

- Global Regional Review (GRR)
- URL: [http://dx.doi.org/10.31703/grr.2022\(VII-1\).18](http://dx.doi.org/10.31703/grr.2022(VII-1).18)



Cite Us



Representation of Afghanistan Government and Taliban in *Dawn* and *Ummat*

- Vol. VII, No. I (Winter 2022)
- Pages: 185 - 192
- DOI: 10.31703/grr.2022(VII-1).18
- p- ISSN: 2616-955X
- e-ISSN: 2663-7030
- ISSN-L: 2616-955X

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Abstract: This research study investigates how selected mainstream Pakistani print media, *Dawn* and *Ummat*, represented the image of Afghanistan and the Taliban in its news coverage. The aim is to understand whether the selected two newspapers portrayed the image of Afghanistan and the Taliban positively or negatively. *Dawn* is considered the leftist newspaper that holds liberal views about the issues in Pakistan. On the other hand, *Ummat* is considered a right-wing newspaper with conservative views. The news content of both newspapers was studied from the 1st of January 2019 to the 31st of January 2019. Content Analysis has been employed as a research method in this study to answer all the outstanding research questions. The findings support that though most of the newspapers' discussion revolved around the US-Taliban peace talks, *Ummat* emphasized the Taliban's perspective more in the coverage. It was also revealed that both the selected newspapers relied more on the Afghan sources to share the Afghan government and Taliban's story with its readers. The research study is grounded on Goffman's Framing Theory.

Key Words: Portrayal, Afghanistan, Pakistan, *Dawn*, *Ummat*, Framing Theory

Introduction

Pakistan and Afghanistan are the two neighbouring countries, and besides sharing the 2250 km long unsettled border, they share miseries and a bumpy ride of bilateral relations. Different historical events have spoiled the relations between these two brother Islamic countries. It includes not recognizing Pakistan soon after its creation in 1947; the issue of Pakhtunistan and alleged support of the Afghan government to the Pashtun nationalists in Pakistan; the creation of the Taliban and empowering them to occupy and rule Afghanistan; and allegations of interference and proxies in the region (Siddiqi, 2008; Sial, 2011; International Crisis Group, 2014; Qaseem, 2008; Gul, 2012).

This research study addresses the

the portrayal of the Afghan government and Taliban in the selected Pakistani print media in January 2019, which is highly significant. It was the month when the US government started formal negotiations with the Taliban in Doha to achieve a peaceful transition and agreement in Afghanistan. Many in Afghanistan feared that the Taliban would be imposed on the Afghan people by outsiders – Pakistan and the United States – to deny them their right to self-determination. They feared that they would be compelled to live under the Taliban's rule again, and there will be a rebirth of an era of eternal trouble. Today, many Afghans see the April 2001 speech of Musharraf as a testimony that Pakistan still considers the adventure of annexing Afghanistan as its fifth province (Safi, 2018).

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Citation: Muska, Marwan, A. H., & Anwar, A. (2022). Representation of Afghanistan Government and Taliban in *Dawn* and *Ummat*. *Global Regional Review*, VII(1), 185-192. [https://doi.org/10.31703/grr.2022\(VII-1\).18](https://doi.org/10.31703/grr.2022(VII-1).18)

Many research studies have been conducted on the Pak-Afghan relations and their historical background, but very few studies addressed the media's role. Indeed, media has become a powerful tool to form and manipulate public opinion. It may also provide a common platform for the public, government officials and politicians to share their discourse in the public sphere. While there is a freedom to share narratives in different mainstream media on different issues, it is often felt that such freedom should be practised through responsibility to achieve harmony and peace. At the time when the US was planning its exit from Afghanistan by striking a deal with the so-called Taliban – without taking the elected Afghan government in confidence, it became significant to find out how the mainstream Pakistani print media portrayed the Afghan government and so-called Taliban to their readers in Pakistan and abroad, given that the selected newspapers are available on the internet.

The primary research questions answered in this study are the following:

1. How do the selected Pakistani newspapers portray the image of Afghanistan and the Taliban to their readers?
2. Which newspaper gave prominence to the issues/ events related to the Afghanistan government and Taliban?
3. What was the discussion in the news stories revolving around it?
4. What was the status of the language used in favour or against the Afghan government and Taliban?
5. Who were the prominent characters visible in the news stories?

The answer to all these questions will help us understand the approach of Pakistani print media to the elected Afghan government and the so-called Taliban. They are accused of being Pakistani apologists in Afghanistan. It would inform us whether the Pakistani print media stayed neutral while explaining the Afghan government and Taliban to their readers or stayed biased and compromised their 'neutral' position as a reporter.

Literature Review

Pakistan and Afghanistan are two neighbouring countries. Like a border, they share many troubling events that strained the relations of the two brother-like Islamic countries, and peace remained a dream. Perhaps, this is why the population on both sides of their borders have blamed each other for their troubles ([Zaman, 2013](#)). Amid such tricky relations, many scholars criticize the role played by the Pakistani media by staying biased toward the Afghan government. They believe that Pakistani media tries their best to highlight the negative issues related to Afghanistan more in their coverage than the positive ones. Thus, the people in Pakistan only get negative information about their neighbouring country ([The news, 2006](#)).

[Siddique \(2011\)](#) believes that relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan revolve around the two fundamental issues – The Pashtun population and the Taliban. Pakistan's regional and foreign policy is framed to achieve the strategic depth in Afghanistan. Many researchers, including [Chomsky \(1989\)](#); [McQuail \(2005\)](#); [McChesney \(2008\)](#), believe that role of media is critical while reporting conflict and crises due to the influence of media reporting on the citizen's governments.

[Zeilizer & Allen \(2002\)](#) believe that mass media can play an essential role in portraying the image of any community, political leaders, or ordinary people. [Malik and Iqbal \(2011\)](#) also believe that the words used by the media in their reporting significantly change the perception of the people about the issues. They believe that "Mujahideen" was a positive word for the militant group. It referred to the group that stayed victorious in their fight against the Soviet forces. "Taliban", on the other hand, they think, referred to the home-grown militant groups.

Researchers including [Khan & Safdar \(2010\)](#) believe that Pakistani media gained notable freedom after 1999, and it is visible in the form of expansion of electronic and print media. They confirm that they have tried to project the feelings of ordinary citizens by avoiding following the line of the Pakistani government. The research study conducted by [Marwan \(2015\)](#) confirms that Western and

Pakistani media, including *Dawn*, *Geo News*, *Dunya News*, *The New York Times* and *Guardian* addressed Osama bin Laden very tactfully by avoiding calling him the "terrorist" after his death in Abbottabad, Pakistan. He argues that though they grilled him and his radical organization in the coverage, they came short of calling him the "terrorist". This also shows Pakistani and Western media's maturity and responsible approach to his death.

Thus, it becomes essential to see how the conservative and liberal mainstream Pakistani print media – *Dawn* and *Ummat* – reacted to the Taliban and Afghan government in the most critical phase of history when the US started making peace with the Taliban without taking much the Afghan government in confidence.

Research Framework

This research study is based on the analysis of Pakistan's two mainstream English and Urdu language newspapers. It includes *Dawn* and *Ummat*. *Dawn* is considered a liberal and left-leaning newspaper of Pakistan – the oldest newspaper founded by Mohammad Ali Jinnah. It is considered one of the professional newspapers of Pakistan – keeping in view its objective coverage of the different issues. It is also one of the highest circulated newspapers in Pakistan. *Ummat*, on the other hand, is known for its conservative views. The right-wing newspaper of Pakistan primarily looks at the issue from the Islamic point of view. It is also popular among the public – keeping in view the religious sentiments of the people of Pakistan. The reason for choosing the diverse sample of newspapers is to assess how two different newspapers – having different content, language, background, and readership – approached the same issue. It would also inform us whether they followed the line drawn by the government or independently narrated the story to the people.

The researchers have looked at the coverage of the portrayal of the Taliban and the Afghan government in January 2019. It includes all the news stories appearing on all

the pages in the selected newspapers from January 1, 2019, to January 31, 2019, which have been selected, studied, and analyzed in this research study. The e-papers of the selected newspapers were browsed on their respective websites and studied accordingly.

It is significant to look at the coverage in January 2019 as US-Taliban talks formally started in the same month in Doha after months of efforts of the Pakistani government too, which included the release of former Deputy Taliban leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar on October 25, 2018, after spending almost nine years in a Pakistani prison.

Research Methodology

The researchers have relied on the 'Content Analysis' as a research method to address the portrayal of the Taliban and Afghan government in the coverage of *Dawn* and *Ummat*. Many researchers appreciate the strength of Content Analysis as a research method. It helps understand the characteristics of text and extract valid and reliable meaning from it. Walizer and Wienir (1980) define it as a system that "examines the content of recorded information." Kerlinger (1986) opines: "Content analysis is a method of studying and analyzing communication in a systematic, objective and quantitative manner for the purpose of measuring variables."

This means that Content Analysis as a research method helps collect the data systematically, objectively, and quantitatively. Indeed, Content Analysis helps in counting and measuring things, and after the accumulative value is found, an opinion is placed on the nature of the data. However, it is essential to remember that data in Content Analysis as a research method is collected through the coding sheet. The researchers in this study also designed the coding sheet keeping in view the research questions of this study. It was finalized after the loopholes were fixed after the pilot study in the initial phase. After the data was collected, it was put into the SPSS to have a more holistic picture of the coverage.

Theoretical Framework

The findings of this research study are

grounded on the 'Framing' theory. It was put forward by Erving Goffman in 1974. He claimed that frames were a set of concepts and theoretical perspective that helps in the organization of experiences and actions of individuals. He further elaborated that the 'natural' and 'social' interpretation of frame helps people interpret their experiences that can be better understood in the larger social context.

Entman (1993) stressed that framing results from salience, which means: "making a piece of information more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to audiences." He further claimed that an increase in salience would result in the possibility that receivers perceive information, extract meaning from it and then process it. Thus, it clearly demonstrates that while framing events, the mass media outlets emphasize the version of reality to the people to make it prominent and visible for the people. The researchers in this research study also want to investigate how *Dawn* and *Ummat* portrayed the image of the Afghan government and Taliban to the readers - by emphasizing the particular version of reality.

Findings/ Discussion

Strength of News Coverage

The researchers collected all the news stories published by *Dawn* and *Ummat* on their news pages. The findings can be seen below in Table 1.

Table 1. Strength of News Coverage

S. No	Names of Newspapers	No. of Stories published
1	<i>Dawn</i>	38
2	<i>Ummat</i>	26

The above findings demonstrate that *Dawn* gave the Taliban and Afghan government more coverage than the *Ummat* in its news pages. It might be because *Dawn* is usually published with 17-18 pages and *Ummat* in eight pages. Thus, it increases the chances that *Dawn* should have accommodated more news stories on its different pages.

Themes Discussed in the News Stories

This section focuses on analyzing three themes/ topics discussed in the news stories. By a theme or topic, the researchers mean that when the Afghan government or Taliban came under discussion, what was shared about them was shared. It would help us understand the nature of coverage revolving around them. More importantly, the overall themes discussed in the coverage were 152. However, to make the data more explicit, the researchers further squeezed it into six broader themes. The findings can be seen in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Themes Discussed in news Stories

	Themes	<i>Dawn</i>	<i>Ummat</i>	Total
1	Taliban-US peace talks and the future of Afghanistan.	35 62.5%	21 37.5%	56 100%
2	Details about attacks in Afghanistan.	19 56%	15 44%	34 100%
3	Role of neighboring countries in Stabilizing Afghanistan	16 57%	12 43%	28 100%
4	Refusal of Taliban to consider Afghan Govt part of peace talks	3 37.5%	5 62.5%	8 100%
5	Visits of Taliban and Afghan politicians	3 75%	1 25%	4 100%
6	Other themes	16 73%	6 27%	22 100%

The above findings reveal that *Dawn* discussed more themes in their coverage than

Ummat. It is also perhaps that *Dawn* published more news stories on their news

pages on the desired dates than Ummat. Interestingly, the findings reflect that most of the discussions of both the selected newspapers surrounded the US-Taliban peace talks and the future of Afghanistan. Dawn emphasized this theme more than Ummat.

The second dominant theme discussed in the coverage revolved around the attacks in Afghanistan. Again, Dawn discussed this theme more than Ummat. The number of pages indeed increased the chances for Dawn to debate issues more, but Dawn showed balance in discussing these issues more systemically. Similarly, the third dominant theme in both newspapers was the role of neighboring countries in stabilizing Afghanistan. Again, Dawn highlighted it more than Ummat.

The only theme discussed more by Ummat than Dawn in the full one-month coverage was the refusal of the Taliban to consider the Afghan government part of peace talks. It demonstrates the bias of the Ummat newspaper towards the Afghan government by favoring the Taliban. By

highlighting the Taliban's point of view more in their coverage, Ummat newspaper has tried to stick to their core ideology – examining the issue from a religious perspective. It was also more critical of the Indian government's relations with the Afghan government and its conflict with the Pakistani government. Now it is vital to ascertain the nature of coverage by going a bit deeper into the content to see how much of the coverage was favorable or critical to the Taliban and the Afghan government.

Nature of news Coverage of Afghan Government and Taliban

This section helps readers understand the nature of coverage revolving around the Afghan government and the Taliban. It would help us understand how much percent of the coverage was favorable to them and how much critical or neutral. After reading the news item, the researchers placed the verdict on the nature of news items. More importantly, the news stories carrying bias towards the Afghan government/ Taliban were coded in the critical category. The findings can be seen below in Table 3.

Table 3. Nature of News Coverage about Afghan Government and Taliban

Name of Newspaper	Critical of Afghan government/ Taliban	Supportive of Afghan government/ Taliban	Neutral Stories
Dawn	12 31.5%	11 29%	15 39.5%
Ummat	14 54%	5 19%	7 27%

The above findings demonstrate that most of the coverage of Dawn newspaper, almost 39.5% of the overall coverage, was neutral towards the Taliban and Afghan government, followed by 31.5% of the critical coverage and 29% of the supportive coverage. It demonstrates that Dawn's approach to the Afghan government and Taliban mainly was favorable, as almost 70% of its total coverage was either friendly or neutral.

However, on the other hand, Ummat newspaper's coverage was drastically different from Dawn's coverage. The findings reveal that more than half, 54% of the total coverage, was critical of the Afghan

government/ Taliban, followed by 27% of the neutral coverage and 19% of the favorable coverage of the Taliban and Afghan government.

The findings are significant as they inform us that none of the selected newspapers avoided bias in their Afghan government and Taliban coverage. Indeed, both included their bias – but Ummat was more critical. A careful examination of the coverage has revealed that both the newspapers were more critical of the Afghan government than the Taliban. It shows another level of bias. The language of the Afghan government was more critical than their treatment of the Taliban. For example, A

story published in *Dawn* about the Afghan government called it "US puppet and ineffective." However, the overall language used by *Dawn* in the coverage was satisfactory compared to the *Ummat* that bashed the Afghan government compared to the Taliban in the coverage related to the peace negotiations.

The findings of this research study are in line with the claim earlier made that since *Dawn* is the liberal newspaper of Pakistan and thus, they would have approached the issue with an open mind compared to the coverage of *Ummat* – which mainly looks at the issue through the prism of religion. However, it is significant to note that both the newspapers were friendlier to the Taliban than the Afghan government. It might be because of the influence of narratives of the government/ establishment of Pakistan.

It is important to note that neutral stories mainly discussed the tours of politicians, occurrences of bomb blasts, suicide attacks, and drone attacks in Afghanistan. It is significant to note that such stories did not criticize the Taliban or the Afghan

government – but superficially discussed the number of causalities and damages.

Main Actors Visible in the News Story

This section informs us about the first three main actors visible in the news stories. It means the sources cited in the coverage or players in the news stories sharing information or cited by the reporters. Indeed, the reporters collect the information from worthy and reputable sources who have information related to the events. Indeed, the reporters cite different sources from different events. But it also shows us the dominance of any particular group in the news coverage. The researchers in this research study have tried to collect the information about the first three primary sources cited by the newspapers' reporters or news agencies in their coverage. The data collected via the coding sheet shows that initially, 93 main characters were identified and coded in the coverage, but later on, they were collapsed to six broader sources to have a more holistic view of the coverage. The findings can be seen below in Table 4.

Table 4. Main Actors Visible in the News Story

Main actors visible in news story	<i>Dawn</i>	<i>Ummat</i>	Total
Afghan Govt	20 65%	11 35%	31 100%
Pakistan Govt	6 46%	7 54%	13 100%
Taliban	4 44.4%	5 55.5%	9 100%
US Government	12 92%	1 8%	13 100%
Rest of the world	8 73%	3 27%	11 100%
Any other	7 44%	9 56%	16 100%

The above findings demonstrate that *Dawn* and *Ummat* mostly shared the story related to the Afghan government and Taliban through the Afghan sources in news coverage. The above statistics show that the Afghan government's sources surpassed any other sources in the coverage numerically. It shows the strength of the coverage that the selected newspapers avoided displaying the dominance of Pakistani sources in the

coverage. It also seems the professional approach of both the newspapers.

However, considering the table above the *Ummat* newspaper seems more favorable toward the Pakistani official sources than *Dawn*. The citation of more Pakistani official sources in the coverage – despite the lesser number of stories – clearly demonstrates that Pakistan's official line on the issue was more

emphasized. On the other hand, *Dawn* accommodated more US government official sources than Pakistani government official sources in the coverage. It means that *Dawn's* coverage on the issue was focused on sharing the international perspective equally (if we combine US and Rest of the world sources) on the issue – besides highlighting the Afghan government's perspective.

Interestingly, both the newspapers avoided relying on the Taliban sources to tell the story of the Afghan government and the Taliban. On the one hand, it shows that they avoided being biased towards the Taliban – but, on the other hand, it might also show the difficulty in contacting the Taliban for information.

Conclusion

This research study attempted to look at the representation of the Afghan government and Taliban in the mainstream Pakistani print media. The findings reveal that *Dawn* gave them more coverage than the *Ummat*. Most newspapers' coverage revolved around the discussion based on the US-Taliban peace talk. *Ummat* newspaper also emphasized the Taliban's perspective more in their coverage than *Dawn* by criticizing the Afghan government. *Dawn*, on the other hand, was favorable to the Afghan government. The findings also revealed that Afghan government officials dominated the coverage and were cited more in both the newspapers, while Pakistani officials were cited more in the *Ummat* newspaper.

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