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The Poetry of the Emirate: From insurgent war propaganda to state-sponsored PR

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Sabawoon Samim

Poetry forms a rich and popular strand of Afghan culture that can have real influence on society, and the Taleban, as insurgents, and now as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) have drawn on this. During the insurgency, poetry was an important propaganda tool used to promote jihad, mock the ‘invaders’ and venerate the martyrs. That poetry has continued since the 2021 takeover, but its style and content have changed dramatically. Patriotism and love of Afghanistan have replaced the themes of war and destruction, and the IEA is now investing some of its scant state resources into poetic public information campaigns. Given how many other forms of cultural expression are banned by the Emirate, unaccompanied, chant-like *taranas* have become the closest permissible thing to music. Given Afghans’ love of poetry, argues AAN’s Sabawoon Samim, it can touch at least some listeners’ hearts deeply.

When the Emirate came to power in August 2021, music was, as AAN [reported](#) in November 2021, “one of the first casualties,” even though, at first, it was only unofficially banned (see also our [2023 report](#) on what had happened to five musicians, young and old). This prohibition encouraged the rise of the only songs that the Taleban believe Islamic law allows, those that are unaccompanied by instruments and are voice-only. Most

famously are the *taranas*, with their “melodies and texts deeply rooted in Pashtun folk culture, but unaccompanied by instruments,” as described in our November 2021 report.

Taranas are closely associated with the Taleban and the author has observed that choosing to listen to them tends to be a good indicator of support for the Emirate. You hear them, especially in rural areas where the Emirate has a large constituency. In towns and cities, by contrast, many young people refrain from listening to them, given the taranas’ association with the IEA, and instead find ways to enjoy banned music privately online, on platforms such as YouTube.

Guests at wedding halls, restaurants and other public spaces might also prefer other forms of music, but given the ban, they turn to taranas as the only legal source of musical entertainment. One interviewee told the author: “Taranas are different from music both in content and the way they are sung, but they are better than nothing.” In Kabul’s restaurants, for example, taranas – many of which are the old popular songs now performed *a cappella* – have replaced other forms of piped music. In Kabul’s wedding halls, where once the sound of live music filled the air, wedding guests are now entertained by the melodies of taranas, while at graduation ceremonies, students and guests are serenaded by songs extolling the virtues of education. The same is true of what is on offer on domestic radio stations. Taxi drivers, who usually put the radio on to break the monotony of their days, now play taranas rather than what was ubiquitous pop music; callers now telephone in to stations to request their favourite tarana instead of their favourite pop song.

Interestingly, some of the taranas now duplicate musical compositions of Pashto, Dari and Hindi songs, sung accompanied by beatboxing – percussive sounds produced by the human voice – in lieu of instruments. Although these kinds of taranas are officially banned (see for example [this](#) Pajhwok News report), they have a wide fanbase among both Taleban and non-Taleban, given their more musical feel, and more and more are being produced in private studios (see, for example, [this](#) and [this](#) tarana).

Drawing on seven in-depth conversations with Taleban poets and members of the Cultural Commission of the Taleban’s shadow government during the insurgency, and analysis of more than two dozen poems from both the insurgency era and the present, this paper looks at how poetry and taranas have become key features of the second Emirate rule. It first explores the high status of poetry in Afghan society and how the Taleban, as insurgents, drew on a long tradition of using it to recruit and galvanise fighters. It then considers how, since the takeover, the IEA has systematically invested in taranas, including promoting new themes of patriotism, unity and development. It finds that poetry is also one of the few ways that members of the movement can convey criticism.

State-produced poetry

As taranas grow in popularity, filling the void left by the ban on other music, the Emirate authorities are investing considerable attention and state resources in creating and promoting them. The government's aim appears to be fostering patriotism, promoting its religious ideology, sharing the Emirate's narrative of itself as the liberator and protector of Afghanistan and attempting to gain greater legitimacy among Afghans. A Taliban-affiliated poet from Paktia described the usefulness of this policy more bluntly: "Poetry is an essential resource for a state to cleanse the toxins that infidels have injected into the hearts of Afghans." Similarly, another interviewee, a Taliban official in Khost province, remarked:

In other societies, people may be less emotional, but in Afghanistan, emotions hold sway, shaping everything. The significance of poetry lies in its profound impact on emotions, which makes it highly effective here.

All our interviewees agreed that senior figures within the movement find taranas and poetry in general effective tools for fostering patriotism and unity as well as conveying the movement's identity. One senior Taliban official in a civilian ministry presented it as a tool for reconciliation:

It's very important for people with political differences to gather together. Discussing ideas and sharing thoughts is the first step towards understanding and knowing each other. Through these events, the Emirate wants to tell people that we are [all] the same. We don't only know war, we also know peace and love.

Emirate officials believe this strategy is making headway, as highlighted by a mid-level Taliban official from the Ministry of Information and Culture: "On social media, we're watching an increased number of Afghans from across the country listening to taranas, particularly those about the motherland." The author has also observed Taliban taranas with over a million views on YouTube and hundreds of public comments (see, for example, videos [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)).

The Emirate has taken steps to regulate and control this growth with the establishment of the Taranum^[1]Taranum is the formal plural of tarana. and Culture Directorate under the auspices of the Technical and Vocation Education and Training Authority (TVETA). The Directorate is responsible for "organising poets and singers, overseeing taranas, aligning them with Islamic [values] and [Emirate] policies and removing instruments from them," as its deputy Mawlawi Ghulam Said Ihsas said at the TEVET 'Accountability Session to the Afghan Nation' ([televised](#) by state broadcaster Radio Television Afghanistan (RTA) and accessible [here](#)).

The authorities have also taken steps to professionalise and enhance the quality of taranas. In contrast to during the insurgency, taranas are not only produced in audio but are now also available as music videos. (While videos are now illegal under the new [Promotion of Virtue and Prevention](#)

of Vice law, issued in August 2024, enforcement appears to be patchy at most.) TVETA has established a new studio for tarana singers, who are also given access to additional studios at the state-owned broadcaster, RTA and ministries, such as the Ministry of Information and Culture and the Ministry of Interior. By the end of 2023, according to Ihsas, TEVTA alone had published more than 200 taranas. State-produced taranas have also been published on official social media accounts such as [RTA Music](#) (see for example [this](#) and [this](#) video).

Another key step the IEA has taken is organising poetry programmes, most of which are also televised. These are large gatherings of poets, government officials and people from across Afghanistan held in different provinces where poets recite their poems to a wide audience. Although the Emirate's poetry events are typically limited to recitations, RTA and other channels often broadcast poetry gatherings which include a type of poetry contest, *musha'ara*, that involves replying to one poem with another. RTA has a programme called '*Cheena*' (spring water), where it invites senior figures, such as Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi and spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahed, alongside leading poets and tarana singers.

Regional Ministry of Information directorates also host annual poetry evenings, mostly in Pashto-speaking provinces, that can boast hundreds of participants, including Taliban-affiliated and other poets, young men and government officials. Famous non-Taliban poets, such as Pir Muhammad Karwan, Matiullah Turab and Alim Bismil join younger, emerging bards and are given the stage to declaim their poetry. Last year, poets from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa on the other side of the Durand Line who hold a Pashtun nationalist political stance and supported the former Republic were invited to Nangrahar's historical and famous Naranj Gul poetry event and VIP reception. The poetry at these events tends to be diverse, containing patriotic, romantic and satirical poems, as well as those condemning Pakistan, Iran and the West.

The Emirate also often uses taranas in its official media, ceremonies and propaganda. For example, when the Emirate announces a new reconstruction project, the video is often scored with a tarana (see, for example, [this](#) state-owned Bakhtar New Agency video on X).

The Emirate's embrace of poetry, especially the tarana, has arisen not only because it has banned or suppressed so many other cultural expressions but also because poetry is a bedrock of Afghan identity and culture and a potent force to be exploited. Poetry was especially important for inspiring fighters during the various phases of Afghanistan's long war, a tradition which the Taliban as insurgents built on. These factors will be addressed in the following sections before the paper returns to how the Emirate is deploying taranas today, including the transformation of their subject matter.

Poetry in Afghanistan

Afghanistan's culture boasts a rich and diverse poetic history that is deeply embedded in Afghan society in all linguistic traditions. Poems are used to welcome a newborn into the world and bid farewell to the deceased. When a child is born, their mother may sing spiritual poetry to instil a sense of connection to the divine. If a child cries, a parent, grandparent or older sibling might sing a soothing poem to calm or help them fall asleep. Poetry provides consolation and often carries valuable lessons in times of sorrow or hardship. More mundane examples include the rhyming couplets frequently seen stuck onto the rear windows of cars (see [this](#) AAN report for examples) or written by pupils in the margins of their school textbooks or on social media. A famous saying in eastern Afghanistan sums up the omnipresence of poetry in the country: "When you move a rock, you may find a poet underneath."

Every ethnic group in Afghanistan has its revered poets, many of whom are treasured and shared across ethnic and linguistic lines. As the Afghan poet Reza Mohammadi [notes](#) in this editorial for the Guardian in 2012, "Whether we are Tajik, Hazara, Pashtun, Uzbek, Turkmen, Nuristani, Baluch, or any other of the hundreds of sub-ethnic groups, Afghans are threaded together by poetry." Somehow it is the Persian poets, such as the thirteenth century 'Mawlana', Jalaluddin Rumi, born in Balkh in what is now Afghanistan, that have attained a global reach (though, as this [essay](#) notes, the price of his fame was the "erasure" of his Muslim identity for western audiences).

Poetry is also deeply intertwined in centuries-old Pashto literary traditions. The 8th century Afghan king, Amir Kror Suri, is regarded as the first Pashto poet whose work was recorded for posterity:^[2]For a detailed background, see 'Amir Korer Suri as the First Poet of Pashto' by Ghulam Sakhi Himat and Azizurrahman Haqyaar in the International Journal for Research in Applied Science and ... Continue reading

*I am a lion
In the world there is none more powerful
Neither In India, Sind, Takhar nor Kabul
Nor is there any in the plains of Zabul
There is none mightier than me
The arrows of my strong decision,
like lightning fall
On the fleeing and escaping enemy I boldly recall
Defeated in battle they have been all.
There is no mightier than me.*

One distinctive form of Pashto poetry is the *landay* or *tappa*, a 22-syllable rhyming couplet with a specific rhythmic and syllabic structure. This is a strong oral tradition, with landays mainly composed and recited by

women. The female poets, themselves, are often unnamed and unknown. Landays address a wide range of daily issues and social themes and leave virtually no part of life untouched. (A rare collection of landays was made by the American poet Eliza Griswold, who worked with Afghan poets to translate their poetry for a 2015 [book](#); some of the poems also feature in this [essay](#)).

Afghan literature also includes a rich tradition of epic poetry known as **hamasi** poetry.^[3] Hamasi means ‘epic’ in Pashto: hamasi poems are focused on war, heroism and commemorating heroes (read more about Pashto epics [here](#)). In modern times, hamasi cover all war-related issues. Used to honour heroes and heroines of war and rally support for battles, hamasi poetry has adapted to changes in circumstances and typically reaches its literary peaks during times of war. For example, during the early 12th century, Pashtun poet and leader Khushal Khan Khattak deployed his poems against the Mughals, encouraging resistance against their invasion and cruelty. Similarly, during the second Anglo-Afghan war in 1880, Malalai’s two-line *tappa* rallied Afghan morale and spirit, contributing to their victory in the Battle of Maiwand against the British:
^[4]See Abdullah Qazi: ‘[The Poetry of Afghanistan](#)’ available on Afghan Web.

*Young love, if you do not fall in the battle of Maiwand,
By God, someone is saving you as a symbol of shame!*

In more recent history, the Soviet-Afghan war during the 1980s once again witnessed a surge in hamasi poetry. Poets captured the inhumane nature of the war and of Soviet aggression, inspiring resistance fighters such as in the poem below by the famous Dari poet, Khalilullah Khalili, which praises the mujahedin (see [here](#)):

*Brave one, I admire your passionate eyes.
The homeland is waiting for your strength.
Fight fiercely – make [the enemy] bleed, thrash it, set it on fire.
What could be worse than having the enemy in your own land?
The homeland is looking to you, waiting for you to prove your skill in battle.*

Even after the Soviets departed, poetry remained alive within the mujahedin factions. The themes, however, shifted to celebrating victory and praising commanders and leaders. The Taleban, who were part of the fight against the Soviets, fully embraced this poetic tradition. When they gained power in 1996, they banned music but encouraged taranas.

That said, poetry and taranas were not very pervasive in the early days of the Taleban movement. One interviewee claimed that only “a handful of poets existed and the taranas were also scarce.” During the first Emirate, taranas focused on specific issues, such as describing the Taleban

movement, praising God and the Prophet Muhammad and highlighting heroism in their conflict against other mujahedin factions. Interviewees noted that at the time, the Taleban had not composed taranas of their own as they would in later years. Rather, theirs was a continuation of the poetry practice inherited from the jihad era and the earlier epic (hamasi) poetry.

The poetry of the insurgents

It was during the long years of insurgency against the Islamic Republic and its foreign backers that the Taleban movement began to effectively use taranas to inspire jihad. After the first Emirate collapsed in the face of heavy United States bombardment in 2001, the movement eventually regrouped as an armed insurgency. Again calling themselves 'mujahedin', their poetry echoed that of the anti-Soviet jihad. It was used to boost morale, call men to arms and legitimise the war effort. It soon became an essential feature of the post-2001 Taleban movement, with more poets and singers offering a growing number of poems reflecting the themes of the movement's new jihad. The key poetic form was the tarana.

The taranas of the insurgency were so vivid and powerful that several Taleban interviewees believed they could by themselves rouse young men to take up arms. "When the youth would listen to these taranas," said one interviewee, a local Emirate official in Khost, "their emotions would go up and the only place they could find relief was in action and by joining [our] ranks." Another Taleban interviewee said they could also cause the enemy to defect: "The taranas were so powerful that if a soldier of the Republic listened to them, he might leave his post and join us instead." A Taleban soldier from Nangrahar concurred that poetry had been a recruiting tool: "During the jihad, people did not listen much to taranas, but for those who did, it was nearly impossible for them not to join [us]." Another interviewee from Khost province recalled:

A soldier of [the Republic] had beaten one of my friends up badly, while he was still at school. He was very angry with the government. I took the opportunity to send him hundreds of taranas. A month later, he slowly reached out to our group and, in the end, joined us. He was later martyred.

According to a New York Times [report](#)) from 2019, Taleban suicide bombers who failed in their missions and were arrested were observed reciting poems to their fellow prisoners, suggesting their deep familiarity with the poetry. One bomber quoted in the piece, whose device detonated prematurely, sang a poem about what the prison was for him:

*In our chains, there are lessons to be learned.
The sun shines and reveals the secrets of our world.
The chains are beautiful, creations of God:*

*The chains on our hands hurt us,
But the scars on our hands teach us.*

Analysis created in support of the US military's counter-insurgency operations during this period certainly saw the Taleban's taranas as a threat to their own information war – see for example, this 2009 paper from the Naval Postgraduate School, '[Understanding Afghan Culture](#)', which purports to:

Offer IO [information operation] practitioners and analysts valuable insight into the power of poetry within the Afghan battle space. ... The intention of this paper is to help operationalize the many facets poetry offers U.S. and Coalition forces.

Another [paper](#) from 2011, casts the overlooked power of the Taleban's taranas as emblematic of the West's failure:

The Taliban taranas appear to be deeply rooted in the Afghan psyche. They appeal to emotions the West do not and have not tried to understand. This lack of understanding, in part, has ultimately doomed Western engagement in Afghanistan.

On this last point, the Taleban and Americans might now agree. The leadership of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan continues to appreciate the poetry of the insurgency. On a stand at the entrance of the Directorate of Taranum and Farhang (Singing and Culture) of the Technical and Vocational Education and Training Authority, it is written:

No one can be blind to the compelling role played by the singers of taranas in propaganda, intellectual and psychological warfare.

Poetry, then and now

Although a significant portion of the taranas during the insurgency revolved around the conflict, the poetry was diverse, lamenting the burdens of war and contrasting the oppression of foreign invaders with the heroism and resistance displayed by the 'occupied'. Consider the following three poems: ^[5]The reference in the second poem to the 'youth of Uhud' is to the companions of the Prophet Muhammad who participated in the Battle of Uhud, the second major battle between the Muslims and the ... Continue reading

*We're not mad to seek death
Our love for freedom drives us
Our dignity endures
We struggle for noble goals, suffering the mountains and sleepless nights
Every step brings bitter memories
Yet we walk barefoot through life's ups and downs*

all in pursuit of the sacred.

*If the entire universe conspires against me
I shall still stand, unwavering
on the battlefield of honour and dignity.
My heart beats for sacrifices and freedom
A living memory of the brave youth of Uhud.*

*Jihad is my path
Through hardships, I embrace [my] love for freedom.
A lone Taleb
I step into the battle of honour – a thorn in the world's eyes
fuelled by love of liberty.*

Such poems resonated with young Afghan men often disgruntled with the US-led coalition and what they saw as the foreigner-installed Republic. Listening to these taranas reminded Taleban fighters, as one interviewee put it, “not to forget what the invaders were doing and [also] that we were responsible for stopping them.” Another interviewee, now a member of the Emirate’s police force, recalled that during their stays in mosques, playing taranas would stir the comrades’ emotions and they would urge the commander in charge to begin the attack, demanding to know what he was waiting for and why they were just sitting around.

In those days, there were also taranas of victimhood, including memorialising the civilian victims of international forces. An English language 2012 anthology, *Poetry of the Taleban*, edited by Alex Strick van Linschoten, included a poem about a wedding party that had been bombed, killing both bride and groom: “But the news brings press releases from Bagram / Saying that ‘we have killed the terrorists” (p 41). Criticism of the United States and the Republic was a common theme, as was mockery, seen in this ode (p 118) to the end of President George W Bush’s tenure in 2009:

*Karzai: Give me your hand as you go;
Turn your face as you disappear.
Bush: Sorrow takes over and overwhelms me;
My darling! Take care of yourself and I will take care of myself.*

For the Taleban, these poems served a purpose beyond mere propaganda; they were an attempt to humanise the war and Taleban suffering and express deep inner feelings. One interviewee, a Taleban

poet who now works in a civilian ministry, said that for some mujahedin, fighting the enemy was not sufficient: they needed the powerful outlet of writing or reciting poetry to also satisfy their need for action. Poetry, the interviewee said, was also “the weeping that comes from the hearts of those who ... were unable to physically resist the occupation and the injustice through [armed] jihad.”

How poetry changed after the capture of power

The wartime themes shifted after August 2021 when the Taleban gained control over all Afghanistan. Poets were quick to celebrate the victory they had secured and emphasise the defeat they had inflicted upon their enemies. After assessing more than a dozen poems from this early period of IEA rule, the author found they were exclusively focused on the victory, for example:

*They have defeated the coalition of 40 countries
The Taleb has won the 20-year war
Their flag is white, flying high
Their purpose and movement are white.
This is the brave Taleb jan
Who has crushed the puppet soldiers all the way to Kabul
And won the 20-year war.
Another poem conveys a similar message:
Felicitations on the Afghan victory
I see the Taleban everywhere
Congratulations
These Crusaders have been ripped apart
Praise be, they have turned to dust
Blessings on this bittersweet victory.*

After that initial ‘poetry of victory’ period, other themes have subsequently emerged in the three years since 2021. For example, the Taleban also tried to present themselves as the defenders and liberators of Afghanistan:^[6]The reference to Tor Ghar (the Black Mountain) in this poem is to a mountain in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province on the other side of the Durand Line, used here as a stand-in for all of ... Continue reading

*From the long winter nights and the icy snow
To fatigue on the battlefield
And bruised and broken feet
To the dark nights of the Tor Ghar
We have long embraced the gunpowder and sacrificed Mansuri youth
To discharge our debt to you
O motherland, we offered our blood to you.*

These poems have a strong narrative of sovereignty and independence. This reflects the Emirate’s boasts that it does not operate under foreign

influence nor, as one interviewee from a civilian ministry put it, do its officials hold “the passports of other countries,” referring to the dual citizenships held by some of the officials of the Republic.

Our interviewees also highlighted a patriotic desire at this time, reflected in official taranas, to promote prosperity and development in Afghanistan after decades of conflict. One Taliban-affiliated poet said: “In the past, the sole goal was jihad, but now that era has ended. Instead of war, our current objective is to rebuild Afghanistan.” Poems such as this one capture the mood well:

*What great transformation God's mercy has brought about
Those who made bombs are making pearls
They have given everyone their rights
They are rebuilding their devastated homeland.*

Another poem conveys a similar sentiment:

*Now that I have freed you
I will rebuild you and make you shine again
Homeland is the cure for hearts
Life breathes, breathes and heals
My desolate country, beloved homeland, needs our care
It needs the lost Taleb inside its heart
It is black, it is on fire, it wants to be rebuilt.*

This poem suggests Afghanistan is now developing after years of violence:

*Quickly progressing country
You are flourishing again
My beloved, beloved homeland
None rival your beauty
But the war-torn country is wounded.
Advance! You will rise again
You will flourish.*

In this poem, patriotism is fused with a yearning for peace and normality:

*I will envelope you with a green shawl
I will make this country like a thousand others
I will protect it with my life's blood
I will sacrifice for it my flesh
I call this a marker of faith
My soul is renewed and gleams
I see the green panoramas of the country
People from heaven shielded you, may God protect you from further*

*adversity
May God make no mother childless here
Be strong and end the night of guns
As we have freed you from occupation
We stand with you.*

Sacrifice, a common motif in wartime poetry, remained after August 2021, although now it was enjoined in the cause of development:

*Afghanistan will grow green and flourish
I have planted you in my heart
Beloved Afghanistan
When someone takes your name
I roar that I will be sacrificed for you,
Afghanistan.

*We will rebuild you, homeland
This promise we make
We will sacrifice our life
We will never let anyone [harm] you
As in you roam the Taleban's caravans.*

Other poems urge the Taleban to be protectors of the realm:
[7]Muḥammad ibn al-Qasim al-Saqafī, mentioned in this poem, was the 8th-century military commander who led the Muslim conquest of Sindh in India for the Umayyad Caliphate. The poet also lauds ... Continue reading

*Be the guardian of the homeland
Rebuild the wasteland
This country, Taleb jan, wants reconstruction
Treat its wounded body sincerely
You are the ibn Qasim of the age
protect it by all means
Take care of this nation through education and instruction
Bring the people closer to you; bring them inside your heart
Rule their hearts
For all shall praise you
Personify Omari principles
History will honour you.

*Let's build our country, compete with the world
We will make it flourish, like paradise
We are bound to progress*

We are serving its beauty and unity

Long live the house of Muslims, beloved Afghanistan

This homeland of martyrs

The homeland of heroes

It is a piece of our hearts

Hell for others, heaven for its people

Its air is heavenly,

Every desert is heavenly

It is bursting with rubies and gems

I am in love with you

I am the guardian of this realm

My purpose strong

I am a Badri soldier

I have no care for riches, no care for myself

I am like a star

Shining bright for you.

Another key aim of the poetry being disseminated is the promotion of unity among Afghanistan's diverse ethnicities. The Taliban want to distance themselves from being labelled as a Pashtun movement (although senior appointments evidence otherwise – see AAN [reporting](#) from 2021 and, more recently, this 2023 [report](#) by a panel of UN experts). One interviewee said that content promoting harmony was effective in countering the divisive “propaganda” that anti-Taliban political groups propagate. The unity theme can be seen here, for example:

Light the light of unity

Erase hatred with unity

Even if the world tries to sow discord

We are bound together in unity.

The poem below stresses that the varied ethnicities in Afghanistan make up a unified Muslim homeland:

This heavenly, heavenly country

Shrines and dusty graves adorn the homeland

May its tears become pearls and its wounds flowers

May the strangers be gone forever

May it never be soaked in blood again

Tajik and Hazara are brothers here

Be they Pashai, Pashtun or Uzbek, they are brothers

*The country is the home of Muslims,
One nation, one united homeland.*

The theme of obedience also looms large in the Taleban's poetry, promoting loyalty to the Amir. See these two poems, for example:^[8] The poem mentions 'hamd', a word from the Quran used exclusively to refer to the praise of God. 'Takbir' is the Arabic term for the phrase, 'Allahu akbar' (God is the greatest). This ... Continue reading

*Do not be neglectful
There is honour in obedience
Obedience is the secret to success and happiness
Do not build your life on betrayal
O shepherd, gain high honours through obedience*

*Do not stray from obedience to these three
First Allah, second the Prophet, third the Amir.
These are the keys to exultation
First, intention; second, piety; third, planning.
Mujahed, always keep on your breath
First, hamd; second, prayer, third, takbir.*

Beyond shaping public perceptions, Taleban poetry also reveals the movement's conservatism. For instance, this poem by Ikram Maftun, a provincial official, highlights the dim views of his fellow Taleban towards NGOs and what he sees as trappings of modernity, such as television:

*If the Quran's commands are not fully applied
Tell me, how would you protect its dignity?
In the face of infidel NGOs
how would you protect the honour, faith and values of Afghans?
In the time of mobiles and television depravity
How would you protect girls and the youth from immorality?*

Not all taranas are officially sanctioned, however. Indeed, poetry has become one of the only platforms where Taleban fighters can voice criticism and alert the Emirate to potential problems. In public poetry events, one can hear poems that caution leaders and fighters not to deviate from the cause. In private gatherings as well, Taleban poets are blunt about the risk of power corrupting. This poem, for example, reflects the concerns of older Taleban members about their superiors practising favouritism:

*Offices have changed the comrades
Big positions and high ranks have changed the comrades
They have forgotten the weary comrades of battlefields
They have forgotten the friend of the bad days
Now, they only remember and see their in-laws and brothers
Now, they only know their tribesmen, villagers and cousins.*

Another poem criticises nepotism within the Emirate:^[9]Arbakai is a term from Loya Paktia for tribally-raised and controlled temporary local militias. It became an insult during the Republic, used to describe pro-government armed groups, including the ... Continue reading

*Thanks to nepotism and connections
The arbakai has now become a mujahed
There is no need for aptitude and piety
The only thing you need is a connection with an official.*

Conclusion

Since the re-establishment of the Islamic Emirate, The Taleban have endeavoured to reframe their identity from fighters to rulers. Not surprisingly, given the importance of poetry to the movement as a means of propaganda and recruitment during the insurgency, they have continued to turn to poetry. Taranas, in particular, sung as chants or a capella anthems, have real power in a society where the poetic tradition is part of everyday life. The Emirate's campaign to systematically promote poetry using state resources is a sign of how successful they believe it was during the insurgency and how powerful it can continue to be.

As the context has changed, the Emirate's strategy has also evolved. During the insurgency, the audience primarily consisted of rural Afghans, often Taleban sympathisers and their own fighters. Unlike today, resources were scarce and the movement struggled to reach a broader audience. Now, the IEA recognises it has new audiences, some of whom have long viewed them as adversaries. Correcting this perception is an urgent priority. It has therefore shifted its focus towards themes shared by both Taleban and non-Taleban Afghans, such as patriotism, unity and development. These powerful sentiments are now the arenas through which the Emirate seeks to influence hearts and minds.

For their own members, poetry is used to foster obedience to the Amir and the Emirate. The lives of former fighters have been dramatically altered by the change in their fortunes, with all the power and resources that such a position affords the victor. Taranas are being used to motivate their loyalty and – perhaps more optimistically – offer reassurance to any sceptics in the ranks. Some of those sceptics are disgruntled poets who use poetry to convey their concerns and caution their leaders –

sometimes even face-to-face. In a video [posted](#) on X, a Taleban-affiliated poet, Nemat Lewanay, sitting with acting Defence Minister Mullah Yaqub cautioned him and other Taleban leaders against forgetting their jihad-era comrades and turning towards worldly pleasures:

*I appreciate you are busy
But not this much
You no longer feel the old love
Comfort brought extravagance
Gone is our reverence for the mountains
If vanity and prejudice do not unseat us
No power in the world can stand against us
Those who neglect old comrades
have no honour.*

Edited by Rachel Reid, Roxanna Shapour and Kate Clark

References[+]

↑¹ Taranum is the formal plural of tarana.

For a detailed background, see ‘[Amir Koror Suri as the First Poet of Pashto](#)’ by Ghulam Sakhi Himat and Azizurahman Haqyaar in the

↑² International Journal for Research in Applied Science and Biotechnology, 2021.

Hamasi means ‘epic’ in Pashto: hamasi poems are focused on war,

↑³ heroism and commemorating heroes (read more about Pashto epics [here](#)). In modern times, hamasi cover all war-related issues.

↑⁴ See Abdullah Qazi: ‘[The Poetry of Afghanistan](#)’ available on Afghan Web.

The reference in the second poem to the ‘youth of Uhud’ is to the companions of the Prophet Muhammad who participated in the Battle of Uhud, the second major battle between the Muslims and the (non-believing) Quraysh of Mecca, fought in 625 CE. The Muslims, with an army of around 700 men, faced the approximately 3000-strong Quraysh and, despite being outnumbered, were victorious.

↑⁵ The reference to Tor Ghar (the Black Mountain) in this poem is to a mountain in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province on the other side of the Durand Line, used here as a stand-in for all of Afghanistan’s high mountain chains. The ‘Mansuri youth’ likely refers to the 10th century Persian Sufi thinker, Mansur Halaj, who gained a large following as a preacher before becoming embroiled in a power struggle with the Abbasid court. He was executed after a long period of imprisonment on religious and political charges.

↑⁷ Muḥammad ibn al-Qasim al-Saqafī, mentioned in this poem, was the 8th-century military commander who led the Muslim conquest of

Sindh in India for the Umayyad Caliphate.

The poet also lauds 'Omari qualities', referring to the virtues attributed to Mullah Muhammad Omar, one of the founders of the Taleban movement and its first supreme leader.

The poet also describes himself as a 'Badri soldier'. This is a reference to the 313 companions of the Prophet Muhammad who participated in the Battle of Badr, an important early battle fought in 624 CE. Muslims honour these 313 men as a symbol of bravery, given they defeated an army of 1,000 non-believers.

↑8 The poem mentions '*hamd*', a word from the Quran used exclusively to refer to the praise of God. '*Takbir*' is the Arabic term for the phrase, 'Allahu akbar' (God is the greatest). This phrase is used to glorify God and is recited in Islamic rituals and events.

↑9 *Arbakai* is a term from Loya Paktia for tribally-raised and controlled temporary local militias. It became an insult during the Republic, used to describe pro-government armed groups, including the Afghan Local Police (ALP) and uprising groups.

References

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