giving pensions to public sector retired employees.
- The continuation of female employees getting salaries and honorariums to the families of dead soldiers in the last decades should be broadcast.

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About the Authors

Dr. Peerzada Tufail Ahmad, Coordinator, Department of Research and Development (DRD) & Assistant Professor, Department of MIR, Kardan University, Kabul, Afghanistan. <t.ahamd@kardan.edu.af>

Mr. Mustafa Fazil, Student, Department of MIR, Kardan University, Kabul, Afghanistan <mustafafazil09@gmail.com>