Afghanistan Center for the Study of Terrorism and Democracy

Forward-thinking research on terrorism, security, and democracy

A Mother's Death and a Nation's Trauma

How Afghans responded online to the death of Mullah Mohammad Omar Mujahid's mother

Tariq Jahan

Research Study

January 2026

About Afghanistan Center for the Study of Terrorism and Democracy

ACSTD is an Afghan-led think-and-do tank and strategic advisory firm specializing in terrorism, conflict, security; and democratization, civic engagement and social resilience. Independent and grounded in local realities, we deliver forward-thinking research, policy advice, and practical solutions for fragile and conflict-affected environments, with a focus on Afghanistan and South Asia.

Registered in the United Kingdom (Company No. SC859228), ACSTD combines local insight, analytical rigor, and global standards to support evidence-based action for security, democracy, and peace.

info@acstd.org | www.acstd.org

Research Study

January 2026

Table of Contents

Introduction

Since their return to power in August 2021, the Taliban have exercised de facto control over Afghanistan, reshaping the country's political order, social norms, and relationship between state, society, and authority. Although the movement's founding leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar Mujahid, died years ago in Pakistan, he remains a central symbolic figure in Taliban ideology and historical memory. He is frequently invoked as a moral reference point, a source of legitimacy, and a foundational figure. For supporters, he represents sacrifice and religious authority; for critics, he remains closely associated with decades of violence and loss. Against this backdrop, the death of Mullah Mohammad Omar's mother represents more than a private or familial event. Instead, it became a symbolic moment that triggered public reactions across Afghan social media. These reactions offer a rare and revealing window into how Afghans today perceive the Taliban, how they process responsibility for past and present violence, and how moral judgment is expressed in a context shaped by long-term conflict, trauma, and political rupture. This rapid study was conducted to examine how Afghans publicly responded to this symbolic death, and what those responses reveal about broader social attitudes toward the Taliban as a ruling authority. Rather than treating the comments as expressions of sympathy or hostility alone, the analysis approaches them as forms of public meaning-making, where grief, anger, religion, gender, morality, and political memory intersect. The comment spaces became arenas in which users articulated blame, restraint, reverence, condemnation, or discomfort, often simultaneously. Importantly, the study does not seek to measure public opinion in a representative sense, nor to infer levels of support or opposition to the Taliban. Instead, it focuses on discursive patterns: how people speak, what moral frameworks they invoke, and how responsibility is assigned or rejected. Particular attention is given to the extent to which individuals hold family members, especially mothers, morally accountable for the actions of political and militant actors, as well as to how religious language is mobilized either to legitimize punishment or to call for restraint. By analyzing Facebook comments posted in response to announcements by ToloNews and Afghanistan International in both Pashto and Dari, this study explores how a single event activated divergent moral logics across language communities and media platforms. The findings shed light on contemporary Afghan public discourse under Taliban rule, highlighting how unresolved memories of violence, collective trauma, and ongoing political realities continue to shape how legitimacy, guilt, and moral responsibility are negotiated in the public sphere.

Methodology

This study employs a rapid qualitative content and thematic analysis of Facebook comments posted in response to announcements by ToloNews and Afghanistan International reporting the death of Mullah Mohammad Omar's mother. The aim is to examine how Afghans publicly reacted to this event and to identify the moral, emotional, and political themes shaping those reactions. The analysis focuses on a short, event-driven time window, capturing public reactions within the first 36 hours following publication, when engagement and emotional intensity were highest. Data were collected from four Facebook posts across Pashto and Dari language spaces. In total, roughly 3000 thousand comments were generated; from these, systematic qualitative samples were drawn for each dataset (ranging from approximately 600 to 800 comments per post). Sampling prioritized top-level comments and high-engagement responses to ensure visibility, relevance, and discursive impact. The analysis combined

qualitative content analysis (to identify recurring themes, frames, and response categories) with thematic analysis (to examine patterns of moral reasoning, emotional expression, religious language, blame attribution, and legitimacy framing). Comments were read iteratively and coded inductively, allowing dominant narratives and minority counter-discourses to emerge from the data rather than being imposed in advance. The study adopts a comparative design, examining differences and similarities across outlets (TOLONews vs. Afghanistan International) and language spaces (Pashto vs. Dari). All comments were anonymized, and no attempt was made to identify individual users. The analysis focuses on discursive patterns, not on measuring public opinion or representativeness. This approach is designed to capture how Afghans publicly perform grief, anger, morality, and political memory in moments of symbolic death, rather than to assess attitudes in a statistical sense.

Findings and analysis

TOLONews – Pashto

a) Dataset description and scope

The dataset draws on Facebook comments posted on the TOLOnews Pashto page following the outlet's announcement of the death of Mullah Mohammad Omar's mother. The analysis covers the first 36 hours after publication, during which the post generated approximately 3,000 comments, 147 shares, and around 19,000 total reactions (including Like, Sad, Love, Haha, Wow, and Angry). From this pool, 800 comments were systematically sampled for analysis, ensuring coverage across the full comment thread until thematic saturation was reached. Engagement levels, particularly sharing, were notably higher than in the corresponding Dari-language post, indicating wider circulation within Pashto-language audiences. Methodologically, this dataset is equivalent to the Dari corpus in terms of sampling strategy, analytical scope, and timeframe, allowing for direct comparison across language spaces.

Photo 1: Death announcement by Zabihullah Mujahid, reported by TOLOnews (Pashto)

b) Dominant pattern: ritualized religious condolence as the primary response

The Pashto comment space functioned primarily as a ritualized mourning arena rather than political debate. Most comments consisted of short, formulaic expressions of condolence rooted in Islamic mourning conventions. These included Qur'anic phrases such as *Innā lillāhi wa innā ilayhi rājiʿūn*, prayers for forgiveness (*May Allah forgive her!*, *forgiveness, etc.*), invocations of paradise, and calls for patience. These comments were largely non-argumentative and non-political. Most made no reference to the Taliban's record or to Mullah Omar's role in violence. Instead, the comment space operated as a shared moral and religious

arena, where demonstrating proper conduct in moments of death took priority over expressing opinion.

c) Sanctification of motherhood and moral elevation

Beyond basic condolence, a substantial number of comments went further by elevating the deceased through narratives of sanctified motherhood. In these responses, she was described as an honorable or brave mother, a symbolic mother of Afghans or of the wider Islamic community, and the woman who raised a heroic or historic son. Within this framing, motherhood itself became a source of moral elevation. Being a mother—particularly the mother of a prominent religious or political figure—was treated as inherently virtuous and deserving of respect. This moral status often placed the deceased beyond criticism or questioning. References to violence, responsibility, or political accountability were either absent or quietly set aside.

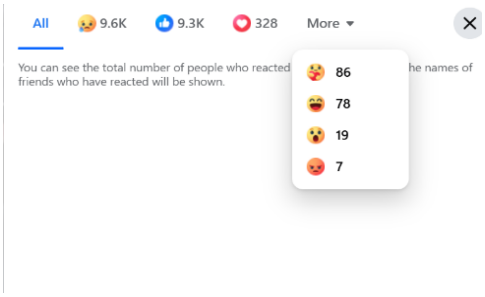

Photo 2: Facebook reaction breakdown following the death announcement published by TOLOnews (Pashto).

d) Norm enforcement: policing speech and condemning insults

Another recurring pattern in the Pashto comments was the active policing of how others spoke. Many users objected strongly to insults, curses, or attempts to politicize the death. These responses often drew on religious language and moral instruction, with comments such as: "Do not insult the dead," "Judgment belongs to God," and "Even if her son sinned, the mother should not be insulted." Importantly, these interventions were not expressions of praise for the Taliban. Instead, they reflected an effort to reassert religious and cultural boundaries around acceptable public speech. Commenters positioned themselves as guardians of moral conduct, reminding others of limits on what could be said in moments of death. In this way, the Pashto comment space displayed strong normative regulation.

e) Minority counter-discourse: condemnation and delegitimization

Alongside the dominant condolence discourse, a smaller but intense minority of comments expressed explicit condemnation. These responses rejected calls for restraint and instead framed the deceased through the actions of her son. Some referred to her explicitly as the mother of a terrorist, linked maternal responsibility to decades of Afghan suffering, or called for divine punishment. References to Taliban violence, civilian deaths, and personal loss were common. Several comments also introduced a geopolitical dimension, pointing to Pakistan and its institutions—such as Punjab, Rawalpindi, or the ISI—to portray the Taliban as a foreign-imposed project rather than an authentic Afghan movement. Within this framing, both the Taliban and their symbolic figures were stripped of moral legitimacy. Although these comments were numerically fewer, they were longer, emotionally intense, and more politically explicit than the dominant condolence responses. They reflected a trauma-driven rejection rooted in lived experience of violence and loss. This counter-discourse exists within the Pashto comment space, but it remains structurally marginal, overshadowed by the much stronger norms of ritual mourning, restraint, and religious propriety.

f) Hybrid positioning: separation of mother and son

A noticeable group of comments adopted a hybrid position that combined religious restraint with political condemnation. In these responses, users prayed for the mother's forgiveness or expressed condolences, while at the same time explicitly condemning the son for responsibility in Afghan bloodshed. This framing allowed commenters to remain within accepted religious and moral norms while still voicing anger, grief, or political grievance. By separating the moral status of the mother from the actions of her son, users could express condemnation without violating expectations around respect for the dead. This hybrid positioning reflects an effort to reconcile religious etiquette with lived experience of violence. It reveals how some Afghans navigate moral tension by carefully balancing restraint and judgement, using separation rather than silence as a way to speak about accountability in a morally constrained space.

g) Platform noise and performative participation

The dataset also contained minimal or low-content responses. These included empty comments, repeated or copy-pasted prayers, long blocks of religious text, decorative symbols, and occasional link sharing. Many of these contributions did not engage with the event itself or with other users. Rather than reflecting discussion or debate, this pattern suggests that participation was often symbolic. Posting a comment appeared to function as a way to signal religious observance, moral alignment, or simple presence within the public moment of mourning. In these cases, visibility and participation mattered more than expression or deliberation.

Summary of results

The Pashto comment space is marked by a clear imbalance in how people responded. Most comments centered on ritual condolence, religious language, and the moral elevation of motherhood. These forms of response set the overall tone of the discussion. Norm enforcement and efforts to depoliticize the moment were also prominent, reinforcing expectations of restraint and religious propriety. Open political condemnation did appear, but it remained limited in number, even though such comments were often emotionally intense. In contrast to the Dari corpus—where condemnation, anger, and gendered blame were more visible—the Pashto space placed greater emphasis on public piety, moral discipline, and indirect forms of legitimization. Rather than confronting the Taliban or its history directly, many commenters relied on religious etiquette, symbolic separation, or silence as ways of navigating a morally charged and politically sensitive moment.

TOLONews – Dari

a) Dataset description and scope

This dataset analyzes over 800 anonymized top-level Facebook comments posted within the first 36 hours following TOLOnews' Dari-language announcement of the death of Mullah Mohammad Omar's mother. During this period, the post generated approximately 3,200 comments, more than 15,000 reactions, and 51 shares, indicating high levels of audience engagement but limited viral diffusion. Comments were systematically sampled and analyzed qualitatively until thematic saturation was reached, with attention to dominant moral frames, recurring discursive patterns, and the presence of counter-discourses.

Photo 3: Death announcement by Zabihullah Mujahid, reported by TOLOnews (Dari)

b) *A highly polarized and emotionally charged discursive environment*

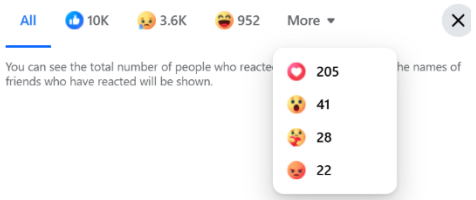

Photo 4: Facebook reaction breakdown following the death announcement published by TOLOnews (Dari).

The comment space was marked by strong emotions and clear divisions. Responses were often intense, confrontational, and framed through religious and moral language. In some cases, commenters also used harsh or dehumanizing terms when referring to the Taliban or those associated with them. Rather than treating the death as a private family matter, many users interpreted it as a symbolic and political moment. The event became a trigger for revisiting long-standing grievances linked to Taliban violence, repression, and years of suffering in Afghanistan. As a result, the discussion resembled less a conversation or exchange of views and more a series of public moral statements. Commenters positioned themselves openly—expressing outrage, loyalty, restraint, or ideological alignment—using the moment to signal where they stood in relation to the Taliban and to Afghanistan's recent history.

c) *Dominant frame: motherhood as moral culpability*

The most prominent and striking pattern in the comments was the way motherhood itself was treated as a source of moral responsibility. In this framing, the act of giving birth to Mullah Mohammad Omar was retrospectively presented as a culpable act. The mother was held morally responsible for the violence, deaths, and social destruction associated with her son. This framing appeared in several recurring forms. First, many comments applied blame after the fact. Birth was judged not as a natural or morally neutral event, but in light of the son's later actions. The mother's role was reassessed through the consequences that followed, rather than through intention or agency. Second, some users engaged in counterfactual moral reasoning. Comments imagined alternative outcomes—such as infertility, miscarriage, or death before pregnancy—as morally preferable, implying that such scenarios might have spared Afghanistan decades of suffering. Third, the mother was often positioned as a symbolic origin of collective harm. In this logic, she became associated with mass orphanhood, widowing, displacement, and national trauma. Individual acts of violence were folded into a broader narrative of shared suffering, all traced back to a single maternal source. Taken together, this frame transformed the womb into a political and moral origin point. Complex histories of war,

ideology, and structural violence were collapsed into a personalized source of blame, placing moral responsibility on motherhood itself rather than on broader political and historical forces.

d) Dehumanization and punitive speech: suspension of moral restraint

A substantial portion of comments escalated from blame into explicit dehumanization and punitive rhetoric. In these responses, the mother was stripped of human status through the use of animal comparisons, filth-related language, and graphic imagery. References to the grave and the afterlife appeared repeatedly, often imagined as sites where justice would finally be delivered. This register of speech had several recurring features. Many comments placed the deceased directly in hell or spoke of eternal punishment. Others focused on desecration, invoking images of the grave, the body, decay, or impurity. In some cases, blame extended beyond the individual altogether, taking the form of collective punishment directed at family, lineage, or origin. What stands out in these responses is the suspension of moral restraint. Widely recognised norms—especially the expectation that the dead should not be insulted—were openly violated. For these commenters, the scale and persistence of suffering associated with Taliban violence appeared to outweigh any obligation to show restraint. The comment space became a symbolic arena for moral retribution, where anger and trauma were expressed through language designed to punish, degrade, and deny dignity.

e) Religion as contested moral language

Religious language played a central role in the comment space, but it was far from unified. Instead, religion became a shared vocabulary used to justify sharply different moral positions.

Religion as punitive certainty (dominant): in most comments, religious references were used to legitimize condemnation rather than restraint. God was invoked as a source of certain and immediate punishment, with little space for doubt, mercy, or humility. Divine justice was treated as already decided, not as something deferred to the afterlife or left to God's ultimate judgement.

Religion as restraint and compassion (minority): a smaller but consistent group drew on Islamic teachings to argue for restraint. These responses emphasised that judgement belongs to God alone, that insulting the dead is religiously impermissible, and that motherhood deserves respect regardless of political or ideological disagreement. These comments, however, were numerically overwhelmed and often challenged or dismissed.

Overall, religion did not function as a unifying moral framework in this space. Instead, it operated as a shared moral language mobilized in opposing ways. While both sides drew on religious references, punitive interpretations were far more visible and dominant, shaping the overall tone of the discussion.

f) Gendered and reproductive shaming

Across the dataset, political condemnation was often expressed through gendered and reproductive language. Rather than focusing only on ideology or violence, many comments targeted the mother's body itself—her sexuality, conception, pregnancy, and fertility—turning these into sites of blame and humiliation. This pattern reflects two overlapping dynamics. First, political rage was frequently translated into gendered insult. Anger toward the Taliban was redirected toward a woman's body, even though the movement itself is openly misogynistic. Second, in condemning the Taliban, some commenters reproduced the very gendered norms

they might otherwise oppose. Misogynistic ideas about women, reproduction, and blame resurfaced as tools for expressing political frustration. In this way, the female body became a symbolic space onto which anger, grief, and unresolved trauma were projected. Rather than being treated as morally protected or separate from politics, motherhood and reproduction were weaponized, revealing how deeply gendered forms of blame remain embedded in Afghan public discourse, even in moments of resistance or condemnation.

g) Counter-discourse: heroic motherhood and sanctification

A smaller but coherent counter-discourse praised the deceased as a heroic mother. In these responses, her son was described as a defender of Islam, a victor over foreign occupiers, or a historical and religious figure whose actions were framed as justified and meaningful. This discourse closely mirrored Taliban-era narratives of legitimacy. Commenters drew on language of jihad, sacrifice, resistance, and national or religious salvation. These comments reaffirmed a positive and idealized interpretation of the Taliban's past. Although this strand of commentary was numerically limited, it was coherent and ideologically consistent. This suggests the presence of a committed audience engaging with the event through an established worldview, rather than spontaneous or purely emotional expressions of sympathy.

h) Structural and gender-aware critique (minor but significant)

A notable minority rejected maternal blame altogether and challenged the logic behind it. These responses argued that women in Afghanistan often live under severe constraints, with limited access to education, autonomy, and decision-making power. From this perspective, holding mothers responsible for the actions of militant figures was seen as unjust. Commenters in this group pointed to broader forces—patriarchal structures, fathers and male authority figures, ideological indoctrination, and organized militant networks—as the factors that shape outcomes. Blaming women, they argued, reflected misogyny and moral displacement rather than a genuine pursuit of justice or accountability. Although these comments were less frequent, they stood out for their analytical depth. By reintroducing structural explanations and gender awareness, this strand of discourse pushed back against the emotional compression of responsibility into motherhood and offered a more reflective way of understanding violence and blame.

i) Meta-moral conflict: judging the act of judgement

Beyond disagreement over the death itself, the comment thread revealed a deeper conflict about *how Afghans should speak in moments of death*. In other words, people were not only arguing about what was right or wrong, but about whether judging at all was morally acceptable. One group of commenters saw condemnation as a moral obligation. From this perspective, silence or restraint was interpreted as complicity. A second group took the opposite view. These commenters warned that abusive language reflected moral decay rather than justice. They argued that insulting the dead violated religious teachings and social norms, and that losing restraint—even in the face of suffering—undermined moral integrity. This conflict was not simply about one individual or one family. Instead, it reflected competing visions of collective moral identity.

Summary of results

Reactions to the death of Mullah Mohammad Omar's mother show how a private death can quickly turn into a public space for working through unresolved political trauma. Across the dataset, motherhood was repeatedly transformed into a site of moral causality. Religious language was used mainly to justify punishment and condemnation rather than restraint or mercy. Even expressions of anti-Taliban anger often relied on gendered forms of blame, revealing how deeply such patterns remain embedded in public discourse. While counter-discourses did exist—both ideological and reflective—they remained marginal and overshadowed by dominant narratives. Overall, the comment space operated as a stage for moral performance, where users publicly positioned themselves in relation to violence, legitimacy, religion, and gender. In this sense, the reactions reveal less about agreement or disagreement with a single event, and more about how Afghans continue to negotiate trauma, accountability, and moral identity under Taliban rule.

Afghanistan International – Pashto

a) Dataset description and scope

This dataset draws on Facebook comments posted on the Afghanistan International Pashto page following the outlet's announcement of the death of Mullah Mohammad Omar's mother. The analysis covers the first 36 hours after publication, during which the post attracted approximately 1,800 comments, generated over 15,000 reactions (including Like, Sad, Love, Haha, Wow, and Angry), and recorded comparatively low levels of sharing. From this pool, 700 comments were systematically sampled for qualitative analysis, ensuring coverage across the comment thread until thematic saturation was reached. Compared to TOLOnews Pashto, this dataset exhibits lower overall volume but denser ideological signaling, stronger moral policing, and more explicit boundary-drawing between legitimate and illegitimate speech. Methodologically, the dataset is comparable to the TOLOnews Pashto corpus in terms of time frame, sampling strategy, and analytical scope, enabling cross-outlet comparison within the Pashto-language media space.

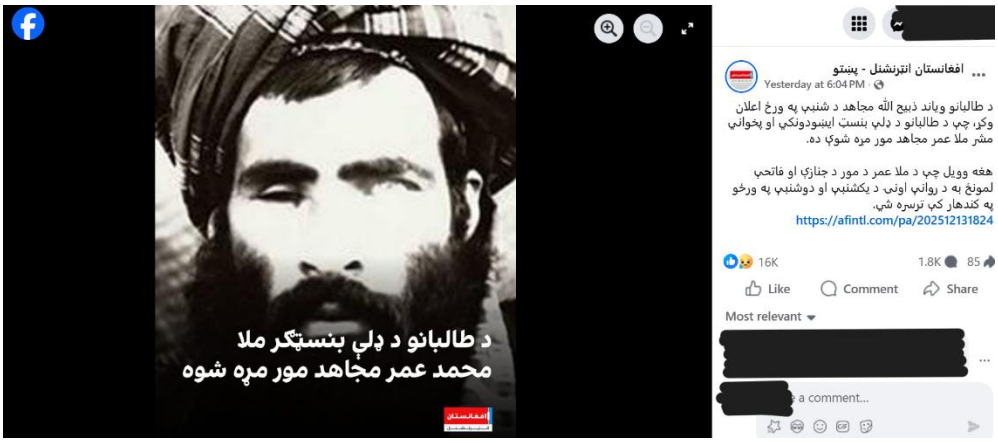

Photo 5: Afghanistan International (Pashto) announcing the death of Mullah Mohammad Omar's mother.

b) Overall discursive environment

The Afghanistan International Pashto comment space is highly polarized, but it is numerically dominated by ritual condolence and sanctifying praise, reinforced through strong moral policing. Open political condemnation and trauma-driven critique are present, but they remain structurally marginal.

Compared to ToloNews Pashto, this space shows more explicit ideological praise, sharper hostility toward the media outlet, and stronger enforcement of religious and moral speech norms. Overall, the discussion functions less as debate and more as symbolic alignment and moral signaling.

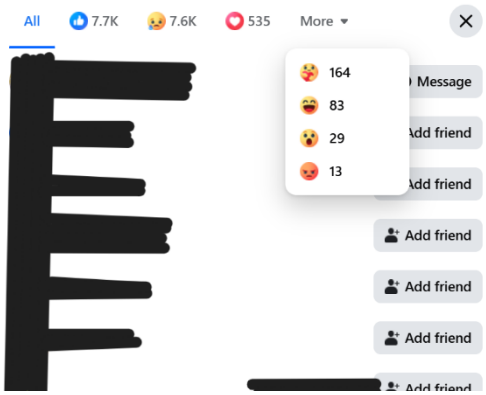

Photo 6: Facebook reaction breakdown following the death announcement published by Afghanistan International (Pashto).

c) Dominant frame: sanctified motherhood and heroic reproduction

The most dominant frame across comments is the sanctification of motherhood through the son's perceived historical role. The mother is repeatedly described as *"the mother of the entire Muslim Ummah," "the mother of all honorable Afghans," "a history-making mother,"* and *"the blessed or beloved grandmother."*

In these responses, motherhood is not treated as a private or personal relationship. Instead, it is framed as a civilizational function: the production of an exceptional son who defended Islam and shaped history. The mother's moral worth is therefore entirely derivative of the son. Within this framing, violence is reframed as sacrifice, jihad, or national salvation, and praise often escalates into calls for national mourning, holidays, or public commemoration. Importantly, it is not only sympathy or grief but ideological reproduction, where narratives of legitimacy are reaffirmed and celebrated through the language of motherhood.

d) Ritualized religious condolence as moral baseline

Alongside explicit praise, a large share of comments consists of standardized religious formulas, including Qur'anic phrases, prayers for forgiveness, and repeated invocations of *Jannat al-Firdaws*. These comments are non-argumentative, repetitive, and outwardly non-political. While these responses appeared outwardly neutral, they, however, establish a moral baseline for participation. Posting such comments signals piety and group belonging rather than reflection or engagement. Participation itself becomes the message.

e) Norm enforcement and moral policing (very strong)

A defining feature of this dataset is aggressive regulation of speech, aimed at critics, neutral users, and even fellow mourners. Commenters repeatedly correct language, insisting that people should not say "she died (مړه مه وایه)" but instead use religiously sanctioned expressions such as *"she passed away (وفات وایه)"* or *"she has returned to the Truth (په حق رسیدلې ده)."* Using the word "dead" is framed as sinful, ignorant, or even satanic. Language policing is therefore

not symbolic but disciplinary, enforcing religious norms and narrowing *what* can be said and *how* it can be said.

f) Policing of behavior and reactions

Moral regulation in these comments extends beyond words to emotional behavior**.** Certain Facebook reactions, especially "Haha" are condemned. Users are warned about accountability in the afterlife, and commenters are repeatedly told to stop "insulting the dead." In this sense, emotional restraint and reverence are actively enforced.

g) Policing the media

Afghanistan International itself becomes a major target. The outlet is labeled *"hypocritical media,"* accused of being a *"Pakistani puppet,"* and described as spreading lies or intelligence-orchestrated drama. Through this language, the media outlet is framed as morally corrupt, foreign-controlled, and illegitimate. These attacks discredited the platform itself, with commenters shifting attention away from disagreement or debate and toward questions of loyalty and moral alignment. In doing so, criticism of the Taliban or alternative interpretations of the event could be dismissed as products of a hostile or untrustworthy source.

h) Minority counter-discourses: condemnation and trauma

A smaller but emotionally intense minority rejects sanctification outright. These comments describe the son as a terrorist or murderer, hold the mother morally responsible for Afghan deaths, and invoke hellfire, curses, and dehumanizing language. Many explicitly reference civilian casualties, destruction, and the long war. Some comments also articulate geopolitical critiques, framing the Taliban as a Pakistani or ISI-backed project and invoking proxy warfare narratives. Notably, compared to the Dari dataset, condemnation here is less gender-sexualized and more focused on national betrayal and collective trauma. Although these voices are numerically marginal, they introduce a sharp counter-narrative that challenges both sanctification and enforced restraint.

i) Hybrid positions: separation of mother and son

A limited number of commenters attempt a middle position. They argue that "a mother is always a mother," offer prayers while criticizing Taliban violence, or call for restraint without engaging in praise. However, such comments are often challenged, corrected, or dismissed by other users enforcing dominant norms. In many cases, they were quickly drowned out by stronger voices calling either for sanctification or for harsh condemnation.

j) Noise, performance, and algorithmic clutter

The dataset also includes large amounts of low-content engagement, such as single-word comments, emoji-only reactions, spam links, and repeated copy-paste blocks. This confirms that much participation is often symbolic than expressive, aimed at visibility and alignment rather than meaning-making.

Summary of results

The Afghanistan International Pashto comment space is shaped by a tightly regulated moral order. Motherhood is sanctified in ideological terms, while ritualized religious condolence operates as a form of moral conformity rather than reflection. Strong norm enforcement

governs not only what can be said, but how emotion, language, and dissent are expressed, narrowing the space for alternative or ambivalent positions. Trauma-driven condemnation is present, but it remains marginal and quickly contained. At the same time, hostility toward Afghanistan International itself frames the outlet as foreign-aligned and morally suspect, further reinforcing boundaries around acceptable speech and interpretation. In contrast to the Dari dataset where rage, misogyny, and dehumanization are more visible, this Pashto space channels legitimacy through piety, honor, and controlled reverence. The result is not explicit defense of Taliban policy, but a form of implicit legitimization produced through moral discipline, sanctification, and the suppression of open confrontation.

Afghanistan International – Dari

a) Dataset description and scope

This dataset draws on Facebook comments posted on the Afghanistan International Dari page following the outlet's announcement of the death of Mullah Mohammad Omar's mother. The analysis covers approximately the first 36 hours after publication, during which the post attracted around 2,900 comments, generated a high volume of reactions (including Like, Sad, Love, Haha, Wow, and Angry), and recorded 41 shares, indicating strong audience engagement but limited viral diffusion. From this pool, 700 comments were systematically sampled for qualitative analysis, ensuring coverage across the comment thread until thematic saturation was reached. Comments were written primarily in Dari, with occasional Pashto and mixed-language entries. Methodologically, this dataset is comparable to the Afghanistan International Pashto corpus in terms of temporal framing, sampling strategy, and analytical scope, enabling cross-language comparison within the same media outlet.

Photo 7: Afghanistan International (Dari) announcing the death of Mullah Mohammad Omar's mother.

Photo 8: Facebook reaction breakdown following the death announcement published by Afghanistan International (Dari).

b) Dominant response pattern: hostile condemnation and blame

The largest and most dominant response pattern is hostile condemnation, often directed at the mother through the actions and legacy of her son. Many commenters explicitly hold the mother morally responsible for Mullah Omar's role in violence, war, and prolonged suffering in Afghanistan. Blame is expressed through direct attribution, with repeated references to the act

of giving birth to, raising, or morally shaping a figure associated with terrorism and conflict. These comments consistently link the mother to civilian deaths, women's suffering, national destruction, and decades of instability. The language used is often absolute and punitive, relying on violent metaphors, curses, and uncompromising moral judgments. This pattern is not marginal or peripheral; it sets the overall tone of the discussion and frames the comment space around blame rather than condolence.

c) Extreme abuse and dehumanization

A substantial subset of comments moves beyond condemnation into explicit abuse and dehumanization. These comments employ animalistic language, sexualized insults, and repeated references to the desecration of death, including imagery of graves, decay, and filth. Many also call for eternal punishment, humiliation, or posthumous suffering. The emotional intensity of this language is extremely high, marked by an absence of restraint and a clear disregard for social or religious taboos surrounding death. Together, these patterns indicate the normalization of extreme verbal violence in public discourse, where abuse is not only expressed but openly performed. Notably, this category is far more prevalent in this dataset than in the ToloNews comment spaces, underscoring a sharper and more aggressive tone in response to this event.

d) Religious condemnation (punitive framing)

Another major cluster frames the mother's death in religious–punitive terms, invoking hell, divine punishment, eternal damnation, and collective accountability in the afterlife. Unlike secular forms of abuse, these comments rely explicitly on Islamic language and moral references, presenting judgment as divinely sanctioned rather than personally expressed. Instead of offering prayers for the deceased, many include prayers against her, calling for punishment rather than mercy. Although this category overlaps significantly with hostile condemnation, it remains analytically distinct in its tone and vocabulary, as moral authority is transferred from the speaker to God, transforming personal anger into religious judgment.

e) Religious condolence and prayer (minority but visible)

A smaller yet consistent minority of comments offers traditional condolences, including Qur'anic phrases such as *Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji'un*, as well as prayers for forgiveness and entry into paradise. These responses are typically brief, formulaic, and non-argumentative, relying on standardized religious expressions rather than personal reflection. In some cases, condolences are paired with praise of the son or are used defensively to counter criticism from other commenters. Compared to the ToloNews Dari dataset, this group is more openly contested and more frequently attacked, with condolence itself becoming a site of dispute rather than a shared social norm.

f) Praise and glorification

A clear but numerically smaller segment of commenters explicitly praises the mother for giving birth to a "leader," "mujahid," or "hero," and for raising a son portrayed as courageous or righteous. In these responses, the mother is framed as an honorable or even historic woman, with praise expressed through reverential and elevated language. While this cluster is more concentrated than in the ToloNews Dari dataset, it remains significantly smaller than the volume of condemnatory responses. These comments frequently provoke hostile replies,

indicating that overt praise is contested and often triggers further polarization within the comment space.

g) Defense of motherhood (moral separation)

Another identifiable category argues that mothers should not be held responsible for the actions of their adult children, that insulting a deceased mother is morally wrong, and that Afghan women often have limited power over their sons once they reach adolescence. These comments attempt to separate moral judgment from political blame and are typically expressed in a conciliatory and restrained tone. However, they are frequently drowned out, challenged, or reframed by other commenters, and in some cases criticized as implicitly "defending the Taliban." This category reflects moral discomfort rather than political alignment, highlighting the difficulty of expressing nuance within a highly polarized comment environment.

h) Speech-policing and ethical appeals

A smaller group of comments focuses on how people are speaking rather than on the event itself. These responses argue that insulting the dead is un-Islamic, that judgment belongs to God alone, and that public discourse has become increasingly inhumane. Commenters in this category often express shock at the cruelty of the language being used, the erosion of moral boundaries, and the overall tone adopted by fellow participants. Rather than taking a clear political position, these comments reflect concern about the degradation of ethical norms in public conversation**.**

i) Mockery, disbelief, and peripheral content

A noticeable number of comments question whether the mother was in fact still alive, mock the secrecy surrounding the Taliban, or joke about her identity, age, or even existence. Others use the moment to introduce unrelated political grievances. Together, these responses contribute to discursive noise, reinforce cynicism, and deepen distrust toward information associated with the Taliban. Rather than engaging with the event itself, this category reflects broader skepticism toward Taliban-related narratives and the credibility of claims surrounding them.

j) Overall tone and intensity

Overall, the Afghanistan International (Dari) comment space is marked by extreme polarization, higher levels of verbal violence than those observed in the ToloNews datasets, and reduced restraint or social filtering. The discussion is characterized by strong emotional release, particularly anger and resentment, which shapes both the tone and direction of engagement. Compared to ToloNews Dari, condemnation is more explicit, abuse is more normalized, and commenters who attempt to defend, moderate, or qualify their positions are more aggressively challenged. Together, these patterns indicate a comment environment in which emotional intensity and moral confrontation dominate over deliberation or restraint.

Summary of results

Taken together, this dataset shows that hostile condemnation is the dominant response, accompanied by widespread extreme abuse and dehumanization and frequent use of religious punishment language. Expressions of condolence and praise are present but remain numerically limited, while attempts to separate moral judgment from political responsibility appear

sporadically and gain little traction. The platform environment itself appears to encourage sharper and harsher forms of expression, amplifying emotional intensity rather than restraint. Overall, the reaction reflects a highly charged public response shaped by grief, anger, collective memory of violence, and unresolved social trauma.

Conclusion

Taken together, the analysis of four Facebook posts across two major Afghan media outlets and two language spaces reveals how a single private death was rapidly transformed into a public site of moral judgment, political memory, and emotional release. Rather than functioning primarily as moments of condolence, the comment spaces became arenas in which Afghans articulated deeply held perceptions about responsibility, legitimacy, religion, gender, and violence in contemporary Afghanistan. Across the datasets, clear differences emerged between Pashto and Dari comment spaces, as well as between outlets. Pashto-language discussions—particularly on ToloNews—were dominated by ritualized religious condolence, sanctified motherhood narratives, and strong norm enforcement that prioritized decorum and moral restraint over political confrontation. In these spaces, overt condemnation existed but remained marginal, while religious etiquette and indirect legitimization shaped the dominant tone. By contrast, Dari-language discussions, especially on Afghanistan International, were marked by far higher levels of hostility, explicit blame, dehumanization, and punitive religious language. Here, motherhood itself was frequently constructed as a site of moral culpability, and social taboos surrounding death were often suspended in favor of expressive condemnation. Despite these differences, several common dynamics cut across all four posts. First, the figure of Mullah Mohammad Omar—though long deceased—continues to operate as a powerful symbolic reference point, with reactions to his mother serving as a proxy for broader judgments about the Taliban and their legacy. Second, responsibility for violence was frequently personalized and compressed, often shifting from political structures and armed organizations onto family members, particularly women. Third, religious language played a central role across all datasets, but it was mobilized in sharply divergent ways: as a tool of restraint and moral regulation in some contexts, and as a source of punitive certainty and legitimized condemnation in others. The analysis also highlights the performative nature of social media engagement in moments of symbolic death. Copy-pasted prayers, ritual expressions, emotional outbursts, and moral policing coexisted with cynicism, mockery, and discursive noise, reflecting how platform dynamics amplify visibility, alignment, and emotional intensity rather than deliberation. Minority positions—whether reflective, gender-aware, or conciliatory—appeared consistently across datasets but struggled to gain traction within highly polarized environments. Overall, these findings suggest that public reactions to symbolic events under Taliban rule cannot be understood simply as expressions of sympathy or opposition. Instead, they reveal a complex landscape of unresolved trauma, moral boundary-drawing, and contested legitimacy, shaped by long-term conflict and ongoing political realities. By examining how Afghans speak in these moments—what they condemn, what they sanctify, and whom they hold responsible—this study offers insight into the deeper moral and emotional currents that continue to shape public discourse in Afghanistan today.

Data sources: Facebook posts analyzed

ToloNews (Pashto) — *13 December 2025*
Statement by Zabihullah Mujahid announcing the death of the mother of the founder and first leader of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.
https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=1295869089249018&id=100064778164082&rdid=ayFvbmKl1zPmMLgu

ToloNews (Dari) — *13 December 2025*
Statement by Zabihullah Mujahid announcing the death of the mother of the founder and first leader of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.
https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=1295869732582287&id=100064778164082&rdid=kTzK26b6UAQ86TxW

Afghanistan International (Pashto) — *13 December 2025*
Report announcing the death of the mother of the Taliban's leader.
https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=122273228906197546&id=615559263989 9&rdid=gO2mVMNNRhcxqoYg

Afghanistan International (Dari) — *13 December 2025*
Report announcing the death of the mother of the Taliban's leader.
https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=1161651056178409&id=100070005769381&rdid=OmGglvsEexxdIisY

About the author

Tariq Jahan is the founding Director of the Afghanistan Center for the Study of Terrorism and Democracy. He is currently pursuing a PhD at the University of St Andrews, where his research focuses on strategic communication in the Afghan conflict. His work examines terrorism, insurgency, and extremism. Tariq has previously worked with the former Afghan government and in international development within the private sector.